
Fluffy-Eared Realm Restoration
Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother
2
Author:
Iota Aiue
Illustrator:
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Liam Renard
Heir of the remote Renard domain. He's inexpressive and hard to read, but he dotes on Lune.
"Liam doesn't know what happened in my past life, but he's still taking the whole kingdom into consideration! So cool!"
"In my past life, Her Majesty even used it in her wallpaper."
Lune
A little girl adopted by House Renard. She was executed under false charges and returned to the past with the help of a great fox spirit.
"That's why she was so sick in her late years. At the time, they thought it was some mysterious illness, but Paris green was the cause."
Reineke
A great fox spirit guiding the Renard domain to prosperity.


"Cool, right? This is my premium seat! I'm lending you my favorite place!"
"Ohhh! It's warm! And there are bubbles all over my legs!"
"Commendable, Lune."
"Here's your share, Lord Reineke!"
Marcel Girard
A skilled former traveling swordsman. He met Lune in the forest near the forbidden zone near the end of summer.
Baldr Chthonius
The illegitimate son of the Garland Kingdom's king. When he first meets Lune, the queen was already after his life.


"He looked into Paris green himself after receiving our letter, so this is all thanks to you as well, Lune."
"Wahhh... Feels good..."

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Prologue: Taking Flight

Sunlight poured down on me through the open ceiling of the dim cave, like a stairway to heaven. The scene was so peaceful that I yawned and closed my eyes, my tail swaying happily. Lord Reineke snuggled up to me as I petted his back. Fine silver strands of his fur soared into the air, shimmering in the sun's rays. Droplets of melting snow trickled down the cavern walls like a quiet song that heralded the coming of spring.

My name was Lune Renard. When I was eight years old, my parents abandoned me during a monster attack and I became an orphan. I hid in the temple of the great fox spirit Lord Reineke until Liam Renard found me, and his marquisate family took me in as their adoptive daughter. It had already been a year since then, and I was now nine.

In fact, in my past life, I had been executed by a mob, but Lord Reineke decided to grant me a second chance to redo my life. So great was his pity for me that he gave me divinely blessed fox ears and a tail, and reincarnated me as his spirit contractor.

"Are you sleepy, Lune?" asked a boy who was using a scrubbing brush to rub Mr. Dragon's back. This was my older adoptive brother Liam, gazing at me with gentle eyes the color of twilight.

Liam was the heir of House Renard who would one day take over the territory. He was fourteen, five years my senior. He had made a spirit contract with the Lord of Darkness, Nott, whose very name was a taboo—though this was a secret just between me and him. It was already rare for children to make spirit contracts, let alone with one of the Lords. My brother was truly exceptional. I loved how kind, clever, and strong he was.

"Nope. Lord Reineke yawned first and it spread to me," I replied, a little embarrassed.

Liam smiled. "If you're ever sleepy, just say so. I'll carry you

back."

Lord Reineke scoffed irritably. **"*I* will carry her. You can stay out of it, Liam,"** he said out loud, wrapping his tail around me.

How much Lord Reineke could interact with the human world changed based on the amount of faith people had in him. When we'd first made our contract, he couldn't speak to humans too often without straining himself. But now that the citizens of the Renard domain had greater faith in him, he could address people as he pleased, even just to wisecrack.

Still, it's unusual for him to do this, I thought giddily, feeling like a protected cub.

But then the dragon wrapped his tail around both me and Lord Reineke.

Liam rubbed the back of his neck. "Sheesh. Everyone loves you, Lune," he mumbled.

The dragon flapped his massive wings. Another boy who was atop the dragon's back to scrub his scales let out a surprised yelp. This was Bal, although his real name was Baldr. He was the illegitimate son of the king, and the queen was after his life. To hide his identity, we dyed his blond hair orange, and House Renard claimed he was the son of a distant relative that they were looking after.

In my past life, Baldr had been the leader of the revolutionary army that toppled the royal family, and the one who had condemned me and my family to death.

"Hey! That startled me! If you're gonna flap your wings, at least tell me first!" Bal complained, smacking the dragon's back with the scrubbing brush.

"Bal! You cannot treat the dragon like that!" Liam warned, but Bal just laughed.

"I bet he didn't even feel that."

Mr. Dragon chuckled.

"Indeed. It's like the bite of a flea," he said, although only Lord Reineke and I could hear him.

Dr. Guillotin, Theo, and House Renard's knights were also here today. We had come to give Mr. Dragon medical treatment, as well

as check on the ice room that we had set up inside the cave to store his shed scales. If the scales were left to rot, they'd eventually turn into monsters. However, if we processed them properly, they'd turn into something with very similar properties to magical ore. We kept any excess that couldn't be processed immediately here in the ice room, and Theo was checking to see if we could have even more of these rooms in the cave.

Liam and Bal were giving the dragon a massage, while I passed the time by chatting with Lord Reineke. Thanks to regular treatment, Mr. Dragon's health was much better these days.

"My strength has returned to me. I would like to take to the sky," the dragon said.

I passed his words onto Liam.

"He can't leave through there, though," Liam said, pointing at the ceiling.

The dragon's cave had once been sealed. When we broke that seal, Liam made the opening in the ceiling inaccessible to anyone other than those who had been present for the occasion by using dark magic to conceal it. All a normal person would see from the outside was a grassy field.

"There's still some residual light magic here, so I don't think a monster like the dragon could get out anyway," Liam added.

"And we might be in trouble if people see a dragon flying through the sky," I said anxiously.

Dragons were legendary beings, and nobody even knew there was one living in our kingdom. Worse yet, dragons were feared as monsters.

"He might even get killed. I mean, every adventurer yearns for the title of Dragonslayer," Bal said.

Mr. Dragon huffed. *"You think a human could kill me?"* he said with a mocking laugh. Yet in reality, he still wasn't fully recovered.

"Maybe you should wait a bit longer..." I began, but before I could finish, the dragon abruptly stood up.

"There's no such need!" he protested, turning toward the ceiling.

The startled Liam and Bal clung to his neck so they wouldn't fall off his back. The ground began to shake, and I could hear a cracking

sound.

"No! That entrance is dangerous!" Liam shouted. "There's a magic circle drawn by the royals. If you pass through it, they will be notified!"

"As if I care!"

The dragon took a step forward.

I ran over and stood in front of him, spreading my arms out.

"Please wait!"

"Out of my way!"

Mr. Dragon let out a roar. Seconds later, Dr. Guillotin, Theo, and the knights appeared from within the side passage.

"Ohh! Darling dragon, you're already so full of energy!" Dr. Guillotin exclaimed cheerfully. "Perhaps it's time to start your rehabilitation!"

"Rehabilitation?" I asked.

"Oh yes! Flying right off the bat might be dangerous. We must begin by strengthening his chest muscles first!"

"What do you mean?"

"You see, flying is not just about the wings. The chest plays a vital role too," the doctor explained.

Mr. Dragon and Lord Reineke listened with interest.

"My sentence has been shortened, and so I must leave this domain next month. That's why I'd like to begin Mr. Dragon's rehabilitation before then," Dr. Guillotin said.

The dragon fluttered his wings in surprise, hitting the cave's ceiling and causing bits of earth to scatter down.

"His...sentence? Wait, this man is leaving?!"

"Dr. Guillotin's sentence was shortened after his research on constrictive roundworm disease was acknowledged," I explained. "He's leaving the Renard domain in a month and going to the capital to become a professor in the academy."

The doctor pursed his lips at my words.

"I don't *want* to go to the capital, though," he grumbled. "They won't let me have the freedom I need for my research, and if something happens again, those idiots will hold me back. And when I think about how I won't get to see Lady Lune or my darling dragon

again... Aah, it's so depressing..."

"Regardless, you can't disobey an order from the royal court," Liam reasoned calmly.

"I know. Besides, if I insist on staying in Renard, they might get suspicious of this place. If they discover my darling dragon..." Dr. Guillotin's whole body shuddered, and he lovingly petted the dragon. "I don't want my precious dragon to become someone's test subject."

"I'm not your *dragon. And I won't let anyone experiment on me,"* the dragon said. Despite his words, instead of threatening the doctor as usual, he was allowing the man to pet him.

Mr. Dragon must be lonely.

I decided not to say that out loud and risk offending him.

Dr. Guillotin pensively looked over the dragon's body and the slightly damaged ceiling.

"I would like my darling dragon to be fully recovered by the time I leave, but it might be impossible to carry out rehabilitation inside the cave."

I looked up at the ceiling too.

"So how about we make a new entrance? Theo can explain the rest!" Dr. Guillotin exclaimed.

Theo's face reddened.

"W-Well, I've been thinking of making a new entrance over there for a while now," he said, pointing at the side passage his group had emerged from earlier.

"That leads to a dead end, right?" I asked.

Liam nodded. "But according to Master Theo, there might be a cave behind one of the walls."

"R-Right," Theo said sheepishly. "There's a small crevice that lets in a breeze. I knocked on the wall out of curiosity, and the sound was more hollow than the other walls. So I thought it might lead to the outside." As usual, he spoke while looking down and hunching over.

I ran up to him and took his hand.

"Incredible as always, Master Theo!"

He quickly looked away from me.

"Not at all..."

"All right! Let's get excavating!" shouted Bal.

"Um... To do that, I'd like to test something out," Theo said timidly. "I asked Dr. Guillotin to make a powerful explosive through the use of the pseudo magical ore."

"In my estimation, the explosion should be bigger than usual, so it would be best to test it in a secluded place," the doctor added.

Originally, the two men had struggled to break the boulder that blocked the entrance to the dragon's cave. Hence, they had researched a more efficient way to pulverize rock.

I had already known that a powerful explosive would be discovered, as it had been used in my previous life to open up the road leading to the Renard domain. However, the explosive was a liquid, and while powerful, it was too reactive with fire, which had led to many accidents.

I'd racked my brain to come up with a way to make it safer until Lord Reineke taught me about it. He instructed us to make pseudo magical ore by soaking Mr. Dragon's molt in the liquid explosive, adding raw lacquer tree sap to prevent it from igniting or exploding through ordinary fire, and coating it with black powder. Through this method, it would only ignite through the use of fire magic, and when it did explode, it would have tremendous power.

Theo must have finished creating this explosive magical ore and now wanted to experiment.

"Go ahead and try. The ground here is so hard that not even a dragon like me can dig through it," Mr. Dragon said snidely. It seemed he was convinced we'd fail.

But Lord Reineke put on a smug look in response.

Theo placed the explosive ore down with fire-aligned pseudo magical ore.

"Everyone, plug your ears and get down!" he shouted.

Liam shielded me with his own body. Next to me, Bal got down too, and Lord Reineke covered the three of us protectively.

"Three! Two! One!"

I heard a loud explosion, and a blast of wind shot out from the side passage. The sound reverberated through the cave as stones

and sand blew past on the hot wind. Lord Reineke's body glowed gold, acting like a barrier that caused debris to bounce off with a high-pitched noise.

The cavern was filled with a cloud of dust, blocking our vision. I gasped and coughed when I breathed it in, so Mr. Dragon blew it away with a huff of his nose.

After that, everything was silent. Slowly, I opened my eyes. Theo staggered over to peer into the tunnel.

"It... It worked! It's open! Thank you, Lord Reineke!"

Bal and the knights cheered loudly, then headed through the new passage.

"I can see a light down there!" Bal exclaimed.

"The tunnel connects to another cave that leads outside!"

"Let's go take a look!"

The knights' joyful shouts filled the cave.

"I can't believe it..." Mr. Dragon groaned.

"Well? Terrific, isn't it?" Lord Reineke laughed haughtily.

The dragon scoffed at the spirit's provocation and stood up. Lord Reineke, Liam, and I followed after his earthshaking steps into the tunnel.

Mr. Dragon passed through the opening left behind by the explosion into the second cave. His back got stuck on the upper edge, but he forced his way through, causing more earth and rock to crumble down as he widened the hole.

Bal and the knights took the lead, pushing forward toward the light.

"Wow! Amazing!" Bal shouted from up ahead, and the rest of us hurried to catch up.

When we stepped out of the cave, we saw a massive field tapering out before us. A thin layer of snow coated the young green grass.

"This is an old crater," Mr. Dragon muttered.

"A crater?" I asked.

"This mountain used to erupt often," Lord Reineke said. **"But it hasn't happened for the past five hundred years."**

Liam gasped. "So the legend from the archives about the sacred

mountains spouting fire was true.”

Mr. Dragon took in a deep breath and spread his wings, causing the knights to fall over from surprise. Everyone gazed up at his majestic form, now in full display. He flapped his wings, kicking up a whirlwind. As the sun shone down on him, the shadow of his wings danced along the ground.

Dr. Guillotin emerged from the cave.

“How do your wings feel?”

“Still a bit stiff.”

I conveyed the dragon’s words to the doctor.

“Then let’s begin your daily rehabilitation. Please come out here during the day and do some push-ups. Also, exercise your wings by opening and closing them.”

“A dragon doing push-ups?” Bal murmured, quickly looking away as his shoulders shook with the effort of holding in his laugh.

I couldn’t help grinning at that mental picture as well.

The knights started doing push-ups in front of the dragon to demonstrate.

However, Dr. Guillotin paid his surroundings no mind as he gave the dragon a serious look.

“You can’t just go flying off on your own, you know?”

“Because you’ll all get in trouble if I’m found?”

When I translated, the doctor looked a little surprised at first, then laughed.

“No. It’s because you might fall down and hurt yourself. If you get a serious injury, you’ll be in pain, darling dragon,” he explained in a kind tone of voice.

“Right... I see,” Mr. Dragon replied reluctantly.

I repeated his words, but Dr. Guillotin looked down at the dragon’s tail dubiously. It was wagging, as the dragon couldn’t hide his eagerness to fly.

“I understand how you feel, but sometimes the seemingly roundabout way is the true shortcut.”

“I get it already, so stop acting so arrogant.”

Mr. Dragon let out an angry huff, and Dr. Guillotin simply shrugged in response.

"He's being mean to me, isn't he?" the doctor asked me.

I hesitated, unsure of what to say.

"Oh, I'm not angry. In fact, I'm glad that I'm starting to understand his feelings," Dr. Guillotin said with a grin.

Liam once again cast the cloaking spell over the entrance to the crater so that the dragon could exercise in peace. The area was big, however, so he needed to borrow some of Lord Reineke's power and draw a circle with the pseudo magical ore.

From then on, Mr. Dragon dedicated himself to his daily rehabilitation.

A month later, on a half-moon night, I clung to the dragon's neck atop his back. Liam was behind me, embracing me tightly while also holding onto the dragon. His warmth against my back reassured me. And Lord Reineke, who was now able to change size at will, was behind Liam in his giant form, his paws on each side of us to keep us safe. Liam leaned back against him, sinking into the fox's fluffy chest.

Mr. Dragon's shiny white scales felt hard and smooth. Without thinking, I brushed my tail against him, and he let out a deep, rumbly giggle.

"That tickles, Lune!"

"Oh! Sorry!"

I made my tail stop moving.

"What happened?" Liam asked.

"I brushed my tail against Mr. Dragon, but he told me to stop because it tickles."

"I see. Well, *I'd* never say something like that," Liam responded sullenly, burying his face between my fox ears.

I smacked his leg with my tail, but he caught it.

"Got you, you naughty tail!"

"Brother?!" I exclaimed in surprise.

Liam tucked my tail against his chest.

"See? Now it can't do any mischief," he said with a smile, which made me happy too.

"Stop flirting while you're in my arms," demanded the

displeased Lord Reineke.

Mr. Dragon nodded in agreement.

But we're not flirting, I thought with a shrug as Liam and I exchanged grins before falling silent.

The dragon began walking to the crater, the ground shaking beneath him. When he stepped out from the dark cave, a warm breeze hit my cheeks. I looked up at the sky and saw the half-moon.

Mr. Dragon let out a roar. It sounded like a storm, shaking the trees and shrubbery all around us. Cherry blossoms fluttered down, and birds jolted awake and flew off.

"Shh! Please, Mr. Dragon! You'll wake everyone up!" I said.

The dragon smirked. Liam smiled wryly as well, then pulled out his sword and drew a circle in the air.

"Lord of Darkness, Nott! Conceal the dragon!"

A purple magical circle shone against the starry sky. As it lowered onto us, a momentary feeling of discomfort overcame me. The dragon's white body turned dark, and a membrane the same shade of purple as my brother's hair enveloped me and Lord Reineke. This was Liam's dark magic—it made me feel calm and safe.

"I cast a cloaking spell on us, and nobody will be able to hear the dragon's roars either. Go on, dragon! Fly at will!"

Mr. Dragon flapped his wings, blasting air against the surrounding greenery. Even a concealment spell couldn't hide such a physical shock wave.

"Here we go!"

With a powerful kick, the dragon leaped into the air.

"Aah!" I screamed, closing my eyes and desperately clinging onto the dragon.

Liam held me tightly, while Lord Reineke's paws were straining with effort.

"Open your eyes, Lune."

At Lord Reineke's words, I peeked over my shoulder and saw that he was smiling at me. The wind swept my silver hair back, causing it to get mixed up in Liam's. Flower petals danced across the spring breeze, and the scent of flowers pooled at the basin of the mountains. I looked up at the sky, to a spot where a river of stars

seemed to divide the sky in two.

"Oh! How beautiful!"

"That's the Milky Way," Liam said.

My breath hitched at the stunning sight.

The dragon rose higher and higher until he broke through the clouds, spinning around beneath the moonlight. He whirled across the sky as if letting out his frustration at not being able to fly for so long.

Whenever I'd look up at the sky from the basin, the mountains surrounded it like a picture frame, making it look small and narrow. But from atop the dragon's back, the sky seemed to stretch on for eternity.

"Lune, look," Liam said, pointing down.

Although not as bright as the night sky, the Renard domain below us was also dotted with lights. But those lamps were precious, so they were used sparingly. I then noticed that the mountain trail was lit up by what must've been torches. There was a line of people, all making their way toward the capital.

"Is that Dr. Guillotin's group?" I asked.

"It is," Liam answered.

Hearing that, Mr. Dragon sharply turned toward the group. We would see the doctor off under the cover of night.

The dragon aimed directly at Dr. Guillotin and dove down. The wind shrieked in my ears, and the trees along the trail warped under the pressure. Flower petals shot up into the air and forest animals scattered in panic.

Dr. Guillotin held down his green hair while looking around frantically. The dragon spat something at him that looked like a rock. It hit the man in the head, but then he caught it in both hands. He scrutinized it for a moment, then quickly hid it in his breast pocket. Wide-eyed, he looked up at the sky.

He shouldn't be able to see us because of Liam's magic...right?

But it was startling that he seemed to be staring right at us. He then smiled, bowed deeply, and gave us a small wave. Though he probably couldn't actually see us, Liam and I waved back while Lord Reineke wagged his tail. Satisfied, Mr. Dragon swooped back around

and began flying away.

"What did you give him?" I asked.

The dragon grinned. *"A dragon bone."*

"A bone?!"

Dragon bone was a fabled miracle drug that Dr. Guillotin had always wanted. Supposedly, it would double the effects of any medicine it was added to.

"Much as I hated it, that man did look after me. It's my farewell gift to him," Mr. Dragon said with a scoff.

Lord Reineke laughed at that.

"Wait, did the dragon give Dr. Guillotin a dragon bone? As in, the legendary medicine?" asked the confused Liam.

"Yep! Mr. Dragon said it was a farewell gift because Dr. Guillotin looked after him," I explained.

"I said I hated it!" the dragon emphasized grumpily.

"I see. Well, I hope Dr. Guillotin succeeds in the capital," Liam said.

"It'll be lonely without him, but I want him to do his best out there."

Liam and I nodded at each other while the dragon carried us further and further from the trail.

On the edge of the mountains, I could see a castle illuminated in the distance. It was the residence of House Renard.

"That's our home," brother said.

His words filled me with joy.

"*Our* home..." I repeated, and he nodded.

Once Mr. Dragon had his fill of soaring across the sky, he set the three of us down in front of Renard Castle and returned to his nest.

Chapter 1: The Secret Workshop

We had set up a workshop for processing pseudo magical ore by the ice room in Mr. Dragon's cave. The raw material—dragon molt—was the Renard domain's most crucial secret, for if anyone discovered it, the dragon might become a prime target to be hunted down.

First, we had to cut the shed skin, following its grooves in the shape of scales. Each diamond-shaped bit of molt would become a single crystal, which could then be imbued with various magical or medicinal properties. Those properties would be twice as powerful as normal and could even be used without the blessing of a spirit.

The creation process was a secret, so only the people who were initially present for the opening of the dragon's cave were allowed to work here. The magic-wielding knights of our domain imbued the dragon molt with magic borrowed from their spirit contracts. Those like Bal who couldn't use magic were still able to help by soaking the skin with medicinal chemicals or lacquer tree sap. For some reason, Lord Reineke's magic didn't work on Mr. Dragon's shed scales, so I assisted with this too. Liam joined in as well, as his dark magic was our secret.

"I wish we could make it a prettier color," I said.

Mr. Dragon's translucent white scales were beautiful, but when we coated them with brown tree sap, their color faded.

"We're making them useful. Isn't that what counts?" Bal asked, confused.

Indeed, their looks had nothing to do with utility.

"True...but practical goods are always less profitable, right? If we could make it seem more valuable to people, we could sell it for a higher price."

A pure white cotton handkerchief was very useful, yet nobles paid it no mind. But by adding some lace or embroidery, suddenly its

value increased. Cluttered designs often made things more difficult to use, but the nobles loved elaborately decorated items nonetheless. I'd found that odd even back in my past life.

"If we made the ore look prettier, we could sell them as magical amulets," I said.

"Good point. Well, when we made explosive ore, we mixed the tree sap with black powder. So why don't we try mixing it with pigments?" Liam proposed.

"That might work!" Bal responded excitedly. "I wanna try orange!"

However, I preferred the molt's original color.

"It'd be best if we could make them clear..." I murmured.

"You can," Lord Reineke said.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, the translucent figure of Lady Kuzunoha appeared before me. In the blink of an eye, she took control of my body and turned to my brother.

"Heed my words, Liam," she said. Her calm, mature voice seeping through my lips made Liam straighten up. **"The ore becomes muddy when you soak it in tree sap because you're using the wrong resin solution."**

"So we're using the wrong ingredients?"

Lady Kuzunoha nodded. **"Use a solution mix of the kakuremino, koshiabura, and takanotsume trees. It will create a clear amber lacquer called gonzetsu."**

Liam repeated the spirit's words under his breath.

"Can we find these trees in Lord Reineke's forest?" he asked.

"Of course! I'll guide you to them," Lord Reineke replied smugly.

Lady Kuzunoha smiled. **"Then I leave the rest to you. You may thank me with fried tofu."**

With that, she stopped possessing me, and my knees gave way from the sudden loss of control. It was exhausting both physically and mentally whenever the great spirits borrowed my body.

Lord Reineke took us around the forest and showed us the trees we needed to make gonzetsu.

"Okay, now let's try out a pigment!" Bal shouted, adding gold dust to the lacquer.

The mixture coated the dragon molt, creating a thin amber film through which the gold dust sparkled beautifully. However, we couldn't extract gonzetsu in large quantities, so for practical and low-priced items we used lacquer tree sap instead. Thanks to Bal's idea, we were able to mix it with various pigments too.

"I'm so glad Lady Kuzunoha told us we can paint with the lacquer!" I said.

"She said it's called 'maki-e,' right? She truly knows about some very strange things," Liam replied.

"But I can't paint!" Bal despaired in frustration.

"I'm not great either," I said.

"Me neither..." Liam said.

The three of us looked at each other, troubled. We could probably scribble a few things, but nothing worth selling.

"Then ask the monastery convicts to do it," Lord Reineke proposed.

"That's a great idea! We can't let them know about the dragon molt, but we can process it here and then send the items off for painting elsewhere," Liam said.

"You've done it again, Lord Reineke!" Bal exclaimed.

The boys looked at the fox with reverence. In response, Lord Reineke proudly puffed out his chest.

We diligently worked on processing the pseudo magical ore. When we were done, there was an assortment of colorful gemstones laid upon the table to dry.

"These will make excellent amulets," Lord Reineke said with a smile.

"I hope they can become the Renard domain's specialty," I whispered.

Brother patted my head. "I'm sure their beauty will draw plenty of eyes."

"Yeah!" I nodded.

Liam leaned down and placed a pendant made from one of the crystals around my neck. It was a light purple shade, so it must've

been made from his magic.

"What is this?" I asked.

Liam pressed his lips between my fox ears.

"I made it in secret. It's imbued with wind magic," he whispered before leaning back.

As he did so, his lips grazed my ear. My cheeks instantly turned red and I squeaked, pressing my ears down with my hands.

"If you're ever in danger, use this to call for help. The wind will carry your voice," Liam said, then turned away. He must've been embarrassed too, because the back of his neck was flushed.

Brother walked away so quickly it was as if he were trying to escape. I rushed after him and grabbed his coat sleeve. He looked back at me with surprise.

"Thank you!" I said bashfully, making him smile. "I'm so happy that you'll always be by my side!"

I rubbed the pendant, unable to stop myself from grinning. Liam pulled me into his arms.

I'll definitely give him something in return too! I thought.

"Ugh! Enough with the endless flirting!"

"You said it."

Bal and Lord Reineke grumbled as they exited the workshop.

"But that's not what we were doing..." I said, looking up at my brother innocently.

Embarrassed, he simply shrugged.

With the work done for the day, we closed the secret workshop's door behind us.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

We had decided to use the explosive magical ore to excavate the Renard River. Our domain was situated in a basin between steep mountains with no way to cross them, so we wanted to create a canal along our largest river. We'd also control the canal, imposing transit fees on any non-Renard citizens who traversed it. Those who didn't want to pay could ask Renard citizens to operate their ships, which would open up more jobs. And if our citizens' income

increased, so would our territory's tax revenue.

The Renard River was wide but shallow in places, so we'd need to dig up some of the riverbed. In order to increase the amount of water before summer was in full swing, we decided to use the explosive ore to assist with the construction work. Father was on-site with the rest of us today.

There was a frame in the middle of the river above the spot where a large boulder lay hidden. The rock was underwater, so we couldn't use the same method of burning and cooling to break it like before. Instead, we set up a frame above the spot, from which a large iron pole would be lowered to break the boulder. The pole was sharpened, then lifted onto the frame using a pulley system operated by the workers. Per Theo's suggestion, they'd also affixed the pseudo magical ore to the pole's tip.

The citizens sang loudly together while working on the pulley. Everyone looked in high spirits. Of course, part of that was because everyone was getting adequately paid, but I was sure they were glad to be bettering their territory with their own hands. Lord Reineke watched over them with a warm gaze.

"Whoa! It's huge!" Bal yelled, staring at the frame.

"People with all sorts of skills are exiled here. They know how to use the same kind of technology as in the capital, while other territories might not even have access to such things," I said.

"Yeah. There are so many ways to do labor," Bal murmured with appreciation.

Theo came over to us, carrying some kind of metallic bucket.

"We're about to begin, so please watch carefully," he said. Indeed, we'd be unveiling the explosive ore to the public for the first time today. "And please put this on."

Theo handed out helmets with open faces and cotton earmuffs.

"We should be safe at this distance, but just in case..." Theo explained.

We all put on the helmets without complaint. I slipped mine on, feeling my fox ears get squished underneath.

The method we'd be using to break rock today took a lot of pseudo magical ore, so we could only use it sparingly on the largest

boulders. Theo used his magic to search for weak points inside the rock. He affixed the explosive ore to those places and then drew back to a safe distance.

"Go ahead!" he shouted vigorously. I almost couldn't believe he was the same man who had hunched over and trembled when I first met him. Indeed, people shone brightest when they did what they loved.

As the countdown began, a fire magic wielder from the monastery began chanting a spell.

"Fire spirit, lend me your strength!"

"Three! Two! One! Go!!!" Theo yelled.

The fire wielder snapped his fingers. Instantly, all of the explosive ore detonated with even more force than we'd seen in the cave. The powerful blast shook the earth.

I flinched. My tail swished nervously as I instinctively clung to my brother.

White smoke rose up following the tremendous shock wave, blinding us all. Despite the helmet upon my head, my ears were stinging. The very air seemed to be shaking, and even Lord Reineke covered his ears with a grimace. Bal had crouched down and hidden his head in his arms.

But father and Liam were unmoved.

They're incredible!

I looked up at Liam admiringly. He smiled and hugged me tightly.

Ah! Brother, I looove you!

I pressed myself even closer against him.

"Wind spirit, clear away the smoke!" father chanted.

The fumes vanished, revealing the viciously crumbled apart remnants of the boulder.

"Wow! Wow! *Wow!!!*" Even though he'd been cowering moments ago, Bal was now hopping up and down.

The citizens cheered, and I started clapping.

"That Theo's not half bad at this," Lord Reineke said with a chuckle. With those words to me, he had truly acknowledged Theo's skills.

"Lord Reineke just praised you," I told the man, who smiled shyly.

"Thank you, Lord Reineke. This is all thanks to your guidance," he said, a golden light of faith spilling from him.

The workers must've thought so too, as they all glowed with a similar light.

Lord Reineke nodded in satisfaction.

"That was excellently done, Theo. I'm very impressed, so keep it up and develop it even further. And make sure to let the marquisate know should you need anything," father said.

He took off his helmet, and I followed suit.

"Thank you very much!" Theo said, bowing deeply.

The construction work became a hot topic within the Garland Kingdom. Theo drew a lot of attention, and people were starting to consider restarting the once-canceled creation of the Grand Canal. For now, the decision was held off so they could see how things developed with the Renard Canal, but Theo was still overjoyed by the news.

The pseudo magical ore raised some interest too, and we were getting a few inquiries about the amulets.

"You were right, Lune. Prettying up the ore was the right choice. The nobles seem to refer to it as magic jewelry," Liam said, a little excited.

My fox ears twitched happily.

"Really?"

"Yes. And the maki-e is proving very popular. The artists at the monastery are starting to receive commissions, so they're getting fired up too," Liam said.

I jumped for joy. "That's great!"

I was glad that my idea was recognized, but more than anything, I was happy that it had enriched the domain and motivated the criminals.

"That's my Lune," Lord Reineke said, rubbing his head against my waist.

"It's all thanks to your advice, Great Lord Reineke!" I replied, giving him a big hug. "I'll bring you lots of deep-fried tofu later!"

"Exactly," Liam agreed.

“I’d prefer wine, actually,” the fox huffed.

“And we should bring Mr. Dragon a bunch of alcohol to say thanks!” I added.

“I wanna help too! I’ll come up with something!” Bal said, joining us.

“Oh, a drinking party? Very good.”

As the three of us eagerly discussed our ideas, Liam watched over us with a gentle smile.

Chapter 2: Yama Moth of the Forbidden Zone

Late in the summer, Liam, Bal, Lord Reineke, and I went into the forest next to Lord Reineke's temple. Some of the shrubs and vegetation were already beginning to show signs of the upcoming fall.

We were headed toward the forbidden zone within the forest—a special place that only those with Lord Reineke's permission could enter. I'd heard that ancient plants and creatures long thought to be extinct still survived in this land.

Before entering, we stopped by the river with the hot spring to prepare curry soup for our return this afternoon. Lord Reineke then led the way in his usual, smaller fox form, with me right behind.

The only human to have ever entered the forbidden land was House Renard's founder. Excitement bubbled within me at the thought of soon stepping foot in such a place myself.

The reason for our trip had all started with the appearance of a certain merchant. After hearing of our pseudo magical ore, he traveled to our domain from the capital and presented House Renard with a bright green fabric. In the Garland Kingdom, green cloth was extremely rare. It had supposedly existed in the ancient past, but the knowledge of how to make it had stopped being passed down for some unknown reason. The material itself became the stuff of legend, even being dubbed "the cloth of the gods."

The merchant's fabric was the most vivid of greens. My mother instantly fell in love and wanted a dress made from it. But the merchant ridiculed her, claiming right in front of Lord Reineke that a backwater domain like ours wouldn't be able to produce anything like it. The infuriated spirit asserted that the Renard domain could

produce an even *better* cloth, and immediately took us to the woods to show us the necessary materials.

"The dye that man was using is bad for your health anyway," Lord Reineke huffed.

"Really?" I looked at him with surprise, but he only shot me a glance.

The bright green pigment, called Paris green, had been all the rage in my past life. It was developed by House Cordier—the marquisate where the queen had been born. This was also one of the three families who held the title of chancellor in our kingdom. As the maternal relatives of the crown prince, they had strong influence over the royal court.

The queen adored Paris green and showed it off in a public event, asserting it as the revival of the cloth of the gods as a demonstration of the royal family's power. This made the popularity of green pigments soar among the royal court, and House Cordier turned a huge profit.

In the present, Paris green was still rare and only occasionally distributed among high-ranked aristocracy. However, a decade from now, it would become mass-produced.

"I don't know why, but that pigment instantly kills insects. Humans don't perish quite so quickly, but it cannot be good for their bodies," Lord Reineke said nonchalantly.

"What?! But in my past life, Her Majesty even used it in her wallpaper," I whispered into his ear.

Since my past-life memories were a secret, the spirit responded telepathically.

"That's why she was so sick in her late years. At the time, they thought it was some mysterious illness, but Paris green was the cause."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Indeed, the queen had been sick in my previous life, and the same illness spread throughout the capital. In fact, the disease turned into an epidemic right around the time I became crown princess, and people directed their resentment at me for it.

They also spread rumors that the illness was a punishment for breaking the promise between the royal family and House Renard. In response, the queen claimed that the Renard vixen—that is, me—cursed everyone.

The queen wasn't exactly a fan of mine and practically harassed me. She blamed me for every misfortune, including her illness. His Highness Hodr never stood up for me. Instead of denying or protesting against his mother's accusations, he just told me to ignore them. But everyone else kept slandering me and telling me to disappear, to the point that I began believing I truly was at fault.

Of course, I hadn't cursed anyone, but I *had* broken the promise between the royal family and House Renard. It made sense to me that there would be some punishment, and my heart had ached at the thought that I might be the cause of the disease after all.

But it all happened because Her Majesty loved Paris green so much.

Enamored with the newly developed color, the woman had dyed not only her attire, but also her curtains and tableware. Even public decorations and donated items had to be green.

I thought I was the reason behind that strange sickness, but that's not true.

I breathed a sigh of relief as some of my guilt dissipated.

"But if that's the case, we can't let mother have a Paris green dress!" I exclaimed, huffing.

"Right. We can't have it used widely in the kingdom either," said Liam.

I gasped. *Liam doesn't know what happened in my past life, but he's already thinking so far ahead!* I thought, gazing at him with admiration.

"I'll write a letter to Dr. Guillotin and see if he can find the cause. I doubt anyone will believe Paris green is toxic if we don't know how it works," Liam explained.

"You're so cool, dear brother! I was only thinking of our mother, but here you are, taking the whole kingdom into consideration!" I said. My tail was wagging.

Liam smiled, his cheeks slightly red.

"It's no big deal."

Classic Liam!

I was proud to have such an intelligent yet humble brother.

"But if we have to wait, won't the toxic cloth continue to be sold? Can't we ban it or something?" Bal asked.

Liam furrowed his brows. "We can put up a notice asking people within our own domain not to deal with the fabric, but as just a marquisate, we don't have the power to ban it throughout the country."

"Are you sure? I mean, House Renard's important. I was taught that it's one of the oldest, most venerable families involved with creating the kingdom."

Liam shrugged, smiling wryly. "Nominally, perhaps. But in reality, we have little influence over the royal court. We protect the frontier, so our power within the capital is limited."

Bal looked dejected. He had a strong sense of justice, so it'd be difficult for him to look the other way while harm was being done.

I understand how he feels... Is there really no other option?

I pondered for a while. Suddenly, realization dawned on me and I stopped in my tracks.

"I know! How about we popularize cloth made in our domain before that other fabric can spread? Even if we can't replace it completely, we'd still reduce some of its sales. Isn't that better than nothing?"

Bal brightened at my idea, rushing over and grabbing my hand.

"Yes! Awesome! That's a great idea!!!"

"It is indeed."

I grinned when Lord Reineke praised me as well.

Bal and I held hands, humming and skipping together as we continued to make our way toward the forbidden zone. After a while, Lord Reineke stopped.

"Here it is."

There was a massive boulder in front of us, split in two. But no matter how much I strained my eyes, the area around it seemed distorted, as if it were a mirage. This boulder had to be the entrance to the forbidden zone.

The shape of a grapevine was engraved on the stone—the same as the one on Lord Reineke's forehead. Wild grapes grew around the crack in the boulder, bridging the gap between the two halves. The dense vegetation seemed to act as a blockade, preventing people from venturing in.

"Whoa, this is crazy! Can we get in?" Bal asked, dumbfounded.

"Only with my permission," Lord Reineke responded arrogantly, swishing his tail.

A golden light surrounded the three of us. With a loud sound, the wild grapes snapped apart, opening up a path inside the boulder.

"Wooow!" I cried.

"Cool!" Bal cheered.

Liam's eyes were wide with surprise.





“Let us go!” Lord Reineke ordered, once more leading the way.

As soon as he stepped past the boulder, his appearance shifted into that of a beautiful young man clad in ancient, mystical-looking attire. His long silver hair swayed behind him, and his violet eyes were the same shade as mine.

He turned back around and knelt in front of me.

“Come here, Lune.”

I jumped into his arms. He grinned and hugged me.

“Aww, lucky!” Bal said.

“Nice, eh?” Lord Reineke looked smug for some reason, then poked my cheek. **“So soft and moist. Your cheeks are like freshly picked peaches.”**

The spirit was in a good mood, but Liam shot him a displeased look.

“Let’s keep going,” he said curtly, causing me to frown slightly. His voice sounded colder than usual.

Maybe it’s because Lord Reineke hugged only me?

I trembled in the spirit’s arms.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“I was thinking, maybe it’s a bit unfair if you only hug me,” I replied.

“Unfair? Of course not! You are my favorite and my contractor! My *partner*!”

“Still...” I trailed off, glancing at my brother.

Lord Reineke smirked.

“Ah, so you’re worried about Liam.”

I flinched because he’d hit the bull’s-eye.

“He’s just jealous of how close we are,” Lord Reineke said, casting Liam a teasing look.

“No! Th-That’s not true!” Liam retorted, turning bright red.

Lord Reineke cackled.

“Exactly! My brother can’t possibly be jealous!” I added.

Liam was cool, intelligent, and always composed. There was no way he’d be jealous over such a trivial thing.

“Oh? I’m wrong, am I? Very well. Then I don’t need to hold back,” Lord Reineke said, then buried his face between my fox

ears. **“Ah... You smell so good, Lune. Reminds me of the scent of rich, mellow grapes. I could just eat you up.”**

His adoring voice tickled my ears. I felt my cheeks grow hot.

“Ah... Lord Reineke, don’t sniff me...”

“Why not? Your scent heals me, you know?”

Bal glanced aside with distaste while Lord Reineke audibly sniffed me.

“What happened to divine majesty?” he murmured, which made me smile awkwardly.

Liam turned away with a huff and stormed off.

“Lord Reineke! Is this the right way?” he raised his voice, causing startled birds to scatter.

“Wait, brother! Don’t leave me behind!” I called out on the verge of tears, reaching out my hands toward him while still in Lord Reineke’s arms.

Liam stopped, then quickly walked back to us.

“Never mind. I didn’t mean to scare you, Lune,” he said, taking my hand.

“You should just be honest. You’re simply upset that I’m hugging her, yes?” Lord Reineke asked mockingly.

Liam bit his lip. “I’m being childish, aren’t I?” he murmured and sighed. “Sorry, Lune. I was just jealous over you and Lord Reineke. Please don’t be mad at me.”

His words made me blush. *He’s jealous? I don’t know why, but that makes me so happy!* My ears twitched, my tail wagged, and I couldn’t fight back a grin.

“It’s okay! I’m not mad at all! Actually, I’m glad!” I said.

Liam breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ugh! Stop your flirting and let’s get going!” Bal said, commanding us with the wave of a stick he’d picked up.

Liam smiled slightly, while Lord Reineke nodded.

“Yes, let us proceed.”

We began walking down a small path leading further into the forbidden zone. The place was full of animals and monsters I’d never seen before.

“There are wounded creatures here,” I said in surprise, looking at

Lord Reineke.

“Indeed. Weak beings that cannot survive in the outside world rest here. That goes for both animals and monsters.”

Lord Reineke surveyed his surroundings with a note of affection in his gaze.

The air in this pleasant, peaceful land was pure. Sunlight filtered down through the trees, and the shadows seemed to glow gold, as if they were a sign of Lord Reineke’s power.

As we walked further, I spotted sawtooth and konara oak trees, their acorns rolling around by our feet.

“Look. It’s the cocoon of a monster called a yama moth,” said Lord Reineke.

The massive cocoon was almost one hundred centimeters long and sixty centimeters wide. It was turquoise, like a mix between the blue sky and the green sawtooth oak leaves. But as I looked around, I realized there were more of them—three in total, spread across different branches.

“Wooow!” Bal and I said in unison.

“Cool! Just how big is the moth?” Bal asked excitedly.

“Look up.”

At Lord Reineke’s instructions, we tilted our heads up. Above us was a gigantic, dark yellow moth. It looked fluffy and cute.

“So those beautiful cocoons are from that moth,” Liam said, also sounding interested as he stepped closer. “They have holes... Does that mean they’ve all finished emerging?”

“Yes. These empty cocoons will just rot here, so let’s take them.”

Liam, Bal, and I each picked up a cocoon. They were very light and exuded a pleasant, woodsy aroma.

“Thank you, Mr. Yama Moth!” I said, addressing the moth resting in the branches.

It flapped its wings in response, which I took as a sign of approval.

Bal stuck his head into the cocoon. “Look, I’ve got a hat!”

Liam put the cocoon on his head as well, since it was easier to carry that way.

“You could make fifty dresses out of a single cocoon,” Lord Reineke explained.

“So with these three, that’s a hundred and fifty!” Bal said.

Liam pondered briefly.

“It’s a decent amount, but we’d need even more if we hope to export them to the capital,” he whispered, glancing around in search of other trees.

“There are others, but they still have larvae inside,” Lord Reineke said. **“What will you do, Liam?”**

Lord Reineke is testing him! I was getting goose bumps.

“L-Lord Reineke!”

“Be quiet for now, Lune,” Lord Reineke responded in a way only I could hear. He pressed his index finger against my lips and winked at me.

After looking around the area, Liam closed his eyes to think. When he opened his eyes again, he looked straight at Lord Reineke.

“Can we collect them after the moths emerge?”

The spirit nodded. **“Very good. I was wondering how to respond if you’d suggested we kill the larvae,”** he said with a grin.

I shuddered and my fur bristled at the spirit’s ominous words.

“No need to be so afraid, Lune.”

Lord Reineke was obviously enjoying himself, but to me this was no laughing matter.

“In the past, it was the yama moth’s silk that people referred to as the cloth of the gods. But the beautiful cocoons were overharvested, and so the moths could not survive outside of here. Before long, the green cloth turned into legend, and now nobody even knows these moths exist.” Lord Reineke gazed at the yama moth affectionately as he spoke.

“But what if we don’t have enough silk? We can’t let that Paris green fabric get popular,” Bal pointed out.

I deliberated for a while before speaking up.

“What if instead of weaving everything with the moth silk, we use different warp and weft yarns?”

My idea was based on my past-life memories. I recalled that by changing the warp and weft yarn colors from a foreign fabric, a lovely iridescent cloth was produced. It was rare, but its beauty made it very popular.

Liam's eyes grew wide. "Yes! If we do that, we could double the amount of clothes we'd make!" he said, then patted my head in approval.

"Besides, humans like rare objects, so they sell for more," Lord Reineke added.

Liam nodded.

Indeed, the iridescent cloth from my previous life had to be imported from abroad, so it was in scarce supply and therefore very expensive. His Highness Hodr always proudly ordered matching outfits for us made from that cloth.

"I really hope yama moth silk gets popular," I said.

"Me too! Now let's get started!" Bal said.

"We'll need a large pot," Liam said.

That was when my stomach growled loudly. The word "pot" made me remember the curry soup that was waiting for us by the river. I felt like I could already smell its sweet aroma.

"I'm pretty hungry," I said with a bashful smile.

Bal grinned. "So am I! I can practically taste the curry in the air!" he said, sniffing.

Lord Reineke and I wagged our tails.

"Then let's get back to the river and have our lunch," Liam suggested.

"Okay!" I said happily.

Bal dashed ahead, still wearing the cocoon over his head, and we chased after him. As we stepped outside of the boundary of the forbidden zone, Lord Reineke changed back into his giant fox form.

"Get on, Lune. And Liam, you may place your cocoon on my back as well."

I took him up on his offer and climbed atop his fluffy back. I put the cocoon down next to me, holding onto it so it wouldn't fall. Lord Reineke carefully stood up and began walking. We descended the mountain trail, following the scent of curry.

"Whoa! Y-You there! Who are you?!" Bal yelled from up ahead.

Alarmed, we rushed to the shore of the river. Bal was the illegitimate son of the king, so I was worried that the queen had sent someone to dispatch him again.

"Bal, are you okay?!" Liam shouted, drawing his sword.

When we arrived, Bal was facing an older man dressed in dirty traveler's garb. The man was helping himself to our pot of curry. He must've been on some kind of long journey; his skin was tanned by the sun, and his salt-and-pepper hair and beard looked grizzled. Scars on his left eyebrow and the nape of his neck suggested that he was a seasoned adventurer. Around his left wrist was a silver bangle, stylized to look like a sword.

However, the man had a kind look in his gray eyes, and he smiled at us amicably. Though his clothes were messy, they were vibrantly colored.

Lord Reineke shot him a scrutinizing look. Liam stared the man down with a tense expression.

"That pot belongs to us. What do you think you're doing?"

The man's expression turned serious as he looked back at Liam. His eyes fixated on the shining silver rapier Liam was wielding—the magic sword known as the Eclipse Blade, and House Renard's family heirloom. And it was within that very blade that Liam had sealed Nott, the Lord of Darkness he had made a contract with.

The old man seemed to appraise the Eclipse Blade for a moment. Suddenly, he smiled, set the pot down, and bowed.

"Ah, my apologies. It smelled so good that I couldn't help myself. And it tastes great!" he said with a bright, pleasant expression. He had a rich voice that carried well.





Bal grinned. “Right? I was in charge of making it today! You want seconds, gramps?”

“You don’t mind?”

“Go for it! We’ve got plenty! Right, Liam?” Bal turned to Liam, happy that someone had taken a liking to his cooking.

My brother smiled dryly. He nodded at the old man, relaxing his guard.

“All right. Feel free to join us.”

“Thanks, kid!”

The man’s white teeth glinted, contrasting against his dark skin. He tried to stand up, but groaned.

“Sorry... My age is catching up with me. My legs hurt, so it takes me a while to get up. I’ll be fine once I’m actually on my feet, but...” The man chuckled, trying to conceal his pain.

“There’s no rush, so take your time,” Liam said, approaching him.

The man smiled, embarrassed. “Thanks. You’re a good kid.”

“It’s no big deal... Also, my name is Liam Renard.”

“Renard? Wait, you’re the son of the marquis?! Where are my manners? My name’s Marcel. I used to be an adventurer, but now I’m just a retired traveler.”

Lord Reineke’s ear twitched. The man’s name sounded familiar to me as well, but I couldn’t place it.

“An adventurer?!” Bal repeated. “Then you must’ve seen all kinds of places!”

“I sure have.”

“Awesome! I wanna travel too!” Bal’s eyes were glittering.

“Aye, lad! You can join me when you’re older!” Marcel said with a laugh.

“My name’s Bal, gramps! I wanna hear all about your adventures!”

“You’ve got it, Bal. Or should I say ‘Lord Bal’?”

“Just ‘Bal’ is fine! I’m not part of the marquisate.”

“That right? Then ‘Bal’ it is!” Marcel said, then glanced my way.

“Oh! I’m Lune. It’s nice to meet you,” I said.

“She’s my adoptive sister, and Great Lord Reineke’s contractor,” Liam added with pride.

"A spirit contractor, at your age? I'm shocked, Lady Lune. In that case, is that magnificent fox the Great Lord Reineke himself?!" Marcel asked.

Lord Reineke nodded, looking quite satisfied to be recognized.

"Wait, what's with those big cocoons? I've never seen anything like them," Marcel said, staring at the cocoons curiously.

I gave Liam a worried glance, but his smile never faltered as he responded.

"They are our local specialty," he replied a little curtly, as though silently telling Marcel not to question it any further.

Sensing the implicit meaning, Marcel gulped and nodded.

There was a moment of silence until Bal, ever unable to read the room, happily broke it.

"Mr. Marcel! I'mma tell you something awesome!" he announced, pulling on the man's sleeve.

"Ow, ow, ow..."

"Just hold on a little longer! You see, this river is super special. It can get rid of your pain!"

Bal helped Marcel over to the part of the river where hot water flowed, as Lady Kuzunoha had shown us in the past. He helped the man slip off his shoes and soak his feet in the water.

"Ohh! It's warm! And there are bubbles all over my legs!"

"Cool, right? This is my premium seat! I'm lending you my favorite place!"

Bal plopped himself down next to Marcel, dipping his feet into the river as well. Liam and I handed them a bowl of curry each, then sat down next to them. We listened to Marcel's stories as we enjoyed the footbath and food. He shared some wild and amusing tales from his life of adventuring, though I had no idea if they were true or not.

We enjoyed passing the time together, but eventually the man let out a long sigh.

"What a strange river. I can feel my pain ebbing away..."

"Do other domains have anything like this?" I asked.

Marcel smiled. "I have seen lakes where hot water rises, but nothing with healing properties. Is this also a blessing from the great spirits?"

Lord Reineke puffed out his chest. *"It's a blessing from a friend of mine. I believe it's called an onsen, also known as a hot spring."*

However, he was still cautious around Marcel, so he spoke so that only I could hear.

When I translated, Marcel gazed at me with respect, and then looked at Lord Reineke.

"Incredible. This is the first time I've visited a domain overflowing with divine blessings," he remarked. A golden light of faith spilled from him.

Even I couldn't stop myself from looking a little smug. "We're very proud of that."

Liam smiled, patting my head.

"Since it's so effective, why don't we turn this place into an official facility?" he proposed.

"A facility?"

"What's that?"

Bal and I tilted our heads.

"It could be a place where weary people stay for a while and rest, enjoying the healing effects of the hot spring," Liam explained, glancing at Lord Reineke to read his reaction. "These are Lord Reineke's sacred woods, so we can't allow too many people in. But we could run the onsen to the nearest town and set up an inn there."

"Great idea," Lord Reineke said with a nod. *"This onsen runs underground to Renard's castle town, so let's find a good spot for it."*

"Lord Reineke says he'll help us make an onsen in the castle town!" I said.

"You can do that? Incredible!" Marcel responded.

"That's it! Praise me!"

"You're amazing, Lord Reineke!"

"That's the great spirit's wisdom for you."

Bal and Liam went along with Lord Reineke's demand and admired him.

"If it's going to be in a town, it'd be good to set it up alongside a hospital," I said.

Bal raised his hand. "I know! It should feature all of Renard's

tastiest food too!”

“And you should sell souvenirs!” Marcel suggested.

Liam smiled at our ideas. “All right, I’ll consult with my father about this as soon as I can.”

He stood up, but before he could turn away, Marcel called out to him.

“Just a moment, Lord Liam. Would you mind telling me where I should go to find a job in this domain?”

“A job?”

“That’s right. I’m a bit tired from my travels, and this is a good land. If I’m to stay anywhere, this is my first choice.”

My tail wagged vigorously. *A well-traveled adventurer thinks our domain is a good place to stay! I’m so glad!*

However, Liam looked pensive.

“Hmm... I can introduce you to some guilds.”

Lord Reineke scoffed at that.

“He should be the gamekeeper of my forest.”

When I conveyed his words, Liam cast the spirit a puzzled look.

“But hunting in this forest is forbidden. I don’t see why a gamekeeper’s necessary.”

Gamekeepers were often hired by nobility to look after their privately owned woods. Their main job was to ensure that there was enough game for the nobles to hunt by increasing the number of prey animals and exterminating vermin.

“The animals won’t need any special care, but someone needs to protect the hot spring,” Lord Reineke said, looking at Marcel as though he were testing him. *“Isn’t that right, former swordmaster?”*

With that, I finally remembered. I knew I’d recognized Marcel’s name—he was once a master swordsman. He was also the very man who had trained Bal in my previous life and played a central role in the revolution.

My heart pounded in my chest as I translated Lord Reineke’s words.

“Um... Lord Reineke says we need someone to protect the hot spring. A-And...that you’re a former swordmaster.”

Marcel flinched, grabbing a hold of the bangle around his wrist.

"Wha—?!"

"There's no fooling a spirit like me," Lord Reineke snapped, glaring at the man.

"Lord Reineke can see through any tricks and lies," I said.

Marcel stepped out of the onsen and prostrated himself in front of the fox, a golden light emanating from his body.

"Huh? Gramps, you're a swordsman?" Bal asked.

"A former swordmaster. Marcel..." Liam muttered under his breath, clutching tightly onto the sword by his waist.

That little action sent a wave of anxiety through me.

In my past life, Marcel was in the possession of a holy sword created by the Lord of Light. But the Lord of Light is gone, and I have no idea what Marcel might do if he finds out that the Lord of Darkness has returned.

I didn't want anyone to notice how shaken I was, so I pressed my face against Lord Reineke to hide my expression.

"I apologize for disrespecting you, Great Lord Reineke. It's just as you say—I am the former swordmaster Marcel Girard. I hid my identity for personal reasons. I beg your forgiveness."

Looking down at the prostrating man, Lord Reineke nodded pompously.

"Good. Now look at me."

"Please look up," I said from behind the spirit.

Marcel gingerly raised his head. As soon as he did, my whole body was paralyzed and I suddenly started floating in the air. My arms were made to spread out as though I was on a cross.

Lord Reineke, what are you doing?!

But I couldn't say anything out loud. It was just like when I'd first met Liam.

"I'm staging a sacred event," Lord Reineke told me calmly, making a halo appear behind my head. His fox form glowed lightly as though he were bestowing us with a divine message.

"I, the Great Lord Reineke, order the former swordmaster Marcel to stay here. Impart your knowledge to the children who will be our future."

Lord Reineke's voice reverberated.

Marcel's eyes were wide-open in shock.

"O-Of course!" he yelled, exaggeratedly prostrating himself again. More bright golden light spilled from him into the spirit. The man seemed overcome with faith. "Absolutely! I shall obey your words, Great Lord Reineke!"

So scary... I thought, but I felt relieved. *Still, under divine orders, Marcel definitely won't be able to hurt Liam.*

I silently thanked the spirit with a look. He bashfully huffed through his nose.

"I can't believe I got to hear a great spirit's voice after all these years," Marcel said with a sob. "It's been so long since the royal family granted me Joyeuse—the holy sword made by the Lord of Light. I've been dubbed a swordmaster and journeyed far and wide, and though I have heard spirits speak before, this is the first time a great spirit has spoken to me. In the capital, all signs of light spirits have vanished, so I was certain that the great spirits had already given up on our corrupt world..."

Marcel grasped the bangle at his wrist, causing a brilliant silver sword to appear in his hand. This was Joyeuse. It was said to be a sister sword made from the same material as Durandal, the sword that signified the king.

"Through Joyeuse, I was able to sense hints of light and forbidden magic in this domain. But I couldn't tell if it was a good or bad omen," Marcel went on.

Liam and I jolted at his words. Had Marcel sensed Nott's reawakening?

The forbidden magic he spoke of was definitely referring to the Lord of Darkness, whose mention was a taboo in this land. In our era, the power of light spirits was diminishing. Worried that the power of dark spirits might rise as a result, the royal family forbade dark magic. Faith empowered spirits, so the royals sought to weaken dark spirits by forbidding the mention of them or their objects of faith.

Marcel might try to punish my brother if he discovers his contract with a dark spirit! In the worst-case scenario, he might report this to the royal family, and they could set out to subjugate the land!

I was full of anxiety. But Marcel didn't seem to notice how affected Liam and I were by his words.

"To think I've encountered a great spirit... I no longer have a single regret in my life!" Marcel cried, his face stained with tears.

Watching him like that made me realize something.

Even if he noticed there's a dark spirit here, he seems to put greater importance on Lord Reineke's oracle. In that case, Liam should be safe.

I went up to the trembling man and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Please assist Bal and my brother to the best of your ability," I said with a calm smile, trying to sound like a divine being.

Marcel looked up at me, his eyes glimmering with reverence.

"Of course, Lady Lune! I will protect those two even at the cost of my life!" he vowed, beating his chest.

I sighed in relief. *A former swordmaster just became our ally! It's like having the strength of an entire army on our side!*

Lord Reineke smirked at me. *"There you go again, acting like a vixen...but I'm not complaining,"* he said with a snicker.

I pouted at him in response.

We brought Marcel back to our residence with us. After hearing our explanation, Marquis Renard simply said, "If that's Lord Reineke's oracle, so be it." He employed Marcel as the gamekeeper and appointed him as an instructor for Liam and Bal.

Father also showed us where we could build an onsen in the town, and granted permission for us to create a new fabric using yama moth silk. It wasn't long before construction started for a textile workshop. We used the money Hodr had brought during his visit to fund the two new projects.

And the projects needed workers, which created jobs. The restoration of the Renard domain was now well underway.

I was on the outskirts of town with Lord Reineke, father, brother, Bal, and Marcel. We were by the foot of a hill a short distance away from the town center, close to the Renard River. The scenery was pretty, and we were considering building a wharf here.

Lord Reineke had said this was also a good place for the hot spring inn, as it was right on top of the water vein.

“Today is a special day, so here,” Lord Reineke addressed everyone before shifting into his human form. The people of our domain had great faith in him these days, enabling him to do so.

A large crowd had gathered upon hearing rumors of Lord Reineke holding a ceremony to open the hot spring inn. Now, they all collectively gasped at the sight of him. Although he was humanoid, his majesty set him apart from ordinary people. Everyone pressed their hands together in prayer.

“He’s so beautiful...”

“He looks truly divine!”

Their admiration and reverence created a golden light, which gathered around Lord Reineke.

“It’s about time I show you all my power.”

With that, Lord Reineke raised his cane, the handle of which was shaped like a grape. Thick clouds covered the sun, casting everything in darkness. From among the clouds, a halo of light shone down upon Lord Reineke, making him look even more godly. The air was tense as the onlookers gulped in anticipation.

“Hot spring, gush forth!” Lord Reineke shouted, pounding his cane against the ground.

From that spot, water and steam spurted out like a fountain. The clouds parted, allowing the sun to shine through. The sunlight hit the water, creating a rainbow.

“Ohh!”

“Amazing!”

The crowd cheered, delighting Lord Reineke.

“From now on, this shall be called the Reineke Hot Spring,” Marquis Renard proclaimed.

Everyone clapped. Lord Reineke smiled at the brilliant light of faith emanating from them all.

And so, a hot spring inn named after a great spirit had been opened in the town of Renard.

Chapter 3: It's Onsen Time!

A month had passed since Marcel's arrival, and he was now officially the gamekeeper of Lord Reineke's forest, as well as Liam and Bal's sword-fighting instructor. He lived in the forest, occasionally coming to the estate's courtyard to teach the boys the basics of wielding a sword.

Bal was brimming with determination, brandishing a wooden sword.

"One more time, master!" he demanded. Indeed, Bal had come to respect Marcel after witnessing his incredible technique.

"Good, don't get discouraged! Come at me again, Bal!" Marcel responded. He was treating Bal like his own grandson.

Liam wiped the sweat from his brow, smiling as he watched the two.

I was observing their training while using Lord Reineke as a sofa.

"So hot... Lune, aren't you hot too?" Lord Reineke grumbled with a sigh, but he was kind enough to not shake me off.

Autumn was coming, and Lord Reineke's fur was changing into a winter coat, making him feel a bit hot. His natural fluffiness coming into contact with the warm body temperature of a young child like me created even more stifling heat. The sweet scent of ripe fruit meant he was sweating.

"Yes, it *is* a bit hot," I agreed with a giggle. I stepped away from him, causing him to give me a grumpy look. "I'll go get drinks for everyone."

"Good idea," he said, closing his eyes and putting his head down.

Father showed up right then, followed by a maid pushing a cart with cold drinks. When Marcel spotted them, he stopped the training and thanked them.

"You two keep going. Liam, come with me," father said, his icy voice reverberating throughout the courtyard.

Liam approached the marquis with a slightly apprehensive look on his face. Feeling nervous, I went over to them as well.

"Is something the matter?" brother asked.

Father furrowed his brows. "A large shipment of high-grade jewelry just arrived, the likes of which our domain could never obtain on our own. And...it's all addressed to Lune."

The man cast a glance at the cart behind him. Atop was a letter with the royal seal on it, as well as some kind of fancy, crimson leather box stamped with the name of a luxurious jewelry shop from the capital. The latch and keyhole were even gold.

Father and brother looked at me, awaiting my response.

I stumbled back, shocked at the sight of the same jewelry box as in my past life. His Highness Hodr had gifted me these boxes countless times. I was ignorant back then, so I simply accepted them without thinking of how much they had cost. It was exactly this kind of extravagant spending that had led to me being labeled a vixen who duped the crown prince and turned the nation upside down. And those accusations had led to my execution.

Th-The same thing is happening all over again!

My breathing quickened in distress. When Lord Reineke noticed, he came up to me and nuzzled against my legs. His warm, fluffy fur tickled my skin, calming me down. I inhaled deeply, leveling my breathing.

No, no. Lord Reineke is here this time!

I stomped hard on the ground and lifted my head.

"I won't accept it!" I declared.

Father and brother both looked relieved.

"I see. So you refuse it?" father asked.

"That's right!"

"I thought you might say that," Liam said, hugging me from behind.

I held tightly onto his arms.

"Living in the Renard domain is more important to me than getting fancy gifts," I told my father. "But...would it help the domain if I accepted it?"

My eyes welled with tears as soon as I said that out loud.

If father orders me to accept the gift, then I'll have no other choice. I'm just an adopted orphan, after all.

Anxiety crushed me from the inside.

"No, it would not. Even if it did, what's most important is how you feel, Lune," father asserted calmly, while Liam petted my head.

"Naturally," Lord Reineke said with a nod.

A single tear of relief rolled down my cheek.

"Thank goodness..." I said, releasing a breath.

Father smiled at me gently, if a little awkwardly. He wasn't very good at expressing his emotions.

"I truly cannot stand His Highness's recent behavior. We've refused him multiple times, and Their Majesties share our sentiment. Yet he continues to be obstinate and high-handed," father said, now looking grave.

Brother nodded. "We can't allow Their Majesties to indulge him in the end. We'd better work on increasing our power."

"Indeed. I will *not* hand Lune over as a bride!!!"

Father's forceful words made my face light up.

With these two on my side, everything will work out!

My ears twitched happily. Father cast me a sideways glance.

"L-Lune... May I...pat your head?" he asked diffidently.

"Of course!" I said, presenting my head to him.

The corners of his lips raised into a rare smile, and he gingerly reached out, touching my head. I could feel his tension through the slight shaking in the palm of his hand.

Could it be that he's been wanting to pet me all this time?

The thought delighted me, and I pressed my head against his palm.

The man gasped. "Lune!"

"Please pet me more!" I coaxed, peering up at him.

Father's expression softened, and he gently and carefully stroked my head. Marcel observed him with surprise, glancing between him and Liam.

"All the rumors said the Renards were cold, ruthless, and iron-faced..." he muttered, shocked to see how caring Marquis Renard was.

Bal grinned. “Family’s a different matter.”

“Right, everyone treasures their own family.”

Marcel and Bal were just having a casual conversation, but their words filled me with joy. I found myself smiling broadly.

I see... Father truly values me as a member of his family.

I pushed my head against father’s hand. He smiled, content to continue the petting while he conversed with Liam, who stole a glance at me.

Is Liam feeling a bit lonely?

I tilted my head. Liam cleared his throat and looked away.

Huh? Is he mad at me?

Lord Reineke laughed at my anxious expression.

“Liam is sulking because the marquis is monopolizing you.”

“Sulking?” I repeated, causing Liam to jolt and cast me a surprised look. His cheeks flushed red, so I must’ve hit the mark.

I smiled and spread my arms.

“Brother, you too!”

Liam timidly drew near and embraced me. I returned the hug, and hugged my father at the same time. But then, without saying anything, Liam suddenly sniffed me.

Humph! I wish he wouldn’t do that!

Still, I couldn’t make myself say that out loud when I saw how happy he looked.

“Father, let’s hasten the canal and shipbuilding projects,” Liam said.

“Yes, indeed.”

The two of them nodded, vowing to each other.

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Today, we were going to show Marcel around Renard’s castle town, taking him all the way to the Renard River. Since Marcel had traveled around the world, Liam wanted to hear his honest assessment regarding the state of the town and river. He planned to identify which areas our domain was lacking in compared to others, and come up with improvements.

Lord Reineke, Liam, Bal, Marcel, and I were drawing near to the town. Lord Reineke was in his giant form, and I was sitting atop his back.

Renard's castle town was modest compared to the capital. Much of it had been ravaged by the monsters during last year's attack, and some buildings were visibly newer than others. However, the common folk looked happy, smiling and walking around energetically. When they saw me atop Lord Reineke's back, they cheered.

"Oh! It's Lord Reineke and Lady Lune!"

"Lord Reineke, you're in your big form today!"

"Lady Lune, please stop by our shop!"

Everyone kept calling out to us. Whenever they did, a golden light of faith spilled from them into Lord Reineke.

"Lord Reineke, you sure are popular," Marcel said, taken aback.

The spirit looked pleased.

"Lune's popular too," Liam added for some reason.

"Well, obviously," Marcel replied with exasperation, causing Liam to look smug.

"Hey, Lady Lune! We have some new sweets! Come try some!"

The shopkeeper gave me a round, light beige confectionary. It felt hard as I picked it up, and when I took a bite, grape juice filled my mouth. I noticed that the frosting had fresh grapes mixed in. The sweetness of sugar combined with the sourness of grapes created a wonderful taste.

"We can make sugar now, thanks to you and Lord Reineke's oracle. That's why I tried making new sweets," the shopkeeper said with a smile.

Lord Reineke had taught us how to refine sugar from turnips that naturally grew in our domain. Sugar had come to be much more widely used, though it wasn't white like in the capital. In a poorer domain like ours, mass production was more important than taking extra time to crystallize sugar to turn it white.

"Grapes are delicate, you see, but drying *all* of them is a bit of a shame. I heard that once the canal is built, we'll be able to transport goods faster, so I tried coating the grapes with sugar to preserve

them longer and see if they could be shipped out," the shopkeeper explained, a little nervously.

"It's delicious!" I replied, my ears and tail perking up.

"Really?" Liam asked.

I took one of the sweets and held it to his mouth. He blushed and took a bite, his warm lips grazing my fingertips and making me jolt in surprise.

"Mm, it *is* tasty," Liam said, licking his lips.

I wasn't sure why, but I found the gesture kind of erotic, so I quickly looked away.

"Ah, r-right. It is, isn't it?" I mumbled in a shrill voice.

"I wanna try too!" Bal exclaimed, suddenly reaching out and stuffing three of the sweets into his mouth.

"Bal! You can't do that!"

"But you shaid itsh taishty," he said while chewing, then slapped his cheeks. "Whoa! Shooo yummy!!!"

"Mr. Marcel, you should try some too," I said.

I placed the sweet onto his palm. It looked tiny compared to his large hand. Marcel threw it high into the air, and it almost looked like a daytime moon against the blue sky. As it fell down, he easily caught it with his mouth.

"Oh, tasty! I want another!"

People around us began clapping, causing Marcel to grin bashfully. Since he was a former swordmaster, he had a knack for grasping people's emotions.

I also gave Lord Reineke a sweet. He happily gobbled it up.

"This tastes good. I dub this the Moon's Vestige."

The shopkeeper looked moved by Lord Reineke's words and bowed deeply.

"Thank you very much!"

"And thank you for the delicious sweets!" I responded.

The rest of our group thanked the shopkeeper too. We bought a bunch of the Moon's Vestiges, then moved onto the next shop.

"It's so good to see that everyone's thinking about the future," Bal said earnestly.

"Yes. It's nice they're considering how they will be affected by the

canal and what comes after," Liam said.

"This is a good place." Marcel nodded, impressed.

"So where are we off to next? What shall we show master?" Bal asked.

"I want him to see our local specialty. He's traveled a lot, so he'll know what will sell in the other domains!" I said.

Brother patted my head. "That's a great idea, Lune."

"And a great responsibility for me!" Marcel added with a hearty laugh.

In high spirits, we entered a compact grocery store with colorful food lined up neatly. There wasn't a great variety, however, due to transportation to our domain being so limited. The shops could only sell locally grown produce, or things that could easily be preserved and transported from other territories.

"This one's my favorite!" I said, showing Marcel a peach compote.

The Renard domain was situated in a basin, creating a stark temperature difference between day and night. This made the fruit sweeter, and we were able to grow cherries, grapes, peaches, and plums. As such, our main local specialty was wine and raisins. Cherry syrup was also popular, packed into ceramic jars and sent off to the capital to be sold as a luxury item.

Right as I was trying to come up with another specialty to follow in the footsteps of the syrup, I'd found this shop's peach compote. All the other peach compotes I'd seen in the past were white, but this one was pink and pretty.

"Oh, looks good!" Marcel said, gazing at the pale liquid and peaches floating in the transparent bottle.

"But you've seen this sort of thing before, right?" I asked.

I was still ignorant in many ways, and had no idea how peach compotes looked in other territories. In my time as the crown princess, I had only seen compote after it was prepared and served to me, so I didn't know how it was bottled.

"No, this is quite unusual," Marcel responded. "I've seen white compotes before, but hardly ever pink. Is this because the peaches are from Renard, or is there some secret recipe?"

The shopkeeper smiled. "Renard peaches have pink flesh, but I

was able to keep even the syrup pink thanks to my grandmother's recipe!"

So the compote was handmade by the woman.

"Go ahead and try it," she said, opening the bottle.

The shopkeeper served the compote to us paired with white goat yogurt. The colors set each other off nicely.

Just one gulp, and my mouth was filled with a sweet and tart taste that reminded me of summer.

"Mmm! Yummy!" I said.

"You're right, it's great!" Marcel smiled.

"But is it good enough to be sold in the capital?" Liam inquired seriously.

"I'd certainly say so!"

We cheered upon receiving the well-traveled Marcel's seal of approval.

After buying the compote, we exited the shop and headed for the fabric store. They had turned the yama moth thread we'd brought last month into cloth. The very first fabric to be weaved using a hundred percent yama moth silk had already been shipped off to House Renard. Mother and I'd had dresses made from it, while father, brother, and Bal had ties and vests.

The store in town was selling cloth made from a mix of yama moth and silkworm thread. Although that lowered the value a bit, it was still a high-quality item that ordinary people couldn't afford.

When we entered the store, we were faced with rows of colorful fabrics. A glass case by the payment counter displayed a green scarf made of yama moth cloth in a red rock crystal ring.

"Welcome." The shopkeeper gave us a pleasant greeting.

"How's the yama moth fabric selling?" Liam asked.

"It's difficult to get for common folk, but many merchants have taken notice. Green is becoming trendy in the capital right now, so more and more traders from other territories are stocking up on cloth to sell to the nobles."

The shopkeeper's cheerful tone was proof that the fabric was doing fairly well.

"And since the cloth is so pretty, I've been advertising it for sale

paired with matching crystals."

With that, the shopkeeper took the red accessory out from the glass case to show us.

Indeed, the Renard domain was also producing rock crystals. They were too plentiful to be of much value within the territory, and once processed, they were often sold to common folk. However, other domains thought this was rather unusual.

"Most people are always happy to buy the crystals to go with the cloth," the shopkeeper went on, smiling mischievously.

"What a shrewd businessman!" Bal said with admiration.

"Indeed. And it's great that you're thinking of a way that benefits both you and the customers," Liam added.

"This domain's something else. In comparison, the capital is just..." Marcel muttered under his breath.

Lord Reineke's ears perked up. I heard that too thanks to my fox ears, but nobody else reacted, as Marcel had spoken so quietly.

Are things different in the capital? I had never walked through the city streets in my past life, so I have no idea what's going on there. But it sounds like our domain is special.

I was so happy that a knowledgeable man like Marcel had praised my home that my tail started wagging vigorously.

"Master! Let's check out the ships next!" Bal said, pulling Marcel by the hand.

We headed to the shipyard, where boats were being made for the canal. Father was there to inspect the works, so our plan was to join up with him.

The domain already had ferryboats to cross the Renard River, but it had never produced a ship made for transporting goods to other domains. As such, we had picked out a shipwright from among the monastery criminals to serve as the master carpenter for the project. This man had been convicted at the same time as Theo, on grounds of being his accomplice. He was a good friend of Theo's, and was just as passionate about the canal construction.

The Renard River was much smaller compared to the canal Theo had been working on in the capital, so the shipyard was working on creating an appropriately sized vessel under the guidance of the

master carpenter. He had come up with an idea for a small ship with sails and a flat bottom to fit the shallow riverbed.

During the monster attacks in the last few years, a lot of lumber had slid down from the mountain, which was a big help now. And since the domain was surrounded by mountains, we had access to plenty of good timber.

As soon as we stepped into the shipyard, the scent of fresh wood drifted in, mixed with a tinge of something else I couldn't identify.

This smell makes me feel a bit nostalgic.

In the dusty shipyard, a bunch of bare-chested men were cutting wood. The sharp sound resonated rhythmically while the workers rolled around pale, shaven logs. With each cut, wood shavings fluttered into the air. Nearby, women were putting up white fabric to make the sails. There were all kinds of other people here too, such as repairmen who looked after the tools and packhorse drivers who brought in fresh timber.

Father was already inside, inspecting the works.

"Wow! This is amazing!" I cried out.

The workers paused and turned to look at me. A couple of them pressed their hands together when they spotted me and Lord Reineke.

"How are things progressing?" father asked.

As the master carpenter began his report, the others resumed working. Bal ran over and watched them, fascinated.

"There's not enough time to build new ships from scratch, so we're converting the old ferryboats and making them bigger," the master carpenter said.

"How big will the ships be?" father asked, listening with great interest.

"Around fifteen meters long and two meters wide. Each ship will need a crew of three to four people, and will be able to transport the same amount of goods as twenty horses."

"How long would the journey take?"

"I calculated that with the sail, they'll travel faster than the previous boats. Going down the river would take somewhere between six to eight hours, whereas it'd take two days for a horse."

That information caused a buzz within the shipyard. It seemed like even the workers hadn't had a concrete understanding of the project.

"That's incredible!" Bal exclaimed, earnestly impressed. He had traveled to Renard on horseback, so he knew how steep and winding the mountain trail was.

The workers were talking among themselves.

"That's way faster than a horse!"

"It's over for the drivers."

Father and brother nodded.

"That is indeed impressive."

"For so many goods to be transported in such a short time..."

The master carpenter smiled wryly. "Yes, but going up the river will require people to pull the ship."

"Still, think of how many things we can transport! All that salt, sugar, ham, and bacon!" I said.

The carpenter's eyes widened. "Why, indeed, it'll be a lot more efficient than going on foot. Brilliant as always, Lady Lune."

I grinned when he praised me.

"It's time to consider what we can ship to the capital as well. It'd be a waste to send empty ships," Liam said with a smile.

I nodded.

"You said there will be thirty boats by the time the canal is complete. Is that still the case?" father inquired.

"Ah, about that... It's not quite going as smoothly as I thought," the master carpenter replied quietly, looking away.

I found that odd, so I turned to Lord Reineke. He looked around the shipyard with an exaggerated motion.

Hmm? Is he trying to tell me something?

I wished he'd tell me telepathically, but it seemed like he wanted me to figure out the answer myself.

As I looked around, I noticed that a lot of the workers had poultices on their shoulders, wrists, and backs.

So that's where that other smell was coming from!

These poultices were made at the monastery. Dr. Guillotin had taught me how to make them, and I must have found the scent

nostalgic from my time helping out there.

They must be in pain...

I pondered for a while. The poultices were very effective, but at the end of the day, they were symptomatic treatments—they didn't address the actual root cause. Though the pain was being soothed, injuries wouldn't heal without proper rest. Worse yet, with the pain temporarily receding, people might push themselves past their actual limits. And that was exactly what had happened to these workers.

Winds of change had come to our domain, and these ships would be a symbol of that. I was glad that the workers were giving it their all, but I definitely didn't want them to destroy their bodies.

But they're already using poultices... Is there anything else I can do for them? If there was a way to get rid of the pain—

That was when I had a flash of inspiration.

"I know! The onsen!!!" I shouted.

Lord Reineke nodded in satisfaction.

"Lune?" Liam looked at me, confused.

"I think everyone here should try out the Reineke Hot Spring!" I said excitedly.

Father and brother stared at me, unable to keep up with my sudden proposal.

The hot spring was already in the town thanks to Lord Reineke's power. The construction of the inn was still ongoing, but I hoped it would be okay since soaking in the onsen would help all the workers here.

"Can you explain what you're thinking, Lune?" Liam asked gently.

I gasped and blushed. I obviously hadn't communicated my thoughts clearly.

"Well...it sounds like the workers won't be able to make thirty ships in time," I said.

"That's right."

"I'm sure all the carpenters are exhausted because they're pushing themselves too hard. They're all using poultices."

I turned to look at the men, whose expressions softened.

"Lady Lune noticed..."

My fox ears picked up on their whispers.

“So I think it’d be good for them to get some proper rest and take a dip in the Reineke Hot Spring,” I explained.

Bal raised his arm. “You’re right! Master said the hot spring helped with his old wounds, so I bet it’ll work for everyone here!”

But father looked unsure.

“And I don’t think we need thirty boats right from the start. They can just make more little by little,” I added.

Liam patted my head. “You’re always so perceptive.”

His words embarrassed me.

“It’s because Lord Reineke gave me a hint.”

With that, a light of faith spilled from the workers into the spirit.

“Lord Reineke...”

“He took notice of simple workers like us.”

“I’m so thankful.”

Lord Reineke looked proud, puffing out his chest.

“But the inn isn’t ready yet,” father murmured.

“Oh...”

Bal and I both slumped.

“Then why don’t we put a bathtub outside the building? Everyone can enjoy being by the riverside, and it won’t be an issue if they keep their clothes on,” Liam suggested.

“In that case, since we won’t need as many boats right away, we could use the extras as bathtubs. After all, a boat is kind of like a bathtub, isn’t it?” said the master carpenter.

“Yeah!” Bal clapped his hands.

“All we need to do is fill it with hot water,” Liam said.

“That’s a good idea.” Father nodded. “All right then, move the extra boats to the inn construction site and make a simple, open-air hot spring. Then you can build the rest of the ships without pushing yourselves. Don’t think that I want these ships so badly that I’d risk injuring my valued engineers.”

The carpenters breathed a collective sigh of relief, feeling moved.

“Our lord is so kind!”

“He looks scary, but he’s a softy on the inside.”

As the men murmured among themselves, the marquis huffed and looked away.

"H-Hey, you lot! Don't be rude!" the master carpenter scolded frantically.

Father cleared his throat before looking at the workers. They all shrunk under his gaze.

"It's fine," he said simply, before promptly leaving the shipyard.

"Did we anger him?" the master carpenter fretted.

"Don't worry about it," Liam replied with a blank look on his face, but his emotionless voice only made the man more afraid.

"Eep!"

I burst into laughter.

Poor father and brother! People keep misunderstanding them.

I pulled on the master carpenter's sleeve.

"Lady Lune!" he wailed.

"It's okay!" I said, winking at him. "My father isn't angry. He just doesn't know what to do in these situations. Will you please believe that he actually wants you to rest?" I pleaded, looking up at him sweetly.

The man's face turned red and he nodded.

"O-Of course! I believe you, Lady Lune!"

Liam embraced me from behind. "Let's go, Lune," he whispered into my ear, sounding a bit displeased.

"Someone's jealous." Lord Reineke laughed, swatting Liam's legs with his tail.

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Just as planned, the workers had placed the boats near the hot spring site and created a makeshift open-air onsen out of them. Those who wanted to use the onsen could enter the water while wearing simple clothes meant for bathing, so mixed bathing was allowed for the time being. Once the inn was established, the baths would be separated by sex. And since this was just a temporary situation and we wanted the people to know how good the hot springs were, anyone could use the bath for free.

Of their own volition, the bathers were giving priority to those who worked on the realm restoration. Someone had even set up a

donation box, enabling those who could afford it to make a monetary contribution after using the baths. All donations went toward the construction costs of the inn.

Having heard that the temporary onsen was thriving, we decided to check it out for ourselves. Liam, Bal, Marcel, and I climbed into the bathtub, clad in simple bathing attire. Lord Reineke did the same, entering the water with a soft splash. The water temperature was perfect, and bubbles tickled my skin.

"Ahh. I can feel my body unwinding already..." Marcel sighed.

Lord Reineke looked euphoric as well, relaxing in the tub.

Bal drank a bit of the water gushing from the tap.

"Hey! This water tastes different from the river! It's like...fizzy!"

"Really?"

I decided to take a sip. The taste of salt filled my mouth.

"Indeed. This water comes from underground, where it soaks up minerals like salt and iron. Carbonic acid is also mixed in," Lord Reineke explained triumphantly. **"Animals drink the water from the fountain to regulate their bodies too."**

That gave me an idea.

"Then could the hot spring water be turned into a souvenir?" I asked.

"Excellent, Lune!" Lady Kuzunoha's joyful voice rang in my mind, and her translucent form appeared before me. *"In my world, onsen water is used to make manju and senbei. You should do the same."*

"Manju? Senbei?" I repeated, unfamiliar with those terms.

"What's going on?" Liam asked me.

Besides me and Lord Reineke, nobody could see or hear Lady Kuzunoha.

"The Great Lady Kuzunoha is giving me an oracle about how to make manju and senbei," I said.

"How to make *what*?" Bal tilted his head.

"I don't know either," I responded.

"You make onsen manju by filling wheat dough with sweet red bean paste. Mineral spring senbei is made by stretching wheat flour and grilling it until it's hardened. They are perfect for souvenirs that can be brought back home," Lady Kuzunoha said.

"Lady Kuzunoha says they're sweets that make for perfect souvenirs. I'd love to try them!" My eyes glittered at the thought.

I guess manju is like a cake? As for the senbei, are they like waffles?

Those were the sweets I had eaten when I was the crown princess.

While I was getting excited, brother patted my head.

"Then let's tell our cooks the exact recipes," he said.

Lady Kuzunoha wagged her tail.

"I will teach you everything once you're back at the mansion," she said, then vanished.

"Gifts and sweets are great, but don't you want drinks too?" Liam inquired.

"Great idea!!!" Bal shouted in agreement.

"A cold wine would be excellent," Lord Reineke said.

"Wine for the adults, and perhaps fruit juice for the children," Liam proposed.

"I suggest you freeze the fruit juice and make sorbet."

"Isn't sorbet super fancy?" Bal asked.

Ice magic was difficult, making such goods expensive.

"Even so, those who want it will pay. Besides, you have the pseudo magical ore at your disposal, do you not? Use it to make a basic icehouse nearby and freeze the juice there. And don't forget the wine," Lord Reineke added, licking his lips.

"All right, we'll go over the details once we're back home," Liam said.

Everyone nodded.

"Woo-hoo! We're getting new snacks!" Bal cheerfully splashed the water.

"Bal, don't bother other people," Marcel admonished curtly.

Bal froze. "Yes, master!" he said, then quietly soaked into the bathtub.

The rest of us laughed at him.

Perhaps thanks to the onsen, both my body and soul felt warm and tranquil. The hot steam swayed in the air around us, brushing

past Lord Reineke's whiskers as it soared into the sky.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Liam, Bal, and I were standing in House Renard's kitchen, wearing aprons and looking at a bowl of wheat flour. Lord Reineke was curled up and dozing off in the corner.

"Let us begin," Lady Kuzunoha spoke through my body in her gentle voice. She was possessing me in order to teach us how to make onsen manju and mineral spring senbei. **"First, we will make the red bean paste. It's supposed to be made from adzuki beans, but since they don't grow in Renard, we'll go with soybeans."**

The day before, we had boiled the soybeans in preparation. Lady Kuzunoha mashed them with black sesame, then mixed them with water and sugar.

"Bal, put this into a small pot and knead it until it thickens."

"Okay!" Bal said, glad to have been given a job.

"Next, let's add the onsen water, sugar, and baking powder to the bowl."

We did so, and the sugar dissolved.

"Now add wheat flour, mix it lightly, and let the dough rest. This will be the crust. While we wait, let's prepare the steamer."

We added onsen water to the steamer too.

"Divide the paste Bal made into ten equal pieces."

The black-sesame-filled bean paste almost looked like a lump of mud. As we shaped it into balls, it felt as though we were playing with soil.

"Now divide the dough into ten pieces and stuff them with the bean paste. Once they're ready, put them in the steamer."

We followed Lady Kuzunoha's instructions. When Liam took off the steamer's lid, thick vapor floated up and fluttered his hair. I could smell the unmistakable scent of the hot spring emanating from the

steam.

"It's hot, so let me do it," Liam said, lining the manju neatly inside the steamer and closing the lid.

"Now it's time for the mineral spring senbei," Lady Kuzunoha said, giving us no time to rest. **"Add wheat flour, baking powder, potato starch, sugar, and a pinch of salt into a bowl. Add the onsen water last, then mix it all together."**

We did as she instructed, mixing the ingredients until we had a thick liquid.

"Heat up a frying pan and pour a tablespoon of the liquid, creating a thin layer."

Bal poured the liquid, coating the surface of the frying pan.

"Fry until it's crisp." Lady Kuzunoha kept a careful eye on Bal. **"Good, now turn it over."**

At the sound of her dignified voice, Bal rushed to flip over the dough. A sweet fragrance filled the kitchen.

"Once both sides are fried, you are done."

When the senbei were finished, we left them on a net to cool off.

The manju were done by that time too, so we added them to the net as well. A bit similar yet different from cakes, they were small, round, light brown snacks—the color was a result of the brown sugar we'd used. I'd never seen anything like it and couldn't even imagine what they tasted like, but I was looking forward to finding out.

The combined fragrance of the manju and senbei made my stomach growl.

"Ahh... It looks so good..." Bal muttered, almost drooling while staring at the snacks. He was fidgeting with excitement, but patiently waited until Lady Kuzunoha told us the food was ready to eat.

We just had to hold back until they weren't so hot anymore.

Lord Reineke stood up and suddenly transformed into a human.

"Whoa! Lord Reineke, you startled me!" Bal exclaimed.

The spirit ignored him and went over to hug me.

"If you want to eat these 'manju' or whatever they're called, then just do it," he said, reaching behind me to grab one.

"Hey! No fair!" Bal objected, but still waited for Lady Kuzunoha's

permission.





“All right, go ahead,” Lady Kuzunoha said at last.

Bal grabbed a manju in one hand and a senbei in the other.

I took one of the manju. Steam rose from it, and it felt heavy and hot to the touch. I reflexively bounced it between my hands and blew on it to cool it off. Once I took a bite, a mixture of sweetness and sesame filled my mouth.

“Mmm! So tasty!”

“Indeed, it has a rather good flavor.”

Lady Kuzunoha and I spoke at the same time.

Next, I tried the senbei. It was like a thin, hard sheet, and biting into it created a satisfying crunch. Its taste was the perfect blend of sweet and salty.

“They’re so thin, I feel like I can eat as many as I want!”

“Both turned out well.”

Lady Kuzunoha nodded and promptly stopped possessing me.

Lord Reineke tried each of the snacks, then licked his lips. The gesture looked so much more erotic in his human form.

“Hmm. Not bad,” he remarked, grabbing another manju.

“I prefer these!” Bal said. He grabbed a few of the senbei, stacked them up, and took a bite of them all at once. There was a loud cracking sound. “I knew it! They taste best when you have more than one at a time!” he said, proudly reporting his great discovery.

The rest of us tried it as well. With everyone crunching away, the atmosphere was fun and lighthearted.

“Wow! They really do taste better that way!” I said.

“True.”

Liam spread some cherry jam in between two pieces of senbei with an impish smile.

“Oh! This is amazing as well!” he said, then made one for me to try.

The sweet and tart jam sandwiched between crispy senbei had a slightly luxurious feel.

“You’re right, brother!”

“I wanna try too!” Bal pestered.

Lord Reineke also looked at the snack greedily.

Liam made two of the jam-filled senbei for them. They opened their mouths wide and took a bite at the same time. A loud crunch resounded, which satisfied Lord Reineke.

"Ohh, nice! Seems like we can make all kinds of flavors!" Bal said.

"Yes. It might be nice if we teach the recipe to the townsfolk and see what flavors each shop can come up with. I think it'd be exciting if they all could sell their original versions," Liam said with a smile.

"Good idea," Lord Reineke affirmed and patted Liam on the head.

The surprised Liam looked up at the spirit. Then he put both his hands on his head where he'd been petted and blushed.

"Th-Thank you very much..." he mumbled, shaken up.

"Oh? Are you not used to this?"

Liam nodded at Lord Reineke's question. I'd never seen him look so embarrassed, and I suddenly felt jealous. I took his hand and peered up at his face.

"Brother! I'll pet you too!!! Please lower your head!" I demanded.

Liam burst out laughing.

"Hey! Don't laugh at me!"

He wiped a tear from his eye and petted my head.

"No! I want to pet *you*!" I hopped up and down, trying to reach his head.

"You're so cute, Lune," Liam said, bending down.

My fingers glided through his purple, silky hair, as elusive as wine. It was soft, beautiful, and smelled like him. It felt nice, and I let out a satisfied sigh.

Lord Reineke then put his hand on top of mine, and put his other hand on my head. Confused, I looked up at him. He grinned, petting both me and Liam simultaneously.

"You're *both* cute," Lord Reineke said gently, causing both of us to blush.

Chapter 4: The Start of Renard Water Transport

The canal construction on the Renard River progressed smoothly, and the shipbuilding was almost complete. After some initial trial operations, we publicly opened a guild called Renard Water Transport. It soon became a hot topic in other territories, in part thanks to the people who completed their sentences at the monastery and returned to the capital with goods and tales from Renard.

Everything was gradually getting off the ground, but there was a problem: We had ships, but not enough oarsmen.

Marcel had the solution. In his life of adventuring, he'd also become proficient at operating ships.

"If you'll entrust me with the task, I can teach people to run ships," he said, and did just that.

Marcel was running a class about ships at the Renard River. The water was clean and sparkling, and a refreshing breeze rustled the greenery by the bank. Besides those with an interest in boats, a large crowd of onlookers had gathered, curious about the former swordmaster.

"I'd expect nothing less," Lord Reineke said, impressed by Marcel's skill set.

Liam and Bal were excited too.

The first step was observation. The crowd's eyes lit up as they watched Marcel's brilliant pole-swinging.

"Master is so cool!!!" Bal yelled.

"That's a legendary adventurer for you. He's incredibly experienced," Liam said with admiration.

The children were kicking up a fuss, while the young adults

stared at Marcel with envy.

"Maybe being a boatman would be kind of cool. My parents told me to become a packhorse driver because ships are too dangerous, but I think I prefer this."

"The drivers get decent pay, but I think I wanna work on a ship!"

The youths discussed among themselves.

"If you're interested in being a boatman, please inquire about it at the Renard Water Transport guild! You can sign up for the training course at the reception!" the guild workers shouted, distributing flyers.

The youths happily took them, and some even ran off to sign up then and there.

"This is a great success!" I said.

I looked up at Liam, and he smiled.

"I wanna be a boatman too!" Bal said, gazing at the guild flyer with jealousy. Unfortunately for him, he was too young to sign up.

"He should have greater aspirations," Lord Reineke huffed in a voice only I could hear.

That's right. In my past life, Bal was a hero who toppled the monarchy.

We got along perfectly now, but back then, he brought down the royal family and condemned House Renard to death. He possessed the talent and qualities to stand above others.

Suddenly, I sensed someone's gaze and turned around. A packhorse driver who pulled a horse bearing a pile of baggage was staring at me. He had a small child with him. When I met his gaze, he glanced away with a grimace and left.

What was that about?

Despite my suspicions, I was soon carried away by the cheerful air around me and forgot all about it.

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The canal was finally complete. Prior to the opening ceremony, we were running trials. More people were interested in being boatmen, so we could operate more ships, but there was an issue.

"A fire?" Liam asked, frowning.

"I would like to consult with the wise Lord Reineke," father said, turning to the fox.

Lord Reineke was resting his chin on my lap and relaxing. He opened his eyes slightly and nodded.

"Speak."

Relieved, father began explaining.

"A lot of our ships have broken right before the launching ceremony. At first there were only a few small cracks, so we thought they were simply accidents. However, as we observed more closely, we noticed that the damage was gradually getting worse, culminating in a small fire."

Lord Reineke scoffed.

"Thankfully, only the ships were damaged. But if we leave things as they are, we will be risking lives."

"Have you not uncovered anything yet?"

My father was strict and earnest, so there was no way he hadn't done anything about it until this point.

"Naturally, we are carrying out an investigation. However..." The usually rational and composed man struggled to find the words for a moment. "I believe a child may be behind this, and I'm having difficulty with discerning how to deal with that."

"Oh?"

"The work is crude and the cracks are superficial. It's hard to imagine an ill-intentioned adult would accomplish so little. We've been supervising everything closely, but with that fire breaking out, we can't just leave things be."

House Renard placed orders for the ships, which meant we also dealt with the damages. If the accidents were caused by a mischievous child's pranks, father wouldn't have them punished severely. However, things were different now that a fire had occurred. The culprit had to be caught and punished, but the most severe penalty for arson was death. Father probably already had an idea about the culprit's identity, but he wasn't sure how to proceed and so decided to consult Lord Reineke.

"Hmm. You should let Liam deal with it," the spirit said

nonchalantly. **“If a child is behind the fire, it’ll be easier if another child speaks to them.”**

“Liam?” the marquis echoed.

“Yes. The next lord of this domain should be able to handle something like this.” Lord Reineke cast Liam a challenging look, his eyes glinting threateningly.

Liam gulped. “Me...?”

“You don’t think you can do it?”

I looked at my brother in a panic. After glancing at me, he nodded.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said resolutely.

Lord Reineke huffed and closed his eyes again. I petted his forehead, causing him to wag his tail.

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It was an early morning in the shipyard on the day of the launching ceremony for one of the ships. Liam, Bal, Marcel, and I were hiding in the corner, hoping to catch the culprit behind the ship-breaking pranks. Lord Reineke made himself small enough to fit into my arms, since he’d stand out too much in his bigger form.

I heard two pairs of footsteps scurry over toward the ship. Two youthful voices whispered to each other against the dim light of a candle.

“Big bro, is this the ship that’s launching today?”

“Yeah. But we went too far last time, so let’s keep things simple today.”

“Maybe we should stop?”

“Too late to back out now. Or do you not care if dad loses his job?”

“I do, but...”

A slightly older boy and his younger brother argued in hushed voices while rummaging through something.

Their candle flame flickered brightly for a moment. Liam chose that moment to lunge out of our hiding spot, and grabbed one of the boys by the wrist.

"What are you doing?" he asked coldly.

The children's faces paled. One of them dropped the candle out of surprise. Bal quickly rushed over to pick it up and blow out the flame.

"Whew! That was close!" he said, wiping the sweat from his brow.

"Why are you doing this? One mistake and you could cause a huge fire," Liam said. He scowled at the two boys, his violet eyes shining with fury.

The children trembled, their eyes welling up with tears. They were so afraid that they couldn't get a word out.

I stepped toward them, holding Lord Reineke in my arms.

"Hmm... It's dark in here," the spirit remarked and decided to make a bright halo appear behind my head.

"Hey! Don't do that!" I objected.

"I'm giving the scene a divine touch. And now it's nice and bright, no?" he replied, entirely unashamed.

The kids looked over in my direction. When they saw the fox in my arms, they both dropped to the floor and bowed.

"We're sorry!"

"Please forgive us!"

They huddled on the floor. Liam looked down at them, then shrugged.

"Why are you doing this?" he questioned again, his voice still icy.

The boys said nothing, continuing to shake all over. They made for a pitiful sight, so I leaned over and addressed them.

"You must have your reasons, right? Can you tell us?"

The smaller boy timidly lifted his head, staring up at me.

"Is Lord Reineke...angry at us? Is he going to give us divine punishment?"

"Depending on your answers, I might," Lord Reineke grumbled, though only I could hear him.

"Do you think what you're doing is so wrong that you deserve divine punishment?" I asked. Based on what the boys were whispering to each other earlier, this didn't seem like a mere prank.

The younger boy burst out crying. "I'm sorry, Lord Reineke! I...

I...” He wept loudly into the sky, his face drenched with tears.

The older boy hugged his brother protectively. “He didn’t do anything wrong! He was just following my orders! If you’re going to punish someone, it should be me, not him!” he said, pleading desperately with Lord Reineke.

The spirit sighed. The halo behind me grew brighter.

“Lune, act in my name and make these children confess to their sins. Show the dignity of a great spirit’s contractor.”

Humph! Lord Reineke just doesn’t feel like doing it himself!

With no other choice, I tried to put on the act of a humble priestess and spoke to the boys again.

“Please confess to Lord Reineke the reasons behind your actions,” I said gravely.

Lord Reineke made the halo shine even more.

“A traveler from the capital said that once Renard Water Transport opened, it’d be the end for packhorse drivers. Our dad is a driver, and he’s always worrying about how he and everyone else could lose their jobs...” the older boy explained reluctantly, biting his lip to stop himself from crying. He closed his eyes tightly, his voice strained as he continued.

“But the adults just complain all day without doing anything about it. They say it’s because there’s no point fighting back against the feudal lord’s orders.” The boy wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “So I had an idea: Everything will be fine if we get rid of the ships! And if the adults won’t act, then *I* will!”

He glared at me, his eyes burning fiercely. “I wanted to show them that I could help!” he practically yelled, his voice overflowing with sincerity.

My heart ached.

I know how he feels. I’ve always wanted to be useful to House Renard, and just like this boy, I went about it the wrong way.

I took his hand. “You have a noble goal, but your methods are wrong,” I said.

The boy’s glare softened. A single tear slid down his cheek.

“But I... I... What else am I supposed to do?”

I didn’t know how to answer him.

What now? What should I say?

While I hesitated, Liam put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"We should've explained things properly. Packhorse drivers won't lose their jobs when the water transport begins."

"You're lying!" the boy replied. "I heard the ships can carry more goods than a horse, and faster too!"

"Yes, but only to places reachable by boat," Liam said. "Horses will continue to carry goods from the town to the harbor and capital. They'll also deliver goods to us from other territories."

"But there'll be less jobs than before!"

"There will be less jobs for delivering goods to the capital or far-off places by horse, but conversely, there will be more jobs for transporting goods within the territory, as we'll handle more goods than before overall."

The boy bit his lip.

Liam continued. "Also, the ships can go down the current themselves, but people will need to pull them upstream. We'll need workers for that job too. So actually, there'll be more jobs once the water transport starts."

"Really...?"

"Yes, really." Liam nodded.

Brother's so amazing. I hadn't even considered how jobs would be affected. I've only been thinking about the goods themselves.

But Liam was taking the whole domain into consideration. I was impressed.

The boy looked at me and Lord Reineke. The spirit sat down with a blank expression and nodded.

"That's right. Please believe Lord Liam," I said solemnly.

The boys once again lowered their heads to the floor.

"Sorry! We didn't understand anything and did horrible things!"

They apologized profusely while crying. I looked over at Liam.

Is he going to have them arrested? But in their own childish way, these boys thought they were doing the right thing.

The thought was painful. These boys committed a sin out of a sense of justice. They hadn't acted selfishly—they were doing this to protect other people.

Bal also cast Liam a worried look. The latter gazed down at the boys with a severe look on his face.

"Part of the blame lies with us for not explaining the situation properly, so you will not be charged for anything."

Bal and I breathed a sigh of relief. The boys looked at each other and smiled.

"But you mustn't do anything like this again. In the future, if you have troubles or concerns, speak to the feudal lord," Liam admonished gently.

The boys nodded.

"Still, you two made me realize we need to do better at informing everyone of the situation. I'll report this to the marquis."

The boys bowed again.

"We're really sorry!"

I smiled at their earnestness. Lord Reineke nodded, indicating he'd forgiven them.

"Lord Reineke forgives you," I said.

The brothers sighed in relief and bowed at the spirit.

"We won't do it again. Thank you for your forgiveness!"

Golden light spilled from them, which Lord Reineke absorbed. The fox smiled, his tail swaying.

"Now hurry home," I said.

The children got up, bowed one more time, and headed to the exit. They turned back to look at us, bowing repeatedly before exiting the shipyard and quietly closing the door behind them.

Finally, the halo behind me disappeared.

"Lord Reineke, please stop it with the halos!" I said, puffing out my cheeks.

The spirit chortled unapologetically.

"Lune, that was very smooth," Liam praised me while blushing.

I felt embarrassed. "You were great too. Thank you for forgiving those boys."

"It's not like they were being selfish; they were worried about their father. And our future rests on the shoulders of children like them."

Bal gazed at Liam with admiration. "You're on another level..."

Lord Reineke jumped from my arms, shifted into his giant form, and patted Liam's head with his front paw. Liam smiled happily.

Sunlight poured in from the shipyard's windows. The sawdust glittered in the air.

"All right. Let's head back and inform father," Liam said.

He and Bal stretched their arms and yawned.

"Okay. But I'm so sleepy..."

"Me too," I said.

Lord Reineke sprawled down on the floor in front of us.

"Get on, all of you."

"Really?" Bal's eyes lit up. He'd never ridden on Lord Reineke's back before.

"I'm making an exception today."

"Yay! Thank you!" Bal shouted, flinging himself onto the fox. "So fluffy! So soft! Awesome!!!"

Lord Reineke smiled dryly at the boy's antics. Liam and I exchanged a look, smiling at each other. He picked me up and placed me behind Bal.

"Pardon me," he said politely before climbing on as well, sitting behind me. He held onto my waist with one hand and used his other to pet Lord Reineke. "It feels so nice..." he muttered with a sigh.

I was a little jealous. I swung my tail, smacking it against Liam's chest.

"There's no need to get violent, Lune." He laughed.

I puffed out my cheeks and kept smacking him.

"Lune..." Liam caught my tail with the hand he'd been using to pet Lord Reineke, and pressed the tip of it to his lips.

"Eek!"

A scream escaped me at the sensation. I looked over my shoulder and cast him a sullen look.

"Brother! I told you not to do that so suddenly!"

He smiled, petting my tail so gently that most of my jealousy melted away.

"Don't be mad, Lune. You feel the best."

My cheeks turned red at his words. *So he realized I was jealous.* It was a bit embarrassing, but I was happy.

Seeing that I was no longer acting up, Liam smiled, then kissed the tip of my tail again. It felt like an electric current ran down my spine, making me shiver. I liked it when he petted me, but kisses made me shy.

"Humph!" I tried to smack Liam with my tail again, but he didn't release his grip on it.

"I'm punishing this naughty tail," Liam said with a smirk, kissing it again.

"Ngh!" I grabbed my tail with both hands and pulled it away from him. "No more!" I huffed.

"Sorry," he said with a laugh. He didn't look sorry in the slightest.

"Reflect on your actions!" I demanded.

Bal looked over his shoulder at us with exasperation.

"Can you guys stop flirting on top of Lord Reineke?"

Liam and I blushed.





“Indeed,” Lord Reineke said, shaking his back lightly.

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Bal and I held onto Liam for balance. He embraced us and held onto Lord Reineke with one hand.

“Don’t fall off!” the spirit warned with a grin before leaping out of the shipyard.

It was starting to get bright outside, and some early birds were already out and about. When they spotted us racing past, they called out greetings.

“Lord Reineke’s visiting us so early today!”

“It’s a good omen.”

The golden light of faith poured into Lord Reineke alongside the morning sun. I basked in the light as well, feeling joyful. The fox’s silver coat was shining, and a pleasant breeze carried us back toward House Renard.

Once we were home, Liam reported back to father, who carried out a prompt search for anyone spreading rumors. We discovered that some malicious merchants from the capital were behind it.

“The royal court is not in favor of water transport,” Liam said with a frown.

“Is His Majesty against it?” I asked.

Brother shook his head. “If it goes well, we will have His Majesty’s approval for implementing the same technology in the capital. But other people might be opposing it.”

I instantly thought of the queen and shuddered. In my past life, she was unkind to me no matter what I did.

Liam noticed how distraught I was and patted my head. Strangely, that was enough to calm me down, and the tension seeped from my shoulders.

“First, we must keep the citizens informed. We’ll hold a meeting to explain all about the water transport and dispel those rumors,” father proclaimed.

Thus, the Renard Water Transport briefing would be held.

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One week later, Renard Water Transport was operating on a trial basis to the territory bordering us. Our neighbor was adjacent to the sea, and goods were transported from the sea to the Renard Water Transport harbor by carriages just like before.

But the neighboring feudal lord was impressed with water transport and began a similar project in his domain. Being connected to the sea would be useful to us as well, so we agreed to share the technology with them. The river was wide and calm by the ocean, so the construction seemed like it would proceed smoothly and we'd soon have easy access to the sea.

We were holding a ship-testing event, together with a briefing about water transport for the citizens. The ship we'd sent out on a trial run had just returned, and there was a massive crowd by the wharf. Even the leader of the Land Transport guild was present, openly showing his distrust. The packhorse drivers had even brought their horses along, perhaps to express their position.

The atmosphere was tense. It felt like just one wrong move could lead to a rebellion. Lord Reineke was in his giant form, perhaps to intimidate everyone as he gazed at the crowd. I settled snugly between his front paws.

The Water Transport guild was hosting the event, so all we could do was watch over the happenings.

First, the guild leader opened with a long explanation of the same points Liam had told those boys.

"That's what my kid said."

"So they were right, huh?"

The packhorse drives muttered to each other.

The guild leader addressed the drivers.

"We'd like you to transport the goods from this ship throughout our domain."

The drivers were shocked to see the amount of goods that were

brought down from the ship. They looked at each other.

"This is incredible."

"Yeah. I was worried about there being no long-distance jobs, but..."

"There's so much stuff, we'll be able to just work within Renard."

"And we'll spend less time away from home."

Meanwhile, the merchants' eyes lit up as they stared at the goods.

"These sweets are very popular in the capital right now!"

"I can't believe they managed to bring over this much salt!"

Everyone was excited at the prospect of receiving items they'd been longing for.

The guild leader raised his voice. "It'll also be up to the packhorse drivers to deliver goods from our territory to the harbor. The more goods we can ship out, the richer our domain will be."

That caused a buzz.

"That's true! I was just thinking about what we'd import and sell here."

"I'd love to make more goods to export to other territories."

The once-tense atmosphere subsided as everything was explained.

"Getting things off the ground might be a bit tricky, but we should be able to split transportation into two categories: long-distance by ship, and short-distance by existing methods. Will you join forces with me to make this a reality?" the guild leader asked, bowing deeply.

The Land Transport guild leader held out his hand. "Very well. Let's do our best."

They exchanged a firm handshake. I sighed in relief. Liam started clapping loudly, and the rest of the crowd soon followed.

"We'd like everyone to experience these ships for themselves today," the water transport guild leader announced. "Each ship can carry up to fifteen people."

Then Marcel appeared.

"Oh! It's that former swordmaster!"

As the crowd gazed at him with admiration, Marcel stood at the

head of the ship.

The boats we used weren't particularly large, with flat bottoms to navigate the shallow river. The crew usually consisted of four people: a boatman to use the pole by the bow, a helmsman at the stern, and two people who handled the sails and did other miscellaneous jobs.

Lord Reineke jumped to where the cargo would normally be loaded. The ship swayed from the force.

"Come, Lune. Tell everyone to get on."

I climbed onboard as well and turned to face the crowd.

"An oracle from Lord Reineke: Get on the ship in order to understand it."

The crowd roared with excitement.

"I wanna ride too!" Bal shouted.

He and Liam climbed aboard the ship. The children scrambled for an opportunity to get onto the same ship as Lord Reineke. The boatmen boarded the other ships, followed by the other citizens. Even packhorse drivers were taking part.

"We're departing!"

The ships began leaving the harbor. The boatmen stood at the bows, using long poles to navigate the riverbed. The ships cut across the sparkling water, led by the one I was on, while Marcel's skillful use of the pole fascinated the kids.

In no time at all, we made it to the second harbor. Two crew members disembarked, then pulled on the ropes attached to the boat to bring it back to the previous harbor. Marcel stayed at the head of the ship, while another crew member manned the helm. The boat rocked against the stream as it slowly returned to the other port.

"Ah, I see. Going downstream is fast, but it's a lot slower the other way."

"Still, these boats can carry a lot."

The children talked with great excitement.

The men pulled the ships along, sweating from the effort. Their powerful backs seemed to be driving Renard's future forward.

"What a nice breeze," Lord Reineke said, obviously enjoying himself. The wind fluttered his silver fur.

I looked at him and nodded.

Chapter 5: The Reineke Hot Spring Prospers!

A domain downstream from Renard was impressed with Renard Water Transport and built their own canals, connecting us to the sea. Due to their proximity to the coast, their part of the river was wide and deep, and the construction proceeded quickly thanks to the engineers we sent over. Once everything was complete, goods could be transported by sea, transferred to the river ships, and brought upstream to Renard. Naturally, the reverse could be done as well.

House Renard also finished building the hot spring inn. We informed Dr. Guillotin, who was living in the capital, and he spread the word that our onsen was effective in helping the sick and injured. Thus, we began receiving a lot of tourists. It was perfect timing, as autumn was upon us, making the warm hot spring water all the more appealing.

For a lot of people, traveling by sea or river was a novelty, and it was a lot faster than going by horse. Ships also provided an easier ride for the sick, wounded, women, and children—it stirred their desire to travel.

In addition to the open-air onsen that we'd built previously, a medicinal bath using local herbs was also added to the inn. Visitors loved the pleasant aroma of the water, and many bought dried herbs to enjoy the same kind of bath back home.

Also, Lady Revon taught us about a steam bath called a "sauna." Lady Revon was another great fox spirit like Lady Kuzunoha who belonged to the Global Legendary Fox Federation. She took on the appearance of a fox with a dazzling, rainbow-colored coat. She watched over a nation colder than Renard, where on occasion a rainbow curtain called an aurora twinkled across the night sky. Lord Reineke was an old friend of hers, and she gave us advice specific to

cold places.

Because many people in poor condition came to visit the onsen, we also developed a nutritional drink for them. Dr. Guillotin had advised us that it was good to have some protein after taking a bath, so we came up with soy milk smoothies.

The doctor had recommended dairy milk, but Renard didn't have many dairy cows and our goats didn't produce much milk. We'd originally planned to just use soy milk alone, but its strong taste made it difficult to drink. So we mixed it with fruit—our local specialty—improving the drink's taste and making it a hit with the visitors, especially while snacking on onsen manju.

With House Renard's hot spring inn booming in popularity, gift shops and other stalls sprang up in its vicinity. We freely gave out the recipes that the great spirits had taught us to our citizens, many of whom put their own spin on them.

The area was full of people laughing and eating konjac balls or onsen manju. It was fun to go around the many stores selling senbei with all kinds of jams, finding which ones were your favorite.

Many of the tourists were wealthy, so yama moth fabric and the rock crystal accessories were also selling well. After being rejuvenated by the onsen, visitors enjoyed leisurely boat rides down the river. Since the domain was surrounded by mountains, mountaineering became popular too.

Renard had once been seen as the grim frontier, but now it was embracing a bright, merry atmosphere.

And that was when Prince Hodr decided to pay a visit under the pretext of inspecting the hot spring.

Refusing his visit wasn't an option, as the hot spring and its related businesses had been created from a relief fund granted by the royal family, who wanted to ensure that the money wasn't being used dishonestly. And since our neighboring territory had just finished constructing a canal and there was a channel connecting Renard to the capital, the prince could kill two birds with one stone by carrying out canal inspection as well.

I was disheartened when I first heard the news.

"He's going to stay with House Renard, isn't he?" I asked my

father, exasperated.

However, he shook his head.

"He's coming for an inspection this time, so I've arranged for him to experience the resort *properly*."

"You mean—"

"Yes, he'll be staying at the hot spring inn. And since we know he'll be coming ahead of time, we'll have a VIP room prepared for him."

I was relieved to hear that I wouldn't have to experience the same torment of him constantly following me around like last time.

"Thank goodness!" I yelled, hopping up and down.

"Last time, he ran with his tail between his legs. He never learns, does he?" Liam said with a sigh.

I nodded.

He's coming back after practically being driven out. It's incredible, in a way. Is this level of obstinance required to qualify as a royal?

My stomach turned in knots as I remembered the rumors and malice surrounding me in my past life.

"I can't go near the inn during His Highness's stay," I told myself.

In the end, despite my resolution...

"Lune! I missed you!"

I was staring at Hodr, who was grinning back at me. He had arrived a few days ago by ship and was staying in the inn's VIP room. But of course, he decided to visit House Renard under the excuse of auditing his donation fund. He couldn't actually do that himself, so a bureaucrat from the royal court was accompanying him.

I flinched and hid behind my brother. Lord Reineke in his fox form nuzzled against me.

"I guess it's been a while, so maybe you forgot? It's me! Your Hodr!" the prince said.

"My" Hodr?! What nonsense!

Meanwhile, the auditor merely scoffed at the sight of me without even giving me a greeting. We had looked into him and found that he was a distant relative of House Cordier, the queen's birth family. She had probably sent him out to investigate House Renard, as an

inspection would allow him to look into our internal affairs in great detail. Right from the start, the queen was acting with hostility toward us.

"Ha! Such disrespect. They say she's the contractor of a great spirit, but she's just some beast from the boonies," the auditor murmured mockingly under his breath.

Lord Reineke's ears twitched. He growled, baring his fangs.

Oh no, he's angry! By making fun of me, that man's basically insulting Lord Reineke! And if I ignore the prince, the auditor will think House Renard is disrespectful! I can't allow that!

I rushed to stand side by side with Liam.

"Welcome, Your Highness. I hope you have a pleasant time here," I said politely, grasping my skirt and curtsying. My form was elegant, as the queen had made me undergo rigorous training in my past life. I used to cry while constantly practicing, but I guess I couldn't complain now that I could bow as beautifully as Her Majesty herself.

The auditor glanced at me and clicked his tongue.

"You're beautiful as ever, Lune!" Hodr said. "It's like you're already the crown princess!"

The prince flung himself at me, but Lord Reineke stepped in between us.

Liam stepped forward as well, his expression icy.

"We've already refused numerous times. Lune will not be your bride," he said.

Hodr just laughed, but when the auditor saw Liam's firm attitude, his eyes widened.

"Oh? Is that the *complete* consensus of House Renard?" he asked.

Father nodded. "Indeed. Besides, House Renard cannot marry into the royal family. We will not break that vow."

The auditor nodded as well. "Your prudence is admirable."

Although the Renards were formally above him in status, the man's words were only superficially polite. The fact that the queen was his ally gave him confidence. I was sure she had ordered him to look into House Renard's intentions. Not to mention, we didn't hold any major posts in the royal court, which was part of the reason the

lower ranks looked down on us.

But just like in my past life, father didn't rebuke the man. He simply accepted the situation for what it was.

"This again..." Hodr muttered grumpily, but nobody else had heard him, so I pretended I hadn't as well. "Anyway, the bards always sing that love nurtures all, right? So Lune, show me around town tomorrow!"

Shocked, I quickly shook my head.

"No..."

"Are you being shy?" he asked, getting the wrong impression.

I shook my head even harder.

"Are you busy? Then until you're free, I'll help out with the auditing! That way, I'll get to come to your home every day!" Hodr announced, proud of his great idea.

"There's no need, Your Highness," the auditor said in a panic.

"Don't worry! I don't mind helping!" Hodr replied, pounding his chest.

The auditor paled. "But...it takes a very high degree of knowledge—"

"Liam's involved in managing his territory, right? Are you implying *I* can't do something *he* can?!"

The auditor was stumped by Hodr's explosive reply, and glanced at the marquis imploringly. However, my father remained silent and expressionless.

"House Renard might find this objectionable as well—"

"Our marquisate has nothing to hide from His Highness," father said firmly.

After all, it'd be more convenient for us if Hodr were to audit us rather than an actual expert.

"Exactly! The Renards are known for their loyalty! I bet they don't even need to be audited in the first place," Hodr said cheerfully.

Father nodded nonchalantly. Driven into a corner, the auditor wiped away cold sweat while trying to come up with a way to put Hodr off the idea.

"O-Of course, it's just as you say, but... Ah, that's right! Your Highness, you are here on a mission to inspect the territory! That is

much more important than auditing! You should go around and see the restor—”

“No.”

“N-No?” the bureaucrat repeated in disbelief.

“That’s right. I’m not going. That stuff sounds boring.”

The auditor was visibly disturbed at how easily Hodr abandoned his own royal responsibilities.

“It’s not boring. It’s an important duty of yours, so—”

“Oh, I’ve got a great idea! *You* go do the inspection! And *I’ll* do the auditing!”

“What?!” The man was at a loss for words.

“Yep, let’s do that! It’s basically the same thing, right? I mean, if the inspection’s so important, then you should do it. I’ll tell my mother all about it too. You want to be in her good graces, right?” the prince asked, his eyes glittering.

The marquis and Liam silently watched the events unfold. I smiled wryly.

Even the auditor didn’t expect His Highness to be this irresponsible.

Only Their Majesties were capable of reining in Hodr’s selfishness. Or maybe that was impossible even for them. Otherwise, Hodr wouldn’t be coming to Renard so frequently. Either way, a mere bureaucrat was in no position to control him.

“But I—”

“Are you opposing me? Want me to send you back to the capital?” Hodr threatened, glaring at the auditor.

“N-No!” the man responded, hanging his head dejectedly.

“Then it’s decided! And until the auditing is done, I’ll be staying with House Renard! Prepare a room for me! I can use the same one as last time. It was small and impoverished, but I’ll bear with it.”

While Hodr spoke triumphantly, my tail puffed up out of fear.

I hate this!

If he stayed here, he’d follow me from dawn until dusk, just like last time. Bal wouldn’t be able to live normally either. Hodr didn’t understand a thing about auditing, so he might mess up the marquisate’s documents while pretending he knew what he was

doing. I didn't want our restorations to be delayed because of him.

"Your Highness Hodr!" I called out.

The prince grinned. "You finally said my name," he said in a satisfied, seductive voice that gave me chills.

I wanted to run, but I knew I had to stand my ground. If I let him have his way, he'd be staying here with us.

I put on a strained smile. "Carrying out an inspection is a very difficult job, so I think you're the only one who can do it."

Hodr's smile widened. "Yeah! It's gotta be me!"

"A-And, um... I'd like you to see our restored town...I guess..."

"Really? Is that what you want, Lune?"

I nodded. "You can see how wonderful our town has become thanks to your funding," I claimed stiffly with a thousand-yard stare.

Because I know that his next line will be...

"I've got a great idea! Lune, take me around town!"

I knew it...

My ears and tail drooped at Hodr's order. Lord Reineke sighed, while my father and brother glowered at the prince with especially severe looks on their faces.

I don't want to do this, but it's better than him staying here. This way, only I have to put up with him...

My shoulders slumped, but I nodded.

That was when Liam interjected.

"Lune is still too young to explain everything properly, so I'll come as well."

The prince frowned. "Huh? No thanks. Lune and I want to enjoy our date by ourselves. Right, Lune?"

I stiffened, my face turning pale.

Date?!

Lord Reineke's fur stood on end as he curled himself around me.

"Your Highness, I cannot guarantee that the same thing as last time won't happen," father said, stone-faced.

"Last time?" Hodr echoed, suddenly looking pallid. "Right... Those guys from the capital betrayed me, and I had an awful time..." he muttered, glancing at the auditor.

"What?! Are you suspicious of *me*?" the man asked, aghast.

The prince looked away. “I want to believe that you wouldn’t do that. You’re related to House Cordier, so...”

“I didn’t mean that either,” father said. “However, His Highness’s guards committed preposterous acts in the town last time. That made my people wary, and if the worst-case scenario were to occur, we’d both be met with misfortune. I believe that if my son and the Great Lord Reineke accompany you, the common folk won’t be able to cause you harm. I’ll also have one of my best guards join you.”

The auditor nodded. “I think even the royal court was concerned about this matter.”

“Then you understand my fears.”

“Indeed. Thank you for taking His Highness’s safety into consideration.” The auditor smiled at the marquis, then cast a sideways glare at Hodr.

Looks like the auditor is offended because His Highness doubted him.

But Hodr paid the man no heed.

I hope nothing bad happens...

My tail fell limply at the thought of what was coming next.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Liam, Lord Reineke, and I went over to the hot spring inn where Hodr was staying. Father had asked Marcel to act as our guard, trusting in the former swordmaster’s skills.

Hodr exited the inn to meet us, clad in glittering attire. His gaudy appearance stood out like a sore thumb in the little town’s district, but nobody said a word. The prince’s attendant already looked exhausted, so I could only imagine how many selfish requests the boy had made until now.

There was also a guard with him. Unlike last time, this man was clad in the proper knight uniform. When he spotted Marcel, his face paled and it seemed like he wanted to say something. But in the end, he simply bowed without a word. He must’ve known who Marcel was.

Marcel remained silent and bowed as well.

The inn's workers had come out to see the prince off, smiling stiffly. Their faces practically screamed, *That boy is finally leaving the inn!*

Thank you for putting up with him, I thought while lowering my head in apology.

We spent some time wandering around the hot spring district.

"This place isn't so bad!" Hodr exclaimed, his eyes shining.

"Your Highness, which areas have you already seen? We can show you around the parts you haven't visited yet," Liam suggested.

Hodr laughed. "I didn't think there was *anything* to see out here in the sticks! Besides, it's dangerous for me, so I haven't gone anywhere. I did try out that 'onsen' thing in the inn, though. That was pretty good! I liked it!" The boy puffed out his chest proudly, for whatever reason.

The VIP room he was staying at had a private open-air bath attached to it.

"It was great that I could watch the stars while bathing! And the food was nice and hot. I mean, there was no meat, but I guess I can overlook that. The soy smoothie was good too. Not bad, Lune."

There was no end to Hodr's condescending attitude. His attendant and guard were covered in cold sweat, their shoulders slumping. As usual, Liam kept a blank look on his face, while Marcel only shrugged, but I noticed an angry vein popping up on Lord Reineke's temple. I petted the fox's side to pacify him, but on the inside I was upset too.

Yes, we live in the countryside. So what? And you're only in danger because of what you and your guards did last time!

In spite of my thoughts, I forced myself to smile.

Just bear with it! I need this inspection to go well!

All I could do was encourage myself.

We continued walking through the district. The prince took a liking to the crispy mineral spring senbei, especially the version with jam sandwiched between two pieces.

"I thought walking around while eating was vulgar, but these

senbei thingies are just like waffles! So tasty!" Hodr said.

"Every shop prepares the senbei differently, and they each use different varieties of jam," Liam explained.

"Oh yeah? Lune, which jam is your favorite?"

"I like cherry jam...but peach is good too. And grape and blueberry... I can't choose!" I replied.

The prince grinned. "Yeah? Okay then, I'll buy them all!"

The stalls all sold fresh foods, which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy. The only issue was that with each item he tried, he proceeded to give a loud criticism of it within the shopkeepers' earshot.

"This tastes good, but it's so small that it looks paltry. Why not make it more expensive and luxurious? Are they dumb or something?"

"Please, Your Highness, not so loudly. And you're going too far," the attendant scolded.

Hodr's eyes widened. "Huh? What's so wrong in telling the truth? These people should be grateful and use my words as reference."

Of course, for the shopkeepers, who hadn't even asked for a critique, his harsh comments were entirely unwelcome. Moreover, stalls were *supposed* to sell casual food aimed at the common folk here in the rural area. Their aim was to offer small, simple snacks for tourists to try out.

The rest of our group frantically bowed in apology toward the visibly aggravated shopkeepers to make up for Hodr's behavior. Even if it weren't for that, his popularity with the people had been at rock bottom since his last visit.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Well...there's nothing we can do," the shopkeeper replied, smiling dryly.

Ugh... My tummy hurts...

I tried to hide it, taking a deep breath.

"You're not the one who should be apologizing," Lord Reineke snapped, filled with resentment.

"I know...but I need to put up with it for a little longer," I whispered to him while petting his back.

The last shop we visited was the one selling the cloth of the gods.

Most of us were already totally exhausted.

"Mother told me to buy this," Hodr said, uninterested in the fabric himself. "Is it any different from what we sell in the capital? Time to find out. Show me your best fabric!" the boy ordered obnoxiously.

The shopkeeper was slightly bewildered but went to the back and brought out a cloth made from a hundred percent yama moth thread. The fabric was beautiful, resembling a windswept meadow. It had a brilliant luster and was so soft that it almost felt warm to the touch.

"Hmm... Not bad, I guess. All right, bring out your whole stock. I'll buy it all," the prince announced.

The store owner hesitated. "My apologies, but I've already made some items to order for other nations, so I can't hand over *everything*."

"Why not? I'm the crown prince of this kingdom. Are you refusing to obey me?"

"Your Highness, please..." the attendant said, worried about the boy's aggressive tone.

Liam stepped forward to cover for the owner.

"Your Highness, it's impossible to create so much of this fabric. And there would be trouble if you took away the goods ordered by another country's royal family."

"So you're scared of them?" Hodr scoffed. "Coward."

But Liam refused to be baited by this juvenile instigation, and remained expressionless as he replied.

"No, but those of us who govern have a duty to avoid unnecessary conflict. A war would hurt our people."

Hodr huffed. "People are *meant* to be sacrificed for the king. Isn't that obvious?"

With that, the air instantly froze over. Lord Reineke's fur was standing on end, and I was panicking. An eerie sensation emanated from Liam's sword.

"Now that's just..." Marcel muttered, pressing his hand to his forehead and staring up to calm himself down.

As if devoid of all emotion, Liam continued to reply with perfect calm.

"I must ask you to limit yourself to one item this time. If it's to your liking, you can place an order for more and we'll ship it over to the capital."

Hodr shrugged. "Fine. I'll go along with this out of respect for you, Liam. Deliver double the amount by next month."

"Your Highness, we use natural goods to create this fabric, so we cannot make more of it so easily."

"No to this, no to that, you say no to everything! You're all so incompetent!!! Just use all the materials you can get!!!" Hodr yelled.

I trembled with fear as the prince turned and smiled at me.

"You agree, right, Lune? That way, I can have matching dresses made for you and mother."

Terrified, I vigorously shook my head and stumbled back.

Matching dress with the queen? That's just a punishment! I can't even imagine how furious she'd be if she heard of this!

In my previous time, I once wore the same ribbon as the queen. That alone earned me endless bullying from her.

"No... I don't want to..."

"There's no need to be shy. You and I get along so well, don't we?" Hodr said, attempting to hug me.

"Eek!"

As soon as I screamed, Lord Reineke grew in size and grabbed the prince by the scruff of his neck with his fangs.

"Ack! You insolent—" Hodr screamed, hanging in the air and kicking his legs.

Lord Reineke stepped outside and threw Hodr onto the street.

"*You* are the insolent one! I am the Great Spirit Reineke! And Lune is my contractor!!!" he bellowed, baring his large fangs. The inside of his mouth was the color of blood.

Hodr was so petrified he couldn't even get up.

"Ah... Ah..." he mumbled mindlessly, as if suffering from a lapse in memory.

Lord Reineke grabbed the attendant and the guard by their necks and hurled them outside as well. The attendant instantly prostrated himself, pressing his head to the ground. The guard didn't even try to protect Hodr, frantically begging for forgiveness. Their fear and

veneration created a golden light, which spilled into the spirit.

"I'm so sorry, Great Lord Reineke!"

"Please forgive me!"

The men pleaded, kneeling.

A flock of birds swooped past, and a rain of feces totally drenched Hodr.

"AHHH!"

"Ew! That stinks!"

"Gross!!!"

That combined with their agonized cries created a scene straight from hell.

"Please, I beg of you! Forgive us!" the attendant appealed.

But Hodr showed no desire to apologize.

Lord Reineke glared at the boy, stomping his foot on the ground and growing even bigger.

"You are *not* forgiven!" he howled, opening his mouth wider. He looked seconds away from biting off the prince's head.

"Eep!"

The boy screamed, but he was still too terrified to get up. All he could do was open and close his mouth like a fish. I noticed he was sitting in a puddle—he must've soiled himself in fear.

"Get out of this land, you piss-stained brat!" Lord Reineke commanded, scoffing and turning away. He'd only pretended to try and eat the prince to threaten him.

Prince Hodr was on the verge of tears. The attendant and guard grabbed him from either side and helped him up. They made for such a wretched sight that I took off my cape and held it out to them.

"Um, please wrap this around His Highness's waist," I said.

No matter what he might've done or said, forcing a teenager to walk through the streets with soaked pants was just too much.

When the prince heard my words, his cheeks instantly turned red.

"I-I don't need that! I'm going home! Prepare a ship! We're going back to the capital!"

After proclaiming as much, he staggered off with his men trailing behind. I stood there, holding the cape he had refused to take.

Early the next morning, Hodr and his party departed from Renard. Normally, we should've gone out to see him off, but we only found out about his departure after the fact, when the auditor informed us. Indeed, Hodr had left without even bringing the man with him.

Having been left behind on his own, the auditor soon grew exhausted trying to do all the work Hodr had abandoned as well. We felt sorry for him, so we arranged a visit to the hot springs for him so that he'd have a moment of peace.

Once he finished all of his work, he had his fill of the relaxing onsen. He then bought lots of souvenirs before going back home to the capital.

Chapter 6: The Merfolk's Song

With Prince Hodr gone, life returned to normal. We heard that the auditor loved the Reineke Hot Spring so much that he gave out the souvenirs he'd bought and recommended it to everyone. Even more tourists from the capital began pouring in, as did merchants looking to deal in our local specialties.

The Renard domain was brimming with vigor. Ship traffic increased, and everything was going well—until it wasn't.

"A leviathan and kraken were spotted out in the sea, so we have suspended service of all large-scale cargo vessels," my father announced. Leviathans and krakens were large monsters that lived in the sea.

Liam and I were in the marquis's office, as he'd wanted to consult us about the impasse he was faced with. Lord Reineke was curled up and asleep by my feet.

"Again? The sea's supposed to be calm at this time of year. How odd," Liam said.

"That's why it's a major problem," father replied.

Both of them sighed, though their expressions were blank.

We'd been dealt a hard blow just as tourism was booming.

"Also, our downstream neighbor lost another ship," father said.

"That's the third one this month," Liam responded.

Father nodded. "I was going to keep an eye on it from afar, since it's another domain's business, but their feudal lord asked me for advice."

"Right. I heard there have been no casualties so far, but at this rate, it's only a matter of time," Liam said, frowning.

"Search teams are trying to find the cause behind the accidents, but it doesn't seem like a sea monster was responsible. They're struggling to understand the situation."

Father spread out a ship route map onto the table. Red circles

indicated the sites of accidents, with the date and extent of damage noted for each.

"Looks like the accidents are occurring closer and closer to Renard," I pointed out, just stating my observation.

My father and brother turned to me.

"That's...true," father said.

Liam patted my head. "You have a good eye."

"Then we can't just ignore this. We don't know when an accident might happen within our bounds," father said.

Liam and I nodded.

"Let's focus on uncovering the cause," Liam suggested.

Lord Reineke stood up.

"This doesn't smell like a human's doing," he said, his muzzle wrinkling in displeasure. **"Whatever it is has some nerve to be treading upon my turf. Liam, send out a ship! And Lune, voice your wish!"**

The spirit was angry, but he couldn't use his power to fulfill his own desire. It had to be his contractor's wish.

"Lord Reineke, please help us to resolve the matter of the capsizing ships," I requested formally.

Satisfied, the fox nodded.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Liam, Bal, Lord Reineke, and I were on a ship sailing down the Renard River. Marcel was in charge, with three other men completing the crew.

We planned to pass the accident sites and investigate what had happened. But there was the danger of us ramming into the sunken ships, so we were all wearing leather vests filled with air that would keep us afloat if we fell into the water. It was compulsory to wear them on any Renard Water Transport vessel.

Marcel had proposed to bring a magical shield for protection, but Lord Reineke rejected the idea in case it alerted any monsters. For the same reason, the spirit made himself small enough to fit into my hands.

It was late fall, and the cold river breeze felt refreshing. My silver ears and tail were glad to be brushed by the wind. We followed the stream and enjoyed the ride until we reached a narrow pass called the Dragon Cascade.

"This part's dangerous. Brace yourselves and hold on tight!" Marcel called out.

"Aye!" the valiant crew members responded in unison.

I stuffed Lord Reineke into the space between my body and the life jacket. Liam grabbed the brim of the ship with one hand and held me with the other. Bal held onto the gunwale too, fascinated.

"Whoa! That boulder looks like a floor!"

A large rock was submerged on the riverbed. The construction crew had had the most difficulty in this area—even their explosives failed to break it apart, leaving the large boulder behind. This had created a waterfall, and the area was prone to accidents.

However, with his extraordinary technique, Marcel managed to avoid the rock. The boat floated smoothly along the swift current.

"Ah! My stomach feels weird!" I said, hugging my belly.

Liam looked a bit unwell too.

"What the— I feel sick...but great at the same time!" Bal shouted.

The crew members laughed.

"Bal, you have the makings of a boatman!"

We safely crossed the Dragon Cascade, and the current was once again calm. That was when Lord Reineke lifted his head.

"This is where I would've expected something to happen."

"What do you mean?" Liam asked.

"This place is accident-prone, which makes it perfect for hunting humans," Lord Reineke responded as though it should've been obvious.

My ears drooped upon hearing such ominous words. I hugged Lord Reineke tightly, and Liam hugged me in turn.

"I'll keep you safe, Lune," he whispered sweetly, making my tail wag all on its own.

Lord Reineke clicked his tongue.

"Don't think I will sit idly by either!"

Marcel and Bal laughed at his indignant shout.

The boat continued traveling down the river. In the distance, Paravento Rock came into view. It was a beautiful sight to behold, a great stone standing as tall as a wall and surrounded by red autumn leaves.

"Wow... So pretty," I said in wonderment.

Marcel chuckled. "Despite its looks, that place is dangerous too. Look over there—there's a second river. They join at that spot, crashing against Paravento Rock. If we get careless, the whole ship might slam into it!"

I shuddered, but Marcel just grinned.

"Don't worry. We won't make that kind of blunder, eh?"

"Aye aye! We've got this!" The other crew members pounded their chests.

Bal stared at Marcel with admiration.

"Thank goodness there are so many reliable people in Renard!" I said, smiling.

Just as Liam nodded, I suddenly heard a beautiful singing voice echoing around me. It was a wondrous, suffocatingly sweet voice that made my fox ears perk up.

The crew members fell into a trance, staring raptly at Paravento Rock where the song was coming from.

One moment the voice sounded like a bubbling stream, the next like a roaring sea. I found myself curious about what it would sound like next. The mysterious, elusive song glided over us like ocean waves. It was so wonderful that I simply *had* to listen to it, yet no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make out the lyrics.

"Is that singer a foreigner? But...where are they?" Bal asked, leaning over the edge of the ship.

"Are they on top of the rock? I can't see from here."

"Could a person even climb up that perilous rock?"

"Well, either way..."

The crew members talked among themselves. Marcel looked puzzled.

I closed my eyes to focus on the song.

"Lune, snap out of it!" Lord Reineke said, smacking me in the

face with his tail.

My eyes flew open.

"Lord Reineke?!"

"This is the voice of a merfolk! If we don't do something, the ship will crash into that rock!"

Everyone had become so mesmerized by the song that they weren't paying attention to where the ship was going.

"What should I do?!"

I tried to come up with an idea, but the singing voice was distracting me, making my mind feel like mud.

Oh no... I feel like I'm losing consciousness...

I was starting to panic. Lord Reineke put his paw pad on my nose.

"Calm down, Lune. I am here."

The fox smiled, then pressed his nose into my ear and exhaled. Suddenly, I could no longer hear the merfolk, and my thoughts cleared up.

"Thank you, Lord Reineke!"

He nodded smugly.

I raised my head. Everyone had lost their sanity because of the song, and I was sure they couldn't even hear Lord Reineke anymore.

"Lune, do as I did and smack them with your tail! That should wake them up!"

As a spirit, Lord Reineke couldn't use his magic to influence the human world as he liked. I had to act on his behalf as his contractor, and he could only use his magic through me.

"Guys! Get a hold of yourselves! That's a merfolk's song!"

Liam was still holding me. When I hit his arm with my tail, he looked down at me with a glazed look in his eyes.

"What is it, Lune?" he asked sleepily. He looked adorable when he was so out of it, but this wasn't the time for such thoughts.

"Brother! A merfolk is enchanting everyone!"

My words finally snapped Liam back to his senses. He gripped the Eclipse Blade, and I felt the Lord of Darkness stirring within.

"No!" I shouted, pushing down his hand.

What if Mr. Marcel finds out that Liam's contracted with the Lord

of Darkness?!

My brother surmised my worries and lowered the sword back into its scabbard with a frustrated sigh.

"I should be able to wake them up with my tail!" I said.

Liam released me from his hold. I rushed over to Bal, smacking him with my tail.

"Bal! Wake up!"

"Huh? Soft..." Bal mumbled, blinking absentmindedly.





I ran over and did the same to Marcel and the rest of the crew.

"Master, the helm!" Liam yelled as soon as Marcel came to. "That's a merfolk song!"

"Sorry, I spaced out! You lot, snap out of it! Get rowing! We can't get swept up in the current!"

Marcel's shout finally broke the spell. The men quickly grabbed the oars, rowing with all their might so that the river wouldn't swallow us up.

Suddenly, a merfolk popped its head out of the water and blasted the ship with powerful enchanting magic.

"Ughhh!"

Everyone grabbed their heads, trying to resist. Marcel and Bal, who had only just shaken the enchantment off, were now on the verge of falling for it again.

Out of desperation, I pressed my nose into Liam's ear, trying to replicate what Lord Reineke had done for me.

May this heal you!

Liam's expression softened.

"Thanks to you, I can't hear the song anymore," he said with a smile.

In contrast, Lord Reineke's jaw fell open. **"What?! Lune healed you?! But you can only free someone from a merfolk's enchantment if you share a very close bond with them!"**

"Huh? So it won't work on the others?" I asked.

"No. It should be impossible for the rest. I thought it'd work between Lune and me, but this..." the spirit grumbled.

I was panicking. "Then how do we protect everyone else?!"

Liam stood up, once more drawing the Eclipse Blade. The sword was jet-black, overflowing with Nott's power.

"Brother, no!"

"Dark magic is able to cut through enchantments."

"But still, you can't do that! If you do..."

I tried to stop Liam, my eyes brimming with tears. He smiled, as though trying to soothe me.

"I know. But you're more important to me than that, Lune."

"Brother! Stop!"

With a sharp look in his eyes, Liam raised the Eclipse Blade, pointing it at the sky. His mana began flowing into the sword.

"Cut through this wicked enchantment, and restore peace to the ship!"

Liam drew a magic circle in the air. A gentle, purple curtain of darkness floated down from it, coating the ship. It soaked up the merfolk's song, stopping it from reaching those on board.

"What?! One of them is contracted to the Lord of Darkness?!" a merfolk shouted, causing the rest of them to fall into mayhem.

Marcel and Bal stared at Liam, wide-eyed. The rest of the crew had no idea what had happened. Most commoners had no deeper knowledge of magic.

Liam looked away with an uncomfortable expression on his face. All I could do was press my hands together and pray.

Please, all of you, do not condemn my brother...

"Liam—" Bal began, but before he could finish his sentence, the ship suddenly lurched.

The merfolk had grabbed onto the rail. The upper halves of their bodies were human, and the lower halves fish. Their skin was pink like salmon, but their fingers were gray and webbed. They had pitch-black eyes with no eyelids.

Unable to use magic to charm the crew, the merfolk were resorting to force. As one, they began pulling the ship toward Paravento Rock.

"Lord Reineke, save us! Keep the ship afloat!" I screamed.

The fox leaped from my arms.

"I will grant your wish, Lune! O ship, heed my contractor's words!" he commanded.

"Please carry us to the bank!" I prayed.

The bottom of the boat lit up in gold and suddenly surged upward, drifting above the water's surface.

Marcel rose to his feet, scowling. He clicked his tongue and kicked the ship's side with a loud thud, shaking the merfolks' grip loose from the impact. The sound startled me as well, causing my tail to quiver.

"We can't have the kids doing all the work!" Marcel shouted, flicking the bangle around his left wrist. "Holy sword, Joyeuse! Come forth!"

A large sword emerged from the bangle. Marcel drew a blackened silver magic circle on the water's surface, then jumped down onto it before pointing his blade at the merfolk. But despite this threatening display, he wasn't looking to kill the creatures—we had come out here to learn the cause behind the ship accidents.

"Lord Liam and Bal, protect the ship!" he ordered.

"Yes, master!" the boys responded in unison.

They split up, each standing on a separate side of the ship, vigilant against any merfolk that might try climbing aboard.

I smiled in relief when I realized that Marcel wouldn't condemn my brother for his dark magic. An ex-swordmaster like Marcel would've had every right to punish Liam for using such forbidden arts, but he was turning a blind eye.

He...trusts Liam.

I was incredibly thankful for that.

Marcel subdued one merfolk after another, jumping onto their heads from his magic circle platform. The defeated merfolk were helplessly carried away by the current.

Soon only one was left assailing the ship—it seemed to be the leader of the group. Using a ring that emitted a silver light, Marcel bound its arms to its body with a magical chain and dragged it to the riverbank.

The captured merfolk had blue braided hair, and the bulge in her chest suggested she was female. I noticed a pendant shaped like a water droplet around her neck. Furious, she bared her teeth, sharp and jagged like a shark's. I certainly didn't want to be bitten by her.

The merfolk still in the river glowered at us and began shouting.

"Release our queen!!!"

"Give her back!!!"

Lord Reineke stepped onto the bank, growing to his giant form.

"You dare act as you please on *my* land?!" he roared, opening his mouth wide.

However, the merfolk queen continued to resist. Still bound in

chains, she slammed her massive tail against the ground, causing a blast of pebbles to soar up and splash into the water.

"*You* wronged me first! Return my egg!" she demanded, glaring at Lord Reineke with her pitch-black eyes.

"Your accusations ring false. Why would I want to steal your egg?"

"Lies!!! The chains binding me now are proof, for my egg was stolen using the same magic! Few people in this world can use light magic!"

Lord Reineke turned his gaze to Marcel, but the man shook his head.

"It wasn't me. My magic doesn't work on the defenseless. It'd be impossible to use it on an egg."

Marcel swung Joyeuse down onto a rock. A burst of blackened silver light flared up, but it harmlessly dissipated as soon as it reached the rock.

The mermaid stared at the chains around her with narrowed eyes.

"Maybe it *was* different. The light that stole my egg wasn't silver but pure gold. However..."

The queen shook her shoulders, revealing a golden thread sealed within the pendant. The cord seemed magical.

"This golden string led us upstream!" she declared.

"So what? Are you using that as an excuse?" Lord Reineke asked with an irritated sigh.

"I sealed a fragment of the net that was used to steal my egg. We followed the net upstream, but the trail led to someplace not connected to the river, somewhere we cannot go. Give it back! Return my egg!" the queen demanded, slamming her tail down again and again. Being outside of water was taking its toll on her, as she was panting heavily.

Her thrashing was so forceful that scales began to peel off of her tail. One of them flew up and stuck to my cheek. I scraped it away and stared at it. It was about the size and hardness of a thumbnail, so transparent that I could see the sky through it.

But as I held and looked through the pretty scale, emotions that

weren't my own suddenly seeped into me—the mermaid queen's terror for her stolen egg, her obsessive dedication to tracking it down, her raging hatred toward the thief. I was overwhelmed by the queen's motherly fury.

My heart hurts so much! Is the queen harboring this much sorrow?!

The feelings were so intense that I collapsed to the ground.

"Mom..." I whispered, my eyes welling with tears as the mermaid's emotions swirled within me. I began hyperventilating, gasping for air as I grabbed my chest.

I'm sure any normal mother would feel the same way about her children. Unlike my biological family, who abandoned me...

"Lune, what's wrong?!" Liam called, rushing to my side. "Is it the scale? Is it hurting you?"

"No, wait—"

Liam plucked the scale from my hand.

"I'm fine. What's going on with you?" he asked, appearing completely unaffected.

"Lune is contracted to a great spirit. She's more sensitive to certain things than other humans," Lord Reineke explained.

Liam looked sad, as though my pain was his own. He gently patted my back. Now that the scale was no longer filling me with those intense emotions, I felt a little better.

"Lord Reineke..." I said, still short of breath. "Let's... Let's find her egg."

"Is that your wish as my contractor?" he asked with a disgruntled look.

If I asked for it, Lord Reineke would fulfill my wish. But I didn't want to force him to obey me. I'd rather try to win him over.

"Ms. Mermaid's child is in that egg, so she must be very upset. Her egg was taken from her, leaving her all alone."

I was unable to stop my tears from flowing.

I wanted my parents to love me this much too...

Upon hearing my words, the queen couldn't bear it any longer. Red droplets gushed from her black eyes as though she were crying tears of blood.

“Return it! Give me back my child!!!” she wailed, her voice like a roaring wave crashing over me. Though her tail was covered in wounds, she continued ramming it in protest, driven by a mother’s rage.

Lord Reineke wrapped his tail around me to shield me from her scattering scales. His warmth seeped into my skin, comforting me.

That’s right—even though my old family threw me away, Lord Reineke is here now, caring for me. That’s why I understand.

I hugged his tail tightly.

“Lord Reineke, if you were to disappear, I’d be just like this mermaid. I would search for you no matter the cost. That’s why I think I understand how she feels.”

The spirit sighed loudly.

“It’d be faster to just exterminate these merfolk…but I don’t want to upset you, Lune.”

The queen glared at Lord Reineke. **“Foolish land beast! Even if I die, my brethren will cast an eternal curse upon Renard. We will return here time and time again, and drown your people in the river!”**

“Why you—”

I stepped between the quarreling pair. “Stop! This is no time for arguments! We need to focus on finding that egg!”

The mermaid queen shut her mouth. Lord Reineke grew silent as well, though he didn’t look happy about it.

Liam stepped forward. “We will search for your egg, so please stop attacking humans.”

The queen scowled. **“How will you find it?”**

“If you lend us that pendant, we’ll use it to help us scour every last corner of Renard.”

“You want me to hand over my only lead? Unbelievable. You humans are the ones who stole my egg—how am I supposed to trust you?!” she snapped, baring her fangs at Liam.

The other merfolk cried out agreements from the river.

“Exactly! And that human over there has signs of light! We can’t trust him! He could be the culprit!”

They were pointing at Bal.

Shocked, the boy pointed a finger at himself and blinked. "Me?"

"I knew it," Marcel muttered to himself.

"But I don't know anything. I didn't do anything!"

"Few can wield light magic! Cease your excuses!" the merfolk pressed relentlessly.

Bal faltered. "B-But I can't use light magic. And isn't it connected to, you know...the royal—"

Liam quickly put his hand over the boy's mouth. "That's enough, Bal."

Bal gasped. "R-Right..." He sank in on himself and turned away from Marcel, ashamed that he'd been hiding something from his master.

Marcel watched him with a sigh, then faced the merfolk.

"Then what now? You want your egg back, but you won't give us a way to find it. So let's hear *your* suggestions. We want to help, but if you refuse to cooperate, these negotiations will come to an end."

Lord Reineke perked up. **"Oh? And then we'll have an all-out war?"**

I placed my hands over his mouth. "Shh, Lord Reineke!"

The merfolk discussed among themselves in hushed whispers.

Grass rustled by the riverbank, and a red dragonfly landed on my tail.

Finally, the merfolk revealed their proposition.

"We'll exchange the golden string for that boy."

"You want Bal as a hostage? No way!!!" I objected reflexively.

However, Bal stopped me, and then knelt in front of the mermaid queen. Her body had grown dry, and she was breathing heavily.

"Okay. I'll go with you."

The queen cast him a dubious look.

"You're a mother, aren't you?" he continued. "You're risking your life for your child. My mom was the same. I'm sure she felt the way you do now. That's why I trust you guys. And I want you to trust me too." Bal wiped away the queen's tears with his finger. "My friends are strong. They *will* find your egg. I guarantee it."

The boy stood up, then turned to face us. "I know I'll be fine, because I believe in all of you. You'll come back for me, won't you?"

He smiled brightly, the perfect picture of light.

"Of course, Bal," Liam replied with a nod.

"We've got you," Marcel added, pounding his chest.

"Bal..." I had no idea what to say. His life was now in danger because of my proposition to help the merfolk.

"It seems I have no other choice," Lord Reineke sighed, scratching his head with his paw. His silver fur soared in the autumn breeze. **"Let's do this."**

We all nodded at his words.

"We'll exchange Bal for the string," Liam announced.

Marcel cautiously untied the mermaid queen, who gave her pendant to Liam. Simultaneously, an orange membrane covered Bal's body. It almost looked like he'd been trapped inside a massive fish egg.

"As long as you're inside of this, you'll be able to breathe underwater, and you'll have no need for nourishment," the queen explained.

Bal touched the orange sphere with fascination. "This is so weird, but so cool! I can go in the water like this?" he asked, his voice muffled.

I was a little relieved that he didn't seem to be worried.

"Bal, wait for us! We'll come back for you, no matter what!" I shouted.

With the agreement in place, the rest of us began the search for the mermaid's egg.

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The pendant was beautiful. The golden thread twinkled, suspended in the aqua blue droplet with such a deep hue that it looked like it contained the whole sea. Upon returning to House Renard, we inspected the string and learned that it was part of a complex tool woven with light magic. Light magic couldn't be used these days, so the artifact had to be ancient. And only those related to the royal family could be in possession of such precious items.

"I don't think His Majesty would do anything so brash," father

said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "He also understands that Lune doesn't wish to be engaged to his son, and has even sent me an official letter stating his wish for our relationship to remain as it is."

That was reassuring. If the egg had been stolen on the king's orders, I was worried that the Renard domain would fall into ruin even faster than in my past life.

"First of all, let's try to figure out the egg's location," Liam said, spreading a map of the territory on the table.

We were in father's office, having explained the situation to him. Lord Reineke and Marcel were here too, brainstorming the strategy for our task.

"The merfolk said it's somewhere with no connection to the river," Marcel groaned. He was still a newcomer to Renard, so he didn't know the land very well.

I knew the territory on the map, but I hadn't gone to distant places, as father and brother didn't like me leaving the mansion in my previous life.

"If only we could use that golden string to search for the egg," I whispered.

"You can," Lord Reineke replied. **"Put that pendant on the map."**

When I did, Lord Reineke pressed the pendant down with his paw, leaving a purple paw print beneath it. The paw print began walking around the map all on its own, carrying the pendant above it.

"What?! This is incredible!" I exclaimed, my tail wagging at this wondrous sight.

"This map reflects the magic of the real world, and the string is searching for its missing part." Lord Reineke puffed out his fluffy chest proudly.

The purple paw print stopped atop a mountain's peak.

"That's our spot."

"There's a pond there that's not connected to the river," Liam pointed out.

Lord Reineke nodded.

"There is?" I asked.

"Yes, a large pond made by a dragon. Since ancient times, it's been a place of worship for the woodcutters of Renard," Liam explained patiently.

"Mount Sept? Hmm... Now that I think about it, I've been receiving a lot of hiking forms from travelers from the capital headed there," father said, producing said forms. "It's an obscure place for most tourists, so it stuck out to me."

We looked through the documents, confirming that they were sent by travelers from the capital.

"They also hired guest porters and bearers," Liam noted.

"What are those?" I asked.

"They carry things up the mountain. Guest porters carry people on their backs, while bearers carry luggage on their shoulders. Mount Sept is steep, so it's a difficult climb for the average tourist."

"I'd never even heard of those jobs before. You know so much!"

I gazed at my brother reverently.

I need to learn more about our domain!

"The arrival of these hikers overlaps with the time the merfolk incidents first began," father said. "And they're still in Renard. I'll look into them."

"Meanwhile, we'll question the bearers about what they were asked to carry," Liam added.

"I'm counting on you, Liam." Father cast Liam an expectant look.

Liam nodded with determination.

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We arrived at the foot of Mount Sept.

"Now, Lune, break the pendant and release the golden cord into the sky. It should seek to join with its counterpart by itself," Lord Reineke advised.

I hurled the pendant to the ground as hard as I could. The string merrily sprung out, tying itself into a bowknot that resembled a butterfly.

"Mr. Butterfly, please guide us!" I requested.

The golden butterfly grazed Lord Reineke's snout, then slowly

began fluttering up the mountain, toward the peak.

The climb was steep. Liam and I were feeling fine, riding atop the giant Lord Reineke's back, but it was a struggle for the House Renard knights accompanying us.

We'd done some investigating and discovered that the mountaineers from the capital were related to House Cordier, the queen's birthplace. However, we still had no proof they were responsible for stealing the merfolk egg. We needed to locate both the culprits and the evidence, so we decided to split with Marcel so each of us could focus on one task.

According to what Liam had heard from asking around, the bearers had been asked to carry a large cask up the mountain. Although the cask had been made to contain alcohol, it had a strange fishy smell, and something seemed to be moving inside of it, which creeped the workers out. Apparently the contents of the cask had been thrown into the pond, but the bearers weren't sure exactly what had happened as the ones who hired them forbade them from getting too close.

"They did mention a golden light coming from inside the barrel," Liam said. Sitting directly behind me, it was a pleasant sensation feeling the vibrations of his voice from his chest. "And it continued to shine for a while even after the cask was emptied."

"That was definitely the egg," Lord Reineke said, picking up speed.

"Can merfolk eggs survive outside of the sea?" I asked. We had promised we'd search for the egg, but we couldn't guarantee that it'd be unharmed.

"The eggshells are made from merfolk magic, so as long as it's still intact, it should be fine. The bigger problem is that it might hatch earlier than intended due to the overabundance of magic."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The pond in Mount Sept contains magic from the dragon who created it. If the egg absorbs it, it might develop faster."

"Would that be bad?"

“It may not be safe for a merfolk child to hatch so far from its kin. I’m not too familiar with water monsters, though.”

“Then we need to hurry!”

“Indeed. Let’s get ahead. Butterfly, time to speed up!”

At Lord Reineke’s command, the golden string butterfly sped forward like a bullet. We had been matching speed with the knights, but the fox spirit began racing up the mountain side in pursuit of the butterfly’s trail. The trees moved aside on their own to open up a path. No part of nature could stand in Lord Reineke’s way in this domain.

I frantically clung on to keep from falling off. Liam leaned over me, covering me with protective dark magic. Within, the whipping of the wind became quiet.

Brother’s magic feels so calming...

Reassured, I buried my face in Lord Reineke’s fur.

Eventually, Lord Reineke slowed his pace and came to a halt. Liam dispelled his magic barrier, drawing away from me as I sat up. Before us was a small pond that indeed wasn’t connected to the river.

Without hesitation, the golden butterfly dove toward the water.

I craned my neck to take a look. There were thick plants beneath the surface, and white flowers resembling cherry blossoms grew among them. The pond looked distinctly mystical.

But I didn’t see any eggs.

“Is it below the plants?” I wondered, touching the water. “Eeek! So cold!”

“These plants need clear, cool water to grow,” Lord Reineke said.

“Then diving in to search may not be wise,” Liam said, frowning.

“You can reel the egg in with your magic, Liam.”

“My magic?”

“Yes. Light and dark magic pull one another. Only dark magic can subdue light magic, and vice versa. Together, they create one kind of magic, like two sides of a coin.”

There was no organized documentation about dark magic, as

Nott's name was a taboo, so Lord Reineke's explanation came as a shock. Liam had only known about his magic through the legends passed down in House Renard, and what Nott had told him directly.

A disgruntled noise emanated from the blade in Liam's scabbard, where Nott was sealed.

"All right," Liam agreed, then gulped. With a grim expression, he pulled out the Eclipse Blade. "Lord of Darkness, Nott! Save the light that lies at the bottom of the pond!"

The violet diamond in the hilt gleamed ominously. The purple darkness within the blade seemed to growl.

"Light... My light..."

Nott was trembling with joy. I shuddered too, disturbed by her sorrowful, maddeningly desirous voice.

The darkness formed a thread and shot out into the point, coiling its way past the aquatic plants to reach the bottom. We watched with a sense of unease as the darkness sank deeper and deeper. It might've only taken a moment, but to us the wait seemed eternal.

Maybe the egg isn't there after all?

Right as I thought that, the purple string grew taut and Nott's voice resounded.

"My light!"

Something below the water forcefully pulled against the thread, causing Liam to stumble.

"Brother!" I shouted, grabbing a hold of his waist.

He held his ground, using the Eclipse Blade like a fishing rod. But the resistance was powerful, making our feet scrape against the ground. The force dragged us closer to the pond until the tips of Liam's shoes dipped into the water.

"Help! Anyone!"

My scream rang through the air, and suddenly something yanked me back. Lord Reineke had shapeshifted into a human, grabbing both me and Liam.

"Hold on, Lune! Liam, picture you're reeling the dark cord back in!"

"Right!" Liam responded. "Darkness, return!"

The three of us pulled with all our strength. We pulled and pulled,

and right as I thought we couldn't hold out any longer, we suddenly tumbled back. The dark string flew out from the water, holding onto a golden web wrapped tightly around an orange egg. The golden butterfly flew over, trying to reconnect with the web as though it were healing itself.

"The egg!" Liam shouted.

It slipped free, flying through the air in an arc.

"Ah! It's gonna fall!!!" I screamed.

Lord Reineke and I used our tails to catch the egg and soften its landing.

"Whew, it didn't break. Thank goodness," I sighed.

Lord Reineke said nothing, but his shoulders relaxed as though he were relieved too.

"Well done, Nott," Liam said, thanking her for her effort while putting the sword back into the scabbard.

Inside of the egg, I saw a merfolk child. She was hitting the inside of the orange membrane, trying to get out. The golden net was digging into the outer layer in a way that looked almost painful. The egg looked on the verge of bursting.

"Stop! Wait until we take off the net!" I told the child, trying to pull the net off.

However, as soon as I touched it, I was hit with an electric shock that repelled me. So that was why the merfolk had sealed the string in the pendant—trying to take the net off or release whatever it was holding triggered the magic.

Liam tried cutting the net with the Eclipse Blade, but to no avail. Whatever the net was made of, dark magic alone wasn't enough to break it.

"Now what?! The child's about to be born! Hey, stop hitting the egg! You can't come out here!"

But my shouts only made the child panic more, either because she couldn't hear my voice or because she was terrified of the sight of us strangers. Red tears welled up in her eyes as she spun round and round inside the egg.

"Stop! Calm down! You can't be born on land, it's dangerous! Even a grown mermaid struggled to survive out of the water!" I said,

recalling the sight of the mermaid queen risking her life on the riverbank for the sake of her egg.

But no matter how hard I begged, my words didn't reach the child.

"Lune, it's okay," Liam said, patting my head. "Darkness, let the child sleep."

The purple darkness gently enveloped the egg, then swayed it back and forth. The child grew calm, perhaps feeling like she was floating in water. She took a deep breath, then cast Liam a trusting look. I thought I saw her smile, and a moment later she suddenly grew still. It was hard to tell because she had no eyelids, but she must've fallen asleep.

"While she sleeps, let's go find Bal," Liam said quietly.

I nodded.

Lord Reineke turned back into a fox and crouched before us. I picked up the egg, while Liam picked me up and climbed atop the spirit's back. Then we sped back down the mountain.

"It's okay. You're okay," I kept whispering to the egg.

We ran into the knights halfway and explained what had happened, letting them know they could go back home. We went straight back to the merfolk who were keeping Bal captive, wanting to get our friend back as quickly as possible. Before long, we arrived by the Paravento Rock on the Renard River.

"Merfolk! We brought your egg, as promised!" Liam called out.

The merfolk popped out from the river together with the orb containing Bal.

"Bal! Are you okay?!" I began moving in his direction, ignoring how wet my shoes were getting.

But the merfolk stood in my way, glaring at me with their black eyes.

"Leave the egg on the water."

I did as they asked. The egg, still covered in Liam's magic, floated lightly on the river. The child was still sound asleep inside.

The mermaid queen caught the egg in her arms so it wouldn't be carried away by the current.

"She'll be born soon. But what is this darkness?" she

asked, looking at us warily.

"It's my brother's magic. When we found the egg, the child inside was very distressed. We put her to sleep so she wouldn't break the egg," I explained.

The queen held the egg even tighter in her arms.

"Release your magic immediately!" she demanded.

Lord Reineke tutted at her tyrannical attitude, while Liam sighed.

"Darkness, return," he said, and the magic retreated back into his sword.

Without hesitation, the mermaid queen tried to tear off the net.

"Ngh!" she groaned, then glared at us. **"Get rid of this net!"**

"I already tried, but my magic isn't enough to break it. It's a very complex magical artifact. It's possible that only the person who made it knows how to break it," Liam said.

The queen screeched, trying to tear the net off in a frenzy. Each time she touched it, it made a crackling sound. Even when she managed to break off small pieces, the net kept regenerating.

"Damn it!!!" she shrieked, frantically continuing her efforts.

The child inside the egg woke up. Perhaps recognizing the queen as her mother, she reached out her hand toward her. She pushed against the orange membrane, almost tearing it open.

"Aah! No! You can't come out yet! I don't know what will happen to you if you touch that net!" the queen yelled.

"You have your egg back. Now return Bal!" Lord Reineke ordered.

"No! My child might die! Unless you break this net, I won't return him!"

At the queen's words, the merfolk dragged the sphere holding Bal out to the middle of the river, where the water was deep and the current was swift.

"Whoa! Hey, didn't you say you'd let me go?" Bal asked, thrashing about in the sphere.

"Bal!"

I tried to enter the river to go after him, but Lord Reineke clamped his teeth around my hood and pulled me back.

"Keep your promise!" he roared to the merfolk.

"We won't hesitate to attack if you refuse. Bal is our dear friend!" Liam said, getting ready to draw his sword. Purple darkness seeped out from the scabbard.

"Light..." Nott spoke in a voice only spirit contractors could hear. *"That child is the light's... I won't forgive this. I won't let them take the light from you."*

Liam nodded slowly.

He can't use dark magic in an open place like this!

I tried to pull on his hand, but Liam shook his head.

"Don't stop me, Lune."

"But brother..."

"Bal is our priority right now," Liam said. He had chosen Bal's safety over his own.

I understood him so well it hurt.

Bal is important to me too!

"Okay. You're right," I said, letting go of his hand.

Whatever happens next, I'll *protect my brother! We can just say I'm the one using dark magic! I don't want him to shoulder this burden alone!*

I stood my ground, scowling at the merfolk.

"That's a good mindset, Lune. Let's show them!" Lord Reineke said, swaying his tail as though he was looking forward to this.

Liam drew his sword. Instantly, the temperature around us dropped. Large clouds loomed across the sky, concealing the sun. It was as dark as a solar eclipse.

The merfolk were obviously distressed, glancing at the queen to gauge her reaction. She was extremely agitated.

"How do I get rid of this net? The culprit... If only I could find them... A light artifact... Light magic..." the queen mumbled, her eyes landing on Bal. **"No, I'm not giving you back!"**

Right as it seemed the queen would attack Bal, a raft appeared from upstream and blocked her way. An old man atop the raft brandished a blackened silver sword, its blade cutting through the mermaid's hair. Blue locks fluttered down into the water.

"I've got the culprits! Liam, put your sword away!" Marcel yelled.

Rather than a ship used by Renard Water Transport, he was on a long raft made from logs. There were a bunch of tied-up men on the raft too, their faces bruised from what I could guess had been a beating by Marcel.

Liam gasped, quickly sheathing his sword.

"Culprits?"

The merfolk turned to Marcel, who pushed the men toward them. They barely avoided falling into the water as Marcel kicked their behinds.

"This is the ringleader," Marcel said.

The accused man turned his face away as the merfolk approached.

"You! Did you use that magic tool to steal the egg?!"

Surrounded, the men shuddered but remained silent.

"I found a sealed magical box in his belongings," Marcel explained, holding out a wooden box with a mesh pattern. There were runes carved on it, and its lid was open. "Now, return Bal in exchange for this!"

The merfolk obliged, pushing the sphere with Bal toward the raft. In turn, Marcel handed the magic item to the queen. Once she took it, the sphere popped like a bubble and vanished.

"Masteeer!" Bal cried, leaping at Marcel.

The man patted his head.

"You did well," he said.

Holding the boy in his arms, Marcel jumped to the riverbank to join us. He left the tied-up men on the raft for the merfolk to interrogate.

"Tell us how to use this tool!"

"Undo this magic!"

The color drained from the men's faces.

"I don't know! It was just given to us. I don't know how to undo the magic," one of them said.

"What?!"

As the merfolk became increasingly furious, the men could only tremble.

"We really don't know anything! We were just told to throw the net at the egg! Light magic should be impossible these days to begin with! Please, just spare our lives! We only did what we were told!"

"Who gave the order?"

"We were just told to hide the egg and the box in the Renard domain..."

A vein of anger popped on Lord Reineke's temple, and he snarled.

"Someone's trying to mess with my land?!"

The men moaned in fright.

"I'll ask again. *Who's* giving you orders?" the spirit demanded.

But the men only shook their heads.

"We don't know what they'll do to us if we tell you. Please, forgive us... Please..."

"If you do not answer me, you'll pay with your lives! Who is it?!" Lord Reineke and the mermaid queen both yelled at the same time.

The men trembled violently.

"Eeek! C-Cor—"

But the second the men tried to answer, they seemed to be overcome with pain. They writhed around on the raft, their bodies slipping into the river.

I screamed at the terrible sight, and Liam quickly covered my eyes. I squeezed my eyes tightly, feeling Lord Reineke's tail wrap around me. But I could hear the men struggling in the water. My tail hid between my legs, and my ears flattened on my head.

Once the sounds stopped, I slowly opened my eyes. The merfolk had dragged the men back onto the raft, but they weren't moving.

Are they dead?

I was filled with dread, clinging onto Liam.

"It's okay. They're just unconscious," he said, stroking my back.

That calmed me down a bit.

"Their client must've cast a curse on them. This spells trouble." Lord Reineke clicked his tongue.

"And now we don't know how to get rid of that net!"

The merfolk were vexed, flying into mayhem.

"Hey!" Bal called out. "Can't we just wind that net up using that shining key?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look, there's a golden key right there. It's connected to that golden string," Bal explained as though it should've been obvious.

All of us stared at him in bewilderment, for none of us could see the key nor the string.

"You can see a key and a string, Bal?" Liam asked.

Bal's eyes widened. "You guys can't?"

Lord Reineke shrugged and chuckled. Marcel was dumbfounded.

"No, I don't see anything," Liam replied.

I nodded. "Me neither."

"I see nothing," Marcel said.

"Nor do we," the merfolk added.

"Well then, Bal, try turning that key," Marcel instructed.

"Indeed. I sense light in you," the mermaid queen said. **"You might be able to do it."**

"You trust me?"

The queen's reluctance was obvious, but she handed the box to Bal nevertheless.

"I have no other choice. Please," she said, gazing into his eyes earnestly.

Bal nodded. He reached out toward the side of the box, took hold of seemingly empty air, and turned his hand.

The golden net that had been enclosed tightly around the egg began loosening before winding back into the box.

"Ohh!" The merfolk were amazed.

"Hmm..." Lord Reineke cast Bal an impressed look.

"I knew it," Marcel muttered, holding onto the bangle on his wrist.

The child inside the egg calmed down, waiting patiently for the process to finish.

Eventually, the entire golden net disappeared into the magical box, and Bal closed the lid. He pulled out the invisible handle he'd been winding, then pushed it into the keyhole and turned it with a click.

"All done!" Bal said, grinning.

At that moment, the egg's membrane popped. A blue-haired merfolk child emerged into the water with a splash and swam over to her mother.

"Princess! Are you all right?!" the queen asked.

"Yes, mommy!"

I couldn't stop myself from clapping at the sight of the mother and child embracing.

"Bal, that was amazing! You're so cool!" I said.

The embarrassed Bal rubbed his nose. "Hee hee! I'm glad it worked."

He then knelt by the riverbank and held the box out to the merfolk.

"You guys should keep this. We wouldn't want anyone misusing it again!"

One of the merfolk tentatively reached out to take the tool.

"Are you sure? This is an ancient tool for capturing monsters, after all."

"Then I guess we can say I accidentally dropped it into the water," Bal replied with a mischievous grin.

The merfolk nodded, then sealed the box into a barrier made of water.

"We are in your debt. Thanks to you, we can finally rest easy."

The merfolk's smile was so bright, but Bal stood up and waved his hand dismissively as if to say it was no big deal.

Liam walked up to him and vigorously rubbed his head.

"Well done, Bal!"

"It's all thanks to you guys for searching for that egg! I'm glad I believed in you and waited. Thanks!" Bal said, bowing to Liam and me.

"Of *course* we searched!" I said, on the verge of crying. I hugged him and wrapped my tail around him.

Bal turned bright red and squirmed.

"I'm so glad you're okay!" I sobbed, pressing my face into his chest.

"W-Were you really *that* worried?"

"Obviously!!! You're like my younger brother, Bal!" I huffed, glaring at him.

At that, he gave me a bashful smile.

"Younger? Shouldn't I be your *older* brother? I'm bigger than you!"

"But I'm the one who found you! So you're my little brother!"

My insistence put a smirk on his face.

"Oh, all right. Little brother, eh? Well, thank you. I'm glad you think so."

His reply melted away my anger.

"Good!"

"So, listen... Can I pet your head?" he asked.

"Of course!" I said, presenting it to him.

Bal slowly and gently stroked my head.

"So soft!" He giggled.

His breath tickled my ears, filling me with pure joy.

Liam came over and hugged us both, standing behind Bal. Without a word, he pressed his cheek against the top of Bal's head. Then Lord Reineke's tail wrapped around the three of us. His fluffy fur surrounded us, and I could see his chest was pressed against Liam's head.

"You did good, Bal."

Bal smiled upon receiving the spirit's praise.

Lord Reineke turned his gaze to the merfolk while still embracing us. They flinched, shrinking back.

"There's something you ought to say, isn't there?" he coerced.

The mermaid queen bit her lip, probably unwilling to bow to a land spirit. But then her daughter grabbed her hand.

"Mommy, these people saved me."

"Princess..."

"I was all alone in that pond until they pulled me out," the child said, turning to look at Liam. **"Mr. Purple Hair, thank you for wrapping me in that gentle magic and carrying me here."**

Then the little girl lowered her head.

“Princess! These are land creatures!”

“Mr. Golden Hair, thank you for taking away my pain,” the child went on, ignoring her mother’s scolding. **“And big fox and little girl—thank you for letting me see my mommy again.”**

A golden light spilled from the bowing child, flowing into Lord Reineke. The spirit received it with a satisfied nod, then glared at the rest of the merfolk. There was a small amount of light accumulating within them too. Even in their defiant silence, they obviously felt grateful for Lord Reineke’s help.

After watching her daughter, the mermaid queen finally lowered her head.

“I am…thankful…for your help.”

As soon as the words left her lips, a burst of golden light spilled out of her. The emotions she’d suppressed in her pride now came forth like a bursting dam.

Lord Reineke smirked haughtily.

“Good to see you understand. Now, don’t ever touch Renard again.”

The merfolk nodded.

“This situation may have been caused by a misunderstanding, but we still burdened you. From now on, as a token of our gratitude and apology, we will grant safe passage to all vessels bearing the Reineke symbol,” the queen proclaimed.

Lord Reineke nodded.

“And we’ll keep custody of these humans. We still need to question them further,” she added.

With that, the merfolk began traveling back to the sea, pushing the raft along with the culprits.

Once the riverbank grew silent, an autumn breeze blew past. I sighed in relief.

Marcel approached Bal and placed his hand on his head.

“Bal?”

“M-Master, I...”

The boy glanced up at the man nervously, then lowered his head in dejection.

After witnessing Bal use the light-based magic tool, Marcel must've realized Bal's true identity. Bal was an honest boy who disliked telling lies, and looked like he wanted to confess everything then and there. However, he knew that doing so would endanger House Renard. So he bit his lip, desperately trying to hold it all in.

Marcel sighed, then chuckled and patted Bal's head.

"I won't ask," he said.

Bal's eyes brimmed with tears.

"But..." He paused, casting Liam an uneasy look.

Liam nodded. "It's fine. You can tell him."

Bal turned back to Marcel. "M-Master, I..."

"Yeah?"

"I never met him, but..."

"Mhm?"

"Apparently, His Majesty is...my father," Bal admitted at last, sounding ashamed and casting his eyes down.

"I see," replied the unsurprised Marcel.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"No need to apologize. And since it's you, I won't say anything," Marcel said with a laugh. "Besides, *I* was the one His Majesty asked to help your mother escape the palace. I suppose you can say I'm an accomplice."

Bal's eyes grew wide. "His Majesty asked you to—"

"Yeah. If your mother had stayed in the palace, her life would've been in danger. So...I'm glad you made it."

Bal gripped his chest, mumbling to himself. "So...His Majesty didn't abandon us?"

Tears streamed down the boy's face. Marcel patted his shoulder.

"I heard the queen was aiming to kill not just the woman, but even the unborn baby. I guess His Majesty figured your mother would never be safe in the palace, what with all those people from House Cordier. I couldn't just let an innocent child be murdered, so I let your mother escape. After that, knowing that light magic wielders were only decreasing in number, I began a journey to search for the successor of the holy sword. And I followed Joyeuse's guidance all the way to Renard."

Marcel scratched the back of his neck, glancing at Liam.

"When I first came here, I thought it was a strange domain. Just having a great spirit like Lord Reineke physically manifesting was a miracle unto itself, but I could also sense signs of dark magic here."

Liam flinched, drawing back.

"Initially, I was worried that dark magic might be smothering light magic. But I soon realized that my fears were unfounded." Marcel smiled at Liam. "I can tell that the dark magic wielder is a very caring person."

Marcel took off the bangle around his wrist. "However, we cannot have the palace find out that someone of light descent lives here," he said, wrapping the bangle around Bal's left wrist. On its own, the bangle grew smaller to become a perfect fit for the boy.

"Huh?!" Bal choked out.

"Here you go. That sword's chosen you too," Marcel said with a grin.

"But master, this is—"

"Yes, it's the holy sword Joyeuse, one of the two swords handed down in the royal family for generations. It's said to choose the bravest of people with hearts worthy of light to wield it."

"Holy sword Joyeuse..." Bal raised his arm into the sky, staring at the bangle with a shine in his eyes.

"I've always been searching for this sword's rightful heir. Bal, that heir is you."

Marcel's grave proclamation snapped Bal out of his wonderment.

"I am passing it onto you," Marcel concluded.

"Why now?" Liam asked.

"It won't be long before the capital finds out that someone used a light magic item here. Besides the item's owner, only the royal family or light magic wielders can do that. The royals will likely suspect Bal, but if he wields Joyeuse, it won't seem so out of the ordinary. See?" Marcel grinned, his white teeth flashing.

Liam smiled, relieved. "Thank you very much!"

"Master!" Bal exclaimed tearfully, hugging Marcel. "I'll do everything I can to become a man worthy of wielding Joyeuse!"

"Good for you, Bal!" I said happily.

Marcel rubbed Bal's back, but I noticed him glaring at Liam's sword. A disturbing growl resounded from the Eclipse Blade, as if responding to the silent threat. Liam stroked the sword in an attempt to pacify Nott. Seeing that, Marcel burst into laughter.

"Master, will you not question me about my own sin?" Liam asked.

As a former swordmaster, Marcel had defeated countless evils. The Lord of Darkness's name itself was a taboo. Liam would be in great danger if people were to find out he wielded a sword that contained that very spirit.

"As long as you can control the spirit, it's fine. But don't mention anything to the royals. As things are now, they wouldn't understand," Marcel said with a bitter smile.

Liam simply nodded.

"Thank goodness," I muttered.

"There was no need to worry," Lord Reineke huffed. **"If Marcel had tried to punish Liam, I'd have punished *him* instead."**

Marcel's face paled at the sound of the spirit cackling.

"Very funny, Lord Reineke," the man said, though he looked worried.

Lord Reineke cast Marcel a sideways look and smacked him with his tail.

"Well, for now, just train those two so they don't stray onto the wrong path."

Marcel nodded. "According to an ancient legend, light magic might disappear without dark magic. If that's true, then guiding the wielders of each is extremely important."

The spirit nodded as well.

"Renard Water Transport can resume service tomorrow, so we'll need to arrange flags bearing Lord Reineke's symbol as quickly as possible," Liam said.

"*My* symbol, hmm?" Lord Reineke asked, wagging his tail.

"The grapevine crest on your forehead is wonderful!" I said.

The fox grinned. **"Isn't it?"**

"Then a golden grapevine will be a symbol of Lord Reineke's

divine protection!”

Afterward, we got onto the spirit’s back and began traveling back to House Renard. Lord Reineke’s shadow stretched on the riverbank. As his warm, fluffy back rocked me back and forth, I let out a yawn.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

With the merfolk incident resolved, Renard Water Transport was doing well again. The merfolk even assisted ships bearing Lord Reineke’s flag by allowing them to move smoothly upstream. I had a feeling that the mermaid princess Liam saved had become fond of him, as she often made up excuses to come play by the riverbank.

However, the situation at sea was rough. Vessels owned by Garland’s royal family struggled to operate. They encountered storms and monsters whenever they set out, often losing much of their cargo and arriving late. Ships owned by House Renard were much safer in comparison, so many merchants chose to travel on them despite needing to pay extra fees.

“Renard Water Transport has grown substantially. We have more tourists too, and souvenirs are selling well, as are our local goods. It’s all thanks to you, Lord Reineke,” Marquis Renard said, giving the spirit an offering.

“Mm,” Lord Reineke muttered in acknowledgment. He was currently sprawled on the large sofa in my father’s office.

I was sitting next to him, listening to the conversation while petting his back. Liam was sitting with us too.

“Guillotin has raised awareness of Paris green’s danger, so our cloth of the gods is gaining popularity,” father went on. “People are even calling Paris green the *false* cloth of the gods, and it’s no longer being used in public spaces.”

“I’m so glad Dr. Guillotin spoke up about it!” I said.

“He looked into Paris green himself after receiving a letter from us, so this is all thanks to you as well, Lune,” Liam said, smiling.

“Me?” I asked in bewilderment. “But I didn’t do anything.”

“You tell us of Lord Reineke’s messages,” Liam responded. “Without you, the criminals from the monastery wouldn’t have been

able to do so much for Renard. Even in the capital, our influence has grown beyond anything we've had before."

He petted me as he spoke, and the gentle gesture distracted me. I moved my ears to the side to make it easier for him, pushing my head against his hand.

"Wahhh... Feels good..." I mumbled, melting into the touch.

Father's expression softened almost imperceptibly. I looked at him curiously, causing him to fix his face into his usual neutrality as he spoke up.

"Our family's duty is to protect the frontier, so we've never held a key position at the imperial court. That has made our influence rather weak. Even now, our political strength is limited. But Lune, you found people like Guillotin and Theo, enabling us to exert influence over the academic world. And with the creation of the canal, our domain has become more abundant and our revenue has increased, giving us a strong position within the economic world as well. Our presence at the imperial court is growing more prominent."

"That's wonderful!" I said, wagging my tail. Hopefully this meant I wouldn't have to obey Prince Hodr's every wish like in my past life.

However, father cast Lord Reineke a worried look.

"There is *one* problem. At present, only vessels bearing Lord Reineke's flag escape disaster. So there have been demands to affix the flag beneath the royal family's on the kingdom's ships."

"I refuse. Why should I be beneath those so-called royals?"

"I thought you might say that, so I already refused. But that has motivated House Cordier to spread rumors that House Renard is orchestrating those accidents. Now they're proposing that all ships bearing Lord Reineke's flag should cease service."

"What?" Liam asked with a concerned frown.

"That's horrible!" I said.

Our domain had no direct access to the sea, so we only owned two large-scale vessels, both of which were anchored in the harbors of other territories. They weren't enough to transport everything, so we hired merchant ships to bear the cargo too. But because Lord Reineke had refused for his flag to be lower than that of the other

domains, we'd made a deal with the merchants to fly his highest.

If all ships bearing his flag were forced to cease service, those merchant ships wouldn't be able to leave harbor either, and we'd have to resort to importing goods through the mountain trail again.

"We finally got this far with Lord Reineke's help, but we might slide back into poverty after all," Liam said, biting his lip.

"House Cordier, you say? This must be the queen's ploy. How very shrewd," Lord Reineke said, hitting the sofa with his tail. **"The fastest solution is to exterminate that entire family."**

Hearing those disturbing words, I hugged his tail.

"Lord Reineke, if the Renards killed Her Majesty, there would be war. Innocent citizens from every territory would suffer," I argued.

"And at present, we are not strong enough to take on the royal army," Liam added flatly.

"Ugh, what a bother. But I won't allow Renard citizens to get wrapped up in this." The spirit sighed.

What now?

I fell silent, pondering.

"There's more. Territories with seaports have closed all sea routes and begun the process of exterminating monsters," father said.

"Already?" Liam asked.

"House Cordier has been tasked with subjugating the monsters. And now that the sea routes are closed, reports are taking longer to reach us."

Father and son exchanged looks, then sighed simultaneously.

If we don't reopen the routes soon, even information will be slow to get here. If this keeps up, we'll be driven to a corner!

"But what are the odds that they succeed at exterminating the monsters? It's reckless to entrust that to a single family," Lord Reineke pointed out.

"Among their family heirlooms is a light magic item designed to capture monsters," father replied. "Supposedly, that tool has a special key that can only be used by the item's owner and the royal family. That's why the task was assigned to them."

"So that golden net came from House Cordier after all,"

Lord Reineke growled, baring his fangs.

"Which families possess which tools is not public knowledge, but that would seem to be the case."

We had been trying to discover who owned that golden net. Though we suspected House Cordier, there was no solid evidence.

"However, now that the golden net is missing, we—House Renard—are to act as an intermediary," father said disdainfully, exhaling sharply.

It was a complete disgrace, but he couldn't refuse royal orders without being accused of being the mastermind behind the maritime disasters.

"Please lend me your strength," father said, kneeling in front of the sofa and lowering his head.

Liam and I knelt before Lord Reineke as well. We pressed our hands together, offering a prayer.

"Negotiating with water monsters is like getting blood out of a stone. They despise land creatures," Lord Reineke said, uninterested.

I had noticed his exchange with the merfolk had been loaded with tension.

"Lord Reineke, please protect our domain!" Liam and I implored.

A huge burst of golden light spilled from us into the spirit. His silver fur fluffed up, and the mark on his forehead glimmered.

Lord Reineke looked somewhat appeased, cleaning his muzzle with his front paw.

"Well, if you wish it *that* badly, then so be it. I say we speak to the dragon. His strength should have returned by now. It won't matter even if his existence is discovered by humans."

"The dragon?" father echoed in surprise.

"Yes. Dragons stand at the top of all monster species. Even merfolk should lend one an ear. And if you ask him, Lune, he certainly won't refuse," Lord Reineke said, rubbing his face against my head. He even wrapped his tail around me tightly. **"What do you say, hmm?"**

"Really?" I asked. "He won't refuse?"

“Unfortunately, he’s become fond of you.” The spirit paused, glancing at Liam’s conflicted expression. He stroked the boy’s back with his tail. **“Do not be jealous, Liam. The dragon likes you as well.”**

Liam blushed and looked away, indicating Lord Reineke had hit the mark.

I didn’t miss the way father smiled subtly as he watched.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Lord Reineke, Liam, Bal, Marcel, and I were riding atop the dragon’s back, soaring above the Garland sea. Bal was allowed to come with us, now that he no longer had to hide the signs of light emanating from him. He was also here in case the golden net needed using again.

Liam hadn’t cast any cloaking magic this time, so everyone was able to perceive us. People trembled at the sight of a massive white dragon flying across the sky.

A cloth bearing Lord Reineke’s symbol was hanging from the dragon’s back. It was a magic carpet that allowed us to ride on his back without the risk of falling off. There was also a transparent shield made of wind magic covering us. Not only did it protect us from wind, dust, and cold, but it could even deflect small-scale attacks.

A couple of battleships were out at sea, engaged in vicious combat with monsters.

“Humph. The pieces of trash are fighting,” the dragon said in a voice only spirits and monsters could hear.

I smiled dryly at the way he referred to humans.

“Hey! It’s a dragon!”

“Aren’t they supposed to only exist in legend?!”

“We’re done for...”

The people aboard the battleships screamed and despaired.

“They think a dragon must be allied with monsters,” I murmured.

“Oh? Fascinating.” Mr. Dragon sounded pleased, shaking his shoulders.

He dove down, aiming right for one of the battleships. His wings hit the sails lightly, causing the vessel to lurch sideways. It looked like it might sink at any moment. Mr. Dragon was capable of sinking a ship with just a swish of his tail.

The knights aboard the ship either scrambled for a way to escape or froze to the spot.

"Mr. Dragon, please stop bullying them!" I pleaded, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"If that's what you want...fine," he grumbled, gaining distance from the ship and hovering in the air.

He then let out a bellowing roar, causing humans and monsters alike to stop what they were doing and look at him.

"Well, Liam, the stage is set," Lord Reineke said. The way he looked at Liam almost seemed to say, *Show me what you've got.*

With a determined look on his face, Liam stood upright atop the dragon. He pulled out the Eclipse Blade, suppressing the Lord of Darkness's powers with his own.

"I am Liam Renard, here as the representative of House Renard. I have a message from the Great Lord Reineke: Monsters and humans, cease fighting!" Liam's beautiful, imposing voice resonated across the sea.

After a moment of silence, there was a deep rumbling sound. The water monsters had flown into a rage, making the humans shudder at their sheer vigor.

"The mermaid queen ordered us not to obey humans!"

"The sea belongs to us!"

"We don't need to listen to some land spirit!"

The creatures caused a commotion, though their words would not reach human ears. Their rage swelled the sea, rocking the battleships. The only thing the people could do was cling to their ships to avoid slipping into the water.

"You dare disregard my *words too?!"* the dragon bellowed sharply.

The rumble grew silent and the waves calm. The mermaid queen and princess popped up from the water. The princess's face lit up when she caught sight of Liam, and she waved at him

enthusiastically. Liam waved back to her.

For some reason, I felt a prickle in my chest.

"Lord White Dragon!" the queen choked out. She withered beneath his gaze. Perhaps because she looked partly human, her voice sounded human too.

"Did you think I was dead?" he asked with a smirk.

The queen seemed paralyzed. **"No, I..."**

The dragon only cast the stammering mermaid one final glance before looking around. The sea monsters stared at him with fear, holding their breaths. The humans couldn't understand what was going on, so they could only gulp and watch the events unfold.

"Monsters, stop your fighting!" Mr. Dragon shouted.

The mermaid queen gazed at him imploringly.

"But the humans kidnapped my daughter! I cannot forgive them!" she said, her voice shaking.

"And who saved that daughter of yours?"

"Lord Reineke and Renard's children. That's why we're sparing Renard ships!" the queen argued, lifting her face. **"But other humans deserve no such mercy,"** she declared, her voice thick with resentment.

Bal shuddered.

"Your shallow actions have driven Renard to a corner. You repay your debt to them by making them enemies?" the dragon asked, looking down at the queen with exasperation.

"Renard is...in trouble?" the princess asked, casting Liam a surprised glance.

"Yes," Lord Reineke responded. **"Renard has lost permission to use sea routes. Because of you, the domain is suffering."**

The princess turned to her mother, grabbing her arm. **"Oh no! Mommy, we can't do this!"**

"I refuse to forgive humans. As the queen, I cannot forgive the human who used that golden net," the queen replied, avoiding her daughter's gaze.

"Then this marks our farewell. I feel indebted to Renard, as it was they who aided me in my recovery," the dragon said.

He opened his mouth wide, inhaling deeply. The air rippled with

tension as the monsters who'd been watching all dove beneath the surface.

"You're siding with the humans?! The land creatures?!" the queen asked tearfully.

The princess clung to her.

No! It's pointless to do things by force from either side!

I wrapped my arms tightly around the dragon's neck.

"Stop! It's not about humans versus monsters, or water creatures versus land creatures!"

At the sound of my scream, Mr. Dragon exhaled slowly. Lord Reineke, Liam, and Bal turned to look at me. The people aboard the ships all raised their heads to stare too.

"The human who took your daughter is at fault, but don't blame the rest of humanity! You can't hate all of them just because they're all the same species!" I screamed.

The dragon glanced at me and laughed. Lord Reineke nuzzled close to me, always ready to protect me.

"There you have it, O queen."

"But we have no way of capturing and punishing that scoundrel. We have no knowledge of the land. All we can do is make those who come out to sea answer for that person's sins," the queen said, grinding her teeth.

I have to be the intermediary between humans and monsters. Otherwise, things will escalate past the point of no return.

Truthfully, I had no confidence in myself. But I knew that in order to convince the merfolk, the criminal would have to be punished. So even if I didn't think I could do this, I had to at least try.

I let go of the dragon's neck and stood in front of Lord Reineke.

"The one who is guilty will be punished, so please spare those who are innocent!" I said.

A halo appeared behind my head.

Ugh! There he goes, staging another divine event!

I glared at Lord Reineke, who simply smirked without a hint of remorse.

I felt so exasperated that all my nerves melted away. Liam patted my head, while Bal nodded. Marcel displayed his approval by flexing

his bicep. Lord Reineke's tail gently brushed against my back.

Everyone is supporting me. I can do this!

I breathed in deeply, feeling the air fill my abdomen. The salty sea breeze tickled my nose. I looked down at the battleship, where some people were prostrating themselves.

"Who holds the highest rank among you?" I asked.

The very same auditor who had once visited Renard staggered forward.

"Do you agree to find the culprit behind the mermaid princess's kidnapping and make them face justice?"

The man nodded repeatedly at my question.

"B-But how?" he asked in a trembling voice.

The mermaid queen glared at him with scorn. **"I have proof right here."**

From beneath the surface, the box with the golden net appeared, as well as a large orb containing the men the merfolk had taken a few days ago. The men were listless, as if on the verge of death.

"That tool is House Cordier's hidden treasure!" the auditor exclaimed, before slapping his hand over his mouth.

"House Cordier, is it?" the queen asked with an unsettling smile.

"Arrest these men and punish the one who gave them orders," I instructed solemnly.

Although the auditor was still quivering, he nodded.

"It seems we're out of other options. I'll do as you say," he vowed, raising his head as though steeling his resolve.

"Mr. Dragon, please put that sphere on the ship," I requested.

The dragon lifted the orb from the sea surface and tossed it onto the battleship's deck. It landed with a soft thud, rolling around. The men inside were tossed around, making them even more groggy. Those aboard the ship quickly dashed out of the way to avoid being crushed by the orb. It finally hit the brim and stopped.

Lord Reineke and I stepped onto the deck as well.

"Please write a report to His Majesty. The spell on that orb will then be released," I said.

The auditor nodded, turning to a subordinate. "Get rope to tie

those men with, and a form for filing a report."

Shortly after, he finished writing the report, then signed and sealed it.

"Ever since my visit to the Reineke Hot Spring, a lot of things have been on my mind. I hope that revealing the sinner will lead to peace in our kingdom," he said, handing me the sealed envelope.

This man had been pushed around left and right by Hodr during his visit to Renard, and he'd come to know our internal affairs very well during the audit. Being tasked with yet another troublesome job must have been exasperating.

"This document will be sent to the palace. I'm sure that the wrongdoer will be punished," I said.

The sea monsters cheered at my words. The mermaid queen snapped her finger, causing the sphere with the men to shatter. While the auditor and his crew tied up the men, Lord Reineke picked up the light magic tool with his mouth.

"Now we go to the capital," Mr. Dragon said, lowering his tail to the ship for Lord Reineke and I to walk up to reach his back.

The dragon picked up the tied men with the claws of his front paw as though he were holding something disgusting.

"We're going to inform His Majesty!" I called out.

The sea creatures hit the water happily as they cheered. The crew of the battleship breathed sighs of relief.

Mr. Dragon ascended on the sea breeze, and began heading to the palace.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

As the legendary dragon soared across the sky of the Garland royal capital, carrying men who looked half dead in his claws, everyone stared with wonder. The elderly folk wiped stray tears and prayed.

"Oh? Things certainly have changed around here," Mr. Dragon said, circling the city with keen interest.

The dragon displayed the symbol of Renard on his back as he slowly flew closer to the palace. Marcel stood up, held out the

document the auditor had given us, and raised his voice.

"I, the former swordmaster Marcel, am here on behalf of House Renard to report about the negotiations with the sea monsters!"

The knights who were observing us through binoculars from one of the guard towers hurried to relay the news.

"The former swordmaster Marcel is riding atop a white dragon!"

"And the dragon bears the Renard crest!"

"He's here as House Renard's messenger!"

The knights withdrew their weapons, and the castle gate opened. But the dragon ignored it, flying over the gate and landing in the courtyard with a thud that shook the castle walls.

As we all got off his back, His Highness Hodr raced over with a wide grin. I shuddered at the sight of him, my tail hiding between my legs. Liam hugged me from behind, and feeling his warm body against my back soothed me.

"Lune!!! Did you come to visit me?" Hodr asked as though he'd completely forgotten his pitiful retreat during his last visit to Renard.

Lord Reineke stood so that Liam and I were between his front paws. He opened his jaws wide, scaring the boy stiff.

His Majesty the King appeared, his hair a dull golden color. Next to him stood Her Majesty, with her fiery red hair tied up. Of the two, Hodr much more closely resembled his mother.

The prince in question quickly hid behind his parents.

"So this is the legendary white dragon...and Liam Renard rode it here," the king said.

Liam knelt, and the rest of our group followed suit behind him. Only Lord Reineke and Mr. Dragon didn't bow, retaining their dignified postures.

I guess they feel like they have no reason to bow to a human king.

That made me a bit nervous.

"I am the first son of House Renard, Liam. This is my adoptive sister, Lune, who has a contract with a great spirit. The former swordmaster Marcel is now my teacher. The son of House Renard's relative, who is training together with me, is also here."

Bal flinched, shrinking in on himself.

Liam had purposely avoided saying the boy's name—it was too soon to reveal it.

The king paid Bal no mind, his focus entirely on me.

"Ah, the great spirit contractor whom Hodr is infatuated with." He let out a quiet sigh of admiration.

"That's right, father! Isn't she incredible? She's the only person contracted to a great spirit in the whole country! She's worthy of being the next queen!" Hodr exclaimed with enthusiasm.

In truth, Liam also had a contract with a great spirit, but that was a secret.

The queen cast Hodr a cold look.

"A girl with fox ears becoming queen? Unbelievable," she whispered, too quiet for anyone else to hear.

But her words actually relieved me.

That's right! I have a tail too. There's no way I can be the crown princess!

"Indeed, such a contract is no small feat. It's a sign of splendid talent. No wonder Hodr is so enamored with her," His Majesty murmured.

I felt a stab of pain in my heart. My ears flattened and I began to tremble.

No! Please don't ask me to stay here!

Liam then held out the document the auditor had written, rather clearly changing the subject.

"Per your orders, Your Majesty, we have mediated with the sea monsters. This is a report pertaining to the maritime disasters."

The king read through the document and frowned.

"A citizen of mine abducted the merfolk princess? In that case, it's no surprise we incurred their wrath. And you resolved the matter..."

"We also brought the culprits," Liam said, casting a look at the dragon.

The men were still hanging limply from his claws.

The queen's face paled when she spotted them.

"I thought they were dead..."

My sensitive ears picked up her whisper.

She put her hands behind her back, and suddenly the men began

writhing in pain.

"It's a silencing curse! Stop it!" the king ordered.

The knights rushed over. The dragon hurled the culprits in their direction. The knights surrounded the men, who were now beginning to foam at the mouth.

Terrified, I clung to Lord Reineke's tail, which curled around me in response.

"We also found this magical tool that was used to commit the crime," Liam went on, presenting the box with the golden net.

The king regarded the object, then turned to his wife who quickly put on a smile.

"My queen, isn't this the tool that went missing from House Cordier?"

"Oh, so it is! I'm so glad it's been found! These criminals here must have stolen it. Now the mystery is solved. Incredible as always, Your Majesty." The queen spoke in a sickly sweet voice. But though she was smiling, her eyes burned with fury.

"We request that the main culprit of the abduction be punished severely. Otherwise, we cannot guarantee safe passage at sea," Liam said.

Her Majesty laughed. "In that case, execute those men and throw their bodies into the sea, right this moment."

The captured men shuddered at her nonchalant proposal.

"How cruel! We were only following your—"

Before the man could finish, his body seized with pain as the curse took hold again.

Another man desperately tried to speak up.

"It was...Her Majesty's order! But now you'll just...discard us like trash?!"

Faced with possible execution, the culprits mustered the last of their strength to defend themselves.

The queen tilted her head in apparent confusion.

"Has the fear of death made them lose their minds?" she mused.

"That must be it!" Hodr said, pouncing at the opportunity. "My mother would never do something like that. How dare you accuse her just because you're mad at being caught!"

The queen hugged Hodr and smiled.

"Exactly. How clever you are, Your Highness," she said, then gave the king a glamorous grin. "Surely you won't take some lowborns for their word? Especially when they have no proof."

His Majesty paused.

"Well...light magic tools can only be used by their owner or the royal family," he said. "Yet here is a tool that has been used."

"But it is not unsealed, see? Which means it *wasn't* used. After all, *sealing* can also only be done by the same people," the queen reasoned.

"That is true...barring one exception," the king groaned.

"Yes—light magic wielders. Who don't exist anymore."

The queen was giving no leeway. His Majesty looked away with a grimace.

In recent years, the royal family's light magic had weakened. They couldn't even contract light spirits, let alone the Lord of Light. The idea of royals contracting the Lord had become nothing more than legend. This weakening relationship with light, which also symbolized royal authority, was one of the pressing issues within our nation.

But if a nonroyal light magic wielder were to appear, the royal order itself would be shaken to its foundation. The royals had first earned their authority because of their contract with the Lord of Light. If that contract were to be made with someone else, it'd be natural for people to view that person as the new rightful ruler.

And if Her Majesty was revealed as the main culprit, our kingdom's reputation would be ruined. It might even be covered up...and the mermaid queen would never accept that.

I was starting to panic.

"And what if we *do* have proof that this tool was unsealed?" Lord Reineke spoke up.

Her Majesty shot him a glare. However, he only scoffed at her.

"I am the Great Fox Spirit Reineke," he proclaimed solemnly.

The air instantly grew tense.

"The very same great spirit who guided the Garland royal family and House Renard?! To think such a being has materialized before

us!” the king exclaimed. He knelt before Lord Reineke, then glared at his wife and son. “Lower your heads!”

At his reprimand, the queen and prince reluctantly knelt as well.

“If you need proof, check the tool’s records. Using light magic, you should be able to trace who unsealed it.”

“But no member of royalty can wield such powerful light magic,” the king replied, his voice full of shame.

“No, but the bearer of the holy sword is with us.”

Lord Reineke pushed Bal forward with his tail. The boy and Marcel flew into a panic.

“Lord Reineke, I can’t—”

“He hasn’t earned the title yet, but he is destined to become a great swordmaster of his generation,” Lord Reineke insisted.

The king gasped when he saw the bangle around Bal’s wrist.

“So the holy sword Joyeuse has chosen this boy,” he whispered.

The bewildered Bal knelt again and glanced at the king. This was his first time meeting his father. The man stared at the boy with narrowed, scrutinizing eyes. His gaze seemed to be searching Bal’s face for something, but he couldn’t say anything in front of the queen.

“Very well. Future swordmaster, will you use your magic to let us see this tool’s records?”

“No way!” Hodr cut in. “He can’t be the one that sword chose! He’s a fake!”

“Hodr’s right. The Renards are just trying to take advantage of the legend,” the queen joined in. “I’m sure *they’re* the ones who stole this tool. These traitors threatened the merfolk and gained control of them to destroy our kingdom! The Renards should be arrested!”

Marcel glared at her scornfully.

“We’ll know if he’s a fake if we let him try,” the king said, then looked at Bal earnestly. He was silently asking the boy to prove himself.

Bal cast a nervous glance at Lord Reineke.

“But I don’t know any light magic,” he said quietly.

Hodr cackled. “Of course you don’t! So let *me* do it. If somebody like you can use the holy sword, then so can I!”

The boy darted forward and tried to grab Bal’s bangle. A harsh light flared up, blowing him away with a sharp sound. Hodr fell down to the ground, limbs akimbo.

His Majesty sighed and shook his head. The queen glared at him for leaving his son in that sorry state.

“Marcel, lend Bal your power,” Lord Reineke said.

Marcel grabbed the boy’s shoulder.

“You can do it. I’m with you.”

“Master!”

With that encouragement, Bal raised his head.

“I’ll do it! I’ll prove that the Renards are innocent!”

The king’s face softened. Liam and I encouraged Bal as well.

“Please, Bal!”

“Do your best!”

Bal nodded.

“Here, former swordmaster Marcel,” the king said, handing him the box.

“Bal, raise Joyeuse and touch the tool with your left hand,” the king instructed.

Bal touched the bangle, which brought forth the holy sword, and touched the box.

“Gather your magic inside the sword. If you do it right, the records will appear on the blade.”

As Bal concentrated, Joyeuse began glowing with a dark-silver light. But it was just a small glimmer, as though there wasn’t enough magic to power it.

“Use your mana, Bal. You recall Dakini’s breathing technique, do you not?”

“Yes!”

Bal breathed deeply, just like Lady Dakini had taught us during yoga. His mana began accumulating.

“One more time!” Marcel said.

Bal placed his left hand on the box, and Marcel placed his hand over it in turn.

"Holy sword, show us the tool's records!" Bal shouted.

"Lord Reineke, please lend him your strength!" I prayed.

A golden light mixed with the silver one, seeping into the sword. One after another, the image of those who had used the magical tool in the past were shown reflected on the blade.

The queen grew pallid.

"Your Majesty, you mustn't! The Great Spirit Reineke is the Renards' guardian! He'll show us an illusion that works in their favor!"

"The Great Spirit *Lord* Reineke," the king corrected. "He guided the royal family's founder and helped us establish this very nation."

Lord Reineke huffed through his nose haughtily.

"Have you forgotten that no matter how royal one may be by blood, they cannot be king if they are deemed unworthy by the spirits?" the king asked.

The queen bit her lip.

"The Lord of Light has been gone for so long, so why now? Am I really supposed to believe that some great spirit has actually materialized?!"

The queen suddenly ran at Bal, a knife glinting in her hand.

"It's time to end this farce!"

Liam quickly stepped in front of Bal, wielding the Eclipse Blade.

If he reveals Nott now, they really will *think it's treason!*

"Brother, no!!!" I screamed.

However, Liam didn't unsheathe the sword. He blocked the queen's attack with the scabbard.

And at that moment, a certain person appeared on Joyeuse.

"Here is the one who *unsealed* this tool last!" Lord Reineke said with a cackle.

The queen was reflected on the holy sword, clear as day.

The king looked up at her.

"It's a lie! Nothing but an illusion!" she cried.

But the blade continued reflecting the magical tool's past. It was moving backward in time, displaying the faces of previous House Cordier marquises. The attire of the ones shown became increasingly antiquated, as though this record had been updated every time the

tool was handed down. It even showed the face of a child in the clothes of a long-past age—had they opened the tool in their youth as a prank?

"Would House Renard know House Cordier's history in such detail?" His Majesty asked. "And how would they create an illusion of people whose portraits don't even exist?"

The queen looked away, out of excuses.

"Arrest the queen," the king ordered grimly.

The knights obeyed, seizing her arms. She turned her gaze on me, and our eyes met.

"Great spirit contractor... If only it weren't for you!!!"

It was the same resentful look I knew all too well from my previous life. This was my first time seeing the queen since my rebirth, but the terror I'd felt in the past raced down my spine anew and caused me to shudder.

She's...horrifying!

Suddenly, a hot wind smacked me in the face. I gasped, feeling the hot air enter my lungs. My chest hurt, like a fire was igniting in my heart. It was the same suffocating sensation I had felt more times than I could count in my past life—the air around my face would heat up, making me unable to breathe.

"Fire magic?!"

Lord Reineke swallowed the air around me, turning it cool and restoring my breath. It was then that I realized the queen had used fire magic to attack me.

I'd never realized it—she was a fire magic wielder all along.

In my past life, I'd often collapsed from a sudden shortness of breath. The queen would add insult to injury, claiming I was cursed. The sight of me gasping for air terrified Hodr, always sending him running and calling for the doctors. But they were afraid of the queen too, so they gave me no medical treatment and just looked the other way. Even I believed I was experiencing fits, and blamed myself for having poor health.

Feeling the exact same sensation now brought those memories flooding back. No matter what I did, the queen scorned me for spreading my curse and told me to disappear. She ignored me when

I greeted her, and when I gave her thoughtful gifts, she'd throw them away or break them before my very eyes. Those who suspected the queen's true nature joined her in tormenting me. I was isolated, with nobody to rely on in the palace beside Hodr.

Then, without ever being taught how to be a crown princess, I was condemned as a vixen and executed.

My chest ached with fear. I clutched it, frantically gasping for air. But no matter how many times I inhaled, I couldn't breathe. It felt like I was choking. My throat wheezed from how hard I tried to swallow in the air.

Lord Reineke dispelled the fire magic, so why am I still like this?!

I flew into hysterics. My hands were shaking. I had no idea what to do.

Am I actually cursed after all? Would it be better if I disappeared?

I was so full of dread that I couldn't think clearly. I just gasped, desperately wishing I could breathe.

The queen laughed.

"You disgraceful contractor! If your heart is this weak, then just disappear already!"

Her cruel voice shouting "Disappear! Disappear!" reverberated in my head.

"Lune, did you inhale the fire magic?! Calm down! It'll go away if you just calm down!" Lord Reineke shouted.

I felt his soft tail rub my back. Usually it would soothe me, but not right now. The roaring chorus telling me to disappear drowned out Lord Reineke's voice.

All the horrible things I'd heard in my past life accumulated in my head. It was like a vortex of memories was raging inside of me. Soot filled my heart, pressing up against my lungs. More of it kept building and building, making me feel like I was about to burst.

I had no idea how I was supposed to calm down. I was terrified that if I stopped breathing, I'd die.

Please, someone, save me!!!

I was panting, on the verge of tears. My burned heart was hurting. I could practically smell the soot coming from my every breath.

“This isn’t good! She’s panicking!”

As tears filled my eyes, Liam placed his hand over my wide-open mouth. My trembling fingers grasped his and I tried to pry him off.

“You’re breathing too quickly, Lune. Calm down and stop for a moment.”

“Ah! B-But—”

Liam’s gentle voice was a calm amid the storm, but I couldn’t stop my shallow breaths. My body was acting of its own accord.

I’m too scared!

Liam hugged me and pressed the tip of his nose to mine.

“Brother?!”

I quickly held my breath in shock. I didn’t want him to smell the soot coming out.

Liam slowly nuzzled against my nose, then my cheek. He took the pendant around my neck, and pressed the gemstone made from pseudo magical ore to my lips. It had a nice, tingling feel.

“O wind magic, grant Lune pure air,” Liam chanted.

A gentle breeze flew out of the gemstone—it was the Renard domain’s wind. A refreshing scent of flowers mixed with the sweet fragrance of fruit and the strong smell of grass. A trace of Liam’s scent was there too, reassuring me.

“Now, breathe slowly through your nose.”

Liam’s soft skin and hair rubbed against me. I loosened my grip on his hand, inhaling deeply through my nose.

“Haaah...”

It was a little easier to breathe.

Liam pressed our noses together again, then lightly sucked on the tip of my nose.

“Ngh?!”

I involuntarily held my breath.

Liam brushed his cheek against mine. Relieved, I exhaled.

“That’s it, Lune. Very good.”

With the gemstone between my lips, I couldn’t use my mouth to breathe. But each time I breathed through my nose, it became a bit easier. My shallow breaths naturally shifted to deeper ones that filled my abdomen.

Once I was breathing normally and my body had stopped shaking, Liam kissed my fox ears.

"Are you okay?" he asked me gently.

I nodded, causing my ear to brush against his lips.

"Ah! Sorry!" I said, flattening my ears.

Liam just silently petted my head. He picked me up in his arms, then faced the queen.

"Lune is a sweet girl who knows the pain of the less fortunate. In no way does she deserve to disappear," he said. His voice was deep, soft, yet commanding.

The queen looked away. A strand of red hair fell across her face.

"I will issue the verdict right away: The queen is to be imprisoned in a remote northern villa!"

"Father, that's ridiculous! *They're* the ones in the wrong!" Hodr said, pointing at us.

"You're going with her, under house arrest," the king said with a sigh.

With that, the chamberlain led Hodr away.

His Majesty watched on with sorrow as his wife and son were taken away.

Her Majesty lost her title and was imprisoned. House Cordier lost their positions at the royal court, their head no longer a chancellor. Only the auditor who had written that report retained his post.

Hodr's disrespect toward a great spirit and his general inappropriate behavior had crossed the line, and so he was stripped of his title as well. Anyone related to House Cordier was removed from his associates. With the queen's influence gone, Hodr was to restart his imperial education, and his future would be determined by his progress.

The royal court mages sealed the magical tool and entrusted it to the mermaid queen. We explained everything that had happened when we brought it to her. She and the other sea creatures were appeased by the news, so they ceased their attacks and returned to their homes.

We all gazed at the calmed sea, feeling at peace.

Epilogue: The Happy Winter Begins

Every time Lord Reineke demonstrated his power, the people's faith in him grew. With so many people believing in him, it was decided that the day he and I descended in the temple would become a national holiday. It was dubbed the Moon Festival, and the celebration was held in his temple.

A market was set up around the temple grounds, and the lively atmosphere attracted donations and volunteers. The temple was beautified even more and made into a place where the displaced refugees could live in comfort. Of course, there were plenty of tourists who came for the festival as well.

Marquis Renard attended too and was currently holding a rite to thank Lord Reineke one more time. He wanted to show the people how beneficial it was to believe in the spirit.

Lord Reineke and I climbed the altar. I sat down, feeling rather meek and awkward in comparison to the mighty pleased fox spirit.

Father approached the altar and presented an extravagant offering: a gold bar, the cloth of the gods, salt, and other expensive goods. The sight of these items caused a buzz in the crowd. Their faith changed into a golden light, accumulating in the spirit and pleasing him further. As an extra touch, he created a halo behind both of us.

"I have been appointed as the chancellor by His Majesty," father announced. "I shall endeavor to fulfill my duties to the best of my ability from my new townhouse in the capital. I humbly request your protection, Lord Reineke."

He bowed before the fox, who placed his front paw on father's forehead.

"We, together with Liam, will protect the Renard domain.

Rest assured," Lord Reineke replied.

Although father was always expressionless, his face softened for just a moment. His iron mask was back in place in no time, but I knew what I saw.

It's really true—everyone in House Renard secretly loves fluffy things.

It was heartwarming to see these rare expressions from them.

With House Cordier stripped of their positions, a chancellor seat held by one of three marquis families had been left open. House Renard had been nominated.

Until now, the Renards had voluntarily distanced themselves from the palace due to their connection to the Lord of Darkness. However, Renard was the only territory that had a great spirit contractor as well as a bond with a legendary dragon, so His Majesty had requested their counsel. Not to mention, given the domain's newfound prosperity, numerous other feudal lords were eager to consult with Marquis Renard regarding economic management. Therefore, it was judged to be in Garland's best interest to have him summoned to the palace.

I'm sure we're headed to a very different future than in my past life.

After all, Hodr was no longer the crown prince, so the possibility of me becoming crown princess was close to zero.

Honestly, I can't imagine him turning over a new leaf and growing into a capable crown prince.

Hodr was no longer in contact with the former queen's associates, and he was now a mere prince. I wouldn't be surprised if his temper only worsened as a result of facing such a disgrace. He was under house arrest in a distant northern villa for the purpose of redoing his education, but from what I'd heard, he was showing no sign of repentance.

In other news, father had confidentially confirmed Bal's identity to His Majesty. It turned out that the king had provided Bal's mother with financial support for many years after her escape from the palace. But once his wife found out about it, she'd had Bal's mother killed. The king had been searching for Bal ever since and was

deeply troubled by his inability to find him until now.

His Majesty hoped to take Bal in as a prince sometime in the future, but it was too soon to give him an official title. The queen and crown prince's demotion had been so recent, and Bal had no support due to being born into his mother's low social standing. Things were just too volatile for the time being.

Instead, the king sent a request to Marquis Renard, asking to let Bal live in the Renard domain and train under Marcel. He would become a worthy wielder of the holy sword Joyeuse so that everyone would acknowledge him as a prince. That was our plan from the very beginning, so Bal was perfectly happy to stay.

If Bal can become a prince, he won't need to resort to a revolution. He'll be able to lead the country to a good future!

He wasn't alone either. He had his master, Marcel, and a good friend in Liam.

Things are totally different from the past. I can only hope that this new direction is the right one!

Once the rite was over, we exited the temple. We found Liam and Bal waiting outside, then met up with Marcel. We all walked around the market together. The steam of manju rose against the chilly breeze, which carried its delicious fragrance all around. The hot white vapor was a joyful sight.

Children were gathered by the stalls, noisily munching on senbei. Lord Reineke smiled as he walked past them, swatting them lightly with his tail.

The children cheered.

"Lord Reineke's out and about!"

"It's Lady Lune!"

"They gave us a divine blessing! Our lord's gonna be the chancellor!"

The tourists also exclaimed when they saw the spirit.

A lady clad in a dress made of the currently trendy cloth of the gods was holding a soy milk smoothie.

"What's that shining pendant around your neck, Lady Lune?" she asked. "What a gentle, beautiful color!"

I grinned, proud of the gift I got from Liam.

"It's an amulet with a gemstone made from pseudo magical ore!" I explained.

"Where could I get one?"

"They're sold in Lord Reineke's temple."

She and her friends headed in that direction, loudly chattering. I was glad to have given the amulets some advertisement.

She seemed like a fashionista. I hope she'll start a new fad once she gets back home!

Everyone around us was smiling, and their happiness was infectious. Lord Reineke was basking in the faith, his silver fur glimmering and flowing in the breeze.

"Lady Luuune!"

Upon hearing a strange voice, I turned around and came face-to-face with Dr. Guillotin, who was carrying a large leather bag.

"Dr. Guillotin?!"

"Hello! I'm hooome!"

He launched himself at me in an attempt to hug me, but I quickly hid behind Liam. Lord Reineke stepped in front of us, blocking the doctor's way. However, that only pleased him.

"Ahh! That's why Renard is the best! I really feel like I'm home now!" he exclaimed.

"Why did you come back?" I asked.

"Ah, you see, I caught a lot of heat for speaking up against Paris green. I was even placed under house arrest. But when House Cordier fell, I was freed! I made a fuss and complained incessantly about my unfair treatment until they eventually caved and told me I could open a research institute in Renard!" Dr. Guillotin said, then grinned mischievously. "And it'll have the same budget as our kingdom's academy! My very own Guillotin Research Institute!"

"That's incredible! That means Renard will be home to the kingdom's brightest minds!" I said, shocked.

Dr. Guillotin nodded proudly.

Suddenly, everyone around us started shouting. The tourists were pointing at a dark silhouette in the sky. It was Mr. Dragon, soaring beneath the sun.

"It's the white dragon!"

"It's real!"

"It doesn't usually show up so early in the day!"

Dr. Guillotin watched the dragon, dazzled.

"Ahh... I heard rumors that he flew all the way to the capital. So he's made a full recovery," the doctor murmured, his eyes misting with deep emotion.

He came across as a frivolous man who was always messing around, but when it came to his patients, he was a true doctor through and through.

"Do you want to visit Mr. Dragon later?" I asked.

Dr. Guillotin's face lit up.

"Yes! I know he's recovered, but he won't mind if I come, will he?"

"Since when are *you* the type to get hung up on that?" Lord Reineke smirked.

Dr. Guillotin scratched his nose.

"It's just that I'm not used to speaking to anyone but my patients. And once they recover, it's time for goodbye, right?"

Bal laughed. "We're all friends, so there's no need for goodbyes! I'm sure the dragon will be happy to see you!" he said as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"We're...friends?" the doctor mumbled.

"Aren't we? Uh, did I get the wrong impression?" Bal asked.

"No! We're friends!" Dr. Guillotin exclaimed, hugging the boy. "I'm so honored to be included!"

"I mean, we all worked together, so isn't it obvious?"

At Bal's words, Liam and I exchanged a look and smiled at each other.

"This really is where Bal shines," Liam said.

"Yeah! He's like a light!"

We laughed.

Marcel then placed his hands on our heads.

"It's not just him. Both of you are like a light of hope to us too," he said.

"Indeed," Lord Reineke said, smirking.

A shadow fell over us alongside a strong gust of wind that blew my silver hair every which way. I gasped as Mr. Dragon grabbed Dr. Guillotin with his front paw.

"Waaah! I got caught by my darling dragon!" the doctor screamed in delight.

Lord Reineke watched with deep exasperation as the dragon flew off with Dr. Guillotin into the sky.

"Um... Is he gonna be okay?" I asked.

"Well, it's not as though his life is at risk. And besides, that man is into it," the spirit scoffed.

I could tell that Lord Reineke had become fond of that man too.

"Aww, there he goes. I wanted him to check on master's wounds," Bal said with a pout.

"Don't worry, Bal. There'll be plenty of time for that," Liam said.

Marcel looked bewildered.

"You guys are acting like this is totally normal around here. I can't believe it," he muttered.

Lord Reineke cackled.

"Ours is a great domain, isn't it?"

"Like no other," Marcel responded seriously.

A snow bug appeared, landing on Lord Reineke's ear. Then, more and more of the woolly aphids began gathering on him.

"Looks like another cold winter is coming," Liam said, watching the bugs.

"Then we can warm ourselves in the onsen," Bal responded.

The thought excited me.

We'll be able to stay warm this year!

Now that Mr. Dragon was perfectly healthy, we shouldn't have much trouble with monsters during winter. We had finished building the embankment on the Renard River, and the water transport was doing well too. We had plenty of salt, sugar, and oil, so we didn't need to worry about going hungry.

"We'll be able to snack on all the hot manju we want!" I said.

"And hot wine," Lord Reineke added.

"Oh, great idea!" Marcel agreed.

"Once we're home, let's begin the winter preparations," Liam

decided.

The rest of us nodded.

"Do you think father will let me learn knitting?" I asked. I wanted to make a scarf for Liam to keep him warm. It would be my thank-you gift for the amulet he gave me, which had saved me.

"Yes. And I'm sure mother will be pleased," he said.

"I want to go with her to buy the yarn!"

My tail wagged as I pictured us all spending the winter together.

"I think we will have a good winter this year," Lord Reineke said. He shook off the snow bugs, who flew into the sky.

His prophetic words filled me with warmth.

This is the first time I'm looking forward to winter!

The calm, clear autumn sky was tinged with cold. A happy winter was coming to Renard.





Afterword

Extra Story: Master and Pupil

"Master! Master! Master!!!"

Bal hopped up and down next to me. My scarred face often terrified women and children, yet this boy had become attached to me.

I ruffled his orange hair.

"What is it, Bal?"

"Look what I can do!"

He hit the bangle on his wrist. The gesture was exactly the same as mine, which made me smile.

Is this what it's like to have a grandson?

I watched as the holy sword materialized. I could see traces of gold light within its dark-silver magic.

As the owner changes, so does the sword!

I was impressed...until the blade began to swing wildly as if it had a mind of its own.

"Ah! Hey! Listen to me!!!"

Bal had been chosen by the sword, but he couldn't control his own power yet.

Time to help him out.

I put my hand on Bal's shoulder. I would pass all of my skills onto the next generation's swordmaster.

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

Thank you for buying volume 2 of *Fluffy-Eared Realm Restoration: Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother*!

I am Iota Aiue. Thanks to you all, I was able to publish a second volume of *Tenmofu*.

The illustrations were once again done by Tsukasa Kuga. As expected, all the fluffy scenes and the kids were drawn adorably. But special thanks for drawing Marcel as such a cool silver fox!

I would also like to thank my readers, my manager Fujiwara, and everyone who supported me in continuing the publication!

The series has received a manga adaptation. The ultra sweet art is done by Momo Chips. Please support Lune and her friends in the manga version too!

I hope we can meet again soon.

Iota Aiue













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Fluffy-Eared Realm Restoration: Taking It Slow with My Cool Big Brother Volume 2
by Iota Aiue

Translated by Raenoire Edited by Austin Conrad

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