
Fluffy-Eared
Realm Restoration
Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother
Author:
Iota Aiue
Illustrator:
Tsukasa Kuga


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Prologue: Crown Princess Lune Renard Is Condemned as a Vixen

“She’s a vixen!”

“That wench is oppressing our people!”

“Execute the criminal!”

“Kill her!!!”

In the public square of the Garland Kingdom’s royal capital, a crowd was roaring. The air was thick with excitement as everyone eagerly awaited the deaths of House Renard.

Someone pulled me along by the rope tied around my waist. I was clad in shabby linen clothing and bound in magical cuffs. The band around my ankle branded me as a criminal who could be given no escape. People used to extol my silver hair for resembling the moonlight, but it had been crudely cut short. The dreadfully strong spring wind tousled the messy strands as though to mock me. My violet eyes, which once had been praised for looking like a pair of amethysts, were soiled with dust and overflowing with tears.

My name was Lune Renard, and I was the crown princess of Garland. However, my kingdom was toppled by a revolution, and I, as a member of the royalty, was to be beheaded for oppressing the people. In bare feet I was forced to climb the steps to the guillotine.

It’s true, I did plead with the crown prince to bolster House Renard. But I had no idea it would cause the people to suffer!

As a child, I had been an orphan living on the northern outskirts of the kingdom in the Renard domain until House Renard—a marquis family—adopted me as their daughter. Then, at the crown prince’s insistence, I was married off to him and became the crown princess. My new station had felt so beyond me—after all, I was a mere orphaned commoner. However, I saw it as a chance to repay my debt to House Renard, so I committed myself to the role.

Since the Garland Kingdom’s founding, House Renard had always loyally served from the shadows. As the most venerable marquisate, its members guarded the kingdom’s remote region

where criminals were exiled to. They received more secret orders from the royals than any other family, which was why they usually kept out of the central politics—though I only discovered that after being condemned.

Yet despite being known as the house of the royal family's loyal retainers, House Renard was impoverished. Just entering the Renard domain meant crossing steep mountains infested with monsters. Worse yet, all the roads connecting it to the capital were too narrow for carriages to pass through. Without ample flatland, business couldn't flourish. The domain had even come to be known as a backwater.

I had curried favor with the crown prince in hopes of getting him to facilitate its enrichment. Because of that, a large road was built leading to the Renard territory in celebration of our marriage. And during the construction, though the workers had to dig through a sacred mountain, they discovered a vein of magical ore inside. Things were finally looking up for the Renards.

But the tide soon turned. Displeased with the royal family's despotism, the commoners revolted. The instigator had been a man known as the "Prince with the Prosthetic Leg." He was the king's illegitimate son, whom everyone had suspected the queen had gotten rid of. But apparently he'd survived, returning as the leader of the revolutionary army. Rumors said that the queen had sent assassins after him since his childhood, so he always wore full-body armor and a basinet when appearing in public. I'd never seen his face.

The revolutionaries had managed to overtake the palace and seize the royals, condemning them to death to set an example. As the crown princess, I too was sent to the guillotine, as were my adoptive father, Marquis Renard, and my brother, Liam.

They're both so incredible... Even now, they hold themselves with dignity.

Members of House Renard were never to let their emotions show, so I couldn't tell what those two truly felt at that moment. I'd always believed they loathed me, so I'd done all I could to be of use to them in hopes of earning their favor.

Marquis Renard had never had any interest in me. He hadn't cared that I didn't want to be married to the crown prince and sent me there as though he were selling me off. As for Liam, who was

five years my senior, he'd scowl anytime I called him my brother. He didn't even look at me, let alone speak with me.

I used to think it was only indifference, but they'd opposed everything I ever wanted to do. They didn't let me enroll in an academy, and I never learned how to use magic despite being the daughter of a noble family. I wasn't allowed to participate in high society, and I'd still been completely ignorant of the world when I became the crown princess. I'd always thought my misfortune was because I, a dim-witted orphan, was a disgrace to House Renard.

Yet in the end, Liam had done everything he could to try and help me flee the kingdom.

We're not even related by blood. He should've just left a fool like me behind…

It was because of his attempt to help me that House Renard was abolished and its domain came under the direct control of the revolutionary army. I'd heard that the heartless mob had gained total control of the territory, and the estate and temple associated with House Renard had already been destroyed.

"Know thy sin," the executioner whispered in my ear with a wicked grin.

"Please! My father and brother are innocent! *I'm* the guilty one!!!" I screamed with all my might, but my voice was drowned out by the cheers of the crowd.

"Lune, you are supposed to be a Renard. Act like one," my father scolded. Even at a time like this, he was so strict with me.

"Marquis Renard! You and your son are found guilty for the crime of falsifying an orphan's identity, passing her off as nobility, and marrying her into the royal family. You are also guilty of attempting to assist her in fleeing the country. Your sentence is death by beheading!"

Two eerie sounds followed one after another. Just like that, my father and brother were decapitated. The Prince with the Prosthetic Leg didn't even flinch at the sight. The only movement was the wind ruffling through the golden hair spilling out of his basinet.

No… They didn't do anything wrong… I'm the only one at fault…

Tears of frustration spilled down my cheeks as I drowned in despair. I glared at the crowd, full of resentment. However, I noticed that some among them were crying—the citizens of House

Renard's domain. Their feudal lord had been branded a criminal; there was no doubt they now faced a bleak future. I was struck with guilt that overpowered my bitterness.

"I'm sorry..." I said to them.

A white cherry petal blew on the breeze and landed on my tear-stained cheek. The cherry flower represented House Renard's domain.

"Crying won't save you now. The people once called you the 'Moonlit Goddess,' but those days are over!" The executioner sneered, gripping me by the hair and placing my head on the guillotine block.

Magic could be used to grant a painless death, yet they'd chosen this barbaric method to make a spectacle of it. The crowd shrieked with glee. They all chanted in unison...

"Kill her!"

"This commoner is found guilty of deceiving the prince and casting the kingdom into ruin. Her punishment is death by beheading!"

Once my charges were read out, the guillotine blade was raised. My vision grew blurry.

I'm so sorry. Father, brother...forgive me. And our people... I just wanted to make things better for you.

In my last moments, I remembered Lord Reineke, the great fox spirit whose temple had brought me to House Renard. As a last resort, I had taken refuge in it after my biological parents had abandoned me. I once again implored the spirit who had saved my life.

Great Lord Reineke, I beg you! If it's possible to go back in time, let me try again! I'll do anything, so please save everyone!

I prayed, gazing up at the azure sky speckled by the fluttering blossoms...and then my breath ceased.

◆◆◆◆

"Ahem. I hereby approve of Lune Renard's second try at life."

I snapped awake to the sound of incomprehensible words. I sat up and glanced around, only to realize I was surrounded by foxes. They came in many colors: black, yellow, red, and green. Their

sizes varied too, and some even had multiple tails. I must've been in the afterlife.

"What's going on?" I asked, my eyes darting about in confusion.

"Ah, Lune Renard. You're awake." A gigantic silver fox addressed me. He was over two meters tall, and his sparkling eyes were the same violet shade as mine. Even more odd than that, he had a faint golden crest upon his forehead in the shape of a grapevine. All that said, he looked a little unwell.

"A fox is talking," I mumbled, dumbfounded.

The silver fox laughed, and with a swish of his fluffy tail, he suddenly transformed. In his place stood a beautiful man with long, straight silver hair and a pair of matching fox ears. He also had the same pale marking of a grapevine on his forehead. However, his clothes were in tatters and he looked haggard.

"I am the great spirit Reineke. I'm the fox who guided you to your adoptive family."

"Great Lord Reineke!" Shocked, I quickly fixed my posture.

"You were convicted as a criminal and executed," he explained.

I shuddered at the terrible recollection. It was enough to raise the hairs on the back of my neck.

"However, you've faced too many misfortunes in your life," he continued. **"Therefore, I have decided to allow you to go back in time and save House Renard. We, the Global Legendary Fox Federation, will permit you to live again."**

"The Global Legendary Fox Federation?" I'd never heard of such a thing before.

"It's an association of mythical foxes who inhabit different places and dimensions."

That still made no sense to me.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Lord Reineke cast me a pitying look. The other foxes were also gazing at me like I was some pitiable child. It made me feel very self-conscious.

"To not even know of *that*? Humans are truly foolish..." The man shrugged before explaining further. **"There are many lands beyond your own kingdom. For example, there are nations to the far east of yours, and worlds even more distant where technology has advanced further."**

I couldn't even imagine the kinds of places he was describing.

"In every one of those worlds, we fox spirits guide you foolish humans with our wisdom. You see, the fox is the most clever being of them all. That's just how it is." Lord Reineke puffed out his chest with pride.

I stared at him, confused. "In that case, why didn't you just save me, Lord Reineke? Surely I don't need to actually do things over."

"You really are a fool. I said we *guide* humans, didn't I?! Spirits can grant human wishes, but we cannot directly change your world to satisfy your desires."

"So that's why you granted my wish of wanting to try again?"

"Indeed. And so you'll be returning to the past."

"Really?!"

"Really. And this time, you must uplift the Renard domain. I hated when those blasted revolutionaries took over! They know not the value of our relics, and they destroyed my shrine in their ignorance!" Lord Reineke snapped with indignation.

"I…get the feeling that *that's* your true motive," I murmured before I could stop myself.

Lord Reineke smirked. **"Surprisingly sharp, aren't you?"**

I pouted at his words.

The fox spirit cleared his throat. With a snap of his fingers, a scroll appeared out of thin air. As he rolled it out, I saw a long list of names written upon it.

"This was a petition signed by the citizens of the Renard territory," Lord Reineke said. **"They appealed for House Renard's sentence to be lessened. Though of course, the revolutionaries simply burned it up."**

"But…anyone who signed a petition like that would be putting themselves in danger…"

"That's right. Even so, they wanted to protect you."

I remembered their tearful faces staring back at me during my execution. I felt so touched.

Suddenly, a small wild grape appeared by Lord Reineke's feet. It shone with a golden light, which was soon absorbed by his forehead. The color of his grapevine crest then grew a little more pronounced.

"See? There are still those who come to my temple, wishing for House Renard's restoration. Not as many as in the old days,

but…” Lord Reineke popped the leftover grape into his mouth. **“Sour, but helpful. This is my first meal in a week. I feel invigorated!”** he said, enjoying the taste.

“In a *week*?!” I asked.

“Oh, you didn’t know? We spirits live off of human faith. The revolutionary army wants to overwrite House Renard’s history and traditions, and so they cruelly destroyed my great temple. If the inhabitants of the domain forget about me, I’ll cease to exist. It’s only a matter of time.”

I looked Lord Reineke over. His tattered clothes and emaciated body must’ve been a reflection of the people’s faith—or lack thereof—at the present moment.

“Aren’t you tired of constantly being downtrodden? Don’t you want to take my hand and do everything over?”

I raised my head. “If I wish for it, I really can have a second chance?”

“Certainly.” Lord Reineke nodded, as did the other foxes gathered around us. It seemed these foxes were all spirits from different worlds. I felt a renewed hope in the way they looked at me with kindness.

With Lord Reineke’s help, things might just work out!

“I may not be able to fix everything, but I’ll do all that I can to protect the citizens! So please lend me your strength, Lord Reineke!” I pleaded on my knees, pressing my hands together.

As soon as the words left my mouth, a golden light emanated from my body. Lord Reineke’s forehead drew it in, and his mark became more colorful again.

“An excellent wish,” he remarked with a satisfied smile. **“Lune, in your second try at life, I will grant you ears that can hear the sacred voices of my people.”** Lord Reineke pressed his forehead to mine. **“With this, the contract is complete.”**

A silver light engulfed me, filling me with warmth. At the same time, Lord Reineke shifted back to his silver fox form.

“I’m worried, so I’ll accompany you. Foxes often travel together with their cubs, after all.” His voice echoed across the realm, mixed with the loud call of a fox.

His words heralding a bright future reassured me. Slowly, I closed my eyes.

Chapter 1: The Fox-Eared Girl Descends

When I awoke, I was sprawled on the floor of Great Lord Reineke's temple. The place was still intact. Just like the spirit had said, I'd returned to a time before the revolutionary army had taken over.

I glanced down, noticing my shoddy skirt. I looked like a dirty town girl. What a nostalgic sight! This was probably right before House Renard adopted me.

I must be eight years old, then—the age I became an orphan.

Monsters prowled the sacred mountains surrounding House Renard's lands, causing disasters and mayhem. In this year I'd returned to, at the coming of spring, more monsters than ever before had appeared alongside the melting snow. Amid the flooding, my family had been attacked by those monsters. My parents had left me behind and fled with my younger brother, but their escape had failed and they were slain.

With no family remaining, I had sneaked into Lord Reineke's temple, stealing a bite of food that had been left as an offering. From the start of spring, when the attack happened, to when House Renard took me in at the end of summer, I had lived in secret at the temple.

Overcome with nostalgia, I gazed at my own hands. They were so small. My fingertips were stained in purple grape juice. When I hurriedly wiped my hands on my skirt, I noticed something I hadn't seen before.

"I... I have a *tail*?!"

A fluffy, white fox tail was protruding from my backside, lifting up my skirt.

"Eek!" I quickly pushed the skirt down. "Wait... No way..." I murmured, hesitantly patting my own head. "Ears! I have fox ears too! Is *this* what Lord Reineke meant when he said he'd give me ears that can hear sacred voices?! Huh?! Does this even follow the laws of nature?! Ah! The mob called me a vixen, and now it's come true!"

In our land, magic could be used to make contracts with spirits.

I thought hearing Lord Reineke's voice was just going to be done with some simple magic. I never imagined I'd end up looking like this! There were animal hybrids in fairy tales, as the incarnations of spirits, but they didn't actually exist.

Making contracts with spirits was also very difficult, and only those who attended magic academies knew how to do it. Contracts with nameless spirits were hard enough—only extremely skilled magicians and saints could do it with those who *did* have a name.

"Either way, I've never heard of anyone making a contract with Great Lord Reineke! What kind of magic do animal spirits even wield?"

Generally speaking, spirits possessed four types of magic: earth, fire, water, and wind. In my previous life, both Marquis Renard and my brother Liam had made contracts with wind spirits. There was also light and dark magic, at least according to legend. One fable said that the Lord of Light had made a contract with the founder of the royal family, and it was taboo to even mention the Lord of Darkness.

"Mind your volume, Lune." Lord Reineke's voice resounded from the fox statue inside the temple.

I looked up to see him emerge from the statue in his fox form and sit down in front of me. He was a bit larger than an average fox, reaching to about the same height as my chest. He had the same grapevine crest on his head, and the purple eyes that matched my own. It was clear that he was no ordinary being.

"Lord Reineke!" I cried out.

"As promised, I came with you," he said, looking very proud of himself. It was so adorable that it made me want to squeeze him.

I couldn't stop myself from asking, "May I pet you?"

Lord Reineke's face hardened at my impudence. *"Well…all right. Do as you like."*

I started petting him, smoothing down the fur on his back and patting his head. I scratched under his chin and thoroughly tousled the fur on his belly. Lord Reineke cooed in satisfaction, showing his tummy.

"Hmm, very good. Yes, that's the spot. Right there. More!" he prompted, enjoying my petting. Lying on his back like that, he didn't look like a lofty spirit in the slightest.

He's like a dog! I thought, getting my fill of petting him as well.

"All right, that's enough. The marquis's son is about to arrive. Pull yourself together," he said after some time, making me snap back to my senses.

"Oh, right! This is where he found me!"

In my past life, House Renard's only son—Liam—had been the one who found me and brought me back to the estate. He was thirteen at the time, and had come to the temple to leave an offering in place of the sickly marquise. House Renard's daughter had passed away three years prior, causing the marquise to fall ill. However, she still held out hope that her daughter would one day reappear.

On the day Liam found me, I had eaten the previous offering as usual. Once I was full, I'd accidentally fallen asleep in the corner of the temple and was discovered. Apparently the color of my eyes and hair were the same as that daughter's. I was the perfect person to console the marquise, so I was adopted into the family.

"B-But if they adopt me again, the Renard domain will face the same misfortune again! It's best if I don't meet them at all!" I exclaimed, getting ready to run outside.

"Hold it! What nonsense!" Lord Reineke protested. *"Do you think you'll be able to protect my temple if the Renards don't take you in?! No. It'll be fine as long as you don't marry that rotten prince!"*

I was suddenly paralyzed. I drifted up into the air, some strange power tightly holding my limbs in place as though I were on a cross.

Huh? What's going on?! I wanted to yell, but no matter how hard I tried, my voice wouldn't come out.

The temple door swung open. A purple-haired boy and a servant stepped in and froze at the sight of me.

"This girl's silver hair and purple eyes are just like my sister's... And she's a hybrid, like those in the legends..." the boy muttered.

Liam!

Only minutes ago, I had seen him be killed because of me. And now here he was as a child. We'd had a strained relationship, but he had tried to save me in the end. My heart ached with a mixture of gratitude, nostalgia, and remorse.

I won't let anyone execute you this time! My eyes welled up with tears. Suddenly, a glowing halo appeared around me. *Huh?! Lord*

Reineke, what are you doing?!

"I'm making this look like a holy event. Humans need a great amount of faith to hear our voices. I have no choice—I'll have to use up all my power to talk to him. It won't recover for a while after this, so prepare yourself," Lord Reineke replied in a serious tone.

I still couldn't speak, and my face was frozen too.

The servant behind Liam dropped his basket out of shock. It was filled with fruit for offering at the temple. Well, seeing a girl float in midair with an extraordinary fox sitting by her feet would certainly be astonishing.

"Heed my words, Liam Renard, heir of House Renard. I am the Great Spirit Reineke." The fox's voice echoed inside the temple.

Liam gasped, then quickly knelt before Lord Reineke. Even at this age he was composed and mature. He didn't panic or make a fuss.

"Ohhh!" the servant choked out, prostrating himself with exaggeration.

"This girl is Lune, and she has made a contract with me. Her silver ears are my ears. They grant her the ability to hear spirits. Her silver tail is my tail. It can point to a destination. I bestowed these gifts upon her in order to save House Renard. Have your family adopt her and raise her courteously as their daughter."

What are you saying?! Please, stop it!

No matter how much I inwardly objected, Lord Reineke ignored me.

Liam remained silent, lowering his head even more.

"As proof, I will give you this sacred cloth." As Lord Reineke spoke, a handkerchief slipped out of my pocket and fell on the ground. The fox spread it open and stepped on it. When he withdrew, a golden paw print was left behind. He picked it up and held it out toward Liam.

Liam reached out both of his hands and accepted it. He gazed intently at the golden mark for a moment, then held the cloth up above his head. Even in this situation, his expression hadn't shifted much.

"The paw print of Lord Reineke... I receive it with gratitude," he said reverently.

A golden light emanated from him and the servant, and Lord Reineke's forehead absorbed it. But it seemed like I was the only person able to see this light. The grapevine crest mark on the fox's head grew more pronounced.

"Ahh, I'm so tired... Unfortunately, this is the best I can do," he complained.

With that, my bindings were undone, the halo disappeared, and I fell onto the ground.

I can't believe this! I did say I wanted to redo things, but I never thought Lord Reineke would make House Renard adopt me as his contractor!

I felt all the blood drain from my face. I looked around and considered making a mad run for it. But there was only one door in the temple.

Should I jump out of the window?

I tried to stand up, but my knees gave out and I stumbled. Perhaps because of the binding, my limbs felt weak.

"Lady Lune!" Liam rushed over to me and steadied me in his arms.

"Bro—" Out of habit, I almost called him my brother, before quickly correcting myself. "Young lord, you'll get dirty!"

I tried to push myself out of his arms, but he gently held on to me.

"You are not dirty, Lady Lune," he responded calmly, burrowing his face in the space between my fox ears. This would've never happened in my past life.

He seems deadpan and nonchalant, but he's definitely sniffing me, isn't he? Ah, right...the members of House Renard do like fluffy things. Liam is no different.

Though the son of House Renard was always expressionless, even *his* cheeks grew a little red when he spotted a horse or a dog.

"Please stop smelling me," I quietly protested, my face flushing with embarrassment.

"My apologies, Lady Lune," Liam said, letting go of me. For some reason, he was blushing a little.

Huh? I didn't know Liam could make that face.

I was surprised by the shift in his usually stoic expression, even if it was subtle. But without his support, I slowly sank down to the floor.

“Lady Lune?” Liam peered down at me.

“M-My legs are weak, and I can’t stand up…”

“Then I will carry you,” he declared without hesitation.

“N-No, I’m fine! Leave me here and I’ll get there myself eventually. I’m heavy, so…”

Come on, just leave already! I want to run away from here!

“I doubt that. But if you’re concerned, I’ll have the servant carry you instead.”

The servant stepped forth with a smile on his face and picked me up.

I’ve been caught…

My face fell. Meanwhile, Lord Reineke looked satisfied that everything was going according to his plan.

“Get ahold of yourself, Lune,” the fox scolded, glaring at me. *“I won’t be able to speak to other humans for some time. Until we can raise everyone’s faith,* you *will be my voice.”*

Liam picked up the fallen basket and placed the offerings on the altar.

“Thank you, Great Lord Reineke. You will both be greeted warmly by our marquisate,” he said, smiling ever so slightly.

The servant and I both gaped at this rare display of emotion. But Liam’s expression quickly shifted back to neutral.

“All right, then. Let’s go back,” he said nonchalantly.

His words stirred my emotions. Ever since I’d been married to the crown prince, I had always wanted to return to House Renard’s estate. I had never wanted to become the crown princess in the first place. The palace was inhabited by evil spirits, and it was far from peaceful. I’d missed my days in the Renard domain. Worse yet, even though I had married the prince for the sake of my domain, that had led to its destruction instead.

I won’t make the same mistake this time.

I’m not going to become the crown princess! And I’ll make sure everyone finds happiness!!!

With renewed resolve, I gazed at Lord Reineke. When our eyes met, I smiled.

“Let us go to our new future,” he said in a voice only I could hear, and cooed in his fox form.

Soon after, we arrived at the Renard estate. As a girl blessed by

the Great Lord Reineke, I was treated as a guest of honor. The maids gave me a warm bath, dressed me in a young noblewoman's long gown, and styled my silver locks into a glistening bob. In no time, I—a poor orphan—was beautifully reborn.

I was currently in the mansion's parlor, waiting to meet the marquis and marquise. Lord Reineke had been given a fluffy pillow and was happily relaxing on top of it. I glanced at my own reflection in the glass window and tried to move my fox ears.

Aww...

They were my own ears, but I still couldn't help but find them cute. As soon as I thought that, my ears perked up and my tail stood at attention, as though they were linked to my emotions. I tried to move my tail to test things out, but it mostly moved on its own, much more freely than normal for a dog or fox. It was almost as if it had a spirit of its own.

I twisted around to look at my bottom. The long dress was lifted awkwardly around that area because of my tail.

That really takes away most of its charm... And it's so hard to move my tail!

In line with my dissatisfied thoughts, the tail drooped down dejectedly. Fascinating how full of emotion it was.

Liam entered the parlor while I was surveying my new body.

"Is everything all right?" he asked, glancing down at my behind. He must've noticed the odd shape of my dress.

How embarrassing!

I reflexively put my hands on my butt to hide it.

"Sorry..." Liam muttered, looking aside with a blank expression.

I hastily replied, "No, it's okay! I guess the skirt looks weird all bunched up like that."

"Is it uncomfortable?"

"Well...yes," I admitted. "It feels a bit cramped because of my tail."

"Then we'll arrange to make you a skirt that can let your tail out."

His unexpected idea made me happy. I raised my head to look at him.

"Is there anything else you'd like to mention?" he asked.

I paused to think.

It might be impudent of me to ask for anything…

Liam noticed that I was hesitant to respond. “You can be honest. I’m sure you must feel uncomfortable in this strange new place.”

His earnest words convinced me to make my request.

“Well, I’m not used to these beautiful long dresses. Would it be possible for me to have something shorter, like the ones the town girls wear?”

“Is that all? No problem. We’ll call for the tailor later,” Liam said, readily agreeing. He then sat down on a chair and patted his lap. “Come sit over here, Lady Lune.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “Over where?”

One of the maids suddenly picked me up and placed me on Liam’s lap.

“Huh?!” I squeaked in surprise. The maids all giggled at me. “Young lord!”

“What is it?”

“Why am I in your lap?!”

“You’re too small to reach the table otherwise.” Liam spoke as if the answer should’ve been obvious, but somehow I felt like he was doting on me.

“I guess so, but…”

This was all so different from my previous life that I couldn’t hide how bewildered I was. Back then, it had felt like there was a wall between me and my taciturn, expressionless brother. I was convinced that he hated me. But in this life, he was treating me with exceptional kindness. He seemed particularly fond of my fox ears, and he was currently petting them with complete nonchalance.

That’s right, he likes fluffy things… I thought, enjoying the sensation.

When I glanced at the confectionery arranged on the table, my belly cried out. Before coming to the marquisate, I would often go hungry. Embarrassed, I hung my head down, flushing red all the way to my ears.

“Help yourself, Lady Lune,” Liam encouraged me.

“I couldn’t… The marquis hasn’t even arrived yet.”

I was hungry, but I forced myself to look away from the sweets and endure it. I didn’t want the family’s first impression of me to

be that I was ill-mannered. But now that I thought back on it, in my previous life, even though I had voraciously devoured the food they gave me, nobody blamed me for it. I hadn't realized it at the time, but the people of House Renard were generous. Now that I'd received education as the crown princess, I knew how to appreciate that.

Liam chuckled quietly as he watched me pointedly ignore the confectionary. That rare smile of his made my heart tighten for a moment. He picked up one of the cookies and brought it over to my mouth.

"Pardon me, Lady Lune, but please say 'aaah.'"

His soft voice combined with the sweet scent of the cookie made me almost open my mouth, but I quickly shook my head.

"If you won't eat, I can't eat either," Liam said with a troubled look on his face, pressing the cookie against my lips.

Isn't this a bit too much?! I thought, but once it was clear that he wouldn't give up, I opened my mouth.



The flavor of the cookie, which I hadn't tasted in so long, spread inside my mouth.

"So yummy!!!"

It was a hard, rustic-style cookie baked with acorn flour, and the people of the royal palace would've laughed it off as despicable. Compared to the capital, the Renard domain was impoverished. Sugar and butter were considered luxury goods, so they weren't used much even by House Renard itself.

Yet right now, I found this simple cookie tremendously tasty. A mix of nostalgia and joy struck me, and my eyes welled up with tears. Liam wiped away my tears with his finger, looking a little surprised.

"Is it really *that* tasty? Well, enjoy as many of them as you like."

I nodded, and Liam turned to one of the maids.

"Bring the cookie platter here," he ordered. "And get some for Lord Reineke as well."

Shortly after, the maid brought the plate and placed it on my knees. Another plate of cookies was put before Lord Reineke. A golden glow emanated from it, which the fox absorbed.

"Let's eat together," Liam said quietly, taking one of the cookies from the platter for himself. "It *is* tasty, isn't it?"

"Yes! Super tasty!"

Now that I'd had one, I couldn't stop myself. As tears fell down my face, I hungrily stuffed my cheeks with cookies. I demolished them in no time at all. Meanwhile, Liam continued petting my head. It felt heavenly.

Soon enough, my tummy was full, and I felt nice and warm in Liam's lap. I started to become sleepy.

No... I can't fall asleep...

While I swayed slightly, trying to stop my head from drooping, a couple entered the parlor. The sharp-featured man with the same purple hair and eyes as Liam was Marquis Renard. The silver-haired woman lingering behind him was the marquise. She was petite and delicate, with kind, light-blue eyes. The woman was frail from her illness, looking like she might fade away to nothing at any second.

I hurriedly put the cookie platter on the table, jumped off of Liam's lap, and curtsied. The couple, Liam, and the maids all stared at me as I performed the proper greeting despite being a poor

orphan.

"Humph!" Marquis Renard's intense gaze bore into me. His expression was stiff. Just like in my past life, it seemed like the marquis didn't think highly of me. This was exactly why I'd tried so hard to win his favor back then.

But the reason he adopted me was—

My thoughts were interrupted by the marquise, who suddenly rushed over and hugged me. I felt all the air drain out of my lungs.

"Lulu! You came back! Lulu!!!" she cried. Lulu was the name of the marquise's dead daughter.

My heart clenched with pain. This had happened in my past life too. The marquise called me "Lulu" because she thought I looked like her daughter. The marquis reluctantly brought me in as his foster daughter because she had developed an almost pathological attachment to me. I'd been desperate to not be abandoned again, so I'd styled my hair into pigtails like Lady Lulu had and did my best to behave like I was really her. But by doing that, I felt like all of the marquise's love wasn't actually aimed at me. I'd believed that if I tried my best and became useful to the family, they would one day love the real me. Yet in the end, the reverse happened, and House Renard fell into misfortune.

"Mother, this isn't Lulu. Lady Lune has fox ears and a tail," Liam said calmly.

The marquise's grip on me loosened, and she carefully looked me over.

She might be disheartened if she realizes I'm not her daughter...

I trembled and held on to my fox ears, which had drooped down to the sides. The woman stared at me for a few seconds, and tears brimmed her eyes. She must have been thinking about Lady Lulu.

"You're right..." she mumbled. "It's not her. Lulu is... Th-That's right... Lulu's dead... I don't want to believe it, but..."

The woman burst into tears, and the marquis wrapped his arm around her shoulders. Even now, he was expressionless.

"My son told me everything," the man said to me. "I understand that you have a contract with the Great Lord Reineke, and that he wishes for us to raise you as our daughter."

He was speaking politely to me precisely because I had a contract with a spirit. In this land, magic was necessary to create

such contracts, so anyone who could was worthy of respect. Not to mention, I was an orphan who could never have learned such things at an academy. It seemed the marquis saw this as proof that I had a special talent when it came to magic. All the more so because my contract was not with some nameless spirit but the Great Lord Reineke himself—the very spirit who guided House Renard.

However, the marquis's expression was cold. It was obvious he was only doing this out of obligation.

The marquise gasped upon hearing his words.

"That's right! I'm sure Lord Reineke sent this girl to us in place of our late daughter! That's why her hair and eyes are the same as Lulu's!"

I shook my head firmly. "I'm just a simple orphan! You don't need to treat me like your daughter! I'd be happy to stay here as a maid instead!" I insisted.

If they adopt me, the marquisate might reach the same terrible fate as before!

"Simple orphans don't have fox ears or tails. And I cannot ignore Lord Reineke's words," the marquis asserted.

I fell silent. He had a point. If I resisted, I'd be going against Lord Reineke's plan. My ears drooped to the sides and my tail hid between my legs. The fluffy sensation of it against my inner thighs gave me an idea.

"But with these ears and this tail, surely nobody will believe that I'm your daughter!" I exclaimed with a wild huff.

"True," the marquis admitted, placing a hand against his chin. "You are the contractor of the Great Lord Reineke, who guided my ancestors in founding House Renard. It was foolish of me to think it suitable for you to merely be our daughter. Forgive me. Please, use us as your servants." He lowered his head before me.

I quickly waved my hands in rejection. I didn't want them to worship me like a spirit, and there was no way I'd treat the marquis like some sort of servant. Compared to that, even being adopted into the family was the better option.

"Please stop, my lord! I myself am not a spirit! I'm just an orphan. I can't possibly think of you as my servant!"

"Lady Lune, are you displeased with House Renard? Your wish is our command, so please... I beg of you..." the marquise addressed

me with tearful, imploring eyes.

"I… I'm not displeased!"

"Then why are you rejecting us?" she asked in turn.

I knew I couldn't just flat-out deny them any longer. In my past life, the marquise really had cared for me as though I were her daughter. Besides, I couldn't bear to trample on the hope of someone who was sickly and dying.

I looked over at Lord Reineke. The faith of all of House Renard was turning into a golden light, steadily gathering around him. He stared back at me with an amused smirk, as though to say that resistance was pointless.

"Ughhh…" I sighed, resigning myself to my fate. "I cannot think of you as my servants, so…please take me on as your daughter," I murmured.

"Then let's become a happy family!" the marquise said.

I responded with a tense smile. Still, I'd rather be treated as their daughter than worshipped. *Lord Reineke did say that even if House Renard adopts me, it'll be fine as long as I don't become the crown princess! This time around, I'll rely on the wisdom of the spirits to improve the domain so I won't have to be used as collateral! And I have fox ears now, so I can't accidentally marry a human being!*

Having reconsidered my stance, I addressed the marquis. "My lord! If we're to be a family, please stop referring to me as 'Lady' Lune. And you don't have to speak to me so formally."

"I couldn't—you are Lord Reineke's contractor. If anything, I humbly request that you do not refer to *me* so formally," he replied with a serious expression.

However, I couldn't back down here.

"Can I call you…'father'?" I asked, tilting my head.

The marquis frowned. The same thing had happened in the past. He'd adopted me for the sake of the marquise, but he never wanted a poor orphan for a daughter. After his wife had passed, the marquis treated me harshly. But now that I was here at Lord Reineke's behest, he surely couldn't refuse me.

This time, I'll do what I can to get him to like me, so that he won't sell me off!

I tried to smile sweetly, like I had when I was the crown princess.

The marquis reluctantly nodded. "Very well."

“Will you call me ‘mother’?” the marquise asked as she looked at me, holding back tears.

“Yes, mother,” I replied.

The woman broke down crying and embraced me again.

“Lulu—no. May I call you Lune?”

“Of course, mother,” I said, causing her to hug me even tighter.

It had been a long time since I’d felt the warmth of her embrace, and it filled me with nostalgia. I wrapped my arms around her back. As I did, Liam patted my head again. Still in the marquise’s embrace, I turned my face to look at him.

“Brother?” I called out.

He nodded, though he was expressionless as always.

I wonder if he’s embarrassed to have an orphan for a sister... I thought, my fox ears drooping in dejection.

“I hope we get along well, Lune,” Liam said gently. His expression hadn’t shifted, but his voice was full of affection.

Oh? Maybe he doesn’t hate me after all!

“Okay!” I replied. My tail swayed happily beneath my dress.

And so, I became House Renard’s adopted daughter. My new mother and brother couldn’t get enough of doting on me. Liam even ordered a custom-made dress for me, with a special skirt that let my tail poke out. I had told him that I wasn’t fond of those long aristocratic gowns, so this one was shorter like what the commoner girls wore. But the design was still extravagant and adorable.

Whenever my mother and brother spoiled me, my father would give us a cold glare. That was one thing that hadn’t changed from my previous incarnation.

I hope I’ll get along with him one day too, I wished. A flame of ambition was kindled within me.

The days passed by peacefully, but there was something I needed to do in order to fix everything this time around: cure my mother’s illness. Her biological daughter had passed away three years ago, causing her own body and mind to fall into a poor condition. In my previous life, two years after the Renards adopted me, she succumbed to constrictive roundworm disease, an illness that had no cure until eight years later.

I want her to survive until she can be cured!

I was determined to prevent my mother's condition from deteriorating further.

The disease was caused by the constrictive roundworm, a parasitic monster that infected vulnerable minds. The worms were nocturnal, giving their host nightmares to wear them down even more. As a result, their victims were trapped in a vicious cycle of insomnia and fatigue, their strength and vitality decaying as they were too exhausted to exercise or even move about. And as they progressively lost their appetite, they eventually passed away from emaciation.

My mother's last moments had been terribly sad. In her final year, she couldn't leave her room at all and was unable to distinguish me from Lady Lulu. My father and brother couldn't bear the pitiful sight of her, and so rarely visited her room while making me look after her. At last, she passed away while calling out to me—to "Lulu." My whole body slumped at the memory.

I shook my head to clear my mind. I couldn't just wallow in misery forever.

The point is, I need to make her exercise during the day and get enough sleep at night! Even if there's no cure yet, I should be able to slow the progress of her illness. She has to make it through the next ten years until the remedy is found!

With that goal in mind, I began sleeping next to my mother and bringing her outside with me to build up her stamina.

It would be incredible if I could find the cure myself. But developing medicine requires water magic, advanced skills, and expert knowledge. It's not possible for me right now.

I asked Lord Reineke about how the medicine was made, but it wasn't something I could do by myself.

I've heard that a person can only make a contract with one spirit at a time. I already have a contract with Lord Reineke, so I can't make another one with a water spirit. In that case, I'll never be able to use water magic at all.

Since this was a matter of life and death, I even considered searching for a medicine specialist who could wield water magic.

Lord Reineke told me that the cure was made from the sentiment flower, so I could at least try to leave those near my mother. It wouldn't be the same as a real cure, but it'd be worth it if it had even a little effect.

The sentiment flower was a plain kind of flower that only grew in the Renard domain, seen as nothing more than a weed at this point in time. However, the component extracted from its bud would become the medicine for the roundworm disease.

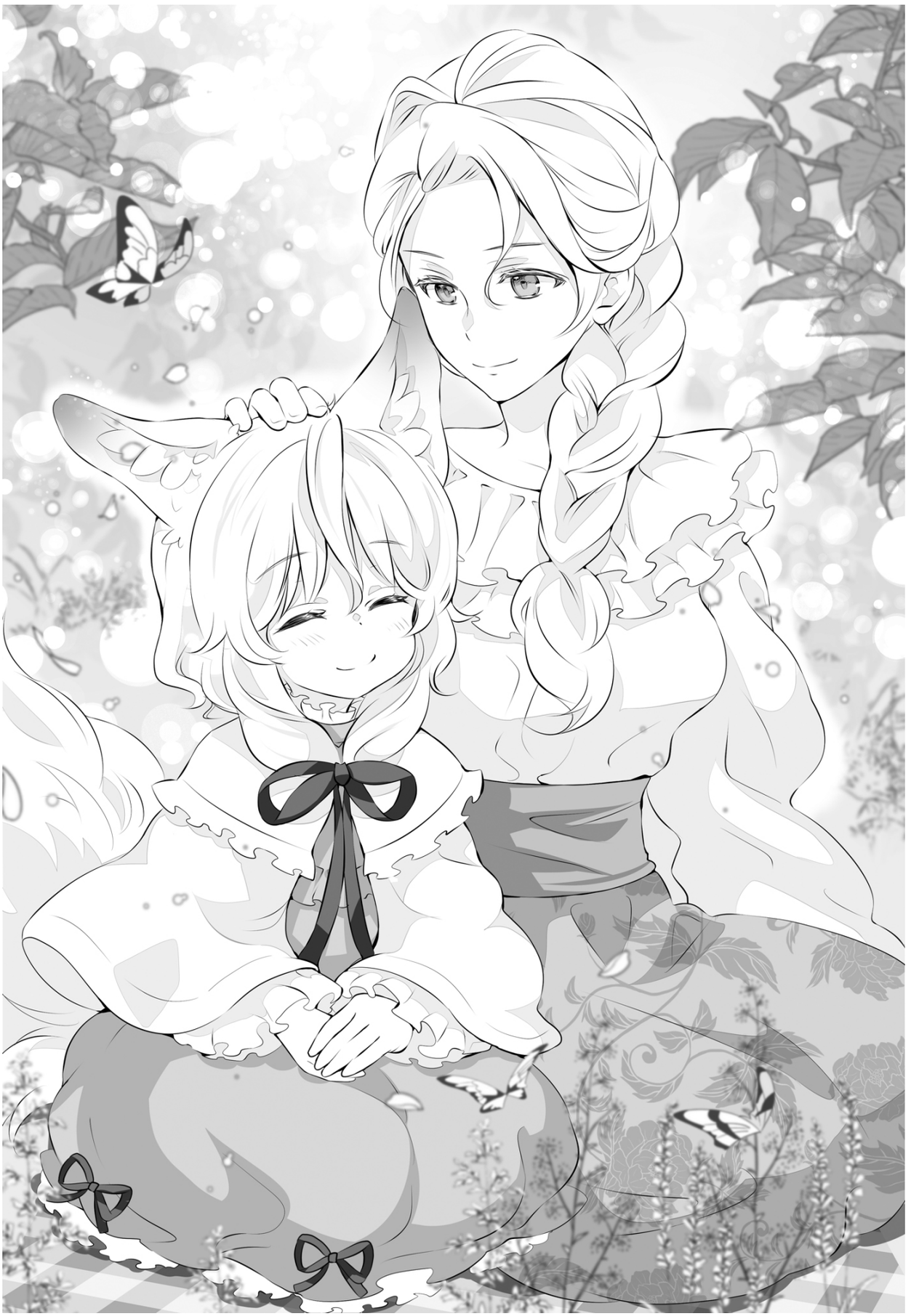
So Lord Reineke found where the sentiment flowers bloomed and brought their buds to me. I started leaving them beneath my mother's pillow every night.

I was having a picnic out in the gardens with my mother and brother. Lord Reineke was asleep on the blanket. Because mother didn't have much energy, we couldn't go very far.

"Mother, have you been sleeping better lately?" Liam asked.

The woman smiled softly.

"Yes, I have. Lune said that being in a big bed all by herself gets lonely, so we've been sleeping together. I feel at ease when she's next to me," she said, patting my head.



If I had to guess, it was actually the flower buds that were helping her sleep.

"Even when I'm shaken awake by a bad dream, feeling Lune's fluffy tail resting on my belly calms me down right away. Before, those dreams just upset me. But I've come to realize that they're my precious memories of Lulu."

I was glad to hear that. If she could fall back asleep despite her nightmares, then she should have more stamina than in my previous incarnation.

"I've always slept by myself, so I'm really happy I get to sleep with you now!" I said with sincerity, and my mother happily stroked my fox ears.

Liam watched us in silence. Mother noticed and smiled at him.

"Would you like to join us sometime?" she asked.

"Mother! Do you think I'm still a baby? I'm already thirteen!" he said.

"You mean you're *only* thirteen," she corrected, giggling at his uncharacteristic blush.

Liam pouted. "You're being mean. Don't tease me..."

I gave him a warm smile. In the past, he had always avoided mother because of her poor mental condition. But he was here now.

I turned to mother. "I'm sure your nightmares will go away if you exercise more! How about learning horseback riding?"

"But I'm not good at exercising," she said with a frown.

"I see... If only there were a way for people who don't like exercise to stay active..." I muttered.

Suddenly, Lord Reineke opened his eyes and raised his head.

"There is a way."

"Huh?"

The surprise must've shown on my face, because the other two were staring at me.

"What's wrong, Lune?" Liam asked.

"I heard Lord Reineke speak just now," I said. They exchanged a look and fell into silence. Perhaps they wanted to give me space to listen to Lord Reineke.

"My fellow fox god, Dakini, can teach you yoga."

"Huh? Dakini? Yoga?" I repeated, confused.

At that moment, the translucent figure of a beautiful woman

appeared before me. However, no one else seemed to be able to see her. She looked glamorous, with dark brown skin and curly black hair that went all the way down to her waist. I'd never seen anyone clad in as little fabric as her; it seemed like she was only wearing undergarments. Her form was bewitching, and I stared at her with admiration.

As soon as our eyes met, this Lady Dakini smiled.

"Lend me your body," she said.

She possessed me, and my body started moving on its own.

"I am the Great Lady Dakini," she spoke through my mouth. **"At the Great Lord Reineke's request, I will teach you the secret art of yoga."**

The words came spilling out of me on their own. The voice wasn't mine either, but the lustrous voice of a grown woman. Unlike Lord Reineke, who had exhausted his powers, Lady Dakini had accumulated enough faith that she could speak to humans directly. Not only that, she had full control of my body.

Wait, Lady Dakini is possessing me right now?! Is this what the magic of fox spirits can do?!

Through my body, Lady Dakini sat down with her legs crossed and began breathing deeply.

Stop it! This pose is so embarrassing!

I tried to protest at this ridiculous position, but I couldn't speak. My mother and brother couldn't hide their shock, bewildered to see me do something so unladylike. The maids and guard knights also looked at me with dismay.

"Do as I do. Ease your breathing and calm your heart. Through this, you will restore your health," Dakini instructed solemnly.

My mother took a deep breath, having made up her mind.

"As you wish, Great Lady," she said and, despite the flush in her cheeks, sat down cross-legged on the blanket.

"Then I will join as well," Liam said, doing the same. His expression remained blank, but he was blushing too. With me and mother sitting so immodestly, he probably had no idea where to look.

This is all so strange, but instead of rejecting it, he's going along with it. He's so kind! I thought, moved by the scene. *He really isn't great at expressing his emotions, though.*

We hadn't understood each other in my previous life—I felt like that was another reason why things had ended so poorly for us. I was determined to convey my emotions to him properly this time and avoid misunderstandings.

"Brother...I love you." I didn't think that the words would come out while I was still possessed, but I'd managed to push through with sheer willpower.

Upon hearing my voice, Liam huffed and looked away.

In contrast to my mother and brother, who were cooperating, the maids were kicking up a fuss.

"Your Ladyship! You mustn't sit like that!"

"It's all right," mother said. "These are the great spirit's instructions. I'm sure this will improve my health. I'd lost the will to live when Lulu passed away, but I've regained it." She looked at me and Liam. "I have to stop living in the past. I want to see where these two will go, so I must take care of myself as best I can. There's no point in letting a little bit of embarrassment stop me."

At mother's assertion, the maids' eyes welled with tears.

"That's wonderful, Your Ladyship!"

"You're right! We should all look after our health!"

"We'll join you!"

The maids sat down cross-legged on the grass, and the knights spread out their cloaks in a circle around us to prevent anyone from seeing us.

Lady Dakini looked around and nodded. **"Let us begin. First, mind your breathing. When you breathe, you take in the life energy of the world. Take a deep breath through your nose and let the air fill you all the way to your abdomen. Then breathe out and feel your abdomen deflating."**

Each time Lady Dakini breathed in and out, I felt my body's stomach rise and fall, and a warm sensation filled the center of my body.

"Once your breathing is even, relax your body."

Lady Dakini began rotating her wrists, then her shoulders, neck, and all the way down to her ankles. I could feel my body unwinding.

"Now, the cat pose."

With outstretched fingers, she placed her hands on the ground and got on all fours, her wrists aligned with her shoulders and her

knees a hip-width apart. Balancing on her toes, she took a deep breath and curled her back like a cat.

“Spread your shoulder blades as if you are trying to look at your navel. Then curve your spine while breathing in.”

At her instructions, everyone curved their spine a few times in a row. Lady Dakini then taught everyone some other poses as well. The whole time, I felt my body warming up and relaxing.

It’s like I can feel the power of nature filling up my body! It feels so good!

“These are the basics of yoga. Practice whenever you can without overworking yourself,” Lady Dakini said.

And with that, she left my body. The sudden loss caused me to collapse on the spot.

“Lady Dakini, you could’ve warned me…” I mumbled as I returned to reality.

“Lune? That’s you, right? Are you okay?” mother asked.

“I’m fine. What about you, mother?”

“I’m perfectly fine as well! The poses were a bit embarrassing, but I feel refreshed!” she replied, wiping her forehead with a handkerchief. Then, she giggled. “But you really are different from Lulu. She never would’ve done anything like that.”

Her words warmed my heart.

In the past, she only saw me as a substitute for Lady Lulu. But now she sees me for who I am!

This alone was a spark of hope for me.

“I thought I could feel the natural mana entering my body when I did those breathing exercises,” Liam remarked.

Mana was a supernatural force that filled the world. Having good control of it was essential to making spirit contracts or using magic. And if you could draw on more mana, you could make contracts with higher-ranking spirits and use greater magic.

“I feel like my senses are sharper than usual,” I said. I’d gained a heightened sense of smell and hearing ever since I made a contract with Lord Reineke, but they felt even more sensitive.

“They are. And telepathy with you is easier right now as well. This is good—practice yoga daily,” Lord Reineke ordered. Lady Dakini smiled in satisfaction.

“The wind’s grown chilly and we’re covered in sweat. We should get back inside,” Liam said.

Mother and I nodded in agreement. He took her right hand, and I her left.

It's like she's truly my mother... I thought, looking up at her as my chest tightened.

Perhaps feeling the same way as me, mother met my eyes. We gave each other slightly bashful smiles.

I'm so happy. I wish this could go on forever...

We began walking back to the mansion. Thanks to yoga, my heightened senses could pick out the lively song of the trees. My tail swished happily from side to side. I hummed to myself as I walked and listened to the birds flapping their wings.

Once mother was back in her room, Liam walked with me to mine. We usually went our separate ways in front of the door, but today he was acting a bit different. He didn't seem to want to leave, but he wasn't saying anything either.

"If you have time...could we maybe talk in my room?" I asked.

"All right, if that's what you want," he replied flatly.

It was a luxurious room, completely unsuited for an orphan like me. In fact, it was a lot more opulent than the room I'd had in my previous life. The Renards were treating me with more care than before.

Liam sat down on the sofa and silently spread his arms, signaling for me to sit on his lap. I ran up to him, and he picked me up and set me down on his knees. He then began expertly petting my tail. The pampering had begun.

It feels so nice!

"Mmm..." Without thinking, I let out a weird noise. I quickly covered my mouth, but I still couldn't stop the sounds from coming out. "Ngh..."

"You don't need to hold back, Lune. It's just you and me here," Liam said.

"Haah... It feels good..." I mumbled, and Liam quietly chuckled. "Hey, don't laugh at me."

"Sorry. You're just too cute."

"Ah?!"

My eyes darted about in a daze. This was the first time he'd ever called me *cute*. With his cheeks a bit flushed, he hugged me tightly, resting his chin in the space between my fox ears. I

pressed my face against his chest.

He…has a slightly stronger scent than usual. Is it because we did yoga earlier? Wait…does that mean I *smell?!*

"L-Liam! I'm all sweaty and dirty…"

"Wait. Stay like this for now. If I see your face, I won't be able to say it."

I fell silent at his response. I could feel his heart rapidly thumping.

Oh no! If I can feel his heartbeat, that means he'll be able to hear mine too!

My eyes grew watery from the embarrassment, but I stayed still. After all, Liam, who was so clumsy with words, was trying to tell me something.

"Thank you, Lune," he said quietly. "Mother's been doing better ever since you came. Before, whenever she looked at me, her eyes were only filled with sadness." His voice grew dark and somber. "I'm sure she thought of Lulu every time, and it only made her hurt more. She often sighed at the sight of me, disappointed that I wasn't my sister. She was so busy looking for Lulu that she spared no thoughts for me. All she ever said was that she wanted to die and be with Lulu."

He sounded so lonely.

So it was hard for him too. Mother only longed for her dead daughter, and so she didn't pay any attention to her living son. How sad…

I rubbed his back to comfort him.

"I wondered why I had been the one to survive. I started thinking that *I* should've died instead of Lulu. I'm sure mother didn't intend to blame me, but…I still felt like it was my fault. That's why I started going to the temple in her stead, praying with all my might. Mother's wish for Lulu to come back became mine as well. But I was at my limit. If things kept going the way they had…I think I would've broken completely."

Liam held me even tighter.

"That's when you appeared, Lune. I'm sorry, but…I thought that if you took Lulu's place, I would finally be freed from her ghost."

You don't need to apologize. I was grateful just to be alive, even as someone's replacement.

"But today, mother said that she doesn't want to live in the past

anymore—that she wants to see where *we* go. And she said that, knowing that you're not Lulu. She's finally thinking of the future. It's all thanks to you, Lune."

As his voice began to shake, I wrapped my arms around him.

"No, it's all thanks to *you*, brother. I only got to meet mother because you found me. And I think she was glad that you joined us for yoga. It gave her courage to keep going in a world without Lady Lulu."

Liam pressed his face between my fox ears. They felt wet from his tears.

He's crying…

I sniffled as well.

"I would've been happy enough with just a warm meal," I said. "Instead, you're looking after me so much… Thank you."

Liam shook his head and inhaled deeply.

Ah, he's sniffing me again! No! I might smell bad today!

I shook my head as well. When I did, one of my fox ears brushed against Liam's lips.

"Oh no, I'm sorry! You might get fur in your mouth!" I exclaimed. I pressed my ears down with my hands and glanced up at him.

Liam was bright red, covering his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Wait… Lune? You didn't mind that?"

"Hmm? No…" I tilted my head in confusion.

Liam let out a breath.

"All right, then. Good," he said with a giggle. His tears had all but vanished.

He's suddenly a lot more expressive… But I like him this way!

"It's better this way, Liam."

"What do you mean?"

"You're smiling right now, even though your face is usually so stiff," I said, poking his cheek.

His cheeks grew even more red, and he chuckled awkwardly.

"The Renards shouldn't show their emotions because we never know where an enemy might be hiding. As the heir of the family, that lesson was pounded into my head."

I nodded. "That's why father is like that too, right? But I think it's fine to show your emotions in front of your family."

Liam smiled, though it looked a little sad.

“Mother has always been prone to illness, so I haven’t been able to speak openly with her much. I…don’t think I know what being a part of a normal family is like.”

“Liam…”

It hurt to see him look so lonely, and I had no idea what to say. But I knew how he felt. My parents had only loved my younger brother, so I had spent my whole life trying to read how they felt and have them not hate me. I couldn’t even be affectionate with my own family, and I definitely couldn’t speak my mind in front of them.

“But I managed to tell *you* all of that, Lune. I know I can truly smile for you,” Liam confessed.

My heart skipped a beat.

“For me?” I inquired, my tail wagging.

“Yes. You’re special. So just be yourself with me too.”

“Okay!” I replied, hugging him. Ever since my parents had abandoned me, I had always wanted to be special to someone. “I love you, brother!”

When he heard that, I got to see him smile again.

Chapter 2: The Little Sinner

Practicing yoga outside on sunny days became our routine. One day, when we had finished, our group—me, Liam, mother, Lord Reineke, and the maids—began heading back to the mansion when I suddenly sensed a disturbing aura emanating from deep within the woods. I looked at the trees, which were dyed an autumnal red. Thanks to yoga, my body was brimming with mana and my heightened senses picked out something I would've normally missed. When I sniffed the air, mixed among the scent of nature was a chilling smell like rusted iron.

That smell...it's blood!

I began looking around and moving my fox ears, trying to pick out any sounds. I heard a very faint groan in the distance, one that definitely didn't sound like an animal.

Someone's hurt!

"What's going on?" I muttered.

"So you noticed," Lord Reineke replied, his voice stiff. *"The sign of light..."*

"What?"

I had no idea what he meant by that. But the fox didn't answer. He—and spirits in general—were capricious like that.

"What's wrong, Lune?" mother called out to me.

I quickly put on a smile.

Mother's mind and body are still in poor condition. If she were to see a wounded person, she might faint!

"Um, I just caught the glimpse of a rabbit! I'm gonna go chase it!"

"A rabbit?" she repeated, confused.

"Uh... It's my fox instinct to go after it!" I blurted out, frantically trying to come up with an excuse.

My mother nodded. "I suppose it's something we wouldn't understand."

"Th-That's right." The guilt was eating me up, but I forced myself to keep smiling.

"I'll go with you, Lune," Liam said, causing mother to frown with

unease.

I looked between her and the maids.

“Liam, Mother’s going to be worried if both of us leave her side. You should make sure she gets back to her room safely,” I said, winking at him.

Reluctantly, he nodded. He knew that I was lying but chose to let it go. I was glad that he’d become much more expressive with me lately.

“Well, off I go!” I waved at the group and headed into the forest.

◆◆◆◆

My body’s felt lighter ever since I got these fox ears from Lord Reineke, I thought while darting through the woods and easily leaping over tree roots. The branches seemed to avoid me on their own as I raced forward. Lord Reineke ran alongside me, looking more carefree than usual. In no time at all, the two of us had reached a very deep part of the forest.

It feels like I’m in my own garden! It’s so nice!

The oak trees were covered in ivy, and hanging from them were purple fruit with creepy, gaping maws. They almost looked like monsters.

“Those are akebia fruit. They’re edible.”

“Really? Wow! You’re like a walking encyclopedia, Lord Reineke.”

“I know almost everything about this whole nation, including these woods, of course. Look—those orange flowers are called fox’s razor, also known as orange surprise lilies. And those yellow ones are fox peonies, or ranunculus silerifolius. They’re poisonous, so watch out. Ah, I know—pick that mugwort over here.”

I looked down at the plant he was leading me to. The leaves were still a vivid green, with white hairs growing on the underside of them.

“Rubbing mugwort on a wound stops the bleeding.”

“You’re incredible, Lord Reineke,” I said in admiration.

“Indeed I am,” he replied with a haughty smirk. *“Now come this way, Lune.”*

I hurried after him, my fox ears twitching. We noisily pushed through the greenery, the rusty tinge in the air growing thicker as we searched for its source.

“This place is dirty and polluted. I do not wish to be here. Fox brethren, give Lune what she needs,” Lord Reineke ordered before promptly vanishing behind the trees.

“Lord Reineke?!” I called out, but he didn’t respond.

Instead, another fox appeared in front of me, carrying a large fruit resembling a cucumber in its mouth. It bumped its head against my leg. Other animals like squirrels and rabbits gathered around me as well, guiding me toward my destination. I followed them for a while, until I came across a boy lying on the ground.

The boy was slender and had blond hair. Despite how gaunt he looked, he was still beautiful. He was dressed nicely for a commoner, but not as gaudily as an aristocrat.

That bright blond hair…it’s rare even among royalty.

For a moment, I remembered my husband from my previous life. Garland’s royal family line had inherited blond hair for generations. However, not even the crown prince had hair as brilliant as this boy’s. Not only that, the boy also had an iron band around his ankle, signifying that he was a criminal. These were only used on people who committed political crimes. That same band had been clasped around my own ankle before my execution.

The Renard domain was in the north of the Garland Kingdom, seated in a basin surrounded by tall mountains with very little flatland. Access to this region was so limited that the domain was often considered a remote area. That was why it had also become a place of exile for nobles who committed crimes. They were affixed with magic bands and put to labor in a monastery on the outskirts of the domain. The people of the capital feared being thrown into this “mountain pit.” For aristocrats used to a luxurious lifestyle, living in the remote countryside alone was punishment enough.

Did one of his parents commit a crime? There’s no way a boy this young could be a criminal himself.

I looked at the boy with pity. Children were sometimes jointly accused of their family’s sins. The same thing had happened to my father and brother in my past life, even though they hadn’t done anything.

Rage began to boil up from within me.

I can’t abandon him here just because he’s the child of a criminal!

“Are you okay?!” I called out.

The moment I did, the boy pointed a tree branch at me. He was covered in cold sweat and gasping for air. However, his sharp, golden eyes were burning brightly as he glared at me. It was obvious he couldn’t defend himself, yet he still tried to appear menacing. It was pitiful. The animals were spooked and hid behind me.

“We have to get the band off or your leg will rot!”

“Rot?!” the boy repeated in shock. His face paled as he looked down at his legs.

A purple liquid was bubbling from the band around his ankle. The band was enchanted with magic to prevent escape: If the prisoner tried running away, a small needle would shoot out on the inside of the band. It would only cause a scratch, but the needle was laced with poison which would seep into the wound, rotting the muscles and preventing the person from moving. If the afflicted flesh wasn’t removed, the victim was doomed to die.

I reached out my hand to the boy. “Come on! Quickly!”

But he brandished the branch at me again.

“Stay back! I won’t let you trick me!”

“But you’ll really die! Haven’t you heard that escaped prisoners turn into trees?”

He shuddered at my words.

“I have…but that’s just an empty threat! Isn’t it?”

“No! You’ll rot away and sink into the earth, and then a tree will sprout in that spot with your band around it. You’ve never seen one?”

Such trees were marked along roads, referred to by the names and titles engraved upon their bands. For example, my band had said “Lune Renard the Vixen.” Even after death, criminals continued to be punished and made examples of until the trees themselves withered away. The only way to be freed from the band was to finish one’s sentence in the monastery or die from illness there.

“So those trees are actually…” the boy muttered, fear in his eyes. He must’ve seen them too. Hesitance mixed in with his wariness.

I raised both my hands.

“Look, see? I won’t do anything.”

Yet he shook his head.

“Just leave me be!”

“But you’ll die!”

“I’m better off dead anyway!” he roared.

“What are you talking about?!”

“My mom died because of me! She was killed protecting me. And the soldiers escorting me to the monastery were attacked just now! I managed to get away, but I’m sure they all died!”

“Why were you sent to the monastery? Did your mom do something bad?”

The boy gritted his teeth.

“No!!! We just wanted to live in peace! But suddenly some government officials showed up and tried to take me away. My mom begged them to spare my life. They said they would if I went to the monastery without resisting. But in the end, they killed her anyway.” The boy paused and squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then lifted his head. “We didn’t do anything wrong. We were just living a normal life. But if that alone is enough to get me sent to the monastery, then my birth itself must be a crime! I should’ve never been born! There’s no point in me staying alive!” he screamed with tears in his eyes, wildly swinging the tree branch.

His birth is a crime? How absurd! He didn’t do anything wrong!

My chest seized with pain—I could relate to him. As a child, I had been abandoned during a monster attack. I’d begged my father for help as the monsters rushed toward me. But he only grabbed my younger brother and left me behind. My father had sometimes abused me verbally for not looking like him, or my mother for giving birth to me.

During the attack, my father had said I’d just get in the way, a useless mouth to feed. My mother had quietly apologized before running away with him. Yet instead of going after me, the monsters had chased and killed them. After witnessing that, I’d frantically run off.

I now got to enjoy a life of comfort with the Renards, but I had often wished I’d never been born.

“That’s not true! Don’t see your birth as a crime!!!” I yelled, as if trying to convince myself as well.

The boy froze and trembled in surprise.

“My parents both abandoned me,” I told him. “They left me behind in front of a horde of monsters.”

He gulped, giving me an intense stare.

“But your mother *protected* you! She wanted you to live, even at the cost of her own life!”

His breath hitched, his golden eyes clouding over with uncertainty.

“She…wanted me to live?”

“Yes! Wouldn’t she be sad to hear you say you wish you hadn’t been born?”

The forest fell into silence. I was fuming with anger.

“I was thrown away. My parents didn’t want me. *I’m* the one who should’ve never been born!”

If I’d never been born, House Renard wouldn’t have adopted me, and they wouldn’t have been executed. If the Renard domain hadn’t been taken over by the revolutionary army, Lord Reineke’s temple wouldn’t have been ransacked. Disaster had befallen everyone because of me.

All of it…everything is my fault!

My emotions burst forth like a breaking dam, and my eyes brimmed with tears. The thoughts I had tried to repress swirled out of control.

“If only it weren’t for me! If only I had died!!!” I howled—but then I gasped with realization. The fox was staring at me fearfully. “That’s right… If I die…”

The prince wouldn’t fall in love with me at first sight, and the marquis and Liam wouldn’t die. The Renard domain and Lord Reineke’s temple would be able to remain as they were. The new life that Lord Reineke had wished for had already begun. If I were to die now, he could make a contract with someone smarter than me, and everyone would have a happy ending.

Lord Reineke’s contractor doesn’t have to be me. Really, Liam should be the one…

“Right…” I murmured.

But suddenly, the blond boy tossed away his tree branch and, dragging one leg behind him, approached me and hugged me.

“Don’t say stupid stuff!”

“But your mother loved you…” I said, sniffling into his small chest. “She loved you enough to give her life for you! And you

think you have no reason to live? Well, my parents abandoned me! I have even less reason to live than you! Nobody loves me!" I sobbed, tears spilling down my cheeks.

That kind of love was something I'd never have. My biological father had only loved my younger brother and shunned me for not resembling him. My mother and brother had kept a distance from me in order to avoid incurring father's wrath. I didn't want to cause them any trouble, so I couldn't be affectionate with them either. House Renard treated me kindly, but in my previous life, they'd only seen me as a replacement for Lady Lulu. They were only nice to me now because I had a contract with the Great Lord Reineke.

My parents, who should've loved me unconditionally, had abandoned me. Who else could ever love someone like me?

The image of a smiling Liam drifted into my mind. My brother was the only person who I felt I could be close with.

He told me to be myself in front of him, and I'm really happy about that…but he's only nice to me because I look like Lady Lulu and have a contract with Lord Reineke. That's all there is to it.

My thoughts caused my heart to throb with pain.

"Sorry! It's all my fault! Don't cry, okay? I'll stop saying I want to die, so you stop it too!" the boy said, vigorously petting my head. It was rough and clumsy, but his warm hand felt pleasant.

The forest animals stepped closer too, nuzzling against me.

"Really? You'll stop?"

"Yeah. So you have to as well. And stop saying nobody loves you. You can't be sure about that. And if not now, then someday you might meet someone who will love you, right?"

I sniffled. My face was wet with tears and snot. As an act of revenge, I rubbed my face against the boy's chest to clean it away.

"Wha— Hey!!! Don't get your snot on me!"

I giggled. "Sorry. I'll tend to your wound to make up for it, so will you forgive me?"

I tilted my head to the side and made my fox ears twitch. The boy scowled, his cheeks flushing as he was momentarily stumped.

"Fine," he said eventually. "Does a kid like you even know how to do that, though?"

I ignored his question as I stepped out of his arms. When I did, the fox dropped the cucumber-like fruit in front of me. It split in

two, and the fox nudged it closer. The fruit had absorbed a lot of water like a sponge. When I pinched it, clear water seeped out.

"I can clear away the blood with this," I said.

The boy's eyes lit up with a sparkle.

"Are you a forest fairy?"

My eyes widened and I blushed.

"No, no! I'm... Well, a lot happened, and I was given fox ears and a tail by the Great Lord Reineke," I explained, wagging my tail and twitching my ears. "Despite how I look, I'm just a normal human! If I were a fairy, my parents wouldn't have thrown me away, right?"

The boy looked away awkwardly.

"Sorry," he mumbled. He must've thought I'd been abandoned by my parents *because* I looked like this.

"Don't worry about it. Thanks to my appearance, I found a new family! And I like my ears and tail! Aren't they cute?" I asked, grinning.

The boy gasped in surprise.

"Well, yeah, but should you really be saying that yourself?" he laughed. At his core, he was a kind child.

"All right, show me your leg."

At my urging, the boy tentatively lifted his leg with the bloody band. When I reached out to touch it, I noticed an eight-digit dial —inputting the correct sequence of numbers would release the lock.

"Ugh..." The boy winced in pain.

"Lord Reineke! Lord Reineke!!!" I cried out. "Can you hear me? Please, help us!"

"Don't summon me to such a filthy place!" Lord Reineke growled as he stepped out from between the trees. He trotted up to me and hid his face under my arm, breathing deeply against me to avoid the polluted air.

The boy's eyes widened at the sudden appearance of a silver fox.

"I'm sorry, but I need to open this lock. Can you do it?" I asked Lord Reineke.

"Humph! This is nothing! Garland Kingdom's ciphers cannot stop me," Lord Reineke said with a sneer.

The dial began turning all on its own, and soon there was a click as the lock came undone. When the band fell off, its needle

retracted as well.

“Now clean his leg with the fruit juice and suck out the poison. As long as it doesn’t enter his system, it won’t take effect. And remember to rub the mugwort onto the wound. Got all that? I’m leaving!”

Despite his huffiness, Lord Reineke had given me proper instructions before disappearing into the woods again.

He acts like he doesn’t care, but he’s actually good at taking care of others, I thought, smiling.

I did as he’d instructed. I wrung out the juice of the cucumber-like fruit and washed the boy’s leg with it. Then, pressing my mouth to the wound, I sucked out the poison and spat it out onto the ground.

“Wait, stop! You might get poisoned yourself!” he protested, trying to pull his leg away. But it must’ve gone numb, as he struggled to move it at all.

“I’ll be fine!” I said.

Once all the poison was out, I sanitized the wound with the fruit juice again. Then I crushed the mugwort and rubbed the paste onto the boy’s leg. Using my handkerchief as a makeshift bandage, I wrapped the wound.

“May it heal quickly,” I prayed, causing the handkerchief to glow for a moment.

I turned my attention back to the ankle band itself, cleaning it with the fruit juice as well. However, it didn’t have any name engraved on it.

I’ve never seen a band without a name. What’s going on? Without a name, he wouldn’t be made an example of if he were to die. Did his captors never intend to kill him in the first place?

I tilted my head in confusion as I turned back to the boy.

“What’s your name?”

He clammed up and looked away from me. But after a moment, he made up his mind.

“My name’s Baldr.”

“Baldr? That’s a good name. I’m Lune.”

“Thank you for saving me, Lune,” Baldr said. His gaze was hardened; there was experience beyond his years reflected in those eyes. “But you should forget about me. You might be killed if anyone finds out you got involved with me.”

“Do you have any place to go?”

He shook his head, then smiled in a way that neither denied nor affirmed anything.

“I’ll be fine. I’ll look for a job!” he claimed, putting on a brave face. He then began limping away.

However, Baldr didn’t look like an ordinary town boy. He was beautiful, with golden hair and eyes. He stood out too much; he was sure to be recaptured if he showed his face in public again. Even so, I had no way of protecting him. If I tried to ask my father to protect him, he wouldn’t give me the time of day.

But maybe if Baldr at least dressed like a servant, he might stick out a bit less.

“Wait!” I called out, causing the boy to look back at me. “If you go out into town looking like that, you’ll just get caught again! At least change your clothes.”

“But I—”

“I’ll bring you the clothes and a hat!”

“I have no money.”

“Then you can pay me back with your body once you’re older!”

Baldr flushed and covered himself with his arms. “With my body?” he echoed, bewildered.

Did I say something weird?

“Wh-What exactly are you talking about?” he asked.

“Once you’re an adult, I’d like you to lend your help to the Renard domain. If we face some kind of disaster or just need an extra pair of hands, you can assist us!”

Baldr stared at me blankly, then let out a huff of laughter.

“Oh, *that’s* what you meant. Right.”

“Are you against the idea?”

“Well, you’re assuming I’ll actually reach adulthood.”

“Huh? Isn’t that obvious?”

Baldr burst into laughter.

“Is it? Well, all right. Then I guess I *have* to!” he declared.

“Okay, then wait here a bit. I’ll be back with everything.”

“Right.”

“Don’t go anywhere, no matter what! And you guys,” I said, addressing the animals around us, “watch over Baldr and make sure he stays here.”

They all cried out in agreement.

“I won’t run,” Baldr said, chuckling.

With that, I raced back to the mansion. Halfway there, Lord Reineke joined me. I found a manservant and asked him to secretly sell me some hand-me-down children's clothing. I paid with the money my mother had given me as an allowance.

An idea suddenly occurred to me as I was stuffing everything into a bag.

"A hat won't be enough to hide his hair. If only we could change its color," I said, but our country didn't have such technology.

"That is possible," Lord Reineke told me.

"It is?"

"Dakini says she wants to talk to you. So annoying... Even the other fox spirits are making a racket about wanting to teach you things! To think they like you *better than* me*..."* Lord Reineke grumbled under his breath.

"I shall grant you wisdom." Lady Dakini's voice rang in my ears. *"Use henna powder to change the boy's hair from blond to orange."*

"Henna flour? Where can I get that?"

"A medicine warehouse. It's usually stored as an ingredient for medicine."

At her instruction, I went to a medicine warehouse and had them put some henna flour into a container for me. After Lady Dakini taught me how to use it, I made my way back to Baldr.

I found him hiding under the shade of a massive oak tree.

"Here you go," I said, handing him the bag of clothes.

"Thanks."

"I also brought something to dye your hair with."

"You'll need hot water," Lady Dakini told me.

"Let me help," said yet another voice. This one sounded graceful and tender.

"Kuzunoha, is that you?" Lady Dakini asked.

It seemed this new spirit was someone named Kuzunoha.

"Guide these children to a hot spring," Lady Kuzunoha ordered.

The fox from before perked up at her words and started leading the way through the woods. Baldr and I followed it while carrying the bag and the leg band, until we came to a running river. The fox chirped while pointing toward a steamy hollow by the riverbank. When I put my hand inside the hollow, I felt hot water. The fox wagged its tail in satisfaction at the shocked look on my face.

"Do as I taught you. Good luck," said Lady Dakini, her presence

vanishing with Lady Kuzunoha's.

I put some of the hot water into the container with the henna flour, dissolving it.

"Rub this sludge on your hair and wait for a bit. That should do the trick," I instructed Baldr.

"Ew..." He grimaced. "Well, if it's to save my life..."

After steeling himself, he smeared the henna onto his head. As we waited for the dye to take effect, we chatted about all kinds of things. Lord Reineke and the other small forest animals took a dip in the hollow's warm water and dozed off.

"That should be enough time," Baldr said after an hour had passed.

He took off his jacket and plunged into the river. It seemed his wound didn't hurt anymore, thanks to Lord Reineke's power, and he didn't mind that his bandage was getting all wet. Water splashed everywhere, irritating Lord Reineke.

"Oooh! It feels great! Jump on in, Lune! The water's nice and warm!" Baldr said, laughing without a care in the world.

His hair had become orange. Water droplets slid off his locks, shimmering like prisms. For a moment, I was taken by how well-built he was at his age.

"Wh-What?" he asked suddenly, pouting.

"I was just admiring how muscular you are."

"It's because I did manual labor."

"Cool!" I said.

Baldr grinned. "Right? You can touch them if you like!"

With a friendly smile, he stepped out of the water and took my hand, pulling me closer.

"Ah!" I let out a scream.

Suddenly, a rush of wind swept across my face. A sword cut through the air, its tip pointed right at Baldr's head.

"Whoa!" he choked out, instantly releasing me and leaning back away from the sword.

I felt a powerful bloodlust behind me. I slowly turned around, only to see Liam standing there, deadpan as usual as he pointed his sword at Baldr.



Liam?! Why is he here? The Renards may do secret operations for the royal family, but how did he slip by even Lord Reineke?!

I was so startled that I couldn't say a word.

"Don't you dare lay a hand on my sister," Liam threatened coldly, pressing the tip of his sword against Baldr's throat. He looked ready to cut open Baldr's pale neck at a moment's notice.

"Stop, Liam!!! This isn't what you think!" I exclaimed, clinging to my adoptive brother's waist.

"Then what is it?"

"He was just showing me his muscles because I hadn't seen anything like it before!"

"Is that so? You can do that with *me* all you like. Mine are better anyway," Liam replied, still deadly serious.

Huh? What is he talking about in such a tense situation?

At first, I was stunned into silence, but then I quickly shook my head.

"Okay, just put your sword away! I'll take a good look at your muscles later."

That sounded a bit weird when I said it out loud, but I pretended not to notice.

Liam nodded, appeased, and lowered his sword. Baldr just stood there, petrified with shock.

"Who is this brat, anyway?" Liam asked sharply, glaring at the other boy. Perhaps because Baldr was a commoner, Liam was sparing him no courtesy.

I showed Liam the ankle band and explained everything that had happened. After hearing me out, he let out a sigh.

"You can't just run off by yourself and get into such dangerous situations, Lune. I was worried."

"I'm sorry..."

"From now on, you need to speak with me first."

"Okay."

"Still, that kindness of yours is a virtue," Liam said.

He picked me up and patted my head to reassure me. I smiled at his praise, and my tail wrapped around him tightly all on its own.

"Ngh..." Liam staggered a bit. For whatever reason, his cheeks were red.

"Oh, sorry! Does it hurt?"

“No, I’m fine. Stay this way.”

“But…” I mumbled, my ears drooping.

Liam’s face flushed even more. “You…feel more steady this way, don’t you?”

I’m pretty sure he’s in pain, but if he insists…

He really seemed to have a soft spot for me. It didn’t seem to be a good time to argue with him.

“What am I watching right now?” Baldr murmured, causing Liam to shoot him a glare. Intimidated, Baldr awkwardly looked away.

Lord Reineke climbed out of the hot spring and went up to Liam before shaking the water off, getting it all over us.

At this point, Baldr finally snapped back to his senses.

“Um, look, I don’t mean to cause you trouble. Lune already did a lot for me, so I’ll leave right away. Please forgive me!” He lowered his head.

“Golden eyes…” Liam murmured, then sighed. “Has your mother ever told you anything about your father?”

My adoptive brother was suddenly being a lot more calm and polite. It was suspicious. It seemed he had realized something I hadn’t, possibly related to the kind of secrets a Renard would deal in.

“What, is it my father’s fault that those people tried to kill me and send me off to the monastery?” Baldr snapped.

Liam stared intently at the other boy, as if trying to ascertain something. Baldr met his gaze head-on.

“I believe my family needs to take you into our custody.”

“Huh?” Baldr blinked in shock.

“We’re going to make everyone else believe that you died before reaching the monastery,” Liam announced. He tossed the ankle band away a small distance from the hot spring and turned to Baldr. “Get a fallen tree seed and tie a lock of your hair around it. Then bury it in the middle of that band.”

Baldr cast me an imploring look.

“It’s okay!” I reassured him. “My brother is smart and kind. I’m sure it’ll all work out!”

Liam smiled warmly at my words.

“Wow, this guy can smile like that?” Baldr murmured, dumbfounded.

“Please hurry up and do as I say,” Liam ordered.

Baldr followed the instructions and buried an oak seed below the band. It immediately began to sprout—the result of the magic imbued within the band. I couldn’t look away.

“Now, let’s get going,” Liam said. Still carrying me, he started walking toward the mansion.

Once we made it back, Liam placed me down by the entrance and took Baldr to Marquis Renard.

He won’t tell me anything… I feel a bit left out.

It was a bit alienating, but I understood why it had to be this way. I wasn’t a Renard by blood. Even in my past life, I’d only learned of the Renards’ clandestine operations just before my execution. It was obvious that there were many things they couldn’t tell me about and I was better off not knowing.

Lord Reineke entwined his body around my legs to comfort me. His fluffy fur tickled me, and I hugged him close.

“Lord Reineke, I realized something earlier. In order to fulfill your wish, it’d be better if you had made a contract with Liam instead of me. Shouldn’t you make one with him now?”

The fox scoffed. *“Such foolishness. Spirit contracts last until the mortal’s death. They’re one-to-one.”*

“I know. So if I die—”

Before I could finish, he lightly bit my nose.

“You truly are a fool.”

The way he laughed at me just made me feel worse. My eyes welled with tears.

“That’s right… I’m just an idiot…”

“Argh!!! That’s not *what I meant!”* Lord Reineke placed his paw on my shoulder and pressed his muzzle to my forehead while swatting me with his tail. *“Do you know why I gave you a second chance? Because I* chose *you. I chose you as my partner, Lune!”*

“Your partner?”

“Yes. Whether you succeed or fail, I will stay with you. Even if you die, I shall not make a contract with anyone else! I won’t care what befalls this domain! So you must do everything in your power to stay alive. That’s an order!”

“Lord Reineke…is it really okay for me to live?” I sobbed, my face drenched with tears.

The fox licked them up from my cheek.

“Of course, you little fool! I have allowed you a second chance. You dare question my judgment? Know your place, human. You have no right to say anything about whom I choose to make contracts with!”

The angrier he got, the happier I felt.

I’m a wicked woman who was tossed away by my parents and ruined the family that adopted me. But Lord Reineke is saying that in spite of all that, it’s okay for me to live.

I buried my face in his chest.

“Hey! Don’t wipe your tears on my fur! And you’d better not get any snot on me!”

I just hugged him even tighter. “Thank you, Lord Reineke.”

“Humph…” The fox gave up his resistance and returned my hug.

Liam and Marquis Renard must’ve discussed some things, as the following day, Baldr officially moved into our mansion under the pretext of being the son of a distant relative. His true hair color was concealed by the henna dye, and everyone was to call him Bal.

“I’m going to tell you a secret,” Bal said, whispering into my fox ears. Lord Reineke was presently curled up asleep by my feet. “Apparently, the king of Garland is my father.”

“What?!” I shouted, then quickly covered my mouth with my hands.

So Bal was the leader of the revolutionary army from my previous life—the Prince with the Prosthetic Leg?! In that case, he must’ve been saved by someone else who had to cut off his leg. But wait…what does this mean? Will the revolution not happen this time?

There was just too much I didn’t know.

Bal continued, not noticing that I was trembling.

“Her Majesty the Queen was after my life, so I was supposed to be sent to the monastery for my own protection. But the queen’s followers caught up to me.”

“So that’s when your mother…”

Bal’s mother had been killed by the queen’s subordinates. They’d even attacked the horse that was carrying them.

“Since I’m still in danger, we’re going to pretend that I died, and the marquis will shelter me for now.”

I nodded. Liam must’ve already known of Bal’s existence and realized that the queen was after him. Offering to take him into the Renards’ custody was quick thinking on his part.

After explaining everything to me, Bal stepped back and looked at me.

"You know, I've thought about what you told me, Lune."

"Hmm?"

"You said that my mother wanted me to live, even at the cost of her own life. And now that she's watching over me from heaven, I think I should live in a way that'd make her glad she saved me," Bal said, his golden eyes glittering.

"That's great!" I said.

"I'm going to study and train with all my might. And…well…"

"Yes?" I prompted, confused.

"I…made you a promise, didn't I?"

"A promise?"

"I said I'd pay you back with my body!"

The moment he exclaimed that, I was suddenly in the air. I quickly looked over my shoulder in surprise, to find that Liam had picked me up.

"Brother!"

"What's this about paying back with your body?" Liam stared Bal down with his twilight-colored eyes, making him shudder.

"It's a promise we made yesterday!" I said. "If House Renard ever needs help, Bal will repay his debt with manual labor."

Liam smiled and rubbed his cheek against my fox ears. "Ah, *that's* what he meant. That's a great agreement, Lune! Once Bal is old enough, we'll put him to work."

"Liaaam! That tickles!" I squealed and giggled.

Bal clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Tch. And she said she wasn't loved by anyone? It's painfully obvious how wrong she was…"

Liam scoffed, glancing at Bal. "Just don't get any ideas."

"Ideas?" I echoed.

"You don't need to worry about it, Lune," my brother replied, once more rubbing his cheek against my fox ears.

Chapter 3: Monastery, the House of Wisdom

Liam and I were inside a horse-drawn carriage, en route to the monastery. Lord Reineke was curled up on my lap with his eyes closed. For a fox, he sure liked to nap like a cat. Bal had stayed home since we couldn't be sure that the queen's allies weren't at the monastery.

As it turned out, Marquis Renard knew of Bal's original hair color. He'd found his new orange hair strange and asked the boy how it happened. Bal had given an honest response, explaining that I helped him dye it. Even then, our kingdom still didn't have the technology to change one's hair color, so the marquis erred on the side of caution and asked a doctor to give him a checkup.

The family doctor was a kindly old man with a white mustache named Trousseau. He used to be famous in the capital, but in his old age he'd retired in the Renard domain while continuing to work as House Renard's family doctor. However, as a result of his retirement, his knowledge on new medical treatments was scarce.

After checking Bal, Dr. Trousseau had traveled to the monastery and consulted with a doctor who had been exiled from the capital. But even that physician, with knowledge of the latest cutting-edge advancements in medicine, had never heard of this technology before. They both immediately began inspecting henna and verifying whether it was safe to use for coloring hair. The doctor from the capital became fascinated with it, and so he'd asked me to visit the monastery to see him.

This has turned into a much bigger deal than I expected...

I was covered in cold sweat as the carriage shook around me. Dr. Trousseau was already waiting for us when we arrived.

Liam was nestled against me as if it were par for the course, petting my tail.

"Ahh... Liam, that feels nice..." I mumbled. His petting made all my anxiety and gloom disappear.

"You don't need to worry so much, Lune," he said.

"I can't help it. I'm worried I'll say something rude."

“The Renard monastery is funded by our marquisate. You have nothing to be nervous about,” Liam assured me with a smile.

“Haah… Feels good…”

But shouldn’t the capital be the one paying for the monastery’s costs, since it houses their criminals?

After being reborn, I was able to look at House Renard’s situation more objectively, and it made me suspicious of the Garland Kingdom’s royal family. In exchange for their title as a distinguished family of loyal retainers, House Renard bore a heavy burden. They were also separated from the central politics. The family had sworn an oath long ago to never marry their children into the royal family, so they could never truly become part of royalty.

Could it be that the Garland royal family is wary of House Renard?

Because of that old oath, I shouldn’t have become the crown princess in my previous life. Yet the crown prince had put out an unbelievably high tax that the Renards couldn’t pay, and so the oath had been broken when I was married off to him instead.

Despite being impoverished, House Renard was subject to the same taxes as the capital. In my past life, a series of disasters caused by monsters had resulted in the Renards not being able to afford those taxes any longer.

If I want to save everyone, I’ll have to figure out a source of income for us to meet those payments!

While I contemplated this, the carriage came to a stop in front of the monastery. It was a large, old building with brick walls covered in ivy. In the high tower, I could see windows fitted with iron railings—that had to be where the criminals were kept.

Although the Renard monastery functioned as a prison, it was still safe. The criminals here weren’t of the violent sort, but rather intellectuals and people who had gotten involved in political strife. Once their term was up, they’d be allowed to return to the capital. They even had the chance to return to politics if the state of affairs changed.

And though they were put to work, it wasn’t anything harrowing. Most of them just copied scripture and other books. They couldn’t afford luxuries, but they were still able to live comfortably.

They sure have it nice! For us commoners, being given food,

clothing, and shelter without having to do backbreaking labor is a dream come true. These people have nothing to complain about.

Commoner criminals were put to hard labor no matter how light their sins. If someone stole, their hand was cut off. If they lied, it was their tongue. Meanwhile, the aristocrats who committed crimes got to enjoy a life of comfort and dignity.

But…from what I recall, the nobles fear being sent here. And those who felt discontent after being thrown into the mountain pit even cooperated with the revolutionary army. Worse yet, their resentment for the monastery was directed at House Renard itself and so condemned them without a trial. It's so outrageous, considering House Renard were just managing the monastery under orders from the royal family.

I continued gazing at the building until the abbot came out to guide me and Liam inside.

The abbot was a middle-aged man with red hair. He'd been a paladin before coming here, so he still looked quite strong and muscular. I had to assume the capital made sure that someone with martial skills could watch over the criminals.

When the man turned to me, his hard expression broke into an affectionate look.

"Are those two Lord Reineke and his contractor Lady Lune?"

Liam nodded.

"This is the first time I've ever seen a materialized spirit. I'm grateful to witness such a thing," the abbot said in his deep voice.

Lord Reineke puffed out his chest proudly and absorbed a golden light from the man.

"As for you, Lady Lune, to have a contract at your age is a testament to your talent. I'm sure House Renard feels at peace having you as their foster daughter."

For some reason, Liam looked smug upon hearing that.

"And…those fox ears are adorable…" the abbot mumbled, covering his mouth.

His words were so quiet that an average human couldn't have heard them, but I did. It seemed this man was a fan of fluffy things as well. I gave him a big smile, which he happily returned. Liam cleared his throat, and the abbot chuckled self-consciously.

"Please follow me," he said.

He guided us to a chamber where Dr. Trousseau was discussing

something with a young man in glasses. The young man was tall but thin, his green hair tied up in a ponytail. He wore a messy white coat over his simple but well-made suit. A metal band was affixed around his ankle, signifying that he was one of the prisoners here. With that, I knew he had to be the exiled doctor from the capital. He seemed unreliable.

As soon as he saw me, his face lit up with a grin and he practically flew right over to me.

“Ahhh! A little girl with fox ears?! Impossible...or so it *should* be! Oh, I want to touch theeem!”

Startled, I quickly hid behind Liam. My tail tucked itself between my legs, and my ears drooped down. Lord Reineke poked his head out from under my arm and barked at the man.

“Such insolence! Who are you?!” Liam demanded, drawing his sword.

“Please stop, Dr. Guillotin!” Dr. Trousseau exclaimed, grabbing the younger man.

Dr. Guillotin stumbled back and landed on his butt. He raised both hands in surrender.

“M-My apologies. It’s just such an unusual sight that I acted without thinking. Such things are only supposed to exist in legend,” the man explained, his face flushed and his breathing ragged. Though there was a sword pointed right at him, his eyes were fixated on me. The abbot looked exasperated as he held him down.

This man... He’s a freak...

I clung to my brother’s jacket, trembling.

Dr. Trousseau introduced us. “This is the son of House Renard, Lord Liam, and their adoptive daughter, Lady Lune. She’s the one who came up with the method of using henna to dye hair, not to mention she’s a contractor of the Great Lord Reineke. So treat her with respect.”

The abbot bowed to Lord Reineke in apology before allowing Dr. Guillotin to stand.

“I am Hugo Guillotin. I used to work as a plain old doctor in the capital. I specialize in manufacturing medicine, and in my free time I research new medical treatments that will improve people’s lives.”

My tail began standing up warily as I listened to his words.

This is the man who first proposed that we be executed by guillotine! But he's also the one who invented a cure for constrictive roundworm disease!

My legs were shaking with a mixture of terror and anticipation. Liam sheathed his sword and picked me up.

"It's all right. I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you," he whispered into my ear.

My tail raised even higher—from joy this time—and my fox ears perked up.

"Dear brother, I love you," I said while hugging him tightly.

"I love you too," he said. His smile warmed my heart and made me feel safe.

"Ahem," Dr. Trousseau cleared his throat to get our attention. "Would the two of you mind returning to reality from your own little world?"

He was used to seeing us like this by this point, but Dr. Guillotin and the abbot were staring with beet-red faces.

Liam's smile is so wonderful! I'm glad everyone got to see this rare sight too, I thought happily. I wanted everyone to know how incredible he was.

When Dr. Guillotin saw my wagging tail, his pupils practically turned into hearts and he let out a squeal of delight.

"To be taught a new application method of medicine...from a little girl with animal ears?! This is just too good!"

Liam glared at him. "You don't get to talk to Lune if you scare her."

With that, the young doctor quickly fixed his posture and stood upright.

"I promise I'll contain myself from now on!"

But his mouth was still twisted into a huge grin.

"Are you okay?" Liam asked me.

I smiled and nodded. "I'm fine."

As long as Dr. Guillotin can invent a cure for the roundworm disease, I can put up with him being a bit creepy.

"This man was imprisoned here for carrying out cruel human experiments," the abbot explained.

"He only did what was necessary for the sake of advancing medicine," Dr. Trousseau said, attempting to mediate. "This is all a huge misunderstanding, you see..."

“These fools will never understand, no matter what you say,” Dr. Guillotin remarked. It seemed he had resigned himself to being labeled a mad doctor.

“But…you were just trying to find a way to expel the roundworms, right?” I asked.

Both doctors turned to me in shock, their eyes glinting.

Huh?! They look so scary!

“Incredible, Lady Lune!” Dr. Guillotin exclaimed, leaping toward me.

“Eek!” I screeched.

Liam, who was still holding me, turned his back to the doctor.

“That’s exactly right! I theorize that constrictive roundworm disease can be cured if only we could find a way to expel the worms themselves! That’s why I dissected a few deceased victims to ascertain where the worms live. I’d next tried to cut open a terminally ill patient to remove their worms, but it didn’t exactly go to plan… You see, if the victim is still alive, so are the worms. They’ll try to escape, even eating their way deeper into the host! While I hunted them down and tried to forcibly pull them out, the patient ended up passing away.”

Dr. Guillotin eagerly rambled about his experiment while circling Liam and me. He was like a big dog excited about his owner coming home.

His story, on the other hand, is anything but cute. I mean, trying to yank worms out of someone’s body?!

The doctor continued to orbit around us. The mental image of that cruel experiment made me nauseous.

“Ew…” I mumbled.

I absolutely won’t let my mother go through something like that!

“Instead of doing it that way, couldn’t you kill the worms while they’re still inside the body and then use medicine to expel them?” I suggested. This was the method he’d invented in my previous incarnation. Surely it wouldn’t be a problem if I sped up the timing of his discovery a little.

Dr. Guillotin stopped in his tracks. “Oh! I hadn’t thought of that! But *how* would I kill the worms that way?”

In my previous life, Dr. Guillotin had labored for many years before arriving at his solution. I decided to give him a hint.

“Isn’t there some kind of herb that those worms don’t like? Now

that I think about it, Lord Reineke told me to leave sentiment flowers in my mother's room. She's been sleeping better since then."

"Sentiment flowers?" he echoed, then gasped. "Of course! Plenty of them grow within the Renard domain. It might be worth a try..."

The doctor stared right at me as he mumbled. Horrified, I denied his idea even before he could say it.

"You will *not* experiment on my mother!"

Dr. Guillotin looked away and chuckled. "Oh, of course not. I'd never experiment on a marquise. Buuut...a few prisoners here *do* have constrictive roundworm disease, don't they? Right? Hmm?" he urged, staring at the abbot.

The red-haired man sighed.

"Fine. As long as it's for the sake of finding a new treatment, you can try with someone who agrees to it. However, I won't allow you to experiment on anyone without their consent."

The doctor grinned. "Yes, yes, naturally! *Consent*, of course! Now...which one of them was in the most pain, again? But first, I must gather the flowers and check a few things. Perhaps I'll prepare ether essence..."

He continued planning his experiment, obviously enjoying himself.

Well, if the cure is found quicker this time...

I found myself smiling as well.

Suddenly, Dr. Guillotin whipped around to look at me. Our eyes met. He swayed on his feet, as though hit with a bout of vertigo.

"Are you okay?" I asked him.

"Oh, to think you're concerned about me!" he said, clutching his heart through his clothes. His eyes glimmered as he gazed at me. "So it really is true—you found a new way to use henna. I doubted the story when I first heard it, which is why I wanted to meet you myself. But now I understand. Lady Lune, you are a goddess!"

"No, I'm not!" I denied the idea immediately.

"I told you, didn't I? She's a genius!" Dr. Trousseau said, looking smug for some reason.

"I'm not a genius! It's just that I can hear Lord Reineke!"

Liam hugged me tighter, while Lord Reineke rubbed up against my legs.

“I knew it, Lune. You’re amazing,” Liam said.

“But…” I was about to protest again, when my brother buried his face between my fox ears and rubbed his cheek against me.

Nooo! That makes me so happy, it’s distracting me!

“Ah…brother…”

I closed my eyes as he soothingly stroked my back. Everyone watched us with smiles on their faces.

“Indeed, Lady Lune! After hearing about your method to dye hair with henna, I started researching how to produce other colors through similar means,” Dr. Trousseau said.

“Great! If you figure it out, dyeing hair might become fashionable in the capital! This could be House Renard’s specialty product!” I exclaimed, but everyone stared at me in silence. “Huh…?”

“That’s Lune for you,” Liam muttered.

“You really have a keen eye, Lady Lune.” Dr. Trousseau looked impressed.

“But we can’t turn henna into a local specialty until the issue with Bal is resolved. We wouldn’t want people to find out he dyed his hair,” my brother explained.

I slumped. “Oh… You’re right.”

“Still, it’s a fantastic idea,” Liam said, petting my head.

“We may not be able to do it with henna, but if we could export our local specialties like the other domains, it might make life a bit easier for us,” the abbot suggested.

“I will do my utmost for you, Lady Lune, so that a cure for the constrictive roundworm disease can become the Renard domain’s specialty!” Dr. Guillotin vowed, huffing fiercely.

From then on, Dr. Guillotin devoted himself to finding the cure. I occasionally visited the monastery to assist him. It was fascinating to see research that involved water magic. I helped as much as I could with things that didn’t require the use of magic. Both doctors found this amusing and taught me about medicine. Thanks to that, I learned all about various medical treatments and poisons.

In my previous life, I’d never been allowed to attend the academy. I had once been ignorant, but now I found the act of learning itself incredibly fun.

After much careful research, we found the cure for constrictive roundworm disease.

“I never would’ve thought the sentiment flower could be used as medicine,” the abbot said.

“It’s incredible! Dr. Guillotin made ether essence from the flower bud, and then extracted the crystallized active ingredient!” I said, my eyes sparkling.

The man looked bashful at my praise.

“Can I pet your tail as a rewa—”

“No.” Liam cut the doctor off, while Lord Reineke stepped in front of me protectively.

“Petting my tail is reserved for my brother only,” I said, causing Dr. Guillotin to frown.

“Then how about your ears?”

“My ears are okay!” I smiled and presented my head to him.

Liam and Lord Reineke grimaced. However, we’d managed to develop the cure in under a year, when originally it had taken a whole decade of research.

And Dr. Guillotin is a criminal, so we can’t pay him directly. This is the least I can do!

“Ahhh, how lovely. Such large ears… It was all worth it!” The man released a deep breath as he petted my fox ears, getting his fill.

“Anyway, how do we use this medicine?” Liam asked grumpily.

“Drinking the medicine will paralyze the roundworms. Once that happens, the body can expel them with the help of a laxative,” the doctor explained.

In short, it was a deworming treatment.

“Is it safe?”

“We used it on the patients inside the monastery. Many of them caught the disease due to the shock of being thrown into the mountain pit. But every single one of them has recovered.”

The abbot nodded. “It’s an amazing medicine, indeed. The monastery’s become livelier lately.”

“Oh yeah? That’s good. But I think it’s time you get away from Lune now,” Liam said, grabbing the doctor’s hand and pulling him away from me.

Dr. Guillotin reluctantly complied. He stared down at his hand and sniffed his fingertips.

I really wish he wouldn't do that...

"I'd now like for the medicine to be used on patients outside of the monastery," the doctor said to Liam, still sniffing his own fingers. "May I ask for Dr. Trousseau's cooperation?"

My brother nodded silently.

"It'd be good if we could cure people of other illnesses too..." I said quietly.

"I agree. That would keep me sharp and let me collect lots of data," Dr. Guillotin added.

Liam nodded. "Right. It'd be best to make use of Dr. Guillotin's skills instead of putting him to pointless labor. The Renard domain is behind when it comes to medicine."

"I'm in agreement as well," the abbot said. "Perhaps we could allow prisoners with medical skills to treat Renard citizens during their incarceration?"

The two negotiated with Marquis Renard, who permitted Dr. Guillotin to treat outsiders who came to the monastery.

Clinical trials for the roundworm disease cure went well too. Medical examinations were free at the monastery since they were a necessary part of the assigned prisoners' labor. Medicine was something one usually had to buy, but since this was new and still under development, it was freely given as well. Medicine manufacture became one of the common ways a prisoner could work in the monastery.

Liam and I visited the monastery's treatment clinic whenever we had the time. The citizens were afraid to be treated by criminals, so we needed to show them that it was safe. My brother's presence reassured the adults, while I helped scared children by holding their hands. Lord Reineke was very kind to the children, curling around those who braved the treatments.

Thanks to our efforts, the clinic gradually earned the trust of the people. Since they were able to receive the same level of medical care for free as in the capital, the number of patients steadily increased. Medical students even took field trips to visit the clinic.

"I'm very glad to be able to treat people. And here I thought that doing labor at the monastery was nothing but a waste of time," said Dr. Guillotin, looking pleased.

"Then how about we allow everyone else to use their own

expertise here?" I proposed. The monastery housed a few other doctors, as well as nobles interested in engineering and art.

"That might be a good idea," the abbot affirmed.

Lord Reineke circled me, showing his approval.

"I also think it's a good idea, but there might be a problem," Dr. Guillotin said with a troubled expression.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Shortage of goods. For example, while we have women who are good at embroidery and people who are excellent artists, we don't have enough threads or painting supplies. And without any large roads leading to the Renard domain, transporting those goods is quite difficult. We have to rely on beasts of burden or simply walking, but then there's the danger of monsters and bandits."

My breath hitched. These were the exact problems I'd wanted to resolve in my past life when I asked the crown prince to build a road to the Renard territory. My husband had been infatuated with me, so despite opposition, he pushed the project through. The workers had to cut into the sacred mountains and dig tunnels through holy places, which provoked monsters and led to much damage and injury.

The price for paving the road had been great. And in the end, after so much sacrifice, the revolutionary army had used that very road to march on House Renard.

Expanding the current path through the mountains isn't a good idea for now. But it's worrying how little transportation access we have. Perhaps there's a different way to transport goods?

I pondered for a while until I remembered what I'd learned in my past life.

I know! Canals! We have a river! What's more, the architect who went on to create navigable canals should be in the monastery right now!

"Are any of the prisoners architects?" I inquired, clenching my fists.

"Do you plan to make them build a bigger road?" the abbot asked suspiciously.

"No, I want to ask them to turn the river into a canal!"

Everyone's eyes grew wide at my words.

"Oh? An excellent idea," Lord Reineke said, rubbing his chin with

his paw.

If that's what he thinks, I'm even more confident!

Liam swept me up in a hug.

"A canal!" he said. "With that, we'd be able to import and export many more goods."

The abbot nodded.

"Information would also travel quickly. Information—in other words, *knowledge*—is power," Dr. Guillotin said with a grin.

"Speaking of which, is there a man named Theo Lambert here now?" I asked.

The abbot turned to me with surprise. "How did you know?"

"I received a divine message from the Great Lord Reineke." I pressed my hands together, putting on a mystical expression.

"Humph. You're as sly as a fox," Lord Reineke said, smirking. I decided to take that as a compliment.

"You're right, we do have a prisoner with that name. However, he's been sent here on charges of bribery. If you involve him, he might do it again," the abbot warned.

"But Lord Reineke insists that I meet with him," I said sternly.

The abbot straightened in his seat.

"In that case, I will bring him right over," he conceded, as Lord Reineke's word was final.

Shortly after, he led a young man with a freckled face and brown hair into the room. The youth looked to be around twenty years old, nervously entering the room with his back hunched.

"I am Theo Lambert," he said, bowing. His voice was barely audible, and his eyes were glued to the ground.

"Master Theo, please help the Renard domain," I requested.

Theo stepped back and shook his head.

"'Master'? I don't deserve that title. I'm a worthless man who bribed the nobility..."

"Those are false charges, aren't they?" I asked.

His face paled. "Wh-Why do you...? How?"

"*Are* they?" the abbot interjected.

Theo waved his hands and stepped back again.

"O-Of course not! I am guilty!"

I shook my head. "When the construction of the Grand Canal hit a snag, a proposal was made to cancel the project. Nobles were bribed in an attempt to shut that proposal down, but of course it

was discovered. Someone had to take the fall. So you, a young man of low status, took the blame in another's place, didn't you?"

The architect vigorously waved his hands in denial. "No! No!"

Liam and the abbot stared at me, bewildered.

Oops, that might've been too mature of me to say as an eight-year-old. Oh well! Too late to take it back! I've gotta push through and sell this oracle act!

I wiggled my fox ears and began speaking in a dramatically serious tone, attempting to imitate the mannerisms of a priestess.

"Strange... Lord Reineke told me that somebody else was behind the bribery," I said. Though of course, I was actually working off of my past life memories. "Are you implying that Lord Reineke is lying?"

The abbot sent Master Theo a sharp glare. The young man shrunk into himself, trembling all over. Slowly, he raised his head, meeting my eyes for the first time. He blinked in shock, then quickly looked away.

"Fox ears and tail..." he mumbled.

"I am the Great Lord Reineke's contractor," I boasted, puffing out my chest. On the inside, I felt anxious and awkward, but I did my best to not let it show.

Lord Reineke mimicked me, huffing out through his nose with a smug look on his face.

Master Theo fell to his knees, lowering his head.

"Please forgive me! Forgive me! I never meant to deceive the kingdom. But if that man had been arrested, all his research and experience would've amounted to nothing..."

"Connecting the oceans east and west of the kingdom was a great idea," Liam chimed in. "However, I recall that making it into a reality was very difficult. There were many accidents during the construction, and seemingly no end in sight. Not to mention, the budget exceeded expectations... Before long, even those who once supported the project were calling for its cancellation."

"But with just a little more time, we *could* have finished it! There was no reason to stop halfway!" Theo argued.

"And that's why someone bribed the nobles to continue the construction," Liam said.

Theo bit his lip. He had been arrested in place of the actual culprit. In my previous life, that fact had only come to light after

the architecture guild's former head had passed away and left behind a letter confessing to the crime. Then, a decade after being thrown into the mountain pit, Theo had been reinstated as a licensed architect and constructed the Grand Canal as part of the Garland Kingdom's state project.

I knelt in front of Theo and took his hand.

"Don't sacrifice yourself for the sake of the architecture guild! You're a very noble man, Master Theo. That's why Lord Reineke asked me to ensure your research would continue even after coming here!"

He didn't actually say that, but everyone will believe me this way…right?

My heart was pounding.

"I'm rather fond of this wicked side of yours," Lord Reineke said, suppressing a grin.

I crouched down next to the fox, letting him stroke my head with the tip of his nose. My bangs fluttered from the movement.

"Very well. If it's for the sake of the domain, I don't care what lies you tell. But you know what'll happen if you act selfishly, hmm?"

His words were a warning. I swallowed heavily and nodded.

Theo observed us with deep emotion.

"Lord Reineke…said that about *me*?"

"Yes. Now, you don't need to betray anyone and expose their sins. The truth will surely be revealed someday. Until then, will you carry on with your research here?"

Theo glanced around. The abbot appeared conflicted, and looked to Liam. Liam, meanwhile, was staring at me.

"We ought to redo the trial—"

"No! That'd be terrible! Please, don't!" Theo interrupted Liam's proposition, lowering his head again.

I ran up to Liam and took his hand, then looked up at him while tilting my head to the side.

"Please, brother? Master Theo doesn't want the truth to be revealed…"

"But we have to clear his name!"

"I'm fine!" the architect insisted. "Really, I mean it! If the truth came out, I'd have to pay with my life!"

"Even if we redo the trial right now, Theo will just plead guilty again," I said.

Liam sighed, staring down at the young man who trembled under his gaze.

"I suppose you're right," he admitted.

"We can still clear his name another way!" I said. "How about we use his expertise to manage the domain's river and do flood control? If it goes well, he'll be able to prove himself, and the land will become more prosperous. Besides, wouldn't it be great if our domain had a canal?"

My brother picked me up and rested his cheek against my fox ears. "You really are clever, Lune. But first, we must fix the damage at the Gupi River."

I gasped in realization. The Gupi River was a tributary on the upper side of the Renard River. It was infamous for overflowing and changing course, often causing the Renard River to flood as well.

Right. We need to focus on the repairs before we can build a canal. That's just like Liam to see the big picture. I want to be more like him!

I looked at my brother with admiration.

"Theo Lambert, I want you to cooperate with us. First, we need to carry out repairs at the Gupi River. Once that's done, I believe you'll be able to start on the construction of the canal," Liam said, still holding me in his arms.

"U-Understood!" Master Theo nodded, his eyes teary from joy.

Liam got the marquis's permission to carry out both projects. Father was so impressed by the idea that he made it a priority in the budget.

I visited the Gupi River repair site with Liam, our father, Lord Reineke, and Bal. Father had pitched a tent by the levee so we could easily oversee the works while referencing the design plan.

The Gupi River's rapid current cut downward through the steep mountains. The stream gradually grew weaker closer to the foot of the mountain, so the volume of the water was usually low and the course was undefined. However, heavy rain would cause it to flood the surrounding flatlands. That had happened last spring along with the monster attack, leading to heavy damage and casualties —including my own family.

Currently, both the Renard citizens and the criminals from the monastery were working together by the riverbed. There was no

danger, as the water level was low in this season.

Lord Reineke was lounging by my feet, lazily sprawled on the ground. The fox tossed aside any dignity a great spirit should have and rolled onto his back, showing his belly. I petted him while listening to my father and brother discuss the works.

"It was indeed a point of concern for me that the confluence between the Gupi and Renard Rivers often had breakages, but I wouldn't have thought of this solution," father said.

"I never would've thought of having the Gupi River crash into the large rocks that were already there on the bank of the Renard River," Liam added.

They both groaned while looking at Theo's plan.

"What are they doing?" Bal asked, pointing to a group of criminals who, under Theo's command, were using earth magic to pile up rocks in the middle of the dry riverbed. That spot would be the bottom of the river once the water level increased.

"I believe that's supposed to reduce the river's current," father replied.

"What about *that*?" Bal inquired again, this time pointing at a few citizens who were assembling a bunch of tree logs together in a somewhat triangular shape by the riverbank.

"Apparently it catches the water as it hits the embankment, reducing the flow. It's called a crib spur," I explained. Lady Kuzunoha had told me about the seigyu river training structure, which I'd then passed on to Theo.

"So many methods, aren't there?"

We all watched on, impressed.

The citizens built a large bonfire on the dry riverbed, and fire-aligned criminals recited spells to intensify the flames. Powerful explosives were strictly controlled, so the Renard domain couldn't use them. Theo had been racking his brain to come up with an alternative when Lord Reineke bestowed ancient wisdom upon me.

"If you rapidly cool a hot rock with water, it'll crack," I repeated to Theo, who immediately put it into practice.

"The Renard territory is finally making some progress," Marquis Renard murmured, observing the works with a glimmer in his eye. "Honestly, I used to think that the monastery housing criminals was just a financial strain on us. We should've used them like this

sooner."

Liam nodded. "Thank goodness Lune figured it out," he said, smiling at me and patting my head. His words made me happy. "It usually costs a lot to gather enough magic wielders for a construction project like this. That's part of the reason why Master Theo's canal construction at the capital didn't go well."

"Nobody can wield magic until they graduate from the academy, after all," father said. "Besides, most graduates are of high status, so they take on key positions within the kingdom. Most of them hate the idea of mingling with the common folk at a construction site, and demand great compensation for it."

"That's where we got lucky. The monastery's filled with magic users who have nothing better to do with their time, and we can make them help out as part of their labor."

The marquis nodded at Liam's words.

"It's all thanks to you two," he said. He, who was usually so expressionless and taciturn, was now smiling at us. Liam and I were startled.

"Don't I *deserve a little gratitude too?"* Lord Reineke complained, batting his tail against my leg.

I quickly embraced him.

"It's all because of Lord Reineke!" I said, holding the fox up in my arms.

Father nodded again, knowing I was speaking on the spirit's behalf.

"I must say my thanks at his temple."

The fox nodded as well, looking content. I breathed a sigh of relief as I set him back down.

After a while, Theo entered the tent. Father and brother greeted him and expressed their gratitude.

"You're doing a great job, Theo Lambert. Your genius is remarkable. Let me know if there's anything you need."

The architect seemed embarrassed by the marquis's words.

"It's all thanks to Lady Lune."

"I gave you the idea, but you're the one who drew up the plan! It's amazing that you could turn my vague imagination into reality!" I told him sincerely.

Yet the young man shook his head.

"I couldn't have done any of this by myself. No matter what kind

of plan I make, it won't amount to anything if nobody believes it's doable. But...you put your trust in me and even arranged for all that lumber! Truly, thank you so much!" Overwhelmed with emotion, Theo was in tears.

As he sobbed, Lord Reineke went up to him and stomped on his foot.

"Lord Reineke!" I chided, but Theo wiped his tears and smiled.

"Of course, I'm very grateful to you too, Lord Reineke."

The fox huffed in satisfaction.

"I came here to let you know we're about to start breaking the rock. Would you like to come watch? We might find something interesting."

At Theo's invitation, we exited the tent and went down to the dry riverbed. A magic circle had been drawn onto a large rock, on top of which the bonfire was burning.

"Just as Lord Reineke said: Rapid cooling of heated rock is very effective. The magic circle increases the firepower and makes the heat conduction more efficient," he explained.

A convict was on standby near the rock. He swung his arms up in a grand motion, and a mass of water floated into the air from the river. A magic circle floated in the air around the water, and once the spell had been chanted, the mass splashed down with tremendous force onto the bonfire. There was a loud, sharp sound, and white steam began pouring out of the rock. Everyone cheered.

Liam picked me up from behind. Bal was frightened and hid behind Liam, clutching onto the hem of his jacket while nervously peering at the scene. The vapor slowly receded, revealing the blackened rock beneath. It was still hot, so more water was poured onto it. Gradually, cracks began appearing on its surface. Once it cooled off, the commoners wedged crowbars into the cracks to widen them.

"Can they break it cleanly?" I asked, and Theo nodded.

"Break it!!!" Bal yelled.

And right then, the rock cracked.

"We did it!"

"It's a success!"

The crowd began clapping in celebration. At the start, the criminals had been displeased to be put to dirty work alongside

the commoners, and the commoners weren't too happy to be working with criminals either. But despite their mutual loathing, they had struggled together. Many of the criminals discovered the value of their work and felt accomplished, while the commoners were able to shed their prejudice and show respect for the other group. And now they were all rejoicing together. The sight pleased me.

"What a wonderful scene," Liam remarked with a smile.

Bal and Lord Reineke nodded.

"It's great to see them all getting along!" Bal said with a grin.

Theo was inspecting the inside of the rock as though he were searching for something.

"Ah, there it is!" he exclaimed, picking up a piece of transparent stone. "This is for you, Lady Lune." With a bashful look, he placed the stone in the palm of my hand.

Liam's brows twitched at the sight. Lord Reineke craned his neck and stole a peek.

"Ah, this is raw magical ore," he said.

"Raw magical ore?" I repeated, staring at it.

I'd never seen this before. In my past life, the only magical ore I knew of was in its processed, beautifully polished form. I never would have recognized this as the same material.

Liam and Theo both gasped and looked into my hand.

"This is raw magical ore?" Liam asked.

"I thought it looked similar, but I had no idea it could be extracted from the Renard River." Theo made a serious observation. "I have on occasion found similar stones when breaking large rocks. That's why I searched for it, as I wanted to give it to Lady Lune."

"We should search through the rock dump site," my brother said.

"But we don't really have the time..." Theo responded hesitantly, frowning.

"What if we allow public access to the site, and have House Renard purchase the ore from whoever finds it? It'll be like a treasure hunt. Even the children can participate," I suggested. That way, even women and children who couldn't do heavy manual labor could contribute.

"Good idea," Lord Reineke said, snuggling up to me.

Liam picked me up again.

“You really are clever, Lune. Let’s do it!”

I was almost worried that he was doting on me too much for making a snap decision like that. However, even father agreed, so we opened the rock dumping site to the public.

After that, we regularly visited the construction site at the Renard River. Liam helped the workers by drawing magical circles, while Bal and I joined the kids in searching around for the magical ore. I learned a lot from directly mingling with the commoners, like what kind of animals, insects, and monsters lived in the woods, or what food you could find there was edible. My knowledge of the domain surpassed even all I’d known from my previous life, and that made me love it all the more.

Chapter 4: The Crown Prince's Visit

And so, the season of melting snow had arrived. The Renard domain itself rarely had heavy snowfall, but the sacred mountains often ended up covered in thick snow. The Gupi River, whose source was in the mountains, overflowed certain years when the snow at the mountain peaks melted. Because of this, the land around it was unusable. Last year, the number of monsters had increased, leading to more damage not just to the tributary but to the main stream of the Renard River itself.

Bal and I were in one of Renard Castle's guard towers, watching through binoculars the Renard army battling monsters. The wind was still very chilly.

The fighting was more intense than usual today, as this was my brother's first battle. Father was commanding the army.

"This is Liam's first time joining the army against monsters, so he's been given the Eclipse Blade. It's a family heirloom," I explained. It was a beautiful rapier with a shining silver blade and a diamond embedded into the hilt.

"Cool! I heard that if you can wield that blade well, you can use magic even without making a spirit contract," Bal said.

"Yep! Apparently it's a magical sword made by a spirit. It's imbued with powerful magic, so if you can't control your mana, you won't even be able to pull it out of its scabbard."

"Whoa... Liam's so cool." Bal watched the battle with glittering eyes.

Ever since he'd moved in with us, he'd been studying and receiving military training together with Liam. Liam could do everything effortlessly, and Bal adored him as though he were his actual older brother.

"I wonder if I can be like him some day..."

I cast Bal an anxious look. "It's way too soon to be thinking of your first battle. You haven't even graduated from the academy."

"I just want to protect the levee..."

"Actually, I wonder *why* more monsters come down this time of year," I mused.

“I don’t know. Liam was worried that even if we send out a force to exterminate them, we’d always be falling behind if we can’t find the source of the problem. He said if we knew that, we could subjugate them before their numbers increased.”

Bal was observing the battle, when suddenly he furrowed his brows.

“Oh no! The embankment’s collapsing!” he yelled.

“Ahhh! Run!!! Brother, run!” I screamed.

Under father’s command, the army retreated, managing to escape just in the nick of time. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw that Liam was safe. But I also felt dejected—the new embankment that everyone had created under Theo’s leadership had been damaged.

“We got Master Theo’s assistance and even used magical circles, but that wasn’t enough… And those new fields of sentiment flowers have been washed away too,” I lamented.

Father had put a lot of funding into the flood management project, but the Renard domain didn’t have much money to begin with. We had gotten the criminals from the monastery to cooperate, but I doubted they’d be thrilled at the prospect of having to rebuild everything all over again. I felt pathetic just watching my brother fight in the mud.

“I want to repay House Renard, but I can’t do anything but watch…”

Bal nodded, understanding my frustration.

“Me too. What can I do to help?” he muttered, clenching his fists.

◆◆◆◆

In Lord Reineke’s temple, I sighed wistfully.

The recent event had caused flooding, covering the territory with muddy water and destroying fields. Homes were lost and children were orphaned. People who had been most affected were now taking shelter in the temple. While father and brother were busy with restoration work, Bal and I wondered if there was anything we could do. We ended up helping mother and the people of the monastery take care of the victims.

“Still, to think I’d eat this kind of vegetable…” I said.

Lady Kuzunoha had taught me how to prepare the strange wild vegetables that grew in the Renard woods.

"You said they're called konjac? It...doesn't taste very good," Bal grumbled.

We processed the konjac, scraping the vegetables in a tub of water. We wore gloves to keep our hands from feeling itchy. The process took time, but it created something edible with a wondrous texture. It was a huge help to have a source of food from what we once thought was inedible.

"Lady Kuzunoha also taught me how to make soy sauce and miso, so hold your horses until then," I told him.

"It's always soybeans with her..."

"Good thing we have plenty of them in the stockpile."

All of Lady Kuzunoha's foods were just plain strange—like tofu, which the people of the monastery were making from soybeans too. Soybeans grew well even in the infertile lands of the Renard domain, so they were kept in large supply.

I mixed fine powder from burnt seashells with water until it dissolved, then dipped the scrubbed konjac in.

"Stir it all together!" I instructed.

Bal stirred it in a hurry, then kneaded the separated konjac together.

"It's looking good. Now just wait a bit to boil it, and it should be ready!"

"What an annoying process. I don't know where Lady Kuzunoha is from, but the people of her land must be really weird."

"Yeah... Tofu, miso, soy sauce—all of them are a lot of trouble to make."

"On the other hand, Lady Dakini's curry is super easy."

Indeed, Lady Dakini had taught us how to cook curry. It was a fragrant stew made using a lot of flour from the medicine warehouse. The ingredients were high in medicinal properties and warmed the body. It was particularly popular with the addition of some seasoned tofu.

"And Lord Reineke taught us about frogs, which also go great with curry," I said.

"I had no idea people used to eat frogs and snails in the past."

Thanks to the fox spirits, we were able to start rebuilding the people's lives. Even those who'd been despondent from losing so

much had gained a renewed vigor by having something to work toward. The children were also happy to help by searching for frogs and snails. For Bal and I, it was reassuring to see things improving for everyone.

Not long after, the crown prince Hodr arrived from the capital with relief supplies. I was grateful that he'd traversed the narrow path to the domain to bring aid, but we were in no position to be welcoming royalty. The marquis tried telling him to wait until things had calmed down, but the prince ignored him and had his way.

"If he'd just think things through, he'd realize he's causing problems," Liam said resentfully, watching the prince and his group approach the mansion from the window. The long procession showed just how many attendants the prince had brought with him.

Of course, if His Highness was to stay in the territory, the Renard estate would have to host him—the local town didn't have suitable lodgings for royalty. The marquisate had to arrange for clean bedding, furniture, and food, not just for the prince but for his attendants as well. But the Renard domain was impoverished. It was hard enough for us to welcome a royal during times of peace, let alone in the midst of a disaster. It frustrated me to think about all the food we could've distributed to the people if only His Highness hadn't come.

"I'm sure he's here because he wanted to compete with you, Liam, after your first battle. He probably asked to be sent on his own first official business, and this is the perfect chance to establish himself as a benevolent ruler who offers support to a devastated domain," father said with a sigh.

"And...they might be suspecting something," he added, casting a grim look at Bal. "The construction at the Renard River, and the possibility that Baldr might still be alive... Bringing all these followers here may be a way of keeping things in check. In a sense, it might be a blessing in disguise that the embankment collapsed and the canal construction hasn't started yet."

The shocked Bal shrank in on himself.

"I... I really should just—"

I quickly grabbed him by his shirt.

“You’re not going to leave, are you?” I asked.

If he were to leave now, he might end up leading the revolutionary army and gain control of the Renard domain, just like in my previous life. His future course would affect not only our territory, but the entire kingdom too. And besides that, he was also my glimmer of hope—as long as his relationship with House Renard didn’t deteriorate, even in the worst-case scenario, surely the executions would be averted.

I have to stop him!

“But…my presence here only brings trouble,” Bal said on the verge of tears.

I whipped around to look at father. “You’re not going to cast him out, are you?”

The man fell into deep thought. I turned to look at Liam, who also remained silent. Lord Reineke scrunched up his face in displeasure.

“If you do, I…I’ll go with him!” I declared.

“Don’t be foolish!” father yelled.

“Lune!” Liam scolded firmly.

“What are you talking about?!” Bal asked in a panic.

Lord Reineke barked at me.

“But…but…Bal is our light of hope!”

When I said that, father and brother gasped. Lord Reineke nodded, while Bal tilted his head in confusion.

“Lune, has Lord Reineke told you our secret?” father asked, giving me a stern look.

I turned to the spirit.

He hasn’t told me anything like that. Was there some deeper meaning in what I said?

But Lord Reineke shook his head, with no intention of explaining. With no other choice, I also shook my head.

“No. That’s just what I believe,” I said vaguely. I couldn’t speak about my past life, so I couldn’t reveal what I was really thinking.

Liam picked me up.

“Lune, you must mind your choice of words. Light represents the royal lineage. If a Renard calls Bal the ‘light’… You understand how that sounds, don’t you?”

My face paled at his gentle admonishment. If someone wanted to read between the lines, it’d sound like House Renard was

acknowledging Bal's royal blood and intended to back him. In these circumstances, it was practically treason.

"But that's not what I meant!"

"I know." Liam smiled, then turned to the marquis. "We can't have Lune leave."

"You're right. So, Bal, don't you think of leaving either," the man said.

Lord Reineke nodded in agreement.

"But—" Bal raised his head, about to protest.

"It's already well-known that House Renard is looking after the child of a distant relative. If we make you leave now, you would only stand out more. You'd be at greater risk of being seen as a child of royalty," father reasoned.

Liam patted the pouting boy's head reassuringly.

"Don't worry. Your hair color's completely different, and the people of the capital don't even know of this method of dyeing hair."

"I guess...but will it really be okay? I don't want anyone else to be hurt because of me," Bal said.

It tore at my heart that even in this situation, instead of thinking about himself, he was only worried about everyone else.

His Highness Hodr is visiting our territory with no regard for the disaster. Compared to him, Bal would be a much better leader!

"Put on these tinted glasses, and try to avoid the prince if you can. You're better off staying in your room as much as possible," father advised, handing Bal a pair of colored glasses. He'd never intended to cast Bal out; in fact, he'd prepared to protect him. "I apologize for the inconvenience."

The boy shook his head. "Not at all! I'm so grateful for everything. Even now, I'm causing you all so much trouble. You'd be better off killing me!"

Liam lightly smacked Bal, while Lord Reineke stomped on the boy's foot.

"Do we seem like the kind of people who'd do that?" Liam questioned.

Bal's eyes welled with tears, and he shook his head even harder.

"That's not what I meant. I just..." he choked out. "Th-Thank you..."

As Bal started to cry and shake, Lord Reineke rubbed against

his side to comfort him.

And so, the crown prince Hodr arrived at the Renard marquisate. He was a short, slender, fair-skinned boy of the same age as Liam, with brown eyes as narrow as a snake's and blond hair much darker than Bal's. He came across as strong-willed and fussy.

Apparently the very first king of the royal family who'd made a contract with the Lord of Light had dazzlingly golden hair and eyes, but his modern descendants lacked that same luster.

House Renard received the prince in our most lavish guest room, but the boy complained incessantly and bothered the servants. He couldn't handle riding a horse through the steep mountain path, so he'd been carried in a litter, yet he still complained of a backache and selfishly reclined on the bed.

Liam had been disappointed to discover that half of the relief supplies His Highness had brought were gold coins. Money simply wasn't helpful in our current situation, no matter how much of it we had. We set it aside for the time being, to use after the majority of the recovery process was complete. We then carried the rest of the supplies to Lord Reineke's temple, where the temporary residents started unpacking the goods. But as soon as the people saw what was inside, they cried out in protest.

"What the— This is rotten!"

"So is this! The food's spoiled!"

"Are they dumping their garbage onto us?!"

Their anger was palpable. I let out a discouraged sigh as I unpacked the contents.

"Most of this is useless…"

Thankfully, there were *some* useful items, such as wheat and salt, but most of the fruit and vegetables were rotten.

"Fruit is abundant in our domain, but there's a reason we can't ship it to the capital. Doesn't he know?" Liam muttered.

"What are you talking about?" Bal asked.

"Coaches can't traverse through the path between our land and the capital city, so raw food has to be carried by horses or cows. Their body warmth and all the shaking as they move causes the food to spoil," Liam explained.

"I had no idea… That makes sense." Bal looked impressed to

have learned something new.

"Is that why we have to process fresh sentiment flowers in our territory instead of shipping them out?" I asked.

My brother nodded. "On the upside, we get to monopolize the manufacture of the medicine."

While we conversed, the citizens around us continued complaining.

"I heard His Highness Prince Hodr chose the supplies himself. So what is the meaning of this?"

"Did he bring this here on purpose to make things even harder for us?!"

Liam frowned at the rousing crowd.

"Mind your words," he warned quietly.

The people snapped to their senses and clapped their hands over their mouths. They could be suspected of treason for saying such things.

"His Highness has no reason to purposely make things harder for us. Look, the fruit he has chosen is not available in our domain in this season. That is proof of his goodwill. I believe he simply wasn't aware of our circumstances. Let's be grateful for his effort, at least."

Upon hearing his cool admonishment, the folk reluctantly went back to unpacking the supplies. They divided up all the items, and distributed those that could be used.

Among the prince's gifts was his favorite food: bananas. The fruit was such a rarity in the Renard domain that most of the commoners had never seen one before. Unfortunately, peeling the skin revealed that the fruit was bruised and blackened.

"Ew... What *is* this?" Bal mumbled.

"I know it doesn't look great, but it's still edible if we cook it," I told him.

In my past life, I had eaten banana cake. The one served in the royal palace would've been made from fresh fruit, but even overripe bananas could still be used if the damaged parts were cut off.

"Seriously?" Bal asked.

"I'll ask the monastery to make a banana cake! It should have more bulk than just using wheat," I said, and the children cheered.

"Yay! Cake!"

“Let’s help pick the fruit!”

“I can help with peeling too!”

The atmosphere within the temple began to brighten along with their joyful voices. Little by little, the adults were coming around too.

“Complaining won’t solve anything. We’d better follow Lady Lune’s example.”

“You’re right. We’ve gotta get creative with what we’ve got.”

“Better to have something than nothing at all.”

“It wasn’t on purpose, so there’s no point in getting angry about it.”

“Thank you, Lune,” Liam said, giving me a smile that made my tail wag.

Shortly after, Liam and the adults carried anything we couldn’t immediately use to House Renard’s ice house, which was filled with snow and ice to keep items cooler than if they were in a typical storeroom. Meanwhile, I journeyed to the monastery together with the children.

A week had passed since the prince’s arrival. Although His Highness claimed he was here to help with the disaster, he’d been holed up in House Renard’s guest room the entire time. Apparently his back still hurt and he was feeling cold. But thanks to that, Bal and I had managed to avoid meeting him so far. I secretly hoped he’d never leave that room at all.

The people had been frustrated with the prince’s attendants during this past week. On top of the official royal escort, Prince Hodr had also brought hired mercenaries and transporters to help with crossing the mountain path. Those people had turned out to be troublemakers, often causing mayhem in the town. Nobody could tell them to hurry up and leave, but everyone was thinking it.

At the moment, we were doing the standard food distribution in front of the monastery, with bean curry and banana cake as part of the day’s menu. But the prince and his chamberlain appeared out of nowhere, sticking out like sore thumbs in their glamorous attire.

Behind him, a man with a hat tipped low over his eyes lurked in the shadows. He just looked like one of the townsfolk at first

glance, but his presence was so subtle that I wouldn't have noticed him without my fox ears.

Is he a secret guard?

I quietly informed Bal of the man's presence. The boy quickly put on his hood and hid behind the crowd.

"What's going on here? Is this line for the food distribution? Is that even safe? Will any of it be edible?" His Highness Hodr asked none too politely.

The chamberlain leaned in to whisper to him. Whatever he said clearly upset the prince, making him sigh and continue his incessant grumbling.

"So it's not even meat? Then it's gonna be nasty for sure. What, is it because of the disaster? If they don't have beef, why not just use pork? I guess these people are too dumb to realize. Not to mention, *criminals* made this food! How filthy! This is exactly why I didn't want to come here. If only father hadn't forced me..."

We don't have enough meat because the monsters ate everything. And we can't raise many cows or pigs in our domain. We have limited flatland, and everyone has their hands full with growing grains. We can barely afford to feed our sheep and birds, let alone pigs! Horses and cattle are often used for transport, so we can't eat them either. It's all so obvious if he just thought it through a little.

Yet I couldn't openly refute him. The commoners glared at Hodr, who shivered at the suddenly cool air. Realizing the tense atmosphere, he cleared his throat and pompously puffed out his chest.

"Well, I guess I can try *one* bite."

Liam didn't react in any way. At times like these, the Renards' ability to remain expressionless was very useful. No matter how irritated he might've been, it didn't show on his face.

The abbot poured some curry from the communal pot into a wooden bowl and handed it to the chamberlain. The man tentatively pressed the bowl to his lips.

"Oh! Delicious!" he cried out in surprise, then quickly covered his mouth. "I mean to say, there's no poison," he added.

"Humph..." Hodr took the bowl, somewhat reassured by the chamberlain's initial slipup. He sniffed the contents and scrunched up his face. "That's the weirdest smell ever."

The prince reluctantly brought the bowl closer to his mouth,

irritating the common folk with his mannerisms. But as soon as he took one sip, his eyes lit up. In no time at all, he gulped down the entire bowl before holding it out toward the abbot without a word.

The abbot frowned at this juvenile behavior, but with no ability to protest, he poured a second helping of curry into the bowl. His Highness devoured it just as quickly. The chamberlain watched in bewilderment but made no move to stop the boy.

The commoners were equally astonished. This food was supposed to be for the victims of the disaster, and everyone had limited themselves to only eating their fair share. The crown prince, who certainly wasn't lacking for food, shouldn't be having multiple servings.

In the end, Hodr ate five full portions and let out a satisfied burp.

"Surprisingly, it was decent. So who's the chef? No way a criminal cooked that. Whoever it is, I wanna bring them back to the palace with me. It's a waste to leave them out here in the boonies."

The abbot bowed as he replied. He managed to restrain his anger, but his shoulders were shaking. "In fact, this meal *was* prepared by the prisoners."

"Ha! I guess everyone makes mistakes. I'll ask father to shorten their sentences!"

The chamberlain rushed to whisper into the prince's ear.

Hodr clicked his tongue. "Shut up!"

I was so fed up. Liam didn't show his emotions, but Bal was clearly worked up. I couldn't let this drag on any longer, so I took Bal with me to the back of the monastery where we handed out the banana cake. It had been made with a mix of acorn flour and wheat to make it extra filling. And thanks to the bananas, we didn't have to use much sugar.

Everyone politely lined up and we began giving out the slices. Suddenly, I heard the chamberlain's voice.

"Your Highness, please return to the Renard estate."

"No! I heard they're handing out banana cake here! I'm gonna have some!"

"That food is for the victims! We cannot eat it."

"What? Even you liked that 'curry' thing. I bet the cake will be good too! And it's a *banana* cake! I brought those bananas here, so

I deserve some too. If I hadn't brought them, these peasants would've gone the rest of their lives without ever having tasted them! Not to mention, they'll get to eat with royalty. They must be beside themselves with gratitude!"

The common folk quickly dispersed at the sight of the prince and chamberlain. The guard with the hat remained hidden in the distance, watching everything.

His Highness scoffed haughtily. "Look! Everyone's clearing the way for me!"

He went right up to me and reached out for the tray of banana cake I was holding, grabbing a piece of cake with each hand. Seeing this, a nearby child burst into tears.

"Manners, Your Highness!" the chamberlain reproached.

"Be quiet. We're not in the palace, so who cares?"

Yet right as Hodr said that, Bal caught his left hand.

"Stop it. You're a disgrace," he said, glaring at the prince from behind his tinted glasses. His patience had finally reached its limit.

"Huh? Do you realize who I am? I'm the crown prince!"

"Even the children are able to wait in line and only take one slice. The least you could do as the crown prince is show the same kind of restraint," Bal responded without fear.

I shot a panicked glance at Lord Reineke, but the fox spirit was on Bal's side, glaring at the prince.

"If a peasant brat gets to have one slice of cake, then I deserve ten. It's just common sense. Or can't you even do such a simple calculation? This is why you commoners are all so hopeless..."

Everyone stared daggers at His Highness, who had practically called them all stupid. They had come to like Bal, as he often helped out at the infirmary or with excavation work.

The chamberlain was visibly concerned by the menacing air, and whispered something to the prince.

"Humph! So you're the kid the Renards are looking after, huh? I've tolerated you so far because father ordered me to be lenient with the victims, but if you're a noble, it's a different story. Take your hood off!" Hodr ordered. "It's disrespectful. Or do you have some reason to keep it on?"

Bal's body stiffened at the question. I felt an icy sensation, and when I looked at the monastery's shadow in the distance, I saw the guard in the hat staring grimly at Bal.

That look in his eyes… He wasn't watching over His Highness—he's been observing Bal!

Nervously, Bal lowered his hood, revealing his orange locks. The guard's eyes softened slightly at the sight.

"Look, it's not gold," Hodr told his chamberlain, suddenly bored. "But let's check his eyes too, just to be safe," he decided, reaching for Bal's glasses.

"Hey! Stop it!"

As soon as Bal raised his voice, I jumped in between the two boys. I pushed Bal behind me, and my own hood slipped off from the vigor of my action. My silver fox ears were now visible.

"Please stop, Your Highness! This boy's eyes are weak, and if they're exposed to sunlight, he'll go blind!" I lied.

Hodr gasped, staring at me in shock. His cheeks flushed and his nostrils flared as his breathing quickened.

"I thought that was a tail sticking out from your skirt, but you even have animal ears?! They can't be real, can they?!" he exclaimed with a glint in his eye and a strange grin.

Huh? How scary!

"Those fox-like ears are the real deal? And the tail too?!" His Highness suddenly grabbed one of my ears and pulled on it.

"Ow! That hurts! Stop!!!" I cried, causing his eyes to light up even more.

"They *are* real… This is the first time I've ever seen a hybrid."

Lord Reineke barked at Hodr, and Bal stepped forward to protect me. However, I couldn't let him do anything reckless that would let the guard see his eyes.

"Bal! Go get Liam!" I screamed.

Bal nodded and ran off.

"Hey! I wanna buy this creature!" the prince announced, pointing at me. He'd forgotten all about Bal.

"What's he doing to Lady Lune?!"

"He might've brought us relief supplies, but this is going too far!"

"I don't care if he's a child. This is unforgivable!"

The men began walking forward in my defense.

"Don't!" I called out to them.

The chamberlain was in a panic over this explosive situation. "Y-Your Highness! You mustn't treat a human being like an object!"

The boy scoffed.

“Human? This isn’t a human—it’s a beast! People hunt foxes all the time!”

Lord Reineke roared and suddenly grew in size until he was gigantic. His Highness and the chamberlain fell on their butts in startlement, staring up at the fox.

“What the—?!”

Lord Reineke was about to pin down the boy with his paw, when the chamberlain—despite quivering with fear—shielded him with his own body. Even now, the guard in the shadows didn’t move to protect the prince.

Is he not actually a guard?

Liam and Bal arrived on the scene, a stormy aura emanating from them both as they stepped in front of me. The abbot, Dr. Guillotin, and Dr. Trousseau had come too, and they all formed a protective wall around me.

“Is something the matter?” Liam asked, deadpan as ever.

The chamberlain staggered to his feet and helped the prince up. Lord Reineke brought his snout closer to Hodr’s face, baring his fangs.

“Eek!” The boy shuddered, clinging onto the chamberlain.

“Th-The beast suddenly grew bigger…” the man stammered.

“I believe I already explained that the Great Lord Reineke lives in our land. My adopted sister is his contractor, and he may turn on those who harm her,” Liam said with an icy glare.

Spirits were very highly revered in our nation. Human ranks meant nothing to spirits—if anything, it was the other way around. The royals had only gained their position because their ancestor had made a contract with the Lord of Light. And if a spirit punished a member of the royalty, that person would lose all honor to their name and be erased from the family tree.

“I thought that was just some empty threat… You’re telling me that’s *actually* Reineke? Didn’t that spirit have something to do with the founder of the royal family?” His Highness mumbled, shielding his head.

A golden light seeped from him into Lord Reineke. Faith empowered the spirit—and the prince’s fear came from belief.

“How discourteous, to address the Great Lord Reineke in such a way,” Liam said, looking up at the fox.

Lord Reineke nodded, opening his jaws wide. The inside of his mouth was unimaginably red, contrasting against his silver fur. He could swallow a human being in a single gulp.

The prince quickly shook his head.

“No! Wait! I didn’t know! I just didn’t know!!!” he insisted, but Lord Reineke drew his open mouth even closer. “Eek!”

Hodr was quaking all over, on the verge of tears. Finally, in a barely audible whisper, he implored for forgiveness.

“I’m… I’m sorry.”

The chamberlain prostrated himself on the ground, a golden light spilling from him as well.

“O Great Lord Reineke, please forgive our terrible ignorance. This young light is completely innocent. I beg of you, do not extinguish him. I beg of you… I beg of you…”

The man was pitiful, but Lord Reineke still looked angry. I walked up to him and petted his massive side.

“Please, do not be so angry,” I pleaded.

“This boy is already thirteen years old!” Lord Reineke snapped. *“He ought to know how to apologize properly. Where are his manners?”*

I smiled wryly. I agreed with him on that point.

“Lord Reineke says: has he not been taught how to apologize properly?” I said.

The chamberlain made Hodr stand upright, and then forcibly held his head down.

“Say, ‘My deepest apologies,’ Your Highness,” the man whispered.

“My deepest…apologies…” the boy repeated through gritted teeth, still trembling and teary-eyed.

The chamberlain bowed even more deeply. “It is my fault for not preventing this. I deeply, thoroughly apologize,” he said with sincerity. He must’ve felt responsible for the numerous breaches in etiquette that had led up to this moment.

I once again petted Lord Reineke to pacify him.

“Fine. I will show magnanimity this time, but only because you mediated, Lune. And because I got a lot of power from this,” Lord Reineke conceded with a sigh, closing his mouth.

The chamberlain sank down to the ground. “Have we…earned his forgiveness?”

“Yes,” I said.

The man began thanking Lord Reineke, tears streaming down his face. Meanwhile, His Highness simply stood there as if paralyzed. The man in the hat remained in the shadows throughout the entire event, showing no intent to interfere on behalf of the prince.

Just who is that man? I wondered as I watched him disappear.

The children all gathered around the gigantic Lord Reineke.

"Wow! Lord Reineke's so big now!"

"I didn't know you could do that, Lord Reineke!"

More golden light poured from them, while the fox spirit grinned proudly.

The next day at noon, father visited me in my room with a grim expression on his face. Brother didn't look happy either.

"We are to have dinner with His Highness the Prince," father said.

"Really? He was so against it until now. I guess that's good," I replied.

Neither of them were eager to reply, leaving a long moment of utter silence.

I gasped, realizing what they were implying. "Wait...do *I* have to be there too?!"

My father nodded silently. I stared at him, my mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.

"Wha— Huh? Um...but why?"

I couldn't fathom it. I was certain that someone as haughty as the crown prince wouldn't want to dine with an ex-orphan like me. We had done so in my previous life, but only because I'd been introduced to him as a daughter of the marquis. This time, everyone knew that I was adopted.

"He called me a beast, and now he wants to dine with me?!"

A vein of anger popped on my father's temple.

Even father can't hide how he feels about this.

"He insisted that he see you again and apologize to you directly. I couldn't refuse such a request," the marquis explained bitterly.

"But I used to be an orphan, and I'm a commoner, and I have fox ears... Did you explain all that?"

"I did, but he wouldn't give up. He said that he won't go back to the capital until he gets to meet with you."

My mouth hung open again.

"Ugh...this sucks. And all this after his shameful behavior in front of everyone... This really suuucks..." Bal groaned.

"I'm completely against it," Liam spoke up. "He said he wanted to *buy* Lune. What an idiot."

Now brother is even willing to insult the crown prince!

"Don't be disrespectful. Although, he *is* immature for his age and his views are shallow," father bit out scathingly. "But that's exactly why I want him to leave as soon as possible. We can't have him staying here long enough to draw the king's attention. So I'm sorry, but will you attend for at least a while?"

I grasped my head at his question, but I knew I couldn't just say no. This was the crown prince's order, after all.

With a thousand-yard stare, I murmured, "Very well."

And so the banquet was upon us. Father was carrying me, and Lord Reineke was trotting behind us. I was dressed in a beautiful, long, purple dress in the fashion of House Renard. The silver lacing glimmered like moonlight.

Honestly, I felt overdressed, which only worried me.

Is father intending to sell me off? He did say he wants His Highness gone as soon as possible, and that would be the quickest way to make him leave.

These bleak thoughts caused me to hang my head down.

"You look lovely, Lune."

Liam's affectionate words lightened my mood. My fox ears twitched and my tail wagged.

"Thank you, brother. You look wonderful too."

Liam was wearing a suit that matched my gown. The sight of us put mother in high spirits.

"How adorable! You two look marvelous together. I'm glad I had these made for you!"

I felt a little relieved to find out that our outfits had been arranged by her.

As for Bal, he had to sit this one out in his room. We couldn't have Prince Hodr find out that Bal was his younger half brother. If the queen were to hear the king's illegitimate child was still alive, she might send more assassins after him. And if she were to know that House Renard had been secretly raising him, it'd cause a huge

conflict between them. My father said that he'd like Bal to meet with the king eventually, but now wasn't the time.

The dinner began. I was sitting in Liam's lap, with Lord Reineke lying by his feet. Even though we were to dine with the crown prince, this wasn't a good show of manners. But when His Highness finally arrived late, he didn't look angry at all. Quite the opposite—his face lit up.

"You, fox girl! I wanted to see you!"

"Please have a seat, Your Highness," father said, cutting the boy off with a blank look.

Faced with the solemn dignity of the royal family's loyal retainer, the prince timidly obeyed. The chamberlain couldn't say anything against the marquis either.

"We are still in the process of recovering, so we cannot offer you sufficient hospitality, but I hope you enjoy the meal nevertheless," father said, and with that, we began dining.

The appetizer was His Highness's least favorite food—mushroom soup. I knew all about his likes and dislikes from my time as the crown princess.

Does father know too? Is that why he chose this meal?

"The soup's delicious, father," I said, causing him to smile.

"I knew you'd be able to appreciate it, Lune. This soup is made from a special kind of mushroom which can only be found by specially trained boars. Your Highness, please have your fill as well."

Father gave Hodr a big smile to pressure him. The boy groaned under his breath and took a sip of the soup with open disgust. However, his face brightened as soon as he tasted it, and he happily ate the rest of it.

"The Renard domain's food really is great!" he said with a smile, for once looking his age.

He had loved the curry soup too. This wasn't like in my past life, when he'd had a poor appetite. But as I sipped the soup myself, realization dawned on me. Our territory didn't have much livestock, so the soup was made with vegetable scraps. It was warm, and the soft mushrooms added a pleasant aroma.

But in the palace, our meals were always cold.

A long corridor separated the kitchen from the dining hall, and all food had to be tested for poison. By the time the royals ate it, it

had already gone cold and lost both its aroma and texture.

That's why His Highness always liked food that tasted good when cold.

I felt the tiniest bit of pity for him. As I watched him happily eating such a simple soup, I found him just a little endearing.

But then our eyes met.

"A-Anyway, introduce me to that fox girl!" Hodr demanded, suddenly remembering why he was here.

Mother put on a smile at his rude request.

"What is your tutor even doing, Your Highness? I'm surprised to hear you speak like that to a lady, especially after Lord Reineke's scolding just yesterday. Her Majesty would be heartbroken."

An icy air exuded from her. The boy bit his lip, while the chamberlain hung his head in shame.

Prince Hodr tried again, speaking politely as though the words were being wrung out of him. "Marquis Renard? I heard that this beautiful lady is your daughter. May I know her name?"

Father nodded. "This is Lune Renard, my adopted daughter. She used to be a commoner orphan, so please be patient when it comes to her manners."

"Right. I'll overlook any rudeness. So, Lune—be mine."

Mother dropped her fork. I was shocked too, hearing the exact same line he'd said in my past life. My ears drooped as I clung to Liam.

"Your Highness, you must be joking. Lune is House Renard's daughter. She isn't to be treated like an object," Liam said, a dark aura surrounding him as he glared at Hodr.

The other boy gasped. "Ah, sorry, that came out wrong. But still, she's such a beautiful girl. It'd be a waste to seclude her here in the countryside. I can't officially marry her since she's a commoner and has animal ears. But if she were to join my harem, she'd live a life of luxury!" he said gleefully, seeing no problems in his own proposal. "Besides, there's that oath about how a woman from House Renard cannot become queen. But I'm sure father would agree to let her be my concubine instead. It's a much better fate than being some nobleman's mistress."

"Lune, a *mistress*...?" mother echoed. She'd grown so pale that she looked like she'd collapse at any moment.

"Isn't it obvious? Any nobleman would be a fool to take on a

lowborn as his legal wife," the boy reasoned, looking around the table with a smile.

However, he was met with nothing but silence. The chamberlain curled in on himself, as if having no idea what else to do. That was when Hodr finally realized his own verbal gaffe.

"Ah, no, I didn't mean it in a bad way…" he mumbled, attempting to laugh it off.

He had probably thought his proposal would be met with words of gratitude and honor, for no other family would've refused to have their daughter become the crown prince's concubine. But he was barking up the wrong tree.

"Your Highness, Lune is only eight," Liam said, glowering at the boy.

"It's not uncommon to put a girl into your harem while she's still a child and raise her the way you want her to be, right? She's got great potential, and I bet she'll be a good woman. Wouldn't you look forward to it?" Hodr smirked while staring at me.

The look on his face gave me goose bumps.

"I hadn't considered it before, but I suppose there *is* such a precedent," father said quietly.

He's agreeing? Maybe he really does *want to sell me off… That vow between House Renard and the royal family was thrown straight into the trash in my past life, after all.*

I was shaking all over.

"The future queen hasn't even been selected yet, and you're already speaking of concubines?" mother muttered, exasperated.

"The queen will have to be a proper noblewoman from a good family," Hodr responded with a nonchalant laugh.

"But she'd have to agree to you having a concubine in the first place, wouldn't she?" mother pointed out.

Jealous queens didn't permit the existence of concubines. I'd heard that the current king had slept with maidservants behind the queen's back, but every pregnant woman had been killed by her.

That's why Bal's mom fled the capital as soon as she realized she was pregnant. In my past life, she'd been lauded as the model mother who'd protected her child.

His Highness looked pensive.

"I…guess that's true. Then how about the crown princess? If we

cut off her fox ears, she could definitely become one."

I shook my head vigorously. I had to avoid becoming the crown princess at all costs.

"No…absolutely not…" I whispered.

My brother hugged me tightly.

"Your Highness, you'd do well to study our kingdom's history," he said coldly.

"What? How dare you?! My tutors say I have exceptional talent when it comes to history!"

Liam and father exchanged a look. The chamberlain shot a glance at my mother, red all the way up to his neck. Lord Reineke laughed through his nose.

"Is that so?" father said. "Then you should know why House Renard will not produce a queen. It's not that the royal family wouldn't choose a daughter of ours, but rather that we, House Renard, decline."

But the prince laughed. "Then we can just change that rule."

There it was. Another identical line from my past life. And he'd really followed through on that back then.

"It's something to do with light and darkness, right? Like if those two mix, light's power is weakened or whatever. But that's just a fairytale, and those contractors are long gone."

"Your Highness, this topic is a taboo," father chided.

"It's fine. Everyone here already knows about the secret anyway."

Liam sighed at Hodr's careless remark.

This revelation shocked me. I had no idea House Renard had anything to do with the Lord of Darkness, nor did I know why the two families couldn't intermarry. I only knew of the vow itself. This was definitely something an adopted child like me shouldn't have heard.

"I'm sure it won't matter again. Besides, this girl doesn't have Renard blood in the first place," Hodr went on.

My father was stone-faced.

Indeed, I had no blood relation to the Renards. Theoretically, even if I gave birth to the crown prince's child, it wouldn't be a result of light and darkness mixing, so there'd be no problem.

"But…" Liam tried to protest, yet struggled to find the words.

Father remained silent.

“Fine, fine. If you’re still not convinced, then I’ll raise your territory’s tax. That’s bad news for you, right? You’re impoverished and have to deal with all these disasters because of monsters. All you have to do to save your citizens is hand over one girl who has no blood relation to you. I’m sure you know what the right choice is as the feudal lord.”

Hodr was bargaining in the exact same way as in my previous incarnation. A chill ran through me, and my stomach was in knots. My vision was starting to grow dark.

It’s over... In the past, father just nodded along to those words. I didn’t think His Highness would get so fixated on me this time because of my fox ears.

The calamities caused by monsters were a major issue, and the marquis wouldn’t feel obliged to oppose the royalty just to protect an orphan like me.

Desperate for help, I looked up at Liam.

“Lune won’t be your bride,” he said flatly.

The prince laughed derisively.

“Oh, I see. You have a sister complex, don’t you? But sooner or later, she’ll have to marry someone.”

“Maybe so, but not someone she hates.”

“So you’re saying you won’t mind as long as she’s fine with it?” Hodr asked. He was brimming with confidence, which terrified me. “Well, Lune? Won’t you come with me?”

“No.”

“You’ll regret rejecting me, you know? We have so many rare and tasty things in the capital. How about it?”

“No.”

“I can have an even prettier dress tailored for you. I’ll buy you diamonds the color of your eyes!”

“No.”

That was how he’d paid tribute to me in the past and turned the kingdom upside down, upsetting the people.

I cannot make the same mistake! I don’t want to become the crown princess!

“I’ll have a castle built just for you. It can be our love nest.”

“Absolutely not,” I said without hesitation. “I don’t want to go anywhere!”

His Highness wiped a tear from his eye. I entwined my tail

around Liam out of fear.

"Ah, there it is. You plainly reject me. You're the only girl who's ever done that."

"Ugh, gross..." I murmured before I could stop myself.

My brother stood up, holding me.

"My sister is feeling unwell, so she'll be leaving now," he declared.

The prince sprang up too, but right as he did so, Lord Reineke stomped on his foot.

"Ow!" he whined, flinching.

As the prince trembled fearfully, Liam smiled.

"Excuse us. Enjoy the rest of your meal," he said, and then walked off with me in his arms.

Ever since that evening, Prince Hodr started following me around everywhere, even when I went to distribute the food at the monastery or temple. It was exhausting.

It would've been one thing if he helped out, but that wasn't the case at all.

"Hey, Lune! Your hands will get dirty if you do stuff like that! Why don't we have some banana cake instead?" he shouted while I was mashing konjac yams.

Lord Reineke growled, making the prince jump. That temporarily settled him down.

"The cake is for the victims, Your Highness. Please go back to the palace," I said, using Lord Reineke's authority to urge him on.

"But the banana cake you guys make is way tastier than in the palace! I'm certain you must have a special chef. Are you trying to hide them from—"

Before Hodr could finish, Lord Reineke cut him off with a bark.

I must say, I'm impressed with His Highness's resilience.

Each time the fox spirit rebuked the boy, he quieted down, but it never lasted. It was always only a matter of moments before he'd go back to making his careless comments.

"You find the cake tasty because it's warm and freshly baked. Once you return to the palace, please enjoy some warm food. Oh, and the acorn flour might contribute to the taste," I said, scrubbing the yams without even looking at the prince.

The chamberlain jotted down my words, looking impressed.

“You make a good point—the food at the palace tends to be cold,” the man said. “But how do you know that, Lady Lune?”

I couldn’t say these were my past life memories, so I made my eyes glaze over and put on a solemn expression.

“Lord Reineke informed me,” I claimed.

The fox spirit chuckled.

“Ohhh! Incredible, indeed,” the chamberlain responded, accepting my words without question.

Bal and the commoners arrived shortly after, carrying more yams. The boy was helping dig them up without a care for how muddy he got in the process.

At the same time, the strange hat-wearing guard reappeared too.

Is he still monitoring Bal?

I was puzzled, but nobody else seemed to notice him. Completely unaware, Bal brought over the yams.

“We got a whole bunch!”

“Thank you, Bal!” I said, rushing up to him to show my appreciation.

Lord Reineke came over as well, rubbing up against the boy’s legs. Bal bashfully rubbed his nose.

“By the way, I also found a strange kind of yam. I’d like Lord Reineke to join us next time. I’m sure we’ll learn something that way!” he said, starting to talk more about the mountains.

I loved listening to his stories. But suddenly, I heard a loud thud behind me. I quickly turned around, only to realize that His Highness had stomped on the ground and was now angrily glowering at us.

“Hey! Why do you only look happy when you’re talking with *him*?!” the prince yelled before whipping around and sulking off.

The chamberlain bowed in apology and chased after him. The guard in a hat chuckled wryly while glancing at Bal, then followed the other two.

Bal and I stood there for a moment, dumbfounded.

“What’s his problem?” Bal huffed.

Everyone around us began murmuring spitefully as well.

“This isn’t good,” Lord Reineke remarked.

I pressed my face against his fluffy back, whispering so that only he could hear me.

“What do you mean?”

“It might be dangerous to have that foolish prince direct all his anger onto Bal…and that other person is always keeping an eye on him. We can’t be sure how much the brat knows, but one word of complaint from him could give those people enough of a reason to dispose of Bal.”

My stomach dropped at Lord Reineke’s unusually serious tone.

“Surely not…”

“I am fond of Bal as well. Go consult with Liam,” the fox said.

I pushed my face into his silver coat.

This is scary…but the thought of losing Bal is even worse.

I bit my lip and raised my head, grasping the boy’s arm.

“Bal! Let’s spend the rest of the day together!”

He flushed, and as his eyes strayed to the side, he responded with, “Okay…”

Once we returned to the mansion, we found Liam and discussed the situation with him. As it turned out, he’d noticed the man in the hat too.

“If even Lord Reineke is concerned, then we ought to take the initiative,” he decided, his purple eyes glinting eerily.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“We’ll give them an opening to attack Bal.”

“You want to use him as bait? That’s too dangerous!” I protested, but there was a belligerent shine in Bal’s eyes.

“It’s fine! Let’s do it! I’m sick of being told what to do and having to put up with all this!” Bal said, as if he thought this was something fun.

But I couldn’t agree with him. “We can’t let you get hurt!”

Liam nodded. “You’re right, it might be too risky after all. If Lune is against it—”

“No!” Bal interrupted. “Look, changing my hair color was one thing, but am I always gonna have to wear these inconvenient glasses? Will I ever be able to go anywhere on my own? Those guys are obviously in no hurry to head home. If they don’t leave, I’ll never be able to live as myself!”

It was a heartbreaking cry. Because of his origins, Bal was being made to live as someone else. I understood his pain.

In my past life, I had to live as Lulu…

Liam was staring at me. He doted on me, and he'd never do something I didn't like. He always prioritized my feelings, and this time was no exception.

"Rather than be stuck in the safety of a cage, I'd prefer to live freely even if it's dangerous," Bal added.

"You understand him, don't you?" Lord Reineke asked, his kind eyes gazing into mine.

When I'd been married off to the crown prince, I had felt like a caged bird. I was treasured, loved...but only within the sight of His Highness. I wasn't allowed to leave by myself, and I was never allowed to return to the Renard domain. It had been that way up until my death.

I slowly raised my head, my eyes brimming with tears.

This is Bal's decision, not mine. I need to support him in whatever choice he makes.

I looked up at him. "Okay. But promise me you won't get hurt."

Bal smiled to reassure me, while Liam patted my head.

"Don't worry. Bal won't be fighting on his own."

"Indeed. I am here as well."

Lord Reineke's warm words delighted me. I held him up and conveyed his words to the other two.

"Lord Reineke says he will help. So I have to do my best too!"

Bal's and Liam's faces instantly fell at my declaration.

"Absolutely not!!!"

"Lune, I won't allow this!"

"But I'm the only one who can speak to Lord Reineke. And as his contractor, I know the forest best!" I said, making my ears twitch and my tail swish for effect.

"Well said, Lune! That's my chosen one!" Lord Reineke said.

He rubbed his face against mine and I hugged him back.

"Lord Reineke agrees with me!"

The boys held their heads in their hands.

"I didn't think you were such a tomboy, Lune." Liam sighed.

"As soon as I met her, I knew she was a ball of chaos!" Bal laughed.

"But that's why I like you, Lune," they both said in unison.

Liam shot Bal a glare, while the latter looked away with an awkward grin.

"I feel the same way, and I want everyone to be happy! So I'll do

all that I can!”

I tightened my fists, and Lord Reineke let out a loud bark.

The decisive day had arrived. Bal was out searching for konjacs in the woods as usual. More of the common folk had been allocated to help with the restoration, so fewer adults were available to go scavenging.

Meanwhile, the prince, chamberlain, and marquis were out visiting the territory’s citizens to console them. As expected, the hat-wearing guard followed Bal into the forest instead. When Liam and I saw where he was headed, we chased after him.

Just as planned, Bal pretended to be so engrossed in searching for vegetables that he wandered off deep into the woods on his own. The guard followed the boy, taking the bait while Liam and I stealthily crept after him.

Lord Reineke was accompanying us too, and thanks to his divine protection, I was able to freely traverse the forest without anyone noticing my presence. Although Liam didn’t have the same advantage, he was able to keep up with me and remain unseen.

He really is incredible!

I couldn’t help admiring his talent. In fact, he was probably much stronger than this guard too.

But to be the prince’s special agent, he must be quite capable.

We eventually reached the spot we’d planned on. Bal began digging up the earth, leaving his back completely unguarded. The rest of us remained hidden, ready to step in at a moment’s notice.

The guard, staring at the back of a defenseless child, drew his sword and swung it down right at him. Instantly, Bal spun around and parried the hit with his hoe, a loud clang echoing through the air. The man was startled by the counterattack, giving Bal a chance to make his escape.

The guard swiftly pursued, raising his sword once more. Bal took advantage of his small, light body to dash away, but the tip of the blade notched his colored glasses, knocking them off his face. He glared at the guard, his golden eyes glinting with wrath. In that moment, the small boy looked like a fearless king.

The guard gasped, then sneered.

“I knew it! There’s light in you.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t let you live!”

The man swung his sword again, and Bal quickly retreated. Pretending to be running blindly, he leaped into an animal trail. The guard chased after him, but his foot snagged on the undergrowth—or rather, the trap we’d made last night by tying the grass together. As soon as he hit the ground, small forest animals darted out of the woods and clambered on top of him. Even leeches and ticks crept onto his skin—all the creatures were following Lord Reineke’s orders.

The guard leaped to his feet furiously and tried to shake off the animals, his bloodshot eyes still fixated on Bal. But as he tried to follow the boy, he was caught in the snare trap. He lost hold of his sword, and Bal kicked it away.

“Woo-hoo!” Bal cheered, turning around and lifting his arms up in celebration.

“Bal! Watch out!” Liam exclaimed.

The guard blew into a small flute which had been hanging around his neck.

A sharp, screeching sound pierced the air, and all the birds and forest animals scattered away. I pressed my ears down, my tail drooping. Something trampled through the forest, and a moment later, a group of burly men emerged from the woods. These were the merchants and transporters Hodr had hired for the journey.

So some of them were secretly assassins, blending in as the attendants.

The men surrounded Bal, whose breath hitched in distress. The assassins smirked as they slowly stepped closer and closer to the boy armed only with a hoe.

He was cornered against a tree, in the very spot where we had first met. Around the tree was the metal band that had once been around his ankle.

“Kill him!” the hat-wearing guard ordered.

All the men sprung at Bal as one.

“Please, Lord Reineke!” I screamed.

The fox spirit bolted forward, growing in size. He stepped in front of Bal and slammed his paw down onto the ground. The soil beneath the men gave way, and they all fell into the massive pit. Lord Reineke picked up Bal and leaped aside before they could be swallowed up too.

“Now!” Liam and I shouted in unison.

A large net fell down from the treetops, covering the hole. A flag raised high above the trees, signifying that the trap had been successful.

The small animals rushed back in to kick dirt and leaves into the hole. I then released a dam which we had built over a tributary from the nearest stream, and water started pouring into the pit. That said, the stream wasn’t very powerful, so the hole wouldn’t flood completely. This would only make the men inside uncomfortable.

“Damn it! I have dirt in my eyes!”

“Ugh! The water feels awful!”

“I can’t move because of this net!”

“Stop moving around so much! You’re bumping into me!”

“Then *you* get away from me!”

The large men were making a commotion like a bunch of children.

Lord Reineke, still giant in size, nestled against me, asking for praise. I hugged his muzzle.

The citizens of the domain soon gathered, having seen the raised flag. When they spotted the men stuck in the pit, they all smirked and rolled up their sleeves.

“How dare you come into our land and act as you please? And now you’ve damaged Lord Reineke’s forest!” one of the commoners shouted.

The people no longer had a reason to hide their dismay. Together, they tied up the terrified assassins and the guard in a hat.

“Don’t think you’ll get away with this!” he yelled. “I am His Highness’s guard!”

The man was glaring at us while tumbling around on the ground, but the leeches and ticks had sucked all the life force out of him. He didn’t look intimidating in the slightest.

Sounds like something a small fry would say.

Bal was grinning. “That’s the desperate cry of a loser!”

Lord Reineke and the citizens roared with laughter. Liam smiled wryly too.

“Well, *I* am the heir of House Renard,” he told the guard.

The man scoffed. “Ha! You are just the son of a marquis. The

difference between you and the future king is plain as day, don't you think?"

"That may be true for His Highness, but *you* are merely a subordinate," Bal pointed out.

The guard's face flushed. "Just you wait and see… Laugh while you can!" he spat out with disdain.

The shrubs parted and knights of the Renard domain stepped out. Behind them were the crown prince, his chamberlain, and Marquis Renard. When Lord Reineke spotted Hodr, he walked up to me and held me close with his front paw. I snuggled into his warm, fluffy chest, feeling comfortable and reassured.

"Your Highness!" The hat-wearing guard's face relaxed at the sight of the prince. Gaining confidence, his voice became louder. "Please punish these people! These commoners have assaulted a royal guard!"

Hodr exchanged a conflicted glance with his chamberlain.

"Why don't we find out what happened first?" my father proposed.

"R-Right. Yes, that's a good idea. Why did this happen?" His Highness asked the guard.

"I went into the woods to help the people dig up vegetables. Then out of nowhere, this boy attacked me!" the man claimed, glaring at Bal.

Bal pouted. "You pointed your sword at me first, old man."

"Which one of us will you believe, Your Highness? That kid, or me?"

"Obviously, y—"

Before Hodr could finish, the marquis clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"You shouldn't just take them for their word, Your Highness. Check things yourself. Those who sit on the throne mustn't let their emotions cloud their judgment."

The prince's back straightened after hearing my father's warning. He'd mentioned the throne to remind the boy that not even a crown prince could ascend to take it without the approval of the royal family's loyal retainer.

"Right. Of course," he replied, glancing between the guard and Bal. However, Hodr already found Bal disagreeable—there was no way he'd give a fair judgment. "No matter how you look at it, that

brat's at fault."

As soon as he said that, the guard grinned smugly at Bal.

Oh no! If this keeps up, Bal will be accused of committing a crime! What can I do? There must be something… Oh, I know!

Still snuggled against Lord Reineke, I stared at His Highness. With the fox spirit by my side, I wasn't afraid. When Hodr noticed my gaze, his face turned bright red.

I knew it! My coaxing's just as effective on him as in my past life!

"But if this was simply an attack on your guard, why are all these merchants from the capital here?" I asked, tilting my head. "Isn't that strange?"

"W-Wait, you're right! That *is* weird! Hey, you guys? Why are you here?" the prince demanded.

The assassins who'd been posing as merchants all looked away at his question.

"They came to assist me!" the guard explained frantically.

"Without any tools?" Liam asked, causing the man to bite his lip.

"And it looks like this guard's scabbard is empty. Why did you draw your sword?" Father's stern gaze was fixated on the man, whose face paled.

Liam handed Bal's hoe to the prince.

"There's a mark here, left by the blade."

When Hodr saw the chip in the wooden handle, his brows furrowed.

"Bal is the same age as me. An adult pointed his sword at a small child… That's horrible!" I clung to Lord Reineke, looking up at His Highness pitifully to entice his empathy.

"You make quite the vixen," Lord Reineke remarked with a smirk.

The prince stumbled back. "Yeah. It's horrible. This man is horrible! You can't raise your sword against a kid, no matter what! Yep! This guy must be at fault! Off with his head!!!" he commanded, pointing at the guard.

Another instant judgment, and an extreme one at that!

The guard looked astonished. "What?! You're abandoning me?! You're the one who told me to punish that boy, Your Highness! I'm only following—"

"You're trying to blame *me*? I may have told you to punish him, but not to *kill* him. You violated my orders."

The guard ground his teeth. "But this boy is the child of His

Majesty's mistress! If we don't dispose of him now, he'll bring nothing but trouble!"

His Highness only shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. "This again? Even if he *is* my half brother, what could a runt like him do to me?"

"He should've been sent to the monastery! But instead, we received a false report that he'd died en route, and now House Renard is raising him while pretending he's their relative! This is a huge deal! It's treason!!!" the guard screeched.

The chamberlain cast father an uneasy glance. Both he and my brother remained completely expressionless.

"Really...?" Hodr couldn't hide the hesitation in his voice as he looked up at the marquis.

If treason was truly at hand, this would be a critical situation for the crown prince. He was surrounded by Renard knights, and his own forces were already captured. There was no way he'd be able to escape with just his chamberlain's help. His disappearance could be covered up with the claim of an accident.

Father stared the guard down. "Where's your proof?"

The man's breath hitched at that simple question. He shuddered, turning his gaze to Bal.

"Th-That kid is the proof! He's been hiding his golden eyes!"

His Highness and the chamberlain turned to look at Bal, who quickly closed his eyes.

"See? He's still trying to hide them because he has a guilty conscience! And he's not just some kid—he has a spirit as an ally!"

Everyone was staring at Bal. Tension filled the silent air of the forest. Not a single bird was chirping, and even the leaves were deathly still.

The silence was broken by the sound of His Highness nervously gulping as he looked at the chamberlain. With a pained expression, the man whispered something into the prince's ear.

"His hair? Of course! His hair is orange! If he truly had royal blood, it'd be blond!" Hodr exclaimed. "So you must be wrong! He cannot be of royal descent!"

His decision must've been made based on the chamberlain's advice. Whatever the truth was, this wasn't the time to be making enemies of House Renard. In this remote place, even if they requested backup, it'd take a long time for anyone to make the

difficult journey here. There was no guarantee that the prince could survive until then, so sacrificing a single guard was the wiser choice.

"Isn't that right, Marquis Renard? You're not betraying the royal family, are you?"

The marquis shook his head. "Besides, if the guard was telling the truth, then what about the leg band? This boy doesn't have one. How would he have gotten rid of it?"

Hodr gasped. "Exactly! Those bands are made by the mages from the royal court, and they have a special cipher! The only way to remove one is to cut off your leg. But this kid has both his legs, so it can't be him!"

"Indeed. Besides, the nameless band is right here," Liam said, pointing at the oak tree behind Bal.

A metal anklet was affixed around the root of the little tree. The guard gasped at the sight, and collapsed in place as if losing all strength.

"That can't be! He's truly dead? But the caliber of this boy... The light..." he mumbled under his breath, but his eyes already looked lifeless.

"A-All right, then! Off with his head!" Hodr ordered the chamberlain, who faltered.

"Wait! You can't kill him if you want to find the real culprit!" I shouted. I hadn't expected things to escalate this much, and the person who ordered him to do this in the first place was far worse. If this guard died here, it'd only please the true perpetrator.

"The real culprit?" Hodr asked.

"Someone was giving orders to this man, right?"

"What orders?"

I couldn't explain it well, so Liam stepped in.

"This guard and the men we captured have interfered with your first official business, Your Highness. They've cast suspicion on House Renard and isolated you in our domain. They behaved unprofessionally in a place stricken by disaster, and planned to turn the animosity of the people against you. Someone is behind all this, and we must find out who. It's too soon to execute this man."

The hesitant prince glanced around and was met by the silent stares of the stern Renard knights. The commoners, brandishing

agricultural tools in their hands, glared at him and the captured men.

“We cannot guarantee your safety, Your Highness, as your attendants have betrayed you. You should return to the capital as soon as possible,” father said with a blank expression.

Hodr fell on his knees and vomited, no longer able to hold his nerve. The panicked chamberlain rubbed his back.

“My knights will escort you to our borders,” father continued. “From there, head back to the capital with only your most trusted forces.”

The boy nodded, his eyes filled with tears. “Quickly! I want to leave! If not today, then tomorrow! I’m sorry, but you’re the only one I can rely on!” he exclaimed as he clung onto the marquis, no longer caring how he looked.

“Of course, Your Highness. Your safety is my priority.”

“Thank you! Thank you, marquis! I won’t forget this! I’ll give all those men the harshest punishment possible! So please look after me!”

Father nodded calmly at the prince’s frantic begging.

After that, His Highness quickly made preparations to go back to the capital.

“See you again, Lune!” he said, sending me a regretful glance.

I couldn’t understand how he could remain so hopeful after everything that had happened.

Does it take that kind of audacity to sit on the throne?

I hid behind my brother without replying, while Lord Reineke nuzzled against me.

“I’ll send you an official invite to the palace, so sit tight!” Hodr said, blushing.

I looked up at father with pleading eyes.

“Now that I’ve finished my first official business, I see just how smart you are. And you were worried about me, right? I can tell you like me. Since I owe a favor to House Renard, I’ll make you into the crown princess. So come to the palace and you’ll get your education. And when you’re all grown up, you’ll get to be a princess!”

His Highness’s words cast me into despair.

Is father going to sell me off this time too?

My ears and tail slumped.

“Lune will not be your bride,” Liam said resolutely.

“As we’ve already discussed, Lune will not be married into the royal family,” father added.

My face lit up. “Father!” I exclaimed happily.

He simply nodded, deadpan as ever.

But for some reason, Hodr smirked.

“I won’t give up no matter how much you resist! I’ll come back for you!”

“Please don’t! I’m not going anywhere!”

The prince’s cheeks flushed even more at my reply.

Oh, right. This guy likes it when I’m cold to him…

“I’ll work hard for you! I’ll survive this arduous journey, so believe in me!” he said without any consideration of my feelings, drunk on his sense of heroism.

Lord Reineke yawned to show that he was bored. I wouldn’t say anything more, because no matter how harsh my words might be, they’d just please His Highness.

Finally, the prince left to travel back to the capital. Not a single one of the people here went to see him off. It was a lonesome departure, hardly suited to someone of royal standing. But the citizens had already shut off His Highness Hodr from their hearts.

“I’m so tired…” I murmured. I was exhausted, my ears and tail hanging down.

Liam petted my head.

“Brother…”

I clung to him tightly.

Father watched us for a moment. Then with a serious look on his face, he asked, “Lune, do you like Liam?”

Liam’s face flushed in surprise. “Why are you suddenly—”

“Yes! I love him!” I answered cheerfully, my tail wagging.

“I see,” father said. “And you told the crown prince that you don’t want to go anywhere. Is that true?”

I nodded. “Please, father! Don’t send me off as anyone’s bride! When I’m older and can live on my own, I’ll pay you back for everything! So please!!!”

I lowered my head, begging.

“I plead with you as well: Don’t send Lune to the palace,” Liam said, bowing deeply too.

“All right. If you’re both this serious about it, then so be it,” father decided. Mother nodded as well.

“Thank you so much!” Liam and I exclaimed in unison. We clasped our hands together, our fingers intertwining.

“That’s great, isn’t it, Lune?”

“Yes! I’m so glad!”

Tears of relief filled my eyes.

“There’s no need to cry, Lune,” mother said, wiping away my tears. “I’m glad I’ll always get to be with you too. Watching you grow up is going to be so much fun.”

Hearing her talk about the future brought me so much joy. With even father smiling, I couldn’t help but smile too. Now that they had approved of me staying in the Renard domain, I was in high spirits.

Thank goodness! Now I can rest easy and focus on returning the favor!

My fluffy tail wagged.

Chapter 5: The Taboo Name

I was sitting in a chair by the window of my bedroom, gazing outside at the Renard domain, which had been ravaged by the flood and monsters.

"We managed to get by this time, but it'll be meaningless if this keeps happening every year," I said with a sigh.

Although I'd managed to find Theo and gain his help, if the riparian works continued at this pace, everything would just get destroyed all over again next spring. His Highness Hodr might even show up once more under the pretext of bringing aid.

"Father said he'll set aside a budget for the project, but we don't have much money in the first place."

In order to carry out construction work, we'd need to call on a large number of earth magic wielders. We'd also need machinery and equipment, but due to recent events, our public finances were deteriorating.

His Highness brought a lot of gold, but he'll want to know how we're using it. He might interfere if he finds out we're trying to build a canal.

The royal family didn't like the idea of the Renard domain becoming self-sufficient, which was why it had been left as an isolated territory in my past life until Hodr paved that large road. On the upside, thanks to the lack of roads, the domain was well fortified. We couldn't lose that advantage this time.

If we had a canal, leaving the territory would be easier, but entering it would still be difficult because the ships would have to travel against the current. The canal would also strengthen our defenses, so I didn't want to give up on the idea. I kept thinking things over until...

"Wait, I know! We have a vein of magical ore!" I shouted, my ears standing at attention. "Lord Reineke?"

The fox, who had been lying down, looked up when I called to him. He climbed onto my lap and I started petting him.

"What is it, Lune?" he asked, happily wagging his tail.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

"Of course I am. Ever since you started speaking in my name, more

and more people have left offerings at my temple. My power is increasing."

"But spirits like you don't eat the offerings."

"We spirits become more powerful as more people believe in us and earnestly wish for our aid. Even those who are suffering still look for beautiful flowers and edible fruit—their resolute hearts give us strength."

"Thanks to Lady Kuzunoha, the people have been planting more soybeans, saying that they want to try making new offerings. And Lady Dakini told us about the koji oranges too."

"Humph! As soon as you learned to control your mana better, they got to using you left and right! It's outrageous!" Lord Reineke snapped.

"When it's fall, I'll make you your favorite wine," I told him.

"Very good, very good," he responded, instantly appeased.

"There's something I'd like to ask you about, Lord Reineke."

"Go ahead."

"It's about the vein of magical ore."

As soon as I brought that up, the spirit's face soured.

"There's one in our domain, right? Why hasn't it been found yet?"

"Because a dragon lives there," he said curtly.

"A dragon?!"

"A dragon lives in the sacred mountains. That's why there are so many monsters, and why recklessly climbing the mountain is a terrible idea. That ore vein was only discovered because the dragon had died before the road was built through its mountains."

"So it's still alive right now?" I was dumbfounded. I'd never have imagined that a dragon was the reason. They were only ever spoken of in fables. I'd heard the legend of a dragon in the sacred mountains, but nobody thought of it as more than just some old story.

"The dragon is sick," Lord Reineke went on. *"In that state, it can't eat its scales."*

"Eat its scales? What are you talking about?"

"Dragons hibernate before they mature—which means they sleep for a long time, sometimes for a hundred years. When they wake up, they molt, and then usually eat their shed scales. But if those scales are left to rot, they transform into monsters which flow into the river

with the melting snow. This worsens the flooding and damages the lands."

"So the recent increase in monsters is because of the dragon too?"

Lord Reineke nodded. In other words, the monsters that attacked me in my previous life were the offspring of the dragon.

"As long as the dragon is alive, nobody can go searching near its nest for the ore vein. However sick it may be, a human is still no match. Best to just wait until it dies. It won't be long now."

The spirit's words gave me pause.

"So…a weakened dragon lives by the vein of magic ore, and its scales are turning into monsters…"

Lord Reineke watched with a smirk as I fell into deep thought.

Dragons were similar to spirits: powerful, long-lived, and wise. If we killed it, we'd not only gain a supply of magical ore, we'd also suppress the monster outbreaks. However, most humans weren't capable of killing a dragon—anyone who managed to would be famous as a Dragonslayer. But in exchange for that fame, they were cursed by the dragon they killed and forever unable to make a spirit contract.

"Well, if you insist, I could lend you my help," Lord Reineke said. The dark look in his narrowed eyes made me shudder.

I gulped. "Then please help me, Lord Reineke."

"Oh? And what is your wish?"

I flinched at the sound of his low, icy voice. *But I can't give up now!* I took a deep breath.

"I want to cure the dragon!" I yelled.

Lord Reineke burst into laughter.

"Cure the dragon, you say? Peculiar, but fascinating indeed…" he said, holding his stomach as he chortled.

"Why are you laughing?!" I asked, disturbed.

"Don't you want to kill it?"

"Huh? You can kill a dragon?"

"All I can do is lend you my power. How you use it is up to you," he responded with a smirk.

"Exactly. I don't think I *could* kill a dragon, nor do I want to. If the dragon can't eat its scales because it's sick, then won't our problem be solved if we cure it? In the worst-case scenario, we can just collect its scales and burn them before they turn into

monsters."

"Hmm. Good point. But what about the magical ore?"

"We can just leave it be. The dragon's guarding it, right? That ore vein must be precious to it."

Lord Reineke chuckled again. *"I see. Then let me give you one piece of advice: When you cure the dragon, take its scales in exchange."*

"But won't they turn into monsters?"

"If you process them properly, they will instead become magical ore."

"What?"

"In fact, magical ore is the corpse wax of dead dragons. The same can happen with dragon scales; they will turn into magical ore so long as you stop them from decomposing. Though, their magical power isn't as potent."

"Wait, so a vein of magical ore is basically a dragon graveyard?! That must be why the dragon is protecting it."

"Correct."

If someone were to attack such a place and try to steal the ore, they'd no doubt incite the dragon's fury. Even against a sick dragon, there was no way of knowing how such an encounter would turn out.

My ears and tail perked up at this load of information.

"Why didn't you tell me anything sooner, Lord Reineke?" I asked. If I'd known about this, I would've never even considered killing the dragon.

The fox only smirked, causing me to shiver.

"Were you...testing me?"

"Perhaps. Now, I wonder if you'll actually manage to cure the dragon?" Lord Reineke chuckled and buried his face into my lap.

What would he have done if I'd said I wanted to kill the dragon?

I felt cold sweat dripping down my back. I shakily leaned over Lord Reineke, my ears and tail drooping.

◆◆◆◆

It was time to start the climb up the sacred mountains to find the dragon's lair. Liam, Bal, and all of Renard's best knights were accompanying me.

At first, I had intended to go alone. I wasn't planning on fighting the dragon, and I didn't want to alert it by bringing a show of force. But of course, Liam was opposed to the idea, and father had summoned the most elite knights to escort me. So with Lord Reineke's guidance, we headed toward the lair. He was in his giant form, leading the expedition with me upon his warm, fluffy back.

Though the mountains were infested with monsters, it was a serene day. I was sure it was because the fox spirit was with us. Everyone else must've thought so too, as golden light spilled from all of them into Lord Reineke's forehead, putting him in a good mood. At his request, I had packed a bottle of gentian liqueur, named after the flower it was made from.

"I wanna ride Lord Reineke's back too," Bal remarked, gazing up at me with envy.

Liam also seemed to be in a bad mood.



Lord Reineke swished his tail. **“Only Lune can do that,”** he said in good humor.

Everyone instantly paled.

“Huh? Lord Reineke, you can talk?!” Bal asked, shocked.

“Your faith in me has grown, and so has my power, enabling me to speak to you,” the spirit explained proudly.

“So our faith in you has helped you!” Bal said happily.

“Indeed. And we spirits help those who believe in us.”

At those words, the knights all joined their hands and prayed. Lord Reineke absorbed even more golden light from them, nodding in satisfaction.

We were following the Gupi River upstream, heading for the origin of the Renard River. Most of the others had started the journey on horseback, but as the animal trail disappeared, everyone had to proceed on foot.

Eventually, we arrived in front of a large cave, into which the river stream continued. The deteriorated entrance wall was covered in old carvings and ivy.

“These are the crests of the royal family and House Renard—a lion and a fox. Are these relics of both families?” Liam asked with surprise.

Lord Reineke didn’t reply, only gazing coldly at him.

“There’s also some writing…but it’s very old. Hmm…” Bal stared at the runes carved into the wall. Indeed, he had already begun studying them during his lessons. “Something about a gate? The rest is scraped off.”

“Scraped off? This place, it couldn’t be…” Liam murmured under his breath.

The scent of rot drifted from within the cave, followed by a deep howling sound that made me shudder.

“Scared?” Lord Reineke asked, and I nodded. **“Well, I shall remain here. Which one of you will enter the cave?”**

I looked at the fox in surprise. I was sure he’d go into the cave too.

“You’re not coming, Lord Reineke?”

“I cannot enter, as the cave is enchanted with magic that seals spirits,” he explained, smiling nonchalantly.

“I’ll go!” Bal volunteered without hesitation.

After witnessing Liam's battle, he'd been inspired and had dedicated himself to studying martial arts. And following the ordeal with Hodr, Bal put a lot of effort into his studies in order to survive. My father ensured that the monastery was a safe place, allowing Bal to mingle with the people there. The abbot who had once been a paladin taught Bal how to use a blade, and he also learned magic from the other experts. He'd even joined our yoga exercises, which helped him to handle his mana better.

"I've gotten even stronger lately!" Bal said, running off to the cave entrance.

However, he crashed into something, and with a burst of golden light, he was sent flying.

Lord Reineke barely suppressed a grin. **"Only the chosen ones may enter."**

"Please set me down," I said, and the fox put me back onto the ground. I turned to face everyone before announcing: "I'll go."

Liam immediately stood in my way.

"Brother..."

"*I'll* go," he said.

"But..."

"I'm sure only I can enter. This must be the place only the head of House Renard knows about—The Gate That Must Not Be Invoked."

"Huh?"

Liam's face grew dark.

"It's part of an ancient legend. In the past, the heirs of House Renard would pass through this gate and make a contract with the spirit inside to become acknowledged as the new head of the house. But a hundred years ago, the person who contracted this spirit went insane while in the royal palace. The spirit's power was found to be the reason. This cave was then sealed by royal decree, and contracting the spirit within is forbidden."

"Someone went mad?"

"He lost the humanity in his heart, and ultimately killed himself in the palace."

"What?! You can't go in there, Liam! What if the same thing happens to you?!" Bal exclaimed.

"If this will help us stop the monsters and control the river, then that's what I must do," Liam said decisively.

But Bal wouldn't back down. "Don't you value your own life?!"

"If we leave the monsters be, many of our citizens will perish. I could be one of their victims too."

Liam turned toward the cave entrance. I grabbed his hand, holding on tightly.

"I wish I hadn't said anything about the dragon after all…" I said, tears spilling down my cheeks. I had wanted to pay the marquisate back, but I couldn't sacrifice Liam for that. "Does it really have to be Liam, Lord Reineke?"

The spirit nodded. **"Unless the barrier is broken from the inside, only one of Renard blood may enter,"** he replied bluntly.

"But…but…" I stammered.

"Lune, you are able to go with him. Foxes have guided humans since long ago. And unlike me, you are not a spirit, so the magic will not seal you," Lord Reineke said, giving me a challenging look.

"Then I'll go too! Liam, I'll guide your path!" I decided, wiping away my tears.

Liam looked shaken by my vigor.

"Don't be foolish, Lune. What if some of that negative energy rubs off on you too?"

"I don't care. I won't let you go all by yourself!"

"Just think of mother. What would she do if something happened to you?"

"But you'll be with me!" I insisted, gazing into my brother's eyes. "If you lose your heart, then I will find it! So you'll find mine too, right?"

"Lune…"

"I'll escort you to the dragon with Lord Reineke's power. That's something only I can do!"

Liam cast a troubled look at the spirit. "Lord Reineke, this is too much. Please stop her."

I hugged Liam, wrapping my arms, legs, and tail around him and clinging as tightly as I could.

"It doesn't matter what Lord Reineke says, I'm still going!"

"Lune."

"Please! Don't leave me behind!"

"Lune."

"Please… I don't want to be left behind again."

The memories flashed before my eyes: my family leaving me to the monsters, my adoptive mother rushing to her death to reunite with Lady Lulu, my father and brother executed before me. I'd had enough of being left behind on my own. Even at the cost of my own heart, I wanted to stay with my dear brother.

"Lune…" Liam said, conflicted by how desperate I was.

"Go with Lune," Lord Reineke said, taking my side.

"Lord Reineke?" Liam looked up at the giant fox, on the verge of tears.

"Liam, you practice yoga daily, do you not? Take a deep breath."

At the spirit's instructions, Liam leveled his breathing. I could tell that the flow of mana around me had changed, as could Bal and the knights. Everyone watched with wide eyes.

"Good. If you are able to hold in your mana like this, you'll be fine," Lord Reineke said, patting Liam with his large tail. **"Take Lune with you. You'll be able to protect her."**

"I will?"

"Yes, but you must remember: Do not let the darkness consume you."

Liam gave a solemn nod. After exhaling slowly, he turned to me with a determined look.

"All right, Lune. But don't push yourself."

"Okay! You too, dear brother!" I said, releasing him and stepping back down onto the ground.

Liam turned to look at Bal and the knights. "There should be a hidden entrance farther up from here. Find it and get it open in case of emergency."

"Got it!" Bal nodded. "I'll go get Master Theo."

"I'm counting on you, Bal."

"Leave it to me!" The boy pressed his fist to his chest.

"Ready?" Lord Reineke asked.

Liam and I nodded.

"Lune's light will show you the way." The fox pressed his tail to mine, causing my tail to light up faintly like a lamp. **"Now go."**

"Right!"

"And return safely."

Liam nodded, drawing a sword from the sheath at his hip. It was the Eclipse Blade, which had been in House Renard for

generations. Facing the cave, Liam drew a pentagram with the sword.

"Leader of night, ruler of the chaotic darkness from which light is born, Lord of Darkness, Nott—take me into the abyss."

The moment Liam spoke the taboo name out loud, the groaning from within the cave stopped. I could no longer hear the current of the stream nor the cries of the birds. All sound disappeared, and the sun hid behind the clouds. The fur on my tail stood on end.

A hole appeared in the transparent wall that had knocked Bal back earlier. Liam took a deep breath, and I did the same. Then, we clasped our hands together and stepped forward.

As soon as Liam and I stepped into the cave, the thin barrier behind us hardened like glass. Bal and the knights rushed over and pounded their fists against it, but to no avail. I waved my shining tail to show them that everything was fine.

"Let's get going," Liam urged.

We walked into the depths of the cave, shrouded in purple shadows. Liam lit his lantern, but sighed when he saw that even the flame was dim. My tail would have to be our only source of light, guiding our way forward.

"I'm glad you're here," my brother said.

"I'm glad you're here too," I replied, squeezing his hand in mine.

"You think your sister's being honest? She hates this."

The darkness coiled around Liam's head, speaking words that were far from the truth.

"Lune, are you really not scared?" Liam asked me, concerned.

"Not at all," I said with a smile.

The darkness then tried to wrap itself around me instead.

"Lune's just pushing herself because she doesn't want to be abandoned," it whispered. **"We can see right through her. She can't say what she truly thinks."**

Liam bit his lip.

"That's not true!" I said, shaking my head.

The darkness recoiled.

"Tch! You have a spirit contract, don't you? And you're not even of Renard blood! Why did you enter here?!"

"Because foxes guide humans!" I responded, repeating Lord Reineke's words as I proudly puffed out my chest.

“Damn it! How annoying!”

The purple shadows once again clung around Liam, even more tightly than before.

“You’re bothering Lune. She doesn’t love you,” it hissed.

“What are you talking about?! Fools! You guys must be demons that stir the darkness in people’s hearts, but you’re so far off the mark it’s just plain laughable!” I said, poking my tongue out.

There was a moment of silence.

“*You’re* the fool,” the darkness said at last.

“Losing your temper so quickly? You must be new to this whole ‘temptation’ thing.”

“No we’re not! We’ve always been here, doing this—”

“Oh really? Then I guess you’ve been away from humans for so long that you’ve lost your touch. Lord Reineke is much better at tormenting people than you. Maybe you should go get someone better to do this for you.”

“Why…why would you say something so cruel? Don’t you dare compare us to some spirit!”

“You were cruel to us first, so this is just payback!” I exclaimed.

It seemed the darkness had no answer to that.

“Sorry, that might’ve been too much…” I added, unnerved by the lasting silence.

“Too late for regrets!” suddenly came the reply.

The shadows dove to the ground and coiled around Liam’s feet, dragging him down like quicksand.

Liam let go of my hand as he sank. “Run, Lune!”

I reached back for him, only barely managing to grab ahold of his wrist. Together, we fell into the murky bog.

◆◆◆◆

There were voices all around me, each saying different things. I heard a woman laughing, and when I turned to look, I saw my adoptive mother. A young girl who looked just like me rushed over to her and hugged her—it must’ve been Lady Lulu.

“Lulu, I’m so glad you’re alive! Everything will be fine as long as you’re here,” mother said with a smile. She was the perfect picture of happiness.

The jet-black darkness chortled.

“If only that girl were alive. If only it had been her,” it whispered in the bewitching voice of a seductive woman.

My brother was staring at the scene with a hollow look in his eyes. “If Lulu had lived—”

“That’s right, boy. Nobody loves *you*. Nobody!”

I pulled Liam by the hand.

“That’s not true! Mother would never say that!”

Hearing my voice seemed to make Liam come to his senses.

“Y-You’re right. She wouldn’t.”

We both nodded at each other, but the darkness snickered like it was enjoying itself. The scene before us shifted, showing myself and Bal. We looked older, and Bal was donning a knight’s uniform. The sight made Liam flinch.

“I love you, Lune. I want you to marry me,” the phantom Bal said.

“That’s ridiculous—” I objected, but before I could finish, my brother suddenly brushed my hand off. “Liam…?”

“Don’t look, Lune,” he said, covering his face.

“Lune will choose Bal,” the darkness whispered. **“She will choose the prince with the glimmering hair. You, the dark-haired one, will be abandoned.”**

“Brother?! Snap out of it!”

“Hear that? She calls you her brother. And you’ll be nothing—”

“Shut up!” Liam shouted, flailing his arms to chase the darkness away.

“She hates having her tail touched, you know. But she can’t tell her brother no, so she puts up with it.”

Liam’s face paled as he turned to look at me.

“That’s not true! It feels nice! I let you do it because I love you!” I said.

“As a brother, that is. She’s just attached to you because you found her. But she doesn’t love you for who you are, Liam. And when she finds out about *that*, she’ll leave.”

“Shut up! I know! I’m fine with it. It’s fine!”

“Liar, liar, *liar*! That’s not what you want!”

“Just shut up!!!”

“You should take what you want by force. You can stop her from running. No one will see…”

As the darkness instigated Liam, the image before us changed

again. An older version of myself was there, wearing the academy's uniform.

"The uniform suits her," Liam grumbled.

"Doesn't it? But you already know, don't you? You cannot let her go into the academy, and certainly not to any parties. If such a beautiful girl joined high society, *everyone* would be after her."

My phantom's attire shifted into a gorgeous gown. Indeed, in my past life Liam had forbidden me from going to the academy or attending parties. What I was seeing now was something I'd only dreamed of.

"Lock her up in the mansion. Nobody can see her. Nobody can know her."

As the darkness whispered, Liam lifted his head. His purple eyes fixed on me.

"Lock her up... Nobody..." Liam mumbled vacantly, his voice mixing with that of the darkness.

"Brother, get ahold of yourself! It's lying to you!"

"Lune..."

"I *do* love you!"

Liam smiled sadly. "Yeah. I know..."

The darkness roared with laughter at his feeble voice. **"Ha! Such sisterly words!"**

"Yes, and she's right. I'm the one in the wrong here."

In response to his words, a purple crystal grew all around him, imprisoning him. He curled up inside of it in a fetal position, gazing wistfully at my phantom.

"Brother!" I shouted, banging my fist against the crystal.

Yet Liam didn't even look at me. His focus was entirely on the illusion created by the darkness.

"Brother! Brother!"

I kept hitting the purple crystal, but it didn't even budge. In fact, its color gradually darkened.

"Look at me, brother! I *need* you!!!" I screamed. My tail began shining more intensely.

"Ugh! So bright!" The darkness recoiled. **"A Renard finally came in here. If I can become one with his body, I'll be set free! So don't get in my way!"**

The darkness slammed into me, causing me to fall down on my

butt. I felt a strange sensation around my fingertips when my hands touched the ground. When I brushed some of the sand away, I realized that I was looking at a magic circle. I quickly started wiping all of the dust off using my hands and tail. Perhaps thanks to Lord Reineke's power within me, I was able to reveal the whole thing in no time at all.

"This is...for summoning a spirit, right?" I murmured, gazing at the symbol written in the center. "Maybe it's the summoning circle for the Lord of Darkness, Nott?"

When I said the name, the circle glowed a bit. It was the same shade of purple as my brother's eyes. The jet-black darkness around him lit up too.

"Is that darkness Nott? But the only way to stop a rampaging spirit is to bind it with a contract using a magic circle!"

Lord Reineke had once taught me that.

"But I can't have two spirit contracts. The only one who can do it in this situation..." I turned to Liam, who was still staring blankly at my phantom. "Brother! Look over here! The only way to stop this spirit is through a contract!"

I pounded my fist against the crystal, but Liam wasn't listening.

"Brother?! Don't ignore me!" I yelled with all my might, but he didn't even spare me a glance. "Brother..."

My phantom now wore a wedding dress, walking side by side with my father toward Bal. My phantom's tail wagged at the sight of him. However, his form suddenly changed into that of His Highness Hodr. I shuddered with disgust, recalling our wedding ceremony from my past life. I watched as he gently petted my phantom's tail.

"Gross!" I exclaimed, my tail reflexively standing on end. Even though nobody was actually touching me, I still felt an uncomfortable sensation creeping up my tail.

Was this a prophecy from the Lord of Darkness? Or a curse?

I'm terrified that this vision will come true!

"No!" I clung to the crystal, my eyes overflowing with tears of dread. "I don't want this! Brother, please! Look at me! Please! Stop that wedding!" I screamed as loud as I could. My tail shone even brighter. "Please, brother, listen to me! Don't make me someone's bride! I don't want to go anywhere!!!"

I kept hitting the crystal, tears streaming down my cheeks.

At last, Liam looked at me.

“Brother, please! I hate this! I don’t want to be married off to anyone!”

“You…don’t?” he asked softly.

“No.”

“Not even to Bal?”

“No.”

“Not even to a rich man?”

“No.”

“Not even if you could go to a much more abundant domain?”

“No! I want to stay with you… Can’t I do that? Once I’m older, I’ll look for a job so I won’t drag the marquisate down. So please, don’t send me off anywhere…” I sobbed, clinging to the crystal.

Liam reached out to me from within his prison. He tried to wipe my tears away, but the barrier between us made that impossible.

“Lune,” he called out to me. “Don’t cry.”

“But you’re not coming out!” I knocked against the crystal again. “Come back to me, brother! I feel so alone and scared without you! Stay with me!”

My words must’ve resonated with him, as he bit his lip and raised his head, gazing into my eyes.

“Sorry, Lune. Step back a little.”

“But…”

“I’ll be by your side soon.”

With that, he drew his sword. It gave him such a commanding aura that I couldn’t help but stare at him in adoration. In a single strike from the blade, the crystal cracked.

“D-Don’t get the wrong idea!” the darkness screeched, desperate. **“Lune’s only relying on you as her older brother! She’s just your sister!”**

“I know! But that’s okay!” Liam snapped.

“This is all *your* fault!”

The jet-black darkness sent me flying back into the center of the magic circle.

“Lune!” Liam called to me.

I tried to get up, but pitch-black hands rose from the ground and grabbed my legs.

“No! Let go of me!”

I waved my shining tail, smacking one of the hands. It turned to

ash, but new ones kept sprouting out of the ground.

“It’s over for you!”

A large black hand loomed above me, about to completely cover me.

“Brother!”

“Lune!”

Just as I screamed, the crystal shattered. Liam sprung forward, slashing the hand and pinning it to the center of the magic circle.

“If you make a contract with it, you should be able to stop its rampage!” I said.

Liam nodded and began chanting the spell while drawing the circle.

“Leader of night, ruler of the chaotic darkness out of whom light is born, Lord of Darkness, Nott—obey me!”

A purple light spread from the circle.

“Damn…” the jet-black darkness groaned.

Liam steadied his breathing and controlled his mana, all while pressing down the darkness with his sword. I hugged him, lending him my mana too.

The Eclipse Blade gradually absorbed the darkness. The once-beautiful silver sword was turned black.

“Give me your body instead, Liam. I can make all your wishes come true—wishes that a sword cannot grant,” the darkness whispered. **“I won’t use it forever, only occasionally. How about it? You’ll get more power this way. If you let me dwell in your body instead of the sword, you’ll be able to get anything you want. You could even become king. Ah, as a first step, I’ll kill Bal for you. You don’t want Lune to become his bride, do you? No need to dirty your hands. I can do it for you.”**

Liam raised his head, his purple eyes glinting wickedly. He had the bewitching smile of a demon. It was chillingly beautiful.

“See? It’s a good deal…”

Liam poured even more of his mana into the sword.

“I hereby make a contract with the Lord of Darkness, Nott. Protect me until my final breath.”

The Eclipse Blade and the diamond in its hilt shone with a purple light.

“Damn! Damn! Damn it all!!!”

The Lord of Darkness’s curses faded into silence as it was

completely absorbed into the sword. Liam put it back in its scabbard, and it clinked into place.

“You miscalculated, Nott. I don’t want to kill Bal,” Liam said with a chuckle.

A small groan echoed from the sword in response to his gloating.

“So…is the contract complete?” I asked.

“It is,” Liam replied. He then hugged me. “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

“It’s okay.”

“And I’m sorry for making you cry.”

“It’s okay!” I shook my head and smiled.

My brother softly stroked my cheek and wiped away my tears.

“Let’s keep going. We’re after the dragon, after all,” he said, picking me up in his arms.

Short Story 1: Their Tale

Liam and Lune disappeared into the cave. Frustration welled up inside me as I was powerless to do anything but watch.

“Lord Bal…” One of House Renard’s elite knights addressed me. The look in his eyes alone told me to get ahold of myself—I could tell because these knights instructed me and Liam in martial arts. “Someone, return to the monastery and bring Master Theo here.”

One of the most swift-footed knights broke into a run and disappeared.

I turned to Lord Reineke and bowed. “Please let us know where the other entrance is.”

After looking me over, he answered, **“Very well.”**

“Then we’ll set off as soon as Master Theo gets here.”

My words caused the fox to grin.

We waited for a while until Theo and Dr. Guillotin arrived. They must’ve rushed to get here, as they were covered in sweat and breathing heavily.

“Where’s Lady Lune?!” Theo, who usually struggled to make eye contact with anyone, now looked right into my eyes.

“She’s inside this cave. It’s sealed so that only members of House Renard can enter. But Liam said there’s a second entrance here somewhere, and he wants you to open it up for us.”

“Ahhh! For Lady Lune to have gone into such a dangerous place!” Dr. Guillotin cried, distraught. “I need to go and get her!” He pulled out a small bottle and drank its contents.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“A special analeptic.”

“A *what*?”

“It’s a type of recovery medicine that lets you push yourself a little bit harder than usual,” Dr. Guillotin explained with an evasive smile.

Theo drank it as well. “Let’s hurry!”

Lord Reineke nodded. **“Follow me.”**

The two men looked startled to have heard him speak.

We followed the spirit as he nimbly climbed up a rocky hill.

Traversing through the forest was his specialty, making it a struggle to catch up even for the well-trained knights.

“You’re only soft on Lune, Lord Reineke,” I mumbled under my breath, causing the fox to smirk.

It was times like this that Lord Reineke could be scary. He always seemed to dote on Lune, yet he’d desert her at the most crucial moments.

“Liam and Lune are fine, right?” I asked, suddenly feeling a sense of dread.

The spirit gave me a serious look. **“I don’t know. That’s up to Liam.”**

“What?! If it’s so dangerous, why did you let Lune go?!”

“If she cannot pass this trial, then it will show the extent of who she is. It’ll mean she didn’t have what it takes to continue contracting me, the Great Lord Reineke.”

His nonchalant answer horrified me.

“That’s just cruel…”

“Don’t look at me like that. I believe that Lune will safely guide Liam back,” he said with a grin. **“But are you really in a position to be chitchatting?”**

Lord Reineke’s mischievous giggle made me snap back to reality. The knights all paled too. The tension in the air was rising.

“Guide us! Hurry! We need to help them somehow!” I urged.

The spirit continued leading the way without sparing the rest of us another glance.

“Here,” he said eventually, stopping in front of an unnaturally round meadow.

There were no trees here, and stranger yet, no sign of any animals or even insects. The meadow must’ve been some kind of forgery.

“It’s so green, but there’s no life,” I murmured.

Lord Reineke smirked, then pulled out one of his own silver whiskers and blew it toward the meadow. When it got close, it disappeared in a flash of light.

“There’s a barrier,” Theo said. He rummaged around in his bag and pulled out a Y-shaped stick. “I’ll use my dowsing rod.”

“What’s that?”

“I can check whether anything dangerous is buried around here using this hazel tree branch,” he explained.

Theo held one end of the branch in each hand, keeping his arms pressed close to his sides and holding the branch level with his solar plexus. The other end of the stick began moving up and down slightly and glowing gold.

"It's…a light magic circle?! I didn't know they existed in such remote places," Theo despaired, biting his lip.

"Alas, we can't break a circle made with light magic," Dr. Guillotin said with a frown.

"Right. The only way to disable it would be to use the same kind of light magic…or *that* magic," Theo said, upholding the taboo of dark magic. "Let's try to physically destroy the perimeter around the meadow without touching the magic circle. I can't think of any other way for us to proceed."

Dr. Guillotin and the knights nodded.

"I wish I could just use light magic," I muttered.

Lord Reineke's tail wagged when he heard me.

Theo used his dowsing rod to point out which areas needed to be destroyed, then used earth magic to crack the ground in those places. The knights who could wield magic helped as well, while the rest dug out holes. I joined in, using my sword to dig up the earth where Theo indicated, but I didn't like this idea at all.

Dr. Guillotin drank more of his special medicine. He paused, took a deep breath, and downed a different medicine.

"Please give me some too," Theo requested.

Dr. Guillotin shrugged, passing him a bottle. "Are you sure? This will amplify your magic by using your life force. You can't use magic again until you naturally recover."

"I know. But even you are willing to take it," Theo pointed out with a smile. The doctor could only shrug again.

"What is that?" I asked.

Theo awkwardly averted his eyes, but Dr. Guillotin looked right at me as he replied.

"It's a forbidden drug that amplifies magic. If the royals were to find out that we used this, we'd be charged with all sorts of crimes."

"Yikes…"

"In fact, if they found out that I made this, I'd be put to death. House Renard and the monastery might get blamed too," Dr. Guillotin said. He laughed, but his eyes seemed deadly serious.

All the knights quickly looked away and pretended they hadn't heard anything.

"Now, let's hurry!" the doctor said, returning us to the task at hand.

Theo and Dr. Guillotin used all the magic they could muster to cut through the magic circle. But I didn't have magic nor strength. I did my best to help with digging, but I felt useless.

"If only I could use magic...or contract a spirit..."

I recklessly thrust my sword into the ground. It hit a large boulder, causing sparks to fly off.

"Looks like that rock is sustaining the magic circle. We'll need to break it to open the entrance," Theo observed. He knelt down and started drawing a magic circle on the rock. When he was done, he pressed his hands against it, took a deep breath, and filled it with his magic. "O earth spirit, lend me your power. Crush this rock and disrupt the magic circle."

A green fog enveloped the boulder, building pressure around it. The more it tightened, the more Theo's face scrunched up with pain. With ragged breaths, he released the last of his magic, and the green fog abruptly disappeared.

"Ah..." Theo sighed. There was only one small crack on the rock. "Dr. Guillotin, please give me one more restorative medicine and amplifier."

"I'm afraid I cannot. Using magic again right after the amplifier has worn off is dangerous. I can't give you any more," the doctor replied, looking just as exhausted from having used his water magic.

"Don't be like that! Lady Lune is down there somewhere! If something's happened to her, I... She gave me this second chance!"

"I know that!" Dr. Guillotin snapped.

Everyone was petrified into silence. The man who always joked around and acted flippantly was looking more serious than ever.

"I owe her a debt of gratitude as well. She's the only one who ever understood me and what I was doing. If she hadn't advised me, countless people would still be suffering from constrictive roundworm disease." The doctor paused, giving Theo a smile. "But don't you think Lady Lune would be heartbroken if you died from overdosing on these amplifiers?"

“I… But… But if Lady Lune doesn’t come back, then my life will have no meaning! Don’t you feel the same, doctor?!” Theo, who was always so reserved, now snarled at the other man.

Dr. Guillotin sighed. “Look, just think this through. In your current state, even just one more amplifier would be the end for you. So let’s all work together instead, hmm? Come on, Theo, give us directions.”

The knights buzzed at his words, eager to help.

“To think you’re actually being cooperative…” Theo said with a sigh before turning to the others. “Is there anyone here who wields fire magic?”

Two knights stepped forward.

“Good. Draw a fire magic circle on the rock and burn it!”

“Yessir!”

The men did as Theo instructed, lighting the boulder on fire.

“Next, water magic. Dr. Guillotin, when I give the signal, cover the rock with water. Make it as cold and forceful as possible.”

“You got it,” the doctor replied.

“The rest of you, use your swords to widen the cracks when they appear.”

“Understood!” the knights all shouted in unison.

Dr. Guillotin passed Theo another bottle of the recovery medicine. Theo seemed a bit dissatisfied, but he drank it anyway. The doctor grinned at his reaction, then took both the medicine and another amplifier.

“Dr. Guillotin!” I yelled. He had only just explained how dangerous this drug was!

“Here, you can finish it up, Theo. But it’ll be an indirect kiss between us!” the doctor said, jovial as ever as he tossed the bottle over.

The other man caught it and downed the rest of its contents without hesitation.

“That was my last one. I don’t even have any left in stock back at the monastery,” Dr. Guillotin said, and Theo nodded.

The doctor turned toward the flaming rock, drawing a magic circle. The knights stared at the flames with determination. The air was practically shaking with tension.

“This time, I’ll focus,” Theo said, and everyone nodded.

A powerful blue aura flickered behind Dr. Guillotin.

“O water spirit, lend me your power. Put out the fire and cut through the rock!”

His chanting activated the magic circle. A huge swell of water crashed into the boulder. A fierce sound echoed, and white steam shrouded the rock.

“O wind spirit, clear the steam away!” shouted one knight.

A gust of wind blew against the boulder, allowing us to see the crack. The knights and I thrust our swords into it.

“O earth spirit, lend me your power. Crush this rock and disrupt the magic circle,” Theo chanted, drawing a magic circle.

Once again, a green fog appeared, entering the crack and forcing it open. High-pressure water entered the crevice, chipping away bits of rock. The knights and I used all our strength to jam our swords inside. Every single person was doing everything they could to try and break the rock.

“Just a bit more! Keep going!”

The crevice deepened with a sharp sound. Dr. Guillotin and Theo, having used up all their magic, collapsed to the ground. However, the rock still hadn’t broken fully.

“Argh! We’re so close!” I yelled, stabbing the crack with my sword. Each time the edge of the blade hit the rock, it created a shrill sound and sparks. “So close! Come on!”

I kept thrusting my sword inside, refusing to give up. More sparks flew, and the sword began getting hot. The knights continued their efforts as well, shaving off bits of the rock.

“Why am I so powerless?!” I cried, frustrated. “Master Theo and Dr. Guillotin tried so hard! Liam and Lune are risking their lives out there!”

I struck the rock again with all my might. My sword bounced off and flew into the air. It spun around, piercing the edge of the light magic circle and landing inside as if to mock me.

I gasped. “That’s where Lord Reineke’s whisker disappeared!”

“You’d best give up,” Lord Reineke said.

“No! My sword is fine. I’m sure I can get it back!” I shook my head and reached for it.

“Lord Bal, watch out!” one knight shouted.

My hand went through an invisible barrier with a zap, and I felt a tingling shock—it was burning.

I have royal blood! I should have the power to make a contract with

a light spirit!

"I won't give up! I'll save Lune! No way I'm losing to some old magic circle!"

I reached out again, and an even harsher noise resounded. But I didn't hesitate, plunging my arm deeper in. A hole in the barrier began to open up. Sparks went flying as I forced it apart to reach my sword, which was shining brilliantly. When I finally grabbed it, Lord Reineke placed his paw on my head.

"Well done. Now that you've opened it this much, I can lend you my power. Now, draw a star."

I steeled myself and drew a star shape with my sword, facing the light magic circle.

"Light, cut through."

A golden star beamed toward the circle, crashing into it and shattering it. The boulder cracked open at the same time, revealing a hole underneath. The shattered, glimmering magic circle fragments fell inside.

"Yes! It's open!" The knights cheered.

"Hey! Is anybody down there?" I called, staring into the hole.

"Bal! We're here! Liam and I are both okay!" Lune's voice echoed up from within.

The knights clapped in celebration, while Lord Reineke smiled.

"Thank goodness! I'll be right there! Wait for me!" I yelled, leaning over the edge and waving at the entrance.

Lune and Liam waved back at me.

"Light..."

I heard an unfamiliar voice in my mind. I stared down at the sword in my hand, but it was little more than a chipped blade now.

"Lord Reineke...is this light magic?"

The spirit chuckled.

"I only gave you some magical power from the remnants of the barrier you broke. It is light, but not truly."

"I see..." I said, a bit disappointed.

"However, you *were* able to touch light magic. You should be pleased."

"R-Right!"

"Now, let us go and see our comrades."

Theo used the last of his strength to create a staircase along the wall. I was the first one to race down those stairs.

Chapter 6: The Sick Dragon

Liam advanced deeper into the cave with me in his arms, using the light of my tail as a guide. Now that he had made a contract with the Lord of Darkness, the cave had become completely ordinary. As we followed the river, the smell of rot began getting stronger.

Loud, grating groans reverberated against the cavern walls, shaking the ceiling so violently it was as if the rock itself were rumbling. I clung onto Liam, whose grip on me tightened in response.

Ahead of us, a small waterfall blocked our path, tiny water droplets spraying from the high ceiling. And it was there, behind the waterfall, that a large dragon of nearly ten meters was lying down, growling in pain. Scattered around it were its shedded diamond-shaped scales, creating the terrible smell as they began to rot.

If left unchecked, those scales were sure to produce monsters. The outbreaks of monsters in the area were caused by the rotting scales sliding into the river and being carried out into the world.

Liam and I weaved our way around the waterfall, careful not to get wet as we stepped past it. Soon, we were face-to-face with the dragon. Its body was white with some dull purple spots, and its legs were bent. It looked at us, then snarled while spreading its wings threateningly.

I had Liam put me down and addressed the dragon.

"I heard from Lord Reineke about your sickness," I said, waving my fox ears and shining tail around.

"You have a contract with him?" the dragon asked.

"That's right. Do you know why you're sick?"

"Once my hibernation was over, I ventured out of the depths of the cave to go outside, but the royal family and House Renard blocked the exit in order to seal the Lord of Darkness. That stopped me from leaving too." The dragon shifted about but seemed unable to move the purple parts of his body. *"I can only feed on what's within the cave, and my limbs hurt from lack of sunlight. I am suffering."*

“That almost sounds like rickets. It’s a condition that develops due to lack of sunlight and calcium. Dr. Guillotin taught me about it.”

“Lune, are you talking with the dragon?” asked the confused Liam.

I turned to him in surprise. He had heard the Lord of Darkness, so I thought he could hear the dragon too.

“You can’t hear it?”

Liam shook his head.

“Then maybe it’s thanks to my fox ears?” I wondered, moving them about.

“That’s right. Foolish humans cannot hear my voice,” the dragon asserted.

Liam didn’t react to the rude remark, so I knew for sure that he couldn’t hear.

“We need to find a way to get out of this cave. Can we return the same way we came?” Liam asked, looking over his shoulder.

“My brother made a contract with the Lord of Darkness, so if we go back that way, he’ll be able to undo the seal by the entrance,” I told the dragon.

“Perhaps, but I cannot move very well because of the pain,” the dragon responded, gazing wistfully at the waterfall. *“In the past, there was no ceiling here. I used to be able to see the sky, but now it’s all covered up and the entrance is blocked off. The Lord of Darkness told me that the royals and House Renard are to blame.”*

The dragon looked at Liam. An ominous sensation wafted from the Eclipse Blade’s scabbard, where the Lord of Darkness was sealed. Liam grasped it tightly, and the ominous feeling vanished. But the dragon’s black eyes were boring holes into him.

“The Eclipse Blade… This boy is one of the Renards—those who trapped me here!” he roared, suddenly rising to his feet.

“Brother!” I exclaimed, quickly stepping in front of Liam.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, covering me in turn.

The dragon was unable to support his own body weight. He collapsed back down with a thud, his breathing labored.

“We’re not here to fight you!” I said, approaching his snout. I held out the gentian liqueur. “This isn’t a cure, but Lord Reineke said it’ll return some vitality to you.”

The dragon sniffed the liquor.

“Ah, what a nostalgic aroma. Reineke gave me this a few times in the past.”

He opened his mouth, and I poured the liquid inside. He drank down every last drop, then grimaced.

“So bitter,” he murmured.

Liam cupped his hands and collected some water from the waterfall, presenting it to the dragon.

“It looks uncomfortable. Maybe this will help?” he asked, glancing at me.

The dragon growled, startling Liam. But after releasing an exasperated sigh, he opened his mouth and allowed Liam to give him the water.

“Mmm, delicious and refreshing,” the dragon said, looking at Liam with less hostility.

He sprawled back down on the ground, then gazed up at the ceiling. He didn’t say anything, but it was clear that he longed for the sky.

“Apparently, the royal family and House Renard blocked off the ceiling here,” I explained to Liam.

He nodded. “According to legend, this cave once had both an entrance and exit. This must’ve been the exit. I hope Bal and the others manage to uncover it.” Liam pulled the Eclipse Blade out. “Well, I’d better do my part too.”

He pointed the sword at the ceiling and drew a pentagram.

“O darkness, cleave through!”

At his words, the magic circle on the ceiling was disabled. It shattered, and shimmering fragments sprinkled down like sunlight filtering through the trees.

The dragon sighed. *“How beautiful.”*

“You’re right, it’s so pretty,” I said.

But then the soil from the ceiling began falling down too.

“Eek!” I covered my head with my arms, and Liam shielded me with his body.

The dragon spread his wings, holding them over us protectively.

An earth tremor rumbled through the ground, raising a cloud of dust. A moment later, flickers of sunlight peeked in from up above.

“Hey! Is anybody down there?” Bal’s voice echoed.

“Bal! We’re here! Liam and I are both okay!” I shouted back.

“Thank goodness! I’ll be right there! Wait for me!”

I looked up and saw Bal’s silhouette in the sunlight, waving his arms. Liam and I squinted our eyes at the brightness.

“Light…” the dragon murmured.

I tilted my head, unsure of what he meant.

Because Liam had disabled the magic circle, the others were able to enter too. Theo used his magic to create a simple staircase along the side of the cave. He and the others must’ve found a way to open up the ceiling from their side. Bal came rushing down the stairs, with Dr. Guillotin not far behind. Theo followed after them shakily, perhaps having used too much magic. Lastly, the massive Lord Reineke leaped down into the cave, landing with a thud that shook the ground. The dragon scoffed at that.

At first, Bal cowered at the sight of the dragon. In contrast, Dr. Guillotin swooped right past him, beelining straight for it.

“Ahhh! It’s real! A real, living dragon!!!”

The dragon looked put off by his excited shouting.

“What is going on with this human?”

“He is the best doctor in our kingdom,” I answered.

“Lady Lune, you can talk to the dragon? Isn’t this amazing? Yes, indeed, it’s incredible! Those cute little ears aren’t just for show, are they?!”

Dr. Guillotin flung himself in my direction, but Liam blocked him.

“Why are you here?” my brother asked, vexed.

“That would be because Theo needed a magic amplifying potion and a recovery potion. In fact, he asked me to let him use the forbidden amplifier.”

“What?! I heard that using that potion shortens your life!” I exclaimed, staring at Theo.

He looked down sheepishly. “When we heard that you might be in danger, even Marquis Renard granted us permission to use it.”

I sighed, pressing my hand to my forehead. “Why didn’t father or Dr. Guillotin try to stop you?”

“Because we were worried, of course,” the doctor replied, giving me and Liam a stern look.

“Huh?”

“Lady Lune, you may be special, and Lord Liam is very strong.

When Lord Reineke is with you, it's one thing. But you two are still children. What if you had gotten hurt?"

I was taken aback by Dr. Guillotin's seriousness.

"Theo won't be able to use any magic for now, thanks to the amplifier's severe side effects," the doctor went on angrily.

Theo fidgeted behind him.

"Master Theo, why would you go this far?" I asked.

"You may not have noticed, Lady Lune, but a great number of people care for you. Dr. Guillotin and I used to live in idle despair in that monastery, wasting our days away. And then you came and gave us hope. So for your sake, a portion of my life is a small price to pay," Theo said bashfully, his head hanging down.

"I'd do anything for you too, Lady Lune!" Dr. Guillotin added. "You may think we're unreliable, but please, trust in us some more!"

His indignant words pierced my heart. "Thank you, Dr. Guillotin," I said with teary eyes, lowering my head while my tail sprang up.

"Eeep! Ahhh! In that case, may I touch that lovely shining tail?!"

"No." I shut down his excitement with a single word.

"No need to be so harsh..."

"Anyway, Dr. Guillotin, this dragon is suffering from rickets. Will you take a look?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes! Absolutely! I've always wanted to examine a dragon!"

The doctor frolicked over to the dragon and began gleefully touching his legs.

The dragon looked annoyed. *"Don't just touch me at your leisure!"*

Lord Reineke bopped the dragon with his paw.

"This human is safe."

"Reineke..." The dragon sighed.

Hearing Lord Reineke's words, Dr. Guillotin's eyes lit up and he grinned.

"It's been a while. How was the liquor?"

"It was terribly bitter, you snide bastard."

"No wonder. After all, gentian is a dragon's innards."

The two of them bantered while snickering. It relieved me to see that they seemed to know each other well.

"You were right, Lady Lune—it sure looks like rickets. First of all,

I'm prescribing plenty of sunbathing. It's also malnourished, so we'll have to give it food until it can move on its own." Dr. Guillotin merrily laid out the treatment plan. "As for calcium... Lady Lune, is this dragon a carnivore?"

"Mr. Dragon, are you carnivorous?" I asked.

"I am omnivorous."

I passed his answer onto the doctor.

"I can even eat humans," the dragon added, opening his jaws wide as he glared at the man.

"Ah, yes, the inside of his mouth will need some maintenance too," the doctor said, unfazed as he touched the dragon's fangs.

"Is something wrong with this human? Does he have no sense of danger?" the dragon grumbled.

"I think he's fine," I said with a dry smile, while Lord Reineke roared with laughter.

The dragon sighed. *"Regardless, it seems I am in your care. You opened the ceiling, and now you're even giving me treatment. How should I show my thanks... Ah, how about I offer you my blood? You can use it to kill people without anyone finding out."*

I shuddered. "No thank you! Can we take your molted scales instead?"

"Very well. I cannot eat them in my current state, so they'd just rot."

"Brother!" I called out happily. "Mr. Dragon will let us take his scales!"

"You have my deepest thanks," Liam told the dragon, then gave orders to the knights. "Those who can, use your magic to freeze over the scales so they don't rot any further. Then deposit them in the cave."

Wielders of water magic carried out his orders. The rest of us promised to keep caring for the dragon before exiting the cave. Lord Reineke allowed both me and Liam to climb onto his back, and carried us out. We were exhausted, and the fox's soft fur was the perfect source of comfort.

Once we were outside, Lord Reineke set us down, turned to face us, and brought us closer to him.

"Liam, did you capture the Lord of Darkness?" he asked with a smirk, quietly enough that nobody else could hear. **"Be careful. That power is a double-edged sword."**

Liam nodded.

“You’ll be in trouble if the royals find out you opened the seal,” the spirit added more seriously.

“I’m sure they’ll notice the seal wavering. I will report that the seal had weakened and I remade it. I’ll also hide this place using a cloaking spell,” Liam said, pulling out the Eclipse Blade. He drew a magic circle in the ground, hidden by Lord Reineke’s form. “There. Now it should be immune to the royal family’s detection magic.”

“You’re quite the rogue,” Lord Reineke scoffed.

Liam responded with a silent smile.

I was visiting the dragon’s nest together with Lord Reineke, Liam, Bal, and Dr. Guillotin. The entrance that Liam and I had originally used to enter the cave was once again sealed off, so we had to use the opening Bal and the others had made. Liam had also cast a spell over it to hide it from ordinary people.

“I find it strange how only those who helped with undoing the seal are able to see the entrance,” Bal commented thoughtfully.

“I’m sure it’s thanks to Lord Reineke,” Liam replied, lying seamlessly.

My pinkie finger was entwined with his as we walked. The sensation made my chest tighten with a joyful, fluttering feeling that made me grin despite myself. I snuggled up to him, brushing him with my tail.

“It’s our pinkie-promise secret,” I whispered to him.

Liam looked surprised at first, then smiled.

“I see you two are in a good mood,” Dr. Guillotin spoke up, startling me.

“I’m just glad everything worked out,” Liam said, looking calm as he gazed up at the ceiling.

A pleasant breeze blew past and the birds chirped. The dragon was lying beneath the opening, sun rays cascading upon his body. He looked content.

“It certainly did!” Dr. Guillotin said before sauntering over to the dragon. “Hello, darling dragon! I’ve brought your calcium medicine today!”

The dragon’s expression instantly soured at his lighthearted voice. The doctor placed the calcium pills made from seashells into the reluctant dragon’s mouth.

“Humph! I have no idea what to make of this human!” he

complained, though most humans here couldn't hear him.

Lord Reineke smirked as he passed the dragon the gentian liqueur. **"Here, wash the pills down with this."**

"Ah, ah! You mustn't only drink alcohol! Have some fish and mushrooms too," Dr. Guillotin said, presenting the dragon with said items. "And beans too! These are soybeans, Lady Kuzunoha's favorite!"

"I want meat. Preferably human," the dragon said, licking his lips as he gazed at the doctor.

The man giggled. "Oh, do you want to eat me? I know, I know. I *do* look pretty tasty, don't I?"

Discouraged, the dragon looked away. **"I've lost my appetite."**

Lord Reineke and I laughed.

"What? What is he saying?" Bal asked.

He and Liam were rubbing the dragon's body with large scrubbing brushes to improve his blood flow.

"Looks like someone *really* likes Guillotin," Lord Reineke lied.

"Really?!" Dr. Guillotin pressed his face against the dragon. "I feel the same way, darling dragon!"

"Reineke, cease your lies! And you, don't get so close to me! I hate you!!!" the dragon roared, but despite his fury, he didn't attack.

I watched the scene with amusement.

Once the treatment was over, we were preparing to leave when the dragon called me over.

"Lune! Have this."

From under his belly, the dragon pulled out a transparent stone with a streak of golden light.



“What is it, Mr. Dragon?”

“Magical ore with the property of light.”

“Wow! But why was it here?” I asked. Each magical ore had the same property as the magic possessed by the spirit, so magical ore found in this cave should have the water attribute.

“I don’t know why, but they appear here very rarely. I’m giving it to you—but only you, not House Renard. Understood?”

I nodded.

“If humans find out there’s magical ore here, they will come here to kill me and steal it. That’s why I’m giving it to you.”

“Why me?”

“Consider it my thanks for saving me.”

“But I didn’t do it alone…”

“Perhaps. But I cannot speak to other humans, nor do I trust them. At least I can believe that you won’t misuse it.”

I nodded again and quietly thanked the dragon.

“Lord Reineke, will you keep it safe for me?” I asked. The fox spirit gave me a surprised look.

“That might be a good idea,” the dragon affirmed.

Lord Reineke smirked. **“If you approve, then so be it.”**

I gave him the magical ore.

“Lune! We’re going!” Bal shouted.

“Coming!” I replied, waving at him. Then, I turned to the dragon and bowed. “Thank you, Mr. Dragon! I’ll visit you again!”

“Indeed. I shall be waiting,” he replied, fluttering his massive wings.

Short Story 2: Liam’s Dream

When we first left the cave, by the time we made it back to the estate, I’d lost consciousness because of the contract I had made with the darkness. I was dragged into a nightmare.

In this dream, I played the part of my ancestor who had lost his sanity. I was in the royal palace, the Eclipse Blade in its scabbard by my hip. Before me stood someone with shining golden hair and brilliant eyes. Perhaps because this was a dream, I knew that this was the crown prince of that bygone era. Yet there was no sign of any light spirits around him.

The Lord of Darkness, Nott, longed for the Lord of Light. But there was no such presence in the crown prince, and so she lamented.

“It’s only a glimmer on the surface. There’s not even a fragment of true light left within him,” Nott’s voice echoed in my mind. It sounded indescribably sorrowful.

“I want her as my queen,” the crown prince said.

As soon as he spoke, my ancestor’s fiancée appeared. She had a dark look on her face, and silver hair just like Lune’s.

“I’m sorry,” she said, crying.

“She is *my* fiancée,” my body responded.

“That’s exactly why.” The prince smirked nastily. It was a vulgar look with not even an ounce of light.

“There’s no light left here. My light! My light!” Nott cried hysterically.

“You fell in love with her at first sight, so she must be a good woman, eh?” the prince continued. “I trust you, my darkness. My counterpart, O shadow of Garland. You understand, don’t you? And I trust in your loyalty as a Renard.”

The darkness swelled within me.

I won’t forgive this.

It began leaking out of my body.

“Her parents have already agreed. With my royal authority, I could break your engagement with her even today.”

The prince grinned, while my love sobbed quietly.

I won't forgive this.

I groaned, clutching my body as I tried to suppress the darkness.

My fiancée's lips moved soundlessly, mouthing out, "Forgive me."

"You cannot forgive them. You mustn't allow this. They have light no longer!"

Nott's rage burst out of me. Before I knew it, the Eclipse Blade was in my hand.

"Kill! Kill! Kill them all! I don't want a world without light! If there's no light, I don't need to be Garland's shadow! Shadow cannot exist without light!"

I swung the sword, cornering the prince. One more step and his life would be snuffed out. But right then, a swarm of paladins seized me. They didn't act alone either—anyone who could wield magic had surrounded me. I was captured by the strongest show of force the royal court could muster.

But the crown prince was squirming on the ground as if he didn't have the strength to support himself. His once golden hair had turned white from terror.

"Why can the Renards make contracts with darkness? Why can't the Garlands turn to light? Why were *you* always the chosen one? That woman chose you…and so did the Lord…" the prince mumbled, his eyes having lost their shine too.

"He's mad! Marquis Renard has gone mad!" one of the paladins holding me down shouted.

My love had crumpled to the ground in tears.

To show their loyalty to the kingdom, House Renard vowed to never again contract the Lord of Darkness, and executed the mad marquis in the very spot where the contract had been made, atop a magic circle within the cave. Nott was released at the moment of his death, but by then the entrance and exit had been sealed by a scepter crafted from magical ore with light properties. And so that the Lord of Darkness would never awaken again, her very name had become a taboo within the kingdom.

People lost their faith, and so Nott grew weak. If her existence was forgotten and her name no longer spoken, she would eventually disappear.

Nott wept.

“There’s no light, no light… My light, my light… Without light, shadow cannot exist…”

She grew weaker with each day, crying in despair. But one day, the seal by the cave entrance was suddenly broken. When Nott saw me walking through the cave, she rejoiced.

“An heir of House Renard! My vessel!”

And when she spotted Lune, whose tail was shining, she was ecstatic.

“Light! Renard’s light! My light! This time—”

I finally awakened, covered in sweat and breathing heavily.

So that’s why the Lord of Darkness was sealed.

There had been nobody left who could contract the Lord of Light, so those who could contract the Lord of Darkness were seen as a threat to the kingdom. I was horrified to have learned the truth.

“This must be what Lord Reineke meant when he said the royals finding out about the broken seal would be dangerous,” I murmured.

Nobody could know about this, not even my parents. If anybody found out, I’d meet the same end as my ancestor from my dream. And this time, the Renard domain itself could come under attack for harboring traitors.

“Good thing I cast that spell to hide the cave.”

Although I felt relieved, the secret weighed heavily on me.

I can’t rely on anyone…

Lune’s face popped into my mind, as though a light had been lit.

Right, Lune already knows. She’s the only one who knows I have a contract with Nott.

“Once it’s morning, I’ll have to tell her to keep it a secret,” I said, feeling a pang of yearning. “But I don’t want to wait. I want to see her now…”

I wanted to make sure that she was safe and unharmed.

I changed out of my nightclothes and looked out the window. In the glass, I saw my own reflection, melting into the darkness. Outside, the silver moon was shining brilliantly.

“Lune,” I called out, and my chest tightened painfully. A quiet groan resounded from my sword.

I didn’t want things to end the way they did in my dream. My stomach was in knots. When I recalled the future that the darkness had shown me, I couldn’t dismiss it as merely an illusion. After all, I was only Lune’s adoptive brother. I could do nothing but watch as she turned prettier by the day.

“I can’t let her go to the academy, and especially not high society,” I whispered. But hearing my own words made me gasp. “I’ve been stained by the darkness…”

This must’ve been a result of making a contract with Nott. If I couldn’t control the darkness within me, I would end up going insane too.

I glared down at the Eclipse Blade, and it fell silent. I then gazed at the moon, its light reminding me of Lune and filling me with yearning. She had saved me when I was about to be consumed by the darkness.

“Lune,” I said. Calling her name only made my longing grow. “Lune…”

I vividly recalled when, in tears, she had asked me to stay with her.

“Lune…”

If this love was unrequited, I could accept that. If Lune wanted me by her side, then I’d always be there for her.

“Lune, I want to see you…”

We were together not so long ago, but I already wanted to see her again. I missed her. I didn’t want to be apart from her, even for a moment. I knew this went beyond mere protectiveness—I loved her. But what Lune needed right now wasn’t me, but a kind older brother.

I know that. As long as I can be the one closest to her, I don’t mind being by her side as her brother.

I tried to tell myself that.

“I’d at least like to see what she looks like when she’s asleep. That’s not weird for a brother, is it?”

After I made that excuse, I headed toward Lune’s room. Without turning on any lights, I quietly opened the door and stepped in. Ever since mother began taking treatment for her roundworm disease, Lune slept by herself in her own room.

Lune’s ears twitched and she sat up in bed. Her hearing was very sharp indeed. Since we were home, I had let down my guard

and forgotten to diminish the signs of my presence.

Or maybe I wanted *her to notice.*

"Brother?" Lune mumbled. She looked so adorable when she was sleepy. Her drowsy eyes gazed in my direction.

"I just came to check if you'd fallen asleep. Sorry for waking you up."

Lune smiled. "It's okay! I'm glad I got to see you. I was worried when you passed out."

Her words caused my heart to tighten, and a warm sensation spread from my chest all the way down to my fingertips.

"Can you come over here?" she asked innocently, patting her bed.

I walked over to her and sat on the edge of the bed. Lune crawled out from beneath her covers and sat in my lap. She nestled against me, her fluffy, warm tail wrapping around my waist. I gently petted her as always, and she let out a pleased sigh.

"Ahhh... Feels good," she said with a satisfied smile, filling my heart with joy. I was the only one who could put that look on her face, and that made me happy.

"Lune, I'd like to ask a favor," I said.

Lune's fox ears twitched and she looked up at me. It was a habit of hers whenever she was concentrating hard to make sure she didn't miss anything.

All her focus was on me right now.

"Let's keep my contract with the Lord of Darkness our secret, okay?"

Her tail wagged.

"A secret just between us?" she echoed, gazing at me with those big purple eyes.

Even though my eyes were purple too, hers didn't look like the color of darkness. They were more like a hopeful sky awaiting the dawn.

"Yes. The royals sealed that cave for a reason, and they might blame me if they find out I removed it. We can't let any harm come to our family or the domain," I explained.

Lune looked pensive. "You're right. Let's keep it a secret, no matter what!" she said, holding out her pinkie finger.

I tilted my head at her gesture.

"Lady Kuzunoha taught me this good luck charm for promises.

We hold our pinkie fingers together and say ‘pinkie swear!’”

I entwined my pinkie with hers.

“And if you break the promise, you’ll be hit ten thousand times!”

“All right.”

“It’s a secret promise between us, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Then let’s say it together! One, two, three—”

“Pinkie swear,” we said in unison.

The secret that had weighed on me was turned into a happy promise between me and Lune. She was grinning.

“You look happy,” I said.

“Yep! I feel like I’m special to you now. You have a secret that nobody except for me knows about. I definitely won’t tell anyone!” she assured me, wagging her tail.

Her honest joy gave me peace of mind. Now that I had shared my burden with her, my heart felt lighter. I patted her head, then pressed my cheek to her fox ears. A sweet fragrance drifted into my nose, calming me. Lune was giggling.

As usual, when we were separating I kissed her fox ears.

“Now, it’s time for sleep,” I said, and she obediently climbed back into bed.

“Good night, dear brother.”

“Good night, Lune.”

I kissed her forehead. I’d never done that before. She covered her forehead with her hands in surprise, then smiled.



“My turn!” Lune demanded, holding out her arms.

I brought my face closer to hers. She grasped my head and placed a kiss on my forehead.

“Sleep well, dear brother.”

“You too, Lune.”

I walked out of her room into the moonlit hallway. This time, I knew I’d sleep soundly.

Epilogue: Lune Renard Receives a Prophecy of Happiness

A year had passed since we first met the dragon, and it was now spring. Bal and I had turned nine years old, while Liam was fourteen.

With Lord Reineke's guidance, we had taken the molted dragon scales and produced stones with properties similar to those of magical ore. First, the scales were dried in the sun, then imbued with the desired type of magic, and finally varnished to make them look like tiles. These imitations of magical ore had different colors depending on the type of magic they were imbued with. They were still experimental, so their use was only permitted within the Renard marquisate, but we hoped to export them to the capital in the near future.

Theo found a way to use the pseudo magical ore to aid in restoring the embankment, rapidly speeding up progress. The riparian works were completed successfully, and the Gupi River didn't overflow this year, allowing the land around it to be used for agriculture. Theo informed us that because monster attacks had often caused the river's current to change, plenty of sediment had accumulated, creating an alluvial fan. This land would be suitable for orchards.

Currently, we were all preparing for the ceremony celebrating the completion of the Renard River embankment. A sacred path was built on the widest part of the levee, leading to a newly erected statue of Undine, the Lord of Water. Large trees with thick roots were planted around the embankment to reinforce it. Lady Kuzunoha had suggested a variety of flowers for us to plant so that each season would bring its own unique beauty. The more beautiful the levee, the more people would visit, and their footsteps would further solidify the ground. We planted cherry trees with white buds, and small yellow flowers that exuded a pleasant fragrance.

This was where the ceremony would happen. We'd also be holding a festival at the same time to further strengthen the

embankment. Liam, Bal, and I were helping the people from the monastery prepare to run the festival's stalls as part of their service.

"I brought the soy sauce and miso!" I said, entering the monastery's kitchen.

Lady Kuzunoha possessed me and licked the soy sauce.

"A good finish," she remarked.

"Please check the sesame oil as well," the abbot requested, holding out a small plate with a light brown liquid.

"Ah, oil is a weakness of mine."

Lady Kuzunoha took the plate and began lapping up the oil. It must've been a strange sight to see a little girl doing that.

I hope Lady Kuzunoha realizes my body's the one taking in all this oil, I thought while tasting it on my tongue.

Lord Reineke watched hungrily, so the abbot gave him a plate of oil as well. The fox happily licked it up.

Sesame oil is in a league of its own. It can make anything taste delicious. That goes for soy sauce as well. Maybe I could combine sesame oil with salt too? It'd probably taste amazing with tofu.

"An excellent idea," Lady Kuzunoha said, reading my thoughts. **"Do try and make it."**

With that, she stopped possessing me.

"Huh? You want me to do it right now?!" I asked with shock. As dismayed as I was, however, I had no choice but to oblige. "Do we have any tofu and salt?"

One of the kitchen staff brought me the items. I added salt and sesame oil to the tofu, then ate a piece.

"Mmm! It really *is* tasty!"

"A delicacy, is it not?" Lady Kuzunoha responded.

Bal cast me a dubious look. "Is it? I still think tofu doesn't taste like anything."

"Then how about you try a bite?"

I picked up a spoonful of tofu and held it out to him. Bal opened his mouth and ate the tofu.

"Oh! It's pretty good! So soy sauce isn't the only seasoning you can use," he said, smiling wryly when he realized he'd totally switched his opinion. "But don't forget about Liam."

I turned to look at my brother—he was glaring at Bal, and the sword in his scabbard was ominously glowing.

Oh, Liam wants to try the tofu too!

"Here you go!" I said, holding out the plate to the sulking Liam. He glanced at it sadly.

"What about me?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"Won't you feed it to me too?"

I was surprised. I hadn't even intended to feed Bal like that. He'd just gone and done it while I was trying to pass the spoon to him.

But I guess from Liam's perspective, it looked intentional on my part.

Still, Liam looked so cute when he was pouting like that.

"Okay, dear brother! Say 'aaah'!"

I held the spoon out to Liam, and he happily ate the tofu.

"It's very tasty," he agreed. Seeing him enjoy it made me happy too.

"Do you like tofu? If so, do you have any other ideas for the menu?" I asked him.

"Let's see... Tofu is good as a source of protein, but the children don't seem to like it."

"What if we flavor it with some honey and soybean flour?" I proposed.

Bal smiled, but it looked strained. "I'd love to taste that, sure...but we need to focus on something that's easy to serve during the festival, right? I think we should get everyone here to try the recipes we've been using in the marquisate kitchen."

I nodded. "Right! We've been wrapping thin slices of meat around tofu and then grilling it with sugar and soy sauce! It's so good, and serving it on skewers would make it easy to eat!"

We asked the people of the monastery to taste test the skewers.

"This is great! Even the tofu tastes like real meat."

"The skewers are very convenient, indeed."

Even the nobles exiled from the capital were satisfied with the taste. Once I had their approval, I taught everyone the recipe. I brought dried tofu from our kitchen, wrapped it up with thin slices of meat, and lightly sprinkled it with wheat flour. The tofu was browned in a hot frying pan, flavored with sake, sugar, and soy sauce to give it a salty-sweet taste, then finally skewered.

However, making this kind of tofu took some time, so we wouldn't be able to serve it as quickly during the festival. So we decided to also boil konjac balls and put them on skewers to serve with miso paste.

Once the menu was settled, we quietly set to work. We made konjac balls and dried the tofu, while the monastery people worked together to prepare in their own ways too. Lord Reineke and Lady Kuzunoha warmly watched over everyone.

Before long, the day of the festival was upon us. We were walking through the area where the ceremony would occur, checking in on the stalls while accompanied by a servant and Lord Reineke. The fox spirit was in a good mood, and allowed me to ride on his back in his giant form.

A white chalk statue came into view among the whirling cherry blossoms. The image of the Lord of Water appeared grand in size even at this distance. We smiled as we saw passing visitors gaze upon it and sigh in wonder.

"I'm glad the embankment was finished, now that there aren't so many monsters," Bal said.

"The pseudo magical ore we made from the dragon's scales helped out a lot," Liam responded. "I was a bit worried, though, since this was the first time we'd ever used them."

"But thankfully Master Theo told us how to use them to reinforce the levee," I said. "And now we have more land to cultivate too. He said it's an 'alluvial fan,' right?"

"Yes. I never would've thought that the river flooding would nourish the soil."

I nodded at Liam's words, then noticed that some of the monastery's criminals were playing music in front of the statue.

"Oh, the music's started. Many of these people were trained in the capital, so it's no wonder they're so skilled in the arts," Liam said.

Indeed, even the statue had been carved by the criminals, and their musical instruments were handmade too.

"Look! The domain's best songstress has joined in!" I exclaimed.

The songstress was a Renard citizen. Before long, a dancer joined her, and things began getting livelier and livelier. There was no longer any discontent between the criminals and commoners.

“I’m glad they’re getting along,” I said, and the boys nodded in agreement.

Lord Reineke happily bounced me on his back.

In my past life, the revolutionary army had largely been made up of those who’d been thrown into the mountain pit. They had grown to hate the land they were exiled to, and they took out their anger by stealing the domain and destroying people’s faith in Lord Reineke. However, now that the criminals’ lives were a little better, they shouldn’t hold as much resentment toward the domain, even if a revolution *did* happen. Not to mention, many of them had grown affectionate toward Lord Reineke and had faith in him.

Originally, Bal was the leader of the revolutionary army. But now he’s on friendly terms with the Renard people. If the revolution still happens, I know he won’t do anything bad to them or Lord Reineke.

Bal suddenly met my gaze.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s nothing,” I replied with a smile.

He rubbed his nose. “Come on, stop it… You’re embarrassing me.”

“I am? Why?”

Before Bal could respond, Liam covered his eyes with his hand.

“Then don’t look at her.”

“Hey! Scold Lune, not me. It’s not my fault she’s so oblivious,” Bal said.

“I can’t. She’s too cute.”

The two of them were bantering as usual. I happily watched them from atop Lord Reineke’s back until we started passing by the stall owners.

“Lady Lune, have this!”

“Lady Lune, thank you for helping cure my mother’s illness!”

Lord Reineke’s tail smacked lightly into my back.

“Where’s my *thanks?”* he demanded.

“I-I didn’t do anything! It’s all thanks to Lord Reineke’s divine messages,” I said quickly. “Please thank him instead.”

“We left an offering at his temple, of course. But if it were not for you, we wouldn’t know about his messages!”

Each person we passed called out to us and gave us various gifts from their stalls: deep-fried tofu, konjac balls, acorn flour cookies, and so on.

“Please have some too, Lord Reineke!”

The fox accepted an acorn cookie, wagging his tail as he gobbled it up.

Everyone’s giving me way too much credit because Dr. Guillotin, Dr. Trousseau, and Master Theo have been talking me up!

I held a heap of gifts in my hands, feeling a little flustered. But my tail gave away my joy, wagging like crazy.

“I’m grateful, but this is a lot…”

It’d be difficult to do anything with my hands full like this.

Liam took the deep-fried tofu from the pile and held it up to my face. I reflexively opened my mouth and took a bite. The corners of my lips got covered in oil.

“Sho taishty!” I said, satisfied with the crunchy texture.

Deep-fried tofu was Lady Kuzunoha’s favorite, and she had insisted we make it. We distributed part of it at the temple and sold the rest in the stalls.

Liam wiped the oil from my mouth with his fingers, then licked them. He shot me a meaningful look and smiled, but I didn’t understand and just tilted my head.

“Is it tasty, brother?”

“Yes, it’s delicious.”

Bal watched us from the side and muttered, “Bleh.”

Lord Reineke smacked Liam with his tail.

“Anyway, the servant can bring most of this back home,” Liam said.

“Of course!” The servant took most of the items from me.

“And for the rest…” I said, looking around. I spotted a group of children watching us wistfully. “Hey, guys! Come here!”

When I called out to them, they rushed over. I got off Lord Reineke and addressed the kids solemnly.

“This is shinsen for the Great Lord Reineke. He is graciously granting it to you.”

“‘Shinsen’?”

“Lady Lune, what does that mean?”

The children peppered me with questions as they took the food.

Shinsen was a concept Lady Kuzunoha had taught me.

“It means eating the food offered to the gods together with them,” I explained.

Many people have been leaving offerings at Lord Reineke’s

temple lately, so he'd decided to have it distributed to those in need.

"The great spirits take in mana from offerings and prayers. They said that once they've taken the mana, we should give the food to those who need it."

"Wow! Thank you, Lord Reineke! Thank you, great spirits!"

The children gladly ate the food. A golden light seeped from each of them, which Lord Reineke absorbed. The fox looked satisfied—indeed, their gratitude powered him.

"How sly you are! I was right to place my trust in you," he said.

"This is so yummy!"

"Hey, I wanna try too! Let's share it!"

"Okay! Here, let's switch!"

The kids were making merry. The people who gave me the gifts watched with smiles on their faces.

"That looks good. Let me try it!"

"Me too!"

Seeing the children so excited made the adults go up to the stalls to buy the same food.

"That's some good advertising for them," Liam said as he patted my head.

"You're amazing when it comes to this stuff," Bal added with a grin.

"No, I'm not. It's all the work of the spirits."

"There you go again." Liam shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, the wisdom may come from Lord Reineke, but knowing what to do with it is important too. You're the one who comes up with these ideas. Have more confidence in yourself."

After chiding me, he picked me up in his arms.

"But…"

"You're precious to me, so don't put yourself down like that," Liam said, bumping his forehead against mine a little forcefully.

"Ow!" I rubbed my stinging forehead.

"Lune, did you get that?" he asked, gazing kindly at me. His eyes were a lovely shade of purple, the color of a hopeful sunrise.

I wrapped my tail tightly around him.

"I got it," I replied.

Strangely enough, his words convinced me. If I was precious to someone, it made me want to treat myself a little more kindly.

I giggled happily, and Liam smiled as well.

“Ugh, how long are you two going to flirt?! The ceremony’s about to begin!” Bal said.

We quickly made our way to the statue of the Lord of Water, where the ceremony would be held. A stage had been erected in front of it, and off to the side was a tent where House Renard would sit. We entered it, joining up with mother and father.

Cherry petals fell from the trees, floating on the surface of the river. They seemed to form a line, as if they were sailing off into a new world. The spring sunlight shone upon the soft green of the freshly sprouting trees.

“Such gorgeous scenery! I never thought I’d get to see something so beautiful,” mother said with admiration.

“How are you feeling, mother?” I asked.

“Dr. Guillotin’s medicine is very effective. I feel great,” she replied warmly.

Mother had finished her constrictive roundworm disease treatment and was in good enough health to attend the ceremony.

“I can’t believe sentiment flowers are so useful. I thought they were merely weeds,” she said. “Even the professors at the academy were stunned when they analyzed the medicine.”

Father nodded. “It’s the only cure for the roundworm disease. Lune had the right idea to keep the sentiment flowers under our marquisate’s management. What was once seen as just a weed now creates jobs and wealth for us. Ever since Lune showed up, our people have led much better lives.”

The Renard domain had accumulated wealth thanks to the cure, and was gradually livening up.

“Lord Reineke is the one you should be thanking,” I said.

“You’re too humble, Lune,” Liam said, patting my head.

I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation.

Have I managed to pay them back a little?

I gazed out of the tent at the crowd of people walking past and laughing.

“It was also a great idea to grant tax exemptions to those living on the embankment, as long as they monitor the flooding,” father said.

“Liam came up with that one,” I said.

Father's eyes widened a little.

"I see..." he said quietly.

Liam deserves proper praise too!!!

But when I turned to look at my brother, he was smiling bashfully.

Oh, so that was enough for him? Thank goodness!

My heart filled with warmth at the sight of their familial bond.

"Liam is something else. He's a good swordsman, and he's even got a head for territory management," Bal said, sounding impressed.

"I'm going to inherit the Renard domain someday. This much is to be expected," Liam replied. He kept a blank look on his face, but he was secretly petting my tail. I was certain that he really felt happy.

"And it's all because you believed in us, father. Thank you," I said.

He cleared his throat and looked away from me. My ears and tail drooped down, dejected.

"Embarrassed, dear?" mother said with a giggle.

I had no idea what she meant.

"His ears are red," mother pointed out, causing father to rub his ears.

"Father is...embarrassed?" I asked. I felt a surge of joy and my fox ears twitched back up.

Mother kept quiet but smiled.

"He's glad that you thanked him," Liam whispered to me.

My tail stood up happily. "Really?"

Liam nodded, rubbing my tail.

"Gratitude shouldn't only be given to us spirits, but also to humans who give us energy," Lord Reineke declared.

"In that case, I'd like to become someone who isn't afraid to say thank you," I replied.

My words caused father's eyes to widen.

"Thank you...both of you," he whispered. It was so quiet that a spring breeze could drown him out, but I understood his feelings.

Overcome with joy, I grinned and wagged my tail. My chest felt nice and warm. Mother smiled at the sight of me.

Father cleared his throat. "Anyway, things are only going to get busier from now on," he said, turning his gaze to the Renard River.

“Now that the flood control is finished, it’s time for the canal,” mother said.

“Boats! Ships! We’re gonna build them too, aren’t we? I wanna sail in one!” Bal exclaimed.

“We’ll need to make a guild for shipbuilding and service management,” Liam mused, observing the people.

Children were running to and fro without a care in the world as their parents chased after them. A smiling woman walked past, carrying a sleeping baby on her back. Performers in eccentric outfits frolicked around singing. The sound of lively laughter resonated from crowds gathering in front of the stalls.

The happy sight made my eyes sting and my vision turn blurry.

“Looks like the Renard domain can still become a good place,” Liam said, smiling.

“Let’s make it even better!” I responded with renewed determination.

Lord Reineke climbed on top of me, his fluffy fur tickling me.

“As long as you’re here, I will be fine.”

“Of course!”

With everyone’s help, the Renard territory was becoming more abundant. I was sure there was more to come, and imagining the future was exciting.

I wish this joy could last forever! I can’t make the same mistakes as in my past life.

Lord Reineke hugged me from behind. His warm pelt reassured me, and his strong embrace gave me courage.

“You look happy, Lune.”

“Yes! I’m very happy!” I replied, then turned around and buried my face in his chest. I breathed in deeply, the scent of water and spring filling my nose.

It was Liam’s turn to hug me from behind.

“Let’s find even more happiness, Lune!”

“Yes!”

Lord Reineke released me and sat down properly with his front paws together in front of him. The pose gave him a sense of divine dignity. Suddenly, the air around us grew pure and intense. Liam, Bal, and I instinctively sat up straighter. Even the people walking outside stopped and turned to look at Lord Reineke curiously.

“Lune Renard will achieve happiness,” the fox proclaimed

loftily, creating a halo around me.

“Lord Reineke?! This is too much!” I protested.

“Just a little performance,” he said in a voice only I could hear, and laughed heartily.

Mother, father, and the boys stared at the glow around me reverently.

“Lord Reineke just delivered a prophecy!” someone from the crowd cried out. “A prophecy of happiness!”

The people cheered in delight as the cherry petals whirled around them. Golden light spilled from them all, absorbed by Lord Reineke. He smiled in satisfaction and let out a fox call. His high-pitched bark spilled across the azure sky, announcing the dawning of a new era.

Extra Chapter: Lune Is Just Too Cute

I, Liam Renard, was standing in an overgrown meadow near Lord Reineke's temple in anguish.

So cute… Lune's just too cute.

I watched her silver tail sway cheerfully against the tall grass. Lord Reineke was nearby, teaching her about medicinal herbs. He was gazing at Lune as affectionately as though she were his daughter.

"This is medicine too? And this?" Lune asked earnestly, concentrating on the fox's words. She was gathering the herbs into a basket.

"Indeed, they are. Aren't I useful? More useful than Dakini, right?"

"Of course!" Lune replied with a grin.

Appeased, Lord Reineke rubbed his head against hers. Lune closed her eyes, smiling with unbridled joy. That peaceful expression was a sign of her complete trust in the spirit. Her tail wagged as Lord Reineke patted her head with his paw. He then curled his body around her and rubbed their cheeks together.

Lune is so cute it hurts…

Their silver tails were entwined together, their fur sparkling in the sunlight. It was a beautiful, sacred scene. If someone told me they were a spirit father and daughter, I'd believe them.

There was no room for me there.

I couldn't take it anymore and turned away, but right then…

"Brother!"

Hearing Lune's voice, I turned to see her waving her arms in my direction.

She then whispered something into Lord Reineke's ear. Such a trivial action, yet it made me feel a pang of jealousy.

She began running over to me. Unlike with Lord Reineke, where she'd been calm and peaceful, now her tail was wagging vigorously and her fox ears were perked up as though she wanted to catch my every move. Her violet eyes were fixated on me and only me. Her smile was more dazzling than moonlight, making my

head spin.

“Brother? What’s wrong?” Lune asked while running, out of breath. It was so adorable, as if she couldn’t wait until she reached me before asking. “Are you going home? Don’t leave!”

Lune jumped at me, her basket flinging into the air. I caught her but fell on my behind from the impact. As I hit the meadow floor, a burst of dandelion seeds went soaring up.

“I just didn’t want to interrupt you two,” I said.

“You’re not interrupting anything!” Lune said, puffing up her cheeks sulkily.

She wrapped her arms, legs, and tail around me, holding on tightly. Warmth filled me from the very core of my being. Lune’s tail squeezed even tighter.

“Ngh…” I couldn’t stop a quiet noise from coming out from a mix of joy and pain.

Lune gasped, softening her grip on me and casting me a timid glance.

“Are you okay? Did that hurt?”

Her tearful purple eyes reminded me of grapes cloaked in morning dew. Drawn in by the sight, I moved my face closer to hers. Lune smiled innocently.

“You’re not in pain?”

“No.”

“Phew! That’s good!”

She wagged her tail, causing a fuzzy dandelion seed to get caught in her fur. I grabbed her tail and plucked out the seed.

“Eep?!”

Lune looked surprised at first, but then she blushed and glared at me. I showed her the dandelion seed and blew on it to make it float in the breeze.

“It got stuck on you.”

“W-Well, you surprised me!”

I poked her puffed up cheek with my finger.

“Don’t be mad, Lune,” I said.

“Humph!”

“Lune?”

She didn’t answer.

“Luuune?”

Still no response.

“I’m sorry,” I said when she remained silent.

Lune pouted and kept glaring at me. “Next time, say something.”

“All right.”

“You’re special, you know?”

Her words pierced me.

“Special?” I echoed.

“That’s right! Because only *you* can touch my tail!” she insisted, proudly huffing and puffing through her nose.

I couldn’t help but laugh. Lune was just too cute. She was so adorable it almost made me want to cry.

“You’re so cute, Lune.”

“Ahhh! You’re making fun of me! Why do you have to be like this?!”

Lune pushed me down. A bunch of small forest critters rushed over and climbed on top of me as well. Usually, animals and children were scared of me, but that didn’t happen when Lune was around.

“Now you can’t get away!” Lune said triumphantly.

Her words embarrassed me a bit.

“Humans are such fools,” Lord Reineke remarked with an exasperated smile.

“My brother isn’t a fool!” Lune cried out indignantly, her tail banging against the ground.

A cloud of dandelion seeds rose into the sky, embarking onto a trip toward a new life.

Afterword

Extra Story: Lord Reineke's Bliss

"It's time to go home!"

A group of children were running around in the garden of my temple. They stopped in their tracks when their mothers called, then waved goodbye to each other and hurried home. I watched over the scene while basking in the evening sun.

Before long, Lune came and sat down next to me, her tail brushing against mine.

Humph! If she's feeling lonely, why not simply say so? There's no need for her to silently endure it.

Despite my exasperation, I climbed onto her lap. Her fox ears perked up instantly.

"Can I pet you, Lord Reineke?"

"Do as you will."

I flopped over to show my belly. Lune gladly pressed her face against it, her hands gently petting me all over. Golden light seeped from the tips of her fingers, signifying her faith in me.

I live because there are people who believe in me.

That beautiful light and her unparalleled petting filled me with bliss. My eyelids were getting heavy…

"Lune? I'm here to pick you up!"

A gentle shadow fell over us, and we both looked up.

"Brother!"

Lune smiled radiantly and stopped her petting. She stood up, holding me in her arms.

I wish that could've gone on for a little longer, but I suppose seeing her this happy isn't so bad either.

I rested my chin against her shoulder and let out a quiet sigh.

◆◆◆◆

Thank you for reading *Fluffy-Eared Realm Restoration: Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother*! I'm the author, Iota Aiue.

Tenmofu is a tale of a little fox girl being reincarnated by going back in time and restoring her domain. I revised a lot of things from the web version to make it even more fluffy and satisfying. Please show your support to this little girl and all her efforts!

Tsukasa Kuga drew all the adorable and lively illustrations. I had always pictured Lune and the others in Kuga's style, so it was incredible to actually see the drawings for myself! Thank you so much.

I'd also like to express my gratitude to my readers, my manager Fujiwara, and all the staff who assisted with the novelizing process. Thanks to you all, my story turned into a wonderful book. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I hope we can meet again soon.

Iota Aiue


Lune
A little girl found by House Renard. She was executed under false charges and returned to the past with the help of a great fox spirit.
"May I pet you?"
"Well... all right. Do as you like."
"You are not dirty, Lady Lune."
Reineke
A great fox spirit guiding the Renard domain to prosperity.
Liam Renard
Heir of the remote Renard domain. He is inexpressive and hard to read, but he dotes on Lune.


"You can pay me back with your body once you're older!"
"With my body?"
Baldr Chthonius
The illegitimate son of the Garland Kingdom's king. When he first meets Lune, the queen was already after his life.
Reineke
He's usually a fox, but his true form is that of a beautiful young man.
"I am the great spirit Reineke. I'm the fox who guided you to your adoptive family."
"Lune, be mine."
Hodr
The crown prince of Garland. He's a selfish boy who wants to force Lune to belong to him.


"I love you, brother!"
"You're special. So just be yourself with me too."
"Okay!"



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Fluffy-Eared Realm Restoration: Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother Volume 1
by Iota Aiue

Translated by Raenoire
Edited by Austin Conrad

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