
FLUFFY PARADISE
7
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Fluffy Paradise Volume 7

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"DAUX, SAY 'AH'!"
Nefertima Osphe (Neema)
A GIRL FROM EARTH WHO WAS REBORN IN ASDYLLON. GOD GAVE HER THE GIFT OF BEING ADORED BY ALL CREATURES OTHER THAN HUMANS.
Marie Enlance
DAUX'S COUSIN.
"THAT ACTUALLY WASN'T SO BAD."
Dauxrouge Shea Linus
FOURTH IMPERIAL PRINCE OF THE LINUS EMPIRE.


"ALL RIGHT,
LET'S DO IT!"


"GET IT OFF! GET IT OFF! WHAT IS THIS?!"
"WAGH!"
Shinki
A FORMER HOBGOBLIN. NEFERTIMA'S SELF-APPOINTED BODYGUARD.


Celiunos Raux Linus
EMPEROR OF THE LINUS EMPIRE.
Euche
A BLUE PEGASUS.
"YOU'D BETTER NOT COMPLAIN ABOUT HAVING TO ANSWER ALL MY QUESTIONS, GOT IT, EUCHE?"
"YOU JUST CAN'T HELP BEING BLISSFULLY HAPPY WHEN YOUR ADORABLE FUR-BABY LOVES ON YOU RIGHT BACK!"

1 - Hugs Are an Expression of Love!

ONCE Will and the others returned home, preparations for Project Roslan moved rapidly within the imperial palace.

Basically, Louis and Theo became very busy, and some aristocrats with a keen eye for profit started discreetly making arrangements. In particular, the aristocrats seemed eager to get a piece of the pie when it came to branding the Linus Empire's regional specialty products.

As for how I learned about all this, Louis was doing his best to keep me updated, but most of my information came from our family's super-multitalented servants. For the most part, their primary interest in the topic came from concern that more aristocrats might try to get close to me for their benefit.

I, on the other hand, was more concerned that I still hadn't figured out a way to summon Daux and Marie to play with me! I'd finally found playmates my age, so naturally, I wanted to be able to play with them whenever I liked!

I feel bad having the emperor take time out of his busy day to deliver the invitation every time, but I can't think of a better way to get in touch with them…

Oh, that's it! I've got an idea!

Without wasting another moment, I summoned Paul and made the necessary preparations.



"LADY Neema, it seems the reply you were waiting for has arrived."

"Really?!"

The letter Paul handed me bore a seal I'd never seen before. I eagerly opened the letter and began to read, happy to find it contained exactly what I hoped it would. The letter was from

Marie's father. I'd only ever met him once, at our welcome banquet, but he seemed more approachable than Marie's mother.

Towen Daux Linus, the emperor's older brother and Marie's father.

Based on my impression of him when we'd been introduced, he seemed a responsible, almost parental figure who was always reining in his headstrong younger brothers, keeping them in line.

Paul's investigation hadn't revealed any connections to problematic aristocrats; Towen seemed to genuinely be his brother's—the emperor—staunchest and most loyal supporter.

In short, if the mother is no good, I'll approach the father!

I wanted to play with Daux and Marie, but they were so carefully guarded that I couldn't get anywhere near them. So, I'd asked Marie's father to lend me a hand.

To summarize, his reply had read: *"It doesn't sit well with me, either, for children to be dragged into political machinations. I hadn't dared to hope you might become friends with Prince Dauxrouge and Marie. I will take care of the others, so please feel free to invite them to play whenever you like."*

And so, I'd taken him at his word and immediately arranged a playdate.

"Hey, Neema! What kind of trick did you use?!"

Marie didn't look the least bit happy to see me despite how long it had been since we'd last been able to play together. Her shoulders were raised almost up to her ears and shook with barely restrained fury.

Marie, you're a noblewoman so calm down, okay?!

"Why, I asked your father for help, of course."

"...My father? Even I rarely get to see him..."

Huh?! What does that mean?!

Now, I clasped Marie on the shoulder.

"Marie, are you saying you don't live with your father?"

"That's right. My father is a member of the imperial family, after all. I live with my mother in her manor."

I already knew that although the current emperor's siblings were considered members of the imperial family, their spouses and children were not, but I'd never imagined that meant they wouldn't live together!

"Then when do you get to see him?"

“At official events or when he comes to visit Mother…”

Wow, so she really does hardly ever get to see him!

Maybe that’s just part of the culture here, but either way, if they don’t reaffirm their parent-child bond before she hits puberty, there will probably be a lot of “I hate you, Daddy!” incidents!

I guess we should count it as a blessing, at least, that he won’t have to experience the dreaded “Don’t wash your clothes with mine, you have cooties!” I’m sure there will be something else to replace that, though…

“Do you like your father?” I asked.

“…I don’t know. I’ve spoken to him before, but only about social niceties like the weather.”

When I pressed for more information, I learned she had no memories of ever being hugged. She said that her mother had never hugged her either, so it hadn’t occurred to her to feel any sort of way about the fact that her father never hugged her.

“Neema, you’ve been hugged by Prince Louivence and Prince Theoval, right? I was shocked by that—if it were me, I would’ve felt terribly rude,” she said.

“…Do you feel the same way, Daux?” I asked.

If Marie was shocked, it would make sense for Daux to feel the same way since they spent a lot of time together. When I asked him, he confirmed my suspicions, saying that his parents had never hugged him, either.

“My older brother Clay always hugs me, though, so I like him a lot,” he added.

It made sense that Clay’s younger brothers loved him, considering how much he doted on them. Whatever else you might say about the playboy, he did have a soft spot for Daux.

I knew it wasn’t good to voice un-asked-for opinions about how other families behaved behind closed doors, but this made me want to clutch my head in exasperation.

“I’ve got it! I’m sure His Majesty and Marie’s father are working right now, so why don’t we go take a peek?” I suggested.

“We can’t; it would interrupt their work.”

Daux immediately slammed the brakes on that train of thought, but I wasn’t ready to stop yet!

“Both of you want to become closer with your fathers, don’t you? But I imagine it’s hard to figure out where to start, so we

need to do reconnaissance first!”

Once I convinced them that just *looking* wouldn’t interrupt their fathers’ work, they agreed to go and see what their work environment was like.

“Are you sure this is okay? If we get in trouble, I’m blaming it all on you!” Marie huffed.

Daux and Marie both seemed uneasy, but I couldn’t imagine either of their fathers would truly be angry that their children had come to visit them because they missed them. And on the off chance they *were* angry, I would just have to convince them not to hold it against Daux and Marie!

“It’ll be fine!”

And so, now it was Seigo and Rikusei’s time to shine.

We didn’t know where Daux and Marie’s fathers were working, so we’d have the kobolds help us find them. They claimed they’d memorized the emperor’s scent, so they led us confidently through the palace halls, tracking his scent trail.

We followed after them, and before long, we came to an area I’d never visited before. Apparently, Daux and Marie had never come here before either because Daux was clinging to Marie’s arm, looking around fearfully.

Finally, Seigo and Rikusei sat down in front of a door, signaling that the emperor was inside. As quietly as possible, I opened the door just a crack and peeked into the room.

Hmm, I can’t see very well…

I took a step back so Daux and Marie could take a look.

“Oh, there’s father!”

Looks like Marie can see a little better than me, at least. How about Daux?

I was still peeking into the room through the sliver of space between them, but I couldn’t make out which of the people inside was the emperor.

“Oh, no! The prime minister spotted us…!” Marie frantically backed away from the door, dragging Daux and me with her.

I wasn’t expecting it and tripped and fell on my butt right in front of the door.

Then the door swung all the way open, and a female elf stepped out into the hall. She closed the door behind her as she

exited the room, so I didn't *think* the emperor or Marie's father had noticed.

"What are you three doing in a place like this?"

What was the prime minister's name again? Um, I think it was something like…

"Lady Zeiatiel…" Marie whispered.

Oh yeah, that's it!

She was a member of the ethnic group of elves who had an affinity with water spirits, as evidenced by her distinctive hair color; her hair was such a light shade of blue that it almost appeared white. The ethnic group of elves with an affinity for earth spirits were petite and adorable, but those with an affinity for water spirits looked much more like the stereotypical image I had in my head of "elves"—statuesque and ethereally beautiful.

"Do you have some business with His Imperial Majesty?" the prime minister pressed.

"Daux and Marie said that they've never seen their fathers working, so I convinced them to come take a peek," I confessed. I knew it was hard to get anything past the astute people who worked high up in the national government, so I skipped over any attempt at lying and went with the truth.

"I see. We're reviewing the status of preparations for Project Roslan. Would you like to come inside and watch for a few minutes?"

"Is it really okay?!" I hadn't dared hope for an invitation to come inside and watch, so I was frankly shocked by her offer.

"It won't interfere with father's work?" Daux asked, making it clear that he was very conscious of the importance of his father's work and hesitant to do anything that might disrupt it.

There was something charming about the innocent way he tried to put up a tough front. In reality, I was sure he was struggling to resist the desire to accept the chance to spend time close to his father.

"There's no need to worry; I assure you it's fine. Besides, this is also an excellent learning opportunity for you, Prince Dauxrouge."

"…A learning opportunity?"

"Indeed. Your Highness is a member of the imperial family, so one day, you will inevitably be involved in governing the country in

one way or another. I'm certain you can learn a lot by observing your father at work."

I was pretty sure that Daux still hadn't come to terms with his position. He seemed convinced a holy beast would never choose to bond with him, but he also wasn't sure how to proceed if one of his siblings was chosen and became the next emperor.

Other than Clay, all of his siblings either didn't seem to pay Daux much mind or actively pushed him away, so it wasn't the kind of relationship where they could freely discuss such things.

It was unreasonable to expect him to be able to smoothly deal with the adults around him at his young age, especially given his timid personality. But the prime minister seemed sympathetic to Daux's plight.

"Daux, let's go watch!" I patted Daux gently on the back, encouraging him, and he finally gave a very faint nod.

"It'll be fine, Daux. Neema and I will be there with you the whole time!" Marie added.

That's right! You won't be alone, so there's nothing to be afraid of. I promise!

Marie and I positioned ourselves protectively on both sides of Daux and followed Lady Zeiatiel into the room.

After leading us to a spot along the wall, Lady Zeiatiel put a finger to her lips in the universal gesture for "Shh!"

A great beauty like Lady Zeiatiel almost makes that gesture look provocative!

"The carpenters' guild has wasted no time in sending over the first draft of the blueprints."

I assumed the blueprint was the large sheet of paper spread out on the table.

"This is a blueprint? I've never seen one like this before…"

"They said that this is a new style of two-dimensional drafting that the carpenters' guild in the Kingdom of Gaché has been advocating."

Look at that! The two-dimensional diagram has made its way to the Linus Empire's carpenters' guild as well! Who would've guessed? Although, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the guilds are constantly sharing information amongst themselves. Craftsmen are notorious for being ravenous for new techniques and methods.

“As we expected, the taller we make it, the more reinforcement it will require. It says here that even with an elemental stone eliminating the issue of outside forces, we still have to find some way to contend with the weight of the building itself…”

I thought that might be a sticking point. If only we had materials such as cement in this world. But wait… The architectural style known as “reinforced concrete” incorporates a frame of steel support beams inside the concrete, doesn’t it?

Couldn’t we do something like that here, too? I’ll have to ask about it later.

“There are no particular issues with the other facilities. However, permission has been requested to make the ludan larger than originally planned.”

I have absolutely no problem with that! If they wanted to make it smaller, I would be disappointed, but when it comes to baths, bigger is always better in my book!

The emperor felt the same way because he easily approved that request.

After that, they discussed how the materials would be procured and the general outline of the budget for Project Roslan. I was shocked by the number of zeros at the end of the total figure.

Just then, a man entered through a separate door, and for some reason, he glared in our direction.

“Why is Prince Dauxrouge here?”

Hearing the man say this, the emperor turned in our direction. I was sure he’d noticed us enter the room but had decided that he should prioritize the meeting and had, therefore, ignored us.

“They said they wanted to observe Your Majesty and the others at work, so I let them in,” Zeiatiel summarized.

Perhaps because it was rare for his children to take the initiative where he was concerned, the emperor’s face transformed into a gentle smile upon hearing this.

“It’s rare for you to express interest openly like this, Daux.”

Despite being addressed directly by his father, Daux simply lowered his face, unable to reply.

“Fathers always look so cool when they’re hard at work, so I thought he should see it for himself!” I chimed in.

“Working is ‘cool’?” the emperor asked incredulously, and I emphatically explained the point.

“My father looks really cool when he’s working! Normally, he’s a little dorky, but he’s so serious when he’s working that it’s really cool.”

It’s true, though—when he’s an over-indulgent, soppy parent, he’s totally uncool, but there’s something super cool about the deadly-serious aura he gives off when he’s working!

“You really love your father, don’t you, Lady Nefertima?”

“It’s not just father; I love mother and my older brother and sister too!”

I knew that the imperial family didn’t get to spend much quality family time together, but I still wanted to encourage the emperor to lean into his role as a father a bit more.

“This is a meeting room, not a playground for children,” the man from before said. “You may be a state guest, but even so, you need to be a bit more aware of your position.”

Tch! Unpleasant as it is, he’s technically correct, so I can only accept the reprimand and apologize.

“It’s fine, Sarius,” the emperor said, covering for me, but I was more curious about who this “Sarius” person was. I didn’t remember meeting him at our welcome banquet.

“Lord Sarius is very strict towards Daux and me, and Prince Aisent as well… He’s not like that toward Prince Theoval, though,” Marie whispered in my ear.

It turned out that Sarius was one of the emperor’s closest advisors.

Maybe he just hates children?

Somehow, he reminded me of my private tutor, Annalee.

While the emperor was speaking with Sarius, Marie’s father approached her.

“Long time no see, Marie. So you’ve been playing with Dauxrouge and Lady Nefertima, have you?”

“Good day, Father. Yes, since you gave your permission, I thought it would be all right…”

This was definitely not a normal parent-child conversation. I could feel a huge distance between them by the stiff and formal

way they spoke to one another.

"Of course, I'm just sorry for not noticing sooner that Marietta was preventing you from interacting with Lady Nefertima."

Marietta was the name of Marie's mother.

Apparently, Marie's father, Towen, had looked into the matter after I reached out to him. That's when he'd discovered that Marietta had also been using her connections to squash my attempts at sending invitations to Daux before he ever received them. That was why I hadn't been able to get Daux to play with me except by passing the invitation through the emperor.

"I'm sure Mother will come around and see what a nice girl Neema is."

You're the one who's a nice girl!

I now knew that Marie had only been standoffish towards me when we first met because she was wary of me due to the kinds of things the adults around her had been saying. It made me achingly curious to know exactly what kind of wicked girl the adults in Daux and Marie's lives thought I was.

"I see…"

Towen, please just lie and agree with her! Given what I know of Marie's mother's personality, I doubt she'll ever approve of Marie's friendship with me, but it would break Marie's heart if she knew that!

Time to change the subject!

"Lord Towen, what kind of work do you do?" I asked.

Back to the original purpose: I wanted to show these two their fathers in action, hard at work.

"I suppose you could say I'm like a personal assistant for Celly — Er, I mean His Majesty. Currently, that entails things like reviewing the reports regarding Project Roslan and making the necessary arrangements."

Hm… I guess that means he handles more "office work" types of tasks, then? I know Louis is also kind of like an assistant to the emperor, but he said most of his work involves observation and traveling. Based on their personalities, it sounds like they're dividing the work based on what suits each person's individual strengths.

"Would you kids like to take a look at the blueprint of the tower we're going to build in the Helios Province?" the emperor asked, finished with his conversation with Sarius. I enthusiastically

jumped at the chance, agreeing without even pausing to consult with Daux and Marie.

"Your Majesty! Do you really think it's prudent to share confidential information with outsiders?!" Sarius objected.

"Lady Nefertima isn't an outsider, and Daux and Marie won't speak of this to anyone else. Isn't that right?"

In response to the question directed at them, both Daux and Marie vehemently swore not to tell anyone.

"You can't believe everything children say…"

"Lord Sarius, do you not have any children?" I asked.

Sorry, but I'm going to stop you right there.

Sarius appeared to be somewhere around his forties, so it would be safe to assume that he would likely be married with children by now.

"…I have two, what of it?"

"Do you also not believe the things your own children say?" I pressed.

The emperor was trying to share what he could about Project Roslan with his son and niece. I understood that, as His Majesty's aide, Sarius had a duty to warn him of the potential danger of divulging sensitive information, but I also wished he would stop making such derogatory statements that would hurt my friends' feelings.

"What makes you think they're worthy of such trust?"

He doesn't even trust his own kids?! That's enough to revoke his right to call himself a father right there!

"In that case, let me put it another way. Can't you relate to the feelings of a father who wants to look cool in front of his children?" I asked.

I had a feeling a lot of fathers in any world, despite not acting particularly fatherly or being overly involved in their children's lives, still tried to show off and make themselves look cool when their children were watching.

Although, the emperor doesn't have to "try to show off"—he's plenty impressive as-is!

"In the first place, I see time spent with children as time wasted," he said gruffly.

It's no use. There's no getting through to this person.

“I see… But children don’t tend to like people such as yourself either, so I can see how it’s probably best for both parties to avoid one another as much as possible,” I quipped.

Considering he’d all but come out and said that he hated kids and didn’t want to spend any time around them, I suspected his own children had already learned not to expect anything of him.

“There’s no way children could hate their own parent,” he argued.

I’d been expecting him to flat-out agree with me, but I probably should’ve realized his ego would never allow him to do that.

“No, I’m quite certain they could…” I returned.

In particular, during the rebellious teenage years, children often say they hate their parents. As the number of things they can do increases, they resent their parents for continuing to treat them like a little kid.

I hadn’t gone through a particularly difficult “rebellious phase” in my past life, but even so, I distinctly remembered thinking at times that my parents were overbearing and annoying. I also recalled that once I hit high school, I no longer wanted my clothes to be washed with those of my father and older brother.

This might be shocking and a bit hurtful to the fathers of the world, but that’s just how girls that age are, so please try to be understanding!

“You’re saying that there are children who hate their parents?”

“It’s unreasonable to expect children to unconditionally love their parents when those parents don’t do anything to act like a parent, isn’t it?” I pointed out.

My grandmother had been a bit heavy-handed in her attempts to ensure Mama wouldn’t suffer in the future, and Mama had put distance between them as a result, but I was certain that being too hands-off was also problematic in its own way.

“Even if you are related by blood, if you fail to build a bond through time spent together, you may as well be strangers,” I declared.

“Lady Nefertima, that hits a bit too close to home for me as well…” the emperor said, sounding a bit uncomfortable.

I’m glad you noticed!

“That’s because I was speaking to you as well! If you don’t cherish the time spent with your family, you’ll have no one but yourself to blame if one of your children says ‘I hate you!’ to you someday!”

In our household, the words “I hate you” were strictly forbidden. I could clearly picture the mortal wound hearing that would deal to Papa in particular. He might actually die if one of us ever said that to him.

“…That’s a terrifying thought.”

“Our King Gauldi often makes a point of spending teatime with the queen and Will,” I said.

It wasn’t *every* day, but at the very least once every three days or so, our king made an appearance for tea. Unfortunately, my timing wasn’t great, so I wasn’t present on many of these occasions.

“I see… Perhaps this is the secret to domestic harmony?”

“So please do your best, Your Majesty, and try to make time to spend with your family! You too, Lord Sarius!”

That ship might have already sailed in Sarius’ case, but as children grew up, they often gained a new perspective on their parents’ situations, so perhaps there was still a chance for him to mend things.

“…I don’t have time for such things.”

Despite his protest, the conviction in his voice seemed weaker than before. Perhaps the idea of being hated by his children had struck a chord within him after all.

“The more skilled a person is, the better they are at arranging their time, so I’m certain *you,* of all people, can find the time!” I said.

Being “skilled” didn’t refer just to how smart you were; it had more to do with knowing how to put your abilities to their best use. That was what made a person effective.

If you’re genuinely so busy that you can’t afford to take a break, then you need to make absolutely sure to rest once the busy period passes! Use that PTO; don’t let it go to waste!

“Your Majesty, you would allow Lord Sarius to take time off if he asked, wouldn’t you?” I asked.

“Of course. Sarius is always working too hard… You really should take a few days off now and again, Sarius,” the emperor

said reflectively.

"I can't stand not being busy working on something… But I will take it into consideration," Sarius allowed gravely.

I hope his relationship with his children can improve after this.

"But Father's so busy with important work…" Marie protested, her uneasy expression making clear how conflicted she felt about interrupting her father's work for the sake of family time. Perhaps that was because she'd never allowed herself to be the least bit selfish with her father's time before.

"Marie, it's as Lady Nefertima said; if I want to make the time, I can. I haven't done so up to this point because I was putting an unfair burden on you."

"It's my duty to support your important work as a member of the imperial family, Father."

Maybe Marie, even more so than Daux, has a deep-rooted loyalty to her father?

"No, Marie," Towen said. "Families are meant to support one another. My parents tried to teach this to me, but it seems I failed to understand it fully until now."

It's possible he failed to notice he was slacking on family obligations because his relationship with his siblings is quite good. But while siblings are an important part of "family," they're different from your wife and kids!

"Why don't you try asking for a hug?" I whispered to Marie, who clearly didn't know how to go about seeking affection from her father. If Marie was holding back, her father would also likely have a hard time judging how proactive he was welcome to be.

We have to use the special perks of childhood while they're still available to us! That means acting a bit spoiled now and then!

"Um… Father, would it be okay for me to get a bit closer to you?"

"Of course. Come over here, Marie," Towen said, holding out both hands and crouching down slightly, positioning himself for a hug.

Marie looked a bit uncertain, or maybe she was just scared? Either way, she didn't show any sign of moving, so I gave her a little push from behind.

I doubted the strength of my gentle push really did much, but either way, Marie took a hesitant step toward Towen and then

another…

Once she'd closed half the distance, Towen came the rest of the way to meet her. Towen's tender feelings for his daughter showed on his face as he wrapped his arms around her, giving her a big hug.

That's right! Marie is so sweet and cute that she'll undoubtedly be snatched up by some lucky guy the moment she's of marriageable age, so this is your chance to have her all to yourself!

I wonder what kind of face Marie's making?

I couldn't see her face from where I was standing, but I figured she was probably either blushing bright red with embarrassment or was so happy that she was struggling to hold back tears.

Either would be really cute, so it's a shame I can't see!

Now then, what will Daux do?

"Daux?"

He was frozen in place, unsure what to do or say now that the emperor was here in front of him. When I called out to him, he looked about to cry. Instead, he quickly hid behind me.

"I can't… I don't know what to say…"

Maybe he was flustered because what was supposed to be just observing from afar had taken such an unexpected turn.

Sorry, Daux. This is due in part to my poor planning. But we can't let this chance pass us by!

"It's okay. Just try telling His Majesty what you're thinking," I encouraged.

"No way, it's too embarrassing," the young prince refused outright.

There's nothing to be embarrassed about!

I turned to face Daux, took both his hands in mine, and did my best to convince him. "Daux, listen to me. Being small and cute are powerful weapons! Just look at Seigo and Rikusei. They're cute right? So cute you can't help but look at them?"

Daux tilted his head to the side, clearly confused about what Seigo and Rikusei had to do with anything.

"This time, when you're a child, and people see you as small and cute, will only last for another two or three cycles. That's why you have to use it while you can!"

The childhood period when it was okay to ask for hugs was short. Even more so for boys.

"You'd be surprised by the number of things you can get away with while you're young. But as you grow, those things become fewer and further between. Don't you think it's a waste not to do all the things you can still get away with now while you have the chance?"

We have to use this special "get out of jail free card" now while we have it! That is the secret weapon given to all children!

"Lady Nefertima, that sounds suspiciously like the speech a general might give to his troops before sending them out into battle…" The emperor was grinning as he said that, but he wasn't wrong—in some ways, this was a life-or-death matter!

"Your Majesty, children can't go through their life all alone, you know? It can be anything—even just empathy is enough—but children need adults to show emotions towards them," I stressed.

Even if they're properly clothed, sheltered, and fed, that's not enough. A person needs to interact and form bonds with others in order to grow.

"I see… I suppose it's akin to a form of battle tactics for children, for the great battle of life."

"In the first place, are those who've never been shown love even capable of loving others? Whether or not Daux can love the citizens of the Linus Empire as a member of the imperial family depends entirely on you and your family, Your Majesty."

It was likely that Daux's difficulties coming to terms with his position as a member of the imperial family were partly due to not knowing how to interact with the citizens.

"That's true… I want Daux to love our empire's citizens as I do and help me govern this empire."

"See, Daux? His Majesty doesn't think of you as a bother—he loves you! So he'll forgive you for being a bit clingy sometimes!"

I did my best to get Daux to see past his insidious concerns of being a hindrance to his father by telling him there was nothing to worry about. Then, I led Daux over to where the emperor was standing.

Once we were right in front of the emperor, he knelt down to put himself at eye level with Daux. Then he gave Daux a tight hug.

“I’m sorry for making you feel lonely. The empress and I love you very much, Daux.”



As I watched Daux, who'd been frozen in place, slowly, tentatively reach up and wrap his arms around the emperor's waist, a sense of accomplishment washed over me.

Both Daux and Marie must be very relieved right now.

Looking at the two children with their fathers made me miss my parents a bit, too. I missed the charmingly dorky way Papa would look confused for a moment after I asked him a question and the gentleness of Mama's hands when she stroked my hair.

I've been so fortunate up to this point, being able to experience my parents' love in all of these small, everyday actions. When I get back to our room, I'm going to get Karna to give me a big hug!

...I'll just have to make sure she doesn't hug me tight enough to break any bones...

2 - Attack on the Linus Imperial Army Part 1

THINGS were peaceful.

Now, I could play with Daux and Marie whenever I wanted. I was left to my own devices while Karna was at school, so I was ecstatic that I had friends to play with.

Things were going well with Project Roslan as well.

However, the tower was still in the planning stage.

The blueprints I'd gotten a glimpse of were much more different from what I'd imagined—the tower was so sturdy it seemed more like a fortress than a tower.

At least make it round! It's supposed to be a tower, after all!

I'd tried voicing that request, but they'd told me it would be less stable if it were round. I also tried suggesting they incorporate a framework of metal support beams inside whatever other building materials they planned to use, but it seemed that in this world, metals such as iron were only used for making weapons.

I hadn't been able to get my point across at all, so in the end, they decided to hold a joint meeting between the carpenters' guild and the blacksmiths' guild soon.

I wanted to prepare a sample before that meeting, but I was terrible at drawing, so I planned to make it out of clay.

Oh, I should have Daux help me! He's good at working with his hands.

But I'd already confirmed that neither Daux nor Marie was available to play today, so I planned to go somewhere within the imperial palace I'd never been to before.

I brought Shinki and Spica with me and asked Seigo and Rikusei to be my guides.

Kai had smoothly integrated with the couriers at the imperial palace. Marie had told me about the rumors that were going around about the "beautiful young man" who'd recently arrived at court. Still, I wondered what exactly he did all day.

"Lady Neema, where are you going today?"

"Today, I'm going to meet the soldiers!"

It would be a shame to miss the opportunity to see an army even stronger than our own Royal Knighthood!

I'd heard that in addition to the large number of beastpeople serving in the imperial army, there were also a few elves.

And so, today, I'd asked Seigo and Rikusei to lead us to the imperial army's office. This office, which was inside the imperial palace, was where most of the administrative work was carried out, but the imperial army's headquarters was located elsewhere. I'd been told that the barracks where the wyverns lived was at this other location, so I wanted to visit it soon, too.

"...I'm not good with wyverns..."

When I mentioned wanting to visit the wyverns' barracks, Spica physically recoiled.

That's fine! It's not your fault; being afraid of wyverns is hardwired into your DNA, so there's nothing to be ashamed of.

"When we go there, you can play with Seigo and Rikusei a short distance away," I suggested.

The dragon stables in the Kingdom of Gaché were spacious, so I assumed the wyverns' barracks in the Linus Empire probably were, too. If so, I figured we could probably find a safe place for Spica to play where the wyverns were unlikely to come.

"But I want to stay by your side, Lady Neema..."

"Spica, you need to pay attention to your instincts as a beastperson," I said. "If you continue oppressing them, they might become dull, and when it comes to it, that might be the difference between life and death!"

Her instincts as a beastperson were essentially her natural survival instincts. A beastperson was no match for a wyvern, and the fear she felt in their presence was her survival instincts at work, warning her not to get close or else she might be eaten. But if she dulled those instincts, they might not kick in when she most needed them—when her life was in danger.

"Okay..."

Spica looked dejected, so I took her hand and tried to cheer her up by saying, "It's okay, don't worry! There's no possibility of the wyverns attacking me. If anything, it's *people* you need to focus on protecting me from. I'm counting on you, Spica!"

Once I started participating in social functions as a member of the nobility more and more, there would be times when it

wasn't appropriate to be accompanied by a male bodyguard. That would be Spica's time to shine.

I hoped it would never be necessary, but a small part of me also secretly longed to see Spica's fighting skills in action.

Maybe I can drop in sometime while she's training? I can just imagine how cool a faceoff between Spica and Shell, dressed in maid uniforms, would be!

I was walking along holding hands with Spica, and as the army's office came into view, Shinki suddenly burst into action. It wasn't just Shinki—Spica also jumped in front of me, covering my body with her own.

Peeking out through the narrow space between Spica's arm and her torso, I saw something large flying towards us. Shinki caught it and tossed it to the side.

I glanced over at the thing that had been thrown on the ground and found that it looked suspiciously human-shaped…

"Look out!" a soldier shouted, running towards us in pursuit of the thing that had come hurtling in our direction. A "thing" which it turned out really *was* a person.

"…Are you okay?" I called out hesitantly to the person lying sprawled out on the ground, but they appeared to be unconscious.

"Forgive me, my lady! Are you injured?!" the soldier who'd finally made it over to us asked frantically.

That guy's the one you need to be worried about, not me!

"I'm fine. Please see to him first."

"Thank you. This is a common occurrence; he will be fine."

Even as he said that, though, the soldier scooped up his fallen companion, threw him over his shoulder, and took off jogging back towards the building.

"…What was that all about?" I wondered.

"They're training over there, so he was probably thrown by someone." Spica pointed to an open area that appeared to be a training arena, which made sense given our current location, but I still couldn't wrap my head around the other part of what she'd said.

Since when can humans fly through the air like that?! Whoever threw him must be on the same level as Grandpa Gouche and Shinki!

I was curious now, so I detoured straight to the training arena to look there first.

Unlike the Royal Knighthood's training grounds, this arena was outdoors but had no roof, making it seem almost like a sports field. A simple grid-patterned fence surrounded the arena that was just a bit taller than I was, meaning the man who'd come hurtling at us must've been sent flying over this fence.

I peeked into the arena through one of the gaps in the fence and saw many people fighting.

"Who goes there?!" someone shouted suddenly, causing me to flinch back and freeze.

Whoa, that surprised me!

Spica stepped protectively in front of me and spoke with the soldier on the other side of the fence. "Pardon the interruption during your training session. My lady would like to tour the facility. If you wouldn't mind pointing out the person in charge?"

Seeing her hold her own like this drove home how much she'd matured.

"Oh, a little noble lady, eh? They sure are curious, aren't they, sticking their noses into the strangest places whenever it suits their fancy... Wait here a minute."

With that, the soldier wandered off.

A minute later, someone came out of the office.

"I was informed that an unusual little noblewoman has arrived saying she would like to view a rough and unrefined location such as this?"

Yep, that's me—the strange and curious little noblewoman. And anyway, what's with his prickly attitude?

The man identified himself as a lieutenant, gave his name, and bowed as was required by protocol, but his blatantly rude attitude made it abundantly clear how much of a waste of time he considered this conversation.

Yeesh, as a grown adult, you'd think he could act with basic courtesy!

"Forgive me for interrupting your important work. I am Nefertima Osphe, visiting from the Kingdom of Gaché. I would very much like to observe today's practice session."

Striving for a flawless presentation, I curtsied, introduced myself, and stated my reason for coming.

If someone bowed to you, it was customary to bow again in acknowledgment. This wasn't absolutely required, but in my country, where people tended to be strict about following proper manners, failing to return a bow would inevitably cause a scandal over your boorish manners.

"…Huh?"

The man's face made it clear that he had no idea what I was talking about.

How strange…

"The emperor did tell me that I could have a look whenever I liked, but perhaps I should've sent word in advance to receive permission? In that case, maybe it would be best for me to meet with the commander-in-chief first…"

It seemed I should've directly contacted the commander-in-chief, a large tiger tribe beastperson who held the highest position of authority in the Linus Imperial Army.

Even if I request a meeting now, he probably won't be available today, though.

I'd thought that it would be fine to just approach whichever lieutenant was on duty at the time I arrived, but apparently, I'd been naïve in assuming this person would know who I was and that I'd been given permission to visit.

I assumed it would work as seamlessly as my "royal palace all-access-pass" back home, but I guess I'm not as widely known here.

Just then, someone I recognized came out of the office.

"Lady Nefertima, what are you doing in a place like this?"

"Unit leader!"

I was certain he was a unit leader but couldn't remember which unit of the private guard he was in charge of. Maybe Theo's private guard?

"I was hoping to observe the soldiers' training session but didn't think to obtain the commander-in-chief's permission in advance…" I said.

"Oh, if that's all, then don't worry—you don't need to get permission. We received a notification that other than the wyverns' barracks, we are to show you around all of the other army facilities whenever you wish."

Huh? So, I have an all-access pass after all? If they received the notification, then why does this lieutenant not seem to know anything

about it?

I tilted my head to the side, unable to reconcile what I was hearing with the situation.

"I'm certain the lieutenant was just hesitant to allow a noble young lady to get too close to a bunch of rowdy soldiers out of a concern for your gently bred sensibilities," the unit leader speculated generously.

I see…

Reading between the lines, I'm assuming this guy didn't bother remembering my name when the notification came, and when he saw me, he just assumed I was a busybody aristocrat come to amuse myself at his expense?

"Treat Lady Nefertima with the utmost care. If you don't, you'll find yourself answering to holy beasts and elemental spirits," the unit leader warned the lieutenant.

I don't think that will make him like me any more…

"Lady Nefertima, don't hesitate to tell me if you have any issues. And when you want to visit the wyvern's barracks, I recommend you arrange it with the commander-in-chief ahead of time."

"Thanks for the advice. I'll definitely do that!"

I thanked the unit leader, and he returned to work, leaving me in an awkwardly tense atmosphere, alone with the lieutenant. The lieutenant did apologize briefly for the misunderstanding, though, before quickly herding me into the office.

Maybe he's not of noble birth and clawed his way up to this position entirely through merit. That would explain why he seems to have a disdain for the nobility.

The internal power struggles in the Linus Empire were too sticky. If I wasn't careful, I risked being sucked into them.

"All of the people in this office are members of the division in charge of guarding the imperial palace," he explained.

"There sure are a lot of beastpeople, huh?"

"While it's true that there are a lot of beastpeople in the army, there are also many humans who despise beastpeople, even though our long history of victories in battles with other countries is largely dependent on their strength."

Hmm, so there is a discord between the species after all, huh? Is that why there appear to be more humans than beastpeople in the

division in charge of protecting the imperial palace?

"In that case, there must be even more beastpeople stationed in other places, right?" I asked.

"…You seem very concerned about beastpeople, my lady. Is there some reason for that?"

"A reason? Only that I want to make friends with them if possible…"

If we become friends, they might agree to let me touch their ears and tails! Not to mention, there are lots of things I don't know about beastpeople, so I would love it if they could teach me.

"…Not many aristocrats would say that they want to make friends with beastpeople."

"Really? But the emperor himself said that species is irrelevant to a person's social status in the Linus Empire."

The style of bowing they used in this country was designed to reflect that.

Not to mention, I'd read in a book on the history of the Linus Empire that the beastpeople played a large part in the founding of the country and its survival through the Age of Turmoil.

"A few beastpeople are among the nobility, but most are commoners. It seems the general sentiment is that humans look down on them for being crude and aggressive."

"What need is there to pay any mind to people who say such things? The country you and your soldiers protect is made up of *all* its citizens. I think it's enough to be sincere to those citizens," I said.

Honestly, I would've liked to suggest the imperial army follow my country's lead and refuse to take orders from the nobility entirely. Since I knew that wasn't possible, I settled for urging him to ignore unkind comments.

"It's been a long time since anyone said something like that to me."

"So there was someone else who said the same thing?"

"Yes, the man who is now emperor. There was a time when I refused to accept any promotions because I knew that the higher in rank I climbed, the more my common birth would be held against me. But His Majesty told me not to waste my time listening to what the aristocrats have to say and instead focus on listening to the voices of the citizens to help ensure they can live in peace."

Way to go, Emperor Celiunos; that was really cool of you! But wait… This also means that since I'm technically an aristocrat, he shouldn't listen to anything I *say either, right? That won't do!*

"In that case, I can see why you were unwilling to let me in earlier despite my protests…"

He'd ultimately let me into the building because the unit leader had vouched for me, but if the unit leader hadn't shown up when he did, I probably would've been turned away.

Just as I came to that conclusion, Spica spoke up, addressing the lieutenant directly despite that as a mere attendant—and a low-ranking attendant at that—protocol demanded that she keep her thoughts to herself. "Lady Neema treats everyone with respect, no matter their species. She doesn't look down on anyone, regardless of whether they're a beastperson or even a monster."

"Spica, it's his right as the person in charge here to determine for himself whether or not to admit outsiders. I'm grateful for your willingness to come to my defense, but please stand down for now."

To be honest, I was happy that Spica had my back, but when it came down to it, this office was off-limits to outsiders. The right to decide who would be permitted entrance was squarely in the lieutenant's hands. Even though the emperor had decreed I could visit, if the lieutenant determined it was dangerous for me to be here while they were training, the emperor wouldn't force the issue, and I had no intention of pushing my luck.

"…I'm sorry."

Spica had apologized, so now it was my turn to apologize on her behalf, as it was only fitting given I was her employer.

"Please forgive my servant's rash words."

"There's no need to apologize. I can see how much she values and respects you as her mistress."

Spica's tails wagged in response to the lieutenant's words. He took in her response with a faint smile. Something told me that the lieutenant took people's unfair judgment of beastpeople to heart.

"I don't mind if you want to watch the soldiers' training session up close, but some of them might say rude things not fit for the ears of a young lady such as yourself. Depending on how

severe it is, I may be able to punish them, but I want you to be prepared for just how terrible their impressions of the nobility are."

"It's fine. If anyone does anything to me, Shinki and Spica won't stand for it. Since they're soldiers, I assume none of them will cry if they get roughed up a bit, right?"

I knew Shinki was strong, so I doubted he would be easy to beat.

If any of the soldiers not only disrespected an aristocrat but then also lost in a fight with her servant, they'd lose face completely. I had no intention of causing a huge scandal, but I wanted confirmation that reasonable self-defense wouldn't be held against me.

"I don't think any of them are foolish enough to go as far as raising a hand against a child, but in the event they do prove so foolish, you needn't go easy on them."

He seems confident that his faith in his subordinates isn't misplaced. Although, I doubt that any of the soldiers would actually strike a child.

"Now then, please come this way."

The lieutenant led us into the training arena, which I realized on closer inspection was more like a plot of undeveloped land than a proper sports field. There was really nothing but flat, bare earth.

It looks to be around the size of three football fields, by my best guess?

The sports fields at the small, rural junior high school I'd attended in my previous life had contained a 400-meter track, a baseball field, a soccer field, and two tennis courts, but this arena was larger than that.

Here and there, soldiers were paired off sparring together.

Magnificent pillars of fire blasted into the air in places, while miniature tornadoes sprung up in others. In yet another area, I saw a person sent flying with such force that it was almost humorous to witness…

Oh, look at that!

"That beastperson is a member of the wing tribe. The wing tribe's ability to fly makes them indispensable in our army's forces."

Oh, right, that was their name! I associated them with their animal ancestor and have been thinking of them as "feliance beastpeople," but their tribe's proper name is actually "the wing tribe."

The wing tribe beastperson was facing off against another beastperson who, although I'd never met one of them before, I could identify immediately.

With that long face, shimmering scales, and thick, muscular tail… He's got to be a member of the lizard tribe!

"Even the lizard tribe, renowned for possessing fighting ability rivaling that of the large tiger tribe and the bear tribe, can't do much if their enemy takes to the air and flies away."

Beastpeople are really amazing! Although their bodies are almost identical to humans, they also clearly display the characteristics of their animal ancestors. It's undoubtedly due to God's power, but this feels like one of the great mysteries of life!

I want to see them up close!

"I would like to speak with that lizard tribe beastperson!"

"…That's fine with me, but I have to warn you that he can be quite gruff and a bit intimidating…"

The most intimidating creatures I'd met so far had been the ogres. Not including monsters, I think Grandpa Gouche was the next most imposing and stern-faced person I knew, and I wasn't afraid of him.

"Is he scarier than an ogre?" I asked.

"No, ogres are hands-down the scarier of the two." The lieutenant grinned wryly, clearly never imagining he'd be asked to compare beastpeople to ogres.

"In that case, it'll be fine!"

Honestly, I was more scared of the emperor than the ogres at the time, anyway!

Convinced by my response, the lieutenant promised to call the lizard tribe beastperson over once their match was done.

From a safe distance away, we watched the two beastpeople battle it out.

The wing tribe beastperson repeatedly divebombed the lizard tribe beastperson, attacking unpredictably from the sky.

But the lizard tribe beastperson countered by leaping unbelievably high, using his powerful tail to knock the sword from

his opponent's hand, and while he was distracted, grabbing the wing tribe beastperson in a headlock, forcing him to land.

I could feel the impact accompanying the loud *CRASH!* as the wing tribe beastperson hit the ground from all the way over here.

"Looks like the winner has been determined," the lieutenant muttered almost to himself before raising his voice to call the two of them over.

Why did he also call the wing tribe beastperson over?

"These are Dayu of the wing tribe and Barg of the lizard tribe."

Up close, the wings of the wing tribe beastperson really did look just like an angel's. They were incredibly beautiful. However, the bushy fur on Dayu's tail was short, like that of a fox in summer. No matter how you looked at it, it was clear that he'd trimmed it short, perhaps for ease of movement.

It's such a shame!

"This is an important guest from the Kingdom of Gaché; please treat her with respect," the lieutenant said, introducing me in the barest terms possible.

"My name is Nefertima Osphe; nice to meet you."

"...What business does some aristocrat's kid have here?" The lizard tribe beastperson, Barg, pinned me with a cold glare.

His face, which was longer than a human's, had no eyebrows, and his eyes were thin and slanted, making him seem every bit as intimidating as the lieutenant had warned. However, the dark gray scales peeking out on all the visible areas of his Shinki-like chiseled physique, such as his arms and neck, were enough to give him a fierce aura all on their own.

And what immediately drew my eye was his tail! It was thicker at the base and tapered out towards the end.

I really *want to try touching that tail!*

"Your tail, can I..."

Oh, crap! What am I doing?! I almost blurted out that I wanted to touch his tail! It would be wildly inappropriate to make such a request to someone I've only just met for the first time, right?!

"My tail?"

"Uh... No, it's nothing. You're just the first member of the lizard tribe I've had the opportunity to meet, so I was hoping to speak to you for just a moment, is all..."

I think I managed to evade the topic successfully just now, but he definitely picked up that I said the word "tail." Please forget you ever heard that!

"I see, so you've come to laugh at me, have you?"

"Absolutely not! I wanted to view your amazing tail—no, I mean your amazing *fighting ability*!—up close!"

I have got *to get ahold of myself! No matter how enticing his tail may be, I have to stop letting that word slip unbidden from my traitorous mouth!*

"I don't know who you heard about me from, but I'm well aware that they all love to gossip about how hideous I am behind my back."

"That's just a difference in sensibilities. I wouldn't bother concerning myself with what such people think if I were you," I said.

"Sensibilities?"

Barg didn't have eyebrows, but I could tell he was furrowing his brow from how his eyes narrowed.

Observing him, it occurred to me that he didn't have scales on his face or fingertips. It was probably an evolutionary trait to make complex movements easier. Rather than his entire body being covered in scales like a true lizard, it seemed likely that he only had them in strategic places where they would provide additional protection against attacks.

"Some people think wyverns are cool, while others think they're scary. I think it's probably the same with how people view you. People tend to fear that which is different. Some will put down those they fear in a foolish attempt at reassuring themselves. Personally, I think it's the best policy to write such people off as a lost cause and ignore them entirely," I said.

"I see… And what do you think of Barg, young lady?" the wing tribe beastperson Dayu asked, causing me to pause to consider how to respond.

If I answer completely honestly, he'll probably be horrified and think I'm a shameless freak. But something tells me that even if I try to smooth out the edges, my real feelings will be seen straight through.

"It probably won't make much sense, but I'll try my best to explain…"

With this preface, I went on to describe my impression of Barg.

His scales reminded me of a dragon, and his powerful tail called to mind a whip as it moved around as if it had a mind of its own. His appearance was, indeed, fierce and a bit intimidating, but his scales were beautiful, and his tail was deeply fascinating. Although they didn't have any of the cuteness of a gecko or a salamander, the lizard tribe beastpeople won hands down when it came to the coolness factor.

They inherited all of their animal ancestor's best qualities!

"...Do you have something wrong with your head, young lady?"

"That's not fair! It's like I said—a difference in sensibilities!"

I'd been trying my best to maintain the facade of a gently bred young noblewoman, but without realizing it, my true nature slipped out.

"I'm quite certain I've never met any other noblewoman who described a beastperson's tail as 'fascinating.'"

"Speaking of tails, why is the hair on your tail so short, Mr. Dayu?"

The tail of the wing tribe beastperson I'd met back home in the Kingdom of Gaché had been bushy like a fox's. *Maybe the wing tribe are the most blessed among all beast people in receiving the best features of their ancestors?*

They all had those beautiful snowy-white wings that looked just like angels, but the color of their ears and tails seemed to differ depending on the individual. Dayu's fur was a light brown color that sometimes looked almost golden depending on the lighting, keeping in line with his overall "angelic" impression.

"When I grow it out long, it gets in the way and gets dirty easily during practice, so I trim it short to make it easier to keep clean."

...Ahh, that's something I think anyone with long hair can relate to. If you don't keep up with it, long hair can easily become tangled and matted. I suppose you could compare his situation to a human buzzing their hair because it's a hassle to wash when it's long.

I enthusiastically took the opportunity to ask the two men several other questions that had been burning in my mind, like

where each of their tribes' native lands were, their tribes' characteristic strengths, and even their favorite foods.

Dayu patiently answered each of my questions, but Barg was a bit gruff in his replies.

While we were talking, other soldiers who'd finished their practice matches began to gather around us, and each reacted as if they'd witnessed some kind of rare creature for the first time.

Is it really that unheard of for a member of the nobility to express interest in understanding beastpeople?!

"That's enough, men. You're being rude to our guest, so get lost."

The lieutenant quickly shooed the gawking soldiers away when they got too rowdy. But by that point, training had finished, which meant the soldiers probably had some other work they needed to get started on, anyway.

"I'll end my visit here for today," I announced. "Would it be okay for me to visit again?"

"You want to come back?!"

Barg seemed shocked, but of course I wanted to come back! It was fun to watch the soldiers training, and I could tell I still had a way to go before I could say we'd truly become friends.

"His Majesty did say you were welcome to visit, and you've given us no reason to refuse you."

"Lieutenant?!" Barg exclaimed incredulously, wanting to argue but unable to due to the strict hierarchy within the imperial army.

Barg might grumble about it all he liked, but I doubted he would actually disobey.

He seems to be a very "what you see is what you get" type of person. That's not a bad thing, though.

After waving goodbye to everyone, I pondered what I might be able to bring as a gift to share with everyone the next time I visited.

"A gift? As the primary organization in charge of protecting the country, the army is always in danger of being maliciously targeted, so they aren't allowed to accept gifts from private citizens…" Paul explained when I asked him for advice after returning to my and Karna's suite of rooms.

“But Dan and Lestin have accepted my gifts plenty of times in the past…”

If I remembered correctly, I’d brought small gifts such as candies and baked goods for the knights at the beast stables and dragon stables to share on multiple occasions.

“That was after they determined the sincerity of your intentions.”

According to Paul, I’d been immediately determined not to be a threat to the animals, but they’d observed me for a while longer before they’d been satisfied with the sincerity of my intentions towards the knights.

Aristocrats often looked down on people whose jobs involved caring for animals as “dirty” and “smelly.”

If I ever hear any nobles saying such things, I’ll give them a piece of my mind! The beast knights and dragon knights treat the animals and dragons in their care as valued partners who help them protect our country and its citizens!

“So if you want to give a gift, I think it might be best to ask His Majesty or Lord Louivence for their assistance.”

I suppose there have been cases in the past where people poisoned the army’s food or water to weaken them in preparation for a large-scale attack. They don’t have poison testers like the nobility, so refusing to eat anything from unconfirmed sources is akin to self-defense.

“Okay. The emperor is probably busy, so I’ll try asking Louis.”

I drafted a letter to Louis summarizing my situation and asked Paul to deliver it for me.

But, for some reason, when Paul returned from making the delivery, Louis was with him.

“I’m bored sick of doing paperwork all day, so I thought this would be the perfect opportunity for a tea break with you, Neema,” he said.

He’s skipping out on his work?! Don’t drag me into it and use me as a convenient excuse for being a slacker!

“Paperwork is also a very important part of your official duties!” I insisted.

“But everyone needs to take a break now and then, right?”

I suppose he has a point. Taking regular breaks has *been shown to improve efficiency. But Louis himself admitted he’s just bored!*

“More importantly, I heard you went to the training arena? How was it?”

“I got to speak with beastpeople from the lizard and wing tribes!”

From an outside perspective, it was probably alarming that I then went on to describe in great detail all of the parts of these two beastpeople I wanted to touch and pet.

“I figured it would be fine since it’s you, but now I’m a bit worried on a different account,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“In general, most beastpeople are extremely loyal by nature. But even if they’ve vowed fealty to the imperial family, they will often bare their fangs at members of the nobility.”

I had a feeling that Barg would skip right over “baring his fangs” at the nobles and jump straight to taking a chunk out of them if they rubbed him the wrong way.

That lieutenant sure has his work cut out for him!

“If you let your guard down just because they’re beastpeople, you might be eaten.”

…He’s speaking rhetorically, right? I’m not in any danger of literally *being chewed up and swallowed, nom-nom-nom, am I?*

Or even worse, does he mean it in some other *manner…?!*

Neeeever mind, I’m going to stop that train of thought right there.

“…I’ll be careful,” I promised.

You never know what could happen, after all. I need to stop relying entirely on Shinki and Spica and work on avoiding danger in the first place!

I determined to take Louis’s warning to heart.

Louis seemed to get along with beastpeople fairly well—the commander-in-chief and he were old friends, after all. He’d told me stories of how he, the commander-in-chief, and several other beastperson friends had played together and gotten up to all manner of mischief when they were young.

Ooooh, I’m so jealous!

“I will prepare the gift and have it delivered in your name, Neema.”

Once he’d finished drinking his tea, Louis announced regretfully, “I suppose it’s time to get back to work,” and left to do

just that.

He really is one of those people whose personality doesn't match their appearance at all!

3 - Attack on the Linus Imperial Army Part 2

TODAY, I was going back to the training arena!

And this time, Daux and Marie were going with me.

However, we had to keep the two of them visiting the training arena a secret from everyone other than their fathers, who, as their parental guardians, needed to be informed to give permission. The emperor and Lord Towen didn't hold any prejudices against beastpeople, so they easily agreed to allow the outing, but the emperor warned us that other adults might not understand, so we'd be better off keeping it a secret.

The emperor had grumbled that it didn't sit well with him, either, how beastpeople were treated and that although he wanted to do something about it, there was no clear path for decisive action that could improve the situation.

"It might be impossible to change things overnight, but we can change the future. All we have to do is change the attitudes of the children who will become the next generation and get them to see how cool beastpeople are!" I suggested enthusiastically.

"The next generation, hm? I suppose it's true that the children of the nobility don't generally have any opportunities to interact with beastpeople. And by the time they're old enough to attend social functions, their impressions of beastpeople are already stained with the prejudices of their parents."

This was just a guess, but I had a strong feeling that the common citizens held much less prejudice against beastpeople than the aristocrats. There were many more beastpeople here than in the Kingdom of Gaché, so I figured the common citizens probably found themselves interacting with beastpeople on a daily basis. Having more contact with the beastpeople would likely have the same effect as it had on Louis, who'd developed feelings of friendly goodwill towards beastpeople after spending so much time with them. Although, in Louis's case, his friends were more like partners in crime.

“Please allow me to join if there’s an opportunity to bring the beastpeople and humans together!” I requested.

“Of course. I have a feeling you will serve as a bridge between our two species, Lady Nefertima.”

I’m nothing that special! The only thing I can do is preach the wonders of beastpeople’s soft fur. And preach I shall!

In case you were wondering, the conversation between the emperor and I occurred when I went to get his permission to take Daux on an outing.

The emperor went one step further, making all the preparations so that instead of merely “playing at the training arena,” we were going on a proper “tour of the Linus Imperial Army’s military facilities.”

In the morning, we would stop in at the training arena as planned, but then we’d eat a picnic lunch in a reportedly stunning spot outside the borders of the imperial city, after which we would take a tour of the army’s headquarters and finally visit the wyverns’ barracks.

“Your ability to get things done is really impressive, Neema.”

“It’s like I said before, Marie—we have to do all the things we can get away with because we’re kids while we’re still young! Girls especially have it tough—before too much longer, they’ll be telling us to act more ‘ladylike’ and not letting us go out anywhere!”

This was especially true for a highborn lady like Marie. Once she approached marriageable age, her “battle of womanhood” would begin in earnest, and her time would be so full of tea parties and other stuffy social functions that she’d have no time to play.

“...I don’t want that. Even when we get older, I want to keep playing with you and Daux,” she said.

“Me too!” Daux agreed.

Ahhh, they’re just too cute! But physical distance might be a problem. I’ll have returned to the Kingdom of Gaché by then, after all...

Maybe I can ask Sol to take me for a little visit now and then? I suppose I could always marry into the Linus Empire, after all... Nah, that’s out of the question. It might be pushing it a bit to hope for both Daux and Marie to marry into the Kingdom of Gaché...

Yeah, Sol is probably the safest bet!

Before the three of us skipped off to play at the training arena, there was one thing we had to do first…

“We’ll be in your care today!” I cheerfully greeted the guards who would accompany us on today’s outing.

“We received orders, so we have no choice but to comply, but Prince Dauxrouge is *supposed* to be engaged in his studies at this time. Please don’t make a habit of disrupting His Highness’s schedule and interfering with his education,” the unit leader of Daux’s private guard replied sternly.

I already knew that the people in Daux’s entourage didn’t think much of me. But education wasn’t restricted to merely what you could learn by reading books at a desk.

“In that case, this is a good opportunity for Daux to further his education. He can see for himself what kind of people the soldiers who protect this country are and what they do on a daily basis.”

“…Is that knowledge necessary for His Highness?”

“Of course it is. Daux needs to become familiar with the soldiers in the Linus Imperial Army to solidify their support of him as a member of the imperial family. Or are you suggesting that you men are the only ones loyal to Daux?”

The adults around Daux had manipulated him so much that he didn’t know many things he should’ve learned by now. It was still forgivable, given his young age, but at the end of the day, he was still a member of the imperial family. The responsibilities he would have to shoulder in the future would be different from those of us who were mere aristocrats. I was certain that Daux would become a kind and just imperial prince no matter what, but even so, it would be a shame to let any opportunities to learn and grow pass him by.

“Certainly, we are not the only ones, but we are His Highness’s most loyal supporters.”

“In that case, act like it,” I said. “What Daux will study and what choices he’ll make in the future are things for *him* to decide, not the adults around him. If you are his loyal supporters, as you claim, should you not be encouraging his growth and keeping bad people away from him?”

“There’s every possibility *you* are one of those ‘bad people’…”

Yeesh, he's like a stubborn, overbearing parent. If only he would open his eyes and be more flexible, he would be a strong ally for Daux.

"I see. In that case, please observe closely and determine my intentions for yourself. There will be plenty of time for you to do so today."

If I don't end this conversation soon, I'm not sure how much longer Paul and Spica will be able to contain their killing auras! Don't worry! I'm Mama's daughter, so I won't be bested at verbal sparring!

Paul was joining us today, which meant I couldn't be quite as reckless as I might otherwise. Paul was coming along because Marie hadn't brought any attendants. We'd had to be very picky when choosing our chaperones because the emperor had said to keep this outing a secret. All of Daux's private guards had vowed upon their names in front of the emperor not to tell anyone where we went today or what we did there.

"All right, let's get a move on, everyone!"

Despite my exuberance, our "journey" was short—the training arena was only a short walk away.

"We're here, Mr. Perry!"

Perry was the name of the lieutenant I'd met last time I was here. He was a burly old soldier but had a cute name. It reminded me of a certain commodore who'd captained a famous fleet of black ships.

"Thank you for gracing us with a visit, Prince Dauxrouge. Oh, and you seem energetic as usual, little lady."

Hold on, Perry! Why am I just an afterthought?!

I'd thought I'd gotten on pretty good terms with the soldiers guarding the imperial palace. The bribe—no, I mean *gift*—I'd asked Louis to help me with seemed to have worked.

The soldiers had taken to calling me "little lady," but somehow, the nickname, coupled with the incongruency between their fierce appearances and kind manner, made me feel a bit like the daughter of a mafia family.

"Sir Perry, isn't that a bit rude to our state guest?" Surprisingly, Daux's unit leader frowned at Perry's lack of decorum towards me.

But you know, there sure are a lot of "unit leaders" here! There's the unit leader of the emperor's private guard, the unit leader of

Louis's private guard, and so on… And I actually see them all pretty regularly.

I should probably work on learning all of their names…

"I told them it was fine to speak casually to me when we're not in a formal setting," I explained.

Not only Perry but the other soldiers also looked so uncomfortable trying to force themselves to adopt formal language and manners that they weren't accustomed to that I'd been the one to finally all but beg them just to act normally.

I often got exhausted from always having to use polite language all the time, so I knew how hard it was.

"Forgive me, the little lady is such an unusual noble that I unintentionally forgot her station. I will take more care in the future."

"I'm the one intruding on your time, so I wish you wouldn't stand at attention for my sake…"

My cheeks were puffed out in frustration when Paul whispered to me, "There's a time and place for everything."

I know that! But the training arena is their territory, and having them behave informally makes me feel more at ease because it gives the impression that they've accepted me.

"Please follow me. My subordinates are all excited to show off their skills in today's demonstration after hearing that Your Highness will be observing."

When we stepped out into the arena, the soldiers were lined up in orderly lines. Someone called out a command, and they all bowed to Daux in perfect unison.

"Daux, say something to the soldiers," I urged in a whisper.

"…What should I say?"

"Hmm, how about something like 'Thank you for all of your hard work on behalf of our empire' or 'Keep working hard on your training'?"

I'd never given a proper speech before myself, so I wasn't sure exactly what it should consist of, but I tried to recall the kinds of things I'd heard Will say in the past.

Daux's unit leader cast a spell using wind magic to project Daux's voice for all the soldiers to hear. Fidgeting uncomfortably, Daux nevertheless took a step forward and opened his mouth, a look of determination coming over his face.

“Um… I think that for most of you, this is probably our first time meeting. My name is Dauxrouge. Today, I’m visiting because Neema invited me, but I would very much like to get to know all of you… Please continue to work hard for the sake of the Linus Empire!”

Whoa! Nice job, Daux!

The soldiers, too, applauded Daux’s bravery in delivering this speech despite his obvious nervousness.

He’s adorable and amusing, right? And you all saw for yourselves how hard he’s trying, right?! I felt something akin to parental pride bloom in my chest.



“That was great, Daux! You’re awesome!”

“I knew you could do it!”

Daux smiled shyly at my and Marie’s praise.

“What do you say, men? Shall we have His Highness view the results of our rigorous training? Don’t put the name of the Linus Imperial Army to shame!” Perry shouted encouragement to the troops, signaling the commencement of a mock battle that encompassed the entirety of the arena’s grounds.

I was awed, just as I was every time I witnessed it, by the sounds of swords clashing and magical explosions. Now and then, sudden gusts of wind buffeted us all the way over in the observation area.

Oh, and Barg threw someone out of the ring again.

No one seemed to be able to stand against Barg, who was rapidly opening a wide space around himself. Anyone who accidentally got too close found themselves on the receiving end of his merciless tail attack.

That tail is a formidable weapon!

Oh no, Barg just took a direct hit from a spell!

…But, for some reason, he seems completely unaffected? Maybe he has some kind of magical item on him? Either that, or his scales are just incredibly magic-resistant?

“Feliance-people really can fly in the sky!” Marie muttered to herself, awestruck as she watched Dayu hovering overhead.

“Lady Marie, forgive my rudeness, but the proper way to refer to them is not as ‘feliance-people’ but as ‘the wing tribe,’” Paul immediately corrected.

When I asked why, he explained that beastpeople deeply respected their animal ancestors and didn’t feel it was appropriate to be lumped in with them as the same creature. The God of Creation had created each tribe of beastpeople based on a different animal. In conclusion, if not for that animal’s existence, they wouldn’t exist.

“Oh, really? I had no idea!”

“Every time you learn something new, you become a little smarter than you were before!”

I had a feeling that Marie had probably heard the adults around her referring to the wing tribe that way, which was why she’d thought nothing of saying the same thing herself.

The training exercise concluded, and the soldiers formed orderly lines once more.

After receiving permission from Lieutenant Perry, I raced straight over to Barg.

“Mr. Barg! Do it again!!”

“Little lady, you sure do love that game, huh?”

The lizard tribe beastperson sighed at me in good-natured exasperation, but I didn’t care—it was so much fun that I couldn’t help asking him to do it over and over again!

Barg’s tail snaked its way around my hips, and I was slowly lifted off my feet and waved gently back and forth. The movements gradually picked up speed, and I dipped and turned, just like riding a roller coaster!

I shrieked with joyful exhilaration, enjoying every second of this thrilling sensation I probably wouldn’t be able to experience anywhere else in this world.

This kind of game was only possible with the assistance of a lizard tribe beastperson’s tail, which was powerful enough to throw full-grown men through the air.

“That was so much fun!”

Paul was clutching his head as if my complete lack of decorum was giving him a migraine, but apparently, this was a common game among the lizard tribe, similar to how human adults often held young children over their heads just to see them laugh.

“Do you want to try, Daux?” I asked.

“What?! Me?!”

The tricky point with this game was that it put quite a burden on the body, so you needed to wear clothes containing written magic spells protecting against physical attacks. All of my clothes contained those spells, and I knew that, as a general rule, all the clothing persons of high status wore contained them as well.

“But if His Highness were to be injured…”

“That’s what we have doctors for! And besides, a little scrape isn’t going to kill him. We have to learn to be able to cope with pain while we’re young, right?” I argued.

A large injury would be another matter, but if he fell and got a little scrape, it would heal in a few days, even without medical treatment.

“I’d thought you’ve been behaving admirably well recently, but you were doing things like this when I wasn’t watching…” Paul lamented.

“I haven’t been nearly as reckless as usual because Ralf isn’t around to heal me up if I get injured,” I replied, causing Paul’s eyebrow to twitch.

Uh-oh, that’s not a good sign…

“In that case, why have you been keeping this game a secret? At least to some degree, you must’ve realized it was dangerous, right?”

“…But if you found out, you would’ve told me to stop!”

“Of course I would. If anything should happen to you, the people around you would be held responsible.”

Grrr!

When Ralf is around, he always offers to keep an eye on me, and I can play as much as I want. And because he can use healing magic, I don’t have to be too careful. I thought this game would be fine, but maybe I was unconsciously using the same judgment I would’ve if Ralf were here?

“I’m sorry,” I obediently apologized, and Barg reached out to ruffle my hair.

“Not to encourage the little lady’s mischievous behavior, but with this much magic sewn into her clothes, she’s even more indestructible than the kids of my tribe.”

“Your goodwill is certainly appreciated, but you realize that *you* are the one being dragged into my lady’s mischief and bothered by her selfish demands, don’t you?” Paul replied, his words mercilessly stabbing into me.

My shoulders drooped, properly reprimanded, but Barg merely laughed graciously.

“This little lady’s ‘selfishness’ is greatly preferable to the disdain other nobles treat me with. Besides, I am not foolish enough to do anything which might injure her or her friends.”

“Oh, that’s not my concern at all. I’m much more worried about the damage to people and items in the immediate vicinity.”

That’s terrible, Paul! You didn’t need to say that (even if it’s true!), did you?!

“That butler knows you very well, eh, Neema? If you make him mad, won’t it become difficult to play?” Marie whispered her

astute observation in my ear.

Well, yeah, but if we let this chance pass us by, Daux will probably never get another opportunity to experience the tail-coaster! I'd feel terrible if Daux missed out because of me. But I might have to brace myself for the worst…

"Please, Paul! I promise to behave myself and not cause trouble in the future!" My puppy-dog eyes had no effect on Paul, so I had no choice but to plead my case directly.

"What a sweet, earnest child. Come on, what's the harm in letting her get away with it just this once?" Barg urged Paul.

Barg, I'm not the least bit sweet or earnest, but I will gladly accept any help you can give in persuading Paul!

Muttering to himself, "I suppose it can't be helped," Paul turned and looked me straight in the eye. His serious gaze caused a jolt to run up my spine, making me stand straighter. "Lady Neema, do you promise that if these people tell you to stop, you will do so *immediately*?"

Does this mean he'll let me continue playing as long as I don't do anything I've been told to stop because it's dangerous?

"I promise! Thank you, Paul!" I gave Paul a tight hug. Although he could be strict at times, at the end of the day, Paul was a good guy. "Okay, Barg! Let's do this!"

I all but dragged Daux over to Barg, who reluctantly wrapped his tail around the young prince.

"Daux, hold on tight to this part right here, okay?" I explained, setting Daux's hands on the fattest part of Barg's tail to grip onto like a safety handle.

All right, have fun!

All of Daux's private guards seemed to have their stomachs in their throats as they watched him being whipped around in the air.

But just look at the expression on his face! He's having the time of his life!

I'd been worried Daux might not be suited for such a violent game, but the longer I watched, the more infectious his obvious joy was, and before long, I was grinning from ear to ear.

"That was so much fun! I've never experienced anything like that in my life!" Daux cried with more excitement than I'd ever seen him show before.

The same seemed true for the members of Daux's private guard, who were staring at him with undisguised shock written all over their faces.

"Barg, you were holding back just now with Daux, weren't you?!" I accused.

"He's not on the same level as *you,* little lady. I doubt anyone could claim that honor. And anyway, I couldn't very well go full-force with the little prince his very first time now, could I?"

I argued back that he'd barely turned Daux over at all. I supposed I understood that he'd felt pressure from all of the overprotective glares boring into him, but still…

He flung me *all over the place at an incredibly high speed my first time!*

"Do you want to try too, Marie?" I asked.

"I'll pass, thanks. It looks quite frightening. …Oh! Of course, I was referring to the speed, not the lizard tribe gentleman!" Marie seemed flustered as she rushed to clarify she wasn't afraid of Barg but simply the speed of his mighty tail lest he misunderstand. But it seemed that was unnecessary.

"No, I think that's quite normal for a young noblewoman. Our little lady is just a bit stra— I mean *special*…"

Barg! You were just about to call me strange, weren't you?! At least be honest!

"I'm not sure how I feel about being compared to Neema…"

"Huh?! How could you say such a thing, Marie?!"

Marie's unexpected betrayal shook me.

Why is everyone in earshot suddenly snickering?! This is no laughing matter!

"That just goes to show how far the little lady has broken away from the mold… Frankly, it's refreshing to meet such an honest aristocrat."

Although I got the feeling Barg was trying to praise me, I didn't feel particularly praised. I wasn't ready to entirely forgive their good-natured teasing but decided to count it as a win since, thanks to their banter, the tenseness lingering in the air had lifted.

After that, it was about time to go to our next destination, but it turned out that we'd need to travel by carriage to get to where we'd be eating our picnic lunch. The members of Daux's private guard decided that, but I wasn't particularly opposed to that.

Given how long it would take to travel there on our short little legs, the carriage was probably the best course of action.

Or rather, carriages. We rode in one carriage with Paul while Shinki, Spica, and the others rode in a second carriage. The members of Daux's private guard rode on horseback.

Louis had suggested this location. I was told it was on top of a low mountain with a stunning view of the entire imperial city.

I haven't been able to go out and tour the city yet, so I'm looking forward to seeing it from above!

We arrived at our destination in a little under an hour. It felt like even less than that, though, because we spent the time talking and laughing together.

I got the impression that this low mountain was something of a day trip vacation spot for people living in the imperial city. The trees were well-kept, and tasteful benches and gazebos were here and there.

"Whoooa!"

The scene stretching out before us was so beautiful that I let out an exclamation of wonder entirely unfitting for a lady of noble birth.

Unlike the royal city in the Kingdom of Gaché, the streets of the imperial city were a mishmash of various cultures.

The first thing that stood out was the Azurite Palace, which, like its namesake, glistened like a blue gemstone in the reflected light of the sun. It seemed to have been built using some kind of special material because it glowed faintly, even at night.

A ring of tall towers surrounded the entire imperial city as if guarding its border. Apparently, they were called "the time-telling towers." Lights were affixed to the summit and around the center of each tower.

It was sunny now, so the lights were difficult to make out, but they were lit.

This just makes me even more aware of how many things are different here compared to my country.

"What's that?"

A large number of trees were growing close together in one corner of the imperial city. It seemed a bit too dense to be an ordinary public park. Furthermore, I could spot what appeared to be chimneys with fluffy smoke wafting up from them.

Neither Daux nor Marie knew what it was, so the unit leader answered for them.

“That’s the Elven Market District.”

“It’s run by elves?”

“That’s right. As a species, elves possess extensive wisdom gathered over the course of their long lives and are especially knowledgeable about magic, so many people are happy to pay for their expertise. They also produce things like medicine and magical items. At some point, their small neighborhood developed into an entire district.”

They’d started growing the herbs necessary for making their medicines and the trees necessary for making their magical items, and while they were at it, they created an environment that was comfortable for them to live in, and this had been the result.

Guides led people through the market, which implied that it was almost maze-like. But it sounded very interesting to me!

I definitely want to add that to my list of places to visit while touring the imperial city!

While we gazed out over the beautiful cityscape below, Paul and the others prepared our lunch. A large rug was spread out on the grass, laden with a variety of bite-sized foods intended to be eaten by hand. The unit leader suggested that perhaps we should set up under the gazebo instead, but it would be a shame not to enjoy this perfect weather without any interference.

“It feels strange to be eating outside, but somehow, not needing to worry about formal dining manners makes the food taste even more delicious than usual!”

“Daux, make sure you eat a lot too! Don’t be picky, try everything!”

I loaded food onto Daux’s plate, and he grimaced. It seemed that he hated vegetables that looked like green peppers.

It may be a root vegetable that tastes remarkably like a green pepper, but it’s really good prepared like this—wrapped in thin-sliced smoked meat and grilled—so just trick yourself into pretending it’s something else and give it a try!

“Daux, say ‘ah’!” Losing patience with Daux, who showed no sign of reaching for the meat-wrapped-pepper, I took the offensive.

“Hold on, Neema! That’s terribly rude!” Marie protested.

Sensing she wasn't going to shut up, I grabbed one of the tomato-like things she'd previously said she hated and stuffed it in her mouth mid-nag. I'd clearly surprised her, but left with no choice but to eat the tomato or face the indignity of spitting it out, she chewed.

Now's my chance!

Daux was distracted watching Marie eat the dreaded tomato, so I took advantage of the opportunity and slipped the meat-wrapped-pepper into his mouth.

Apparently, Daux, too, was *far* too well-mannered to spit out food that had already entered his mouth because he forced himself to swallow it despite frowning deeply.

"...That actually wasn't so bad."

Daux nodded in agreement with Marie's observation, and I sighed in relief. My guess had been correct. The two of them had been biased against foods they held pre-conceived ideas about based on smell and texture.

"Right?! The cooks at the imperial palace put a lot of effort into all the dishes they prepare, so of course they'll be delicious!" I chirped.

In my country, most dishes tended to be lightly seasoned, but in the Linus Empire, they tended to favor bold seasonings. Perhaps for this reason, their bread and salad courses were simpler, perfect for eating between main courses to cleanse the palate.

For the rest of the meal, all three of us sampled all the dishes prepared for us, sharing our impressions of which were delicious and which weren't to our taste.

I ate so much that it felt like my stomach was bulging by the end of the meal.

After a short break to digest it all while sipping a cup of steaming tea, I decided it would be a shame to miss out on any chance to play, so I challenged Seigo and Rikusei to a game of tag. Perhaps due to the vast difference in our physical abilities, however, I couldn't catch either of them.

It could just be because they outnumber me two to one... I'll have Daux and Marie join my team!

"Daux, over there!"

"Neema, I can't!"

“Woof!”

We would have to really use our brains to outsmart the kobolds if we wanted to catch them.

I had Daux chase after Seigo and Marie keep an eye on Rikusei’s movements. We deliberately separated the two so they couldn’t work together, then waited for them to slow down to turn before pouncing.

“I got you, Seigo!”

“Woof!”

Seigo didn’t seem the least bit disappointed about being caught because his tail was wagging happily, and he rubbed his cheek affectionately against mine.

“You’re really incredible!” Daux said, praising Seigo.

Although I had never seen their full abilities in action, I knew that as high kobolds, this wasn’t the extent of what they were capable of. I strongly suspected they’d adjusted their speed and skill to match ours because they knew this was just a game.

While I was enthusiastically praising Seigo and calling him a “Good boy!” Rikusei rushed over as if saying, *“Me too! I’m a good boy too!”*

I passed Seigo over to Daux so I could give Rikusei a big hug.

“I got you too, Rikusei!”

I was rubbing my cheeks against Rikusei when one of the adults called out that it was about time to get going.

Once our attendants had used magic to instantly remove all traces of our exuberant play from our clothes, we piled back into the carriage. I’d wiped myself out running around playing, so the instant the carriage began moving, sleepiness stole over me. At my side, Daux was already fast asleep.

Daux’s face is so cute when he’s sleeping that I want to stay awake and look at it, but I’m so tired…

“…ma. Lady Neema, please wake up.”

“…I don’t wanna…”

“We’ve arrived at army headquarters. If you don’t wake up, you’ll be left behind to nap in the carriage.”

You don’t joke about leaving a man behind!

I shot violently awake, shocking Marie in the process.

“Paul, I think your name was? You certainly are talented when it comes to dealing with Neema!”

“Thank you kindly for your praise.”

Huuuuh? Is that something you thank someone for saying?

Perhaps because I was still half-asleep, I was having a hard time following the exchange between the two of them.

“Come on, let’s get going already!”

At Marie’s urging, I climbed out of the carriage and found myself inside a massive fortress. It seemed to be around the same size as the imperial palace. While I was marveling at the tremendous presence of the fortress, at my side, Daux mumbled something unconsciously out of sheer wonder.

“This is Fort Eileed…”

“Fort Eileed? It’s not the army’s headquarters?” I asked, confused that his statement seemed to contradict what I’d previously been told.

“This fortress, which currently houses the army’s headquarters, was built long ago when our country was still at war. It was named after the emperor who was reigning at the time of its construction.”

I see. So it’s an important historical site as well, huh? Perhaps the fact that it was used in actual wars has something to do with its imposing atmosphere.

“We’ve been eagerly awaiting your arrival, Prince Dauxrouge. Lady Nefertima and Lady Marie, as well. It’s my honor to welcome you all to the Linus Imperial Army’s Headquarters.”

The person who executed a beautiful bow as he greeted us was none other than the commander-in-chief I’d previously met at our welcome banquet. Today, he wasn’t dressed in formal wear; he was wearing a simple military uniform that prominently displayed his ears and tail. The fur was light brown, bordering on cream, but depending on the light, it also gave hints of white and gold—a very unusual but enchanting color. The shape of his ears and tail were distinctly feline but not distinct enough to point to a specific animal. I’d heard that both the grand tiger tribe and the small tiger tribe contained so much mixed blood that it was likely that many people could no longer pinpoint a single dominant animal ancestor.

“We’re very much looking forward to the tour!”

“Perry told me all about how you’ve somehow charmed all the soldiers stationed at the imperial palace.”

The soldiers' innate good natures had played a big part in that; they hadn't been able to hold a grudge against an innocent child based on their dislike of the nobility. I tried explaining that to the commander-in-chief, but he responded that my personality must've had something to do with it as well.

Please tell Barg all about what a stellar personality you think I have, sir!

The commander-in-chief announced that he would give us a tour around the army headquarters, an offer we were happy to accept. The unit leader was grumbling about something to himself again, but all it took was one word from the commander-in-chief to shut him right up.

We followed after the commander-in-chief in a slow-moving, ambling pack, observing the many soldiers bustling here and there, busy at work. Of course, most of them were beastpeople. I got the impression that the majority had cat ears, but there were also plenty of dog ears and rabbit ears as well.

To my surprise, there were also some people that, despite looking almost indistinguishable from humans, were apparently beastpeople.

"What kind of beastperson is that man?" I asked.

"He's a member of the snake tribe. Most soldiers from the snake tribe are 'shadows.'"

I asked what he meant by "shadows," and the answer was "spies."

If I remembered correctly, back in the Kingdom of Gaché, I'd heard the king's private soldiers referred to as "shadows" a time or two, but in the Linus Empire, "shadows" seemed to be more like our country's Intelligence Department.

The traits the snake tribe inherited from their animal ancestor were impressive.

"Members of the snake tribe possess different senses than other beastpeople. It's hard to put into words, but from what I understand, they can taste scents on their tongue and pick up on the heat given off by living creatures."

Those are due to the extra organs, particularly the Jacobson organ and pit organ, right? If I remember correctly, other animals besides snakes also possess them, but either way, they're undoubtedly two of the highest-performance sensors that exist in the animal world.

“More than anything, though, what stands out as something the rest of us have no hope of replicating is how they can manipulate their joints at will.”

“What?! By ‘joints,’ you mean all of them, not just their arms and legs?!”

“Well, not quite *all* of them. Apparently, they can’t disjoin their spines…”

If they could disjoin their spine, that would exclude them from the dictionary definition of a vertebrate! I know snakes are extremely flexible, but even they can’t pop out their joints!

Snakes on Earth had foldable jaws that could open horizontally and vertically, allowing them to swallow prey whole. When they did so, their ribcage would expand, and their skin would stretch, which was why they could consume creatures larger than themselves.

And you’re telling me that the snakes in this world can also pop out their other joints at will?! Which *joints?!*

I was stunned into silence more by the mysteriousness of the snake tribe’s biology than by the covert nature of their job. Seemingly oblivious to my deep shock, the commander-in-chief went on to share all kinds of information regarding the snake tribe.

With their ability to pop out their joints, they could easily escape if they were tied up and slip through the narrowest of spaces. Using their high-performance sensors, they could determine the number of enemies and their locations. And, on top of everything else, they were almost impervious to starvation.

I suppose that part makes sense; snakes don’t strike me as an animal that burns a lot of energy to survive.

But it’s strange… All the snakes I’ve seen in this world so far looked pretty much the same as snakes on Earth… Well, except for the fact that they were all bigger than anacondas, of course. But this all sounds like an entirely different species!

I don’t think there’s any tribe of beastpeople more shocking than the snake tribe. If there is*, somebody really needs to sit God down with a biology textbook for some remedial studies.*

For the most part, God seems to have used earth animals as a basis for the animals here, but now and then, I run across an animal

so far removed from anything we have on Earth… I really can't let my guard down!

Take feliances, for example: their body is a cross between a fox and a raccoon dog, with giant wings stuck on their back. Even the "provisional mammals" known as platypuses, who are born from eggs but drink their mother's milk, don't have wings!

I would very much like to ask God what Earth animal he based feliances on!

We peeked into several offices before coming to a meeting room—or perhaps I should call it a meeting hall? Seats were set up in a fan-shaped arrangement facing a raised platform with several maps hung on the wall behind it.

"This room is normally used for meetings, but when necessary, it's also where we hold war councils."

I asked the commander-in-chief for permission to examine the maps on the wall up close and was surprised to see how detailed they were. There was a map of the entire continent of Larshia, maps of each country, and the rest were of the Linus Empire.

I examined the map of the Kingdom of Gaché and found it was every bit as precise as the one in the royal palace's library. Of course, even more detailed maps existed, but as a matter of national security, they could only be viewed with direct permission from the king. I had a feeling that this map toed the line of violating peace treaties between our two countries; that's how detailed it was.

"Incredible!"

"We rarely have any reason to use any of these maps other than those of our own territory, but…" the commander-in-chief said, trailing off.

I followed his gaze to a map that seemed newer than the others but was covered in handwritten markings. This was a map of Icoux and the Alliance of Nations.

The commander-in-chief explained that the areas shaded red were "danger zones" where the national government had lost all control, leading to a deterioration of order and rendering those areas lawless territories. Icoux actually didn't have as much red shading as I would've expected, but nearly half of the territory making up the Alliance of Nations was shaded red.

Just how many countries have already fallen to ruin? And how many of those citizens, who should've been living happy, simple lives, had already journeyed home to be with the Goddess before their time?

It filled me with an intense feeling of helplessness.

"Just like the Kingdom of Gaché, we are working to eliminate Runohark. We will not fail—we *will* restore peace to this continent," the commander-in-chief vowed passionately as if trying to lift the sense of despair that had settled over me.

"Yeah!"

They were probably working on some kind of plan that involved cooperation between the countries. I didn't have the slightest clue what I could do to help, but nonetheless, I felt committed to doing my best.

"Come to think of it, what is this flag?"

Daux and Marie had been examining the maps alongside me, but it seemed a flag that was hung on one of the walls had caught their attention.

I had a feeling I already knew the answer to this question.

"Oh, yes. That's the army's flag, which incorporates the emblems of all the divisions of the army."

There were so many emblems that it was impossible to count them all. But this wasn't exactly surprising—the Linus Empire encompassed approximately half of the entire landmass of the continent of Larshia, so, of course, there would be a large number of troops.

"There are this many divisions in the army?"

"As a whole, we are known as the 'Linus Imperial Army,' but to make things more manageable, we've divided the country into five regions, each with its own military organizations."

Despite the fact that the structure of the army was probably a state secret, the commander-in-chief kindly drew us a simplified diagram explaining how it was set up.

First, the country was divided into five regional divisions. That was the same as in our country. Each regional division was further subdivided into squadrons, troops, and units. For example, there were ten units in one troop and eight troops in one squadron.

The only group outside this structure was the pride of the Linus Imperial Army—the Dragon Corps. Apparently, the Dragon Corps answered directly to the commander-in-chief.

“What squad is Lieutenant Perry in?” I asked.

“If I remember correctly, Perry is in the Central Region, Imperial City Defense Squadron, First Imperial Palace Defense Troop.”

That’s so long! I bet he trips over his tongue every time he has to say his full title! And it turns out he’s not just a low-ranking lieutenant; he’s in charge of an entire troop!

…Now I’m more convinced than ever that it really is hard having such a huge country.

“If we don’t move on now, we’ll run out of time. I’ve prepared the teleportation spell, so please follow me.”

“Teleportation spell?”

“The wyverns’ barracks can only be reached by teleportation or flying.”

What? I thought the wyverns’ barracks were located inside the army’s headquarters…

We followed the commander-in-chief, who led us to the room that housed the army headquarters’ teleportation circle. It was even larger than the one in the royal palace. We were, as usual, a pretty large group when you added all our bodyguards and attendants, but with this massive teleportation circle it seemed like we’d all be able to travel in a single trip.

“All right, let’s go visit the home of the wyverns.”

I’m excited to see what kind of wyverns we’ll meet today. All of the retired wyverns were very calm, and, well… Honestly, they mostly just seemed sleepy!

Oh, I hope there are baby wyverns!

4 - Misunderstandings Happen to Everyone, Right?

EVEN after we finished teleporting, our surroundings didn't look any different. I guess all the rooms housing teleportation circles were pretty minimalistic.

"A little bit further ahead, there's a place with a great view," the commander-in-chief urged us forward with an almost mischievous grin.

I was fond of beautiful views, so I eagerly followed along.

Before long…

"No way! Absolutely not!"

I was in *fierce* agreement with Marie's opinion.

On one side, a cliff dropped off suddenly in a straight vertical plummet. There wasn't any hint of an incline, just a flat wall like you might expect to see in a rock-climbing gym. There was a *tiny* ledge fortified with magic to create a path to walk along. The path was wide enough that people walking in opposite directions could theoretically pass by one another, but if you *did* fall, it would be like going wireless bungee-jumping; you wouldn't tumble down; it would be a straight free-fall.

The scenery is *beautiful, but I don't have the peace of mind to enjoy the scenery in a situation like this! Why didn't they install a fence?! Would it kill them to at least set up a guardrail?! There are no safety precautions at all! If there was ever a time for a lifesaving rope, this is it!*

"Are you okay, Daux?" I asked.

"Yeah. I mean, I'm a little nervous, but…"

Dang, he's got nerves of steel! Although, he's still a bit of a scaredy-cat when it comes to social interaction… Maybe he's more suited for the military arts than diplomacy, after all?

"Marie, would you prefer to be carried by Paul or Shinki?" I asked.

"Why do I have to be carried?! I can't think of anything I would like *less* than being even *further* off the ground in a place like this!"

Calm down, Marie! Being carried is the safest option!

I was doing my best to calm Marie down when Paul unexpectedly knelt down in front of her.

"If you're frightened of being carried, how about I hold your hand?" he suggested, holding out a hand towards her. Doing her best not to look at the scenery around us, Marie gripped Paul's hand for dear life. "I swear I will protect you, so please don't worry."

Even though I'd been the one to ask him to do so, it felt weird to see my servant so earnestly serving another lady. *All of our servants seem to place the Osphe family before God himself in the ranking of who they most respect!*

"What will you do, Miss Neema?" Shinki asked.

"I want to be carried, of course!"

There was no way Shinki would ever drop me, and even if he somehow fell, I had a feeling he'd save us one way or another. He could always get the elemental spirits to help him, after all.

Safe in Shinki's arms, I returned my attention to appreciating the scenery, and it was gorgeous. The view from the northern mountain where Sol lived had been beautiful as well, but that mountain was covered in year-round snow that made the scenery seem rather desolate.

I suppose this wasn't entirely dissimilar. It was a sheer cliff boasting only the barest dusting of greenery. Something about it seemed to forbid the intrusion of humans or any living creatures. Although, I suppose most places described as "scenic" only got that title because they'd maintained their natural state due to a lack of human interference.

Marie desperately clung onto Paul's entire arm while Daux shuffled forward a bit stiffly, staring almost recklessly down the entire time.

Even the members of the private guard were walking as close to the wall of the path as possible. Only the commander-in-chief seemed entirely unbothered, strolling along with an unperturbed gait.

Does the way his tail is waving leisurely back and forth prove just how relaxed he is? Maybe his feline blood is responsible for him being so unfazed in this situation? But even if he likes heights, it's not as if he can climb a sheer cliff!

In the end, we all made it to flat land without anyone getting an impromptu wireless bungee jumping experience. The flat land also appeared to have been created using magic and was large enough to house a small village.

“These are temporary dwellings for the Dragon Corps soldiers.” The commander-in-chief explained that the Dragon Corps soldiers lived here while on duty.

In general, the Dragon Corps soldiers didn’t work typical 9-5 shifts. Instead, the three troops each took turns being stationed here, working and training for two days at a time. Of course, they didn’t work for 48 hours straight. Just like the foot soldiers, they alternated their work time between patrolling, practice, and rest.

Once their two days on duty were up, they would spend the next day doing various tasks at the army headquarters, followed by two days off before starting the cycle over.

Thanks for your hard work, gentlemen! Oh, wait, can I say that? It kind of makes it sound like they’re working for me, or I’m talking down to them or something…

Maybe it’s okay because I’m an aristocrat, so my rank is technically higher? Hmm, but considering I’m an aristocrat from a foreign country, it’s probably better I don’t say it, just to be safe.

Since the commander-in-chief seemed to not mind in the slightest answering all of my questions, no matter how asinine, I went ahead and asked one more. “I remember hearing that the wyverns’ barracks are close to the army headquarters; is that true?”

“Yes, they’re surprisingly not far.”

Saying that you couldn’t see it from here, he led us into a narrow tunnel that seemed to have been carved from a naturally occurring crevice in the cliff wall. Once we exited the tunnel, our line of sight opened up dramatically, revealing the wyverns.

While I was distracted by the sight of the magnificent wyverns, the commander-in-chief pointed off into the distance and said, “It’s over there.” He was pointing to a large building.

So that’s the army headquarters where we were just a short while ago, huh? Looking at it from above like this, it sure looks massive!

Even at this considerable distance, the fortress was still imposing in its size and presence.

“From here, it doesn’t even take a whole segment for the wyverns to fly down there. They hardly have to ‘fly’ at all; it’s more like gliding, really.”

It certainly didn’t *look* like a distance that could be covered in just two or three minutes, but I supposed that just went to show how fast the wyverns were.

“I will introduce you to the person in charge as well as the wyverns’ leader.”

Before we got any closer to where the wyverns were roaming around freely, there was one thing I needed to do first.

“Pardon the imposition, but is there someplace these two can wait for me? They’re unable to get close to the wyverns.”

By “these two,” I was referring to Seigo and Rikusei, who’d come along as bodyguards. They were fine with holy beasts but, unfortunately, said they were afraid of wyverns.

I wonder if the fact that they aren’t afraid of holy beasts is a special ability they received due to being named by me?

“Of course. Wyverns are a species of dragon that sits at the top of the food chain, so it’s only natural to be frightened of them,” the commander-in-chief acknowledged, assigning two soldiers who seemed to be especially fond of animals to keep an eye on the kobolds.

I’m going to have Spica sit this one out, too.

“Spica, I’d like you to wait here with them. If they start getting bored, please play with them to keep them from getting into any trouble.”

Seigo and Rikusei both had such a strong sense of curiosity that it often got them in trouble. I hoped they’d behave but felt bad about leaving them bored and with nothing to do while they waited, so it made sense to assign Spica to watch over and play with them.

“Very well.”

“Seigo and Rikusei, be good and listen to Spica and these men, okay?”

The two kobolds barked their replies in perfect unison.

It might’ve been a bit late now, but I suddenly worried whether the other monsters left behind at the imperial palace were doing okay.

Even though I'd "tamed" her by giving her a name, Inaho was still a strong and famous monster. I couldn't bring her along for fear that she would trigger the beastpeople's instincts to attack in preemptive self-defense.

Haku and Gratia had offered to stay behind with her, and I'd gratefully agreed, but… Kai was in charge of looking after everyone, a decision that I was now uneasy about.

But Haku and Gratia *had* been behaving more responsibly since Inaho joined the family. According to Shizuku, slimes capable of becoming parent slimes would never mature completely until they reached that final evolution. So it made me smile to see how Haku and Gratia behaved like older brothers towards Inaho despite still being juveniles themselves.

It's just so cute how earnest they are towards her! I wish I could install a nanny cam so I could spy on them and see what they're doing when I'm not around! Whatever they're up to, I'm sure it's cute!

Spica and the others waved goodbye as we entered the area where the wyverns roamed freely.

"Many young wyverns live here, and we're also breeding the wyverns."

I didn't see any obvious babies, but some wyverns were distinctly smaller than the others. *These ones seem to be just on the cusp of entering adolescence.*

"This is Gaen, the leader of the Dragon Corps."

"My name is Gaen Corsass. Thank you for translating the wyverns' words for me last time we met."

Oh, he means when Sol was here.

The wyverns who'd come to escort the emperor home had refused to return to the barracks even after completing their mission. Lieutenant Gaen had been unable to figure out why they were behaving strangely until I explained that the wyverns were saying they didn't want to leave without first paying their respects to Sol.

Sol sure is popular among all the different types of dragons. The lindblooms and lindrakes working with the Kingdom of Gaché's Dragon Knights Legion treat him with deference. They even try to speak in respectful language to him, but more often than not, it just ends up sounding weird.

I accepted Lieutenant Gaen's thanks and asked him to introduce me to the leader of this flock. Unlike the other wyverns, he seemed almost the size of a small mountain and had an impressive set of spikes running along his back and down his tail.

"I welcome you, dragon's maiden."

"This is the wyverns' leader, Darson."

All the dragons I'd met, regardless of species, called me "dragon's maiden." I'd asked Sol what that meant, and he said it referred to someone bonded to a primordial dragon.

In short, if the other primordial dragon besides Sol, the water dragon who lived in Wazhite, were to bond with someone, that person would also be a "dragon's maiden." I'd asked what would happen if the bonded partner were a man, and Sol said they'd call him a "dragon's boy."

Why isn't there any decent male equivalent for the word "maiden," anyway? "Dragon's boy" doesn't have the same ring to it as "dragon's maiden."

"Nice to meet you, Darson! My name's Neema."



Darson's face wasn't covered in scales. Instead, the skin was thick and rough like rock. He did resemble the winged lindblooms in some ways, but as a wyvern, he looked more like my stereotypical image of a dragon, whereas the lindblooms were more reptilian.

Once I'd finished petting him, Darson stretched his neck and let out a huge *"ROAR!"*

His voice, which was deeper than that of a lindbloom or a lindrake, was so tremendous that its vibrations rolled over my skin.

Now, this is what I'm talking about! He's even more fiercely intimidating than Ghizel!

In response to Darson's roar, the other wyverns all let loose powerful roars of their own. The noise was so immense that the air around us seemed to waver. And yet, rather than being frightening, it was mostly just awe-inspiring.

I'm so happy to receive such an enthusiastic welcome!

The soldiers who'd been busy at work taking care of the wyverns seemed startled by the unexpected chorus of roars, but the wyverns calmed down immediately after, so the soldiers seemed satisfied there was no danger.

"What kinds of things does the Dragon Corps normally do?" Daux asked Lieutenant Gaen curiously.

"Outside of patrols and training, we spend all our time caring for the wyverns. They won't let us touch their nests, but we prepare materials such as straw, logs, and stones for them to maintain the nests themselves. We also provide them with food. The wyverns can be very picky and only allow people they like to care for them."

Hmm, that sounds pretty similar to the Beast Knights Legion.

However, unlike the lindblooms, if a wyvern built a rapport with one soldier, they might also allow others to ride on their back.

Clearly curious, Daux peppered Lieutenant Gaen with one question after another. He asked what the wyverns ate, how the soldiers gave them their food, and if they were ever attacked, among other things.

I don't blame him for being excited. The wyverns are so cool that you can't help wanting to learn all about them! I know just how you feel, Daux!

“Daux seems like an entirely different person today,” Marie remarked, watching Daux hanging on Lieutenant Gaen’s every word.

Indeed, he seemed more full of life today than I’d ever seen him.

“But you still like this side of him, too, right?” I whispered back in Marie’s ear, causing her to flush bright red and shoot me a glare.

Hehe, I’m not scared of you, Marie, not anymore! Could this be “first love”? How adorable.

“Ooooh, you really annoy me sometimes, Neema! Don’t make that face!” Marie pinched my cheek, trying desperately to disguise her embarrassment by redirecting the topic back to me. It didn’t actually hurt, though, so I knew she was only playing.

“Don’t worry, I’m cheering for you Marie.”

“That’s not terribly encouraging.”

Since I wasn’t part of the Linus Empire’s nobility, there wasn’t much I could do to actually support her, but I *did* have the emperor’s ear.

While Marie and I were teasing each other, Lieutenant Gaen and Daux’s conversation turned in a terrifying direction. Lieutenant Gaen was recounting in great detail the story of how a wild lindbloom had once attacked him.

Why are you telling us something so frightening right before we’re about to approach the other wyverns?!

“Don’t worry; if any other dragons come, the wyverns will protect us,” I hurried to reassure Daux and Marie, but the leader of those wyverns interrupted with a warning of his own.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, dragon’s maiden, but the others should be careful. Some of our flock are guarding eggs and will lash out if they feel threatened.”

“Eggs?! There are going to be baby wyverns born soon?” I perked right up at this bit of news.

Baby wyverns! I bet they’ll be suuuuper cute!

“Darson told you about the eggs, did he? Yes, several of the mated pairs are incubating eggs, so I believe the babies will be born before too much longer.”

“Will the wyverns raise their own babies? Or do the soldiers take care of them?” I asked.

“Wyverns are fiercely protective of their young and won’t allow us to help with caring for them in any way.”

I see… The lindblooms and lindrakes don’t seem to have any problem handing their eggs over to humans to care for. In fact, they seem to prefer that arrangement since it leaves them with more time to play!

“Does that mean you can only gaze upon the babies from a distance?”

“Yes, we try to keep an eye on the babies to ensure they’re healthy but have to do so from far enough away to avoid antagonizing their parents. Once the babies are old enough to separate from their parents, they’ll begin choosing soldiers they like.”

Seeing cute little roly-poly baby wyverns right in front of you and having to sit on your hands and watch sounded like absolute torture to me! If I had to stand by watching them totter around adorably and couldn’t run over and hug them, I thought I might cry!

“It must be hard seeing those cute babies but being unable to do anything…” I said.

“Oh, yes. All Dragon Corps members love the wyverns, so a few grown men are always reduced to helpless tears during that period…”

Heh, it sounds like, despite the species, the people who love dragons are all the same.

There were times I’d seen dragon knights on the verge of tears because the lindblooms and lindrakes had snubbed them. Their happiness or misery was entirely dependent on the dragons’ whims.

“I understand how they feel!” I was nodding emphatically in agreement when Lieutenant Gaen’s face took on a jealous sheen.

“In your case, Lady Nefertima, I believe you’d be accepted even by wyverns with eggs or babies.”

“No dragon would turn their teeth or claws against a dragon’s maiden.”

“I’m so jealous…”

“All creatures seem to love Neema; it’s not fair!”

…Don’t all speak at once, guys!

I could barely make out what Daux and Marie were saying over Darson's roar.

Suddenly…

Wyvern roars filled the air.

Unlike Darson's roar, these roars echoed with rage and murderous intent. Darson immediately beat his wings and flew off to where the problem was occurring.

"I'm very sorry, but please wait here until we've confirmed all is well."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

Lieutenant Gaen shook his head once, excused himself, and quickly ran off.

"I wonder what happened…" Marie pondered, clearly unnerved by the commotion.

Based on the snippets of what I could pick up from the wyverns, all I could make out was that they were angry. However, concerningly, I did hear the word "egg" several times…

"I think something might've happened to one of the eggs…" I said.

I'd heard that dragon eggs sold for an exorbitantly high price.

You'd be risking your life if you tried to steal an egg from a wild dragon, but in the unlikely event that you were successful, you'd be able to live in luxury for the rest of your life, so many people dared to try.

On the other hand, it might be slightly easier to steal an egg from dragons who lived among humans, but this was a severe crime.

"Meaning someone got too close to an egg?"

"Could it be a thief?"

Daux and Marie voiced their suspicions, but this was a military facility. It was doubtful anyone could get inside unnoticed. If anything, I thought it could potentially be an inside job or one of the soldiers had sneaked the criminal in.

"Lady Nefertima, as the commander-in-chief of the Linus Imperial Army, I have a request for you. I vow I will ensure your safety, so will you please help calm the wyverns down?"

"Hold on! We still don't even know what happened! Are you seriously considering bringing Neema to such a dangerous place?!"

Before I could even open my mouth to form a reply, Marie was already protesting against the commander-in-chief's request. I was happy she was so concerned about my safety, but I also understood the commander-in-chief's position.

We didn't know exactly what had happened, but the wyverns were *extremely* agitated. The soldiers who worked with and cared for them daily were doing their best to calm the wyverns down, but if that didn't work, there was a very real possibility someone might be injured or even die.

"Marie, it's fine, so calm down, please," I said.

"I'm perfectly calm!"

"Darson confirmed just now that no wyvern will harm me."

Marie glared at me with tears in her eyes and asked what made me so sure I could take his word for that.

Is it my fault for making her cry?

"Because I'm bonded with the fire dragon. As long as I have the dragon orb, I can communicate with all the different species of dragons, and I've been told that none of them would dare challenge a primordial dragon by harming their bonded partner."

Although it was still technically just an informal bond, Ghizel, Darson, and Kalce had all called me "dragon's maiden," so, apparently, it still counted. Based on all that evidence, I was quite confident that none of the wyverns would harm me.

"The commander-in-chief can see that in their current state, the wyverns might attack the soldiers, and someone might even die," I explained. "To prevent that, he's asking me to intervene."

Daux and Marie should both understand.

What it cost the commander-in-chief to bow down to me to prevent the deaths of any of his men. And the fact that anyone associated with the imperial family could not stand idly by and allow soldiers to be killed.

"...I request it of you, too, Neema. Please help them."

I'm so moved that I think my hands are shaking! Just now, Daux made that request not as a friend but as an imperial prince!

Perhaps it was just his personality, but he never spoke to Marie and me in such a manner. Despite the undeniable difference in our social statuses, he always treated us as friends, not subjects.

And yet, for the sake of these soldiers, Daux stepped into his role as imperial prince and made a formal request to me!

"Of course! Leave it to me!"

If Daux's doing his best to push past the boundaries of his comfort zone, then I have to do my best, too!

"Your Highness and Lady Marie, please wait here," Paul instructed.

"Paul, you stay here too," I ordered.

Paul showed immediate resistance to this order, but I didn't have time to stop and explain my reasoning to him.

"Let's go, Shinki."

I was leaving Paul behind because the wyverns would probably be wary of him. For some reason, dragons never seemed to feel threatened by Shinki. I didn't know about Darson, but Ghizel and Kalce had even let him ride on their backs so I figured it must have something to do with being a "beloved child's knight" or whatever.

I wasted no time having Shinki pick me up and carry me so we could move faster. The commander-in-chief raced toward the source of the commotion at an incredible speed, and Shinki easily kept pace with him.

Watching the commander-in-chief run, I got the distinct impression that he really was a member of the cat family. The way his tail moved when he deftly changed directions reminded me of a cheetah more than a housecat, though.

Just as we arrived at the site of the trouble, one of the soldiers was sent flying through the air. It seemed one of the wyverns had struck him with their wing. Thank goodness it hadn't been a tail. The spikes on the ends of the wyverns' tails contained poison.

"Darson!"

"Dragon's maiden… I suppose I can't convince you to return to safety? No, I thought not. Stay by my side where I can protect you, then."

"Okay. More importantly, what happened?"

I walked over to Darson and positioned myself between his front legs. After giving a shallow nod, the commander-in-chief went over to stand with Lieutenant Gaen.

"An egg was almost stolen. By one of these humans."

It looked like my guess had been right on the mark. I asked who the culprit was, and Darson conveyed my question to the egg's parents.

"It was that guy! He's just a weakling, but he got cocky thinking he could steal our egg just because we seemed calm and docile!" the egg's father raged.

Although I knew the wrath coloring these furious roars wasn't directed at me, it was still terrifying.

The wyvern's gaze was fixed on a single young soldier. He seemed frozen in fear, finding himself the focus of the wyverns' murderous rage.

"Lieutenant! Apprehend that man!" I shouted.

This is an emergency, so forgive me for pointing fingers; I know it's poor manners.

After a shocked moment, the young soldier begged Lieutenant Gaen, "Lieutenant, I didn't do anything! I swear! You have to believe me!"

For his part, Lieutenant Gaen looked torn.

If I was saying to detain the soldier, it clearly must mean that the wyverns had said something to justify such action.

And yet, this was one of his men.

The desire to trust his subordinate was at war with the desire to capture the person who'd angered the wyverns and, in doing so, caused another of his men to be injured.

"What are you waiting for?! Restrain him!" the commander-in-chief ordered the other soldiers when Lieutenant Gaen failed to act.

In response, the young soldier glared at the commander-in-chief. The look in his eyes was nothing like how you were supposed to look at the person who held the highest position of authority in the organization you were a part of. It was the look you gave an object of hate and repulsion.

On the commander-in-chief's orders, the other soldiers snapped back to their senses and grabbed the young soldier.

"...Vile beastperson scum!"

Everyone froze in shock at the words the young soldier had thrown at the commander-in-chief. That was not something a soldier in the Linus Imperial Army should ever say. They were

sworn to protect the empire's citizens without prejudice, regardless of species.

That finally sparked a rage rivaling even that of the wyverns among the other soldiers. Some of them likely had good friends who were beastpeople, not to mention respected superiors, including the commander-in-chief himself.

And this man dared to speak slurs against these beastpeople.

"Humans are pitiful creatures. Even so, we cannot forgive this outrage perpetrated against our child!" the egg's father roared.

What was it that the wyvern found "pitiful" about humans? Was it the inability to respectfully coexist with other species or the tendency to identify creatures weaker than oneself and be unable to resist the urge to oppress them?

I supposed it was also possible that this off-handed comment had no deeper meaning than referring to humans' relative position of weakness compared to that of the dragons who stood at the very pinnacle of the food chain.

"Calm down, daddy wyvern! You're going to scare your baby if you keep it up!" I said.

Trust me, I understand your anger that someone tried to harm your precious child.

"Can you let us deal with this man's punishment? You and the baby's mother should focus on caring for the egg."

Just like how it wasn't good for the baby if a human mother became too stressed while pregnant, I was certain that the wyvern parents' unrestrained anger couldn't be good for their egg, either. *The baby might become too afraid of the outside world and refuse to hatch!*

"But...!"

"Your baby is more important!" I stressed. "Go on and comfort your mate! She must be feeling terrified right now!"

For a mother of any species, there was likely nothing more frightening than the thought that her baby might be snatched away. The egg was unharmed, but that didn't change the fear the mother must be feeling, so I wanted to reassure her as soon as possible.

After being urged to go to his mate, the wyvern reluctantly obeyed.

The female wyvern, clutching the egg desperately to her chest, let out a cry low in her throat, almost like a mournful wail, and rubbed her body against the male wyvern's, seeking comfort from his presence.

Once I'd gotten my fill of watching the two wyverns console one another, I turned to the captured young soldier. "That wyvern called you 'pitiful.' But I don't agree. This is your own fault for not even trying to understand."

"What would a brat like you know...?!"

The men restraining the young soldier tightened their grip to the point it must've been painful, effectively muffling his vicious reply.

"Even a foreigner like myself is well aware that the fine and noble beastpeople serving in the Linus Imperial Army are worthy of respect for their hard work. If you, working amongst them day in and day out, haven't even figured that out, then perhaps your eyes don't function properly and are merely for decoration?"

It's just as the emperor said. People happily pretend not to see or hear things that are inconvenient for themselves. It must be easy to blindly cling only to beliefs that serve you.

"Was someone close to you killed by a beastperson or something? Why do you hate them so much?" I asked.

It would make sense if a beastperson had murdered a relative or someone else he cared about. Not that that would make it *right*—other beastpeople weren't to blame for what had happened. But it would at least be understandable where his prejudice came from if that were the case.

"They...! Because of them, I... I...!"

It seemed that even he didn't fully understand his feelings. He was being flung around by powerful emotions that he couldn't put into words, leaving his heart in chaos.

"You know, what's really important is how *you* want to be. If you want to become stronger, you just need to train. If you want to become smarter, you just need to study. A certain adventurer once told me that he chose to become an adventurer because he loved the strong version of himself. He is a purple-rank adventurer now, but I'm certain even you realize it's no easy feat to attain purple rank, right?"

As a person, Uncle Phillip had a tendency towards goofing off and fooling around, but as an adventurer, it was undeniable how hard he'd worked to get to where he was now.

In general, very few people can get by in life without putting in the hard work!

The only time a person could really spend their days doing whatever they wanted was during the tragically short years of childhood.

"I'm strong! If not for *them*, I'd be...!"

Hmm, perhaps he has an inferiority complex when it comes to beastpeople?

It was all but impossible for humans to best or even draw even with beastpeople in a fight. But that being said, I knew there were humans amongst the Linus Imperial Army who had achieved that nearly impossible feat. I probably wasn't even capable of imagining the lengths they must've gone to to become that strong.

"Aren't you just blaming others for your own failings? It's fine to admit that there are some things you just can't do. Everyone has things they can't do, no matter how hard they try. Rather than obsessing over one thing you can't do, you should try other things."

It took a very special type of person to devote themselves to one specific thing. It might be a bit unkind to say so, but the people who *did* manage that tended to straddle the line between normal and "freakishly obsessed."

Just look at the researchers at the Magical Research Center! They're all out-of-control obsessed with their love of magic, but they straight up don't give a flop that everyone around them thinks they're absolutely crazy, and just look at all they're able to accomplish as a result!

"...Other things...?"

"That's right. Maybe there's something that only you are capable of being the best at. Doesn't that idea fill you with excitement?"

I was the type to easily get excited. Whenever I encountered new and unknown things, my curiosity got the better of me.

I'm going to be the "master of fluffiness!" It's my dream to meet and learn about every species of creature in this world!

“I… What have I done?! I’d heard rumors that the commander-in-chief was showing favoritism towards beastpeople and became so enraged… Before I knew it, I was plotting to drag the commander-in-chief down…”

…Was he even listening to me? It seems like he calmed down enough to grasp the situation and return to his senses on his own while I was monologuing to myself?!

“You can tell me all the details later. For now, take him away,” the commander-in-chief cut in.

Wait a minute! I’m super embarrassed right now! I read the situation wrong, didn’t I?! He wasn’t acting out of sheer racism fueled by an inferiority complex, but instead reacting to a perceived bias?

Ahhh, somebody dig me a hole to bury myself in—I’m so embarrassed!

“Lady Nefertima, thank you for your assistance.”

Both the commander-in-chief and Lieutenant Gaen bowed their heads to me.

“No, I… It seems I misunderstood the situation a bit. I’m quite embarrassed with myself.”

Argh, this is so humiliating! I wish the earth would just open up and swallow me whole!

“Think nothing of it. I am very happy to have learned how you feel about us beastpeople, Lady Nefertima.” The commander-in-chief’s brilliant smile was the only redeeming factor in this humiliating situation.

“You have to promise to keep this a secret from Daux and Marie! And *please* don’t tell the emperor either!”

If nothing else, I would strong-arm them into never telling another soul about this embarrassing scene.

In the end, they kept their promise not to tell Daux or Marie, but there was no keeping secrets from the emperor.

I was teased *mercilessly* about it the next day.

Euche, do you know any of the emperor’s embarrassing secrets that you can share with me?!

5 - Let’s Lighten This Gloomy Atmosphere!

I received a summons from the emperor!

I thought it was strange, considering the emperor already knew the entire series of events.

Paul led me to some kind of meeting room, where I found a panel of familiar faces assembled. Essentially, all the important figures from this country’s government were there waiting for me.

“Lady Nefertima, please dispense with the formalities and take a seat,” the emperor said, interrupting me just as I was about to bow. I’d been studying the Linus Empire’s social manners ever since arriving. I wanted to say that I’d mastered them pretty well, but I rarely got the chance to actually use them with how informal everyone was here.

“I’ve asked Lady Nefertima to join us today because of an unsettling incident that occurred at the wyverns’ barracks.”

Certainly, I *had* been there when the incident occurred, but I still didn’t understand why he’d felt the need to summon me to this meeting.

“I can see you’re confused about why you’ve been summoned. I will explain that now,” the elven prime minister, Zeiatiel, said with a gentle smile before launching into an explanation.

The young soldier who’d been taken into custody had much to say.

Despite being quite skilled, none of the wyverns had taken a liking to him, so he’d been left doing inglorious grunt work behind the scenes. At the same time, beastpeople who’d joined the army at the same time as him had already begun to establish themselves and earn respect for their achievements, which left him feeling jealous and left behind.

One day, he’d met a man claiming to be a fellow soldier in a tavern, and while drinking together, the man had told him that the commander-in-chief was showing favoritism to beastpeople.

The man had complained that in his post, beastpeople were earning promotions and fame much easier than humans. When the young soldier expressed indignation, the man had whispered something insidious in his ear.

“Say, you’re *a member of the Dragon Corps under the direct supervision of the commander-in-chief, aren’t you? Won’t you be a tool of change for your fellow humans? If something occurred to call the commander-in-chief’s management skills into question, it might be enough to remove the coveted position of commander-in-chief from the hands of a beastperson…”*

The young soldier had foolishly agreed and came up with the idea of stealing a wyvern’s egg on the day the commander-in-chief was visiting the wyverns’ barracks.

On the day of the incident, the soldier had attempted to steal the egg as planned, but the wyverns caught him and turned the full force of their terrifying fury on him, causing the plan to end in failure.

While I’d been self-righteously lecturing him, apparently, the word “tool” had finally made him realize something. That he had been nothing more than a pawn used by those who didn’t like the commander-in-chief.

The soldier deeply regretted his actions and desperately wanted to redeem himself by starting over at the absolute lowest rank and working his way back up. However, his crime was too grave to be dealt with by a mere demotion, so he’d also been sentenced to pay a fine and do a period of hard labor.

The fine could be paid in installments and would be deducted from his salary. As for the hard labor, his term was set at 100 days, and he could choose from a list of tasks, so perhaps it would turn out to be a good learning experience for him.

“We searched for the man he spoke to at the tavern but could find no one matching his description in the imperial army. It appears that he was lying about being a soldier.”

That’s not terribly surprising. I wouldn’t expect someone who’s instigating the commission of a crime to use their true identity.

“What about people who have a grudge against the commander-in-chief?”

The commander-in-chief was also present at this meeting, and he confirmed that he had plenty of enemies. His family, the Stoughans, had loyally served the Linus Empire for many generations, and among all the beastpeople in the nobility, they had the longest history and the highest rank at marquess. Many people, both human and beastperson, didn't like that.

I thought it was entirely possible this was nothing more than an internal power struggle amongst the nobility, but the emperor didn't seem convinced.

"The young soldier we captured was from a well-known family of devout followers of the Church of Divine Creation. Allegedly, the man who instigated this incident also referred to the church's teachings several times during their conversation."

"So you believe that this young soldier was targeted because, in addition to his position in the army, he was also a follower of the Church of Divine Creation?"

"I find it highly likely."

I see… Should we take this to mean that Runohark, rather than the Church of Divine Creation, has begun making moves against the Linus Empire?

"We're in the process of looking into the Church of Divine Creation's movements within the empire, but I've received some interesting information." Zeiatiel paused dramatically for a moment, and the emperor shot her a look that said *Get on with it already!*

Zeiatiel, don't mess with the emperor! He's scary when he gets mad!

"Do you recall High Priest Carriduvelle, who was previously stationed in the empire?"

"Yes. Didn't he return to Farshia following the Great Cleansing two cycles ago?"

"Yes. It seems he will be appointed as the next Grand Divinator."

The internal structure of the church's clergy was complicated, and I didn't really understand it, but if I remembered correctly, the Grand Divinator was the highest position of authority within the church and the leader of the Council of Diviners whose self-appointed task was to "divine the will of God" and lead the church accordingly.

“What’s interesting about that?”

“The shadows uncovered evidence that he was issuing orders to Runohark while stationed in the Linus Empire.”

I was shocked.

I had no idea who this Carry-doo-doo guy was, but essentially, she was saying that someone with proven ties to Runohark was about to become the most powerful person in the entire church, right?!

“Are you saying that he might be the mastermind who orchestrated Lady Nefertima’s kidnapping?”

“I’m saying he might even be the Holy Master we’ve been looking everywhere for.”

“But we don’t have concrete proof of this, right?”

Several gathered officials radiated a murderous rage in response to Zeiatiel’s announcement, but the emperor raised a hand indicating that they should not get ahead of themselves.

“Unfortunately not. The evidence we do have is not signed using the title of ‘holy master.’”

The fact that High Priest Carry-doo-doo (or whatever his name was!) had been issuing orders to Runohark agents implied he was, at the very least, a high-ranking figure within the organization. But it was still possible that even the leaders of Runohark didn’t know the Holy Master’s true identity…

Or maybe he really is *the Holy Master?*

“Can the shadows infiltrate Farshia?”

“They can physically get into the city by pretending to be pilgrims but say the organization itself is impossible to infiltrate.”

“I see… For the time being, let’s continue working on it in collaboration with the Kingdom of Gaché’s Intelligence Department,” the emperor concluded, decisively determining the plan of action.

Lady Zeiatiel bowed gracefully and took a step back.

“Lady Nefertima, it seems that Runohark has dug their claws in here in the Linus Empire as well. I doubt High Priest Carriduvelle spent his time praying devoutly to the God of Creation while he was stationed here.”

I think you’re probably right. So what you’re saying is, “Don’t let your guard down,” right?

“I’m sure it will feel stifling for you, but for the time being, at least until our investigation is complete, I would like you to remain within the imperial palace where you’re safe.”

“I understand. Am I still allowed to move freely so long as I stay inside the imperial palace?”

“Yes, but please ensure that you’re accompanied by a bodyguard at all times.”

I’ve always got either Shinki or Spica with me, and Seigo and Rikusei follow me around most of the time, so that shouldn’t be a hardship.

“Just to be safe, I’ll also assign elemental spirits to watch over you. I’ll instruct them to inform Euche immediately if anything happens.”

Oh boy, it looks like the number of elemental spirits surrounding me is going to increase yet again. I’ve already got the elemental spirits Sol and Lars assigned to watch over me, as well as those drawn to Shinki…

And as for you, Euche! What are you making such a determined face for?!

“While we’re at it, it’s probably about time to meet with the elemental kings. One can never have too many allies in protecting a beloved child,” the emperor said.

Huuuh?! Is he plotting to pressure even the elemental kings into protecting me?!

“In that case, I will arrange a meeting,” Lady Zeiatiel said.

Wait, is it okay to use the elemental kings like that? Isn’t anybody going to stop the emperor?

I glanced over at Lady Zeiatiel, bewildered and looking for backup, but she went on to say something alarming with a beautiful smile.

“If anything were to happen to the beloved child Lady Nefertima, the elemental spirits and holy beasts would surely become enraged. That’s why the elemental kings’ power is necessary: to protect not only our own empire but, indeed, all of the continent of Larshia. There’s no guarantee that the Goddess will bestow her mercy a second time, after all.”

Oh, is that it? He wants to be extra, extra cautious because if something happens, the Goddess might not suppress the elemental spirits and holy beasts’ anger this time? I didn’t get the impression

that she was a cold-hearted goddess, but she is *the daughter of* that *God, so I suppose I can't afford to be too optimistic.*

And that's how it was decided that we'd be making a trip to the Elemental Palace!



BECAUSE the emperor had ordered me to stay obediently ensconced within the imperial palace, from that day forward, I became a homebody with no plans to go out other than the upcoming trip to the elemental palace.

It wasn't as if I could just spend all day every day playing with Daux and Marie, either. The two of them were frightfully busy with studies and lessons. Inspired by their dedication to learning and self-improvement, I sometimes went to the palace library to read.

It was on one such occasion when…

"Oh, if it isn't Lady Nefertima. Where are you going to play today?"

…I encountered the playboy by complete coincidence!

Perhaps because Karna had asked her not to let him get close to me, Spica blatantly stepped in front of me, covering my body with hers protectively, not even bothering to try and be subtle about it.

"Good Day, Prince Aisent."

"You don't need to be so uptight. You call Daux and my older brothers by their nicknames, don't you?"

I didn't trust his expression for a second when he told me he wanted me to be on equally friendly terms with him as well.

Playboy, have you forgotten the ominous warning you gave me before?

"Don't you think it's a bit cruel that I'm the only imperial prince whose nickname you refuse to use?"

Why is he so caught up on being called by his nickname? We just aren't that close!

"…Does this mean you're officially giving me permission to call you by your nickname?"

He's complaining that I don't call him by his nickname, but as a member of the imperial family, it would be unthinkably rude if I did

without first receiving permission!

"That's right. Can I call you 'Neema' too?"

"…If I agree, in exchange, will you please stop acting so shifty?"

I know this is also unthinkably rude of me to say, but I've already come up with the perfect excuse: that it's necessary to improve our relationship!

"What do you mean 'acting shifty'? I don't see how my manner is in any way unfitting for my position as an imperial prince…"

His incredibly thick fake-polite front, every bit as impressive as Will's, was appropriate and even commendable for an imperial prince. But that didn't change the fact that it gave me the creeps! I couldn't relax around him!

"When you're putting on a front like that, Prince Aisent, I don't feel as if we can become truly close because I have to be on guard at all times, making sure I'm behaving appropriately as an aristocrat."

"You aren't charmed by the idea of a fairytale prince like other young ladies?"

"My experience with princes tends toward the perverted, black-hearted demon prince variety, so no, not really…" I responded honestly with a certain person in mind before thinking the better of it, causing the playboy to bend over, clutching his stomach as he howled with laughter.

"You're the first person I've ever heard describe Will so accurately!"

Hey! I didn't say I was talking about Will! Shut up, will you?! What if the elemental spirits rat me out to Will for talking crap about him?!

"I didn't say I was talking about Will! You're mistaken!"

"Oh, no. The only person who fits *your* description of a prince is, without a doubt, Will!"

Will, your reputation proceeds you all the way to a foreign country!

"In any case, if you feel that strongly, then I will attempt to tone it down a bit. But don't expect miracles—I won't show my belly to anyone."

"Why is that?"

"You never know where enemies might be hiding. You should be careful, too, Neema. This is the heart of the monsters' nest, you

know."

Umm… I think I get the gist of what he's trying to say, but I've never encountered anything that terrible, so I can't really grasp it.

"In the Kingdom of Gaché, your king and crown prince seem to have a firm grasp on the nobility, so things may be different there, but here, we still don't know who will be the next emperor, so the internal power struggles are vicious and fierce."

I see…

In our country, succession was by the laws of primogeniture, and each family's heir needed the approval of the current king. So long as there was no unfortunate tragedy or the heir-apparent didn't have some kind of flaw so grave it prevented them from succeeding the title, there was all but no possibility of changing the order of succession.

"Are you fighting with the people who want to see your siblings become the next emperor?"

"I suppose you could say that. In reality, my enemies are anyone I feel is an enemy, regardless of who they support as the next emperor. For this reason, depending on your behavior, even you might become an enemy of mine, Neema."

That sounds troublesome. I just want to keep living in peace! My only goal is to spend all my time playing with fluffy animals!

"Then what should I do to avoid becoming your enemy?"

"If I told you not to get too close to someone, would you listen to me? Personally, I'd be happy if you'd just stayed close to His Majesty and the others where you're safely out of trouble."

Basically, what he's saying is he wants me to mind my own business and stop sticking my neck into everything?

"Nope, I don't think I can do that!"

"…I thought not. Well, just know I won't show any mercy when you make yourself my enemy; you can count on that."

Don't just decide by yourself that we're definitely going to end up as enemies! Didn't you skip over even trying *to avoid becoming enemies?! What about my peaceful life of animal-petting?!*

"Come to think of it, are you on friendly terms with Will?"

Aise chuckled at the sudden change in topic but answered, "As someone else in the position of having the weight of the country on his shoulders, I respect him deeply. More than I respect my own older brothers, certainly."

I don't see how Theo and Clay are particularly inferior to Will…

"I'm sure you'll understand how incredible Will is when you're older, Neema. Even more so once he takes the throne."

I'm most impressed that Will's made such an impression on Aise!



WHEN I told Karna about our conversation, she lit up with anger. Literally, her magic began leaking out, spraying tiny fireworks all around her.

"Knowing that he idolizes Prince Wilhelt is all the more reason not to let our guard down around him!" she announced in a clipped tone.

Karna was fluent in social niceties but made no attempt to hide her intense dislike of Will. I thought part of it was an act to avoid ending up forcibly engaged to him, but if she was really that against the idea, I, too, would do whatever I could to help her.

"As you wish, my lady. The other party is a wily fox who, despite our best efforts, refuses to allow us to get a good read on him. It's been a while since I've faced such a satisfyingly difficult challenge."

Now Paul's getting in on it too. I'm kind of impressed with Aise, though. Even Paul considers him a "wily fox."

"Is Prince Aise really that amazing?" I asked, getting into the habit of using his nickname.

"Yes. On the surface, he appears to be socializing with the aristocrats who oppose the emperor's political stances and doing a remarkable job of keeping them in line."

Because he'd said "on the surface," I assumed something else was going on *below* the surface, but I resisted the impulse to interrupt and ask what that might be, waiting instead for Paul to elaborate on his own.

"He must have some concealed motives, but he has never let so much as a glimpse of them slip."

"I understand that the staff we brought with us has been unable to uncover anything on him as of yet, but surely the agent from our household, who has been undercover in the Linus Empire since before our arrival, has found out something?"

“Unfortunately not.”

Our family employed many people. Even I had no idea just how many of them there were.

However, all of the highest-ranking aristocrats employed spies both domestically and abroad. That just went to show how aware the nobility were of the value of information.

In our country, according to Will, the Dierta ducal house employed the largest number of spies. I wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that the royal family was aware of precisely how many spies the Dierta family had on their personal payroll, but that was another matter, I supposed.

Anyways, our family also had spies all over the place, and like all of the other servants in our employ, they were exceptionally skilled.

And yet none of them could get anything on Aise’s hidden agenda.

He’s really something!

“Neema, you mustn’t let your guard down around Prince Aisent, you understand?! Even if he brings up Prince Wilhelt, don’t go along with it!” Karna started unintentionally sparking again as she muttered to herself, “That black-hearted prince really attracts the most unsavory people!”

The emperor had also cautioned me to be wary of the people around me, so I decided to include Aise in the list of people to be cautious of.

“As a last resort, we can always have Kai eat his desire to scheme. Neema’s safety is much more important than international relations.”

Karna! As a daughter of the family who serves as prime minister of our country generation after generation, it would be catastrophic if anyone were to overhear you saying something like that!

“Come to think of it, what do you do all day, every day, Kai?” I asked Kai, who was playing with Inaho, and he responded that he mostly attended tea parties. “Tea parties?”

It wasn’t as if drinking tea would do anything to satiate Kai’s hunger.

“I keep getting invited by the… what do you call them… young noble ladies?”

Oh, now I see… So this is the source of the rumors about a "handsome young man newly arrived at court" that Marie was talking about.

"None of them have very tasty desires, though."

I had no idea what qualified desires as "tasty" by Kai's standards, but I was pretty sure it was a good thing for us that there weren't many people with especially tasty desires.

"What kinds of desires did they have?" Karna asked.

After a pause during which he seemed to think it over, Kai finally answered that most of them were sexual in nature.

Why are gently bred young ladies full of lusty desires?!

"Goodness! It looks like they're hoping for more than just to charm an eligible gentleman and improve their station in life!"

If they were the type of pure-hearted maidens who dreamed of a Cinderella story like that, the words "sexual in nature" would've never come up!

"Many of their desires seemed to revolve around needing to gain experience to become a favored concubine," Kai explained.

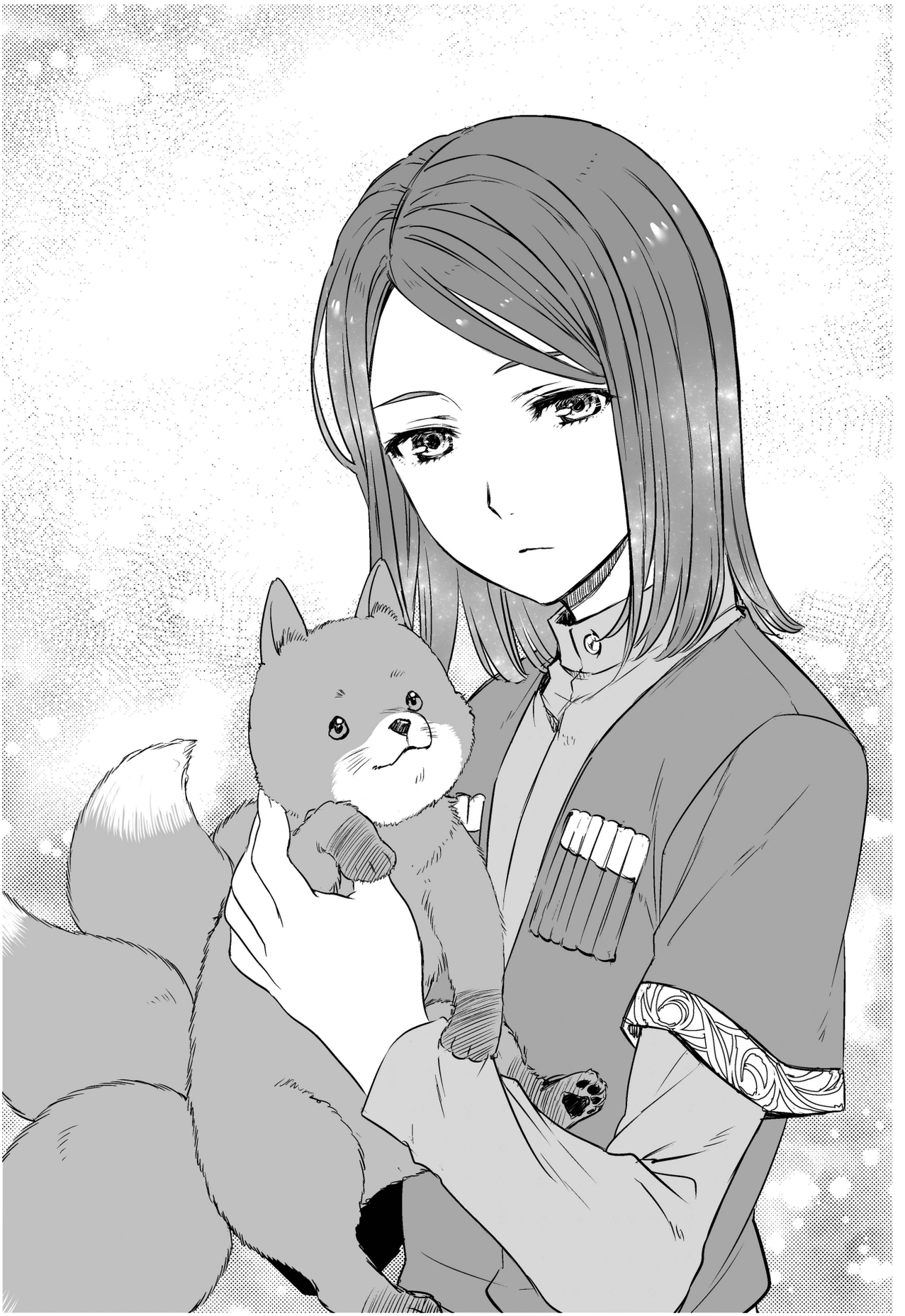
"This topic is not suitable for the ears of young ladies. I will take your report in private later, so please stop there for now, Kai," Paul cut in smoothly.

With this, the conversation came to an abrupt end, with Kai nonchalantly saying, "Okay," and returning to playing with Inaho.

I was surprised to see how good Kai was with Inaho, Haku, and the others. Apparently, he sampled a tiny taste of their desire to play to glean what kind of games they were in the mood for and would grant their wishes whenever possible.

I would never, under pain of death, admit how jealous I'd been to see the three monsters playing in the bath on the water slide Kai had made for them entirely out of water after we'd returned from our tour of the military facilities.

I consoled myself by deciding to have Euche or Sache do something similar for me the next time we played together.





ZEIATIEL said she would arrange a meeting with the elemental kings, but before she got the chance to do so, the elemental spirits informed us of a death.

The water dragon who lived on the continent of Wazhite had died.

I was shocked to hear that the water dragon, a primordial dragon, even *could* die.

This means that Sol will also die someday, right?!

I frantically opened a telepathic connection with Sol.

"Sol! Are you going to die too?!"

"What are you going on about all of a sudden?"

I explained that we'd just heard the news of the water dragon's death, and Sol responded, *"Oh, that..."* in a tone that made it clear that he now understood the connection between this news and my sudden outburst.

"Will you also go to be with the Goddess one day?"

"No, holy beasts go to the God of Creation. Or rather, I suppose it's more accurate to say we return *to the God of Creation."*

I didn't really get it, so I did my best to focus on what he was saying.

Holy beasts were made from fragmented pieces of the God of Creation, so when their purpose was fulfilled, they returned to the source. As such, they didn't have true "death."

"Does that mean the water dragon was absorbed into God?"

"I couldn't say for sure, but I assume it's something like that."

I guess it makes sense that even Sol doesn't know what happens after we die and return to the state of a soul.

While I had the opportunity, though, I decided to ask Sol a bunch of things I'd been wondering.

"How many primordial dragons are there now?"

...Come to think of it, I wonder what counter-word would be appropriate for counting primordial dragons in Japanese? We use "tou" for many large, four-legged creatures like cows and horses... There's also the more generic animal-counter "hiki," but I associate that word with smaller animals like cats and dogs... But considering

their level of sentience, I feel like maybe the counter-word for humans, "nin" is most appropriate!

"If nothing unexpected has happened to the others, there should be one for each element."

Meaning that, aside from Sol, there should also be a wind dragon and a land dragon… That doesn't sound very nice; it calls to mind a mole! Let's go with "earth dragon."

I wonder if they're green and yellow?

"I'd like to meet them someday."

"If you're lucky, you probably will. The wind dragon never stays in one place for long, so I have no idea where they might be roaming now. As for the earth dragon, they rarely come to the surface."

Hearing that made me realize how upstanding Sol was in comparison.

But you know, it's just occurring to me now that maybe Sol only responded to the summoning spell cast on that magic circle because he felt like it.

Even if it was due to God's meddling that the "random" creature the summoning spell selected was Sol, he's strong enough that he could've ignored the summons if he really wanted.

"Sol, thank you for coming to meet me!"

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"Well, you could've disabled the magic circle that summoned you if you'd wanted to, right?"

"I… I no longer recall such events!"

Whether he was feeling shy or just didn't want to answer, I didn't know, but, for whatever reason, Sol abruptly ended the telepathic connection there.

Hmph, he's not honest with his feelings at all!

But that didn't change the fact that having Sol on my side made me feel brave.

The Linus Empire, as a country of water holy beasts and verdant greenery, had decided to honor the water dragon's passing with five days of mourning. However, unlike what I was used to in Japan, this period of mourning would be a grand affair, designed to see the water dragon off on their journey to return to the God of Creation.

The entire imperial city was bustling with a festive atmosphere, and ice sculptures of the water dragon were

displayed proudly on practically every street corner.

A *massive* ice sculpture of the water dragon was erected inside the imperial palace as well. I was surprised to learn that it had been crafted by the retired emperor himself. It turned out the retired emperor had met the water dragon in person. It had only been once, but the retired emperor seemed very satisfied with his work, declaring it a “perfect likeness.”

All of these festivities following the somber occasion of a death may have been unconventional, at least by the standards I was accustomed to on Earth, but I thought it was kind of nice.

And I understood that thoughts regarding death were different here because of religious differences. Just like how they called dying “journeying home to be with the Goddess,” they also viewed death as the beginning of a journey to receiving a new life. For that reason, people prayed that the deceased’s journey would be safe and that their next life would be full of happiness.

That was why funerals in this world were lively and cheerful. When a king, emperor, or other person of high status died, their mourning period would become like a national holiday. It was said that the more wild the celebrating became, the more the deceased had been loved.

However, even if someone who wasn’t loved by those around them or who’d committed crimes died, that didn’t mean everyone would blaspheme them after their death. Instead, everyone prayed for the Goddess to show mercy upon them. It was believed that such people had experienced suffering in this life that had caused them to lose their way, so those around them prayed that they would be able to atone for their sins to earn a happier situation in their next life.

They’re able to cheerfully send their deceased loved ones off because they believe they’ll have another life. But it’s still sad. You still miss the person who died. All the more so if they were someone close to you.

Even now, thinking of Dee caused sad and lonely feelings to bubble up inside me. But I still clung to the belief that in his next life, Dee would find his way back to our family one way or another.

I’m sure that’s how everyone feels about their deceased loved ones. So, I have to do my best, too, and stay positive during the period

of mourning. Even if I never met the water dragon in this life, we might meet in the next life!

With that decided, the next course of action was…

"Shinki, Kai, let's go out in the garden!"

"…What are you planning to do out there?" Shinki asked skeptically. It was clear from the look on his face that he'd deduced, based on my attitude, that I was probably up to something weird again.

Ruuuude!

"Don't worry about that! Come on, let's go already!"

I dragged the two of them and Spica out to the garden, where I summoned Sache and Euche.

Aside from Spica, all of these people could manipulate water.

I explained the mission to them, and they all accepted—Shinki with raised eyebrows that seemed to be saying, *"See! I knew you were up to something!"* and Kai with the stipulation that I'd better feed him after.

"All right, let's do it!"

At my signal, everyone unleashed their powers in perfect sync.

A massive sphere of water appeared in the sky above the imperial palace, growing even larger as I watched.

Then, it slowly formed into a distinct shape. It was identical to the ice sculpture inside the imperial palace, except it was more than twice as large. To make it stand out, we'd decided to make it even larger than the real water dragon had been.

Once it was finished, the dragon, made entirely out of water, "flew" all around the imperial city. It flapped its wings with graceful elegance, reflecting the sunlight like millions of stunningly beautiful gemstones.

At the end of the performance, the dragon dispersed into teeny-tiny droplets that rained down over the imperial city like gentle tears.

That cast a huge rainbow over the entire imperial city, and rumors spread all over the continent that it sparkled with light, almost as if the Goddess had descended once more.

Later on, Sol would laugh at me for creating such a flashy display.

I responded that if he passed on during my lifetime, I'd make an even more magnificent display for him, an idea he flat-out rejected.

But Sol, if you turn back into a soul, there's nothing you can do to stop me!

Perhaps sensing the pervasive gloominess I was trying my best to ignore, Sol announced that because he could not abandon a beloved child even to succumb to the inevitability of death, his lady's plan would have to remain unfulfilled.

I'm fine with that!

"In that case, we'll be together always!"

6 - I Suspected God Was Unreliable Before; Now, I'm Sure!

EVEN after the period of mourning ended, the emperor remained busy.

And, seemingly having heard I had nothing to do, Louis and Marie's father started reaching out to me. For some reason, they wanted my opinions about the plan to brand-ify local, regional products and Project Roslan.

On one such day, I happened to be with Daux and Marie when Marie's father, Towen, requested a moment of my time. I responded that I was available now if it was okay for all three of us to come together, and he easily agreed.

It's a perfect chance to let Marie spend even more time with her father, so I want to make the most of it!

Towen said he would come to us, and we could talk in the room where Daux, Marie, and I had been playing.

"It's about the construction of the tower. The carpenters' guild is saying they simply cannot build it according to these specifications."

Oh, right. They were stuck on the issue of fortifying the walls to hold up the tower's weight. Heh, good thing I came prepared!

I'd had nothing but time on my hands lately, so I'd made use of it by having Paul procure the necessary materials for me. With those materials, Daux, Marie, and I worked together to build something.

Such perfect timing!

"Paul, could you bring it in for me?"

The "materials" I'd asked Paul to procure included a large amount of clay.

Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to find the kind of modeling clay I had in mind. What he brought back was a reddish-brown clay of the type commonly used for making pottery.

There was a tradition of pottery-making on this continent as well, but only a small portion of the products produced were

“luxury items” made of white porcelain. Of course, that drove up the price and desirability of the pieces that *were* produced. Louis had been the one to tell me all about that, but the pottery industry intrigued me, and I would like to tour an artisan’s workshop in person at some point if possible.

Clay wasn’t the only thing I’d asked Paul to find for me.

It turned out there were several materials stronger than iron available in this world, so I had him procure the most abundant and inexpensive option. It was a material unique to this world that was made by mixing common metals such as iron and copper.

I guess the technical term is an “alloy?”

In case you were wondering, the strongest and most durable material in this world was an exceedingly rare material named “gaidite,” which was made from refined minerals. The legendary sword Gandal, which had been wielded by the first king of the Kingdom of Gaché, was said to have been made of gaidite.

In any case, I’d asked the blacksmiths’ guild to form the alloy Paul had procured for me into indented rods shaped like the letter H.

Now, this is what I call steel-reinforced concrete! Or, at least, metal-reinforced clay?

I’d been planning to assemble these alloy rods together and cover them with clay to build a model of the tower. However, I ran into a problem immediately when I realized I didn’t have any tools capable of cutting the alloy rods to the size I needed. Luckily, a savior came to my rescue, quickly remedying this issue!

The one to lend me a hand in my darkest hour was Kaideetay.

Well, I guess, to be more accurate, he lent me his tail.

I just had to tell Kaideetay how long I wanted it and he would quickly and efficiently sever the rods in the correct place. Luckily, Kaideetay wasn’t a sky tiger like Lars; it turned out that as an earth tiger, he could also manipulate metal.

Thank God for that!

Thanks to Kaideetay’s assistance and Daux’s aptitude for detailed crafting, the tower turned out great! Marie and I focused on helping with the parts that wouldn’t be noticeable…

Hey, the foundation is important, too!

When Paul carried it in, the model of the tower was just a bit shorter than me.

Towen let out a noise somewhere between amazement and surprise when he saw it. “This is incredible. The three of you made it by yourselves?”

“Yes. Daux is really good at doing detailed work like this, so it turned out to be a masterpiece!” Marie responded, shamelessly praising Daux’s considerable contribution to the project and earning a shy smile from him.

I thought that Towen had started being more fatherly lately. Apparently, that encouraged Marie because she, too, was doing her best to draw out their previously brief and formal interactions into actual conversations. The fact that the content of these attempts at conversation tended towards extolling Daux’s virtues as if they were her own probably just reflected the fact that she was a girl in love.

That must fill her father with some rather complicated feelings, huh?

“We fashioned this model so that it won’t collapse just from being shaken a little.” I instructed Paul to shake the foundation, and without a flicker of change to his expression, he shook the heavy model.

I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that Paul is ridiculously strong from all the training he does.

The clay making up the foundation was hardened like concrete, so despite Paul’s best attempt at shaking the tower, it didn’t fall.

“May I ask what kind of structure you used to achieve this?” Towen asked.

“We first built a framework using these, then covered it over with a layer of clay,” I explained, showing him one of the alloy rods.

Clearly intrigued, Towen took the alloy rod from me and examined it closely. “Is this suntate? What is the meaning of this particular shape?” Towen asked, peppering me with one question after another.

Suntate was the Larshian word for “alloy”—a generic term used to refer to any type of mixed-metal compound.

“It’s a harder type than the more common varieties of suntate. As for the shape, I think that making the sides thicker and

the center thinner makes it almost as strong as a solid rectangular beam, but much lighter."

I didn't have any kind of engineering background, so I wasn't sure of the reasoning behind the shape either. But given how frequently I'd seen beams of this shape used in steel-reinforced concrete buildings in my past life, I figured there must be a good reason for it.

I had absolutely no aptitude for physics or any of that in my past life, so I never learned much about engineering. Now I wish I'd tried a little harder!

"...I don't know if this technique will work, but it's certainly worth looking into. Could I have a few of these pieces of suntate?"

"Of course. If there aren't enough here, you can ask the blacksmith's guild in the imperial city to make you more of them."

I'd given a rather shoddy drawing to a servant and had them place the order with the blacksmiths' guild to create the alloy rods based on that.

I bet the blacksmiths were stumped by such an odd request!

And yet, they'd created exactly what I was looking for. This only went to show what highly skilled professionals they were.



THE following day, Louis barged in.

He brought along a gift of my favorite sweets, pechenne, so I couldn't very well turn him away. Not that I'd wanted to in the first place.

"Just now, the guild master of the carpenters' guild ran out of the palace in a huge rush. What did you do this time, Neema?"

"Why do you automatically assume I'm the cause of this?!"

I've never even met the guild master of this country's carpenters' guild! It's unreasonable to jump to the conclusion that it's somehow my fault!

"Who else could it be? There was a meeting about Project Roslan today. The guild master of the carpenters' guild, who is in charge of the focal point, that tower, suddenly went white as a ghost and left in a hurry, as if running away!"

This is clearly *a false accusation!*

Certain that there must be some kind of misunderstanding, I asked Louis to walk me through what had been discussed during the meeting to see if we could figure it out.

"Anyone who knows you would just shrug their shoulders and accept it as another of your eccentric ideas, but the guild master's eyes got so wide I thought they might pop out of his head!"

When he said that, I finally realized…

It's not a false accusation, after all. I should've realized. If a bunch of kids created something, even in miniature, which you, as the guild master of the carpenters' guild, have proclaimed impossible, of course, that will cause you to lose face.

I accidentally dealt a terrible blow to the guild master's pride in front of so many important people…

"That wasn't my intention…" I muttered.

"He's a very forgiving person, so don't beat yourself up over it. I bet he's already gotten over his initial embarrassment and is now more determined than ever to outdo you so he can salvage his reputation."

That's not much better. I don't want the carpenters to view me as a rival! I'm not an engineer by any stretch of the imagination!

"Oh, I almost forgot the reason I came. His Majesty said that the date of your visit to the elemental palace has been set for three days from now."

"Really?!"

"Yup. I'm certain everything will be explained fully the day before the trip, but since only holy beasts and their bonded partners are allowed to visit the elemental palace, no one will be able to accompany you other than His Majesty."

Does that mean that named monsters like Haku and Gratia are also prohibited? I'm pretty sure Shinki will be allowed, but I'd better leave everyone else behind this time just to be safe. But I'm going to be super nervous being alone with the emperor!

"Don't worry; I'm sure His Majesty won't insist on being formal if it's just the two of you," Louis assured me, having picked up on my nervousness.

I wish Louis or Theo could come along; their presence would help break the tension.

"I've heard some species of animals only live in the area immediately surrounding the elemental palace. If you have the

time before you leave, maybe you should research them a bit now," he suggested.

"Oh! That's right!"

There was a book in the Kingdom of Gaché's royal palace library titled *Animals of the Elemental Palace.* I remember seeing all kinds of strange and interesting animals when I flipped through it.

"I wonder if there are any books about them here that would be okay for me to read…"

"Of course there are."

Depending on the book, some were prohibited from being removed from the library or viewable only with special permission. A foreigner normally wouldn't be granted access to restricted books like those.

"Let's go to the library right now, and I'll introduce you to the person in charge. If I do that, you'll be able to read any book you want, as much as you like."

"Yes, please!"

I'd visited the imperial palace library several times already, but there were so many books! An extensive collection of non-fiction books covered a wide variety of topics and spanned a vast period of history. I could spend my entire life reading and never get through them all.

In short, the library was an excellent place to pass the time and stave off boredom.

Louis and I made our way to the library, where he introduced me to the head librarian, officially had access granted to me for the entire library, and then led me to a small adjoining room.

"This room is for the imperial family's exclusive use, but Eliza is the only one who ever comes here, so you can use this room as you like."

"Is it really okay? I wouldn't want to inconvenience Princess Eliza…"

"It's fine. Even Eliza only comes here occasionally."

I suppose if the imperial family aren't going to use this room, somebody should!

Because the room was intended to be used by the imperial family, it was decorated with only the finest furnishings and featured a relaxing yet elegant color palette. In short, it was a very comfortable space.

After that, I spent a good while relaxing in the private room, chatting with Louis, and flipping through an illustrated encyclopedia titled *Animals of the Linus Empire.*

Over the next two days, I closed myself up in the library, reading book after book about the elemental palace.

The section of forest surrounding the elemental palace seemed to be influenced by the thick concentration of elemental power because the biology of the plants and animals there differed from elsewhere in Wildwood.

First of all, there weren't any large carnivorous animals.

Some smaller animals fed on insects, but even then, I'd only found two species named in the books I'd read that fit that criteria.

All of the other animals were herbivorous, and boy, were there a lot of them! The books I read listed a huge variety of plant-eating animals of all shapes and sizes that called the elemental forest their home.

I suspected there were so many more books about the elemental palace here than in the Kingdom of Gaché's royal palace library because the emperor was always bonded with a holy beast generation after generation. One piece of evidence supporting that suspicion was that the authors of many of the books had the last name "Linus."

The more I read, the more excited I became for my upcoming visit to the elemental palace.

If possible, I want to shut myself up in the elemental palace just like this and play with all these interesting animals to my heart's content!



ON the day before our trip, I was reading in the library as usual when the emperor himself came in person to speak with me. He said it was to prepare me for our journey to the elemental palace, but I thought it would've been more appropriate for him to summon me to his office rather than humbling himself by coming to me. But when I tried saying that, the emperor just laughed and said that he'd spent so much time holed up in his office that he

thought he might go mad if he didn't get a change of scenery soon.

Heh, he has that in common with his younger brother Louis.

The first thing he told me was that only those who were bonded with a holy beast could enter the elemental forest. That confirmed my supposition that we would be traveling alone.

I can still bring Shinki, but how are we going to travel?

"Sache will join us so you and Shinki can ride together on her back."

Oh, Sache's coming too? Come to think of it, shouldn't we ask Sol to come for something like this?

"Should I ask Sol to come?" I asked.

"I've already asked the elemental spirits to convey an invitation to the fire dragon, but he responded that there's no need for his presence if Euche and I will be accompanying you."

Whaaat?! Sol, that's so cold! Would it kill you to come along for moral support?!

Seeing me stewing in indignation at Sol's callousness, the emperor spoke up in his defense. "I believe he made this decision out of consideration for Euche and Sache's feelings, not wanting to make them uncomfortable by repeatedly intruding on their territory. It's also evidence of how much he trusts us."

"How so?"

"For a holy beast to be able to entrust their bonded partner to another holy beast's care, they first need to carefully consider their partner's situation and determine that they trust the people around them. We have sworn that we will do nothing to violate this enormous trust the fire dragon has placed in us."

I see. So Sol was actually being considerate? As usual, he couldn't just be honest with his feelings and come out and say *that, could he?!*

"The fire dragon understands very well that primordial dragons, unlike other holy beasts, have massive bodies and incredible powers, so it's impossible for them to always be by their bonded partner's side."

"Oh…"

Come to think of it, all of the other holy beasts I knew—blue pegasi, sky tigers, and earth tigers—almost never left their bonded partner's side. Sol was the only one who wasn't always hanging around close to me.

“Are all other types of holy beasts small enough to always stay with their bonded partner?”

Thanks to the books I’d read in the library, I’d learned of several additional types of holy beasts I’d never seen in real life. For water holy beasts, the only two types that had been confirmed were blue pegasi and ice monkeys. What was particularly interesting was that there was also an “opposite” for ice monkeys —fire monkeys.

This makes me want to complain to God for a variety of reasons! Did he make it this way simply because he was feeling lazy, or—and this seems more likely—did he get carried away with delusions of grandeur and think it would be super cool to create everything in opposing pairs?

Because they were opposites, whenever a sky tiger was born, an earth tiger would also be born, and when an ice monkey was born, a fire monkey would also be born.

I can just picture God grinning like a kid with his fingers in the cookie jar while coming up with this arrangement!

“All of the holy beasts known to exist on the continent of Larshia are small enough to stay with their bonded partners.”

Even Lars, who was significantly larger than any tiger on Earth, could live in the royal palace. And the imperial palace in the Linus Empire had been specifically designed to accommodate holy beasts.

It’s a little sad that primordial dragons are the only ones who can’t be with their bonded partners all the time. Maybe that’s why primordial dragons give their partner a dragon orb, so they can communicate via telepathy?

“I wonder if Sol is lonely…”

I asked the emperor, and he said that since the beginning of modern history, there was no mention of Sol ever bonding with anyone before. Although, that said, roughly 2000 years were still unaccounted for *before* the beginning of modern history. Everything before that belonged to a different linguistic family, so even if documents from that long ago could be found, no one could read them. And without computers, it would take an ungodly amount of time to decrypt those dead languages. Among the elves and the other species with long lifespans, some

individuals made it their life's work to research the ancient texts, but as of yet, no one had made any significant breakthroughs.

"According to Euche, just having the bond brings a holy beast great joy, but in the end, nothing can compare to being with their partner."

Based on the way Euche was always begging for Celiunos's attention, I figured that if he, as a holy beast, was saying that, then it must be true.

Even if Sol can feel our bond through the dragon orb, being together in person is still better! All right, I'm going to make a point of speaking with Sol more often!

Just as I decided that, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

This is the mister-emotionally-constipated Sol we're talking about! Even if I contact him telepathically on a regular basis, who's to say he'll bother responding in a meaningful way?!

"Oh, we've also been instructed to bring along the monsters you've named."

I was so focused on coming up with a plan of attack to break through Sol's emotional armor that it took me a moment to comprehend the meaning of the emperor's words.

"...Huh?! It's okay to bring them with us?! Lord Louis said it would just be the two of us..."

"Euche said it was okay. It's best if the elemental kings familiarize themselves with your named monsters. They should already know all about your 'knight,' Shinki."

If it was okay to bring them along, I certainly wouldn't argue. I felt better having them with me. Even if it turned out *not* to be okay, I doubted the elemental spirits would do anything to my monster friends, but since I didn't want to put them in danger, I figured it would be best to double-check with the elemental spirits, just to be safe.

Once I parted ways with the emperor and returned to my room, I informed Shinki and the others of the plan for the following day. Since I'd already told them they would have to stay behind, Haku and the others were ecstatic to hear they could go after all.

"Lady Neema, Haku, and the other small monsters should be no problem, but how do you intend to transport the larger monsters like Seigo, Rikusei, and Kai to the elemental palace?"

I froze for a moment after Paul asked this very astute question.

I hadn't thought about that! Haku and Gratia can ride on me, but if I'm riding with Shinki on Sache's back, there won't be room for Kai. Not to mention Seigo, Rikusei, and Inaho… It would be difficult to carry all of them in our arms and still hold on so we don't fall off ourselves.

"…What should we do?"

"Mistress, I can fly…" Kai pointed out, tilting his head slightly as if confused.

…Oh, that's right! I forgot!

Kai had been in his human form so much lately that it skipped my mind that, like all sirens, he could also transform into a bird.

If Kai will also be flying, we can split the load!

"In that case, will you please carry Seigo and Rikusei?"

"Sure."

However, since a siren's arms transformed into wings when they took their bird form, we would need to prepare a basket of some kind for the kobolds to ride in that Kai could grip with his talons. I asked Paul to take care of it.

"Peep!" Nox let out an inquisitive cry that seemed to ask, *"What about me?"*

Hm, I wonder if it's okay to bring Nox? The emperor said to bring my monster friends, but he didn't say anything about animal friends…

"Elemental spirits, can Nox enter the elemental forest?"

I could neither see nor hear the elemental spirits myself, but I knew that there were always at least a few of them hovering around us at pretty much all times, and they could hear me even if I couldn't hear them. As long as Shinki was around to relay their responses to me, we could communicate just fine!

"They say it's fine if he's accompanying you. They also say, 'Don't eat any of the creatures of the forest; they are poisonous to animals from the outside.'"

"Poisonous?!" My voice rose sharply with alarm at the unexpected word.

That bit of information wasn't written in any of the books I read! I'll have to give Nox an extra-large meal before we leave. Oh, but that will make it difficult to fly…

"Nox, can you resist eating anything while we're in the forest?"

“Peep?”

That did not sound very reassuring. All right, once we enter the forest, no more flying for you, Nox! If I’m holding him, he won’t be able to “accidentally” give into temptation and eat anything.

The next few hours passed in the blink of an eye as we prepared for the journey.

At Kai’s request, the “basket” for carrying Seigo and Rikusei ended up being more like a set of messenger bags that he would wear crossed over his chest. Apparently, it was easier to fly with the weight distributed evenly on both sides of his body.

Unbearably curious about the bags, Inaho sniffed them thoroughly before ducking inside one. Her head and most of her body disappeared into the bag, leaving just her tails hanging out. The four tails that stuck out, giving away her location, wagged happily.

“Inaho, time for bed!”

Inaho burst energetically out of the bag and raced for the bedroom, dragging Haku and Gratia with her. Seigo and Rikusei were already in there, curled up on their cushions, yawning. Shinki and Kai slept in the neighboring servants’ quarters, and it seemed they’d already returned to their room for the night.

I wonder if it makes them anxious to share a room with Paul?

I’d planned to contact Sol and tell him about tomorrow’s plans before I went to sleep, but Inaho plopped right down on my bunny backpack and promptly fell asleep.

Dang, she’s fast! But that’s my *bunny backpack!*

Inaho seemed drawn to the bunny backpack, probably because it radiated a strong aura of Sol’s fire magic, which calmed her as a fellow fire-affiliated creature.

Oh well, I’ll just have to wait until tomorrow morning to call Sol.

With a last jealous glance at Inaho peacefully sleeping, I, too, climbed into bed and positioned myself to use the Hanley stuffed animal instead of a pillow.

“No oversleeping tomorrow,” Paul cautioned as he pulled the blankets over my body.

I obligingly agreed, “Okaaay.”

“May you pass the night in safety and peace.”

Paul spoke the traditional nighttime greeting and dimmed the lights. Karna was still awake, so he was compromising by

dimming the lights instead of turning them off completely.

I can feel Gratia squirming around. Is he having a hard time getting comfortable? Either way, I can't keep my eyelids open any longer, so I'm going to sleep!

7 - The Road to the Elemental Palace Is Full of Unknown Wonders

I was shaken awake by Paul and ushered through my morning routine still half-asleep—until the washcloth soaked in freezing cold water touched my face. *That* woke me right up!

"We don't have the time to drag our feet this morning, so you'll have to forgive me for resorting to such forceful methods," Paul "apologized" without sounding the least bit apologetic. Once he'd confirmed that I was well and truly awake, Paul adjusted the water to a more pleasant temperature.

His "kindness" is so rough…

Before breakfast, I telepathically called Sol to say good morning and tell him we'd be visiting the elemental palace today.

"Oh, that's today, is it? Those guys are eccentric, but I'm sure they'll love you."

If Sol was calling them eccentric, they must be seriously weird!

"Let's go together next time!"

"If there's another opportunity, then sure."

Opportunities are something one makes for oneself, so he's agreeing to go with me next time, right?! Sol, you don't have to hide your tender emotions with prickliness all the time, you know! You're safe to be honest and vulnerable with me…

After breakfast, Louis came to get us. The emperor was already waiting in the southern courtyard.

We can't keep the emperor waiting! You should've gotten us sooner!

With me hurrying an unconcerned Louis along, we went to the courtyard, where Euche zoomed around happily in the sky.

"I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting!" I cried as I ran into the courtyard, but the emperor greeted me with a benevolent smile.

"There's no need to hurry."

Try telling that to everyone who would eat me alive if they knew I kept the emperor waiting on me!

“I’ll be in your care today!” I said, giving a little bow before the overly casual emperor could order me not to.

He rewarded me with a gentle pat on the head and the words, “I could say the same.”

I don’t know what he means by that… Is there something going on here that I’m not aware of?

“Now then, if you’re all ready, let’s get going, shall we?”

Kai had already transformed into his bird form and put on the bags. Their straps crossed over his chest, and one bag dangled down on each side of his body. Based on the four happily wagging tails sticking out of one of the bags, it appeared that Inaho was inside.

That can’t be comfortable, leaping head-first and riding upside down like that!

Originally, I’d planned to carry Inaho in my arms, but she was so fond of the bag and seemed afraid of water holy beasts, so I’d given up on that plan.

Seigo rode in the other bag, and I would carry Rikusei, who Inaho had displaced. Haku and Gratia clung on to Shinki, and Nox would fly most of the way himself.

“Spica, I know you’ll be lonely being left behind, but we’ll be back as soon as we can, so wait for us here, okay?”

Unfortunately, since Spica was a beastperson and not a monster, I had been told I couldn’t bring her. Although I’d named her, it didn’t create a binding between us as it did with monsters, so she didn’t qualify to enter the elemental palace.

“Yes, Lady Neema. I’ll be awaiting your safe return,” Spica said, but her drooping ears and tail gave away how disappointed she was.

Even when I’d been in my long sleep, she’d at least had Seigo and Rikusei with her the whole time. *It must be hard having* everyone *leave without her…*

Resolving to spend extra time lavishing Spica with attention after we returned, I climbed onto Sache’s back.

Or rather, Shinki picked me up and set me on Sache’s back…

Euche took off, and Sache quickly followed.

Kai flapped his wings and leapt into the air as well.

From time to time, Sache glanced back to ensure Kai kept up.

It was amazing just how different the two blue pegasi were.

Sache had a magnanimous personality and liked just about everyone, although she particularly favored my monster friends. Euche, on the other hand, was more temperamental and had absolutely no tolerance for anyone or anything he didn't like. And he especially didn't get along with Sol.

I'd never thought much about the holy beasts' ages, but Euche seemed younger than the others.

We made good time on our journey through the sky, and before long, the elemental forest came into view in the distance. Even though it was my second time seeing it, I was still struck by its incredible presence.

Why do I get such a strong feeling that I shouldn't get any closer than this?

Instead of flying directly up to the elemental palace, Euche landed a good distance away in a spot that was still technically part of Wildwood.

"We have to walk from here," the emperor said. "If you stray from the holy beasts' path, you'll be lost for all eternity, so be careful."

Whaaat?! That's scary!

Fear won out over shock at the emperor's sudden and unexpected warning.

With a chuckle, the emperor held out his hand to me. "If we hold hands, we probably won't get lost."

I wasn't sure if I should be grateful for or disturbed by that offer. But I didn't want to end up "lost for all eternity," so I elected to take the emperor's hand.

"Thank you."

Apparently, Sache would be leading the way from here.

The emperor and I followed directly behind Sache, then came Shinki and finally Kai. Euche brought up the rear of our procession, presumably to prevent us from getting lost.

As we walked amongst the impossibly tall, sequoia-like trees, it looked like the path ahead was a dead end. The trees were so dense and close together that they seemed to form an impassable wall.

How are we supposed to get in?

Sache let out a high-pitched whinny, and the trees moved aside as if they were living creatures.

Talk about “open sesame!”

“This is one of the reasons humans can only enter the elemental forest with a holy beast. Only a holy beast is strong enough to control the highly concentrated elemental power here.”

Meaning even an elementalist can’t open this?

We slipped through the space created when the trees moved, and I was surprised to find it was brighter than expected. With how densely packed the trees appeared, I’d expected it to be dim.

While I was distracted by that unexpected revelation, something cut across the path ahead of us.

What was that?

My gaze followed it when suddenly I made eye contact with another set of eyes.

“Huh?!”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing and couldn’t control the cry that slipped from my lips unbidden.

The owner of the other set of eyes also seemed surprised because their round eyes became even rounder. Then, snapping back to its senses, the tiny being dashed off to hide in the dense foliage.

“Was that an elemental spirit?!”

“Are you saying you’ve never seen an elemental spirit before, Lady Nefertima?! But there are so many of them following you around like little soldiers all the time!”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about how he worded it, but more than that, I was surprised to hear there were that many of them. I looked around reflectively, not believing that I would see anything, but there they were—elemental spirits were practically swarming all around me! It was enough to make me seriously question how I could’ve possibly *not* noticed them up until now.

When I explained that Sol and I hadn’t formally bonded using our true names, just exchanged nicknames and a promise, the emperor seemed surprised.

“I understand that the fire dragon cares about you very much and is trying to be considerate, but it must be difficult to use the holy beast’s power if you can’t even see elemental spirits…”

“I can use the dragon orb to borrow Sol’s power,” I pointed out, confused because I was sure he already knew this.

But the emperor shook his head, saying that wasn't what he meant. "A holy beast's power is just like magic. The power that flows into the bonded partner from their holy beast becomes the partner's power, and they have complete control over it. However, unlike magic, that power can also affect the balance of nature. So, the elemental spirits will suppress it if necessary."

The emperor adjusted his pace to match that of my much shorter legs, leisurely strolling beside me as we spoke.

"For example, let's pretend I used Euche's power to flood this forest. That water would seep into the soil, causing the ground to loosen, and the trees' roots might even begin to rot. To prevent that, the elemental spirits would step in and scatter their power around."

With magic, in addition to casting the spell, you need to continuously pour power into it to keep it going. If you didn't, the spell would fizzle out as soon as it used up all the power used to cast it.

One of the biggest differences between the types of elementally attributed magic was whether casting or maintaining the spell used more power and how much more.

In particular, earth magic was said to be very easy to maintain.

Everyone always makes casting spells look as simple as breathing, so you'd be tempted to think it is, but there are actually all kinds of restrictions. Although, those with special abilities seem to be able to bust right through all of those restrictions…

"You have to communicate closely with the elemental spirits and use the holy beast's power only in ways that won't disturb the balance of nature. If you fail to do this, the bonded partner of a holy beast could easily destroy the world. Do you understand?"

I nodded emphatically several times.

For the bonded partner of a holy beast, elemental spirits were kind of like an automatic emergency break—something they absolutely needed when using the holy beast's power.

In my case, up until this point, all of the holy beasts who've used their power to help me controlled it themselves, so there was never any issue with the fact that I couldn't see or hear elemental spirits.

"I don't have any magic, so I don't really know what it feels like to use power…"

“I see, so that’s why you lost control…”

Of course the emperor had heard about that incident. But the fact that he hadn’t known I didn’t possess any magic might’ve meant he thought I’d merely mishandled Sol’s magic due to my age and inexperience.

“If not for the Goddess’s intervention, you might not be here now, Lady Nefertima. If a person without any magic absorbs a holy beast’s power, their body can’t handle it.”

Will had explained to me that bonded partners without magic were supposed to “wear” the holy beast’s power instead of absorbing it. This explanation was a bit too abstract for me to understand, but I thought it might refer to draping the power over your body like a barrier of some kind.

When I tried asking the emperor what I was supposed to do, I received yet another difficult-to-understand reply.

“Think of it like clothing. You put on an outfit that fits the situation.”

I still didn’t understand, but the emperor declared that he wasn’t the right person to explain it to me. He was an elite-level water magic user, and his holy beast was also water-affiliated, meaning his compatibility with Sol’s power was very low. He even went so far as to say that he couldn’t predict what might occur if he attempted to teach me: either the two opposing powers would cancel each other out or would both reverberate back on the source. So, the emperor suggested that the retired empress and Kaideetay might be more suitable teachers.

Just as the conversation entered a natural lull, the trees thinned out enough that we could see our surroundings more clearly. Everywhere I looked, there were plants that I’d never seen before.

Do those colorful plants contain magic?

An elemental spirit suddenly popped out in front of me. This time, it didn’t try to hide when our eyes met. Its tiny little mouth moved as if it were speaking, but I couldn’t hear anything.

I tilted my head to the side in confusion, and the emperor announced, “Lady Nefertima can see you.”

Immediately, a wide smile broke out across the elemental spirit’s face, and it fluttered its beautiful, transparent wings. Apparently, the elemental spirit in front of me had called out to

the others because more and more of them began gathering around.

I couldn’t hear their voices, but they were all wearing happy smiles.

The elemental spirits clung to my face and hair. There were so many of them that I couldn’t even open my eyes!

It hadn’t been a problem when I couldn’t see them, but now that I could, I desperately felt the need for some personal boundaries!

Are there really this *many elemental spirits hovering around me daily?!*

I could feel the sensation of their tiny hands grabbing onto me, and their wings tickled where they flicked against my skin.



“C-Come on, everyone back up a little, will you…?!”

Unable to so much as open my eyes, I obviously couldn’t keep walking. All I *could* do was grip the emperor’s hand for dear life.

Hey, hey! Emperor Celiunos, stop laughing and help me!

“I know how happy you all must be, but we really need to meet with the elemental kings first…”

At Emperor Celiunos’s words, the elemental spirits snapped to attention, straightening not their posture but their wings.

I guess this means the elemental spirits recognize the elemental kings as their rulers?

“These elemental spirits have been watching over you all along, Lady Nefertima. They are very happy that you’re finally able to see them.”

“I see… Thank you for always looking out for me. Could you please show us the way to the elemental kings?”

All the elemental spirits nodded vigorously and flew ahead, gesturing, *‘This way!’* There were so many of them, it was almost like a fluttering mass of faerie lights marking our way.

As we walked along following the elemental spirits, we encountered our first animal.

I’ve seen one of these before!

Several purple creatures were bumbling along in a cluster of sorts. They seemed to be family because three of them were smaller than the others. As soon as the creatures caught sight of Sache’s legs, they stopped in their tracks and curled up into a ball.

I eagerly observed the little purple creatures, noticing a slightly unsettling pattern that looked like eyeballs around the center of each animal. The pattern of eyeballs only became apparent when they rolled up, fully extending their protective outer shell just so, which led me to believe that it was part of their natural defenses.

Even though they’d rolled up in self-preservation mode, once the creatures realized they weren’t in danger, they unrolled themselves and began walking again.

With these purple shells and mouse-like facial features, these creatures were an exact replica of the taxidermy I’d seen in Ardo’s —the guild master of the adventurers’ guild back in the Kingdom of Gaché—office.

Meaning that taxidermy was made from an animal that once lived here in the elemental forest? How did he come to possess such a thing?

The family of armadillo-like creatures moseyed off, and not long after, something black leapt out of the underbrush. It had four legs and looked a bit like a bear. A very *small* bear, but undeniably a bear.

The bear-like creature stood up on its back legs and spread its forelegs wide in the air.

"Grawr!"

I couldn't help but grin at the adorable, baby-like sound it made.

The baby grawr seemed like a little toddler begging to be picked up and hugged. This animal had looked a bit scarier in the drawings I'd seen in the books in the imperial palace library. It was one of the only meat-eating animals in the elemental forest.

"Grawr!"

It gazed adorably up at us with its bright, round little eyes, still begging for a hug. It was almost enough to make a person walk right over to the precious little baby without even realizing they'd moved an inch.

I'd nearly done that very thing because I felt a quick tug on my arm and looked up to see the emperor shake his head at me.

"That is one of the fiercest and most violent species in the elemental forest. You mustn't allow yourself to be deceived by its adorable appearance."

This description of "cute but aggressive" called to mind a Tasmanian Devil.

Come to think of it, Tasmanian Devils are also black, aren't they? I guess that's a closer comparison to this creature than a bear, after all.

Only the mouth and talons were different. The creature had a protruding muzzle, more like a bear, and long, sharp talons. I assumed those features made it easier for them to scrounge in holes and under fallen trees for their favorite food—insects.

"Grawr?"

But just look at him! He's so disappointed I won't hug him! Doesn't the way he's trying to toddle over here unsteadily on two legs just make you want to praise him?!

"Your Majesty, I want to give him a hug!" I pleaded.

I couldn’t tell anyone about my special ability to be adored by animals, so I had no choice but to do my best to somehow convince the emperor that I wouldn’t be in danger without mentioning it.

Fortunately, the clothes I wore today were embroidered with so many protective written magic spells that it was borderline excessive. It was highly unlikely an animal’s claws or teeth would be able to get through all of that, even if it *did* attempt to attack me.

“But…”

Seeing that the emperor wasn’t about to budge, Haku and Gratia stepped out in front of him and tried to say something. According to Shinki-translate, they were saying that they would go with me and protect me from harm.

In the unlikely event that the baby grawr tried to attack, Haku could suck it into its body to prevent it from moving, and Gratia could use his poison to put it immediately to sleep.

“Don’t you think you’re a bit too lenient towards the mistress you’re supposed to protect?” the emperor asked with a raised eyebrow.

Shinki simply replied, “Perhaps…” neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the assessment. “In a situation like this, it’s best to let her do as she likes. Just as monsters cannot harm my mistress, animals also cannot harm her.”

“Because she’s a beloved child?”

“No… Just because she’s her.”

Does Shinki know about the ability I received from God?

He’d previously said that when he became my “knight,” he’d been endowed with all the knowledge he would need to fulfill this role, so it was possible he knew.

“In short, you’re saying we should let Lady Nefertima do as she likes?”

“Yes.”

“Who am I to argue, then? You’re lucky to have such a magnanimous knight serving you, Lady Nefertima.”

The emperor gave in!

He released my hand and gave me a little pat on the back as if saying, *“Go on, then!”*

“Thank you!”

After quickly thanking the emperor, I turned and cautiously approached the baby grawr with its hopefully shining little eyes.

“Come here, little guy!”

I copied the baby grawr’s earlier movement, raising both arms in invitation, and it toddled over to me. Then, moving almost too fast for my eyes to follow, he grabbed me in a tight hug. The baby grawr was stronger than I’d expected, but he was careful not to nick me with his sharp claws.

I carefully picked the tiny black furball up. It was just like holding a baby.

Considering he’s light enough for me to pick up, I’m assuming he’s not full-grown yet?

“Grawr!” the baby grawr cried in a decidedly joyous tone, and I patted his back affectionately in response. His fur was stiff and firm. He was a short-haired animal, so his coat was slick to the touch.

The baby grawr leaned forward and affectionately licked my cheek with a long and thin tongue.

How can a tongue of that length fit in his tiny little mouth?? I think I’ve heard of animals on Earth whose tongues retract into their throat when not in use; could that be it?

And, putting that aside for a moment, his saliva is super *sticky! Huh?! Could it be that in addition to a bear and a Tasmanian Devil, this animal also has some features from an anteater?! That would explain his long, thin tongue and saliva’s adhesive properties.*

Seemingly satisfied with licking my cheek, the baby grawr wiggled like he wanted to get down, so I set him on the ground. Then he let out a loud cry. Something instinctively told me this cry was directed not at us but at other members of his species.

A moment later, footsteps rustling through the underbrush could be heard, confirming my suspicion.

The face that peeked out from the underbrush was almost identical to the baby grawr I’d just been holding, only much larger.

“Is that your mother?”

She was still smaller than a bear but larger than a pig.

The mommy grawr nudged her baby, seeming to be saying, “*There you are! I was looking all over for you!*”

Then she glanced over at me and flicked out her long tongue, licking me once on the cheek. I was sure that was meant to say,

“Thanks for watching out for him.”

The baby grawr scrambled onto his mother’s back and clung on tightly.

I think they really might be closest to anteaters, after all.

The mommy grawr checked to make sure her baby was settled safely on her back, then turned and lumbered off.

As we watched them walk away, the emperor clapped a hand on my shoulder, seeming to breathe a sigh of relief. “I’ve never seen them behave in such a friendly manner before.”

The emperor had encountered this species several times because, with a wry laugh, he recounted how they usually charged as soon as they caught sight of him and Euche.

Shinki helped me clean off my sticky cheeks, and the emperor urged us to continue.

“Let’s keep going.” He took my hand again, and we resumed pressing forward, making our way ever deeper into the forest.

A short while later, we came upon something hanging down from a tree overhead.

“How rare. These usually don’t show themselves…” he remarked.

This animal that the emperor seemed surprised to see was a species called garaima. I’d read about them in a book from the Kingdom of Gaché’s royal palace library. This book, written by the bonded partner of a holy beast approximately 200 years prior, was titled *Creatures Living in the Elemental Forest.* I’d read it cover to cover multiple times and all but memorized its contents.

However, since the images in the book were all drawings, they inevitably varied from the real thing a bit. In the drawing, this animal looked like a cross between a bird and a sloth, but in person, its face distinctly resembled a bat.

Its ears were small and rounded but folded outwards in a way that made them look almost crumpled. Instead of membranous wings like a bat, the garaima had feathered wings, but according to the book I’d read, they weren’t suitable for flying; instead, they were used to glide. However, garaimas reportedly spent most of their time in the treetops and moved slowly like sloths, rarely ever coming down closer to the ground.

We bid farewell to the garaima and continued following after the many elemental spirits guiding our way.

However, after only a few more steps, we encountered yet another animal…

This pattern repeated several times before the emperor made a suspicious and slightly aggravated face.

“It’s almost as if every single animal that calls this forest home is coming out to greet you, Lady Nefertima…” Apparently, the elemental spirits commented on that because the emperor asked, “Why, though?”

Then, with a dubious expression that suggested he wasn’t convinced by whatever the elemental spirits had said in response, Emperor Celiunos argued, “I don’t believe any of the other beloved children throughout history possessed that kind of power…” He then turned and addressed me. “Hmm… The elemental spirits are saying that you’re special, Lady Nefertima. Do you have any idea what they might be referring to?”

Hey, elemental spirits! What do you think you’re doing, casually spilling other people’s secrets?! I’m sure they’re referring to the special ability I requested from God to be adored by all creatures other than humans, but there’s no way I’ll admit that! Time to play dumb, big time!

“Special?”

“It might mean you’ve been granted a different ability than other beloved children who’ve appeared up to this point. Either we don’t know simply because your powers haven’t awakened yet, or else…” Emperor Celiunos trailed off, seemingly lost in thought.

Beloved children were all souls reborn in Asdyllon from other worlds. It seemed likely that God had also offered each of them an ability of their choosing before they were reborn. I’d probably just picked a very unusual ability compared to the others.

Still pondering that mystery, the emperor resumed walking, leading me by the hand.

We’ve already made our way pretty deep into the forest. I wonder if there’s still far to go until we reach the elemental kings?

I didn’t mind the long walk. More than anything, I was excited to see what other animals we might meet along the way.

Just then, my vision suddenly went dark.

“Wagh!” Something was covering my face. “Get it off! Get it off! What is this?!”

Panicked, I struggled in earnest, but someone grabbed my arm and held me in place. Unable to move, I somehow forced myself to stop fighting. Then, a strange *POP! POP! POP!* sound reached my ears.

It felt bizarre as the thing was removed from my face. It didn't *hurt* per se, but it felt almost like someone was sucking my skin through a straw…

I struggled to calm my ragged breathing and glanced over at Shinki once I regained my sight, only to find him holding something strange and entirely unexpected in his hands.

"What the heck is that?!"

It turned out that what had been wrapped around my head were tentacles—the appendages of a mollusk. At first glance, it looked an awful lot like an octopus or a squid.

"I've never seen one of these before," Emperor Celiunos admitted.

Even the emperor, who's been here many times, has never seen this creature before?!

It flailed its appendages wildly, attempting to twine its body around Shinki's arms. I poked it experimentally with my finger, and it wriggled its body, recoiling from the point of contact.

Upon closer inspection, I noticed suckers on the creature's tentacles. They were large and rounded, more like an octopus than a squid.

So that's why it made that weird sucking noise when Shinki pulled it off of me!

It looked pretty similar to an octopus, except the portion of its body I presumed to be its head was quite small. I couldn't tell where its eyeballs were. If it even had any. Either they were very small or non-existent.

The creature was yellow, but its tentacles transitioned in a gradation to bright red at the tips.

This coloration seems like a sure sign of a poisonous animal…

"…You aren't poisonous, are you, little guy?"

The elemental spirits, not the octopus-thing, answered my question.

"The elemental spirits say it's not harmful to you as long as you don't eat it," Shinki translated for me, causing the emperor to suddenly look over at him sharply.

“Shinki, you can see elemental spirits?”

Huh? Did no one bother telling the emperor about that? He knows that Shinki is my “knight” as a beloved child. I don’t know if Euche told him or if he just figured it out on his own based on his knowledge of beloved children, but…

“Can’t all ‘knights’ see elemental spirits?” I asked.

The first king of the Kingdom of Gaché had been a beloved child, but his “knight” was his rhinoceros beast mount. Will had said that this rhinoceros had also been able to see elemental spirits. He’d explained that was so that the “knight” could deescalate the situation if it looked like holy beasts or elemental spirits were going to go on a rampage for the beloved child’s sake.

“Will said all that, did he?” Emperor Celiunos asked when I explained that to him.

“Will and Lars taught me many things!” I nodded.

“Euche, you knew and didn’t bother to tell me?”

So he did learn about Shinki from Euche, after all? But Euche didn’t necessarily tell the emperor everything he knew.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Emperor Celiunos pressed. His eyes drilled accusingly into Euche, who neighed imperiously back at him.

A moment of heavy silence followed this exchange before the emperor finally sighed and gave in, saying, “I’m sorry; I was wrong to accuse you of intentionally withholding information.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what had passed between them, but regardless, I was glad to see that they’d resolved their disagreement relatively easily.

As we walked, I got the emperor to tell me what Euche had said to him.

“Isn’t it obvious that a ‘knight’ can see elemental spirits?”

In short, Euche hadn’t bothered to *tell* the emperor that Shinki could see elemental spirits only because he’d assumed Emperor Celiunos already knew.

“My knowledge on the topic is fragmented,” he admitted. “I should’ve asked more questions about beloved children and their ‘knights.’”

Because they’re always together and have such a close relationship that they truly consider each other “life partners,” it seems they have developed a bad habit of not bothering to communicate

with words. Euche must've assumed the emperor would know something like that because he's well acquainted with how clever Emperor Celiunos is.

"I'm going to ask more questions from now on to make sure I don't miss important information like this again. So you'd better not complain about having to answer all my questions, got it, Euche?" Emperor Celiunos said, not even bothering to conceal the tenderness on his face as he stroked Euche's muzzle.

That! That's it! It's the same besotted look the dragon knights and beast knights always wear when they're with their beloved mounts! In other words, it's the face a pet owner makes when their precious pet cuddles up to them affectionately.

You just can't help being blissfully happy when your adorable fur baby loves you right back!

"It's finally come into sight."

Urged by the emperor's relieved tone, I searched the area ahead with my eyes but saw only trees. If there was anything there, *I* certainly couldn't see it.

"...Where?"

"Look, can't you see the legs over there?"

"Legs?" I stared hard at the area the emperor had pointed to but still didn't see anything.

What does he mean by "legs?"

With my mind a whirlwind of confusion, the emperor practically dragged me forward.

"Did you know? The gatekeeper of the elemental palace, home to the elemental kings, is a komorizae."

I've heard of komorizae, but why would one of them be the elemental kings' gatekeeper?

I knew komorizae were supposed to be really big, so I tried tipping my head back to look *up*—and boy, was I in for a shock!

"Whoa!"

A giant face was looming directly over us.

What the heck?! Is scaring the pants off of people a special interest for all the animals in this forest or something?!

The komorizae's body was about three times the size of an elephant's, and a variety of small trees and bushes grew on its back. It looked quite a bit like an elephant, except that it wasn't its nose that was long—it was its neck. This neck appeared capable of

a large range of movement, similar to a snapping turtle or other long-necked turtle.

So you can only imagine how terrifying it would be to look up and find this creature looming over you!

However, the komorizae's long neck extended past me and stopped directly in front of Shinki. Something jumped out of Shinki's arms and latched onto the komorizae's face.

Oh, it's that octopus-thing from earlier! But why did it jump on the komorizae? And, more importantly, has it been stuck to Shinki this whole time?!

The komorizae slowly raised its long neck, then brought its head around toward the small forest on its back.

Is that octopus-like creature actually a resident of the forest on the komorizae's back?

…If so, would that mean it used Shinki as a taxi service? Aren't they a little too *lax with security around here just because humans can't get in?!*

"Lady Nefertima, try ducking between the komorizae's legs."

At the emperor's urging, I hesitantly stepped beneath the giant komorizae. I was planning to dash under the huge animal and escape out the far side, but the moment I ducked underneath it, the scenery around me suddenly changed.

Without even a moment to register my new surroundings, I was suddenly pounced on and pulled into a tight hug. It was hard to believe such a thing was even possible, but it was even tighter than Karna's trademark stranglehold hug.

"It feels like we've been waiting for-*EVER*!"

"I… can't… breathe…"

Somebody, anybody, help meeee!

8 - Elemental Kings, There Are Some Things I Really Don’t Need to Know!

SOMETHING soft enveloped my entire face, and I couldn’t breathe because of it.

“King of Fire, will you please release Lady Nefertima?”

“Oh, you’re here too, Celiunos?”

Once I was finally released, I greedily gulped in fresh, clean air as quickly as I could.

Who would’ve thought air could be so delicious?! This must be the freshest, most unpolluted, pure, and natural air in the world!

Having avoided suffocation, I examined the person who’d been hugging me and immediately understood why I’d come so close to death.

She’s freaking huge!

She wasn’t quite big enough to call a “giant” but was even taller than Shinki, making her close to seven feet tall.

And her generous bosom was a sight to behold as well.

Just as her title suggested, this woman, who Celiunos had referred to as the King of Fire, was decked out in flames. Her hair was literally made out of fire, and her clothes flickered around her like flames. I couldn’t determine if she’d somehow made actual fire take on the properties of cloth or if it was just some kind of mysterious garment.

Either way, it clearly wasn’t any old normal fire. After all, I hadn’t been burned when she hugged me.

“Yes,” Emperor Celiunos replied. “My empire has the honor of being in charge of protecting the beloved child.”

The King of Fire, dissatisfied with the emperor’s response, opened her mouth to say something, but…

“Farlem, all things in good time. Stand down for now.”

The King of Water interrupted with that admonishment. His hair seemed to be made of water, and he wore a mysterious garment that rippled every time he moved so I could immediately recognize which king he was.

“You never learn, Lem! That’s why Deen is always getting angry at you.”

“Why do you insist on abbreviating the names we received from the God of Creation like that?”

“Hmph! But ‘Lem’ is much cuter than ‘Farlem’!”

The one aggravating the King of Fire must be the King of Wind. The way his hair and clothing seemed to perpetually flutter in a breeze that I couldn’t feel gave him away.

Which would mean the remaining figure was the King of Earth… Who was, by all appearances, fast asleep.

Aside from the King of Water, I didn’t sense so much as a speck of kingly majesty from any of them.

“Elemental kings, you’re befuddling the beloved child,” Emperor Celiunos said.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s been so long since a beloved child last appeared that we got a little over-excited.”

Hmm, the King of Fire can speak in a kingly manner, after all… But the way she greeted me pretty much negated it completely!

However, the elemental spirits hovering around me were all adorable and looked just like the drawing Ardo and Vel had shown me.

As for the elemental kings, they were all magnificently attractive, but their slightly tilted eyes were so disproportionately large that it almost made them look like aliens. Their beauty had an otherworldly quality to it. Although, come to think of it, God and the Goddess were also inhumanly beautiful…

“Welcome, beloved child. I am the King of Water, Akdeen.”

“I am the King of Fire, Farlem.”

“I am the King of Wind, Veezae.”

Each elemental king introduced themselves, except for the King of Earth, who was still asleep. The King of Water fixed him with a frigid, disapproving glare, and out of nowhere, a sphere of water appeared in the air directly above the King of Earth’s sleeping form.

I had a feeling I knew what the intended purpose of this water was, and my guess was right on the mark because the King of Water released the water, spilling it over the King of Earth’s head.

“…That’s cold.”

“The beloved child is here, and you’re still sleeping!”

The King of Earth’s big, round eyes snapped open the moment he heard the word “beloved child,” and he sat up abruptly, turning to look at me. “You’re right! There really is a beloved child! Hello there! My name is Gnouas, I’m the King of Earth!”

“My name is Nefertima Osphe. It’s an honor to meet the elemental kings.” I executed a bow that I rarely got the chance to use—one used when the other party was of a higher social status than myself.

“You don’t need to bow to us, child,” the King of Fire said.

“That’s right, a beloved child is a precious treasure bestowed upon us by the God of Creation,” the King of Water added.

I think “precious treasure” might be a bit of an exaggeration…

Despite still being preoccupied with studying the elemental kings, I finally began to notice the scenery around us.

Trees and vines had grown together in a complex weave, forming a huge domed structure so large it was hard to remember we were actually in the middle of a forest. A grand waterfall was in the background, but I couldn’t make out where the water originated. At the base of the waterfall was a pristine pool full of water so clear that I could easily make out that the stones lining the bottom were glistening in the colors representing the four elements.

“Elemental kings, what kind of being is a beloved child?”

The King of Fire laughed at the emperor’s question. “How rare for you to ask us a question!”

“…I thought I knew, but the more I get to know Lady Nefertima, the more I doubt my knowledge.”

“My, if you aren’t unusually honest today.” Her tone was teasing, but the gaze fixed on the emperor’s face was kind.

“We elemental kings and the holy beasts, like everything else made by the God of Creation, exist within the divine balance of nature. You understand that much, right?” the King of Water began.

The emperor nodded.

At his side, I, too, eagerly awaited the rest of the explanation.

“Beloved children exist outside the constraints of the divine balance and are not subject to the will of the God of Creation. For

that reason, the God of Creation loves them dearly, and we too are inevitably drawn to them."

I wouldn't say God "loves" me so much as he "loves using me." He needs someone who isn't connected to the divine balance of this world.

"Are the elemental kings unable to lend power to anyone other than a beloved child?" I spoke up, asking something I'd been wondering for a while now.

The existence of elementalists proved that other elemental spirits could bond with certain mortals and lend them their powers, so it would stand to reason that the elemental kings should be able to do the same.

"If we searched hard enough, there might be someone strong enough to bear the bond, but certainly not with all of us."

"We have been bestowed an incredible amount of power, more than enough to destroy the world. Only a beloved child can handle such power," the King of Earth spoke up, taking over for the King of Water.

But I had a very difficult time understanding what they were saying.

After all, even though I'm supposedly a beloved child, I couldn't even properly control Sol's power!

"A beloved child can borrow power from all of the elemental spirits, all of the holy beasts, and even from the God of Creation himself."

...Hold it right there!

"Borrowing God's power"... That has to refer to what will happen if I decide humans here in Asdyllon are beyond saving and need to be destroyed, doesn't it?!

The King of Earth's words were so shocking and impactful that they bowled me right over.

Elemental spirits and holy beasts were like living receptacles of God's power that he had created. This had to be what Sol had been talking about when he likened them to "fragmented pieces." And if God possessed the powers of creation and destruction, that must mean that elemental spirits and holy beasts possessed those same powers. The elemental spirits and holy beasts never used those powers of their own accord, but apparently, a beloved child was the one exception to the rule. If and only if a beloved child

requested it of them, they would wield the power to create and destroy.

"Are you saying this has been true of all beloved children up to this point?" the emperor asked. His expression was shocked, as if he, too, found this all hard to believe.

I don't blame him! Even with some fancy title like "beloved child," it's hard to imagine anyone with a normal human body being able to wield the power of God!

"That's right. Beloved children appear at times when God is undecided. When he's pondering whether the world is okay the way it is. The God of Creation may be hoping the beloved child will build the foundations of countries."

The emperor immediately caught on to what the King of Fire was implying.

"Do you draw this conclusion based on the fact that the founder of my empire, Roslan, was also a beloved child?"

"Huh?! Your Majesty's ancestor was a beloved child?!" I screeched, forgetting all semblance of decorum in my state of shock.

Although I'd directed the almost hysterical question at the emperor, the King of Wind answered. "That's right. Roslan had mixed human and elf blood, but in those days, humans were weak and had a hard time surviving. That's why he was full of bright-eyed and bushy-tailed determination to create a country where even the weakest among us could live peaceful, happy lives. I think Gee was next, but oh boy, was Gee a stubborn one… He refused to use the elemental spirits and holy beasts unless he absolutely had no other option," the King of Wind said, his face almost wistful with nostalgia.

The conversation went off on a tangent, with everyone sharing their observations about Gee and recounting stories about him.

As the first king of the Kingdom of Gaché, it seemed Gee had felt it wasn't a good idea to depend on the elemental spirits for every little thing.

"He really was a stubborn one, all right. But he was also a *very* fine man…Tee-hee!"

"What are you going on about, 'a very fine man,' pshh… You elemental kings don't even have gender, right?" Emperor Celiunos

pointed out without missing a beat.

I suppose he feels comfortable being so flippant with the elemental kings because he's known them for a very long time?

...Wait a minute, I just missed a very important revelation just now...

"King of Fire, you're not a woman?!" I cried.

Then that generous chest that nearly suffocated me to death was fake?! There's no way a fake could be that soft; I'm not buying it!

"We elemental kings don't have innate gender, but we can manipulate our bodies to look however we like."

As if to prove the point, the King of Fire's appearance transformed right before my eyes, taking on the shape of a fit young man. He was masculine and handsome, but it didn't detract from his beauty. Even as a man, the King of Fire was still incredibly beautiful.

Then the king's body changed again, this time taking on an androgynous appearance that looked simultaneously both male and female but couldn't be definitively identified as either.

Finally, she resumed her original female form.

"Whatever form we find beautiful, that is our true form. Don't you agree?"

I thought they were all beautiful, but based on her distinctly female manner of speech and behavior, personally, I felt this female form suited her the most.

Finding it amusing to surprise me, the other elemental kings also began showing off by changing their appearances. No matter how many times they changed their forms, though, they were always strikingly beautiful or devastatingly handsome. Apparently, beauty was a core element of their being.

"Or maybe I should take the form of a young boy to serve the beloved child?"

The King of Fire shrank, transforming into a young boy only a little taller than me. Even I couldn't help but feel my heart flutter a bit faster at the boy's looks, which rivaled even those of my handsome brother, Ralf.

Getting in on the mischief, the King of Wind also transformed into an attractive young boy, and I soon found myself in the debatably enviable situation of being sandwiched between two

pretty boys who'd give any boy band member a run for their money.

"That's enough messing around, you two," the King of Water scolded the other kings, who thankfully released me before my racing heart gave out from over-exertion.

For some reason, I feel like a bit of a creep for getting more worked up over pretty-boy types than macho hotties! I never get flustered like this over Daux…

I guess it's because my feelings towards him are closer to maternal love than anything romantic?

"Returning to the topic at hand, the God of Creation endows beloved children with his authority. To the point that if a beloved child makes a decision, we elemental spirits and the holy beasts will obey."

I'm still a bit confused, but doesn't this mean that, ultimately, God is using people reborn from other worlds as betting chips?!

Until now, it seems that all of the beloved children have wanted to make this world a better place, so they've focused on noble causes like founding countries and the like, but it's also entirely possible that with one poor decision, I could make all their work for naught, right?

Hold on…

What if one of the beloved children prior to Roland did choose to destroy something? Humans aren't the only thing that could be destroyed…

It's possible that at that time, whichever species was prospering held ideals similar to those of the current Church of Divine Creation.

For example, if demons were prospering and the same kind of thing that's happening now occurred, a beloved child could've decided to destroy them. And maybe all the demons born after that live on the continent of Wazhite for that reason.

Of course, this is all just unfounded speculation!

"Beloved child, the God of Creation is constantly testing you. Because of this, a large amount of power has begun to gather around you. Whether it's to create something or destroy something, that power will be yours to use as you see fit."

It was true that the family I was born into was a ducal house with blood ties to the royal family, practically the definition of political power. Thanks to my friendship with the holy beast, Lars, I'd won the favor of the royal family, and even if it was still

unofficial, I'd also bonded with Sol. Shinki had become my "knight," and a number of monsters had gathered around me. And I'd even spent time with the imperial family of the Linus Empire.

If, on top of all this, I'd also inherited my parents' good looks, I really might've had a shot at total world domination. However, God had chosen not to bless me with a face that would launch a thousand ships.

I didn't have any real interest in legendary beauty or world domination, but it *was* certainly impactful to hear it confirmed that the reason all of the people around me seemed to have practically supernatural abilities was intentional on God's part.

...Maybe God is the root of all evil, after all?

"Then does this mean that the monsters I've named were also gathered around me for this reason?"

"No, they received special powers because they were chosen by a beloved child, not the other way around."

I'd had a sneaking suspicion, but this confirmed it—it was my fault that my monster friends were all evolving differently from the usual patterns for their species. I still had no idea exactly how strong they were or the extent of their abilities, however.

"The monsters serving this beloved child certainly are fearless, aren't they?" the King of Wind chuckled, his large eyes crinkled with good-natured humor.

I followed his gaze to the spot a short distance away where the monsters in question were engaging in what appeared to be some kind of athletic competition. Seigo, Rikusei, and Inaho were running around wildly in all directions, and Kai was in his merman form, playing in the pond.

And, for some reason, Gratia was floating in mid-air.

I don't think Gratia possesses the ability to fly...

"Can they also see the elemental spirits?" I asked.

"Our power is especially concentrated here, so even weaker creatures can see us here."

In that case, perhaps Gratia is playing around with the elemental spirits?

The elemental spirits who'd noticed me watching said something, and Gratia came bobbing over towards us. As he moved, for just a moment, the sunlight glinted off of something that explained the mystery.

Gratia! There's a whole pack of elemental spirits holding onto the end of a string of spider thread attached to your butt!

How he used that thread to swing back and forth at a high speed looked fun.

Inaho and the others also noticed us looking at them and ran over to me.

Inaho was crying, *"Kyun, kyuuun!"* but I had no idea what she was trying to tell me, so I asked Shinki to translate.

"She's saying that if you're bored, you should also come play with them and the nanos."

This might be a boring topic for the monsters, but it still involves them! Although, thanks to the elemental spirits taking over babysitting duty, I could listen to everything the elemental kings said without being distracted.

"Thank you, elemental spirits!"

The way the spirits flapped their wings in delight at my words of gratitude was really cute. Still not done playing, Inaho turned and charged at a cluster of elemental spirits hovering nearby, signaling the game of tag had resumed. Seigo and Rikusei needed no further encouragement because they both dashed into the fray.

I took a quick inventory of the other monsters and noticed Kai was still floating happily in the pond.

It's rare to see him looking so cheerful!

"How are you doing over there, Kai?"

"I'm great! This water is delicious! I feel so full."

Kai feeds on the desires of living things… How can that water appease his hunger the same as desire?

"This water flows directly from the Land of the Dead. It would seem that the Goddess's Mercy is even capable of assuaging hunger," the King of Water explained, leaving me wanting to try it out for myself.

I used my cupped hands to scoop up some water from the pool and took an experimental sip.

I'll have Koku analyze the water's properties while I'm at it. Blegh! What the heck?! This water tastes terrible!

The water I normally drank didn't seem any different than the water I was used to drinking in my past life, so I assumed it was similar to soft water. But the water in this pond must've been more

like hard water. It wasn't unsafe to drink or anything, but it certainly tasted bad to me as someone used to drinking soft water.

As for Koku's analysis of the water, I wasn't terribly surprised to find that the water in this pool contained some of the same properties as the hot spring at Mount Reitimo. There were "the Goddess's Healing" and "the Goddess's Salvation," which, if I remembered correctly, worked on illness and injuries, respectively. And Koku also detected that mysterious ingredient "Tears of the God of Creation."

As for the original question about whether the water would make me feel full or not… I hadn't been particularly hungry to begin with, so it was hard to say. However, Koku was ecstatic inside me, so it seemed Koku's hunger had been appeased. For a highly gluttonous slime, this water must seem truly miraculous.

As if to prove that, Haku drank a large amount of water from the pond, causing its body to swell to more than twice its original size.

"Don't overdo it, okay, Haku?"

"Mew!"

Floating around leisurely in the pond, Haku looked just like a giant jellyfish.

Is it just my imagination, or does Haku seem to be acting like it's drunk?

Nothing Koku's analysis had picked up would suggest the water had such an effect, but Kai had also been acting strangely, so it worried me a little.

Although I was concerned about Haku and Kai, I also wondered what Nox was up to. But when I glanced around, searching for him, I was relieved to find him perched on Shinki's shoulder, looking relaxed. Well, except for the group of mischievous elemental spirits sitting on his back, pretending to ride him like a pony. Nox seemed to see the elemental spirits as well, but he didn't seem bothered by their antics, ignoring them for the most part. From time to time, he reached back with his beak to rearrange his feathers, but otherwise, he seemed content to let the elemental spirits do as they liked.

As for Shinki, who was serving as Nox's impromptu perch, he seemed to be ignoring the elemental spirits practically crawling all over him.

There's such a thing as being too *easy-going, you know!*

Even without being able to hear them, I could tell the elemental spirits were begging me to play with them, too, but they would need to wait a little longer. There was one more thing I wanted to confirm.

"I would like to gain the ability to see elemental spirits outside of the elemental forest. What should I do?"

"...You can't normally see them? I really don't understand what the fire dragon is thinking," the King of Water responded dubiously, shaking his head in disapproval.

"It's in the beloved child's best interests that he does not bond with her while she's still so young. But he probably couldn't stand the idea of another holy beast snatching her up either," the King of Wind chuckled, adding, "I know how he feels."

The elemental kings seemed to know why I couldn't see elemental spirits, but I wanted them to explain it to me!

"Beloved child, are you aware that a person needs to bond with a holy beast using their true name to gain the ability to see elemental spirits?"

No one had ever come out and told me, but I'd figured it must be something like that.

"Sol didn't tell me that, but I thought it might be related to the bond based on my observations of Will and His Majesty."

"As the King of Wind said, completing the bond is not a good idea when you're still so young. Until you can control your emotions, you won't be able to control your power."

There were multiple potential issues if a bonded partner was too young. It turned out there had been other cases in the past where a holy beast used a nickname to form an unofficial bond until the partner was ready.

On a whim, I asked the emperor how old he'd been when he bonded with Euche, and he said he was eight years old at the time.

"Will bonded with Lars at the age of eight as well. We were specifically educated for that purpose, so apparently, it was decided that it was safe for us to complete the bond at an earlier age than normal," Emperor Celiunos explained. He also told me that in his parents' cases, the retired emperor bonded with Sache when he was ten, and the retired empress bonded with Kaideetay when she was thirteen.

At the time, the retired empress had been engaged to the crown prince of another country and undergoing a rigorous education program in preparation for becoming a future queen. Perhaps receiving a higher standard of education, including topics such as governance and learning to critically assess a situation and make level-headed judgments, was sufficient preparation to bond with a holy beast.

"It would be easiest for the fire dragon to tell you his true name, but you could always bond with one of us instead."

Now, the King of Fire is just teasing me!

It wouldn't be a good look for me to jump ship and bond with one of the elemental kings just because I wanted to gain the ability to see elemental spirits sooner. Plus, Sol would surely be upset if I went ahead and did something he was so adamantly opposed to without even bothering to discuss it with him.

"I agree with the fire dragon; it's best to approach the topic of bonding carefully. Given the traces of tampering evident on the beloved child's soul, we don't know what might happen…"

"My soul was tampered with…?"

The King of Earth's words sounded incredibly ominous to my ears.

What does that mean?! God, what the heck did you do to my soul?!

"It does seem something has been done, but your soul itself is beautiful and healthy looking. I don't see it as a problem."

I was happy to hear the King of Water describe my soul as "beautiful."

Previously, Kai described me as a "living incarnation of the desire to commune with animals."

Even I had to admit I was guilty of more than a few deadly sins…

Gluttony… Yup.

Greed… For cuddle time with cute fluffy critters, oh yeah!

Sloth… If you count over-sleeping, I'm guilty as charged!

"It's not a problem for us elemental spirits and the holy beasts. But the God of Creation wouldn't have done something like this without a reason."

Oh yes, he would! He'd do anything you could imagine and more to me merely for his amusement!

The elemental kings said it themselves—beloved children exist outside the divine balance of this world. That means I'm the only being in all of creation that he can mess with!

…It's kind of sad now that you think about it.

"For the time being, when you want to use elemental power, it's best to ask your knight or the holy beasts to help you."

He's saying I should put off trying to use elemental power myself until we can figure out if it's safe with this so-called "tampering." Grrrr, that damn meddling, overgrown brat of a god! I am definitely going to find some way to demand he tell me exactly what he did to my soul!

"You seem very mature for your age, Lady Nefertima. But the fire dragon still feels you're not ready?"

Because I retained my memories of my previous life, I probably didn't seem very childish on an intellectual level, but that didn't mean there weren't parts of me that still could use a lot of work.

When I was a child, I'd thought I'd be a fully formed adult the day I turned twenty. And while society did use this milestone to differentiate between "child" and "adult," the truth was that emotionally, I'd still been a child.

I'd gotten a respectable job, interacted with many people, and worked myself to the bone until I was physically and mentally depleted, all the while playing the part of a mature adult. Even if, by society's standards, I'd been making it as a successful, independent adult, I now realized that I wasn't a fully matured and empowered adult like Mama and Papa. It might be pointless trying to compare my adult self from my past life to my parents in this life due to the vast difference in the environment, but speaking theoretically, if I were ever to become a parent, I wanted to be one like my current parents.

"We're just not sure what effect the God of Creation's handiwork might have on the power. But it certainly won't cause any problems for you personally."

"That's a relief. Don't worry, Lady Nefertima. I'm sure it won't be long before you gain the ability to see elemental spirits. The fire dragon is just a big worrywart," the emperor said, stroking my head reassuringly.

The emperor is a good father, too. Not as good as my papa, though!

“If you have any issues related to elemental power, you can call us. We’ll help you no matter where you are on the continent.”

“And that goes for not only the beloved child but also her knight. We grant you permission to call on us by name as well.”

Let’s see if I remember all the elemental kings’ names… Fire is Farlem, Water is Akdeen, Wind is Veezae, and Earth is Gnouas, right?

All right, I’ve got this!

…But wait a minute…

Their names are the same as the magic words to activate the stones in the pendant I received from King Gauldi! Does that mean that if I use one, it will initiate a magic spell that can only be used in very specific circumstances and *summon an elemental king?!*

I bet that when he gave me that pendant, King Gauldi never imagined I’d one day be granted permission to summon the elemental kings just by saying their names.

When I told the elemental kings about the pendant, the emperor was the most shocked. This seemed to be due to the fact that all of the spells packed into the pendant were very powerful, high-level spells that would affect a large area. Well, except for the earth magic spell “Absolute Inviolability.” That one only affected a small, fixed area.

“Your protection takes priority, of course, but please try to avoid using those spells unless you have no other choice,” Emperor Celiunos cautioned.

I understood his feelings very well. I also didn’t want to use a spell that would create a hurricane or a massive tidal wave.

The pendant itself is really cute, though!

“In that case, we’ll endow those magical stones with a tiny flicker of our power. That will make it so that you can contact us by thinking our name really hard.”

“If you want to use the spells, say the names out loud. If you want to summon us, call out our name telepathically in your mind. This way you won’t get the two mixed up and accidentally unleash a spell when you really just wanted to summon one of us!”

The King of Wind praised the King of Earth for his cleverness in coming up with that system.

They *were* the elemental kings, so there wasn’t much I would immediately rule out as being beyond the scope of their abilities,

but the fact remained that I hadn’t brought all the magical stones with me.

“I only have this one with me right now; the others are all back at the imperial palace…”

I normally wore the pendant with the stone containing the defensive earth spell inside, although I sometimes changed it out for one of the other colors to match the dress I was wearing at the time.

“That’s fine, no big deal!”

For some reason, when the King of Wind says, “It’s fine,” it isn’t the least bit reassuring! Is that because of his flighty and carefree personality?

“As Gnouas said earlier, there’s nowhere on this continent that our power can’t reach. We can send our power from here.” As the King of Water said that, a blue light appeared in his hand. In succession, the King of Fire produced a red light, and the King of Wind produced a green light.

The lights elongated like a laser beam, then flashed, disappearing suddenly.

The final elemental king, the King of Earth, waved his hand over me, sending a beam of yellow light straight towards me.

I reflexively flinched back and slammed my eyes shut, but the only thing that happened was the pendant warmed ever so slightly where it sat against the skin on my chest.

“It’s done.”

I opened my eyes when the King of Earth said that.

Glancing down at the pendant to see if anything had changed, I found something moving around inside of the yellow magical stone. It looked almost like mist and was a darker shade of yellow than the stone itself. The mist swirled leisurely around inside the pendant.

It kind of looks like a snow globe, but I’m assuming this moving mist is the elemental king’s power?

“If you just say our name, we won’t bother responding even if we hear it. We’ll come to you only if you activate the magical stone by calling out to us telepathically… Oh, but maybe we should also respond if the pendant ever breaks, just to be safe?” the King of Earth explained, directing the final question to the other elemental kings.

However, the King of Fire seemed a bit dissatisfied with that arrangement.

"If she calls *my* name out loud, I'll probably at least check to make sure she's okay…"

"Don't try to hide it; we all know you've been using the little ones to check up on the beloved child long before even meeting her!"

Is it part of the King of Wind's personality that he can't help but make teasing remarks about anything the King of Fire says?

"You're one to talk! You've been doing the same thing, right?!"

"Well, of course I have. I am the wind, after all. I can see anything and go anywhere, any time I like. So, unlike *you,* Lem, I've been watching her ever since she was born."

He basically just announced he's been stalking me for years…

Does that mean he was watching when I was nursing from Mama's breast and having my diaper changed? Whoa, we might have an even bigger pervert than Will right here!

"Bet you're jealous you didn't get to see the beloved child as a cute little baby, eh, Lem?"

And now he's antagonizing the King of Fire! He really is a free spirit! I suppose that's just how wind is, though…

On Earth, the mechanics of how wind worked had mostly all been scientifically quantified, but in this world, it seemed to all be the work of elemental spirits. There were even times when the weather changed suddenly due entirely to the whims of the elemental spirits.

In Japan, we called the phenomenon of sudden rain on a sunny day a "fox bride's wedding," but when that happened here, they said it was raining because "the water spirits are in a good mood."

This "good mood rain" was always a light rain that helped plants grow without causing flooding or other damage sometimes associated with heavy rain, so it had a very positive connotation, amongst farmers in particular, as being a good omen.

Come to think of it, although everyone worshiped God, the Goddess and the elemental spirits had more impact on their day-to-day lives. Although God was the primary deity that everyone worshiped, it seemed kind of sad and lonely that he couldn't interact with people the way the Goddess could.

“Hopefully, you will never need to seek our assistance, but you are welcome to visit us here any time you like.”

As Sol had warned me, the elemental kings were all unique in their own way, but the King of Water seemed to be the most reasonable among them.

“That’s right, come visit any time! Roslan only really started visiting us regularly after becoming king, and even then, it wasn’t very often.”

“That’s true… He was always showing up to scold us about being too blunt because we’re supposedly clueless when it comes to the ‘subtleties of human hearts’ or some such nonsense.”

Meaning that Roslan would come all the way here just to complain? Not only that, but he was complaining about the elemental kings straight to their faces? Somehow, this changes my first impression of him considerably…

“Founding a country is much more difficult than keeping an existing country going. I can only imagine it, but I think it must’ve been very difficult for him until he’d gathered a solid group of loyal and reliable retainers,” Emperor Celiunos astutely observed on his ancestor’s behalf, practically shuddering as he said it.

Either he was unable to fully picture the work that it would take to build a country from the ground up, or he didn’t even want to think about it, but either way, for the current emperor to react with such repulsion to the idea really told you how difficult an undertaking it must be. Roslan must’ve had his work cut out for him! Maybe that was why royals started building a network of trusted vassals as children.

“I imagine the longer a country exists, the more difficult it becomes to keep going,” I speculated.

It wasn’t as if Emperor Celiunos had it easy.

Beings in this world, such as elves, possessed incredibly long lifespans. It was likely that, having lived through the rule of multiple emperors, at least some of them might romanticize the past and complain about how terrible things were now. It simply wasn’t possible for different emperors to continue ruling the country in the same way, especially as times changed and the world changed, too.

Both founding a country and keeping it going were surely very difficult. I certainly couldn’t do it. I just wasn’t cut out for such

a thing!

"Thank you, Lady Nefertima. If you decide to found your own country, I'll gladly lend you my assistance. Just let me know."

"I will not be doing any such thing!"

I could not, by any stretch of the imagination, picture myself ruling over an entire country. I knew myself well enough to know it would *not* end well. I would probably push all my responsibilities off on others and hide away in my room.

As the old saying goes, time flies when you're having fun, and before I knew it, it was time for us to leave. I was grateful to the emperor for taking time out of his busy schedule to bring me here.

Because our return trip took even longer than the journey here, I asked Emperor Celiunos if this would interfere with his plans for the rest of the day.

"I had a feeling something like this might happen, so I cleared my schedule for the day. Don't worry."

Just as the entrance into the elemental palace was accessed by ducking underneath the komorizae, naturally, so was the exit. If the komorizae had moved since you entered, the route out of the elemental forest from where you exited might be much longer than the route there. I assumed this was what the emperor was referring to having planned for, but I was wrong.

The emperor chuckled and explained that he'd planned extra time for me to be distracted by animal after animal. He'd gone out of his way to make sure I had time to observe and pet each animal that inevitably appeared along our journey.

He really thinks of everything!

We'd only known each other for a short while, but he already knew me so well.

The trip back through the elemental forest was highly enjoyable, full of enchanting fluffy creatures and mysterious plant life.

Once we arrived back at the imperial palace, I thanked the emperor, and then we parted ways. Spica and Paul came to the courtyard to pick me up, but for some reason, Spica looked worn out.

Did Paul work her to the bone or something while I was gone?! You have to let her take breaks properly, Paul!

I turned to Paul for an explanation, and he coolly passed it off as nothing more than ordinary tiredness from a vigorous training session.

Training with Paul has got to be the most rigorous workout known to mankind—there's nothing ordinary about it!

When we reached my and Karna's room, I felt a sense of relief at being back in the familiar atmosphere, surrounded by familiar smells, and, of course, together with my sister.

"Karna!"

"Welcome back, Neema."

I hugged Karna tightly, reveling in her comfortingly familiar scent.

Karna had changed her perfume since coming to the Linus Empire. She was now using Mama's favorite perfume. I knew she was doing that for me so that whenever I returned to our rooms, I would feel like I was coming home.

"It looks like you had fun at the elemental palace, huh?"

I confirmed that I'd indeed had fun, and Karna chuckled that she could tell just from looking at my face.

"Let's have some tea. I want to hear all about it."

As soon as Karna said that, Shell astutely began preparing the tea. She also served us some sweets, which I dug into happily as I recounted my visit to the elemental palace in as much detail as I could.

I even managed to needle Paul into allowing Spica to join us for tea! I figured he only had himself to blame for tiring her out before I got home.

When the topic of the pendant came up, I checked the other magical stones to see how they looked. Paul brought them out at my request, and as predicted, they all contained the same kind of mist I'd witnessed in the earth stone. I held the stones up to the light, examining the mist, which was a darker shade than the base color of each stone.

"They're so beautiful…" Karna said in a breathless tone as I peered at the stones.

They really are beautiful… Beautiful enough to completely enchant even Karna!

When the light hit the mist at just the right angle, it produced a faint rainbow. And as the mist swirled, the different colors

alternately became more pronounced, first red, then green, continuously fading in and out and changing hues.



It suddenly occurred to me that these magical stones might even surpass the level of national treasures. Not only had a king commissioned them, but the stones were of the highest quality and had been expertly cut by a famous jeweler. I'd also been told that an elite-level magic user who was a member of the special division of the royal knighthood known as the Magic Knights Legion had enchanted the stones. At that point, they'd already been an unbelievably valuable treasure bestowed upon our family by the king.

And now, with the elemental kings' power added to such valuable gems, it wouldn't be strange if the king demanded I turn them over to be claimed as a national treasure—not that I thought our King Gauldi would do such a thing.

If word got around, though, people might die trying to get their hands on them.

"Paul, please store these very carefully."

Paul bowed and said, "Yes, my lady." I watched as he carefully carried them into our dressing room to lock them away.

I've become the owner of a truly terrifying treasure.

Small Talk: Being Too Lenient Is Nothing But Trouble… For Me! (POV: Shinki)

“SHINKI, where are we going?”

This punk wasn’t listening to a thing Miss Neema said again…

I told Kai we were going to the elemental palace, and he nodded dispassionately.

If you don’t care, why even bother asking?

At Kai’s feet, Inaho was jumping around excitedly as if saying, *“Put me in already!”*

“Miss Neema said she was going to carry you, Inaho…” I reminded the little kyubi, but Inaho let out a petulant *“Kyun!”* of protest. “If you don’t like it, take it up with Miss Neema.”

Inaho was completely enamored by the feeling of being inside the sack because she poutily insisted she would be riding in there.

I relayed this message to my mistress, who easily caved and allowed the change in plans.

Overjoyed, Inaho leapt headfirst into the sack, which Kai picked up and fastened across his chest. Inaho scuttled around a bit inside the sack, and her tails disappeared… only to pop back out a moment later.

“You’re going to fall out if you move around too much. Don’t expect Kai to catch you if you fall.” I had no idea what she was doing in there, but I gave her a stern warning just to be safe.

“Kyun!”

She said she understood, but I wasn’t sure she really did. Kai’s arms transformed into wings in his bird form, so if she fell out while he was flying, there was no way for him to grab her without falling from the sky himself.

If Inaho was going to ride in one of the sacks, either Seigo or Rikusei would be displaced. Thankfully, the issue was easily resolved when Rikusei eagerly volunteered to be carried by our mistress.

“Hey, hey, Shinki! The beloved child is going to the elemental palace too, right?”

“If we ask the elemental kings, they might let us play with her!”

“Help us convince them, pleeeease, Shinki!”

The bugs were being annoying again today. They would be a nuisance whether or not you acknowledged them, so I’d found it best to just ignore them.

We made good time, and before long, we arrived in the elemental forest, where, as you might imagine, the number of bugs increased exponentially.

With my mistress’s arrival, they were all shrieking with almost hysterical joy, *“The beloved child! She’s here! It’s really her!”*

“Was that an elemental spirit?!”

Miss Neema could see the elemental spirits within these woods, and the sudden revelation had surprised her.

That Emperor Linus guy hadn’t realized she couldn’t normally see elemental spirits. He began explaining the way holy beasts’ power worked to her, so I left them to it for the time being.

“Gratia, stop that.”

I grabbed Gratia, who was about to jump down onto a nearby tree. He clacked his fangs together irritably in response. He was saying that he’d spotted something yummy-looking but seemed to have conveniently forgotten that he’d been *thoroughly* cautioned not to kill any living creature within the confines of the elemental forest.

I can’t take my eyes off these guys for even a moment without them getting into some kind of trouble.

This was true of Haku as well, so I grabbed the mischievous slime tightly.

“Shinki, that hurts…”

“Deal with it. You were about to go play with Gratia just now, weren’t you?”

I stuffed Haku into my clothing, and after a bit of rustling around, it settled down. Gratia also seemed to finally accept that I wasn’t going to let him go play because he crawled into my hair and hunkered down.

Nox was sitting obediently on Seigo’s shoulder as Miss Neema had instructed him to before we left.

As for that rascal Inaho, perhaps because of how much fooling around she'd done before we left, she was sleeping peacefully inside the sack.

I wish the rest of them were as calm and well-behaved as Seigo and Rikusei.

Inaho was always super hyper, and Haku and Gratia only behaved if Paul was around. Paul was just as mercilessly strict with the monsters as he was with everyone who served the Osphe family, a lesson those two had learned the hard way.

I was walking along, babysitting Haku and Gratia, when the bugs started raising a ruckus again.

It seemed they'd only just realized that Miss Neema could see them. As a result, a deluge of bugs was swarming all around her.

Ick, that sure looks unpleasant. I suppose she's not in danger, though, so I don't need to step in.

Miss Neema asked them to give her some space, but the over-excited bugs weren't listening to her. They finally backed off only after the emperor invoked the name of the elemental kings. Even the bugs, who were notorious for doing whatever they felt like, respected the elemental kings.

The swarm of bugs flew ahead to guide Miss Neema's path to the elemental kings.

Each time an animal appeared along the way, Miss Neema eagerly approached it to observe it up close. I was well accustomed to animals flocking to my mistress, so I did what I usually did and tried not to get too close. If I were there, it would frighten the animals away, and I couldn't bear the thought of ruining Miss Neema's fun.

When the strange, eyeball-patterned animal ran off, the next animal to appear made a strange noise. The emperor warned Miss Neema not to get too close because this animal was dangerous, but of course, she couldn't just let it go so easily.

"Haku and Gratia, isn't this where you come in?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you say you were going to take over for Dee as well in protecting our mistress?"



DEE had journeyed home to be with the Goddess because of my mistake. If I'd only been more cautious, I wouldn't have been knocked out.

In addition to mourning the loss of Dee, Haku and Gratia also had to deal with Miss Neema being in an endless slumber. They became very depressed.

Nox, too, refused to leave Miss Neema's side and stopped eating.

Miss Neema's family were very worried, so I'd been forced to intervene.

"If Dee could see you guys like this, he'd probably say he can't possibly leave Miss Neema in your care. While our mistress is sleeping, you should become stronger so you can surprise her."

"If we become stronger, will Mama wake up?"

Because Haku and Gratia were still so young, we weren't sure how being named by a beloved child would affect them. It was clear that both were growing and evolving differently than the usual pattern for their species.

However, if they didn't have the determination to become stronger, they wouldn't.

There was something to be said for living a safe and easy life in a human dwelling rather than in the harsh environment of the forest, but without the need to constantly be fighting to survive, they wouldn't gain the edge they needed to always come out on top.

"Perhaps the Goddess will return her to us once she feels we can keep her safe."

Currently, the Goddess was protecting Miss Neema, so we didn't need to worry about her.

Instead, we needed to worry about ourselves.

When it came to becoming stronger, it turned out that Nox was the most motivated. Nox was an animal, not a monster, so the more he trained, the more his flight skills improved.

Determined not to be outdone by the little rain hawk, I brought Haku and Gratia with me on a visit to Mount Reitimo. The purpose of the trip was to build up a tolerance to poisons with the help of one of the poisonous slimes.

While we were there, Haku and Gratia worked on learning how to use their abilities. Apparently, Shizuku, who'd been in

charge of overseeing their training, hadn't gone easy on them.



HAKU and Gratia leapt off me and scurried ahead to stand directly in front of the emperor.

"We'll protect Mama!"

"Yeah, mistress will be safe with us!"

They were trying to convince the emperor that there was nothing for him to worry about because they would protect Miss Neema, but, unfortunately, he couldn't understand a word they said.

As usual, I translated for them, and in response, the emperor accused us of being too lenient on Miss Neema.

But it was impossible to reason with our mistress, who had a completely abnormal, borderline freakish obsession with interacting with animals and monsters. For their part, the animals also seemed to be drawn to her, so I didn't think they would attack. All things considered, I felt that the best course of action was to just let her do as she liked and protect her if the need arose.

When I mentioned that, Celiunos asked if it was because she was a beloved child.

"No... Just because she's her."

I didn't think it had anything to do with being a beloved child. I suspected that Miss Neema herself was the cause.

In the end, the emperor relented and let Miss Neema do as she wanted.

While holding the animal that had been making those strange noises, her expression was identical to the one she often wore while hugging Lars.

Before parting ways, the animal licked her cheek, leaving behind quite a mess.

I was frankly astounded by Paul's level of preparedness because, foreseeing that something like this might occur, he'd handed me a cloth before we left and told me to bring it because I'd probably need it. Paul could use magic to instantly clean Miss Neema up, but I didn't possess such powers.

I dampened the cloth with water just as Paul had instructed and used it to clean Miss Neema up.

We encountered so many animals along the way that it was becoming rather troublesome. Even the emperor seemed to find it strange.

When he mentioned it seemed as if all the animals of the forest were coming to meet with Miss Neema, the bugs laughed and said that was exactly what they were doing.

"Why, though?"

"Because she's the beloved child, of course!"

"I don't believe any of the other beloved children throughout history possessed that kind of power..."

"Well... This is special to the current beloved child."

"Everyone can't help but love her!"

Unless you asked a direct question, the bugs only gave vague answers. I thought this was due to their perspective being different from that of humans and monsters, but this didn't negate the fact that it could be annoying at times.

The emperor, too, seemed to have a hard time understanding what they were saying because he asked Miss Neema about it. However, it was unclear how much she understood what they'd been talking about either. The emperor seemed to have his suspicions because he was quietly thinking it over. Meanwhile, Miss Neema was curiously looking around at our surroundings.

Suddenly, something dropped down from above, landing on Miss Neema's face.

"Get it off! Get it off! What is this?!" she shrieked, flapping her arms wildly, vaguely resembling Gratia's trademark bizarre dance.

It might be amusing to see what would happen if I didn't intervene... But I'll resist the impulse and do my duty to my mistress properly.

I held Miss Neema in place and peeled the strange animal off her face. It made an unexpected noise when I pulled it off, causing me to look closer at the animal and discover what appeared to be suction cups on its tentacles.

It really was an unusual creature because it happily moved on to suctioning onto my arm, totally unafraid.

Now that she'd been freed from the creature's grasp, Miss Neema had transformed from panicked to curious and poked the

creature and asked—a bit too late now, if you asked me—whether or not it contained poison.

I couldn't communicate with animals, but thankfully, the elemental spirits answered for it.

"The elemental spirits say it's not harmful to you as long as you don't eat it."

The topic shifted to focus on me after that, but I was more immediately concerned about what I should do with the creature attached to my arm. It seemed to have no intention of going anywhere; it had suctioned onto me and was staying perfectly still.

Gratia leapt over to the creature and, as if copying our mistress, began poking it with one of his forelegs. The creature attached to my arm responded by smacking Gratia with one of its tentacles. That sparked something in Gratia's most primitive instincts because his four beady little eyes sparkled.

"*Don't* try to eat it."

Haku, as a slime, was beyond help, but Gratia and Kai were both beginning to show an almost fanatical love of eating. I supposed that could also be blamed on taking on the traits of their mistress.

"It's finally come into sight." The emperor pointed to something massive a short distance ahead.

The bugs were cheering, *"Hurry up! Hurry up!"* so it seemed that was our destination.

The thing stretched out its long neck towards us, and finally, I could get a picture of its entire body. The trees and bushes growing on its back proved that it was yet another strange and mysterious animal.

The animal's face came right up to me, and then the tentacled animal on my arm finally released me of its own accord.

Was it tagging along because it knew we were heading this way?

…Oh well, no harm done, I guess. Hurry on home, little guy.

We ducked underneath the giant creature and emerged in a completely different setting.

Someone immediately grabbed Miss Neema, but based on their aura, they seemed to be an elemental spirit, so I wasn't overly concerned.

So these are the elemental kings, huh?

The elemental kings introduced themselves, then launched right into a serious discussion.

There's no need for us to join in on this discussion.

Inaho had awoken and was getting antsy.

"Seigo and Rikusei, can you entertain Inaho a bit so she doesn't get into trouble?"

I was pretty sure they could be trusted not to let her do anything too reckless.

Saying, *"Leave it to us!"* Seigo poked Inaho with his nose and led her away from our mistress and the others.

Kai, who'd been behaving well enough up to then, staggered towards the pond. Considering Kai was a siren, it made sense that he would feel more at ease close to water.

Nox was trying to fly over here, but the bugs were crowding around him, making it difficult for him to fly. Based on how he attempted to avoid them, it seemed Nox could see the bugs, too.

"Hey, you guys are causing trouble for Nox. It looks like he can see you guys in here. It's dangerous, so stop getting in his way."

After I said that, all of the bugs began swarming. They stopped bothering Nox while he was flying, but now they were thronging around Inaho's group and Kai.

I let out a sigh of exasperation and did my best to chase the bugs away.

"It's fine to play, but be quiet about it, will you? You don't want to make the elemental kings mad…"

My mistress was in the middle of learning important things from the elemental kings that we'd only had hazy notions of up to this point. If these guys were too rambunctious, it would be difficult for Miss Neema and the others to focus.

I wasn't terribly confident that the elemental spirits would be able to restrain themselves on my say-so, though.

Tired of dealing with the elemental spirits, Nox landed on my shoulder. Then he began grooming his feathers, which looked mussed from the long and exhausting flight.

However, the bugs just couldn't help themselves.

Taking advantage of the fact that Nox had stopped moving, they landed on his back and began playing. For his part, Nox didn't seem to care as long as they weren't impeding his flying because

he ignored the bugs crawling around on his back and continued grooming himself.

While I was distracted by that, I suddenly heard the sound of a large *SPLASH!*

It seemed that Kai, who was lounging in the pond in his merman form, had smacked the surface of the water with the flat of his tailfins. The bugs danced around, playing happily in the shower of water droplets Kai had sprayed everywhere.

They really don't listen, do they?

"Water bugs, make Kai behave himself, will you?"

"We're not bugs!"

"Shinki called us bugs again!"

"If you don't want to be called bugs, then stop being such pests."

Right after I'd just finished setting the water bugs on Kai, Inaho and Seigo dashed past me. I wanted to pull out my hair by this point, but first, I grabbed Rikusei.

"Didn't I tell you guys to play over there so you don't disturb Miss Neema and the elemental kings?"

"Inaho said she wanted to play tag with the little ones. I was in the middle of trying to stop her when you grabbed me!" He claimed he was trying to stop her, but his voice sounded more excited than repentant.

Looks like this is a lost cause...

"Haku... Hey, Haku!"

"What?"

Just then, I heard Kai call out Haku's name, and Haku went over to see what he wanted. Kai said something else I couldn't hear, and Haku began drinking the pond water.

Maybe he told Haku to try the water because it's clean and tasty?

However, Haku's manner of drinking was highly unusual.

"Amazing! My hunger is completely gone!"

Immediately following Haku's cry of wonder, Gratia suddenly leapt into the air. Taking advantage of the opportunity to play, the bugs reacted almost faster than the eye could see, grabbing onto the string of spider thread coming out of his bottom.

However, it seemed that Gratia's jump was the more powerful because the bugs were dragged along behind the string.

More bugs rushed to their companions' aid and saved them from being pulled to the ground, but now Gratia was dangling in mid-air. He was flailing his legs with all his might, but so many elemental spirits were holding his thread that he was no match for them.

The bugs flew around here and there with Gratia dangling by his spider thread from their grasp.

"Am I flying?!"

Gratia quickly realized it was the bugs' doing but seemed to be enjoying himself nonetheless because he became more and more animated.

"Fly faster! Let's catch Inaho!"

Oh boy, when he's this worked up, the only one who has any hope of stopping him is Miss Neema.

"Nox, I'm going to take a break."

I found a comfortable place to sit next to a few relatively calm and easy-going earth spirits and gazed over at Miss Neema speaking with the elemental kings. They seemed to be teasing her, changing their forms, and cozying up to her. She appeared to be having fun, though, so I figured it was fine.

The elemental king, who wrapped wind around him like a cloak, glanced over at me and gave a wry grin.

"The monsters serving this beloved child certainly are fearless, aren't they?"

That mention of her monster entourage finally reminded her to check and see what the little hellions were getting up to.

Inaho, Seigo, and Rikusei were playing tag with the bugs.

Gratia was flying around, dangling by his spider thread.

Kai was splashing and playing with the water bugs in the pond.

Haku was floating leisurely on the water's surface.

And Nox was riding on my shoulder.

"Can they also see the elemental spirits?" Miss Neema asked the elemental kings. She seemed surprised but also looked a tiny bit jealous as she watched Gratia being swung around by the elemental spirits.

Heh, when it comes to the serious topic of play, Miss Neema isn't any different from these guys. They all charge headfirst towards

whatever strikes them as "amusing" without stopping to think it over first.

Noticing our mistress was looking over at us, Inaho charged straight for her.

"I was soooo bored because I was told not to get in mistress's way. But then these guys invited me to play!"

I conveyed Inaho's words to Miss Neema, who thanked the bugs.

You don't need to thank them; they weren't acting out of benevolence—they just wanted to fool around.

The bugs invited Miss Neema to join them and play together, but she wasn't done speaking with the elemental kings. Thankfully, the monsters were given permission to go ahead and play, freeing me from babysitting duty.

The return trip went about as well as you might expect. Meaning we were swarmed with animals who'd gathered around, hoping to meet Miss Neema.

I shoved the animals aside, and we pushed through the seemingly endless procession until we came to a spot where water was welling up from the ground. A large number of real bugs were gathered here, and the sight caused Miss Neema to pause.

Are these bugs the same ones we saw in the cave on Mount Reitimo? They both give off colored lights that look like tiny sparks of fire.

"There are so many pevans...!"

"These creatures are born here and return to this spot to lay their eggs."

According to the earth bug, the newborn pevans would live here until they reached maturity, and then leave the elemental forest and make their way out into the world. When it came time for their breeding period, they would return here, lay their eggs, and then set off again.

"Could it be that this spring is fed by the same water that's in the pond at the elemental palace?"

"That's right! That water sustains this entire forest!"

I see...

Both Kai and Haku had said that the water from that pond had satiated their hunger. According to the elemental kings, this

water contained the Goddess's Mercy, which gave it the properties of a cure-all medicine.

So, the Goddess's Mercy also transferred to the pevans who were born and raised here? No, that's not quite right. The entire forest is reaping its benefits. So that's why the animals who eat the plants in this forest become so strong.

Miss Neema called it "interesting."

Unlike the outside world, the "strong eat the weak" laws of nature didn't apply here. However, this was no place for monsters like us. This forest didn't need us.

"Oh, I've seen this animal in a book before!" Miss Neema ran off, and Inaho and the others chased after her.

An animal that looked like a tailless potte crept up on Miss Neema from behind. I scared it off, but not a moment later, another of the creatures came down from above. But as I approached, that one also fled. That continued, with the animals popping out and making for Miss Neema and me chasing them away.

A particularly small one of the creatures leapt at Miss Neema and clung to her...

What does she call it, a back-pack?

In any case, I reached out and pulled the creature off. It was so tiny it felt like it might break in my hands if I weren't careful.

I was looking down at the trembling creature clinging to my finger when Miss Neema noticed it.

"It's so small! Ahh, it's so cuuute!" She held out her little hands, gesturing to the animal to "come here."

"Hmm, are you a type of monkey? You look a bit like a marmoset, except your face looks more like a hamster..." Miss Neema said in a quiet voice, clearly speaking to herself. Once again, she was saying things that made absolutely no sense.

Even if I ask, she'll probably just tell me to forget about it, so I guess I'll just keep my mouth shut.

I half expected her to announce that she loved this little creature and wanted to bring it home, but that didn't happen. I didn't know what my mistress's requirements were for choosing which animals to adopt into her entourage, but personally, I prefer intelligent and well-behaved animals like Nox.

I'm already exhausted from trying to keep up with the current members and their boundless energy…

Once we made it safely back to the imperial palace, perhaps because they'd worked up an appetite from playing so hard, all the members of our group who hadn't been binging on that pond water demanded something to eat.

But I didn't even need to convey their requests—Paul had already prepared food for us.

I was beat and wanted nothing more than to take a little nap.

Inaho was running in excited circles around Spica, chanting, *"Food, food!"* but for some reason, Spica looked exhausted.

"You look tired… Did something happen?"

"…I was training with Mr. Paul, and let's just say he didn't take it easy on me."

Oh, that tracks. Paul is merciless. He has to be, though, to be able to maintain discipline around here.

That was impossible for Miss Neema. Even now, she took one look at Spica's tired face and ordered Paul to let her rest.

Paul seemed to be of the opinion that no servant worth their salt *wouldn't* be capable of serving their master immediately after a training session.

However, in this instance, Paul was the one to relent.

Miss Neema had Spica sitting at the table with her, and with Lady Karna, they examined the magical stones that had been imbued with the elemental kings' power. I had no interest in such things, so I lay down on a nearby sofa. Immediately, Inaho jumped up on top of me, having just finished her meal.

"Shinki, are you going to sleep?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'll sleep with you!"

Inaho curled up on top of my stomach. Her body heat was pleasantly warm. She made the perfect substitute for a soft fur blanket, so I let her stay. Seigo and Rikusei both scrambled up onto the sofa as well and found spots for themselves to nestle in to sleep.



“This sofa’s feeling a bit crowded…” I protested half-heartedly.

“We’re all together!”

“We were together all day today!”

“…Fine.”

I stroked the two kobolds’ heads and felt their wagging tails beat against my legs. I knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of them converged on the sofa as well, and I was right.

“You’re so lucky, Shinki. That looks really comfortable,” Kai remarked, sounding jealous of my situation, sandwiched between fluffy creatures just like how our mistress often found herself.

“Will you sleep with us, too, Kai?” Rikusei asked, and Kai nodded once.

Then, he carried over a mountain of cushions that he spread out on the floor to create a sort of nest where he curled up to sleep. Seeing that, Haku and Gratia also made their way over to us.

“Let me in, too!”

Gratia hid away in the bushy mass of Inaho’s tails.

He’s going to sleep in a place like that?

“I’ll sleep here!” Haku took up position on top of Kai’s stomach.

“If you’re serious about sleeping, stop chatting and fall asleep already.”

At that, I ignored all further antics and followed my own advice. With a yawn, I closed my eyes and felt sleep roll over me.

🐎🐎🐎

I was struck by how unusually quiet it was, but it turned out everyone was sleeping. Shinki was lying on the sofa with his legs sticking off the end, looking very squished. Inaho was on his stomach, and Seigo had wedged himself between Shinki’s body and the back of the sofa. Rikusei was burrowed in between Shinki’s legs.

In front of the sofa lay Kai buried in a pile of cushions, and I spotted a flash of white, which I assumed must have been Haku among the cushions as well.

I couldn’t spot Gratia anywhere but figured he must be hiding in someone’s hair or fur.

“Even Shinki looks cute sleeping in a pile with everyone like this,” Karna remarked, seeming touched by the sweet scene in front of us.

“I want to join them…” Spica said longingly.

There’s got to be something comforting about sleeping huddled together with your friends, especially for someone who grew up in a pack like Spica did.

“Why don’t we take a little nap, too, then?”

“Paul won’t like it…” Spica’s ears drooped with obvious disappointment as she considered my suggestion.

“Paul isn’t a heartless beast! …*Right, Paul?*” I glanced over at Paul, who heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“Very well, you may rest Spica. I will wake you before dinner.”

All right!

Once Paul gave his permission, we arranged more cushions on the floor to make beds for ourselves.

“You sleep here, Spica!” I called, patting a particularly plush cushion right next to me. Spica obediently came over and, after a brief stretch, settled down on the cushion I’d indicated.

As for me, I wiggled into the crevice between Kai and the sofa.

There’s something comforting about cozy, tight spaces!

“Neema, aren’t you uncomfortable stuffed in there like that?” Karna asked with a note of concern when she noticed the odd place I’d chosen to sleep.

“Nope, I like tight places like this!”

Half of my body had slipped underneath the sofa, but the maids in the imperial palace were on their game, so there wasn’t so much as a speck of dust under there.

“I hope you have a fun dream,” Karna said but I was already on my way to sleep and didn’t manage a reply.

I wonder what kind of dream I’ll have?

9 - Now They’re Appearing in This Country Too!

AFTER our eventful trip to the elemental palace, you would assume we’d be free to take it easy for a while, right?

Unfortunately, that was not the case.

I didn’t mind meeting with Marie’s father, Towen, to discuss matters related to Project Roslan. The problem was the person Towen introduced me to: the guild master of the Carpenters’ Guild in the Linus Empire, Master Warnock.

He was a strange person who wouldn’t deign to respond if you forgot to address him as “Master” and had been rather forcefully visiting every day for a few days now.

The first time we met, he ran over to me, shouting with great force, “So you’re the one who made that small tower?!”

“Yes, though Daux and Marie helped…”

“Then who thought up that method of using the suntate support beams?!”

Aren’t you getting a bit over-excited, mister? At least stop spraying me with spit while you speak! I am technically a noblewoman, so you might be accused of criminal disrespect!

“Um, me?”

Master Warnock’s eyes practically bulged out of his head when he heard that, and he grabbed me roughly by the shoulders. I had just enough time to register a moment of genuine fear before Shinki scooped me up, and Towen dragged Master Warnock away from me.

“Master Warnock, please calm down.”

“How can I possibly be calm at a time like this?! This little child has easily solved the fortification issue that our greatest minds have pondered over for years to no avail!”

I wasn’t the one who came up with this technology; engineers developed it many years ago on Earth…

“Does it matter who came up with the idea? I think what’s more important to focus on now is how you will implement this technique…” I protested weakly.

“Of course that’s what an aristocrat would say.”

Eek, it looks like this has seriously damaged his pride…

“But you, the esteemed members of the carpenters’ guild, are the only ones who have the skill to construct anything using that idea, right?”

That’s something to be proud of! Focus on that instead of seeing a random little kid as a serious rival, please!

“Well, of course. This isn’t the kind of thing you can achieve by just casting a few spells and calling it a day!”

Exactly. Magic isn’t all-powerful by any means. If you blindly use magic to stack up the materials to build a structure without any forethought, it will immediately fall over. You need to create a blueprint, prepare the foundation, and construct the building in a careful order, checking periodically to ensure it’s right. For all of this, the skill that can only be obtained through experience is invaluable. I’m certain this is no different from Earth.

“I wouldn’t dare to presume that *I* could make any kind of efficient use of those suntate support beams,” I said. “I don’t have the skill. That’s why I entrust the matter entirely to the expertise of the carpenters’ guild.”

With such a reputable group of professionals on hand, I’d have to be crazy *not* to leave it to them. An amateur like me being overcome with hubris and trying to do things beyond my skill level would only invite disaster.

“Hm, so you’re saying you’ll just hand over the technology of those suntate support beams to us?”

“Yes. Just as with the 2-dimensional drafting method, when professionals get their hands on it, they can vastly improve upon the original concept.”

Both the 2-dimensional drafting and the H-shaped support beams had been recreated based on my terrible drawings and rough explanations. The carpenters had improved the technique I’d poorly described, making it more professional and practical to actually use for drafting blueprints.

“Wait, you were the one who came up with the idea of 2-dimensional drafting as well?!”

“I made a teeny tiny request to the Kingdom of Gaché’s carpenters’ guild, and they very kindly used 2-dimensional drafting for all the blueprints for Project Shiana.”

“Good grief…! I just can’t win, can I?!”

The way he ran his hands aggressively back and forth through his hair in agitation reminded me of a typical testosterone-fueled civil engineer.

All he’s missing are the trademark “knickerbocker” style construction trousers with tabi-socks and a sweat towel draped around the neck—the defacto “uniform” worn by virtually every construction worker in Japan!

Master Warnock sheepishly apologized for his brusque and borderline rude manner. I got the impression he wasn’t a bad person but just wasn’t very good at social interactions. He didn’t seem to hold much regard for things like social status and instead cared more about a person’s reputation in their trade.

“The unique perspective of children can sometimes be so innovative that it dumbfounds even adults, wouldn’t you say?” Towen remarked with a wry chuckle. He turned to me and begged my forgiveness on Master Warnock’s behalf, to which I replied with a genuine smile that I wasn’t offended.

“What led you to come up with the idea for those suntate support beams?”

I felt guilty for lying but didn’t see any other option. “When you’re playing with blocks, you can only stack them so high before they fall over, right? I experimented with stacking blocks in various ways, and this pattern seemed the most stable.”

They seem to be buying it, but is that really a good enough explanation?

But blocks are a believable cover—what kid doesn’t play with them? And, anyway, I’m sure anyone with an architect’s heart can relate to the desire to somehow find a way to stack a round block on top of a triangular one!

“All right! Nefertima, I believe you said your name was? You shall become my apprentice!”

Both Towen and I gaped at Master Warnock’s sudden and unexpected announcement.

Apprentice? He wants me to train to become a carpenter?!

“Master Warnock, no matter how tolerant Lady Nefertima may have been up to this point, there is a limit to her patience! Please do not forget that she is an honored guest from the Kingdom of Gaché.”

“Even so! She’s a genius. If we start training her now from a young age, she could become the greatest carpenter of our time! No, there’s no doubt about it; she surely *will* become the greatest carpenter of *all* time!”

He’s getting very *excited all on his own, but there is no way I’ll ever become a carpenter!*

“Unfortunately, I don’t possess any magic, so I don’t think I could become a craftsman.”

Some trades, such as the culinary arts, were ideal for those with very low-level magic, but my magic was *so* insignificant that I couldn’t cast even a single spell.

“What are you saying?! It doesn’t matter if you can’t use magic as long as you have skill! I will train you to be so skilled that you’ll be able to earn a living with one hand tied behind your back!”

I suppose some craftsmen don’t use any magic…

Take Mama’s favorite furniture maker, for example. They prided themselves on not using a lick of magic, creating the most intricately detailed pieces entirely by hand and ensuring the furniture would last a long time by staining it with compounds extracted from plants rather than casting spells on it. This furniture maker’s skill was easily on par with the best craftsmen Earth had to offer, no doubt about it.

“Warnock, listen to me! There is absolutely *no* possibility of Lady Nefertima *ever* becoming your apprentice!”

Whoa! I’ve never heard Towen raise his voice like that. And he’s in full-on lecture mode! He’s really letting him have it, saying things like, “You’ve always been like this!”

…Does this mean they’ve known each other for a long time?

“Just like how you always used to sneakily change the menu in the cafeteria at the Hall of Learning and build strange creations out in the schoolyard…”

“Hey, hey, don’t bring up the old days at the Hall of Learning! That’s not fair…”

Only the two of them could hope to comprehend what they were talking about fully, but it was clear that they had known each other since they were kids.

“Did the two of you attend the Hall of Learning together?” I asked tentatively.

“That’s right. I wanted to enter straight into an apprenticeship to succeed my father, but he insisted that to become a master, I would also need academic studies. Fortunately, when I entered the Hall of Advanced Studies, one of my classmates was a certain imperial prince.”

“As I’m sure you’ve noticed, this guy has absolutely no tact. So the other aristocrats gave him a wide berth.”

“All except for this kind imperial prince, who couldn’t bring himself to ignore me.”

How nice. In addition to his father’s loving guidance, he also received the friendship of a true friend who saw past superficial things like social status.

The way they seamlessly bantered back and forth, all but finishing each other’s sentences, gave me an idea of how well they’d gotten along during their school days.

“The fact that you’ve stayed friends all this time just goes to show that you’re very similar, huh?” I remarked.

In response, Master Warnock’s eyes bulged again, and he shouted, “As if!”

“Lady Nefertima, I don’t see how I’m at all similar to a ruffian like this…”

It couldn’t be any more clear if it smacked you in the face! You’re two peas in a pod!

“I’m jealous of the two of you. I don’t have many friends my own age…”

Even though I was the one to say it, I felt a twinge of sadness at my words.

I want to make more friends! I, too, want to build deep bonds that overcome social status!

“Huh? Just go play outside; you’ll make friends in an instant,” Master Warnock said.

“Don’t confuse the situation of a highly ranked noble lady with that of a normal kid like you were,” Towen chided.

It must be nice… I want to run around the neighborhood and play tag with the other kids, too!

“In that case, you can come play at my place. I have a son, and neighborhood kids are always running in and out at all times of the day.”

“…Is it really okay?!”

I was surprised by the sudden invitation, but if he was serious, I absolutely wanted to go play!

"Of course. I can't very well expect you to accept an apprenticeship at a workshop you've never even seen before, after all."

Hey, wait a minute! We're back at that *again?! I just want to go play, that's all!*

"Give up on making her your apprentice already. Besides, right now isn't a good time."

Oh, that's right. Until they can get a handle on Runohark's movements, I'm not allowed to leave the imperial palace. Hmph, those Runohark jerks! How long are they going to prevent me from exploring the Imperial City?!

"For now, please focus on your job," Towen said to Master Warnock, steering the conversation solidly back on the topic of the proposed tower.

In the days that followed, I met with Master Warnock every day, attempting to improve on the suntate support beams. We experimented with different combinations and ratios of metals, as well as testing out different shapes—L and C shapes instead of the H shape I'd proposed.

However, when Master Warnock started talking about technical stuff, I didn't understand even half of what he said. But Master Warnock just laughed and declared that, too, was another part of my "training."

I suppose I should assume that these hand-made blocks that Master Warnock gave me as a gift are also intended to sharpen my creative abilities? I don't know if that will work, but I'm happy to play with them and see!

One such day, while I was meeting with Master Warnock, the emperor's advisor, Sarius, suddenly appeared.

"Lady Nefertima, forgive me for interrupting while you are entertaining company, but the emperor has summoned you. Will you please come with me?"

It was strange to see Sarius, who was normally so stoic, look shaken like this. It was the first time I'd ever been summoned so urgently, so there was no doubt about it—something was going on.

“Master Warnock, it seems the emperor is summoning me, so I’d better go.”

“Yes, of course! Off with you, then.”

Based on the way Master Warnock waved his hands leisurely as he essentially dismissed me, I gathered that he intended to stay here, avoiding his work for a bit longer.

I’ve known the truth for some time now! The task of improving the suntate support beams is actually assigned to someone else. Master Warnock has other tasks he should be seeing to.

Our family’s servants reported that the other members of the carpenters’ guild have been grumbling about Master Warnock neglecting his duties lately. I’d better inform Towen later.

I’d already begun moving, and Shinki and Spica reacted automatically, preparing to follow me, but Sarius stopped them.

“His Majesty instructed me that you should bring only Shinki as your bodyguard.”

If Spica can’t come, then I assume it has something to do with beloved child stuff?

“Very well.”

Although it wasn’t ideal, I accepted the emperor’s instruction to only bring Shinki.

Paul, having picked up on the fact that this was an emergency, quickly checked over my outfit.

It’s okay; I have the usual stone containing the defensive spell in my pendant, and the dagger Grandpa Gouche gave me is inside my bunny backpack.

“Come back safely, my lady.”

After Paul and Spica formally saw us off, Sarius explained that the matter was urgent and requested that Shinki carry me so we could travel quicker. We weren’t running, precisely, but we followed after Sarius at a brisk trot and soon arrived not at the emperor’s office as I’d expected but at the southern courtyard.

The emperor was there along with Euche and Sache, but wyverns were also present, so it seemed we weren’t heading to the elemental palace.

“Lady Nefertima, I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but please come with me. It seems something has happened to Dalgard and the others.”

Dalgard is the ogre that His Majesty named, right? What happened in Wildwood?!

"We need to hurry."

Shinki and I hitched a ride on Sache, and we set off immediately, flying as fast as we could towards Wildwood. Along the way, the emperor explained that he'd felt something. He'd started having an ominous feeling while working, and Weedy also seemed to sense something wasn't right because she'd begun moving her tentacles around restlessly.

Then he'd realized that his instincts were telling him that something had happened to Dalgard and the other ogres.

"The ogres usually spend most of their time hunting in the forest, but I've never sensed anything like this from them before."

He said that he'd been hesitant to bring me to a place that he knew was likely dangerous but ultimately decided the presence of a beloved child might be able to calm the ogres down.

"If you find yourself in danger, don't hesitate to use elemental power."

Ideally, I'd like to avoid danger entirely! But I promise to be on my guard.

"Okay. Shinki, I'm counting on you!" I said.

I'll leave the elemental power to Shinki.

"We'll have to be careful the nanos don't get carried away."

...Yeah, he's got a point there. I could totally see that happening.

Euche and Sache flew the entire distance at top speed, allowing us to make it to Wildwood much faster than before.

As far as we could see from above, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary.

The emperor seemed to know where the ogres were because, without hesitation, he directed us to land at a specific spot deep in the forest. As soon as we touched down, the sound of people shouting orders back and forth to one another could be heard.

The Dragon Corps soldiers and the members of the private guard who'd come along all took up fighting stances.

"There are more of them than I expected. A large number of hostiles dressed as adventurers means there's a high likelihood that Runohark is involved," Emperor Celiunos mused, apparently being fed information by the elemental spirits.

Currently, there was a no-kill order in effect for all monsters, so it was clear that these weren't members of the adventurers' guild.

Does that mean Runohark are attacking the monsters directly?!

"Do your best to capture them alive if at all possible," Emperor Celiunos ordered, and the Dragon Corps soldiers nodded, then disappeared into the forest.

Several wyverns remained in the air, their riders raining down magical attacks on the enemy from above.

There was a cacophony of sounds like something out of a monster movie—ogres and dragons roaring and magical explosions everywhere.

"The enemy is trying to flee! Catch them!"

"I've got two men injured over here! Please send help!"

"Damn it, now the ogres are attacking us! Use the wyverns to push them back!"

The dense forest wasn't ideal for the wyverns, and the Dragon Corps were having a hard time.

Whose screams were those that I kept hearing from time to time?

"Your Majesty..." the leader of the private guard spoke up in a pinched tone.

"Very well. Leave just a few men here. The rest of you go help them."

Several men were selected to guard the emperor, and the rest of the private guard dashed off into the woods.

"Gather the injured over here!"

It seemed that one of the members of the private guard was a healer. They immediately began tending to the wounded.

"We've tied up the captives!"

"If you've managed to take a few of them captive, don't bother chasing down the ones that fled," Emperor Celiunos ordered, using elemental power to send his voice to our allies.

After that, the sounds of battle gradually faded.

Once total silence fell, the normal sounds of the wind and birds singing resumed.

"It looks like no enemies left in this area."

Once the area was determined to be safe, the emperor headed for the spot where the fighting had taken place. The

soldiers were working together to carry large and heavy-looking objects that I assumed to be the unconscious bodies of the captured Runohark agents.

"Dalgard, are you okay?" Emperor Celiunos called out before stepping into the ogre's line of sight, clearly trying to avoid startling the ogre and raising his self-protection instincts.

There was a rustling and snapping sound, and the ground faintly shook as Dalgard stepped out into view.

"You're wounded...!"

Dalgard was covered in blood and had so many injuries all over his body that I couldn't help instinctively averting my eyes in horror. And it wasn't just Dalgard, either. As the other ogres gathered around, all of them were likewise covered in deep wounds.

"It looks like you're not okay at all, huh?"

When he recognized the emperor and me, it was like all the power had left Dalgard's body. He slumped to the ground in a seated position, looking exhausted. "It was them. Those who attacked the clan, they came again."

"The people who previously captured the seven of you?"

"Yes. They were very strong. As strong as you, master, if not stronger. They killed everyone."

I was shocked to hear Dalgard's claim that the Runohark agents were stronger than Emperor Celiunos. Even though he hadn't been using Euche's power during the fight with Dalgard, Emperor Celiunos was an elite-level water magic user, and his skill with the sword was easily on the same level as the unit leaders of the private guard.

"First things first, let's patch you guys up."

Emperor Celiunos called over the healer who'd just finished tending to the Dragon Corps soldiers, and the man immediately began using magic to heal the ogres. Some of the ogres didn't want to let anyone other than the emperor or me get close to them, so he had to move slowly and speak in a gentle, calming voice, reassuring them that he meant no harm before they would let him heal them.

"No matter how strong they may have been, I can't believe they managed to injure you all this badly. How many of them were there?"

"...Many. That's all I know."

You'd think the people working on Project Roslan would've noticed so many people sneaking around in the forest...

The emperor had the same idea because he muttered to himself, "We'd better go check in on the base." Then he asked the ogres, "What will you guys do? It may be dangerous for you to remain here in this forest."

"We will stay. We can't live among people. We can't tolerate humans other than you, master."

Dalgard's fierce frown was suitably terrifying. But I could understand how he felt. After this, he and the other ogres had even less desire than ever to be around humans.

"Very well. If anything happens, I'll come right away, so don't fight recklessly."

"We are ogres, born to fight. Fleeing is not in our blood."

I'd heard they were a warlike species, but maybe "war-loving" was a better description?

Is fighting engraved into their basic instincts?

"I suppose it can't be helped, then. Elemental spirits, if anyone tries to enter this forest, please inform me immediately," Emperor Celiunos said, arranging it so that if anyone who might be a part of Runohark showed up, he could come running before the ogres were attacked again. "Now then, we'd better head to the base."

The ogres, their injuries healed, thanked the emperor and then disappeared into the trees, seeking refuge even deeper in the forest.

It feels like Runohark are hellbent on chasing the monsters no matter how far they run. I hope the monsters on Mount Reitimo are okay...

With so many powerful adventurers gathered there, it wouldn't be easy for Runohark to make any move against the monsters, but I'd better warn Papa anyway so he can have them on the lookout.

In the end, we captured four Runohark agents. They were loaded onto the wyverns using magical items attached to them to be transported back to the army headquarters.

The rest of us took to the sky once more, following the road that ran through the forest below, and in just a matter of minutes, the base came into view.

Surprisingly, the clearing was much larger than the last time I'd visited, and the previous collection of shacks had grown to resemble a proper, albeit small, village.

"Your Majesty, what is the purpose of your unexpected visit?"

Luttie ran over to meet us as we landed, and once again, I was struck by how feminine and beautiful she was. I would've never guessed in a million years if I didn't already know that she'd been born as a man. The combination of her charming traditional outfit and the rustic scenery around us called to mind a certain young lady of the Alps…

"I received information that a group suspected to be Runohark had appeared in Wildwood. Have you seen any strangers dressed like adventurers in this area?"

"Runohark, really? All the way out here?"

Luttie looks doubtful, but maybe she knows something after all?

"A lot of people have been coming and going lately, so I may have failed to notice them," she admitted after a moment of thought.

Sensing a chance to turn a profit, the merchants' guild had set up temporary shops that looked almost like market stalls at the base. As a result, travelers passing through the area began gathering to restock their supplies along their journey, which led to the stalls being expanded, and, eventually, a small restaurant had even been set up.

When things reached that point, many of the carpenters decided it was too much of a hassle to commute to and from the closest village, so they built small cabins to live in, which likewise grew in size and number until, at this point, travelers were also able to stay the night here before moving on.

You gotta give it to the merchants' guild; they have a keen eye for business!

"Do adventurers also stop here?"

"Yes. However, I haven't seen any during the times I've visited. Shall I ask around to the others?"

It seemed that Luttie wasn't always at the base, so it was possible she'd simply missed seeing the Runohark agents. It was easy to forget that she wasn't just a whimsical country maid but a member of the nobility with duties to attend to in assisting her sister in running the province.

So, we took Luttie up on her offer and had her ask if any of the others had seen anyone suspicious, particularly focusing on the carpenters who were living here full-time at the moment. However, no one reported seeing anything out of the ordinary.

“If they snuck into the forest without being seen by anyone, that must mean they entered from the side of Wildwood closest to the Alliance of Nations…”

“But that entire area is said to be devolved into a lawless mess at the moment. I imagine it would be difficult for even Runohark to pass through safely.”

Although the Helios Province didn’t share a border with the Alliance of Nations, it was not far away. They got the latest information on the situation at the border more quickly here, so Luttie informed us of what she’d heard from her sister.

Fighting had broken out in the province that abutted the Alliance of Nations. Of course, the Linus Imperial Army had been dispatched to protect the citizens and assist the refugees.

“…So they snuck into the country under the guise of refugees?”

“That’s likely the case, but we can’t just stop accepting refugees. That would only lead to even greater tragedy.”

Fleeing for their lives, the refugees would become desperate if turned away at the border and try to force or sneak their way in by any means possible. It would be a huge mess.

Not to mention the fact that being turned away in their time of need would sow the seeds of hatred and resentment towards the Linus Empire in the refugees’ hearts, and they might even target the innocent citizens trying to live their lives peacefully along the border.

For the Linus Empire to protect its citizens, they would take in the refugees. When that happened, our enemy would walk right in the front door along with them.

Talk about being caught between a rock and a hard place!

“It’s a terrible situation. I can only imagine how you must feel, Your Majesty.”

Luttie was wearing a somber expression as she said quietly, “Our family will help in any way we can.”

Then her tone changed, and her voice filled with anger as she cried, “Runohark are trying to get their filthy hands on Lady

Nefertima, right? I'll kill every last one of those pedo freaks before they can get anywhere near her!"

It was a shocking statement, but somehow, she made it sound cute.

"For the time being, I will station soldiers here to keep an eye on things," the emperor said, trying and failing to hide the way the corner of his lip turned up at Luttie's outburst.

"Very well. I will make the necessary preparations for their arrival."



AFTER that, we returned to the imperial palace, but that wasn't the end of it.

The following day, the palace was in an uproar.

When Theo came to check up on me, he filled me in on what was going on.

"The fighting along the border has worsened."

"...Are things getting dire?"

"It seems the remaining soldiers from the armies of each of the countries making up the Alliance of Nations have banded together."

I see. I can understand how the fighting would be much worse if the Linus Imperial Army is up against trained soldiers.

Until now, all of the skirmishes had been instigated by peasants armed with little more than farming tools, so the army had been able to disarm them easily with minimal casualties.

"According to reports from the front, some of the opponents are civilians armed with weapons."

That indicated that someone was supplying these civilians with weapons. It could be Runohark, or it could be the military of another country.

Theo explained they were currently investigating this lead. "We're also still working on interrogating the men who were captured yesterday. Once we get more information, His Majesty will explain it to you personally."

So essentially, he's saying that they still don't know much, so please wait patiently a little longer? Okay. Not as if I can do much else

even if I wanted to!

"I suggested sending you home to your own country for your safety, but we just received word that fighting has broken out there too at suspiciously the same time, so my suggestion was rejected."

"What?! Fighting has broken out in the Kingdom of Gaché as well?!"

Our country's royal knighthood was incredibly skilled so I seriously doubted there was any chance of them being defeated, but I still couldn't help but worry.

My friends, Dan and Lestin among them, might be participating in the battles. The same went for the animals from the beast stables and dragons from the dragon stables. The animals and dragons had been bred and raised for war, and the knights had trained relentlessly for it. But that didn't change the fact that someone I knew personally might die.

The thought terrified me.

"I know you must be worried, but for now, I need you to bear it." With this last, grave statement, Theo left.

I decided to write Papa a letter right away. I wanted to hear anything he could tell me about the situation in the Kingdom of Gaché. Although, if it was really bad, I was sure Paul would've mentioned it before now.

"Neema, calm down."

"But…"

Unlike me, Karna was her usual self. For some reason, she handed Inaho to me.

"Kyuuu?"

It seemed Inaho had been sleeping peacefully on the couch, but after being suddenly picked up and thrust towards me, she let out a little cry that seemed to be asking, *"What's going on?!"*

I set Inaho down on my lap and gently grabbed onto her tails. A soothing warmth flowed from the tails into the palms of my hands. Inaho's tails were always radiating heat. The effect was similar to gripping a handwarmer—it calmed me down just a little.

"Now then, Paul. In order to reassure Neema, please tell her everything you know about the current situation," Karna instructed Paul once she determined I'd calmed down sufficiently.

"I have orders from his lordship."

In short, Papa ordered him not to tell us anything?

"But I'm certain he also told you that, if you deem it necessary, you are allowed to discuss it. Isn't that right?"

Paul didn't respond to my grinning sister's pointed question. I could only take this to mean she was right on the mark.

"In her current state of agitation at the unknown situation, Neema might accidentally use the holy beasts' and elemental spirits' power recklessly. If it were *me*, I'd use any power I could get my hands on," Karna continued, blatantly threatening Paul. Well, maybe that wasn't her intention, but that was how it sounded, at least. "Paul, I, Karnadia Osphe, am giving you an order. You will tell us everything you know."

By "any power she could get her hands on," she was referring to her power to issue orders to him as her servant?

Papa's orders should theoretically take precedence as the head of the Osphe family, but Paul *was* Karna's and my private butler.

In short, Karna was forcing Paul to choose between Papa and herself.

"...Very well. If you ladies did anything reckless under my supervision, His Grace would end me for sure. I will tell you everything we've been able to uncover."

So that was the brunt of Karna's threat?! I suppose he's right, though; if he were to become the focus of Papa's fiery rage, there might not even be ashes left when all was said and done!

However, even more than that, the way Karna used her words to back him into a corner, just like Mama always does, was truly terrifying! I won't let her know that, though...



10 - Battle at the Border Part 1 (POV: Lestin)

I'D finished my shift for the day, but a female was about to give birth, so out of concern, I'd decided to spend the night in my office. I'd given strict orders that someone who could use healing magic should be on duty at all times, but that didn't change the fact that childbirth was not without risk.

Well, that and I just really wanted to be there to support her personally!

"Commander Les! The general has issued an emergency alert!"

Unfortunately, my wishes were not to be granted.

The letter my subordinate handed me contained orders to lend aid and gather information immediately in an area along the national border in the Dierta Province where fighting had broken out.

I knew the situation was tense along the border, but has it already come to this?

"Call up units one through four. We'll be departing as soon as I've explained the details of the mission."

Based on the fact that the Intelligence Department had received the same orders, it seemed like something was going on behind the scenes. It was our mission to help them narrow down what and put an end to it.

Since we'd even received permission to travel via teleportation circle, they clearly wanted us to get there as quickly as possible.

In a situation like this, we should probably bring along animals who are good at communicating with humans. Which animals are best suited for this mission?

Once the knights who would participate in the operation had gathered, I conveyed our orders from General Zelnan. There hadn't been a serious battle since the previous king's reign, so nervousness was written all over my men's faces.

“Without warning, perfectly ordinary citizens suddenly took up arms and launched a sneak attack against our kingdom’s royal knighthood. Don’t you think that’s strange? Our mission is to back up the knights already on site and to link up with the Intelligence Department to investigate the true motives behind this attack.”

While we’d leave the actual information-gathering to the professionals, we’d be backing them up and helping however we could.

“I will leave the choice of mount to each of you, but be certain to choose someone you communicate well with. Also, the site of the battle is an environment made up of mountains with a good line of sight and large expanses of scarlet forest.”

It was essential to choose a mount fit for the environment.

I’d decided to bring along Uwaz and the toetail, Elena.

I’d also bring along a gleyhawk, a night owl, a tolqueg, and a pack of land wolves to assist the Intelligence Department. Some members of the Intelligence Department had received the training necessary to work with the animals from the beast stables, so I’d have the animals I brought along pair up with those knights.

Once all of the animals coming along had been loaded into transport cages as we’d practiced many times for exactly such a scenario, we carried them to the room in the royal palace that housed the teleportation circle.

First, my direct subordinates and I teleported to a city close to the national border in the Dierta Province. Then, we had the others send over the animals. Finally, the rest of my men teleported to meet us. Once everyone had arrived, we set off immediately for the area where the fighting was taking place.

We used magic to light our way so we could travel quickly and safely despite the late hour, but when we arrived at the fortress, the Intelligence Department had already beat us there.

“Over here, Les.”

The Director of the Intelligence Department, Seerio Yugee, was the one who’d called out to me.

“Director Seerio, I see you’re as quick as ever.”

“Yeah, well, we weren’t far away.”

If I remember correctly, most of the Intelligence Department had been working undercover on long-term assignments in Icoux and the Alliance of Nations. Of course, due to the nature of their

work, the details of where they were and what they were doing were strictly confidential, so that was just my extrapolation based on the information I had.

“I’ve been hearing quite a bit about your activities of late, Director.”

“It was that guy Dan, wasn’t it? I’m sure that entire episode was only an afterthought compared to his story about meeting the magnificent and glorious fire dragon, right?”

Many of the legion commanders—including Dan, the commander of the Dragon Knights Legion—were drinking buddies. That was how Seerio had been able to hit the nail on the head despite not being present for our discussion—he knew Dan’s personality so well.

“I certainly hadn’t expected to have to listen to him go on and on about it all night long.”

Dan, a die-hard dragon lover, had become more inspired than ever to throw himself into his work after meeting his idol, the fire dragon, in person. However, it seemed that even now, no matter how hard he tried, the leader of the dragons living in the dragon stables, a lindbloom named Ghizel, was still playing hard to get.

“That guy never changes, does he?” Seerio laughed, but I knew I had no business pointing fingers at others when I was much the same.

“In any case, let’s end this quickly. When we get back to the royal city, let’s go get something tasty to eat, eh?”

I said I was down for that if he was paying, and Seerio grumbled back, “In your dreams!”

The fortress commander called for everyone to assemble, so we ended our discussion there and turned serious, focusing entirely on the task at hand.

The group that had attacked the fortress trying to cross the border hadn’t been refugees but a scraggly, ragtag band of soldiers. Some wore the uniforms of the Icouxian military, while others were from the Alliance of Nations. Allegedly, even a few knights were in the mix. These soldiers had operated in an organized fashion, working together to execute their attack.

“Somebody has to be at the center of it all, calling the shots. Even if they were from a different country, if their position in the

organization was high enough, others would probably follow them."

"What I'm most curious about is the source of their supplies. Soldiers know better than anyone that you can't fight without food and weapons."

"Leave that to us; the Intelligence Department will figure it out; never fear."

The beast knights' mission for the moment was to work with the knights stationed at this fortress to push back the line of fighting. If the enemy were disorganized, it would provide the perfect opening for the Intelligence Department to sneak in unnoticed.



AFTER passing the animals used for communication over to the Intelligence Department, we headed for the battlefield.

When I released Elena into the night, she set off to silently stalk her prey. At the same time, several other toetails and yargles ran ahead, dashing toward the scene of battle.

"Remember, men, your first priority is to protect yourself and your partner. Don't be reckless; if you think you're about to be overwhelmed, retreat immediately—that is an order."

Many of these men had never experienced a true battle before, so I struck home the message that they were forbidden from sticking their necks out too far. Unlike their sparring partners, these opponents wouldn't hesitate to go for blood. Furthermore, if at all possible, we wanted to avoid losing even one of our animal partners.

I mounted up on Uwaz's back and headed straight for where the fighting was the thickest.

Without preamble, I mercilessly cast spell after spell at the attackers.

This was Uwaz's first time seeing real combat as well, but he showed no fear as he valiantly kicked and stomped any enemies who made the mistake of getting close enough for him to reach. Anyone sent flying or trampled by Uwaz's powerful legs wouldn't

be getting back up to keep fighting, that was for sure. However, there was also a high danger of “friendly fire” with his rampage.

“Uwaz, I need you to buy me some time, okay?” I gave Uwaz’s neck a pat, then dismounted in one swift movement.

One of the biggest challenges with earth magic was that you needed to have your feet on the ground when casting powerful spells.

I let the magic circulate around inside my body, building up as I worked out the formulation.

“Become six defensive walls made of dirt and stone.”

A series of walls tall enough for a grown man to hide behind materialized behind me. At first glance, it looked like simple earth magic, but I’d made a few modifications with fortification in mind, making the walls stronger.

The animals from the beast stables taught me to do this.

One animal species that lived at the beast stables mixed its saliva into the dirt it used to build its nests. When mixed with materials such as dirt, the saliva made the nest significantly sturdier.

I was an advanced-level earth magic user but could also use low-level water magic. Until now, I’d only ever used this ability to produce safe drinking water, but it turned out that by tweaking the properties of the water just a little, I could use it like the animal’s saliva to make the walls stronger.

Furthermore, by strategically arranging stones inside the walls in a mesh pattern, I’d succeeded in making them more difficult to knock down. I was confident it would take elite-level destructive magic to breach these walls.

“Everyone who’s injured, fall back behind the defensive walls! Ceros, please take point on tending to the wounded.” I passed off the task of caring for the injured knights to my subordinate, who possessed healing magic.

The royal knighthood’s healers were knights first and foremost; in addition to their healing abilities, they were every bit as skilled at fighting as any other knight. They were experienced in assessing the severity of a wound and patching it up in such a way as to use the least amount of magic possible, preventing the wound from becoming fatal but not healing it completely. In this

way, they conserved their magic so they could help as many people as possible.

"Yes, sir!"

"Uwaz!" I called Uwaz back to me, swiftly mounted, and returned to the battle.

Just then, a voice came from the direction of the fortress, urging the attackers to surrender. The voice was projected using wind magic, making it easily audible across the entire battlefield.

"The Royal Knighthood of the Kingdom of Gaché does not want to fight with you. If you put down your weapons and surrender, you will not be harmed."

"Don't believe a thing they say! Those beastpeople lovers will kill us all in a heartbeat if we give them a chance!"

That's quite an extreme exaggeration.

Our country didn't show preferential treatment to any species above others.

There weren't any beastpeople stationed at the royal palace due to their special characteristics, but plenty of beastperson knights were among the troops stationed in each of the provinces.

Besides, it was simply down to superior endurance that the beastpeople had managed to cross the border quicker. It seemed that among the beastpeople who'd fled as refugees, some reported not being able to shake a feeling that something bad would happen and said they'd fled in fear. That was probably due to their primal instincts as beastpeople at work.

That was an innate ability of their species, so no matter what humans said, it just sounded like resentment.

"My, you lot certainly look stupid, falling for such unfounded rumors. Aren't you ashamed, as knights, to have been so easily deceived?"

All the while, as we gradually fought to push the line of enemies back, I searched for whoever was issuing orders on their side. I was looking for a spot that our opponents seemed to be particularly protecting, assuming that's where I'd find their leader, but in the darkness, it wasn't easy.

First, one color passed, and then another, and the battlefield thinned considerably.

Just as we were turning our focus to immobilizing rather than killing, the sky suddenly lit up. I didn't know who it was or whether

they were friend or foe, but it was clear that *someone* had cast a powerful spell.

The light turned an unsettling shade of red and flashed three distinct pulses, surprising me. Someone had used magic instead of a manual flare to send up a signal. Three flashes of red light indicated "objective location." In short, the person directing this ragtag band of soldiers had been in the area indicated by the signal.

"Make for that area! Everyone who can still fight, with me!"

I stuck two fingers into my mouth and whistled to call Elena back to me, then shouted those orders to my men, directing everyone to make for the area indicated.

A group of beast knights mounted on wild bears tore into the enemies blocking our way, forcefully opening a path.

I watched as Uwaz joyfully stopped the enemies who'd evaded the wild bears' onslaught as we followed close on their heels and found myself struggling with mixed feelings.

I certainly didn't raise him to be so vicious… I take no responsibility for this!

"Uwaz, we have to hurry. We don't have time to waste stomping out every last little pest."

Up ahead, a group of soldiers standing nearly shoulder-to-shoulder came into view, and we launched a joint attack on this unusually heavily protected flank.

I continued erecting protective walls, observing the situation around me as I did.

"Ah-woo!"

A familiar howl rang out above the sounds of battle. I immediately traced the sound to its source—one of the land wolves I'd lent to the Intelligence Department. A small tube used for carrying messages was tied around the land wolf's neck with a piece of string.

"Thanks, Ruyah."

I removed the tube containing the missive and quickly read its contents.

"Enemy leader secured."

A smile bloomed on my face.

You gotta give it to Seerio's department. They sure work fast!

“We’ve captured your leader! This is your last chance to surrender!” I shouted, projecting my voice as much as I could for the enemy combatants to hear, and I could feel a renewed vigor come over my men as they realized victory was at hand.

It was in opposition with my personality to speak so gruffly, but in a situation like this, what mattered most was being taken seriously by my opponent.

The news that their leader had been captured sent the enemy soldiers spiraling into confusion.

“Even without Lord Kawavaugh, our mission remains the same!”

I gathered that “Kawavaugh” must be their leader’s name, but it was a cardinal rule of combat psychology that the capture of their commanders inevitably sent an army into disarray.

“Is this leader worth risking your lives for?! If you’re that eager to journey home to be with the Goddess, then by all means, keep fighting, and I’ll send you off myself!”

These men weren’t fighting out of loyalty to their country; they were fighting for their survival. Without a country, it was inevitable that one would value their own life more than ever since they had nothing else left.

In response to my challenge, the enemy combatants surrendered one after another. We stripped them of their weapons and magical items and replaced them with magical items of our own to bind the captives’ magic. We quickly ran out of the magic-binding items and had no choice but to remove them from anyone who agreed to vow upon their name not to resist and use them only on those who refused to cooperate.

“You bastard!!!”

The same man I’d been speaking with earlier, who appeared to be a higher-ranked officer among the enemy’s forces, lunged towards me, swinging his sword wildly. It suddenly occurred to me that he might’ve actually been one of the captured leader’s direct subordinates.

I have to respect his determination to carry out his leader’s mission to the bitter end.

“All right, then. Let’s do this.”

I drew my beloved sword and took up a fighting pose.

The previous commander of the Beast Knights Legion passed this sword down to me. There was a gentle curve to the blade, making it a bit unique to handle compared to a standard-issue longsword, and its hilt was made from the horn of a rhinoceros. The first commander of the Beast Knights Legion had commissioned it to be made out of the horn of a rhinoceros that had died naturally, and the sword had been passed down from commander to commander ever since.

My blade intercepted my opponent's, and I heard him chant a short spell.

Wind magic, huh? That's inconvenient…

I used magic as well, creating a small shield on my left arm. This shield, which incorporated metal drawn out of the ground deep beneath our feet, wouldn't break so easily. Not even a wind blade would get through it.

I dodged one swing, deflected another, then lashed out with a strike of my own.

This pattern continued for several more moments, and although I didn't deliver any fatal injuries, my opponent's movements soon became clumsy and heavy.

"Damn it…!"

However, it was clear that the man was determined to fight to the death, and that made him desperate. Even though he'd clearly started to weaken, I couldn't afford to let down my guard just yet.

I sensed a large amount of magic start to gather and was in the middle of casting a defensive spell of my own when…

My opponent suddenly swallowed something, and I felt the magic swirling around us increase drastically.

"…Gwaaagh…!"

The magic he'd summoned was too much for his body to contain, and it began spilling out of him. The wild and unrestrained wind magic took the form of sharp blades that went flying in all directions, cutting into everyone in the immediate area and causing significant damage.

He's lost control of his magic. I bet that thing he swallowed was a magical stone.

If someone swallowed a small magical stone, they could expect to replenish some of their depleted magic, but if they over-reached and swallowed a stone that was too large and powerful,

the body wouldn't be able to contain the magic, and it would rampage out of control.

Talk about a double-edged sword, eh?

I deflected some of the wind blades with my shield, but not all of them.

"...Ow!"

A flash of heat seared across my right thigh, followed by something warm and wet flooding down my leg. My leg could no longer hold me up and I fell to the ground, flinging out magic as I did.

"Become a dome of solid stone."

I created a half-sphere of stone around the man to trap his rampaging magic, but it wouldn't hold for long.

"Everyone retreat! Hurry!"

Already, I could hear cracking from the stone dome surrounding my opponent. My magic was advanced-level, but it was common knowledge that the raw power of out-of-control magic rivaled that of even elite-level magic.

I, too, attempted to retreat, dragging my leg uselessly behind me, but I knew deep down that I wouldn't make it in time.

"Neigh!"

"Uwaz?! What are you doing?! Get out of here, now!" I shouted frantically, trying to dissuade Uwaz from racing towards me, but he didn't listen. "Uwaz!"

Once he reached me, the warhorse reached out and tugged on my arm with his teeth, urging me to climb onto his back.

Somehow, I draped myself haphazardly across his back, and while I was not properly mounted by any stretch of the imagination, by some miracle, Uwaz broke into a run without dropping me.

I heard rock crumbling behind us, and immediately, the wind assaulted us again. What hurt even more than the seemingly hundreds of blades slicing into my flesh, though, was the sight of wounds appearing on Uwaz's body one after another.

If I don't kill that guy and stop this out-of-control magic, Uwaz might not make it. With that thought, I threw myself off of Uwaz's back.

The impact of my landing reverberated through my many injuries, but I ignored the pain and focused on gathering up my

magic for one final attack.

I sensed Uwaz turning to come back for me, but there was no time.

“Become quicksand, sinking deep underground.”

This spell caused a considerable area around the target to slip into a sinkhole of quicksand, so I would’ve liked to avoid using it if possible, but…

The last vestiges of magic left my body, and my consciousness became hazy.

I didn’t even know what ultimately happened to the man whose magic was raging out of control.

Seerio, the rest is up to you now.

11 - Battle at the Border Part 2 (POV: Director of the Intelligence Department)

THE beast knights rode out with the knights stationed at the fortress towards the area where the battle was in full swing.

Before he left, Les told me to “look after these guys for me” and entrusted me with several different varieties of animals. The way he talked about them as if they were his children drove home just how much he had in common with Dan.

The mission my men and I faced here was to identify and capture the person in charge of this supposed army.

We melted into the darkness, setting off on our mission, but the sounds of battle all around us were tremendous. There was no guarantee a stray spell wouldn’t come ricocheting straight at us, even if we weren’t its intended targets.

“Proceed with caution.”

We passed the area where the heaviest fighting was and made our way towards the makeshift encampment further back.

Thanks to the land wolves who led our way, we made it without being detected by the enemy.

“You guys are pretty handy… Unlike some people I know…”

Even when we encountered enemies, the land wolves swiftly worked as a pack to eliminate them. Despite the need for stealth, I couldn’t help but praise them in a sarcastic whisper, which caused the subordinates close enough to hear me to complain.

“Whose fault is that, but the person who trained us?”

“No, I’d have to agree, we *are* rather ineffective… But only because we’re constantly trying to keep up with a certain someone’s unreasonable demands…”

Heh, they really don’t pull any punches, do they, these smart-mouthed brats? Would it kill them to show a little respect to their superiors? Come to think of it, what is that stupidly serious guy doing right now…? He’s the only one who, even while bantering with me, manages to remain respectful.

Well, whatever.

According to information provided by the wind spirits, a large number of people were gathered in a spot a bit further ahead.

We'll need to slip in undetected and do our best to hobble their defenses.

I'd nearly reached the end of my power as an elementalist during my previous mission. However, Prince Wilhelt had considerately assigned some wind spirits that typically gathered around his holy beast to assist me. The bonded partners of holy beasts were able to command elemental spirits to do their bidding by giving them bits of the power bestowed upon them by God for this exact purpose. So whenever I needed to ask the wind spirits to do something, His Highness provided the power offered in compensation for those favors.

Coming to terms with the fact that I now had access to even greater power than I'd had before losing mine hurt my head. If I messed up, it would be a one-way trip to becoming "fallen" for sure.

"Director, it's come into sight."

A massive tent with several light-emitting magical items affixed to it in strategic locations loomed up ahead of us.

"First, let's determine the distribution of lookouts around the perimeter. Once that's done, Evans and Rinali, I want you to pretend to be refugees and attempt to make contact."

Rinali was my trusted subordinate who'd pretended to be my wife in our fake identities while we were undercover in Icoux. Evans had also been undercover in Icoux, so no matter what questions the enemy asked the two supposed "refugees from Icoux," they should be able to respond without raising suspicion.

Thank goodness I had the foresight to prepare disguises in advance, eh?



IN the end, our investigation revealed that their defenses were full of holes.

Even though soldiers from several different countries and a handful of knights were working together, they'd essentially formed cliques with others of the same nationality. It made sense

that they were wary of one another in a situation like this, but no matter how you looked at it, it was hard to picture them as soldiers who had once been in charge of protecting their respective countries.

“We’ll aim for the area where the Icouxians are gathered. Evans and Rinali, are you ready?”

“At your leisure, Director.”

So she says, but there’s something off about this picture. Who’s ever seen such clean refugees?

“All right, roll around on the ground a bit. Get yourselves nice and dirty, you hear?” I couldn’t help grinning evilly as the two of them shot me dirty looks before grudgingly obeying.

Once they looked sufficiently disheveled, I turned to my subordinates, who were trained to handle the beast stables’ animals.

“Have the land wolves follow these two. If the enemy sees that wild beasts are hunting these weak and helpless refugees, they’ll surely take pity on them and take them in.”

“Won’t that put the land wolves in danger? I would very much like to avoid being killed by Commander Lestin if it’s all the same to you.”

I wouldn’t put it past him. Oh well, if it comes to that, I suppose I’ll have to take the beating myself.

“Once the enemy catches sight of the land wolves, call them back immediately.”

And so, we put our plan into action without another moment’s delay.

The two “refugees” ran towards the enemy camp, and the land wolves chased them, growling ferociously. When Evans and Rinali approached the camp, several men carrying swords rushed out of the tent to intercept them, but the moment the men caught sight of the land wolves, they changed their focus from the supposed refugees to the wolves, who they began lobbing spells at.

“Fall back!”

My subordinate in charge of the land wolves blew a whistle. I could hear the hiss of his breath as he blew, but if the whistle made any kind of noise, I couldn’t hear it.

And yet, the land wolves obediently came back.

“The whistle didn’t make any noise, right?”

“All of the members of the wolf family have incredible hearing, allowing them to pick up on noises that human ears can’t hear.”

Noises inaudible to human ears? Now that’s sure something!

“They’ve successfully infiltrated the enemy’s tent.”

“Good. Now, all we have to do is wait for the signal. You’ve got the scent-bag, right?”

“Yes. Once Evans releases the tolqueg, it will follow its nose straight here.”

We’d decided to use animals to communicate as a precaution since we didn’t know for certain there wasn’t an elementalist among the enemy’s ranks. It turned out animals could be pretty darn useful after all.

A short while later, there was a little chirping cry.

“Here comes the tolqueg. Good job, little guy. Here you go.”

The agent in charge of the tolqueg took out a small jar, and the animal, with its strange little face, eagerly leapt onto his shoulder and grabbed the jar from him. It was undeniably adorable how the tolqueg clutched the jar and used its tongue to slurp up the nectar inside with all its might. The nectar was gone in no time, and then the tolqueg turned its attention to grooming its fur.

I assigned this subordinate to keep an eye on all the animals while the rest of us checked the rest of our gear.

“Let’s get going, then, shall we? Does everyone have all their weapons?”

“Yes, sir!”

We used one of the holes in the enemies’ defenses to slip unnoticed into their encampment.

We quietly picked off opponents who were walking alone or in pairs and stripped them of their clothing and gear. I would have my subordinates dress up in the stolen outfits and take strategic placements around the tent where we assumed the enemy leader was located.

I snuck up behind a man without making so much as a whisper of a sound, covered his mouth with my hand, and, in one swift motion, sliced his throat. There was a hiss as the air escaped from his severed trachea, and blood sprayed with great force from

the wound. I leapt out of the way to avoid the blood splatter, and the man's body collapsed to the ground.

I grabbed his legs and dragged him out of the way to a spot where we wouldn't be noticed. Once there, I left the body for one of my subordinates to hide using earth magic. We also used earth magic to make quick work of the remaining blood stains on the ground. It certainly was a useful ability to have when working for the Intelligence Department.

"I would've done a much better job hiding the body!"

My elemental spirit partner, Serafi, complained, but I didn't think she was seriously angry.

Unfortunately, I could no longer make requests to Serafi.

We were in the middle of carrying out an operation, so I didn't have time to chat with her, so I used just my eyes to order her to "*Calm down!*"

My subordinates each used their preferred weapons and methods to swiftly and silently decimate the enemy's ranks, leaving no one the wiser. Some chose to do as I'd done and cut out their targets' throats, while others used a quick-acting deadly poison.

Even the most potent poison took time to work, so it wasn't my preferred method, but I used it sometimes when the job called for it. It *was* convenient that, by altering the type and strength of the poison, you could adjust it to fit the situation, rendering your target unconscious or paralyzed rather than killing them if you wished.

Come to think of it, that poison we got special permission to use for our last mission was pretty darn impressive. I've never encountered any other poison that worked so fast.

If I had any of that stuff left, I would've gladly used it for this mission, but alas, I'd only received a small amount directly from the prime minister for that mission. Apparently, it would be difficult to secure a regular supply.

The members of the Intelligence Department specialized in assassinations and disguise, but it was rare for all my subordinates to be dressed up as enemies while I was not.

On my orders, my subordinates spread out, surrounding the tent entirely, and I snuck inside.

Inside, I spotted the figures, who I assumed were the leader and three of his subordinates.

I hurled a throwing knife, and the thump of one of the people inside the tent falling to the ground was our signal.

Once my subordinates sliced open the side of the tent and came pouring in, everything ended in a few intense moments.

We killed those who attempted to resist, and captured the leader and one of his subordinates.

In order to avoid light leaking out suspiciously from the gap where the tent had been cut, we dimmed the lanterns inside as low as they went, making it look like the leader had gone to sleep.

“Two of you will stay here with me. The rest of you report the location of this encampment to the others and carry on with annihilating the enemy forces.”

“Yes, sir.”

Aside from the two agents I’d selected as lookouts, the others obediently slipped from the tent and resumed silently taking out the remaining enemies.

A moment later, a bright red light flooded in through the slit in the tent wall. The light flashed three times, then disappeared. I peeked out to check the situation outside, but despite the magical signal set off directly above the encampment, there seemed to be no reaction.

“Hey, hey! And you guys call yourselves soldiers?! What kind of soldiers don’t get suspicious and come to investigate when someone uses magic close by?!” I asked the leader incredulously, but he didn’t respond.

This was far from the ideal location for an interrogation, so we would need to transport the captives back to the fortress.

In addition to setting off the magical signal flare, my subordinates had also dispatched the land wolves carrying messages containing news of the enemy leader’s capture and details of their encampment. It was only a matter of time before the main force arrived.

“Lord Kawavaugh! The enemy forces are headed this way!”

A messenger burst into the tent but froze when he spotted us.

“Thanks for the message.”

I clapped the frozen messenger on the shoulder, and the second I finished saying that, I knocked him unconscious.

Time to join your friends.



IT was still faint, but the sounds of battle began to reach us.

The main forces appeared to be getting closer, but it seemed that something wasn't quite right.

"Oh no, this is bad! Really bad!"

"A strange person lost control of their magic!"

The wind spirits spoke over each other, frantically attempting to convey something to me. I didn't know who this "strange person" was, but apparently, they had lost control of their magic, and now it was rampaging unchecked.

"Has anyone on our side been injured?"

"A person who's friends with the beloved child collapsed!"

"The horse is saying, 'Please save him!'"

Someone who's friends with Lady Nefertima and has a horse emotionally involved in his well-being? It must be Les!

"I sensed a very powerful earth magic spell. I think it was... yup, it was quicksand."

I've heard of an advanced-level earth magic spell capable of turning a large area into quicksand and dragging everything in the vicinity deep underground. Could that be it?

"We've received a message from the Beast Knights Legion! Commander Lestin was dragged into the enemy's magical overload, and it's unknown whether he's dead or alive!"

It seemed the beast knights had used a bird to deliver the message to us. However...

"Everyone focus! We're going to wipe this encampment out."

"But, Director...!"

The agents who'd trained to work with animals under Les also saw him as a beloved mentor. I understood very well their feelings of wanting to run to his rescue.

"That guy isn't going to die so easily, trust me. If you want to do right by him, then focus on the task in front of you!"

I, just as much as anyone, wanted to drop everything and rush to help Les. But I knew he wouldn't want that. We may be in charge of different legions, but leaders' feelings with subordinates who counted on them were the same.

"Right now, our enemies are disorganized and confused. Tell the fortress commander to press forward."

If we had time to argue amongst ourselves, then it would be better spent taking out our enemies so we could rescue Les faster.

With this goal of rescuing a respected and beloved comrade in mind, my subordinates' usual fighting spirit seemed to swell to epic proportions.

The main force also seemed to be assessing the situation and proceeding as I'd hoped because my subordinates reported they'd taken a detour and were making their way here. It was also reported that the area where Les was believed to have collapsed was still impossible to get close to due to the magic's effects.

If I gave the order, Serafi could return the ground to normal easily. However, if I did that, I would exhaust my last bit of power and lose the ability to see and hear Serafi.

Do I choose my partner Serafi or my dear friend Les?

...Sorry, Les.

As the Director of the Intelligence Department and His Majesty's loyal servant, I needed to retain my ability to see and speak with elemental spirits.

🐎🐎🐎

DAWN would be breaking any moment now.

I looked up at the lightening sky and realized the fighting had finally stopped.

We'd captured the enemy leader. Their encampment was full of strangers who were unconfirmed as enemies or allies, and the main force of the royal knighthood was heading straight for them. Realizing they had no hope of winning, the remaining enemies began throwing down their weapons and surrendering.

"Take these two to the fortress," I instructed the knights from the main force as they rushed into the encampment.

In addition to being tied up, the enemy leader and his subordinate's magic was bound. They were dragged off to await their fate in the fortress's dungeon. Of course, the Intelligence Department would take point on their interrogation.

"Beast Knights Legion! We'll take care of things here, so you go search for Les. With the help of your animal partners' keen sense of smell, you should be able to find him quicker than anyone else, right?"

I recalled something Les had told me… Wild bears had an excellent sense of smell, but tracking engaged their primal instincts, and once they found their "prey," they usually ripped it to pieces.

But this was Les, the man who'd poured every ounce of love he possessed into all of the animals under his care. There was no way the wild bears would attack *him*… right?

"Thank you!"

The beast knights didn't waste another minute, turning and running from the encampment to begin their rescue mission.

It's better this way… They have a better chance of finding him faster than I would.

"All right, back to business! We're going to search every last inch of this place for clues!"

First things first, we went through the documents inside the tent and the supplies they'd transported here. In the process, we came across something puzzling.

"Director, look at this."

One of my subordinates pointed to a box that contained several platinum coins from the Linus Empire.

"See if you can find anything else from the Linus Empire."

If it was just the money, that was fine. The Linus Empire was a massive country with a long history. Many people collected money from the Linus Empire rather than that of their own country, reasoning that its value was more stable.

"Director Seerio, we've located the inventory list."

Among the disarray of paperwork, Rinali had found the records of supplies delivered to this encampment. All of the things you might expect for a military campaign were listed: weapons, magical items, medical supplies, and food rations. However, it didn't list the source of any of these goods.

“Was there anything else listing a name?”

“No… Not that we’ve been able to locate so far, at least.”

It couldn’t have been easy gathering such a large amount of supplies. I would go as far as to say it was probably impossible for these items to have been sourced from Icoux or the Alliance of Nations. Meaning there was a high likelihood that enemies had infiltrated The Kingdom of Gaché, the Linus Empire, or Milma.

Either that or the Church of Divine Creation in Farshia might’ve had a hand in it.

Unfortunately, unless we found some kind of concrete evidence, that was all nothing more than conjecture.

We searched every corner of the encampment and turned up a few clues indicating that at least some of the supplies had most likely been sent from the Linus Empire.

One crate believed to contain weapons was marked with the symbol of the Linus Empire’s blacksmiths’ guild.

We also discovered a letter that was unsigned but embossed with the crest of a noble family from the Linus Empire. The wax seal used to close the letter was common, but the paper the letter was written on was watermarked with a distinct design.

“Figure out which noble family uses this crest.”

Let’s head back to the fortress and see what the enemy leader has to say.

After communicating with the main force and confirming they would take care of things here, my subordinates and I returned to the fortress.

“Good job out there today, Seerio.”

The person who came out to greet us as we arrived back at the fortress was none other than the Provincial Lord of the Dierta Province’s son— the Kingdom of Gaché’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Eugene Dierta.

“What are you doing here, Lord Eugene?”

“What do you mean, ‘what am I doing here’? Contrary to appearances, I do take my position as Duke Dierta’s heir seriously, you know? I heard that the fighting had gotten particularly brutal, so I came to check it out.”

To be perfectly honest, I hadn’t expected him to even be in the country. Eugene always seemed to be traveling somewhere or other, so I’d assumed he was probably wandering around Icoux or

the Alliance of Nations as if he was on a leisurely vacation despite being well aware of the danger.

"So, what did you find?"

"...There's no concrete evidence, but it's possible the Linus Empire might secretly be involved," I said, showing him the letter we'd discovered.

Eugene immediately recognized that this was watermarked letterhead because he used a magical item to shine light through it so he could see the design.

"This is..." Eugene seemed surprised by the embossed seal. It appeared he recognized whose mark this was. "This is the crest of Earl Helios of the Linus Empire."

"Helios? I've never heard of them."

"I may be remembering incorrectly, but I believe they preside over a small, mostly rural province close to the border with the Alliance of Nations."

If this information was correct, it meant that Lady Nefertima could be in danger in the Linus Empire at this very moment.

"I will request Gouche to make it an official order as soon as possible, but in the meantime, please get right to work investigating the connection between this incident and Earl Helios. We need to figure this out before anything happens to Duke Osphe's children in the Linus Empire."

Technically, I couldn't obey this order. The Intelligence Department was a part of the Royal Knighthood, and the Royal Knighthood didn't answer to the nobility. The only things we acted on were direct orders from the king and requests from the citizens.

"Please bring me orders from either the king or the general. If not, we will be guilty of treason for what we're about to do."

"Of course. I'll return to the royal palace immediately and request a royal decree."

So it's come to a royal decree, has it? That just goes to show how priceless the beloved child Lady Nefertima is to the royal family.

"Oh, also..." Lord Eugene was just about to turn and walk away when he stopped and called over his shoulder to me. "It seems that Lestin Ogma has somehow survived."

Those words filled me with instant relief. He'd been saved. The beast knights had made it in time.

I wouldn’t learn the true meaning of these words until later.

Side Story: Only He Knows if It Was a Dream or Reality

SINCE turning four, I'd begun my studies and etiquette training in earnest, so the frequency of my visits to the royal palace had decreased. With that in mind, I was determined to enjoy myself to the fullest while exploring the royal palace today.

"Huh? Where am I?"

Unfortunately, I was now hopelessly lost.

I'd turned down the offer of a guide, thinking it would ruin the excitement of being on an adventure.

I'd set out from the south building, so I was pretty sure I must still be somewhere in the south building. I figured that if I kept walking, I'd eventually end up somewhere I recognized, so I decided to keep exploring.

I climbed higher and higher, eagerly examining every inch of what seemed to be a museum displaying exquisite paintings and works of art. I had no idea whether the items on display were valuable or not, but they were certainly interesting.

When the museum came to an end, there was a door, and when I opened it and peeked through, it opened into another long corridor.

I stepped into the corridor, curious about where it might lead, and found doors in front and on both sides of me.

After a moment of indecision, I opened the door on the right, and this time, there were five more doors to choose from.

I opened door after door after door, but each time, I found myself in yet another corridor lined with even more doors.

After what seemed like an eternity of choosing doors at random, I finally realized something wasn't right.

What is this place?



“Oh look, more doors…”

I reached up on my tiptoes to open yet another door, and this time, when I stepped through, I found myself in not another corridor but a room. This was the first time any of the doors had led to an actual room!

Unfortunately, the room was stark and sparsely furnished, containing only a bookshelf, a small writing desk, and a comfortable-looking lounge chair.

The real problem, though, was…

In addition to the door I’d entered, two more doors were in this room—one directly in front of me and one on my right.

Hmm. It seems easiest to go with the door in front of me first.

I opened the door and stepped into yet another hallway. The door on the right was a dead-end, and the door to the left just led to more doors.

Is this some kind of labyrinth?

I opened one of the doors and stepped into a room best described as *untidy*. Books and newspapers were scattered everywhere, and what appeared to be some kind of magic circle was drawn on the top of the desk. There were also several rocks that I thought might be magical stones, as well as a multitude of magical items that I couldn’t even begin to guess their uses.

Hmm, was someone conducting some kind of magical research here?

This room only contained one additional door to the right of where I’d entered. I opened it and stepped into another corridor with two doors at the far end.

This is like the kind of labyrinth mansion you’d find in a video game!

Next was another corridor, followed by another room. This room at least changed things up a bit by containing a large bed. And more doors, of course.

This is getting really annoying…

Should I keep going or return to the first room I discovered and try the door on the right? Turning back now seems more difficult than pressing on, so I’ll keep going!

“Huh?!”

Behind the next door was a person.

I was so startled that I reflexively slammed the door shut.

Oh my God! I thought my heart was going to explode! I wasn't expecting there to be another person in here!

The door I'd closed slowly swung open.

"You surprised me. What is a child doing in a place like this?"

The person who stepped through the door was a handsome young man. He was in fine clothing, so I assumed he was an aristocrat. I couldn't quite place it, but I got the feeling I'd seen him somewhere before. I didn't know what he was doing here, but maybe he'd come to request an audience with the king.

"I was exploring, but it looks like I got a little lost…"

I didn't know who he was, but I would be very grateful if this young man could lead me back to someplace I was familiar with.

"…Only certain people can enter this place. Who exactly are you?"

If it's a matter of authorization, I should be okay since the king gave me an all-access pass to the royal palace… Unless he means there's a spell cast on this section of the palace to keep outsiders from entering? Does the all-access pass from the king somehow have the power to circumvent such spells?

"I am Dayland Osphe's youngest daughter, Nefertima!"

Everyone in the royal palace knew of the Osphe family. With that in mind, I told the man my name, hoping he'd recognize me.

"Osphe, you say?!"

Our family possessed a heavy dose of royal blood, and the Osphe family name was well known as belonging to one of the top ducal houses in the kingdom, but was it really something to be so surprised about?

"In that case, you must know Rhydelt?"

Huh? I'm sure I've heard that name before…

I was searching my memory, trying to figure out where I'd heard of Rhydelt before, and it came to me the moment I turned to look at the young man in front of me again.

At the same time, I realized why he seemed so familiar. He had amethyst eyes, just like someone else I knew…

"Rhydelt was our family's progenitor…"

"Progenitor?"

"That's right, the founder of our family line."

Rhydelt Osphe. As the first prime minister of the Kingdom of Gaché, he'd spent his entire life loyally serving as the former

soldier-turned-first-king Gee's right-hand man.

"I suppose Rhy *was* the first to call himself by the name 'Osphe.' I was the one who gave him that name, you know."

…Huh?! What is he saying?!!

"Could you possibly be… Gee Russ Gaché?"

"Yup, that's me. What of it?"

What is the first king doing here? GOD! You did something weird again, didn't you?!

"Nefertima, you said your name was? In any case, come with me."

While I was still too dumbfounded to respond, Gee scooped me up in his arms without asking permission.

One thing's for sure: he's certainly Will's ancestor.

Gee's room was utilitarian. In other words, it was small and hardly had anything in it. There was a bed, a bedside table, and a bookcase. That was all. I wouldn't go as far as to say it was as small as a walk-in closet, but certainly no bigger than a child's bedroom. If a TV were on the wall, I would've said it looked like a studio apartment.

"So, Nefertima, what is your relation to Rhy?"

I'm not sure whether I should tell him the truth or not…

"Well, the truth is… I'm the daughter of the eleventh-generation patriarch of the Osphe family. I'm pretty sure you and I are from times nearly four ages apart."

Four ages is roughly 400 years, right?

When he heard this, far from being shocked and suspicious, Gee actually seemed to believe what I was saying because he heaved a huge sigh.

"So this is the God of Creation's doing, is it? I suppose that means you're also a beloved child, then?"

"A beloved child?"

"If you don't know what I'm talking about, then don't worry about it."

It's almost impossible to simply "not worry about it" once you've brought the topic up!

Sensing that I was frustrated he wouldn't explain it to me, Gee chuckled and stroked the top of my head.

"In this world, there are many things that you're better off not knowing or that you'll find out naturally when the time is right."

Hmph. So he's saying I don't need to know yet, but I'll find out eventually? That doesn't do anything to alleviate this itching curiosity I'm facing right now, though!

"What should I do if I just can't wait?"

"When you get home, you can ask the fire dragon. You're bonded with the fire dragon of the north, right?" Gee said, gesturing to my bunny backpack.

Oh, that's right. I bet Sol knows what a "beloved child" is!

"Now then, we don't know how long you'll be here, but if you want to do anything while you're here, now's your chance."

If I don't get back to my own time, I won't be able to fulfill my promise to God, so I'd very much like to avoid being stuck here! But while I'm here, there is *one thing I want to do…*

"I want to meet Roy!"

"Roy?"

He's the most legendary beast mount in the history of our country! Not to mention he's a rhinoceros—a species even I haven't been able to pet! The rhinoceroses at the beast stables kept their distance, but if I'm with Roy's master, maybe there's a chance he'll allow me to touch him?

I explained to Gee that in my time, rhinoceroses were a symbol of the Beast Knights Legion and that they were the only animal the legion commander, who I was close friends with, wouldn't allow me to pet.

"I see… So people in your time remember Roy as some kind of amazing beast mount?" Gee seemed happy to hear that. I supposed that made sense. Who wouldn't be happy to hear that everyone loved their partner?

"Okay! Then let's go!"

Gee carried me through the halls towards our destination, and I couldn't help but wonder if this was really the same palace. Everything looked completely different.

"Nefertima, look outside."

Because we were currently on one of the higher levels of the palace, we had a clear view of the city spread out below.

However, this was not the Royal City that I knew.

Even calling it a "town" was generous. It was a lonely cluster of buildings containing hardly any homes.

“All the land around here has been wrung dry of all resources. That’s why most of the citizens have fled to the Linus Empire. A country abandoned by its citizens is doomed to fall to ruin, but I couldn’t just sit by and watch that happen. I couldn’t bear to watch the homeland where I was born and raised disappear forever.”

I got the feeling that Gee had lost something very precious to him. Perhaps he had chosen to fight because he hated to lose anything else.

“Has the fighting ended?” I asked.

“Small clashes are still happening in some areas, but I’m confident those will end soon, too. The Linus Empire have taken it upon themselves to become my rear guard.”

The neighboring country, the Linus Empire, encompassed nearly half the entire landmass of the continent of Larshia. They also possessed an impressive military force capable of keeping order in such a large country. Even at this time, the Linus Empire was undoubtedly a formidable mega-country.

But the Kingdom of Gaché will grow into an impressive country as well, just you wait!

As we walked through the royal palace, I couldn’t help but notice all the differences from my own time.

First things first, those super detailed pillars and the inner courtyard with the hedge maze didn’t exist yet.

There were also *significantly* fewer servants.

It says something that the king himself can stroll around the palace and not encounter a single person!

Apparently, I looked puzzled because Gee answered my unasked question.

“This palace is still in the process of being built. I asked them to focus on making it look nice from the outside first.”

I see, so that’s why it looks impressive from the outside but is bare on the inside? I suppose there’s value in appearing magnificent and intimidating, though. Gee must’ve felt the same if he ordered the palace to be built like this.

“Gee, what are you doing?”

Just when I was about to rejoice that we’d finally encountered another living person, a familiar blizzard-like sensation crept over my body.

I clung to Gee in surprise and a touch of fear, and he pat me on the back reassuringly.

“That’s Rhydelt Osphe.”

I hesitantly took a peek at my ancestor, and he looked just like the portrait that hung on the wall in our house.

He had curlier hair than Papa, and it was a blend of vibrant shades of red and orange, resembling real flames. I assumed fire magic was so prevalent in the Osphe family because Rhydelt was just that strongly affiliated with the element.

And his blizzard-like aura was identical to Papa’s when he was angry.

“Who is that kid? Have you been keeping a secret love child hidden away somewhere?”

I don’t think I look at all like Gee… I mean, technically, we are related by blood, but very, very *distantly…*

“As if I have time to be producing illegitimate children. In fact, she looks remarkably like *you*; are you sure she’s not your offspring?” Gee said this as a teasing jab at his friend, but my ancestor frowned deeply in response.

“Unfortunately, I have my hands so full with taking care of you that I don’t even have time to be introduced to prospective fiancées.”

Gee chuckled. “Heh, sorry about that,” but he didn’t seem concerned that, as a king, he was the one who should be most concerned about producing heirs to carry on his line.

“This girl is a very important guest who the God of Creation arranged for me to meet. She may still be a child, but that’s no reason to show her disrespect.”

“The God of Creation?! Please forgive my rudeness, my lady.”

Please stop! It’s making me extremely uncomfortable to see my venerated ancestor bow his head to me!

And more importantly, why did he accept that explanation without question? Has Gee told him about God’s meddling tendencies?

“Right now, we’re on our way to fulfill my guest’s request to meet with Roy.”

“In that case, shall I have tea waiting for you upon your return?”

“That would be great, thanks.”

The conversation wrapped up quickly, and my ancestor strode off, leaving us to continue in the direction we'd been headed before we were stopped. Before long, we'd left the royal palace entirely.

The area surrounding the royal palace was also completely different from how it looked in my time.

To start with, neither the beast stables nor dragon stables existed yet!

There was only a moderately sized barn to house horses. I presumed it belonged to whatever organization currently existed as a predecessor to the royal guard.

"It seems the world is quite peaceful in your time, Nefertima."

"That's right! Thanks to the hard work of the dragons at the dragon stables, the animals at the beast stables, and all of the members of the royal knighthood!"

The peace enjoyed throughout the Kingdom of Gaché in my time depended in part on the capable governance of the king and his cabinet ministers, but it was the knights who ensured the physical safety of the citizens. Because of all their efforts, the citizens lived peaceful, happy lives.

"In that case, we'll also have to do our best. If not, our descendants will look back at us and laugh."

"What were you doing before you became a knight?" I asked Gee curiously. In my day, the only thing known about Gee's origins was that he was a common knight before he rose to the position of king. Even the information about which country he'd been a knight of during the Age of Turmoil had been lost to time.

"Originally, I was an adventurer. I was an orphan, so I started working as an adventurer pretty much as soon as I was old enough to hold a sword. When the war started, adventurers started getting recruited to fight. The pay was good, so I accepted the offer, but I never got back out once I started down that path."

In short, he started as essentially a temp worker, then became a full-fledged knight in his own right, began making a name for himself with his accomplishments on the battlefield, and before he knew it, he'd ended up becoming king. That probably spoke to just how talented Gee was, but I suspected having God's favor also didn't hurt.

"Look, there's Roy."

A massive animal was mingling with the horses grazing lazily in the pasture.

It's a rhinoceros! But he looks even bigger than the rhinoceroses I saw at the beast stables…

"Roy!" Gee called, and Roy responded immediately, raising his head and lumbering towards us. The way the ground shook as he ran led me to suspect he weighed even more than the dragons at the dragon stables. "This child's name is Nefertima. You should be able to tell whether or not she's a beloved child, right?" Gee said, stroking Roy's armored flank.

As if he understood what Gee was saying, Roy nodded twice.

"Nice to meet you, Roy!"

Gee jerked his head in Roy's direction, indicating that it was okay to pet him, so I timidly reached out my hand and touched him. His skin was lined with deep, almost crevice-like wrinkles that created a bumpy texture as I ran my fingers over his flesh. The outer layer of his skin also seemed to be comprised of hard plates similar to a suit of armor that overlapped at the joints.

On Earth, there were multiple different varieties of rhinoceros, including white rhinoceroses, black rhinoceroses, and Indian rhinoceroses. Although he didn't fit any of these categories exactly, Roy seemed to have the most in common with the Indian rhinoceros.

The different varieties of rhinoceros on Earth had been driven nearly to the brink of extinction by poachers who wanted their horns, but it seemed the same was true of the rhinoceroses in this world.

Looking at Roy's horn, it was indeed thick and magnificent, but to be honest, it wasn't nearly as pretty to look at as the horns of other animals. However, because a rhinoceros's horn could be used to make a cure-all medicine as well as the strongest weapons known to man, and because they symbolized authority and power, rhinoceroses were excessively over-hunted by adventurers hoping to get rich quick.

It was common knowledge on Earth that rhinoceros horns—unlike the horns of other animals made from a bone-like material—were made of keratin, just like hair and nails. I was curious if the same was true of the rhinoceroses here.

"Is it okay to touch your horn?"

Roy slowly lowered his head, which I took to mean he was consenting to my request.

The texture feels different from the horn heads' and land bulls' horns, but Roy's horn feels just as hard as theirs. It's smooth, but it's also dimpled all over…

Looking closely, I could see an extremely detailed pattern engraved in the horn that looked a bit like laser-etched glass.

"It's so strangely wonderful…" The indescribable texture of the horn only added to its mysterious allure.

"The elemental spirits engraved the patterns on rhinoceroses' horns. The pattern is different on every rhinoceros, as well as how much of the horn it covers."

What?! The elemental spirits made this pattern?!

In nature, rhinoceroses lived in a forest called the Dwelling of Elemental Spirits, a place known to be inhabited by a large number of elemental spirits. It was said that was why rhinoceroses could sense elemental spirits and even communicate with them to a certain degree.

That's so cool! The elemental spirits mark the rhinoceroses' horns with their own coat of arms, so to speak, almost like exchanging friendship bracelets or something!

Roy's horn was covered in engravings from base to tip, showing just how many elemental spirits he was friends with.

"You're really amazing, Roy!"

"Would you like to ride on Roy's back and go for a walk around the exterior of the palace?"

"Is it really okay?!" I exclaimed almost before Gee had even finished speaking.

Apparently, my exuberance was more endearing than off-putting because Gee just chuckled and set me on Roy's back. Then Gee climbed up behind me and called out to Roy, "Go slow, okay, buddy?"

I could feel the thump of Roy's heavy footfalls reverberate through my entire body, but it wasn't as jarring as I would've expected. Of course, that would probably change the second Roy started running, but at our current pace, the ride was surprisingly smoother than riding on a horse.

We took a leisurely stroll around the exterior of the royal palace, and as we rode, I told Gee all sorts of things. I told him

about my family, of course, and about the king and Will, too. He seemed surprised to hear that Will was bonded with a holy beast, because he remarked in an awed tone, “One of my descendants, bonded with a holy beast?”

After playing with Roy until I was satisfied, we returned to the palace to have the tea my ancestor had promised to prepare for us. The sweets served with the tea were just ordinary baked goods, but there was something simple and almost nostalgic about the flavor.

“What’s wrong? Are you getting tired?”

I’d cycled through being surprised, nervous, and excited all in such a short span of time, on top of spending what felt like hours wandering through the maze of doors earlier, and now that I was finally sitting and resting, a fierce wave of exhaustion washed over me.

“Nooo… I’m still… fine…”

Despite my attempt to deny it, Gee sat me on his lap and rhythmically patted me on my back as if soothing a baby to sleep.

“Go to sleep. When you wake up, I suspect you’ll find you’ve returned to your own time.” Gee seemed to have a hunch that this was where we parted ways.

“…Thanks for everything, Gee.”

“I’m the one who should be thanking you for giving me a glimpse of the road I must walk. Thank you, Nefertima.”

Gee’s voice faded into the distance, and my eyelids slid shut of their own accord.

🐎🐎🐎

WHEN I opened my eyes, I found myself in a place I recognized.

“Oh, you’re finally awake, Neema?”

The door to the room was open, and Will stood in the doorway, leaning up against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest.

…Only handsome men can get away with that pose, but infuriatingly, Will pulls it off just fine.

As for me, I had apparently been fast asleep curled up against Lars’ fluffy belly.

“Lars found you sleeping on the floor in the south building and brought you here. You really need to think things through more before acting.”

Will was in full-on lecture mode, but I ignored him in favor of wondering how the heck I’d fallen asleep on the floor in the south building.

I could swear I had some kind of dream, but I can’t remember what it was about…

“Thank you, Lars!”

I hugged Lars tightly and thanked him for looking after me, and he licked my cheek in response. Then Lars sniffed my scent inquisitively and rubbed against me. Something seemed to be up with him; he didn’t normally act like this.

“What is it, Lars?” Will asked, also noticing that Lars was behaving unusually.

Lars said something to Will, though it only sounded like *“Growl!”* to me.

Will looked dubious about whatever Lars had told him, and he heaved a long-suffering sigh.

“Neema, what happened in the south building?”

“Um, well… The last thing I remember I was just looking around a bit, but… I wonder why I fell asleep?”

As far as I knew, nothing in particular “happened” other than I’d exhausted myself exploring and fallen asleep in a weird place. I’d fallen asleep at the royal palace several times before after playing a lot, so it wasn’t that unusual. Normally, I’d nap in Will’s room, with Lars in one of his favorite napping spots, or in the grassy field at the dragon stables, but…

Come to think of it, I take naps in a lot of different places, huh?

“You don’t remember anything after that? …Well, I suppose it’s fine, then, but the next time you feel like wandering around the royal palace, you have to promise to bring Lars with you.”

“But…”

I couldn’t make such a blanket promise. After all, *Will* was Lars’ bonded partner. I doubted he’d be thrilled about having to be apart from Will just to satisfy my selfish desires to explore and play.

“We can’t afford to wait to react until after something’s already happened to you. Besides, I can use Lars’ powers even if

we’re apart, so there’s nothing to worry about on my account.”

Oh, don’t be mistaken, I wasn’t the least bit concerned about you*, Will. I was just worried about Lars being unhappy with the arrangement. You, on the other hand, are like a cockroach—nearly impossible to kill!*

“You’re thinking something weird again right now, aren’t you?”

Will pinched my cheeks between his fingers and pulled, distorting my face in a way I was sure looked absolutely hideous. I gasped and demanded to know how he’d known, and Will responded with a chuckle that it was written all over my face.

Grrr, I still have a ways to go before my perfect aristocrat training is complete!



“SHE returned home?”

“Yeah. Thanks to the God of Creation.”

The tiny warmth there just a moment ago was gone now.

But there was no denying that she’d been there, the young beloved child who’d come from a period far, far in the future…

“Why now, of all times?”

The beloved child with blood ties to Rhydelt didn’t share any of his facial features. However, she claimed that his eyes had been passed down among his descendants all the way into her time.

“Because now was when it was needed the most, I imagine.”

Until this point, I’d been running around, throwing myself almost blindly into battle after battle. However, from here on out, I would need to fight for the sake of the citizens who I wanted to entrust me with their hope for a brighter future. Just one decision of mine could change the future of this country.

“It’s about time you found yourself a wife, Rhy.”

Meeting the beloved child who named herself an Osphe made me see Rhydelt in a new light and picture what he would be like with a wife and children. Until now, he’d dedicated himself entirely to following me, so the thought of him marrying hadn’t even crossed my mind. But he *would* marry and have children, and

someday, far in the future, Nefertima would be born from his lineage.

"You're one to talk! When things calm down a bit, we need to find you a wife first."

Maybe I'd been a bit *too* focused on the fight. I'd been consumed with the desire to create a better country where the citizens could live happy, peaceful lives.

The truth was, yes, the country needed to be stable for the citizens to live their lives, but when it came to the happiness of those lives, that was up to each individual to determine for themselves.

Nefertima had seemed happy to me.

Having a family to love and be loved by, play together with, occasionally argue with, and laugh often with…

It was essentially the exact opposite of my childhood. I'd been too busy simply trying to survive to have time to laugh or even cry.

But if I were able to make it so that even one more child could be like Nefertima and be able to laugh freely instead of experiencing the kind of childhood I'd had, it would all be worth it.

It was my duty to create a country where my children, my friends' children, and the children of all my subjects could run around energetically, playing and laughing. That was the road ahead of me, the path I would walk.

"I hope I'll be lucky enough to find a wife who will give me many healthy children."

Perhaps that wish reached the God of Creation's ears because two cycles later, I would marry a beautiful woman, and we would be blessed with four children.

Dear Nefertima,

It's almost time for me to meet with the God of Creation once more.

I'm writing this letter to you in my mother tongue out of a sneaking suspicion that you, too, might be from the same homeland as I. If my guess was amiss, please forgive me. Although, I suppose if I'm mistaken, you won't understand these words anyway…

At the time you read this letter, you may be thinking there's nothing you would love more than to curse the God of Creation's

name. Please do so as much as you like! I've got plenty of complaints saved up myself that I fully intend to air to him when we meet again.

In my previous life, I was unable to protect anything important to me. In the end, I died alone on foreign soil, thinking of the family I'd left behind in my homeland.

That's why, when the flames of war began to rage around my new homeland as well, I was determined not to lose anything else.

And now, here I am.

The Kingdom of Gaché turned out to be a pretty good country if I do say so myself. You might see it as still needing a lot of work, but I've done as much as I can with the time I've been given.

I hope we can meet again someday.

Sincerely,
Gee Russ Gaché
King of the Kingdom of Gaché

Side Story: Let’s Go to the Beach!

TODAY, we were going on an outing. Finally, my heart’s desire would be granted! I’d made a request to the emperor, and after seemingly endless coordination and preparation, finally, we were going!

“You seem really excited, eh, Neema?”

“Well, yeah, it’s the beach! The *beach*!”

That’s right. I told the emperor I wanted to go to the beach in the Linus Empire.

And I had no intention of just sitting on the sand gazing at the ocean, oh no! I wanted to swim! If at all possible, I really, *really* wanted to swim.

Paul and the others had packed for the trip, so all that was left to do was wait for someone to come get us when it was time to leave.

Karna giggled at the sight of me fidgeting excitedly, hardly able to sit still.

Finally, there was a knock on the door, and I followed hot on Paul’s heels as he went to answer it.

Is it someone coming to get us? It has to be, right?

Paul opened the door, and Theo stood out in the hall.

“Neema…”

Why is Theo laughing at me?!

It was rare for Theo to show any kind of emotion on his face, so I must’ve looked especially strange to elicit such a response from him.

“It looks like you’re ready to go.”

“We’re good to go!”

Although I can’t take much credit for that, Paul and the others handled all the preparations.

Theo picked me up, and we all headed to the room containing the teleportation circle, where it turned out the others were all assembled waiting for us.

It wasn’t just us going on this beach trip. No, it was an extremely rare occasion when the entire imperial family would join.

Apparently, after I’d made the initial request to the emperor, Euche had said that he wanted to go, and then Sache started saying that she wanted to go…

As a result, the emperor and former emperor had no choice but to attend, and when the empress and former empress heard about the trip, they thought it sounded interesting, so *they’d* also decided to join—and drag the others along as well.

In summary, because all of the most important people in the country had decided to go on a group beach vacation, a lot of time and effort was required to coordinate a date that worked for everyone’s schedules and attend to the necessary security concerns.

The emperor’s brothers would be joining us as well.

Marie’s father, Towen, was the emperor’s oldest brother and had a very kind-looking face. He was pretty much living proof of the old saying, “You can tell everything you need to know about a person by their face.” His smile was identical to Marie’s. It made me secretly a little happy to see since it was one less way she resembled her mother.

As for Marie’s mother, she’d refused the invitation on the grounds that she wasn’t a member of the imperial family. The emperor had made it clear that she was welcome to join Marie’s father on the trip, but it seemed that she was just using that as an excuse when the real reason she didn’t want to come was because I’d been the one to suggest the trip in the first place.

“Good, everyone’s arrived. Shall we get going, then?”

Everyone stepped into the teleportation circle, and the retired empress came to stand beside me. She clicked her tongue and said petulantly, “Oh, Celly! I’ve been nearly beside myself with excitement. And to think this is our first time going on a trip all together as a family like this!”

Whaaat?! Is it okay for outsiders like Karna and me to intrude on such an epic occasion?!

While I was reeling in shock, the teleportation spell kicked in, and sparkles covered my entire field of view.

Our destination was one of the imperial family's private residences, the Aquamarine Palace.

Immediately upon arrival, we were led to a tastefully decorated room that boasted a stunning ocean view. When I stepped out onto the balcony, the rhythmic sound of the waves and salty ocean breeze greeted me.

There's just something about the smell of the ocean that gets me all riled up with anticipation! I can't wait to go down to the beach!

In the Kingdom of Gaché, it was unheard of for members of the nobility to engage in such an unseemly activity as swimming, but in the Linus Empire, it was perfectly acceptable.

So, they also had swim outfits similar to bathing suits.

However, they were *extremely* ugly.

The female version of this swim outfit consisted of a tight garment similar to a wetsuit with short sleeves and shorts, except that several layers of ruffled sheer fabric hung from the waist. In addition to being simply decorative, these filmy layers of fabric provided ample room for embroidering written magic spells to prevent drowning, so I supposed they did serve a purpose, but…

The swim outfits are still super ugly! If I'd known how drab they looked, I would've designed something and had it custom-made! I suppose there's no point in complaining about it now, though. I'll just have to write to Auntie Olive later and see if together we can come up with something a little better for next time.

I dragged Karna and Paul along and made a beeline for the beach.

Clay had already arrived with Aise and Daux, and together, the brothers were playing in the shallow waves right offshore.

…Why is it that men's swim outfits in this world are ordinary swim trunks?! I mean, they're a bit shorter and tighter than the "loose, above-the-knee shorts" style that are popular on Earth, but that's fine. At least they're not speedos! I might've pulled a muscle laughing if that were the case…

All right! Before swimming, you need to warm up properly!

I sang the familiar tune of the Japanese warm-up exercise routine "radio *taisou*" in my head on repeat as I moved my body along with the lyrics, stretching and dancing to the beat only I could hear.

Even though this song and the accompanying exercise routine were deeply engrained in the subconscious of every Japanese through frequent repetition, without the music playing in the background, I was surprised to find that I *didn't* remember the lyrics as well as I thought I did. I probably got the order wrong a few times, but since no other Japanese were around to know the difference, I figured it was fine.

"...Lady Nefertima, what is the purpose of this strange dance you've suddenly started doing?"

When you put it that way, you make me sound like Gratia! Everybody knows if you don't warm up before swimming, you'll likely get a cramp and drown! This is a very important pre-workout routine, not a silly dance!

"It's important to move your body before you go in the ocean!" I insisted.

Last move—deep breathing!

Phew, I'm done!

With that out of the way, I dashed headlong straight into the ocean.

However, almost as soon as I entered the ocean, the drag of the water rising up around my calves caused my speed to drop drastically. But I didn't let it deter me—I carried on splashing water in all directions as I trudged at top speed through the waves until I got far enough out that I felt the water start to support my body weight. At that point, I bobbed up and down in time with each wave that rolled in.

This strange, weightless feeling is really indescribable!

When the next large wave came, I lifted my feet off the sandy bottom and let it carry me to shore.

Hmm, I wish I had a surfboard or at least a bodyboard right about now...

I wonder if I can get someone to find me something I can use instead? If it's successful, we might even be able to introduce surfing as a tourist attraction in the Shiana Special Region!

I was so deep in thought I didn't notice anyone approaching until with a *SPLASH!* I was plucked out of the water and found myself cradled in a strong pair of arms.

"Are you tired already?"

"Theo..."

It was Theo who'd picked me up.

So Theo's one of those people who look deceptively slender with clothes on, huh?

He wasn't nearly as muscular as Shinki, but Theo was more built than my brother, Ralf.

He seems to be a capable swordsman, so maybe he got this muscle from training? Oh! Speaking of muscular bodies, where is Paul?!

I got Theo to put me down and hurried back to where Karna and the others were waiting on the sand. Karna was wearing the same ugly swim outfit as me, but because the model was so beautiful, it didn't look too bad on her.

It's so unfair!

Shinki and Paul were in swim trunks, but the sight of them side-by-side was really something.

It was like I'd suddenly found myself smack dab in the middle of a bodybuilder competition. Although, rather than the almost artificial perfection of a bodybuilder's sculpted physique, their musculature was a bit rougher, proof that their bodies had been hardened by hours spent fighting, not working out in a gym.

They're both built like an upside-down triangle… Their arms and pecs are massive, and they've both got abs for days, leading down to trim waists… I think many men would kill for bodies like this!



“Wooow, Paul, you look so strong!” I gasped, unable to formulate a less vapid remark in my state of awe.

Paul answered in a dead-serious tone, “I train every day to be able to protect you ladies.”

I poked Paul’s stomach experimentally.

Whoa, it’s rock-hard!

“Lady Neema, please behave in a lady-like manner.”

Who can remember their manners when there’s a real live eight-pack right in front of their face?! There’s no way I could possibly not *touch it! I may never have the chance to touch an eight-pack again in my life! And, as if his sexy physique isn’t enough, each of Paul’s thighs has got to be as thick as my waist! His swim trunks obscured my view, but I can see well enough to hazard a guess that if he were to remove them, it would be* very *impressive indeed.*

Just then, Louis walked over and praised Shinki and Paul’s bodies, saying, “Even as a fellow man, I have to admit that you both have enviably good bodies. What kind of training produces results like that?”

So you say, but your body is a thing of beauty as well, Louis! I suppose this is just proof that he’s been keeping up with his self-defense training as a member of the imperial family.

After this, Louis and Paul launched into a discussion about weight training, going into everything from exercise routines to diet choices. It was like listening to a couple of pro athletes discussing their training regimens.

“You’re all here already! My, you certainly are quick!” the retired empress called out as she arrived on the beach, her husband and the current emperor and empress following behind her.

The servants accompanying them carried a massive umbrella and several lounge chairs, which they quickly set up to create a scene reminiscent of some kind of tropical beach-resort vacation destination. It seemed the current and former emperors and their wives didn’t plan to swim, but they had changed into loose, airy clothing that looked easy to move in.

“Euche! Sache! Let’s play!” I invited.

Kaideetay lay down beside the retired empress without so much as looking at me, which I took to mean he didn’t feel like playing, so I didn’t bother calling out to him.

Before heading back into the water, I couldn't forget to pick up Daux along the way!

Euche and Sache, being affiliated with water, charged ahead, diving eagerly into the ocean. I was curious to see what their bodies would feel like underwater, so once I caught up with them, I reached out to touch one of the blue pegasi's legs… Only to discover that they didn't *have* legs!

I reared back and looked at Sache in shock. She seemed to understand what I was so surprised about because she lifted one of her legs out of the water to show me.

"…When a part of your body is submerged, it melts into the water?"

I suppose it makes sense that since blue pegasi can transport themselves between any body of water, they can melt completely into the water.

Ever since I'd dragged him reluctantly into the water, Daux had been clinging onto me and refusing to let go, but that made it difficult to move and was becoming dangerous, so I really wanted him to back off.

"It's okay, Daux. Euche and Sache are here. There's no way they'll let you drown," I attempted to convince him, but Daux wordlessly shook his head and refused to loosen his grip.

At a loss, I looked to Sache for assistance.

Sache huffed out a puff of air, giving the impression she was sighing, *"Fine, leave it to me."*

I'd barely had time to register the wave before it wrapped itself around Daux's body and picked him up. Kai was also capable of manipulating water to do his bidding, so it went without saying that Sache and Euche could, too.

I watched to see what would become of Daux, and a moment later, the wave deposited him safely atop Euche's back.

Sache glanced over at me, and her eyes seemed to say, *"Next is your turn!"*

Hey, hey! Grabbing me with your teeth and yanking is unnecessarily rough, don't you think?!

With me on Sache's back and Daux on Euche's back, the two set off running out to sea.

That's right, they were running on top of the water.

The feel of the wind and spray on my face was exhilarating.

As we came to a spot where the water was suddenly much darker than before, I felt as if my body was rising up, but it turned out that we were actually rapidly descending.

We're going to crash into the surface of the water! I thought, slamming my eyes shut and bracing myself for the impact. Somewhere off to the side, Daux let out a cry that could've been either a shout of delight or a screech of terror.

The anticipated impact never came, and through my tightly shut eyelids, the light around us seemed to be becoming dimmer. That seemed strange to me, but when I opened my eyes to see what was going on, the entire world was blue.

It took me a minute to realize I was underwater.

It wasn't a colorful underwater scene from some tropical paradise; it was a quiet and peaceful ocean. Fish swam across our path from time to time, but I couldn't identify the species of fish.

Sache dove deeper and deeper.

I looked up, curious to see how deep we'd gotten, when I noticed something. I was pretty sure I was breathing normally, but there was no trail of bubbles floating up towards the surface when I exhaled…

I hadn't bothered worrying about breathing since I was with water holy beasts. But now that I thought about it, I was curious where the air I breathed in was coming from and where the air I breathed out was going.

There wasn't an air bubble around us like that time with Lars. I could feel the water all around us. But I couldn't see the evidence of my breathing.

How mysterious…

I'm kind of disappointed that I can't watch a stream of air bubbles dance up to the surface like with scuba diving.

I'd been so focused on looking up that I didn't notice at first that Sache had stopped moving.

"Neema! Look at that!" Daux's excited voice brought me back to my senses.

I looked in the direction he was pointing and saw a forest. And I'm not talking about "a forest of seaweed."

It was an honest-to-goodness *forest* like you'd find in the mountains somewhere! The trees swayed gently in the current,

and their leaves were a deep green that almost sparkled in the light filtering down from above.

…Or are these leaves actually producing light of their own?

It wasn't the eerie bluish-white light typically produced by photoluminescent deep-sea lifeforms, but a warm, faint green light. And there was a variety of marine life in this area, seemingly drawn by the light. There were fish, some kind of crustacean that looked almost like an insect, and…

Could those things that look like jellyfish actually be slimes?!

And, to top it all off, at that very moment, some kind of massive creature swam slowly by above us.

In terms of Earth animals, that thing has to be around the size of a blue whale!

It was so large that it was impossible to make out what kind of animal it might be.

"Wow! There are so many creatures I've never seen before!"

I told Sache that I wanted to get a bit closer so I could see better, and she obligingly steered us over to float directly above the forest.

Looking down at the underwater forest from above was another surreal experience I'd never had before. There was something almost mystical about the forest that made it seem even more beautiful than a coral reef.

Many fish hiding amongst the trees sported the bright colors and patterns you'd normally associate with tropical fish. They could hide amongst the dense foliage in the forest, whereas they would've stuck out like a sore thumb in any of the other scenery I'd seen so far in this ocean, which was probably why they'd made their home here.

Just then, the massive creature returned for another pass, so I asked Sache to take me closer to it so I could slake my curiosity. Its body was like a mix between a shark and a whale, but its face was truly shocking. A thick and durable shell encased the creature's entire head, which looked like a samurai helmet. The teeth protruding from its huge mouth looked more like planks of wood than teeth. There were sharp-looking, tusk-like protrusions sticking out of the area around the creature's mouth, further adding to the fierce appearance of its face.

I bet that long tail could also be used as a weapon! This guy is definitely a carnivore.

However, the creature didn't so much as look at us; it just kept swimming gracefully on by.

It sure is big, though, huh? It's practically the size of a cruise ship! Oh, I know! It's a living warship!

The creature showed no sign of intending to attack, so I asked Sache to swim up alongside it, and I even jumped on its back at one point, but no matter what I did, the creature didn't even seem to notice we existed.

"...Neema, aren't you scared?"

"Not at all! Isn't it wonderful being able to see unknown creatures up close?!"

I suppose I can only feel this way because I have the assurance of the special ability I received from God, preventing me from being attacked by any living creatures.

If someone ordered me to walk right up to a carnivorous beast on Earth, I'd be plenty afraid then! No matter how tame they may seem, animals were ultimately ruled by their primal instincts and didn't always behave as humans might wish. You might be prepared for the possibility of being squeezed to death by a huge reticulated python, but even a simple housecat could do considerable damage with its claws and teeth if provoked. And if those wounds became infected, they might even prove life-threatening.

But the thing I was most grateful for when it came to the power I'd received from God was that I could get close to animals without causing them distress. That made it possible to observe their natural behavior in the wild, not the way they reacted to the presence of humans.

However, this time, based on the large whale-like creature's complete lack of reaction, I had a sneaking suspicion that Sache and Euche were somehow concealing our presence. Lars and Sol often concealed their presence when I was playing with animals to avoid scaring the life out of the poor creatures, so I knew it was possible.

We left the forest and continued. I left the choice of destination up to Sache.

The ocean floor was made of sand, and there wasn't much to see but small schools of fish for a while until large boulders started appearing with increasing frequency.

But there's something odd about those boulders… They look unusually smooth…

Unable to comprehend what I was seeing, I asked Sache to get a little closer, but she jerked her head to the side in response as if saying, *"Look over there."*

In the direction Sache had indicated, I spotted something that had no business being at the bottom of the ocean.

"Is that a… statue? In the middle of the ocean?" I asked.

"It looks pretty old."

As Daux had said, the presumed statue was cracked in several places and looked seriously worn down. If it was a statue, the preservation spell that had undoubtedly been cast on it when it was made had already long expired.

"Is this supposed to be the Goddess?"

Due to the advanced stage of erosion, it was impossible to make out the facial features or details of the figure's clothing, but it was clear that this was a depiction of a woman with long hair.

The Goddess was a common motif found in all kinds of works of art, so I thought it likely that this might also be a statue of her.

"But the item she's holding isn't right…"

The Goddess was typically depicted as holding "this world" in her right hand and "the world of the dead" in her left hand.

In religious paintings, however, she was sometimes shown interacting with dragons or with her arms outspread, bestowing her blessings upon mankind. Apparently, there were even paintings depicting the Goddess fighting with a sword. Over time, the items the Goddess was shown holding had changed.

As for this statue, it was holding… Or rather, it was lifting a ship above its head.

Even if this statue was created as a sort of good luck charm for safe sea voyages, isn't it a bit weird for her to be holding a ship up like that?

"Sache, can we get a bit closer?"

This time, Sache easily agreed to my request, propelling us right up to the statue.

A large number of fish were gathered around the statue, but something seemed different about the way they moved compared to the fish we'd seen in the underwater forest.

After a moment of close observation, I understood the difference.

The fish were rubbing their bodies up against the statue, after which they nibbled on the surface of the statue, seemingly eating something.

I reached out to touch the surface of the statue, wondering if there was something on there, and found that a fine layer of what appeared to be moss covered it. The "moss" was white, so it was difficult to see against the stone, but I speculated that it was probably some kind of algae. When I experimentally scratched the surface with my nail, a small piece of the moss easily came off.

"Neema?!" Daux squeaked in surprise. "You can't put something like that in your mouth…"

Oh, oops… I unconsciously put the finger with the moss on it in my mouth.

A gritty sensation that confirmed the moss had entered my mouth, but almost immediately, it melted on my tongue. The flavor was faintly sweet, but I wouldn't go so far as to say it tasted good. It kind of reminded me of sucking the nectar out of honeysuckle flowers—faintly sweet but not something you necessarily wanted to keep eating.

According to Koku's analysis of the material I'd unintentionally consumed, it detected something called "harlin sunoko" and "the Goddess's Healing."

"Daux, do you know what 'harlin sunoko' is?" I tried asking Daux about the unfamiliar ingredient, but he'd never heard of it either.

I knew that "the Goddess's Healing" was an ingredient that could heal injuries, but I was really curious now what "harlin sunoko" was.

"More importantly, who put a statue of the Goddess in a place like this?"

He has a point; that's also highly unusual…

While the two of us were commenting on what a mystery it was, we suddenly heard what seemed to be a song coming from

somewhere. It sounded like someone was humming a cheerful tune to themselves.

I looked around and spotted yet another mysterious lifeform.

This creature, which was swishing its long tail leisurely back and forth as it swam, was shaped kind of like a seal.

Is this some kind of fish?

Its tailfins stuck out from the sides of its tail, not the top and bottom. It also had fins on the sides of its chest that were just as long as the tailfins, but they seemed to drag listlessly in the water like the train of a dress. I didn't get the impression the pectoral fins helped the creature swim at all.

Its plump, cylindrical torso was pretty much identical to a seal's, except glowing scales covered it.

And the humming "song" I'd heard seemed its voice.

"It's an astiarna!"

Daux seems to recognize it, but isn't "astiarna" the Larshian word for "legendary songstress?"

There was a famous singer often referred to as "the continent's premier astiarna," but when I'd asked Karna what an "astiarna" was, she'd told me it was a term used to refer to a legendary songstress.

"Astiarna actually means 'God's singer.' This animal was named that because their beautiful voice sounds like a song."

Oh, I see. So, the animal's name was adopted as a euphemism to refer to exceptionally talented singers as well!

"La-la-la!"

Once the astiarna noticed us, it swam in circles around us, continuing to sing.

Then Sache fluttered her wings in time with the astiarna's song. A faint light appeared in a fan shape radiating out from the holy beast's body, and the way it enchantingly flickered each time Sache's wings fluttered was so beautiful it made my breath catch in my throat.

Euche joined in and copied Sache. Between the two of them, the entire vicinity was illuminated with a mesmerizing light show.

The astiarna didn't seem frightened by the light; it just threw itself into its song with renewed vigor.

We spent an immeasurable amount of time like that, enjoying the astiarna's beautiful singing voice. It was like a private concert

just for us.



I wanted to continue exploring the ocean, but regrettably, it was already time to head back. Sache and Euche refused to be moved by my repeated pleas to make a little detour each time I spotted something interesting on the way back.

By the time we made it back to shore, a tantalizing smell greeted us.

"Oh, you're just in time, Neema!"

Karna teased me, saying that my gluttonous stomach had somehow sensed the food was almost ready, but that wasn't the case at all! The emperor had used telepathy to tell Euche to come back because it was time for lunch. The fact that I *did* have a gluttonous stomach was a complete coincidence!

"Lady Nefertima, how was the ocean?" the emperor asked as we gathered around to eat. The food was much too grand a spread to be called a beach barbecue… More like a beach banquet?

"Sache brought us to an underwater forest! It was really beautiful!"

"There were many animals I'd never seen before. I believe I'll look them up in an illustrated encyclopedia later."

Daux continued sharing his impressions of our adventure, but I was stuck on the word "illustrated encyclopedia."

They've got to have at least a small library here, right? And there's probably at least one or two illustrated encyclopedias about marine animals, right?!

"I'll join you! I want to learn more about the animals we saw today, too!"

"What kind of creatures did you see?" the retired empress asked, and I told her about the massive whale-shark creature we'd seen.

"If it's as big as you describe, I bet it was a 'one-gulp.'"

One-gulp? Is that its name?!

I mean, I get why they'd call it that; with how big its mouth is it would only take one gulp to swallow a human whole, but…

They should give it a bit more dignified of a name!

"An orecti, huh? Someone was able to meet a very rare creature. I guess this is also due to your special charm, eh, Neema?"

Hey, hey! What are you saying, Louis?! I know you probably mean it the other way around, but when you put it like that, it sounds like you're saying the one-gulp came to see me because I'm *some kind of rare creature!*

Encountering animals in the wild is entirely up to fate! It certainly isn't proof that I'm a "rare beast," that's for sure!

I puffed my cheeks out indignantly, and Louis apologized with a chuckle.

I don't sense even a drop of sincerity in your apology!

"I'll go get some of your favorite dessert, pechenne. Will you forgive me then?"

Did you say pechenne?!

"...How many pieces?"

"As many as you can eat."

Ho-ho! In that case, I suppose I'll have to forgive you!

"Prince Louivence, please don't give Lady Neema any sweets."

"Why not?!"

I responded to Paul's interference with an entirely unladylike screech of protest. Whether it was because of my poor manners or for some other reason, Paul fixed me with a glare so frigid it hurt.

"Who was it that, just the other day, ate so many sweets that she couldn't eat her dinner, hm?"

...Yes, that was me.

But they were so delicious, I couldn't help myself!

"Heh, it looks like even you are no match for Paul, eh, Neema? But it should be fine if she just has a little bit, right?"

"...Very well. But only one or two pieces."

Paul! That's so stingy! Pechenne are teeny-tiny little bite-sized teacakes!

"Neema, when Paul gets like this, he's not going to back down, so you might as well take what you can get."

If even Karna was taking his side, I supposed I had no choice but to accept the low-ball offer...

But I wasn't content to settle so easily!

“Paul, you said I could have two pieces, right? Speaking hypothetically, what would happen if I miscounted and *accidentally* ate a third piece?”

Eek! Paul’s face right now is terrifying! It’s completely expressionless, which is scarier than any emotion he could possibly show!

“If that were to happen, you would be forbidden to play outside for a while so you could review your mathematics studies.”

Noooo! I let out an anguished wail inside my head.

I was essentially being ordered to choose between sweets and playing outside, but that was an impossible choice for a child!

The correct answer was probably not to choose either, but in this case, being unable to play outside also carried the added stipulation of not being able to interact with all the adorable fluffies who lived outdoors.

That would mean being forbidden from playing with the birds and pottes in the palace’s gardens, the wyverns at their barracks, and even from playing with Sache and the others outside where there was room to run around freely.

If you take away my fluffies, what else do I have left to live for?! Nothing, that’s what!

There was only one thing I could do.

That’s right, I had to follow Paul’s orders…

At a time like this, I wished someone would’ve spoken up in my defense, but no one dared involve themselves in another family’s personal business.

“The Osphe family’s servants are impressive. Normally, a servant wouldn’t dare speak up in a setting such as this among persons of higher rank,” the retired emperor remarked, praising Paul.

“My family has served as the Osphe family’s stewards for generations. My father, the current steward, instructed me that when our masters become a bit too uninhibited, it is our job to rein them in.”

“Too uninhibited, huh? …Louis could use a servant like you.”

Huh? They are *praising Paul right now, right? The Osphe family isn’t being snubbed right to our face, are we?*

“Does Marjace also scold father like this?” I asked.

The way he put it makes it sound like I’m not the only one…

If every generation of the Osphe family constantly had to be scolded by the Dasnees, I wasn't sure if I should laugh at the amusing relationship between our families or cry at the hereditary hopelessness of my family line…

"It's not just His Grace. The previous duke was the same, and I'm sure you can only imagine the mess my ancestor had to clean up when the duke two generations ago abdicated from the royal family…" Paul said.

The retired emperor and empress seemed to have known my great-grandfather personally because their eyes shone with what I thought was sympathy for Paul's ancestor's plight as they nodded and said, "Oh, yes, *that* person was quite something…"

What exactly did my great-grandfather do?!

All I knew about my great-grandfather's scandalous activities was that he'd fallen in love with my great-grandmother, relentlessly pursued her, and eventually won her over. As expected from Papa's grandfather, it seemed he'd been a very headstrong person.

Karna talked about their timeless love story with hearts in her eyes, but personally, I thought that our great-grandmother must've had a hard time dealing with such a strong-willed husband. However, she'd been able to stick it out to the very end, so I was convinced that she, too, had what it took to be a member of the Osphe family.

I'll just have to hope and pray that Ralf and Karna find love in a less explosive manner!

"Well, if you want to discuss *that person,* let's do it later this evening."

Retired emperor, this is the Osphe family's sordid past you're talking about, so please go easy on us! In fact, it's the sordid past of our entire country!

🐎🐎🐎

AFTER lunch, I remember going to the Aquamarine Palace's small library with Daux to research marine animals. But that's where my memories end. I must've exhausted my body's endurance by that point.

I wonder who carried me back to my room after I fell asleep? Maybe Shinki?

The late afternoon sun, its burnished red and orange rays shining through the open window, had already begun to sink below the horizon.

"You played too hard and wore yourself out. After lunch, you and Prince Dauxrouge fell asleep," Karna said as she sat on the edge of my bed and gently stroked the top of my head.

It can't be helped since I'm in the weak little body of a child, but it feels like such a waste to have lost so much precious time to an afternoon nap!

"Here you go." Karna passed me the book I'd been perusing in the library before I fell asleep. "Even in your sleep, you refused to let this go, so they had to bring it back with you," she giggled, seemingly replaying the scene in her head.

"But...!"

I learned a lot of interesting things through my research with Daux.

The statue we'd seen underwater was made a long time ago. As suspected, it had been created as a sort of good luck charm for ocean voyages. The Goddess had been depicted holding up a ship out of the hope that the Goddess would intervene if any ships started to sink and push them back up to the surface.

As for the moss growing on the statue, it turned out "harlin sunoko" was its name, and as I'd suspected, it was a type of algae. The book said it was often used in medicine, with its primary function being purification. It was specifically written that this medicine worked by "expelling impurities from the body," so harlin sunoko was akin to a laxative! I'd carelessly eaten some of it, but thanks to Koku, I'd avoided several unpleasant hours trapped in the bathroom.

I was awake now, so I returned to reading the book, and before I knew it, dinner time had rolled around. I was practically bouncing up and down with excitement to share everything we'd learned today, so I gave an informal presentation during dinner, with Daux as my co-presenter.

The emperor knew of the statue's existence but didn't know that it had become a breeding ground for harlin sunoko and seemed interested in the idea that the statue's location had

become something of an underwater hospital for the animals living in that part of the ocean.

The empress smiled kindly and told us we'd had a rare and precious experience, hearing an astiarna's song in person. The way Daux smiled shyly and invited his mother to join us next time was absolutely adorable.

After dinner, the retired emperor kept his promise and regaled us with tales of my great-grandfather, but…

I found myself speechless at my ancestor's unbelievable wildness.

I kind of wish he hadn't told us!

"I am incredibly grateful not to have been alive during his time," Paul remarked.

I bet! The people who suffered most from great-grandfather's antics were undoubtedly the Dasnees, who had to run around trying to minimize the fall-out!

"Lady Neema, please do your best to live in such a way that there are no stories like this to pass down to future generations about you."

I don't think I could surpass my great-grandfather even if I tried! But I have a feeling the future young ladies of the Osphe family will probably be reprimanded with warnings such as "Don't become a hopeless tomboy like your ancestor Nefertima!"

In the end, the beach trip became a precious memory for me… Aside from the stories about my great-grandfather that I wished I could've wiped from my memory!



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato　Illust Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue　Illust Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken　Illust Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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