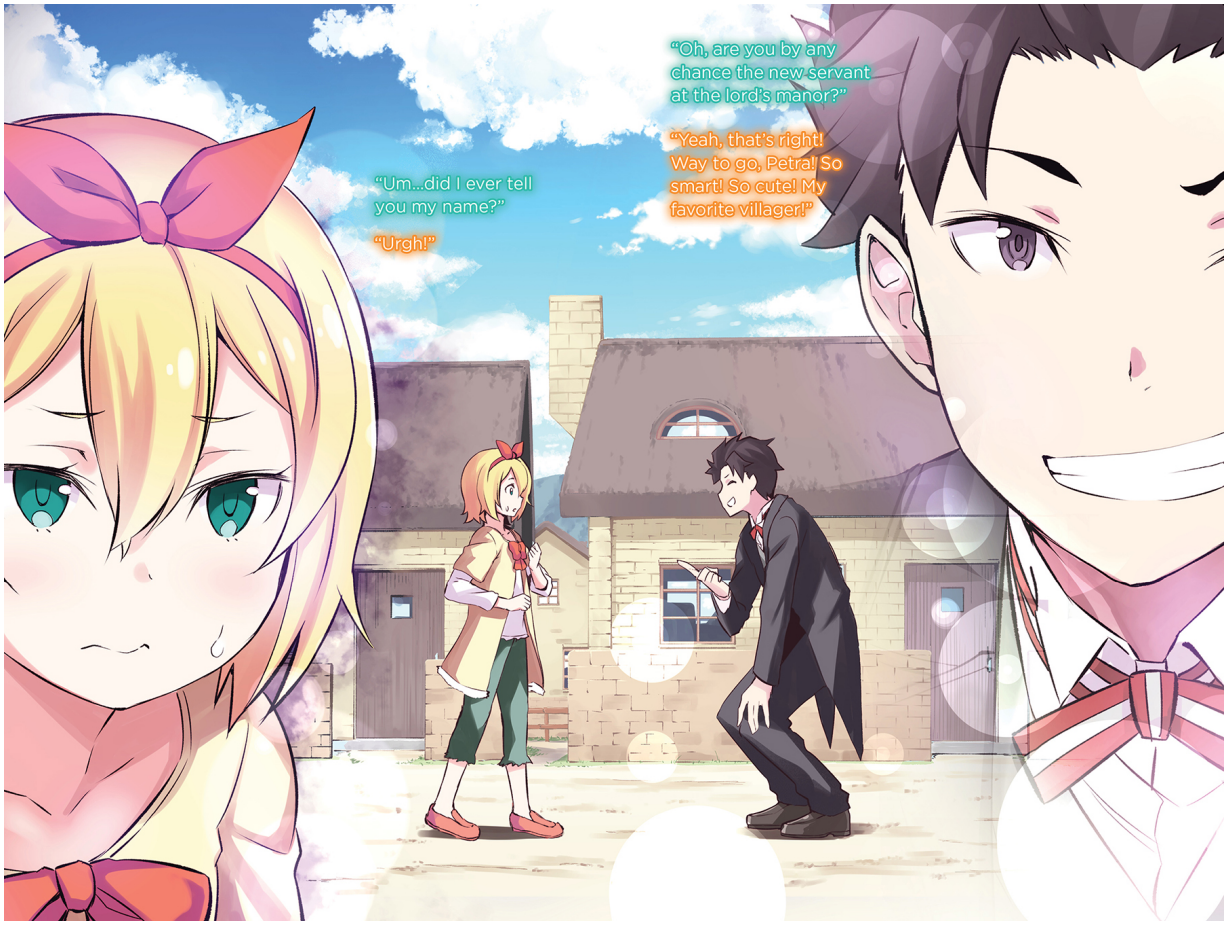

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SHINICHIROU OTSUKA
Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION 3


Re:ZeRo
-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION 3




"What in heavens is the matter? Surely you all remember your good friend—*Natsumi Schwartz*."
Their silent stares were met with a brazen introduction. Natsumi Schwartz's each and every gesture was executed with shocking perfection.
"Excuse me—is there room for another lady at the table?"
The sudden development was so wildly unexpected that not even Ram could have seen it coming.
"……"


"Um...did I ever tell you my name?"
"Urgh!"
"Oh, are you by any chance the new servant at the lord's manor?"
"Yeah, that's right! Way to go, Petra! So smart! So cute! My favorite villager!"


"By the way, about those catfolk kids who got captured with you and helped out... where'd they go?"
"Well, we don't know. The oldest sister could use healin' magic—I know she healed the other two boys, so they should be okay..."
"She said somethin' like, 'Champions of justice *neeeever* ask for payment!' and then ran off somewhere."

Re:ZERO -Starting Life in Another World-

The only ability Subaru Natsuki gets when he's summoned to another world is time travel via his own death. But to save her, he'll die as many times as it takes.

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Re:ZeRo

-Starting Life in Another World-
SHORT STORY COLLECTION

VOLUME 3

TAPPEI NAGATSUKI
ILLUSTRATION: MAKOTO FUGETSU
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Re:ZERO Short Story Collection Vol. 3
TAPPEI NAGATSUKI

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MY FAIR BAD LADY

1

"Hey, Subaru, did you hear the news?" Emilia asked, her eyes glittering. "A wandering master chef is visiting tomorrow."

Subaru dramatically cocked his head. "…A what, now?"

They were in the Roswaal Manor's central garden. It was still quite early, before breakfast. Visiting Emilia as she conversed with her contracted spirits beneath the crisp morning sky had become part of Subaru's daily ritual.

And during one of these visits, it was Emilia who suddenly announced some news. Her silvery hair glittered in the morning sun, and her big, round eyes shone like purple amethysts. Emilia's beauty was usually pure and resolute, but when she was animated with this much excitement, she was charming in a completely different way.

Put simply, she was as beautiful as she was precious. An angel.

"Subaru—? Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah, of course. E M T—Emilia's a Major Treasure. Right, so, uh, what were you saying?"

"I *knew* you weren't listening! I said a wandering master chef is coming here! Isn't that *really* exciting?"

Emilia could barely contain her excitement, and it showed as much in her bell-like voice as it did in her eyes. She was so adorable, Subaru wished they could settle down together so he could take care of her for the rest of his life. Of course, there was just one thing that he couldn't help commenting on.

He scrunched his face and asked, "A wandering…master chef? Who gave them such a dumb title?"

"Hey, you shouldn't talk about people like that. Though I don't really know much about this chef, either," Emilia said, pressing a

hand to her chest. “Anyway, this chef is supposed to be *really* good. People say one bite and you’ll be obsessed. Two bites will steal your heart away. And after three bites, it’ll shackle your very soul!”

“Sounds more like a curse than cooking.”

Emilia’s appraisal sounded so poetic and unprecedented that Subaru couldn’t glean much from it. Ignoring the exaggerated hype, he at least gathered that a talented chef was coming to the manor to hold a special banquet.

Though Subaru thought it odd he was technically a servant of that very manor, and this was the first he was hearing of it.

“Well, knowing Rozchi, there’s a good chance he wants this to be a surprise. When did you find out about this, Emilia-tan?”

“Just now.”

“Aha. Sounds like I was right on the money.”

The master of the house, Roswaal L Mathers, was an enigma who dressed eccentrically and constantly wore clown makeup. His devilish whims were a source of endless chaos for everyone in the manor. Since outlandish announcements and proposals were a daily occurrence, Subaru was mostly unfazed by the latest one.

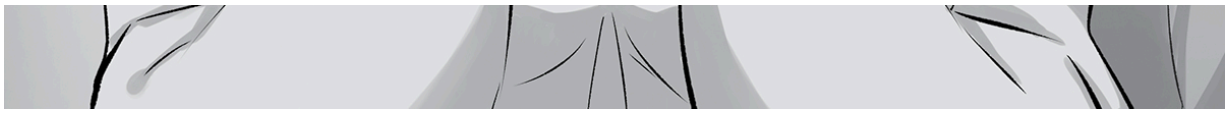
“Anyway, I hope this chef’s cooking tastes better than their name sounds.”

“Me too! I’m *really* looking forward to it! I’m not sure why, but Roswaal implied meeting this chef would be important for predicting my future.”

“He said that?”

Though Emilia was a frolicking ball of adorable excitement, something she said made Subaru’s ears perk up. He wasn’t quite sure why exactly. This remained a mystery even as he replied, “Well, whatever. Let’s do our radio calisthenics. Time to get our stretch on.”





"Sure. Let's start by raising our arms up…and then reaching high into the sky for a good back stretch!"

Emilia kicked off the morning exercise routine that she had happily adopted from Subaru's world. As Subaru enjoyed her cheerful, soothing voice, he focused on his own stretches.

2

After Subaru finished his morning calisthenics and headed back to work, Rem turned to him with stars in her eyes and asked, "Oh, Subaru, have you heard the news? Tomorrow, the *ultimate chef who makes dragons howl*, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI, is coming to our manor."

"……Come again?"

Rem usually carried out her morning chores with calm and precision. But now, to Subaru's astonishment, her cheeks were red with unbridled anticipation.

"I said, the *ultimate chef who makes dragons howl*, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI, is coming to our manor! Isn't that incredible news?!"

"Yeah…incredible in more than one way. Are you sure this person's a chef and not an adventurer?"

"What? Don't be silly, Subaru. Everybody's heard of the world-famous chef Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI," Rem said as she leaned in aggressively, practically heaving with excitement.

Subaru flinched and staggered back a couple paces. "Y-you don't say…"

Her disappointment and disapproval were plain to see. There was no doubt Rem respected this chef a great deal, since she usually took Subaru's side unconditionally.

"So, uhhh, I assume that's the visitor who's coming tomorrow? Emilia-tan told me the news a little while ago. Is this chef really that famous?"

"Of course! Dias has been blessed by the goddess of cuisine! He brings out the best flavors from all over the world while seeking ever

greater culinary heights that have yet to be discovered—the ultimate chef who makes dragons howl! People say one bite and you'll be obsessed. Two bites will steal your heart away. And after three bites, it'll shackle your very soul!"

"Yeah, that slogan makes me more anxious every time I hear it… And you seem oddly knowledgeable about this chef, Rem."

"That's because I also work in the kitchen. It's only natural that I would respect and admire a master of the craft. I am terribly excited about tomorrow."

Rem was almost bouncing with excitement as she flashed normally rare smiles with wild abandon. Seeing her like this warmed Subaru's heart, but as he was a young man, part of him couldn't help feeling put off that those precious smiles were for someone else.

He had discovered Rem's tendency to follow the hype during Liliana's visit, and it was back in full force as the famous chef's visit drew closer.

"Oh, Subaru? Is something wrong? You look a bit upset…"

"Upset? *Me?* Nah. It's just that you and Emilia both seem obsessed with Dias-whatever-his-name-was, so don't mind me. If you need me, I'll just be in the corner licking plates. That's all I'm good for."

Rem giggled. "Oh, Subaru, you say the strangest things sometimes. Oh! But…" Rem interrupted Subaru's pity party with a sudden clap of her hands as she remembered something. "I'm sure you were joking about licking plates, but I hear that Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI is a real stickler for etiquette. His cuisine is unparalleled, and his talents are supreme, so he expects his dinner guests to have impeccable table manners."

"Ahhh, gotcha. So he's a pretentious artist. You find those in every world, I guess. Just for the record, does he refuse to cook if you aren't polite enough?"

"No, rumor has it he cooks *you*."

"Is this chef from *The Restaurant of Many Orders* or something?!"

A chill shot through Subaru's spine at the thought of being turned into dinner. But then he saw Rem giggle, and his fear deflated when

he realized she was just joking.

"Geez, Rem, you're killing me. For a second there, I thought you were being serious."

"I'm sorry. You were just so adorably gullible that I couldn't help myself. But good manners are important away from the dinner table as well. I'm not sure, however, just how much of that will be demanded from lower staff like you and me."

"Well, if this chef wants me to behave like a guest at a palace banquet, I'll be too distracted to taste the food."

Subaru didn't want to come off as an ignorant boor, but if this famous chef refused to serve anyone who wasn't schooled in formal etiquette, it was already game over…and it was here that once again, something felt off to Subaru. Now, what could it be?

"Since we'll have a master in the kitchen, I'll be learning everything I can tomorrow," Rem said. "Subaru, pay close attention to me today. After tomorrow, you will get to taste a whole new flavor of Rem."

"That just makes it sound like I'll be eating you, which is kind of naughty, now that I think about it…"

"Oh dear… I can't believe you said I'm so cute, you could just eat me up. I'm blushing."

"Uh, I never said that!"

When he quipped at Rem, the strange foreboding Subaru had been feeling faded away. He gave Rem's head a casual pat, and they got back to work with their morning chores. It seemed safe to look forward to tomorrow—and the highly anticipated meal.

3

After their morning chores were assigned, Subaru was about to start work with Ram on cleaning the manor when she asked him a question.

"Barusu, have you heard? Tomorrow, the *sleazy lecher who is nevertheless a legendary chef*, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI, is coming to our manor. Mind your manners and act

sharp.”

“…Say what?”

Subaru turned around, with his head cocked at an extreme angle in open confusion for the third time that day. Her arms crossed, Ram heaved an oddly arrogant sigh and shrugged. “I said, the sleazy womanizer who is nevertheless a legendary chef, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI, is coming to our manor tomorrow to cook. I’m afraid you won’t be able to join the meal, but you are to conduct yourself in a manner that won’t besmirch Master Roswaal’s good name.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up! Who exactly is coming again? Dias Whatsit?”

“Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI. I know the name is a mouthful, but he gets very upset if you don’t address him properly. Make sure you don’t mess it up, Barusu. And one more thing.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Let me catch up.”

Once he stopped Ram’s steamrolling, Subaru added more notes into his mental Chef Intel Guide he’d started when he heard the news from Emilia. And what was the deal with this chef?

“This Dias…Lepunzo character… Is this the same chef Rem was telling me about?”

“I don’t know what Rem told you exactly, but she surely overheard what Master Roswaal told me last night, so I assume it’s the same person. What of it?”

“There’s a couple minor discrepancies between the chef you and she described.”

From the delighted way Rem had described him, the chef seemed like a moody artist, but she hadn’t mentioned anything that could be construed as the description of a lecher.

“Plus, you just casually declared I can’t join in the meal, either—what’s the deal?”

“The man is notorious for being an absolute lecher. He elevates fine cuisine to new heights and stands at the apex of flavor. That allows Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI to choose his own patrons. In other words, he only serves *women*—the pervert.”

“But that means Roswaal can’t eat, either. Isn’t that kinda silly?”

"Hah!" Ram snorted at Subaru's complaint, unable to hide the scorn in her voice. "Master Roswaal skillfully negotiated himself a seat at the table. It's unfortunate, Barusu, but there's no room for you. You'll have to make do by licking somebody's else's plate—but *not* Master Roswaal's. Give up on Lady Emilia's, too. And if you so much as touch Rem's plate, I'll kill you. And if you lick *my* plate, kill yourself… But you can do with Beatrice's plate as you wish."

"Why is it a given that I'm going to be licking someone's plate clean? Am I being punished for something?!"

Not only was Subaru barred from the table, he was told that licking Beatrice's plate was the most he could expect out of this meal. How could he possibly take that lying down?

"This is just too much abuse for one guy! I demand better working conditions! I'm gonna ask Rozchi directly!"

"Sorry, but Master Roswaal has already departed to meet Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI. He won't return until tomorrow's scheduled dinner…meaning he won't be returning until right before the chef starts cooking. My deepest condolences."

"So much for my last resort!"

Subaru fell to his knees, staring up at the ceiling and lamenting his misfortune.

Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani—My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

"Also, why am *I* the only one left out?! I smell a conspiracy!"

"The man is a wandering chef who roams the land. He's hard to book even under ideal circumstances. Getting him for tomorrow was challenging. But once we told him this manor was home to four beautiful ladies, he was completely on board."

"This dude's definitely a sleazy womanizing chef!"

The reason their request was approved was just so cliché that this moniker finally made perfect sense to Subaru.

Emilia's self-evident beauty aside, both Ram and Rem were classic pretty girls. And as long as Beatrice sat still and smiled quietly, she looked like an adorable fairy, or a cute doll.

"But come on, this is downright tyrannical… I don't have to take this!"

“Accept your fate. This sort of privilege was never meant for a common servant like you. My sister and I are an exception as it is. And we have Master Roswaal to thank for that. I think that’s rather beautiful, don’t you?”

“You think I’m going to be happy for you when I’m actively being blackballed?!”

“You’ve gone on about that long enough… Besides, there’s more than dinner at stake with this visit.”

Subaru was too busy pounding the floor in rage to catch that last part that Ram had muttered quietly under her breath. In the end, Ram cut her half-hearted consolation short and went back to work by herself.

Still wallowing in self-pity, Subaru muttered, “At least let me lick Emilia’s plate…I say like I would try even if I had the chance…!” before meekly resigning himself to his morning chores.

4

“You’ve heard the news, I suppose? Tomorrow, the Axing Chef, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm’s successor, is coming here.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up!”

This was the fourth time Subaru was having this conversation in the same day, but there was a new revelation that compelled Subaru to cry out.

Beatrice responded with a look of annoyance, which was business as usual. What was astonishing was that she also seemed strangely smug for once as she sat on her stepladder, snorting haughtily at Subaru. She glared at him and said, “How dare you interrupt me—you’ve got some nerve, I suppose. And stop making a commotion in here. You’ll stir up dust. And worst of all, you’ll offend the books.”

“Ignoring the manic dream pixie girl comment that makes it sound like you commune with the books—can we go back to what you said earlier? One more time?”

Beatrice sighed. “Tomorrow, the Axing Chef, Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm’s successor, is coming here—that’s all I

said."

"Yes, *there!* That part! What's with the super-creepy name?! *Axing?!* I didn't get that memo!"

The mysterious chef's title seemed to change like the wind, but all the names Subaru had heard until now were still within the realm of possibility for a chef. This sudden addition of a bizarre horror element was just too much for Subaru to take in stride.

"Who needs this many nicknames?! Having this many just dilutes the coolness factor! So this guy is supposed to be a wandering master chef, the ultimate chef who makes dragons howl, a sleazy womanizer who is nevertheless a legendary chef, and now he axes people, too? The womanizer bit was already pretty wild, if I'm being totally honest! I'm not even sure what I'm expecting anymore. Who—*who* else has so many damn nicknames?! Name another person! Anyone!"

"Well, Roswaal gets called Demi-Human Fetish, Clown Noble, Top Court Mage, and Court Jester."

"When he gets home, he's getting a piece of my mind!"

Subaru exploded when he learned someone so close to him had quite a few nicknames of his own, making him wildly scratch his head in frustration.

Beatrice shook her head and sighed as she watched him. "I don't understand why you're so upset…though I'm sure it's over something frivolous."

"Frivolous, my ass. Having Axing in your nickname is scary enough as is, but you'd have to ax at *least* two or three people to even get that title. Why is he even allowed to be a chef?"

"Ah…that's what you mean. A big misunderstanding, I suppose. *Obviously*, he didn't get the title because he murdered people with an ax."

Subaru raised an eyebrow and dubiously asked, "You sure?" in response to Beatrice's frustrated declaration. "Well, yeah…I guess that tracks. There's no way society would casually let someone hack up anyone they don't like. Okay, so the nickname is just an exaggeration."

"Of course. However, rumor has it that anyone Dias Lepunzo

Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm's successor does not like will mysteriously lose their job or title after dinner service—that's how he came to be called the Axing Chef."

"Wait, so it's axing *jobs*?!"

Beatrice's explanation, equally as convincing as the womanizer nickname, was making Subaru royally freak out.

The more out-there the nickname, the more legitimate it seemed to be—which was absolutely terrifying. But Subaru consoled himself with the idea that at present, none of those nicknames implied this chef was overtly malicious.

"Wait just a minute…?"

But just when he was about to relax, a little voice in the back of Subaru's mind yelled very loudly once more: *Something is wrong.*

And that sense of foreboding had reared its ugly head each time the chef came up in conversation, starting with his chat with Emilia that morning. That suspicion had been building all day, but now, combined with everything Subaru had learned, a new revelation was dawning on him.

"Predicting Emilia's future…a stickler for manners, a womanizer, a chef who axes jobs…"

The anxious and disquieting words intertwined, sparking activity in the hazy recesses of Subaru's mind. And in time, Subaru finally arrived at a single conclusion.

A scheme vicious, cruel, and draconian.

"That would be insane… Then again, I wouldn't put it past Roswaal."

Roswaal L Mathers was Emilia's biggest patron in the royal selection—some might call him her sole supporter. But he was also a member of the nobility holding the rank of marquis—and naturally, it was a position that sometimes required him to make hard choices.

That was what convinced Subaru that Roswaal would demand from Emilia an equal commitment and resolve *to do whatever it took* to win the crown.

But the marquis's methods were surely beyond what kindhearted, pure Emilia could imagine.

"…I've gotta do something."

Emilia's smile…her excited voice…the warmth of her fingers…it all shone brightly in his memory.

…He had to protect all those things.

"I'll always be on your side, even if I have to do it alone."

Subaru wanted to support Emilia, to illuminate the path forward. There was no reason to hold back. He had already been amply rewarded.

"Helloooo?" Beatrice sang. "Goodness, he's completely ignoring me, I suppose. Well, see if I care."

Clenching his fist with renewed resolve, Subaru retreated into his own world and completely forgot about Beatrice, who turned away in a decidedly sulky huff. Their failure to share what they were thinking in that moment would later make things much, much messier.

But at the time, neither of them could have known this.

5

"Hey, Puck, did you hear? Tomorrow, the wandering and womanizing legendary axing chef who makes dragons howl is coming to the manor."

"…Was that his name?"

Subaru was having this conversation for the fifth time that day. But while it was mostly the same, there was one major difference—this time, Subaru was the one delivering the news. As he cautiously relayed the latest gossip in this secret meeting in the garden, the pocket-sized, gray-furred cat he was talking to seemed confused.

This was Emilia's contracted spirit and her self-appointed guardian, Puck.

Puck was visibly pondering the news and hugged his long tail to himself, twirling the end of it as he replied, "Well, I did know a chef was coming. Lia is very excited about it. But I don't remember hearing such a strange title. It was a bit more basic, though still sort of sketchy…"

"Okay, fair! You're right that it's *kinda* incorrect. Truth be told, he

has a whole string of nicknames, but they got all mixed up in my head. Anyway, that's beside the point."

"Mmm, I don't quite get where you're going with this. What's on your mind?"

"I called you out here to talk in private, Puck, so obviously, it's important. And it's about Emilia."

When Subaru said that in a hushed voice, Puck's mood changed instantly. The little cat still seemed carefree on the surface, but he slowly floated closer to Subaru's face and looked him right in the eyes as he said, "If it's about Lia, I'm all ears. What is it?"

"I'll tell you, but, um, I don't want Emilia to know. It'd just make her worry… Besides, this is the sort of thing that if she finds out about it, it's over."

"Hmmm?"

Puck had no idea what it could be, but he was ready to hear Subaru out. Grateful for Puck's cooperation, Subaru told him about tomorrow's banquet—and exposed the nefarious conspiracy he had stumbled upon.

"Tomorrow's banquet…is actually a trap Roswaal set."

"What do you mean?"

"And I don't mean poison or anything like that, okay? Unless we're talking about how poisonous this scheme is."

"You're confusing me."

"I know, *I'm* confusing me, too! Arghhh, okay, lemme start over. Roswaal is gonna use tomorrow's dinner as a test—for Emilia's table manners!" After all that buildup, Subaru made his big reveal.

Puck made a face and asked, "Table manners?"

Subaru fumed at the spirit's lackluster reaction. "Don't you get it? Before long, Emilia is gonna get invited to tons of events as a candidate for the royal selection. She'll go to parties, banquets—and Roswaal is testing her to see if she can pull it off."

Puck's eyes shot open. "So you're saying, tomorrow's banquet is a sort of a trial match?"

"Yeah—and that's not all. People call the dude the Axing Chef because it's over for any guest of his whose etiquette doesn't satisfy him. Anyone deemed unworthy can never redeem themselves.

Rumor has it, he's ruined countless lives and sent them to early graves… *That's* what Roswaal is aiming for."

When he pieced together this plot while in the Archive of Forbidden Books, Subaru wished in his heart of hearts that he was wrong. But the more he thought about it, the more everything added up. In other words, this banquet was a touchstone for Emilia to demonstrate how she would fare in the royal selection—a declaration that Emilia's performance here would determine whether she would even be in the running.

"But Roswaal would never… No, yeah, he totally would…!"

"He *would*? No, no, correction—he *will*! Emilia *will* be tested! But even if I tell her and she avoids it somehow, then what? He'll just find some other way to test her."

"But Lia trusts Roswaal. What do we do?"

Puck's ears folded listlessly, and sadness filled his black eyes. Knowing his pain all too well, Subaru gave the cat's chest a firm, reassuring tap.

"That's why I called you over, Puck. You and I are gonna save Emilia."

"The two of us? But how?"

"It's simple. Tomorrow, Roswaal and the others are going to test Emilia's table manners. Now, Emilia won't know about this…but you and I can help her!"

As Puck froze in shock, Subaru gave a firm nod to drive the point home.

Roswaal was diabolical, but this time, Puck and Subaru were wise to his plot. The pair were on Emilia's side no matter what, and they refused to let anything stand in her way.

"Let's do this, Puck. Together, we'll save Emilia!"

"Okay, I'm on board. I'll bet everything on your feelings, Subaru."

Puck hesitated only a moment before tapping Subaru's offered hand with his paw. It wasn't a proper handshake, but it cemented their determination all the same.

"So, what's the plan for tomorrow?" Puck asked.

"There's already a lot of barriers in our way. But we'll clear them. We need to be ready to support her no matter what happens, so

we'll need a game plan. Doesn't look like we're gonna get much sleep tonight."

United by a common goal, the boy and the cat spirit vowed to give their all for the girl who was so precious to them. With identical smiles on their faces, Subaru and Puck brandished their claws and fangs, ready to crush tomorrow's nefarious plot.

6

Ram woke that morning in a foul mood.

Naturally, she didn't show it—she wasn't some babe in the woods. She maintained her usual composure, and on the surface, she was perfectly put together—though on the inside, she was anything but.

"Barusu—what a disgrace."

The moment she let her mask slip, she immediately started griping about her foolish coworker and his slack-jawed grin.

Ordinarily, as a servant, Subaru Natsuki was supposed to take care of all the chores of the mansion just like Ram and Rem—and as they would be receiving a special guest that day, he needed to clean with the fury of a raging lion.

And yet, on such an important day, he had the audacity to become ill and had holed himself up in his room since the morning.

"Sister, I'm sure that Subaru was exhausted from all those days of work he's not used to doing," Rem said. "I will do everything in my power to make up for his absence, so please, let him rest."

As Ram's other half, Rem alone noticed Ram's irritation and swooped in to defend Subaru. But this only further worsened Ram's already poor impression of Subaru. His pathetic nature increased the burden on her sweet little sister because she doted on him. In Ram's mind, Subaru's value had hit rock bottom.

"Barusu does not deserve to live another day."

Ram vowed silently that the next time he shamelessly showed his face, she would show him no mercy. Her heart burned with anger as she got back to work—they had to prepare to receive their guest.

Roswaal, the master of the house, soon returned with the sleazy

womanizer who was, nevertheless, the legendary chef Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI.

"A real *treat* to be invited."

"…"

When the man boldly made his entrance through the front door of the manor, Ram's face stiffened. He had a bulging stomach, a greasy face, and hair salted with gray. He was as wide as he was tall and stood proudly with a vulgar grin on his face. He had a servant (whose face was hidden deep beneath a kerchief) carrying his things beside him. The legendary chef certainly gave off the air of a big shot as Roswaal stood beside him and smiled in a warm show of hospitality.

"Apooologies for our late arrival. Our rendezvous was delayed just a tad. However, this fellow is more agreeable than his reputation suggests. Be on your absolute beeest behavior, please."

This was a direct order from the master of the house. Ram and Rem curtsied deeply at the waist.

""Welcome to our humble home,"" they said in unison.

The chef let out a corpulent moan, his belly, chest, and cheeks flapping as he said, "Oooh, how utterly *ravishing*. Their beauty and charm is made all the more indulgent by the fact that they're twins. Good gravy, Marquis, you do have incredible taste. Geh! Heh! Heh!"

"Why, thaaank you. Your praise humbles me."

Roswaal gave the excited chef a generic polite reply. As Ram listened to the exchange, she took out her frustration by mentally grabbing the man's fat cheeks, kicking him in the gut, and bouncing him all over the hall like a football.

That'll teach him to ogle Rem.

Just when they all thought they would have to humor more obscene comments, the chef's servant poked his back and muttered something to him that reminded him of the main event.

"Oh my, listen to me ramble on. Sorry to cut pleasantries short, but can you show me to the kitchen? I would like to get down to business." The chef's expression snapped to attention as he asked for directions.

"Right this way, Chef. My name is Rem, and I shall be your guide

today."

Rem stepped forward to escort the pair to the kitchen. Ram noticed the chef leer at Rem's butt as she walked in front of them, but when his servant bowed apologetically on his behalf, Ram managed to suppress her rage with her imaginary game of human football.

"Did that offend you, I wooonder?" Roswaal asked her.

"No, Master…don't be silly. I would never harbor malice toward any esteemed guest you bring home."

"Now tell me how you really feel," Roswaal requested.

"For ogling my sweet Rem, I wish to crush his eyeballs in my bare hands."

Between the chef's lecherous gaze and his nauseating manner of speech, Ram's entire body was covered in goose bumps. She had to admit, even Subaru was more preferable; she'd pick his buffoonery over the chef's perversion any day of the week. And she gave him credit for not ogling her sister *too* often.

"Rem probably doesn't mind it, and Emilia and Beatrice won't even notice. So I'm the only one who will need to keep my rage in check."

"Sorry to put you through this," Roswaal apologized. "By the way, I don't see Subaru. Has something happened to him?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Master, but Barusu fell ill this morning, and he is resting in his room. Ordinarily, I would have pawned it all off— I would have *entrusted* all the hospitality duties to him."

"Oh my, what a pity. And I was sure tonight's dinner would have been a special experience—life-changing, even."

When she heard the genuine disappointment in Roswaal's voice, Ram lowered her gaze.

"Shall I tell Subaru to make an appearance tonight?"

"No, let's not trouble him. If he can make it, we will welcome him no maaatter what state he may be in. Now then, we don't have time to dwell on Subaru's health."

As he gently tapped her shoulder, Ram felt the warmth in his hand and began to blush. Roswaal smiled and playfully winked, gazing at her with just his other golden eye as he said, "I hope you

enjoy yourself tonight. It will uuundoubtedly be a dinner to remember."

7

A pair of beady black eyes peered out from a gap between the curtains as the guest of honor was welcomed in. The boy they belonged to turned around in the darkness and said, "Target spotted—there's no mistaking it. That dude is exactly like the rumors said."

The tiny floating cat crossed his short arms and nodded. "So it's safe to say our prediction was correct."

The boy shrugged in apparent agreement as tension creeped onto his naturally menacing face.

Sensing a change in the boy's demeanor, the little cat—Puck—sighed. "Are you really going through with it?"

"Yeah. I mean, either way I'll regret it. And I'd rather regret doing something than nothing, hands down—that's how I feel right now."

"You know…I may have misjudged you, Subaru. Okay, I understand. If you really are that committed to this, then I'll help you in every way I can. This is for my sweet daughter."

"Yes…for her."

A solemn air hung around the pair as they nodded in agreement. Their objective was clear. They were joined for one purpose, and there was no longer any hesitation.

"……"

Adjusting the position of the chair he was sitting in, Subaru steadied his beathing and looked down at the assortment of tools before him. He wasn't familiar with them, but they were not so alien that he had never touched them before.

He never dreamed his past experience would come in handy like this. In life, you never know what might save you in your time of need.

With a dash of wistfulness and a mountain of resolve, the boy readied himself for battle.

8

Dinner preparations were well underway, and a few hours later, Emilia and Beatrice were summoned to the dining hall.

In the meanwhile, Ram handled all the household chores by herself. That was primarily because Rem's desire to see the unparalleled chef Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI at work had compelled her to ask Ram for a rare favor.

And whenever Rem pleaded with such adorable eyes, there was no way Ram could refuse. That was why today she completed all the remaining chores with more effort than was normal for her.

"Damn you, Barusu…"

Naturally, that didn't change the fact that she found all this labor unagreeable in the extreme, so she decided to focus her resentment on the bedridden Subaru. All the same, when Subaru's health did not improve by dinnertime…

"Oh, Subaru was looking forward to this dinner," Emilia said, feeling bad for him. "He's got *really* bad timing. Maybe I can save him a little something… Should I go ask him?"

"I believe Master Roswaal can help you there," Ram replied. "Don't worry yourself over such trivialities, Lady Emilia, just enjoy dinner."

"Mmm, okay. I'll do that, thanks." And with Ram's kind words, Emilia's disappointment over Subaru's absence faded into a smile. It wasn't Subaru that Emilia should have worried about, but herself.

Emilia had not realized that Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI's dinners bore a certain significance for people in high society.

"Speaking of disappointing things, Puck won't come out today. I think he's somewhere in the mansion, but he just won't return to his crystal. Have you seen him, Ram?"

"Sorry, I have not. Besides, I assume it would be difficult for a great spirit to attend a formal dinner."

"Aw, so there *is* a problem? But he always keeps his fur so nicely groomed…"

Even though he was a spirit, most people would consider it

improper for a cat to sit at the table. And if he were simply a demi-human, that would add another layer of complications here in Lugunica, but since he simply looked like a cat, Emilia accepted that his physical form meant he couldn't join them.

"Hmph. What a pitiful boy he is, I suppose. His daily antics have caught up with him, I see."

Beatrice entered the dining hall next, commenting on Subaru's absence. Unlike Emilia, there wasn't a shard of empathy in her statement, but since it was plain to Ram that she did care about Subaru, her behavior was touching.

"Yes, indeed they have. I hope you aren't lonely, Lady Beatrice."

"Wait just a moment…why must I—*Betty*—feel at all lonely? Answer me that, elder twin. You hear me?!"

"Yes, yes, I hear you, Lady Beatrice. Now please be good and sit quietly—the appetizers will arrive shortly." Ram coaxed the red-faced, squawking girl into her chair to calm her down.

That was when Roswaal and Rem entered the dining hall. Noticing that Ram was putting on the finishing touches, Rem immediately ran over to her.

"Sister! I'm sorry I dumped all the work on you. Were you all right?"

"It was just more of the usual, and you deserve to be selfish now and then. Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Oh, yes, Sister! Do look forward to the new and improved Rem starting tomorrow!"

Rem really must have gleaned a lot from her observations, as the usually reserved girl was loud and proud. Seeing that warmed Ram's heart. She reached out and patted her sister's head, and Rem giggled from the ticklish sensation.

"Since you've returned from the kitchen, does that mean dinner is almost ready?" Ram asked.

"Yes, and since they don't need us to serve the food, we've been instructed to take our seats at the table. Sister, let's sit together."

Ram smiled and said, "Don't get too excited now. It's indecent."

Rem impatiently tugged on her sister's hand, and they quickly found their seats. She nervously glanced at the dining hall entrance

and idly said, "Poor Subaru, I wish he could enjoy this dinner with us."

After a pause, Ram suggested, "You should give him a heartfelt account of the meal afterward to make up for it."

Rem's eyes lit up. "That's a great idea, Sister. Do you think Subaru will like that?"

"He'll burst into tears, trust me."

Naturally, Ram conveniently didn't mention whether those would be tears of joy or bitterness.

Just as their conversation was winding down, the double doors to the dining hall flew open. It was time for the grand entrance of the star of the night—the chef supreme.

"So sorry to keep you in anticipation. Is everyone here?"

The man looked around the dining hall, his fat jiggling as he turned. What greeted him was a table filled with young ladies, each more beautiful than the last. With a few savage snorts of the nose, he nodded in satisfaction.

"Yes, yes, how *delicious*. It's just as you said, Marquis, mm-hmm. Now then, everything is ready, so let us lay out the feast, shall we?"

The chef shamelessly licked Emilia's entire body with his eyes, but she smiled cheerfully, completely oblivious to this.

"Yes, thank you, Chef."

She was eagerly awaiting her dinner with innocent impatience. Ram glanced at her out of the corner of her eye, worried how this dinner party would turn out.

However—

"Excuse me, is there room for another lady at the table?"

The sudden development was so wildly unexpected that not even Ram could have seen it coming.

"……"

It was a collected, slightly raspy voice that sounded distinctly familiar.

An outsider had shown up. Everyone was so startled by the sudden appearance of an uninvited guest that their eyes darted over to the dining hall entrance without meaning to. And there stood the newcomer in a brilliant black dress.

Long lustrous brunette hair cascaded down the jet-black dress that hugged the new guest's somewhat tall frame. Her lips had been painted darkly with rouge, and dark eyeliner and long lashes accentuated the allure of her eyes. A sheer shawl was draped over the shoulders, and the way the dinner guest's high heels clacked against the floor exuded elegance.

As they beheld the sudden addition to their dinner party, everyone held their breaths and doubted their eyes.

But the guest in the black dress stood boldly before them all, and with a coy tilt of the head and a sweet smile, said, "What in heavens is the matter? Surely you all remember your good friend—Natsumi Schwartz."

Their silent stares were met with a brazen introduction. Natsumi Schwartz's each and every gesture was executed with shocking perfection.

"…!"

Once she recovered from the initial shock, Ram struggled to decide what she should do. This moment of hesitation—quite unusual for Ram, who was otherwise decidedly decisive—was because the situation had simply exceeded the bounds of her imagination.

Though it was a challenge to tear her eyes away from this interloper, Ram somehow managed to glance at Roswaal. How would the master of the house and host of the party handle the situation?

"……Weeeell, apologies about the mix-up, Lady Natsumi. Come, come, have a seat. I'm so sorry, Chef, but would you mind if we added just *one* more guest to the table?"

The dinner party shall resume!!!

Roswaal's words of welcome were essentially a declaration that the show must go on.

The mysterious woman smiled beautifully and sauntered seductively beside the chef's fat frame. The way she ran a slinky hand along his jaw and neck was the epitome of voluptuousness.

The man dumbly nodded his head up and down, then frantically dashed out of the room to fetch another serving of food. In a pitiful turn of events, the chef had been dethroned by the dame as the dinner party's star.

After she was certain the chef was gone, the mysterious lady elegantly made her way to the seat beside Emilia and asked, "Pardon me—is this seat taken?"

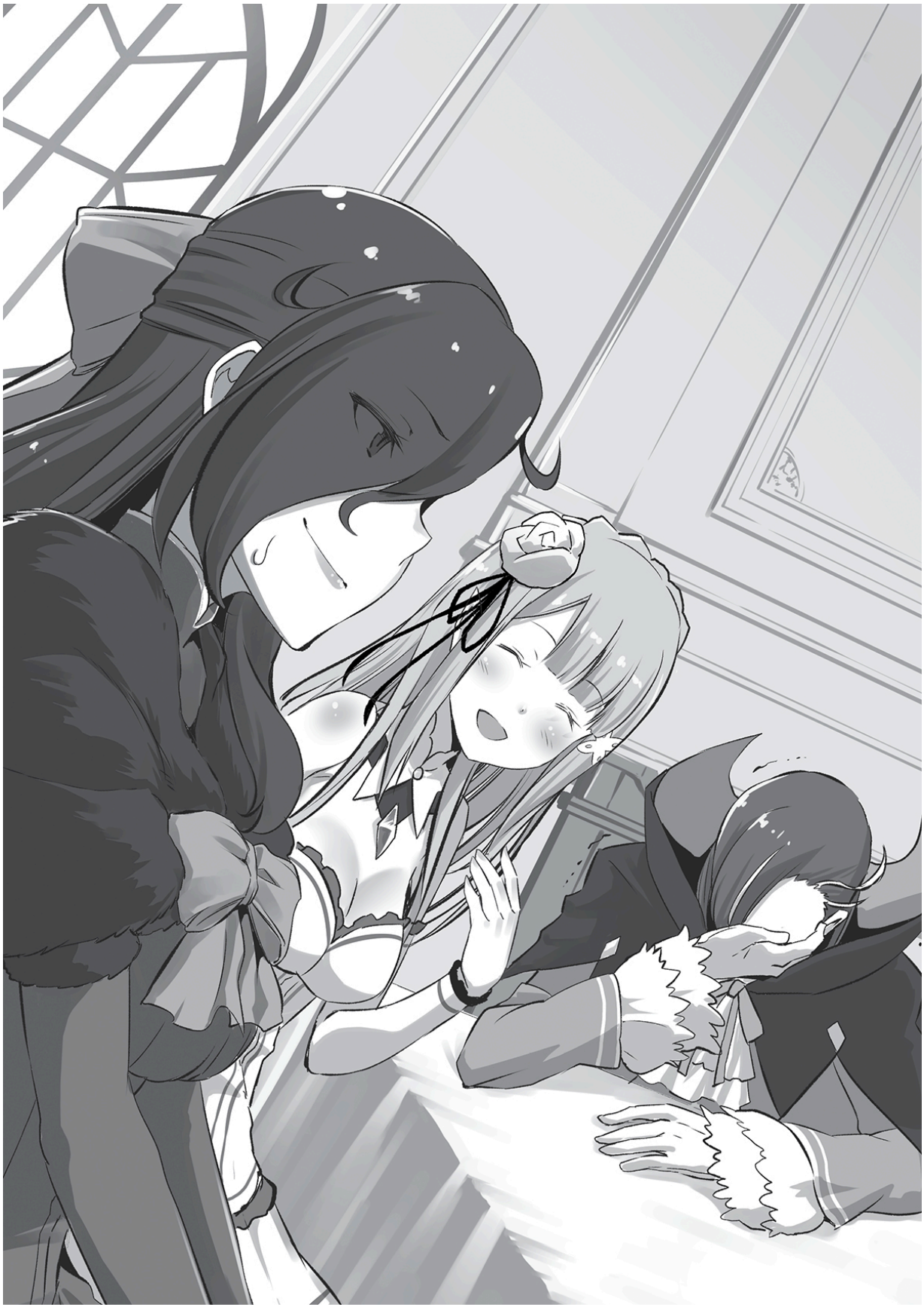
"Sooo pretty… Oh! Y-yes, go ahead. I'm sorry, silly Roswaal didn't inform me we had another guest."

Unable to hide her surprise, Emilia spoke as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

Ram chanced a glance at everyone else at the table. Rem and Beatrice reacted in different ways—Beatrice wore a knowing grin. Meanwhile, judging from the faint flush on her cheeks, Rem was struggling with unknown impulses surging inside her.

And Roswaal, the ever-steady anchor, lowered himself into his seat and hunched over the table, saying, "I……I never…s-saw that coming…!"

While her master fought the urge to burst out laughing with every fiber in his being, Ram finally resigned herself to confront the insanity head-on.





"I *wondered* what stunt you'd try to pull… Barusu, a force to be feared."

The lady Natsumi Schwartz was none other than Subaru Natsuki in drag. While traces of his original features peeked through the disguise, he had successfully duped Emilia into believing he was a woman. That's just how terrifyingly flawless his transformation was.

9

Natsumi Schwartz successfully secured a seat next to Emilia at the table. But as he sat there in his flawless ensemble for the evening, he secretly made a sour face to himself.

"Don't let your guard down yet, Subaru."

—Yeah, yeah, I get it. I won't slip up.

As his made-up face smiled, Subaru frowned at Puck's warning voice in his head. It was spirit-induced telepathy—the ultimate form of encrypted communication. With this, Subaru and Puck could coordinate perfectly to create the facade of Natsumi Schwartz.

When Subaru discovered the conspiracy hidden in the night's dinner party, he went over the intel he'd gathered on the chef and quickly determined that cross-dressing was the only way to go.

Luckily, this wasn't his first rodeo—he knew what he was doing.

—After all, I flawlessly passed for a girl my first day of high school and had everybody fooled for a whole three days!

His unexpected affinity for makeup and his gender-neutral name of Subaru had been crucial. He even joined a group of girls at school and got dangerously close to living out the rest of his school days as a girl.

"Y'know, something tells me I'd rather not hear more…"

—Yeah, it'll just open old wounds, so let's drop it.

Telepathically nodding to his tactful partner, Subaru looked down to make sure his disguise was still in place. He had masked his fierce eyes with dark eyeshadow, and with a combination of false eyelashes and a handy tool, he had attained perfect albeit temporary double eyelids. He had added a dewy luster to his skin with

foundation and a contrasting dark lip color, and the long brunette wig had been borrowed from the dressing room. The tight dress that hid his masculine body came from the same room—it likely belonged to a taller maid who once worked at the mansion.

If he ever were to meet this maid, no amount of apologizing could make up for what he did that day. But for now, he owed this mystery maid his gratitude for a perfect Natsumi Schwartz transformation.

Once he had mastered the physical appearance, the mannerisms and movements required to perform the role of a well-bred lady were small potatoes for Subaru. He was more talented than he gave himself credit for.

But there was one element that Subaru could not change, no matter how hard he tried, and that was his voice. That was what caused his prior cross-dressing adventure to fail—his falsetto had cracked catastrophically on the third day.

However, Subaru embodied the lessons he learned that day and managed to overcome the issue with a little help from his spirit friend.

"I am quite looking forward to dinner. Lady Emilia, do you have confidence in your etiquette tonight?"

"Er—me? Ummm…I'm still learning. But I'll try my best to avoid embarrassing myself."

"O-ho-ho, excellent. We mustn't let ourselves get carried away in the splendor of the feast."

With a hand daintily covering her smiling lips, Lady Natsumi boldly initiated conversation with Emilia. She spoke not with a deep man's voice but with a husky sort of androgynous voice. This was not Subaru's doing, but his partner's—namely, Puck.

Puck had nestled himself in Lady Natsumi's shawl at her breast and was sneakily speaking instead of Subaru. In a way, Natsumi Schwartz was a ventriloquist performance put on by Subaru and Puck.

"……"

Two people were staring intensely at Lady Natsumi—Ram and Beatrice. From the obvious strain on their faces, they knew Lady

Natsumi's true identity. But it was less the quality of the disguise and more the fact that there was nobody else she *could* be.

Of course, Rem was staring at Lady Natsumi for the same reason, but in her case, she was using the same mothering gaze she always gave him. It was unclear how she felt about the situation in her heart of hearts, but as she was simply staring quietly and not compromising the facade, she could tentatively be counted as an ally.

And as for Roswaal, the person who set this whole operation in motion, and the *adversary* they needed to heed most—

"Pfft—hee-hee…"

He was genuinely amused by the farce and seemed to have no intention of blowing Lady Natsumi's cover. Evidently, Subaru had been spot-on when he'd predicted that Roswaal would not go out of his way to stop them.

Incidentally, Emilia still seemed genuinely oblivious to Lady Natsumi's true identity, and he was ready to assume he could pull off the charade from start to finish with her. (Because E M T.)

"Dinner is served, my lovelies."

Dias (the following omitted) returned and carefully served the meal one plate at a time. Silver cloches were removed to reveal whitefish. The sweet aroma was stunning.

"*Laute Loix Poisson* in Ragudishu sauce."

He spoke briefly, and not a single word in the dish name was recognizable.

However, no explanation was needed to see how the lustrous gold and green sauces blended as they rested atop the white of the lightly grilled fish. And the warming aroma passing through Subaru's nostrils seized him by his stomach. Drool pooled in his mouth, and he almost felt faint.

"Wh-whoa there, Subaru!"

—Ah! D-disaster narrowly averted!

Right as Subaru was about to pick up the plate and lap at it like a dog, Puck's voice brought him to his senses. He had almost ruined his social life, never mind blown his cover. A quick peek confirmed that Emilia was also entranced by her plate, and everyone else at

the table showed similar reactions, more or less.

The impending gourmet experience clashed horribly with the chef's obsession for strictly enforcing good table manners. Its aroma alone threatened to peel away the veil of civilization, awakening the primal instincts that lay beneath. Subaru—nay, Lady Natsumi—swallowed the drool collecting in her mouth and grabbed her knife and fork before anyone else.

"Know what you have to do, Subaru?"

When he heard Puck's telepathic question, Subaru grinned like a villain and nodded.

—I've already come this far. Time to put my money where my mouth is…or fish, I guess. I'll finish faster than anyone else at this table.

"My, it looks absolutely scrumptious. Almost feels a waste to eat it."

Synchronizing with her lips, Puck gave Lady Natsumi a graceful yet bold voice. It was crucial that Subaru not do anything to ruin this stylish arrangement, so he kept his cool and focused on his table manners.

He pressed his fork against the fish, cutting a bite-sized piece with his knife. It was grilled to perfection, so tender that it gave way with a gentle press of the fork. The way it danced with the sauce was so visually appetizing that Subaru almost lost control. He held his breath, willing himself to resist the tantalizing anticipation of sumptuous flavors that were just one bite away.

If he let his guard down now, there would be no coming back.

He couldn't let this glorious feast incapacitate him right when he was supposed to be guiding Emilia. Armed with a steely resolve and a love for Emilia, Subaru readied himself to conquer his plate. He opened his eyes with renewed determination and slowly brought the bite of fish to his lips.

"……"

His order of operations, appearance, movements, elegance, and all other aspects of his performance had been polished to a beautiful sheen…but the moment the fish hit his tongue, his efforts were instantly crushed.

For a moment, Subaru thought his eyes would fall out of his head.

Overwhelming flavor shot through his entire body, shocking his brain, the blood in his veins, every muscle and every bone, down to the cellular level. In that moment, Subaru's underbaked determination and resolve melted away.

Crushed, humiliated, and utterly defeated, Lady Natsumi quietly slipped out of her chair. She walked over with the click-clack of her heels and stood before Dias (the following omitted).

The chef gave her a dubious look and asked, "Is something the matter?"

She took a quiet breath, then dropped to her knees.

"Please forgive me—I licked the plate clean!"

His head pressed against the floor, Subaru promptly surrendered in his own voice.

"Welp…guess that's our loss." Puck muttered telepathically from his hiding spot in Subaru's bosom. But he was absolutely right. They had failed.

Echoes of Subaru's emotions reached Puck through their psychic link, so he tasted the defeat just as keenly as the boy. Subaru let those crushing feelings guide him and prostrated himself before Dias.

"That food was freaking amazing. I tried to eat it with poise and grace. But that was utterly impossible. I don't think anybody could do it. I know we're supposed to have good table manners, and I absolutely agree. But please consider that maybe it's also a good thing to talk about the food, smile, laugh, and say how tasty it is while you eat it!"

Unable to see the chef's face, Lady Natsumi—nay, Subaru—apologized with dogged desperation. It was both an excuse and the bitter complaint of a man defeated by conspiracy, and yet it was also genuine and heartfelt praise. This cooking was so powerful, it robbed people of their manners.

Once Subaru had finished sharing his ridiculous rambling, Dias's eyes widened in surprise. It was an understandable reaction. But Subaru hoped that if anyone should be axed that evening, it would

only be—

"Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Subaru's moment of prayer was shattered by the sudden burst of laughter. He jerked his head up and spotted someone shamelessly guffawing by the dining hall entrance. This person overflowing with mirth was short and wore a head covering—

"Ha-ha, I'm terribly sorry. Hearing of my reputation and trying to seduce me at my dinner table with evasive words, surely a fellow can only be so cunning."

The individual pulled the head cloth up, revealing her face. The young girl's high-pitched voice and daring smile were at total odds with the oddly archaic way she was talking.

When the person they assumed to be Dias's assistant made her grand entrance, Subaru was at a loss for words. But the girl studied Subaru's blank stare, bared her teeth in a satisfied smile, and said, "I don't encounter many dinner guests who let my cuisine defeat them and respond with such sincerity. Oh, Marquis, you *are* a sly fellow. So this is what you meant when you said I would enjoy myself!"

"I figured the honest reactions would be mooost suitable. Personally, I was expecting it to come from someone else…but, aaaaall's well that ends well."

As the girl cackled, Roswaal responded in kind with a knowing smirk. Subaru gave them both a confused look, still not following.

"All sorts of rumors circulate about my master, but they're nothing but lies and fabrications. My master deliberately allows those tall tales to spread and doesn't refute any of them, because she finds it terribly enjoyable to use her divine cooking to torment the poor souls who put too much stock in rumors."

The one who answered Subaru in his nasally voice was Dias (the following omitted)—though of course it was now obvious that he was not who he had claimed to be.

"So, does that mean the real Dias—the following omitted—is…?"

"'Tis I. By the by, the rumor about my prodigious anger when I'm not addressed by my full name? That one's true. I suggest you commit it to memory so that you may say it without error."

Sticking out her chest with pride, the girl gave the floor a mighty

stomp and declared, “My name is Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI! Your struggle against the rumors and your overwhelming defeat at the hands of my cooking was a joy to watch! Splendid work!”

As the girl—the real Dias—cackled, all Subaru could do was continue staring blankly into space. The real Dias walked over to him, extended a hand, and helped him to his feet. Before he knew it, she had escorted him back to his seat with flawless poise.

“Rather bold costuming, if I do say so myself—also splendid! I have no choice but to counter with my specialty! Come, Rodriguez!”

“Yes, Master!”

With that declaration, Dias raced back into the kitchen with her apprentice in tow.

The banquet resumed, and the next set of dishes was brought to the table—or that was what happened in theory, but the actual events that followed were as turbulent as a hurricane.

“Well, then! Noooow that we have passed the esteemed legendary chef’s trial by fire, let the banquet resume. To Suba—Lady Natsumi, let’s raise a glass to her sacrifice.”

Seizing the moment, Roswaal raised a glass and toasted Subaru’s glorious death in battle.

“Good going, Barusu—I mean, Lady Natsumi Schwartz.”

“You were a splendid disaster. But Brother was as lovely as always, I suppose.”

“Lady Natsumi, you’re so lovely. A very good transformation. I would love for you to give your Rem some fashion and cosmetics tips sometime.”

When Ram, Beatrice, and Rem followed Roswaal’s cheers with their own comments as they toasted Suabaru’s epic failure, Subaru’s only wish was to find a hole he could bury himself in.

And as Subaru wrestled with his roiling emotions, Emilia patted him on the shoulder and said, “I don’t really understand what happened, but can I ask just one question?”

Sensing the trepidation in Emilia’s preamble, Subaru awkwardly muttered, “Go ahead…” while he awaited his doom.

And then Emilia pressed a finger to her cheek, and with a sweet

but confused smile, she said, "Your voice sounds *really* similar to Subaru's… Have we met before?"

Right at the moment of his greatest defeat yet, Emilia mercilessly delivered the absolute worst response possible.

And still in Subaru's—nay, Lady Natsumi's—bosom, Puck smirked and telepathically delivered the final punch line of the day.

"Womp, womp."

10

"I do believe that was a very fruitful banquet indeed," Dias said as she chuckled with great enthusiasm. Her cooking utensils had been stowed away in the big bag she carried on her back.

Roswaal, who was standing out in the lobby to bid her farewell at the door, smirked and replied, "I'm terribly sorry the members of my household couldn't all come see you off. They're all quite worn out, you see. And thank you for everything… Rem ceeertainly learned a great deal studying under you."

"Anyone who seeks to walk the path of a chef is always welcome under my wing. She has mettle, that one. Cherish her." Dias was very pleased with Rem, who had stared so hard watching the legendary chef cook that her eyes could have opened holes in the walls.

Then Dias turned to her gloomy apprentice and gave him a little poke in the shoulder.

"Come, Rodriguez. Don't look so dull before we set off. Square up those shoulders."

"I know I say this all the time, but you don't need to *tease* your guests *all* the time. You could just cook the way you always do. That way, I could also stop constantly acting and promoting those sleazy rumors."

"I shall do no such thing! It's simply too enjoyable to crush those fools who believe hearsay without thinking! And as for the sleazy rumors, they'll never stop until you stop talking so suggestively!"

"What do you mean?"

Turning her back on her blissfully oblivious apprentice, Dias waved to Roswaal and said, "I'll be taking my leave now. There are still many in this world who wish to taste my cooking. It sure is tough being popular! The river of fools will never run dry!"

"You certainly do take a greaaat deal of satisfaction in your work."

"It's a *hobby*. A hobby I devote my life to. Besides…"

Dias cut herself off there, placing her hands on the kerchief covering her head. She quickly pulled it off, revealing a wave of beautiful golden hair—and a pair of ears slightly longer than a human's—

"Showing an elf like me that half-elf girl of yours—that was the main reason you brought me here, right?"

"The path she walks…it just might become the bridge between races. If that day ever comes, you won't need to mask your identity and hide behind your apprentice on your never-ending journey."

"Hmph, spare me your analysis, Court Jester. I live this way because it suits me. I have no intention of publicly supporting her for the crown."

With a wink, Dias flashed a smile and covered her head again. Then, with a dashing twirl, she boldly walked outside.

"That said, I enjoyed hearing her opinions on the food. She was just as sincere as that cross-dressing boy. If you need anything, call on me again. I won't mind."

"Then is it safe to consider this the staaaart of a fabulous relationship?"

"Consider it whatever you want. Oh, there is one more thing." Giving in to Roswaal's persistence, Dias held up a finger to indicate she expected something in return. "Next time, I want to hear some honest opinions again. Keep that half-elf girl and that cross-dressing boy close. Also, next time I come, make sure that boy dresses like a lady again."

"If that's all, it would be my pleasure."

Roswaal promptly agreed to the cross-dressing proviso without the subject's consent or knowledge.

With that parting exchange, Dias and Rodriguez set out on the next leg of their long journey.

“For a moment there, things looked quite fraught…but I guess I now have a friend in the famous Dias Lepunzo Elemanso Oplane Fatsbalm VI.”

Though there were mishaps every step of the way, Roswaal felt it a fair assessment to say that he had achieved his main objective.

“Still…what a masterpiece that was.”

The image of Subaru’s perfected drag persona—Natsumi Schwartz—appeared unbidden in Roswaal’s mind. He would have plenty of excuses to tease the boy for a long while. What an incredibly fruitful banquet.

A feast for the eyes, for the memories, and—excluding himself—for the taste buds.

“Pfft! Ha-ha…ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Unable to hold it in any longer, Roswaal doubled over. With a face he never showed anyone, in a place unseen, he howled with laughter. He continued to laugh all alone for quite some time.

THE WORLD THROUGH PETRA'S EYES

1

To Petra Leyte, the world was very small and simple.

On the lands of Marquis Mathers sat a little village named Earlham. It was here that the Leyte family made their home and where Petra was born.

Petra was not fortunate enough to have a blessing, nor did she have a wealthy family. She was born in the most ordinary village in the most ordinary house as the most ordinary village girl, but she was fortunate enough to grow up healthy.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy about Earlham Village. It was just one more lonely village, much like any other. Being near the marquis's mansion was the village's only distinguishing feature. Unlike the rest of the marquis's realm, many of Earlham's residents had the chance to see the lord in person from time to time.

But to demand of the still quite young Petra that she comprehend these valuable encounters was a cruel notion indeed.

Now, this lord, Roswaal L Mathers, was quite an enigma. For a start, he looked nothing like what most people imagined one of those grand nobles was supposed to look like.

He fancied wearing the sort of clown makeup that belonged more in fairy tales than at court, and he was always dressed in eccentric, bizarre clothing. Whenever anyone saw him, they looked upon him not with reverence but with bewilderment.

If the lord of the land isn't respectable, common folk like us are gonna be in serious trouble.

This was a thought that had slowly taken shape in Petra's mind based on the children's books she'd read and the adult conversations

she'd overheard. And even as a child, Petra somehow noticed that her lord did not seem to be the most upstanding person.

In fact, the way he sometimes sauntered down to "inspect" their village was quite peculiar. He didn't seem very much like their lord. Instead, he pulled pranks on the adults, said strange things that angered the blond maid, and generally turned the village upside down, leaving chaos in his wake.

Unable to understand why the village elders laughed it off, Petra once complained directly to the marquis himself. However—

"Oh, myyyy. What a strict judge of character you are. But to be able to say such a thing to someone like me truly makes you a brave little girl. I hope you keep that courage in your heart always, even when you grow up."

For some reason, he ignored Petra's righteous indignation and happily patted her on the head. Ever since that day, Petra gave up lecturing him about his eccentric behavior, deeming any conversation with her lord a complete waste of time.

Now that that's out of the way, our story's focus will shift from the village and its lord back to Petra.

Petra lived an ordinary life as an ordinary girl in an ordinary village. And to borrow a word from the lord, we can add that she was a *brave* girl. And as an ordinary village girl, as long as she could remember, she had realized something about herself. Compared to the other village children, *she was a bit prettier*.

Even taking Petra's childishness into account, she was indeed quite pretty. She had big round eyes, lips the color of cherry blossoms, long, lean proportions, and fair skin. Her reddish-brown hair was fine and silky, waving gently in the breeze behind her. Petra's youthful yet elegant appearance earned her the village's stamp of approval—everyone agreed that someday, she would be a stunning beauty.

A little girl's self-awareness was not to be taken lightly. Because not only was Petra better-looking than most, she was also more intelligent. On the other hand, that intelligence could be called

cunning.

Petra believed that being born with good looks was equal to being born with a blessing or talent. So it was only natural that she should exploit her good looks to make her mark in life.

Whenever she broke something because she got a little too carried away at play.

Whenever she stole a bite of the sweet orenjes that grew in the orchards.

Whenever she neglected the family livestock and played with her friends instead.

And every time the adults got angry with her, Petra slyly made use of her beauty and charm. If she let her eyes fill with tears, peered down at her feet, and muttered an apology, that was enough to convince the adults to not be mad. And it was only natural that once they stopped scolding Petra, they would have to stop scolding the other children, too.

The only adults who could scold Petra without reservation—her parents—were thoroughly fooled by the good-girl facade she maintained around them. So Petra spent her days acting like a mischievous little devil.

As long as you have Petra by your side, fortune will smile on you.

Everyone had no problem believing that, even though she was a child—perhaps *because* she was a child. Organically, Petra became a focal point for the village children. And because of this, Petra grew more and more spoiled.

Admired by the boys, relied upon by the girls, and doted on by the adults, Petra watered her flower of self-worth until it was in full bloom.

It was almost harder to not believe the world revolved around her, as delusional as that may have seemed. Of course, she was still a child, which made her precious, delusion and all.

And though she was spoiled, Petra's rottenness never went beyond what was expected of any other rascal, and none of her misadventures with her friends ever rose above the level of your average village antics.

Petra Leyte, center of the world, would eventually recognize her

delusion. She would learn that the world was much bigger than she once assumed. That happened when she turned ten years old.

It was when a merchant selling silk goods came to the village; a rarity in Earlham. Apparently, this merchant sold several unusual pieces to the marquis with eccentric fashion tastes before leaving. On the way out, the merchant stopped at Earlham Village and briefly set up shop.

"These are the latest trends out west in Kararagi, far to the south in Volakia, and in the royal capital of Lugunica."

When Petra heard the merchant's voice and saw the wares on display, her worldview changed. Her gaze was stolen by the brilliant, colorful fabrics. In a flash, she was sucked into a mirage.

The next thing she knew, she used her cute charm to wrap the merchant and her parents around her little finger, attained several pieces of fabric, and stared at them for hours on end in bed in her room, never tiring of them.

They became an irreplaceable treasure to her…and they ignited a dream within her.

2

Years passed since Petra found her dream, and now Petra was twelve years old.

At this age, not only the mind changed but the body as well. It was a time when girls began to bloom slowly, not with childish cuteness, but with the beauty of a woman.

Though still a little bud, Petra's prized charm was alive and well—in fact, she had carefully nurtured it (and her self-awareness) until they grew to impressive new heights.

And this twelve-year-old Petra was still the center of attention in the village. The adults called her clever and cute in turn. But alone in her room, her cheeks puffed with dissatisfaction.

The reason was her dream.

The shock that consumed her by chance that fateful day grew

bigger and bigger with every passing month. Two years later, her treasure was still carefully tucked away, every bit as vibrant as before.

And as a once-vague desire took definite shape, Petra realized what her dream was.

When she grew up, she would move to the royal capital and make clothes for a living.

She would drape herself in pretty fabric to her heart's content and make the cutest and most dashing clothes. The beautiful bolts of fabric that stole her gaze that day had helped Petra realize what her dearest wish was.

Upon further consideration, she might have only disliked the marquis because she didn't like his fashion sense. It was truly terrible. Textile blasphemy.

Ultimately, her feelings about the marquis and his outfits were inconsequential. The actual source of Petra's dissatisfaction ran much deeper. When she started practiced sewing, most people around her didn't seem to approve.

Especially the other children. Their reactions were truly deplorable. Whenever she tried to talk about the future with them, they never said what she wanted to hear.

Luca just dribbled snot out of his nose while declaring he was going to be a lumberjack like his dad, and Mildo thought very hard until his stomach growled. When Dyne and Cain heard that Petra planned to leave the village one day, they fought constantly over who would get to marry her. And she loved Meyna like a sister, but whenever Petra mentioned leaving for the royal capital, she would burst into tears.

That was when Petra had her first real taste of loneliness.

The other children relied on Petra, but Petra had no friends to rely on. And talking to adults about her dream without them laughing at her was a struggle.

What could possibly be the meaning of this? It was so dreadfully lonely being pretty.

To Petra, who had gotten everything she wanted just by being pretty, this was a hard truth to swallow. Finding a hurdle that could

not be cleared with prettiness was Petra's first major setback in life.

In the end, Petra kept her dream and her struggles to herself. Her days were now filled with a new struggle. Maybe when she grew up a little more and got prettier, everything would work out.

She took solace in entrusting this hope on her future self.

Then one day, another strange chance encounter found Petra, at that very difficult age of twelve.

It happened while she and her friends were on their way to the nearby stream to fish for kreyfish. Since she didn't want to get her clothes dirty, Petra was originally going to watch, but she still loved being with her friends. Though she secretly held her fears for the future in her chest, that was no problem at the moment—

Then it happened.

"Hey, you over there! Yeah, you kids! Do you know where the head of the village might be?!"

A very pushy boy with black hair came out of nowhere, calling to them. He had unsettling eyes and a slack expression. He was grinning like a fool, but he was also dressed well—meaning he was horribly mismatched. His face wasn't good enough for his nice clothes.

But thanks to his strange appearance, Petra could immediately guess where he was from.

"Oh, are you by any chance the new servant at the marquis's manor?"

"Yeah, that's right! Way to go, Petra! So smart! So cute! My favorite villager!"

"Um…did I ever give you my name?"

"Urgh!"

The boy stopped his excited clapping and groaned awkwardly at Petra's critical stare. A total stranger had just called her by name, which raised all sorts of red flags for Petra. She was also still ticked off by the way his loud voice had startled her. How in the world had he learned her name?

"Uhhh, you know how I know! It's that thing! You're the most

beautiful girl in the village! Tales of Petra's bravery echo far and wide outside of Earlham Village! Even in Roswaal Manor! Get it?"

"Oh…in the marquis's mansion? Oh dear…I'm…I'm so embarrassed…!"

Just moments ago, the boy was unsteady and panicking, but when he saw Petra's hands shyly snap to her cheeks, he breathed a huge sigh of relief. "Well, that just makes sense! Totally normal! And let me tell you, you're a hundred times prettier than the stories say. Ha-ha-ha!"

And as the boy carried on, Petra continued to be embarrassed… on the surface. All the while, she was carefully scrutinizing his reactions.

Though his clothing made him look like a respectable servant at a mansion, she still didn't trust him. Once, the mansion had a male guest who stared at Petra and her friends a lot. Though that guest had a handsome face and dressed well, something about his gaze had been very unsettling.

And upon a closer glance, that man and this boy wore the same clothes. Though she was startled that the same garment could look so starkly different depending on who wore it, carelessness was her biggest enemy. Her prettiness put her in danger.

"My name is Subaru Natsuki! A plucky butler in training! I started working at Roswaal Manor only yesterday. I hope we all can be good friends!"

Oblivious to Petra's wariness, the boy—Subaru—introduced himself with much fanfare. There wasn't even a hint of an adult's composure in him, and all his excessive jumping around didn't suggest that he'd had a good upbringing. Petra quickly got the sense that he was messing with her because she was just a child, and the way he casually entered her personal space rubbed her the wrong way.

In brief, Petra's first impression of Subaru was terrible.

However, perhaps amused by the demeanor that was neither childish nor mature, Luca and Mildo immediately warmed up to him, and to Petra's dismay, they became fast friends. That meant Petra, as the representative of all the village children, would be obligated

to accept him, too.

"So…you want to see the village head? What business do you have?"

"Well, my senior maid asked me to deliver something. So, guess I'm a delivery boy!"

"Hmph. Understood. Then I'll take you to the village elders."

With Luca on his back and Mildo and Dyne tugging at his clothes, Subaru smiled awkwardly as Petra showed him the way. Petra couldn't help thinking he was a pushover for not getting angry at their childish antics like he should have.

Incidentally, the head of the village was technically Elder Milde, but Petra made it a point to bring Subaru to Milde's younger brother, Lasfume, who looked more like a village chief.

He'll probably get chewed out at the mansion later for going to the wrong person. Heh, funny.

The next day, the new hire at the mansion was the talk of the town. It was a small village. Nothing scandalous ever happened, but that meant the most trivial of news spread in the blink of an eye. Especially when it came to the servants of Roswaal Manor, who visited the village regularly on shopping trips. This was somebody whom they would be seeing a lot of in the coming months and years, so it was only natural they wanted to know more about him.

"Well, I'm not sure what he's like, exactly. Oh, but he doesn't seem like a bad person, at least," Petra answered vaguely when her parents asked her about him.

Since she had been the one to show him around the day before, quite a few people were coming to her about the rumors. The other children got questions as well, but Petra was the one the adults trusted most.

Subaru hadn't left a very good impression on her, but it would be bad for her to give a different answer from the other kids. Being pretty sure was difficult. After a day of interrogations, Petra was all sighs.

"Huh…? Haven't seen her around before."

After Petra slipped away from the adults and retreated to the outskirts of the village, her eyes widened in surprise. There was a girl with light brown hair in pigtails—this was now her second day in a row encountering a stranger.

"Whatcha doing here all by yourself?" she asked.

"Uh…"

Compared with yesterday's visitor, Petra felt no hesitation in approaching the unfamiliar girl, who turned around at the sound of Petra's voice. And in Petra's eyes, she was a little—or actually *very*—pretty.

Her clothes were plain, and she wore no decorations in her hair, but her features were easy on the eyes. A desire consumed Petra—she wanted to get her hands on that girl.

After years of polishing and refining her own beauty, Petra paid close attention to the beauty of others. She especially hated wasted beauty, which was why she was a real thorn in her mother's and Meyna's sides.

She wanted to instill the spirit of beauty into this little girl—that desire raced through her.

"My name is Meili. Due to family issues, I've come to stay at this village for a little while."

Meili smiled as she introduced herself—she was a very well-behaved girl. She answered immediately whenever anyone talked to her, but she never started conversations. She had a similar personality to Meyna, which triggered Petra's big sister instincts. She felt compelled to take care of the little girl.

"Come with me! I'll introduce you to everyone. I'm Petra! Your new friend!"

When Petra dragged the shy Meili back to the village with her, Luca and the others quickly welcomed her into their circle.

When it came to a fellow kid, one short chat was all it took for them to be as good as friends. In no time at all, Meili was one of them. The very same day, they ran around the village and got to know each other better.

"It's okay, come here," Meili said coaxingly. "I think this little one's a girl…"

"Wow, that's so, so cool, Meili! It's like you can talk to animals!"

What made Petra and her friends particularly excited was the puppy Meili tamed. The little dark brown ball of fur had come with Meili, and it was rather friendly with people. When it performed tricks at Meili's command like it understood exactly what she was saying, the children were awestruck.

"Meili! We're totally playing together again tomorrow, okay?!"

When the sun had set, Petra squeezed Meili's hand good-bye as they promised to see each other the next day. Meili shyly nodded, and Petra returned home satisfied.

"Listen, I made a new friend today! She was all alone, so I invited her to play."

When Petra shared at the dinner table how her day had gone, her parents smiled warmly and praised her. That was yet another thing that satisfied Petra's ego.

Meili was a good girl, sure, but *Petra* was the one who had reached out to her when Meili was all alone. Not only was Petra pretty, she was kind, too. That had to count for something. It felt like she was one step closer to the royal capital.

And with these slightly calculated thoughts buoying her smiling cheeks, Petra happily fell asleep that night.

The next day, Petra woke up and went out to play as she normally would. It seemed like just another ordinary day. Little did she know that momentous days sometimes masquerade as ordinary ones.

"I'm here! What do you wanna do today?"

When the sun was high in the sky, she met up with Luca and the others and then proceeded to the village outskirts to see Meili. And as they discussed what they were going to do that day—

"Oh! It's Subaru!"

"Huh?! Subaru?!"

"Yay! Subaru's here!"

The boys' faces lit up and they ran in a pack toward the young man who never looked good in a uniform. Surprised by their

eagerness, Subaru cried out and said, "Whoa! Hey! Bring it…oof!"

He spread his arms wide to catch them and epically failed. Luca, Mildo, Dyne, and Cain all slammed into him, and the five of them tumbled straight to the ground.

Petra called out as the uniformed boy fell on his butt. "You guys! Stop being so stupid! Subaru, are you okay?"

Subaru smirked sheepishly and scratched his head. Petra was a little confused by this. This was her second time seeing him, and for some reason, he gave off a very different impression this time. Last time, he seemed oddly flustered and foolish.

"Subaru, did something happen to you yesterday?"

"Huh?! N-no-no-no-not really?! If you think I cried my eyes out on the lap of my crush, then made it worse by dribbling snot and falling asleep, *you're totally wrong*!"

"Hmmm…"

He denied a claim she'd never made. For the time being, she could assume he didn't cry on someone's lap, get snotty, and fall asleep. But something quite similar might have happened.

"Well, whatever," Petra said with a shrug.

Petra much preferred this Subaru to the earlier model. She didn't know how the boys felt, but she got the sense she could be a little friendlier with him now.

"So are you making another delivery?" she asked Subaru.

"Yeah, but I'm on break at the moment. I was just exploring the village and— Hey! Don't climb on my back! Wipe your nose! When did I say you could wipe your snot on me?!"

"Uhh…do you need help?" Petra asked.

"……Yes, please."

Petra felt a bit sorry for Subaru as he tried to walk while the boys clung onto him. They decided to take him on a tour of the village and introduce him to the adults.

This tour included the "village chief" Lasfume, the actual village chief Milde, and Makiji, who was the de facto leader of all the village youths and sometimes wore a mask.

And as they took Subaru around the village to meet and greet everyone, he mused, "You know, maybe it would make more sense

to gather everyone so I could get up on a soapbox and introduce myself."

"What's a sope-box?"

"I just mean I'm gonna give everyone a big ol' greeting, basically." Subaru grinned impishly.

And when Petra saw his harmless smile, that was the first time she found herself liking him.

3

"Victory!"

"Victoryyy!!!"

The first glimmer of fondness Petra had for Subaru was totally offset by a strange, confusing dance. The radio calisthenics he'd gotten most of the villagers hooked on were a great embarrassment for preteen Petra. Yet the boys liked it, and their enthusiasm rubbed off on the adults. What was once fondness mutated as Petra found herself hating Subaru more and more.

Hate was probably too strong a word. She didn't like him. Or maybe she didn't know how to handle him. And his face wasn't good enough for his clothes.

"You're the only one who understands how I feel…," Petra muttered to the puppy in Meili's arms.

She gave the little dog a warm smile while Meili patted its head.

The reason she felt a curious connection with the dog was because after the strange dancing was over, Subaru was detained briefly to meet the puppy, who surprised everyone by chomping hard on his hand. To Petra, who was upset by how readily everyone else had accepted Subaru, it felt like she had finally found a kindred spirit.

Just when Petra was about to ask Meili in a burst of affection if the puppy could spend the night with her—

"Ahhh!"

Either Cain or Meyna shrieked in surprise. Or maybe it was Petra.

The puppy suddenly squirmed, jumped out of Meili's arms, and

ran away. Everyone ran after her, but they couldn't even come close. And just like that, the puppy slipped through the white fence on the village outskirts and disappeared into the forest.

"What do we do…?"

The puppy had retreated into the opposite end of the forest—the area the adults strictly forbade them from playing in. There was a barrier of magic stones to keep dangerous creatures out. In other words, the forest wasn't safe.

If a little puppy got lost in a place like that—

"Petra…"

The worried eyes of the children all focused on Petra. She was their rock. If there was ever any trouble, they came to her first. And since they relied on her, she had a duty not to betray their trust in her.

"M-Meili…?!"

They were counting on her, yet Petra couldn't say anything. So it was Meili who turned to the white fence instead. Her cheeks were stiff with fear, but she stared straight into the forest ahead and said, "I have to go rescue her…"

When Petra heard the weight of responsibility in Meili's voice, a wave of shame hit her. How could she stand still when a meek girl like Meili was ready to do anything to save her puppy?

"…"

The magic stones that separated the forest from the village hung from the trees at equal intervals. Noting the positions of the stones, Petra drew a mental map and came up with a safe route to search for the puppy.

As long as they could stay close enough to the barrier to make a run for it at the first sign of trouble, they could go search for the puppy.

"I'm joining Meili in the forest," she said. "The rest of you—"

"We can't let you!"

"You're going, right?"

"I'm gonna meet my doom there with you!"

When Petra grabbed Meili's hand, Meyna grabbed her free hand, then Luca grabbed Meyna's hand, until everyone was holding hands

in a line. Not a single one of them had run away in fear.

After a pause, Petra smiled and said, "Okay. Thanks."

The other children had leaned on Petra all her life. But for the first time, Petra was leaning on them. Had it just been her and Meili, she might not have had the courage. But, of course…

"…It'll be too difficult to walk if we all hold hands like this, so let's stop, yeah?"

Following the mental map she drew, Petra led the children into the forest.

"…"

As they crunched through the leaves and branches, Petra's heart was pounding loudly enough to rip her chest open. Sunset was approaching, and the forest lighting got gradually worse. What would they do if they lost their way? What would they do if they overlooked something? Her fears and worries filled her brow with sweat.

About an hour had passed since they'd entered the forest. And only now did Petra curse her own lack of preparedness.

They could use food to lure the puppy—no, it might lure dangerous animals to them. They could shout for the puppy—no, that was also too dangerous. They could tell an adult—yes, that's what they should have done, no matter how scared they were of a scolding. They could have brought a crystal light—or they could turn back before it got too dark. Would that be enough, though?

"…"

Petra picked up a rock and etched marks in the trees so they wouldn't lose their way, but it did little to reassure her. Little by little, her friends' faces filled with worry. If one of them broke, the whole fellowship would crumble. And that first person just might be her.

She knew where the barriers were. But would they really make it to safety if they didn't start running until after they were spotted? Was she actually doing something ridiculously dangerous?

Petra's worries grew by the second, filling her eyes with tears. After two—maybe three—more breaths, she should tell the others

they were going home. Tell them they should leave this to the adults.

She squeezed her eyes shut and mustered up the courage to tell everyone they were going home, and—

"You guys? I think…this is it…"

"Agreed—it's time to call it."

"Huh?"

Someone interrupted her. Their voice sounded familiar, but it was different somehow. Opening her eyes to see who it was, Petra found Meili's face directly in front of hers.

The timid, unconfident girl had completely transformed. Her expression was much more mature now. She didn't have that girlish prettiness anymore… Instead, she had a beauty that sent chills down the spine.

"Sorry, guys. But this is my job."

As soon as Meili said that with a smile, Petra noticed something was standing behind her. She whirled around in shock and found herself face-to-face with a giant dog. When it started growling, Petra tried to scream, "*Run away!!!*" but her voice refused to come out.

That was when she passed out.

4

In the end, Petra did not regain consciousness until the following evening.

"Petra! Oh, you silly girl…we were worried sick about you!"

When Petra slowly opened her eyes in bed, the first thing she saw was her mother holding her tightly, her face bright red.

The moment he heard his wife's voice, Petra's father came rushing into the room. He flung his arms around Petra and her mother, and in a loud voice, he started crying.

"The people from the manor helped you kids when you got lost in the forest. Subaru got a little bit hurt, and it was a whole ordeal, but he made sure to bring everyone back safely."

As Petra lay there, staring blankly at her parents in confusion, they explained everything to her. The puppy turned out to be one of those dangerous creatures that lived in the forest—a demon beast. Petra and her friends had been in mortal danger. And to Petra's surprise, it was Subaru and a maid from Roswaal Manor who had saved them.

"Now that you mention it…I think something like that did… happen…"

After hearing the story, Petra tried to search her hazy memory, but all she could remember was how it had hurt to breathe, how her body felt like it was on fire, and how she had been in so much pain. Petra remembered lying on the grass with the other children scattered on the ground around her. Then Subaru and somebody else ran over to them. When Subaru came to talk to them, Meili wasn't there—

"That's right, where's Meili?" Petra asked. "What happened to her?"

After a pause, her mother answered, "Subaru brought her back. Her family came to fetch her right away. They must have been terribly worried. She wanted us to tell you she said good-bye."

"Oh…" Petra sighed.

It seemed she was supposed to believe that Meili had said good-bye and left Earlham Village. Somehow, Petra knew that was a lie. She remembered Meili's sudden transformation the moment before it all went down. If that puppy Meili brought was actually a demon beast, then she surely must have also had a secret of her own.

Petra still wished she could have spoken with Meili one last time…

"Petra, you awake?!"

"Petra's awake?!"

"Wake up, Petra!"

Not allowing Petra even a moment of reflection, her friends noisily filled the room. Since they had woken up earlier than Petra, they had already received the same explanation. They readily accepted it at face value and were sad to hear Meili had left.

"Wanna go visit Subaru at the mansion? He's still recovering."

It was the usually shy Meyna who suggested it. The boys raised

eager hands of approval. Petra was also on board, but she thought it odd.

"Meyna, you wouldn't normally suggest a thing like that."

"Well, if Subaru wasn't there, I might have never met my little brother or sister…"

Petra knew Meyna's mother was pregnant. As an only child, it made her a little jealous. This was because Meyna started acting a bit like a big sister once she learned she was going to become one.

Yeah, I can definitely see why she would want to thank Subaru.

"Okay, let's go ask the marquis for permission to visit him!"

Even proud Petra felt she owed Subaru her gratitude for saving her life. His strange dancing had lowered his likability score, but she figured his heroics were enough to cancel that out. She would try to start being a little nicer to him from now on. Petra was a reasonable girl, after all.

"You want to see Barusu? He's still in bed…but I suppose that's fine. He's the only one who will mind if we see him drooling in his sleep. I'll take you to his room."

Petra was nervous to pay a visit to the mansion, but the pink-haired maid who greeted them was much nicer than she'd imagined. Her expression and voice were icy, but Petra got the sense that it was not out of scorn, and that she acted the same way around everybody.

"Don't you need to inform your master first?"

"He entrusts miscellaneous household matters to us. Now, if you were an assassin who came to slit Barusu's throat, that would be another matter entirely… *Are* you an assassin?"

"A girl this pretty would never be an assassin."

"Exactly. That's why you can come in."

The maid nonchalantly escorted the children inside (and didn't deny that Petra was pretty). Petra's heart raced from her first mansion visit as the party of six was escorted to a set of ornate doors.

Subaru was probably still asleep inside, even though it was

already evening. What a lazybones.

"We're coming in."

After receiving no reply from her knock, the maid opened the door. The room was spacious, and opposite the door was a very big bed. Spotting the black-haired boy lying in it, Petra sighed in relief as she stepped inside—

"Subaru, it's evening already. You shouldn't be in bed this—" She had fully intended to call him out with a smile, but Petra's voice froze in her throat.

Subaru was sleeping peacefully, breaths coming slow and steady. If that was all she'd noticed, she could have simply chalked it up as him being lazy.

But his body was covered in wounds, wrapped in bandages, with white scars peeking out here and there. And to her horror, Petra knew those were bite marks from demon beasts.

"Please be quiet so as not to wake him. When you're ready to go, let me know."

And without a word more, the maid walked out into the hall. The other children approached Subaru's bedside with worry, but Petra did not budge. She was nailed to the spot as her memories came flooding back.

"Oh."

When she was suffering in the forest, Petra had asked Subaru to do something for her. Or rather, she had asked him about *someone*. She wanted him to find Meili and bring her back. Her father told her that Subaru had taken Meili home. Had taken Petra and the other children home. That he had gotten a bit hurt, and it was quite the ordeal… Just what about those wounds implied he'd gotten "a bit hurt"?

"Ah…ahh…"

It was all her fault. Everything was her doing.

It was her fault for letting Meili into their circle. It was her fault for playing with the puppy Meili brought with her and letting it run into the forest. It was her fault for dragging everyone into the forest when she knew it was forbidden. It was her fault for knowing they should turn back, but not making that call. Even though she had

been dazed, it was her fault for asking Subaru to do something so unreasonable. And as a result of that unreasonable request, Subaru had suffered scars that would never fade.

From start to finish, this was all caused by Petra's hubris.

"Let's write something on Subaru's bandages…"

"Yes, let's…"

"Proof we came to visit…"

While Petra had gone completely still, the boys flipped back Subaru's blankets and eyed the bandage on his leg. They put on a show of hushed restraint while they poured their hearts out onto Subaru's bandages.

Then, after Meyna shyly wrote a message of gratitude, she turned back to Petra and called her name with a questioning look. It was her turn. All eyes were on her now, but she couldn't bring herself to take the quill from Meyna. Her knees were shaking, and she couldn't look at Subaru.

"Petra?"

"What's wrong?"

"You okay?"

The boys craned their necks, confused by Petra's strange behavior. And under their collective stares, Petra remembered what had happened in the forest. When they'd entered it, the boys had given Petra the same look. And back then, Petra was able to muster up what little courage she had—

"…!"

—but today, she couldn't.

Stifling a wail in the back of her throat, Petra covered her ears and ran out of the room. The maid did not chase after her. Petra headed straight for the front door, and the maid simply watched, almost like she knew Petra was going back to the village.

And that was exactly what she did. Petra couldn't get away fast enough. She ran straight home and bolted into her room. As her parents called out to her in surprise, she curled up into a little ball and shivered in terror.

It was then that Petra fully realized the weight of her sin—a sin that could never be forgiven.

"It's all my fault… I did something so horrible…!"

It wasn't until late that night that a tearful Petra confessed everything to her parents. She knew that the other children came to her house, worried by her sudden disappearance from the mansion. Her parents had come to her room many times to soothe their beloved daughter.

But she pretended not to hear them, shutting herself inside until eventually, unable to bear the mounting waves of guilt, Petra finally stumbled into her parents' room, sobbing.

Her parents were surprised when Petra started telling them what had happened. She told them about Meili, the puppy, her request to Subaru, and his terrible wounds. She told them that everything was her fault, sobbing and begging them to tell her what she should do.

Her mother coaxed her into their bed and stroked her hair as she said, "Well, let's see…you're right, Petra, what you did was quite bad."

Petra's father snuggled under the covers on her other side, sandwiching his daughter as she sniffled and sobbed.

"Whenever you do something bad, you have to make sure to apologize," her mother said. "Apologize earnestly, with all your heart."

"But…," Petra whimpered, "even if I apologize, he'll never forgive me."

"Why do we say sorry? To be forgiven? Or because we want to say how sorry we are? What do you think, Petra?"

"…"

Petra fell silent, sensing she had just been asked a very difficult question. Wasn't that what apologizing was for? To be forgiven? That's what apologies had always been to Petra—a tool; a means to an end. Even if she felt genuine remorse when she said she was sorry, in the end, the words *I'm sorry* were primarily a way to get people to forgive her.

If forgiveness wasn't a possibility…was there even any point in apologizing?

"What you're going to do is tell Subaru you're sorry," her father said. "If you're too scared to go alone, we can come with you. But

you have to be the one to say sorry, Petra."

"…"

As Petra's father held her tight, she nuzzled her cheek against his chest. She realized then that this was probably the first time she had truly let her parents baby her like this since she was an actual baby.

Petra hid her true feelings, even in front of her parents. And in that moment, in her heart of hearts, she wanted her parents' help. She wanted them by her side when she apologized to Subaru. But—

"No, thanks—I want to apologize on my own."

Petra said this, certain that she did not deserve to rely on them for this.

5

It was two days later that Subaru rose from his sickbed and paid the village a visit.

"Yeah, I really had a close call there, but I'm just glad you're all okay!"

Subaru grinned and gave a thumbs-up. He was dressed not in the butler's uniform but in some strange gray clothing Petra had never seen before. Even in her current state, Petra still had enough presence of mind to conclude that this suited him much better than the dignified uniform.

"Subaru!"

"He's better!"

"Subaru's up and moving!"

"Subaru walks the earth!"

"Oooh, hey there, little punks. Glad to see you guys are in good shape. Don't say I never did nothing for ya."

Though he was shy and awkward around the grateful adults, Subaru was his usual self around the kids, boasting about his heroics to anyone who would listen. But Petra and the adults somehow knew that was only an act to help everyone else feel comfortable.

This realization made Petra feel terribly frustrated. What Subaru had done for them, for the entire village, was incredibly significant.

So why was he acting like this?

"Subaru! Come play with us!"

"Yeah, come on!"

"Let's go fish for kreyfish!"

"We'll catch a whopper!"

Meanwhile, the boys paid no heed to Subaru's delicate condition and had grabbed his arms and legs to drag him around like they always did. When Petra saw Luca get ready to jump on Subaru's back, she shouted, "Luca! What are you thinking?! Subaru is still recovering!"

"Wha-wha-wha-wha—?!"

Startled by the loud scolding, Luca felt his bottom hit the ground. The others spun around to see Petra standing off to the side on her own.

Then Subaru extended a hand to her and said, "Hey, Petra. Whatcha doing all the way over—? Wait, huh?!"

The moment he called out to her with a smile, Petra turned around and ran. She heard Subaru's startled gasp behind her, but she didn't stop. She had been planning to apologize, but that plan went up in smoke. This was no better than how she had behaved back at the mansion.

"Haagh… Hagh…"

Petra ran all the way to the other end of the village. Her knees buckled, and her breath was ragged when she looked around. She had reached the village outskirts—and the spot where she had met Meili and the puppy.

"It's all my—"

"A lot of messy things happened here, huh."

This time, Petra was so shocked that she wouldn't have been surprised if her heart had actually stopped. She turned around and spotted Subaru just a few steps away. He made a big show of catching his breath as he leaned against a tree with a magic stone hanging from it and said, "D-dang…running this hard on the first day out of my sickbed…that really hurts. Wait, maybe I shouldn't call it a sickbed if I was injured… What do you even call that? An *injury bed*?"

"Why…?"

"You sure recovered quick… Guess my stamina just sucks."

With a sheepish grin, Subaru unceremoniously plopped himself on the ground. Petra just stood there, confused, unsure where he was going with all this. Subaru looked at her, patted the ground next to him, and said, "C'mon, Petra, sit. Let's talk."

"…Okay."

Petra didn't have the courage to tell him no. She gingerly sat beside Subaru, her eyes shifting nervously from the ground to Subaru's face. He didn't look angry. But he had every right to be.

"Agggh— Okay, so, I don't really get what this is all about," he began. "But the other kids said I should go after you. Is there something you wanna say to me?"

Petra's eyes shot open. "W-well yeah, there is, but…"

She realized the others had set this all up to give her a chance to apologize. In other words, the entire village was helping her make up for what she had done. Luca, Mildo, Cain and Dyne, even Meyna…all of them were helping Petra apologize.

And with the table set so neatly for Subaru, this was the perfect opportunity for him to give Petra a piece of his mind—

"What did you want to talk about? Don't tell me you got hurt before I got you out of the woods?! Those dogs had a real mean bite! I hope they didn't give you any scars… If they did, I'm sorry!"

"Uh, um…"

"Leaving a mark on a little girl is just unforgivable. Lemme see, I think if you want to make sure it doesn't leave a scar, you're supposed to massage it…something like this…"

Blue in the face, Subaru suddenly panicked, worried that Petra had gotten hurt. As he frantically racked his brain for helpful tips, Petra remained slack-jawed for a while, wondering if all of this was just a ruse to make Petra feel even guiltier. Of course, she quickly realized that wasn't his intention at all.

"…"

The boy sitting beside her genuinely thought Petra had done nothing wrong. If anything, he felt guilty about possibly hurting her somehow.

And that misunderstanding only made Petra angrier.

"Subaru."

"I know! Petra, show me your wound—oh, but, uh, only if it's not in a problematic place—"

"Subaru!!!"

"Yes, yes, yes, hello?! What's wrong???"

Stupefied by Petra's growl, Subaru whirled around and quietly opened his striking black eyes wide—because Petra looked like she was about to cry.

She was so overwhelmed with emotion that she wanted to scream. But it wasn't shouts of anger that she needed to get out.

"I…"

"I?"

"I'm sorry…!"

Moments after she stammered those words, tears rolled down her cheeks. This only made Subaru more flustered, but Petra let her emotions guide her and repeated her apology again and again.

"P-Petra?! Why are you apologizing?!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry…! I'm sorryyyy…"

As Subaru grew increasingly alarmed, Petra just sobbed as she said those words over and over.

"It's all my fault."

After confessing, Petra glued her gaze to the ground as she tightly clenched her fists. The tears were still falling, but her shaking had subsided enough for her to talk. So she talked, the best she could, and confessed her sins to Subaru just as she had to her parents.

She told him what had happened with Meili and the puppy, then explained how it was all her fault that he had gotten hurt.

Once she was finished, Subaru fell silent, a perplexed look on his face. Whenever Petra closed her eyes, she could see Subaru unconscious in bed. And the way he ran after her and arrived totally winded was still fresh in her memory.

As he sat beside her now, she could see the white scars on his

arms beneath the rolled-up sleeves. Scars that would never disappear.

Subaru watched her with just as much concern as before and said, "Listen, Petra…"

"……Yeah?"

Petra gritted her teeth when he called her name. She was ready for whatever came next.

What would he say to her? How would he rebuke her? For Petra, who had always been told that everything was forgiven no matter what she did, it was terrifying to face the possibility that this time might be different.

So when she peered up and saw Subaru's troubled smile, she forgot to breathe. Those weren't the eyes of a man who intended to hold a grudge forever.

"Well, I don't think you did anything wrong, Petra… Well, that's not quite right," Subaru stretched his neck, searching for the right words. "You apologized…so it must be…"

"H-huh…?" Petra stammered nervously.

"Yeah, I think I know what I need to say now." With an understanding nod, Subaru looked deep into her perplexed eyes and said, "I forgive you."

"……"

"I guess it's true that you did mess up in a lot of ways—and it would probably be wrong of me to brush it off and say you did nothing wrong. But when you feel so bad about what you did that you'd cry about it, it made me think about what you needed to hear most of all…"

"……"

"I forgive you, Petra. Don't worry, I'm not angry. I'm just glad all this didn't leave any marks on you and Meyna. It's different for me and the boys—scars are a mark of courage for us."

There wasn't a trace of anger in Subaru's smile as he talked. It was the same smile that first made Petra like him.

"—Wahhh."

As a totally different kind of shock ran through Petra, she promptly crumpled to the ground and started crying again.

6

That night, alone in her room, Petra had a long, hard think.

Why wasn't Subaru angry? Why had he forgiven her?

"Is it because I'm…?"

Pretty? No, that wasn't it. Petra already knew all too well that there were some problems being pretty couldn't solve. So that couldn't have been the reason.

Naive. Simpleminded. A pushover—that was how she thought of people all the times she used her prettiness as a weapon to mess with adults and children alike.

But none of those seemed to explain it, either. There could be only one reason why he forgave her.

"It's because…he's kind."

The moment the word *kind* appeared in Petra's mind, everything fell into place. Subaru had forgiven Petra because he was kind. Subaru had entered the forest to save the children, risked his life fighting for them, gotten terribly hurt without a word of complaint, smiled at the villagers to ease the worry in their hearts, and patted Petra's head when she cried—all because he was kind.





"Oh."

Suddenly, Petra realized then that she had lived her whole life under a gross misapprehension.

Whenever the village adults forgave Petra for playing pranks or stealing food or ditching her chores, she'd assumed it was because she was pretty. But she was wrong.

What a horrible misunderstanding. That was never it at all. The adults forgave her because they were kind, too.

The reason they overlooked her half-hearted apologies, lack of remorse, and flimsy promises that she would never do the same thing again—it was all because she let herself be spoiled by their kindness.

Petra's life was built on the kindness of others.

Only then did she finally realize it.

And she had only managed to have this realization thanks to the greatest act of kindness she had received yet.

"Hey, Petra. You're looking very fashionable today."

When Petra and Subaru saw each other the next day on the village green, Subaru smiled at her. He considerately didn't mention anything about the tears she'd shed the day before. Petra realized that was yet another act of kindness. She wanted to honor his kindness, so Petra didn't mention her tears, either.

Instead, she gripped the hem of her skirt and did a cute little twirl. "Hee-hee. I know, right? So, am I pretty? Am I?"

"Yeah, you're super pretty. Where did you buy those clothes?"

"So the truth is, I didn't buy these clothes—I made them!"

"You *made* them?! Wow! That's crazy. Dang, Petra, you rock!"

Petra was a little confused by Subaru rapidly alternating between comprehension, surprise, and acceptance, but she appreciated the sincerity in his response. She blushed and puffed out her chest with pride.

The dress she had on today was a lovely little one-piece, and just as she had told Subaru, she had sewn it herself using one of her treasured bolts of fabric she had bought exactly two years prior. This

was the first time she presented her creation to the world.

"You've got great taste, Petra. You could totally open a shop when you grow up."

"Do you…really think that?"

"Hmm?"

Subaru's innocent remark made all her happiness wither away in an instant. He was a little perplexed by the sudden gloom he heard in Petra's voice.

She was scared. This wasn't her first time confiding in someone about her dream of opening a clothing shop someday.

But she had always done so jokingly, so nobody took her seriously. The adults laughed, and her friends wouldn't believe her. They didn't believe in Petra's dream.

But how would Subaru respond? A surge of emotion rushed through her.

"You see, when I grow up, I'm gonna move to the capital and make clothes for a living. This dress I'm wearing now… It's practice… it's just one dress, but I'm gonna practice more, and then—"

A bit too quickly and with great difficulty, Petra told him about her dream. And not in the joking way she usually did. She poured all her hopes and wishes into it. She wanted him to know.

And when he learned of Petra's dream, Subaru said—

"That's a great dream, Petra. I know you'll run the best clothing shop in the capital."

"Oh."

She'd expected Subaru to respond with a chuckle like he usually did, but he didn't laugh. With a solemn gaze and voice, he patted Petra's head and gave her encouragement.

Everyone else laughed at my dream—but not Subaru.

Why is he so kind?

As Petra asked herself these questions, Subaru filled her big round eyes…and without realizing it, she was blushing.

The face that she only let Subaru see then was Petra at her absolute prettiest.

At twelve years old, Petra Leyte had a dream.

It had been to become a first-rate seamstress and open the best clothing shop in the capital—but not anymore.

"I do love making clothes. That part hasn't changed…"

As she stared at her finished treasure, Petra remembered the day her dream first came to her. That day, Petra's gaze was stolen by the colorful bolts of fabric, and she dreamed of spreading her wings and flying to the royal capital then and there. But now, Petra knew the true meaning behind the emotions she felt that day.

It wasn't all the fabric that had captured Petra's heart. It was the tremendous allure of seeing something that did not exist in her little world, the shock of encountering the unknown.

Her passion did not need to be limited to clothing. What mattered most was to make Petra Leyte's world just a bit bigger.

Petra assumed once that the world revolved around her because she was pretty. She'd had no idea how much kindness had protected her all this time. But learning that lesson had broadened Petra's worldview with as much impact as those colorful bolts of fabric.

And that was why—

"Luca is going to be a lumberjack like his father. Mildo is going to revive the village tavern? Or open a restaurant? Dyne and Cain… nah, there's no use in asking them. Definitely not."

She was with her friends, talking about the future as they had done many times before, and Dyne and Cain began to quarrel again. It was, as always, over who got to marry Petra.

"What about you, Petra? Do you still wanna move to the capital?"

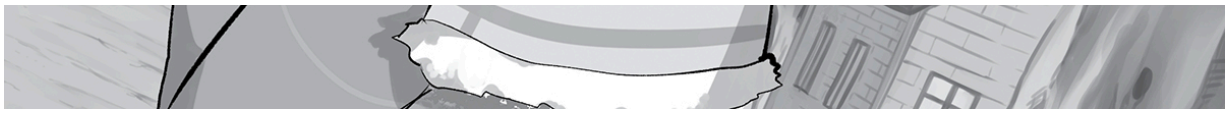
Perhaps due to the budding realization that she would be a big sister soon, Meyna posed the question to Petra with more confidence than before.

Petra blushed and answered, "Well…I think my dream changed a little."

"Really? So what do you wanna be when you grow up now?" Meyna pressed.

Petra stuck out her tongue. And with the sweetest little smile that could make any heart flutter, she answered, "When I grow up—I wanna marry a good, kind man."





REM'S ULTRA-ORDINARY AND COZY DAY

1

As the head maid at Roswaal Manor, Rem began her day quite early.

The manor consisted of three wings. Rem awoke in one of the bedrooms in the eastern wing when the sky was still dark indigo.

"……"

As the morning sun began to approach in the east and a touch of light mixed with the inky night sky, the girl quietly opened her eyes in bed as if she'd heard dawn's footsteps in the air.

Her frame was small, her limbs were thin, and her short bob of hair was a bright blue. Her big blue eyes, a shade lighter than her hair, were cute, and her youthful face was another noteworthy part of her charm.

But Rem herself had no awareness of her blessed good looks.

"Phwah…"

Sitting up with a little yawn, the girl in the blue nightgown lowered her legs from her bed to the floor. She always woke with ease. As she rose to her feet without a trace of sleepiness, Rem did a few small stretches. And with a little rub of her eyes with the palm of her hand, she bid farewell to any lingering dreams.

"I have to wash my face and get dressed…"

Vocalizing her to-do list before getting to work was one of Rem's secret habits. Rem knew she wasn't the brightest, so putting all her tasks on a list and checking off everything in order was a necessary ritual. That was how she just barely managed to fulfill her duties as head maid of the mansion. At the very least, that was how Rem saw it.

"……"

On the way to the washroom with a towel in hand, Rem reviewed

her mental list. A splash of cold water sharpened her foggy thoughts, and after she wiped her face with the soft towel, she returned to her room to get dressed.

She let her thin nightdress drop to the floor, leaving her supple skin covered only in underwear. Rem was small for seventeen, but she was well-endowed. Her bust in particular had grown remarkably the past few months and was a source of concern for her.

"Haa…"

Rem turned to her closet with a melancholy sigh. Inside were neat rows of maid uniforms, all in the same familiar design. She grabbed one and quickly dressed herself. That was when she realized that she was coming up on her tenth year wearing this uniform.

Ten years. That was the same amount of time that had passed since the oni village had been destroyed and Roswaal took in Rem and her twin sister Ram. This was more than half of all her years of life.

And that whole time, Rem had spent her days sliding her arms through the sleeves of that maid uniform. She never once felt any doubt or discomfort over it, and she assumed she would continue to feel the same way forever—

"But I wonder, would it feel strange to wear different clothes every now and then?"

Rem examined her reflection in the closet mirror, checking to make sure her uniform was on properly. A well put-together appearance was essential to being a good maid; it was the bare minimum maids needed to ensure they would not bring shame to their master. Frederica had told her that countless times when Rem was a maid-in-training.

And naturally, Rem followed Frederica's rules precisely, never neglecting her attire and grooming. But for the past few weeks, she had been putting extra care into her appearance. Yet it wasn't perfection that she was after, but cuteness.

"I guess this should work as a compromise…"

After twirling several times in front of the mirror, Rem wrapped up her endless primping. After donning the rather revealing maid's

uniform, all that remained was to slide the flower clip into her hair. With a flip of her short skirt, she darted out into the hall and took a deep breath.

The mansion hallways were filled with the cold air of the morning. After filling her lungs with it, Rem walked with a spring in her step. She headed to the next room over. Anyone assuming that would be her sister's room were wildly incorrect.

"Good morning," Rem chirped as she entered.

Though the room was the same size and make of Rem's, its decor reflected aspects of its owner's personality. There weren't many items in the room yet, but the air in the room still reminded her of him, and every time that she laid eyes on it, Rem felt a warmth deep in her chest.

This room didn't belong to either Rem or Ram, but it was still in the servants' quarters. Besides the twins, there was only one other servant currently in the employ of Roswaal Manor, and this was his room.

"Subaru…" Rem looked down at the boy asleep in bed in the dimly lit room and called his name. But her voice was so frail, it disappeared into the air, and there was no way it could reach the boy, who was still in dreamland.

But she did call out her morning greeting before entering the room, so it was all right to call out to him in his sleep.

"The fact that Subaru didn't wake from that only further proves he isn't a morning person."

This was the perfect excuse for Rem to stand beside the bed. Then she peered into the sleeping face of the boy—Subaru Natsuki—and let the tenderness welling inside her surface as a smile.

Subaru was sleeping on his side, hugging a little blanket to himself. He was dressed in a replica Rem had made of his sweatsuit—clothing from the foreign land Subaru originally came from. Seeing him use it as pajamas warmed her heart.

But that was not the only thing that warmed her heart. His innocent sleeping face was shadowed by the hair that usually stood up straight. It gave him a sweet, boyish look. The surprisingly quiet breathing from his lips, his thin, graceful fingers hugging the

blanket, the drool wetting his pillow—so precious.

"Subaru, you're so cute…"

Rem admonished herself for her reckless behavior, but she couldn't betray her feelings. She couldn't help how she truly felt.

Her pale cheeks pinkened as Rem enjoyed the stunning sight of Subaru sleeping. She sharpened all her senses and prepared herself to catch any signal Subaru might give away. And after carrying out her ridiculously grandiose observance for some time, she finally said —

"Th-that's all for this morning… I won't last any longer. I have to pull away…"

When she realized her heart was pounding fast and her blush had extended all the way out to her ears, Rem steeled herself and stepped away from Subaru's bed. It wasn't until she finally tore her eyes away from him that she somehow managed to regain her composure.

"That was close… I almost lost myself there."

She pressed her hands to her cheeks and gave herself a pat on the back. Sneaking a peek at Subaru in bed was part of her morning routine, and it was never easy to keep her desire in check. It was a test of willpower she always barely cleared.

Even now, as she succumbed to the temptation to watch him sleep, she scarcely had any misgivings about her compelling desires.

"A valiant effort for an early morning, if I do say so myself. Subaru, your charm is downright criminal…"

Of course, if Subaru were awake, he would have hotly protested that comment.

Leaving behind those words on a gust of hot breath, Rem scurried out of Subaru's room. Now that her morning trial was over, it was finally time to go to Ram's room.

"Good morning—"

Whenever Rem called out to her elder sister as she entered her room, her voice was always meek as a mosquito. Though the lights were off and the room was dim, compared with Subaru's room, it was quite bright. That was due to the coming of the rising sun and was further proof that Rem had spent quite a lot of time in Subaru's

room. However, it was not enough of a delay to hinder her duties. She made sure to wake a bit earlier to compensate.

It cut into her sleep time, but vitality of the spirit was just as important as vitality of the body when it came to her daily work. Rem was merely prioritizing her spirit vitality. And not only with Subaru's sleeping face—

"Beautiful as always, my dear sister…"

Rem smiled softly at Ram, who lay flat on her back, breathing quietly in her sleep. Ram was Rem's older twin sister. Outwardly, they were the spitting image of each other—or so others often said—but Rem did not believe a word of it.

Ram's face was elegantly composed, with intelligent, highly confident eyes of light crimson. Her pink hair was beautiful and vibrant, yet it held a fleeting luster. With a perfectly proportioned body and thin, delicate limbs, her big sister seemed perfect in every way, and Rem felt unworthy to be compared to her.

Rem was often told that she had her own virtues, and she was making every effort not to feel a sense of inferiority. However—

"Still, you are everything I aspire to be, Sister."

Ever brimming with confidence, always correct and just, strong in the face of any challenge—that was Ram.

At times, Rem felt burdened, but her pride in her sister always won over any negative feelings. And so, it was with love and respect that Rem called out to her sleeping sister.

"Sister, Sister…it's morning. Time to wake up."

She hated to disturb Ram's peaceful slumber, but Rem hardened her heart and shook her sister awake. Waking Ram before the day's work began was part of Rem's daily routine. (And Ram sleepily opening her eyes at the sound of Rem's voice and weakly muttering, "Five more minutes…" was also part of this routine.)

If it were up to Rem, she would let Ram sleep in to her heart's content. But it was not up to Rem.

"No, Sister, you must get up quickly and get dressed to set a good example for our trainee, Subaru. His wounds from the demon beast incident are still not healed, so it wouldn't be fair to make him work too much."

"…I don't like that you worry more about Barusu than me, so I'm not getting up."

"Please don't say something so cute, Sister. But if you do take the day off, that means it will just be Subaru and me working today. All right, Sister, you can take it eas—"

"I just decided that I will be getting up after all. Fetch me my clothes, Rem."

Brazenly retracting her last statement, Ram jumped out of bed and stretched toward the ceiling. Rem's eyes widened in surprise over how fast her sister had changed her mind, but they quickly softened as she broke into a smile.

"Not so fast. We'll get you dressed, but first we must brush your hair. You have a particularly large crow's nest today. Were you up late last night?"

"It's been hard to sleep lately, since you won't share a bed with me anymore."

"But it's been years since we shared a bed, Sister."

As she reminisced about those tender moments, Rem ran a comb through her older sister's hair. Her lustrous pink hair was so glossy that it seemed to dance between her fingers. The fine, silky locks that slid between Rem's fingers ought to be the same as hers… Then a sudden thought occurred to her.

"Maybe I should grow my hair longer…"

There was only one reason Rem's hair was in a short bob—so she could have the same hairstyle as Ram. As long as she had the same hairstyle, wore the same clothes, matched her sister's appearance in every way possible, Rem felt closer to Ram. It was a source of great comfort for her.

But lately, she was starting to feel that it might be time to abandon such childish hang-ups.

"Sister, do you think I would look strange if I grew out my hair…?"

"…Are you asking if *I* think it'll look strange? Or are you asking about other people? My answer will change, depending."

"Um, will Subaru think it looks strange…?"

When Rem timidly jumped to the heart of her concerns, Ram let out a long, blatant sigh and said, "What brought this on? Did Barusu

say something to you?”





"No, not at all. It's just a passing thought I had while combing your hair…"

"……Lady Emilia has long, beautiful hair, doesn't she?"

Rem smiled sheepishly as her sister immediately saw through her. Rem's only response was to shake her head tiredly as Ram continued, "Of course, if you grew your hair long, you would look very pretty, Rem. You would look so pretty that I'd want to rip Barusu limb from limb."

"Sister…"

Rem felt both joy and concern over Ram's harshening voice and demeanor. Joy over Ram's concern for her, and concern over Ram's potentially sour relationship with Subaru.

"Sister, do you dislike Subaru?"

"Whether I dislike him and whether I simply think he isn't worthy of my adorable Rem are totally unrelated."

Rem was momentarily taken aback by her sister's snubbing. But it didn't take long for her surprise to melt into a smile. This was because one thing was now clear: Ram did not dislike Subaru.

"Thank you. I couldn't be prouder to call you my sister."

"Oh? Well, I can't blame you. I am a big sister to be proud of."

Though they were slightly talking past each other, Rem felt elated knowing her sister loved her just as much as she loved her. And if she wasn't mistaken, Ram was humming a cheerful little tune under her breath, perhaps unconsciously. Even her singing was exceptional.

Rem gently slid the comb through her sister's hair as she listened to her soft humming.

This special sisterly bonding ritual was yet another part of Rem's daily routine.

2

On the spacious grounds of Roswaal Manor, Subaru and Emilia were having a lively chat. Rem smiled as she watched them from a distance.

"Subaru looks so cute when he's having fun."

As she quietly murmured that while Subaru became even more animated, Rem was happy and content. Every morning in the central garden, Emilia communed with the lesser spirits—conversing with them. This had become a habit ever since she came to the manor, and Subaru had joined since he started living there as well.

"Intruding on her treasured time with the spirits—could he be any more incorrigible, I wonder?"

Rem had been so distracted by the scene in the garden that hearing an unexpected voice startled her. She was even more startled when she saw who it was.

"Lady Beatrice."

Rather than respond, Beatrice simply stood beside her, quietly folding her arms. Based purely on outward appearances, she was a cute little girl. Her blond hair was in ringlets, and she wore a gorgeous dress covered in frills. Her face was as flawless and perfectly symmetrical as any doll's.

It was as if the word *lovely* was made for her—that was just how peerless she was.

"Though she still can't compare to my sister…," Rem murmured.

"I'm not sure why…but I have a sneaking suspicion that I was just insulted."

"Oh, not at all, Lady Beatrice. Nobody can hold a candle to my sister. But you have your own charm, Lady Beatrice, so please don't despair."

"The more you say, the more pitiful I sound!"

As Beatrice stamped her feet in anger over what Rem meant to be words of encouragement, all Rem could do was bow low and apologize profusely. She didn't mean to anger Beatrice—had she hit a nerve?

"Are you hungry, Lady Beatrice? Breakfast won't be for a little while—"

"I am *not* in a bad mood because I'm hungry. Nobody makes a fool out of Betty! The behavior from the household staff has been intolerable as of late! And I am certain *that boy* is responsible…!"

Beatrice's face twisted into a sneer as she glanced toward the

central garden. Subaru and Emilia were still chatting excitedly.

"His influence has changed you and your sister, I suppose. How infuriating!"

"Influence? Well, yes… Subaru is a wonderful person."

"Why did that make you smile, I wonder…? Betty is starting to sorely regret initiating this conversation."

Beatrice sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead. At the same time, her words reminded Rem of her original surprise. Beatrice's regrets aside, it was unusual for the two to chitchat. And the number of times Beatrice initiated conversation could be counted on one hand.

"Well, Lady Beatrice, I shall have to write about our little exchange in my diary today."

"Ohh. You keep a diary? How meticulous."

"Yes, I recently started one so I could document daily interactions with Subaru and my sister. I'm only on my sixth volume, though, so I'm a little embarrassed by my poor writing habits…"

"Your *sixth* volume? But I thought that boy just came here a month ago…"

For some reason, Beatrice shuddered, but Rem was too preoccupied with her inadequacy to notice. There were so many things to write about in her diary. Sadly, without the time or talent, she had no hope of documenting it all. Expressing Subaru's charms and Ram's greatness was a truly daunting task.

"I hope to someday write well enough—is that presumptuous of me?"

"Why should I care?! Do what you want! Good grief…if that's all that's bothering you, then I wasted my time worrying, I suppose."

"Worrying?"

Beatrice scowled and spat out a sigh that seemed slightly out of place. "I refuse to get wrapped up in some other harebrained scheme to give you a day off. That's why I decided to keep an eye on you—so I can intervene before you need one."

Rem's breath caught, and her eyes went wide. Beatrice had said something unbelievable.

The "harebrained scheme" Beatrice bemoaned was undoubtedly

the day off Rem had received recently. Subaru had suddenly proposed to Roswaal that Rem needed a vacation for her physical and emotional well-being.

Truth be told, the sudden proposal had startled and scared Rem. She had mainly been worried about leaving her work in everyone else's hands, but in the end, that day off helped her realize just how immensely blessed she was.

Ever since, she poured her heart and soul even more fiercely into her work. And it seemed like Rem wasn't the only person at Roswaal Manor who was forever changed by that day.

"Could it be, Lady Beatrice…that you've been worried about me?"

No answer.

"Thank you so much, Lady Beatrice. That makes me happy. From now on, I shall work myself to the bone even more!"

"That's exactly what we're telling you *not* to do! Can't you pace yourself, so you don't get exhausted, I wonder?! It'll be such a pain otherwise!"

Beatrice immediately rejected Rem's renewed determination to work harder than ever. As Rem hung her head dejectedly in reply, Beatrice tugged on a ringlet and said, "We have more staff than before—so *why* are you *more* exhausted than before, I wonder? Even if he's useless, if we pair that boy up with your slacker of a big sister—"

My sister is perfect. She is flawless in every way."

"…I'm sure you can find a flaw or two if you look for it. When you do find a hole in your precious sister's flawlessness, take that boy and have him patch it up. It's about time he does something useful."

Rem wanted to argue that she would never find such a flaw, but she bit her tongue. What mattered most was not how big one's shortcomings were, but Beatrice's expectations.

She also realized that having those expectations at all meant their relationship had evolved.

"Hey. Why are you smiling, I wonder."

"Do forgive me, Lady Beatrice, but I'm just overcome with joy. You never worried about me like this before."

"…I wouldn't say that's true. Betty is a font of compassion."

As Beatrice puffed her cheeks and turned her back, Rem didn't say a word.

Beatrice's words might have been true. She was kind and cared for Rem. She just never put her feelings into words until today.

"Lady Beatrice, you said earlier that Subaru changed my sister and me…but I think he's changed you, too."

"A bit of sarcasm, I suppose."

"I didn't mean it that way…"

"All the more disturbing, then."

Beatrice turned her back to Rem with an unamused snort and touched the door in front of her. It normally led to one of the guest rooms, but since Beatrice could use Passage to connect any door in the house to the Archive of Forbidden Books, to her, it was no more than an entrance to her chambers.

Right as Beatrice was about to return to her library, Rem called out to her tiny back.

"I'll call you when it's time for breakfast, Lady Beatrice."

Without another word, Beatrice waved back. Then the space in the mansion warped, and the little girl disappeared into the Archive of Forbidden Books.

And once the girl had disappeared and was well out of earshot, Rem whispered, "I really do think Lady Beatrice has changed."

In the past, Beatrice rarely attended breakfast. But in just one month, she had become a regular (and she hadn't turned down that morning's invitation, either).

A look out the window revealed Subaru and Emilia leaving the garden. She watched them walk out in the direction of Earlham, the village near the mansion. They were probably on their way to do the radio calisthenics that had become a morning ritual for the villagers. Breakfast would come immediately after that once the two returned to the mansion.

"Time to get to work."

As the two silhouettes grew smaller in the distance, Rem scurried off to the kitchen.

All residents of Roswaal Manor would be in attendance at breakfast. Rem hastened her footsteps as she crossed the carpeted

floor of the hallway.

3

When Rem entered her quarters, Emilia greeted her with a radiant smile and said, "Ooh, you made the tea today, Rem? It's been a *really* long time!"

With her long silvery hair and crystalline violet eyes, Emilia was a vision of immense beauty—even to Rem, who regarded her sister Ram as a supreme being.

It was midafternoon. Lunch had passed, and the manor's residents were busy with their own tasks as teatime approached.

Bringing Emilia a moment of respite with a tray of tea and sweet treats was part of Rem's duties as a servant—though Subaru usually took on that role himself.

"Subaru and my sister went shopping in the village today. Their list was rather long, so they didn't make it back in time for tea."

"That's too bad," Emilia said. "That's an unusual pairing, though. Usually, you go shopping with one of them, Rem."

"I do, yes. But today, I made a special request for them to go together instead… I want my sister and Subaru to become better friends."

Just as that morning's conversations had suggested, Subaru and Ram weren't necessarily enemies. In fact, to an outside observer, they seemed to get along just fine.

The only issue was that both of them could be rather closed off at times, and Rem wanted to change that.

"So I had to harden my heart and give them a little tough oni love," Rem explained.

"I see. So you want them to be friends… Yep, that sounds like a good thing. I'm on board."

Emilia clapped her hands and smiled brightly in agreement with Rem's plan. But then she tilted her head, and after pondering for a moment, she added, "I always thought Subaru and Ram got along really well… Remember when they went with Puck into the forest to

forage for tea ingredients?”

“Yes, and that did improve my sister’s opinion of him greatly. But I think they need another push, so I decided to give them one.”

The shopping list Rem had given them required them to run all over the village, which would take extra time. If, during that time, they managed to open up to each other a little more, then Rem’s Happiness Project would be one step closer to success.

The only issue was that Rem’s Happiness Project also required assistance from Emilia as well as herself…

“Hmm? Is something the matter?” Emilia asked.

“Oh, no, nothing’s wrong. In any case, that’s why I’m serving you today. My tea isn’t as tasty as my sister’s, and I’m not as good at small talk as Subaru, so my apologies in advance.”

With an emotionless bow to conceal the feelings inside, Rem pushed her cart into Emilia’s rooms.

Emilia’s rooms were more than twice the size of Rem’s or Ram’s and were located near Roswaal’s study. At the back of the main room stood an ebony desk, while in the center was a large table with chairs for hosting guests. Her bed was in an adjoining room.

Both her desk and dining table were covered in books and documents.

“Sorry about the mess. I’ll tidy up right away,” Emilia said.

“My apologies for the inconvenience.”

Emilia immediately started cleaning, while Rem prepared the tea behind her. Once the table was cleared, a steaming cup was placed on top of it.

“Wait, where’s your cup, Rem? Aren’t you having any tea?”

“No, Lady Emilia, I’m just your server. I couldn’t possibly join you…”

“But Ram and Subaru always drink tea with me.”

After a brief hesitation, Rem said, “Then I graciously accept your hospitality,” retracting her earlier statement and accepting Emilia’s invitation.

Her instincts as a servant resisted the idea at first, but since both Subaru and Ram did it, she decided to prioritize relationships over formality. (Though she did feel a twinge of guilt, recalling Frederica’s

training.)

"I'll have to apologize next time I see her…"

With a murmured apology for her senior maid, who was currently away from the mansion due to personal matters, Rem poured herself a cup of tea. Then she accepted Emilia's offer and sat down for teatime.

"…"

Both quietly savored the flavor and aroma of the tea. No conversation naturally sprang up between them. Realizing this, Rem felt a slight bitterness—not from the tea, but from her own shyness.

Rem was naturally passive. She knew this well. She wasn't as assertive as Ram, nor did she possess Subaru's boundless energy.

Perhaps because of that, Emilia kept a bit of distance from her. The silence between them was proof of that, and Rem felt wretched for it.

I shouldn't have accepted Emilia's invitation—

"You know…it's really nice, drinking tea in silence like this now and then."

"…"

"Subaru always talks a lot, and Ram helps me with my studies, but being with you is really relaxing, Rem."

The thin smile on Emilia's lips and the sincerity in her words caught Rem completely off guard. A closer look at her expression showed no trace of insincerity. She truly meant what she said.

Rem was ashamed of herself for sulking, for thinking she was worthless just because of a little silence.

She glanced toward Emilia's desk, searching for a conversation topic. "Your studies…how are they going?"

Emilia's eyebrows lowered slightly. "Not bad, I hope. I'm very behind than the other candidates, so I have to work much harder."

As a candidate in the royal selection, much was expected of Emilia. Beyond the wisdom to govern an entire kingdom, she needed the knowledge, education, and countless other qualifications that would become the backbone of that wisdom.

At present, she was still in the early learning stages, and even the most charitable assessment would place her far below the necessary

standard. Yet the royal selection would begin before long.

"Before it starts, I want to become at least a little more competent," Emilia confessed.

"I understand how you feel. When my sister and I were first taken in by Master Roswaal, our first task was to learn all sorts of things."

When they had first left their village, Rem had been utterly ignorant of the outside world. What she learned at the mansion extended far beyond her duties as a servant. Aside from the basics of reading and writing, she had to study everything she should have known but didn't. That was why it wasn't mere lip service when Rem said she understood what Emilia was going through.

"You and Ram spent all your time studying at first?"

"Yes. Especially me, since I'm not as intelligent as my sister. I had quite a hard time."

"So it was difficult for both of you… I guess there really aren't any shortcuts. I was a little panicked at first…but I suppose I just have to keep moving forward."

As Emilia's voice grew quieter, Rem's eyes widened at an unexpected thought. "Lady Emilia…do you also have moments of anxiousness?"

Emilia puffed her cheeks slightly. "Of course I do, silly. All the other candidates are *really* extraordinary. I'm already seen as a problem just for being a half-elf, but even without that, I spent most of my life in the forest before all this."

Rem knew that Emilia had been born and raised in the Great Elior Forest, but beyond that, she knew very little about her life.

Looking back, Rem realized she had avoided getting too close to Emilia. That was due to her own insular, conservative way of thinking. To Rem, the most important things in life were her precious sister and the world that immediately surrounded her.

Rem had no particular interest in Emilia—neither positive nor negative. That was why, when it came to her, she only involved herself or assisted when Roswaal commanded it.

She also assumed that somebody as ever-positive and hardworking as Emilia didn't need her help. Rem would take care of

herself, and Emilia would take care of herself—it was best if they interacted as little as possible. Their shallow relationship had been based on that assumption.

But now—

"Lady Emilia, it really is a shame about your singing."

"What?! Oh no, why are you bringing that up all of a sudden?!"

Rem's remark made Emilia's peaceful smile twist into a grimace, as if she was on the verge of tears. Watching this transformation, Rem maintained her nonchalant expression and continued. "You're all thumbs, you're a little too trusting at times, which makes you rather gullible. Also, you're easily influenced by those around you…to the point that you'll wear a bucket on your head."

"But Subaru made me do that! Plus, it was an important lesson."

"Yes, that's true." Rem then lowered her voice and murmured, "All of these are things I only learned in the past month."

Because she had never tried to get to know Emilia on a deeper level, this was all Rem knew about her. But there were still some things she hadn't mentioned.

Hearing the subtle change in Rem's voice, Emilia stopped fuming and pressed a hand to her mouth and said, "Oh!" apparently realizing something. Then, with a playful grin, she said, "Okay then, my turn. Rem—you're surprisingly *really* stubborn. Also, you love children's books, songs, and poetry, but you're not the biggest fan of mayonnaise. And…you and Subaru are very close friends!"

"Well put, Lady Emilia. I cannot refute any of that. That last part in particular was quite agreeable."

"Hee-hee! Wasn't it? But what's come over you all of a sudden?" After proudly puffing out her chest, Emilia tilted her head in curiosity.

Rem awkwardly shook her head and said, "There wasn't any deep meaning behind it. I just wanted to make sure of something. We've known each other for half a year now, yet so much has happened this past month."

"Hmm…you're right. Things have been really hectic since Subaru arrived. I've spoken with you and Ram much more often, too."

"Yes, so, um…what I'm trying to say is…"

Unable to properly express herself, Rem fell into thought,

searching for the right words. Emilia's amethyst eyes reflected her patience as she waited in silence.

Seeing her like this, Rem made a decision. Truth be told, she had once felt indifferent about Emilia's progress. Whether or not the future unfolded as Roswaal envisioned was of no concern to her.

But now, she could admit she had been wrong.

"I hope you come out on top in the royal selection, Lady Emilia. I doubt there's much that someone like me can do to help…but even so, I'll do whatever I can."

"…"

"I didn't care about supporting you before, but I've recently had a change of heart. It was because I got a chance to know you better, Lady Emilia."

"…Even though everything you mentioned about me was really embarrassing?"

"…Well, yes, I suppose it was," Rem admitted with a mischievous smirk.

Emilia puffed out her cheeks and whined, "Heyyy!"—then immediately burst into giggles. The two shared a laugh at the table for a while before Emilia said, "Thanks, Rem. That *really* made me happy. Yet another thing I need to thank Subaru for."

"Yes…Subaru is truly wonderful."

"He sure is. Subaru is a *really* good boy."

As they shared their subtly different opinions about the boy, Rem and Emilia lifted their teacups to their lips.

The midday tea had turned into a much different affair than either had expected. However—

"Rem, may I make a request?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Could you make me another cup of tea? I'm really in the mood for more of your tea today, Rem."

* * *





And with heartfelt affection, Rem prepared Emilia's next cup of tea.

4

When Rem was summoned by the bell, an unexpected array of faces awaited her.

"You summoned me, Master Roswaal…? And Great Spirit."

It was nighttime at Roswaal Manor, on the terrace of the top floor. There, waiting for Rem, was Roswaal, reclining in a chair, and the spirit Puck, lounging on the table in front of him.

A mage in clown makeup and a spirit who took the form of a small gray cat… The mansion housed many beings beyond human comprehension, but among them, these two in particular humbled Rem.

"You really do come right away the moment you're called, don't you?" Puck remarked. "But you don't need to shrink so much in our presence. Then again, it'll be really hard for you to shrink smaller than me."

"My deepest apologies," Rem replied. "I wish I possessed the skill to shrink to meet your expectations, Great Spirit…"

"Dooon't take it so literally, Rem. The Great Spirit was speaking in jest."

"Yup, just a little spirit humor. Not like spirits really get humor, either."

Puck wrapped his extra-long tail around himself and cackled merrily. Directly beneath Puck's feet—on top of the round table—sat a glass of amber liquid. Its twin sat in Roswaal's hand, meaning there could only be one reason they were together.

"The Great Spirit and I were enjoying a little drink. Subaru was kind enough to unearth this heirloom liquor, after all. As a Mathers, I have a duuuty to test the merits of my ancestors. But in doing so, we sadly ran out of snaaacks."

Puck added, "We wanted to call the matron of this fine establishment over, so we decided to call you. Sorry?"

“Matron…isn’t that what they call important women in Kararagi?”

“Rem, what did I just saaay? Dooon’t take everything the Great Spirit says at face value.”

Rem gave her master a respectful bow in acknowledgment. Puck, meanwhile, stuck out his tongue and made a playful noise, but Roswaal remained indifferent to his antics.

That being said, Rem quickly understood why she had been summoned.

“Understood, Master. I’ll fetch some snacks right away. Any particular requests?”

“Nooo, I trust you.”

“I want mayonnaise! Mayonnaise would hit the spot!”

Once she took their requests, Rem scurried off to the kitchen, mentally reviewing the leftover ingredients. Drinking snacks and mayonnaise—of the two, the latter had become a household staple.

Most of the manor’s residents enjoyed the condiment that Subaru had introduced. Rem wasn’t particularly fond of strong, vinegary tastes, but since everyone else—especially Subaru—loved it, she always kept it in stock. Emilia, Puck, and Beatrice also liked it, so she made an effort to incorporate it into her dishes.

Most drinkers weren’t picky about their snacks. Rem retrieved some fish from the pantry, kept chilled by a magic stone, quickly grilled a fillet, and topped it with mayonnaise.

When she returned, Puck looked up from washing his face and said, “Mmm, that smells good. It’s stirring my instincts.”

Though he looked like a cat, Puck was a spirit at heart. Still, his mannerisms and preferences were distinctly feline. Suppressing a laugh, Rem set the plates down on the table.

“If you leave the plates and glasses when you’re done, I’ll clear them later. If there’s nothing else, I’ll take my leave…”

“Thank you, Rem. Yeees, you may turn in for the night…is what I’d like to say, but you’re going to keep us company instead.”

Rem’s expression stiffened slightly. “Understood, Master. Um, but I don’t—”

“I am weeell aware that you don’t drink,” Roswaal said with a chuckle. He then set his glass on the opposite side of the table,

away from Rem. “Even the smell doesn’t agree with you. We’d better put a little distance between you and it.”

Though it shamed her as an oni, Rem could not hold her liquor. oni were supposedly a race of hearty drinkers, or so the stories said. When she lived in the village where she was born, she often saw adults binge drinking and celebrating with alcohol. Unlike Rem, Ram could drink like a fish and be completely unaffected—she was a true oni.

“You twins are opposites in everything, aren’t youuu? It surprises me that Ram’s cheeks don’t even flush, but you surprise me in a different way. After all, you manage to use alcohol just fine when you’re cooking.”

Rem lowered her head in apology. “When I’m cooking, I cut out all unnecessary distractions—it’s a matter of focus. But when I’m at the dining table, there’s no sense of urgency, so…”

Puck continued chomping on his snack while his chin was smeared with mayonnaise. “Yeah, you and Lia were all over each other at that party. It was really cute, though. I wish you both could learn to drink in moderation.”

The event Puck referred to was the stargazing party held at Roswaal Manor a few days prior, which was well-lubricated thanks to the hidden cache of liquor Subaru had found.

Rem had made quite the scene.

“I truly apologize for the disgraceful way I behaved that night…”

“Nah, blushing and cuddling with Lia was cute. Neither Betty nor I can get drunk even if we want to…well, I guess that’s not exactly right. Her circumstances are a bit different from mine.”

Rem was unsure how to react to the heartfelt tone in Puck’s voice.

Noticing her silence, Puck nodded and said, “I see you’ve learned to show discomfort when you feel that way—I think that’s a good thing.”

His words startled Rem even more, but by the time she raised a hand to her cheek, Puck had already shifted his attention back to his plate.

“It’s the same with jokes, but someone with a fickle personality

can be hard to understand," Roswaal agreed. "The trick is to not worry too much and simply keep a suitable distance."

The flustered Rem nodded at Roswaal's advice and turned to face him. "That sounds difficult, but I'll try my best. So, Master Roswaal…"

Understanding immediately what she was implying, the ever-perceptive marquis responded, "I feel bad making you stay here for so long when it reeks of alcohol. Yes, let's cut to the chaaase… It's about Subaru's health."

"What's wrong with him, Master?"

"It's his Gate—it's in exceedingly bad shape from the strain he put it through in the forest."

Roswaal's tone wasn't overly grim, but there was an unmistakable weight to it. During the demon beast incident in the forest surrounding the manor, Subaru had pushed his mind and body to their absolute limits, sustaining numerous injuries. Most concerning was the damage to his Gate—the organ necessary for using magic—which had suffered severe strain and was now being closely monitored.

"Neither myself nor Ram, nor Emilia, nor the Great Spirit, nor even Beatrice, has a high aptitude for healing magic, you seeee. The only one in this household with any real healing ability is you, but only for external wounds. Internal wounds are outside your area of expertise."

"And you tend to use your magic with wild and reckless abandon, which isn't always a good thing," Puck added dryly.

It frustrated Rem that she couldn't deny that. But there was a reason behind Roswaal's explanation. If there wasn't a healer within the household, that meant—

"You want me to find an internal specialist for Subaru?"

"Most of the village and manor were spared casualties, thanks to his efforts, and that was no small feat. It is the least I can do to compensate him for that, you seeee. So the Great Spirit and I have been doing some scheming…"

Roswaal spread his arms in an exaggerated gesture, but despite his theatrics, his sincerity was clear. That brought Rem some relief.

From the way he spoke, it was apparent he had already found a solution. She had served under him for ten years—she could tell when he had things figured out.

The real question was how did Puck fit into the solution?

"His efforts were commendable. And we have the perfect opportunity to repay him. Sooo, I was thinking of calling upon the best healer in the royal capital. And I was consulting the Great Spirit here for the best gift to compensate them."

"Not like he really needs my permission anyway. Sentimentality aside, you have jurisdiction over that land, don't you, Roswaal? Of course, I won't object—and neither will Lia, as long as her kin are safe."

"Be that as it maaay, I wouldn't want to displease you and *blow things out of proportion* again."

"C'mon, that was one time. Geesh, why do you always hold grudges…"

The two laughed, but Rem knew the underlying context of their conversation was far from lighthearted. When Roswaal had gone into the forest to retrieve Emilia for the royal selection, Puck had opposed it. The resulting clash—according to rumor—had altered the very topography of the region.

However, Rem pushed aside those past conflicts and focused on the task at hand. It had to be important if Roswaal had summoned her to discuss it at this hour.

"I can see from your expression that you're raring to go, but let me clarify the assignment. Rem, I have an important role for you… Subaru's surveillance. More specifically, you are to keep a close watch over him to ensure he doesn't do anything reckless."

"And am I correct in assuming that you're giving me full authority to handle this task as I see fit, Master Roswaal?"

"Oh myyy, you are twisting my words quite a bit to fit an agenda, aren't you? I'm not mad at that, though."

"Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, I have done everything within my power not to step on Subaru's shadow or breathe the air he exhales—and now you command me to keep a *close* eye on him?"

“Wow, sounds like you were holding back quite a bit. I had no idea,” Puck said, blinking in surprise.

Rem’s self-imposed restrictions shocked him. But in truth, that was only the surface of it. Fearing her own lack of self-control, the limitations she had placed upon herself extended far beyond what she had just revealed.

“However, now is not the time to share everything…,” Rem murmured.

“Hmmm?” Puck tilted his head inquisitively.

“Anyway! I have received your command,” Rem said, ignoring Puck and standing straight before Roswaal. “I shall obey and stay near Subaru. You commanded it. If I must, I must.”

With that, she gracefully moved toward the terrace door, parting the flowing curtains as she stepped through.

“I shall take my leave. Master Roswaal, Great Spirit, may sweet dreams visit you this evening—”

After some abnormally poetic parting words, Rem practically pirouetted out of the terrace.

Puck and Roswaal eyed each other after her grand exit. Then the tip of Puck’s tail pointed at Roswaal’s glass as he said, “I think she was downwind of your drink.”

“…Juuust to be clear, that most certainly wasn’t intentional.”

With a shrug, the clown and the cat resumed their drinking.

5

“I’ve knocked—now I’m coming in.”

After giving the door a soft, almost caressing knock, Rem slipped into the room. The lights were already out. The only source of illumination came from two eerie, pale blue orbs floating in the darkness—or, more specifically, Rem’s slightly intoxicated eyes.

“I knocked, okay?”

Repeating her defense for the record, Rem silenced her footsteps and made her way to the back of the room. It was a path she walked every morning and every night. Even with her eyes closed,

she could navigate it effortlessly. However, she needed to keep them open for the task at hand, so she preferred to do so.

"Aww, Subaru…so precious."

Her open eyes settled on the black-haired boy curled up in bed, fast asleep. The instant she saw him, her face melted into a smile—or rather, a smirk.

Every night, part of Rem's bedtime routine was to sneak into Subaru's room just to steal a glimpse of his sleeping face. She believed there was a unique charm to both his nighttime and morning expressions. Such were the thoughts of the ever-Subaru-obsessed Rem.

Tonight, however, her heart, which usually teetered between desire and guilt, felt unusually clear. That was because she wasn't here out of selfish desire—she was merely following Roswaal's direct command.

"I'm afraid I've been ordered to watch over you from within arm's reach. If I must, I must."

Taking her master's command with an almost hysterical level of creative interpretation, Rem cozied up beside the bed and knelt on the floor next to Subaru. She lowered her gaze to match the height of his face, instantly closing the distance between them.

She was now close enough to feel his breath.

"Subaru…are you sure it's okay for you to be so vulnerable around me?" she whispered.

Subaru did not answer. He was fast asleep, completely unaware of Rem's intrusion. He was the polar opposite of his lively, talkative daytime self. Even his breathing was softer, quieter. With his sharp, slanted eyes now closed, he looked more his age—or perhaps even younger, Rem thought.

"……"

As she knelt there, helplessly swooning over his sleeping face, a blush crept onto her cheeks at the sheer audacity of it all. She had always prided herself on discipline, yet here she was—a frivolous oni indulging in something so shamefully improper.

For a long time, she had been unable to understand her sister, Ram, who devoted herself so completely, body and soul, to Roswaal.

Rem's deep respect for Roswaal was entirely different from Ram's deep affection for him. But unable to perceive this distinction, Rem had developed an inferiority complex.

Then Subaru Natsuki appeared. The more space he occupied in her mind, the closer she came to understanding the nature of Ram's devotion to Roswaal.

And with that realization came another—this feeling was something far beyond her control.

"……"

With her knees still on the floor, Rem leaned forward, surrendering her upper body to the bed. Subaru's face was almost touching hers. As she watched him sleep, she murmured softly.

"Your fingers…they're so thin and beautiful for a man's. Your sleeping face…it's so peaceful, just like a baby's. Your hair…if you don't dry it properly before you sleep, you'll have terrible bedhead tomorrow."

One by one, she listed the little details of Subaru's appearance—things he considered his flaws. And yet, to Rem, they were anything but. That was the terrifying nature of the feverish passion that afflicted her.

"Your lips—"

Her gaze fixated on the one particularly vulnerable feature of his already vulnerable sleeping face. His lips were parted slightly as he breathed. If she leaned in just a little more, she could reach them. She could already feel the warmth of his breath against her lips. Ordinarily, even approaching this close would be a violation of her own boundaries.

"—Ah."

But the moment she remembered those boundaries, reality crashed into her at supersonic speed.

Even in her intoxicated state… It had been a minuscule dose—she had merely inhaled the scent of alcohol. And now, with her mind abruptly sobering, the disciplined girl within her regained control, pulling herself back from temptation.

"Rem…what a fool you are."

With her drunken haze gone, regret and shame rushed in to take

its place. Blushing fiercely, she ground her teeth at her own worthlessness and quickly rose to her feet.

Roswaal had commanded her to watch over and protect Subaru from a reasonable distance. That much hadn't changed. But she had taken the liberty of interpreting it broadly, essentially giving herself carte blanche to do as she pleased—how insolent could she be?

"It's all your fault, Subaru, for driving me crazy."

As Subaru slept, blissfully unaware of the accusations being leveled against him, Rem smiled at him. As always, she would leave his bedside, having done nothing. And come morning, she would whisper a quiet apology for her transgressions.

Having made up her mind, a small impulse took over. In a playful burst of mischief, Rem traced Subaru's lips with a slender, pale finger, and—

"—Oh."

The moment her fingertip brushed against his lips, Subaru's mouth instinctively closed around it.

A hot, rough sensation wrapped around her finger, and Rem's mind went blank, flashing white with euphoric chaos.

But the licking was fleeting, and soon her finger was released.

"……"

Rem stared blankly at her right index finger and froze in place. Even in the dim light, she could see the moisture glistening on her fingertip, a suggestive sheen making it clear what had just occurred.

"I…suppose this is barely permissible."

Any thoughts of wiping her finger with a kerchief or her apron vanished from her mind. In her heart, there were only two options: to embrace the moment or to suppress it.

Rem had imposed countless restrictions on herself regarding Subaru, but this? This was an entirely unexpected development. She had never prepared for this possibility or even considered how she might resist it. Now she was forced to confront the dilemma head-on, and the task was nothing short of monumental.

This was a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence—a fleeting miracle.

"However…"

The angel and devil on Rem's shoulders waged a fierce battle,

each vying for control.

How could she, a survivor of the proud oni race, succumb to such a fleeting temptation? And yet, she was the only conscious party. No one was watching. But what would Ram say if she knew? Would this be something her perfect elder sister would be proud of?

She cursed her brain for failing to preserve the exact sensation of Subaru's tongue against her skin.

Sparks flew between the warring sides of her mind. Her breathing grew uneven, her pulse, erratic. Sweat beaded on her forehead, her entire body stiff with stress, torn between impulse and restraint until —

"I……can't do it!"

With a desperate cry, a white horn sprouted from her forehead as the battle within her came to a dramatic conclusion. Her trembling hand shot to her apron, wiping her finger clean with fervent force.

And yet…

The moment it was done, a hollow emptiness filled her heart.

She ignored it. She knew she had made the right choice.

"Isn't that right, Suba—?"

Free from her inner torment, Rem turned a weak smile toward Subaru—only to have her words cut off by a sudden shock.

She had been leaning over the bed, her palms pressed against the mattress, trying to steady her erratic breath. And then, out of nowhere, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her back, pulling her forward.

"—No."

Her mind blanked as heat shot through her body. Flames of embarrassment burned across her face as she struggled to process what had just happened.

She was lying flat on the bed. In his arms.

The rough tumble had wrinkled her uniform, and, unless she was mistaken, her skirt had flipped up—a truly scandalous position.

"—Mm!"

The arms holding her tightened their grip, pulling her even closer.

Now completely cradled against him, Rem felt her heart pound so violently, she feared it might burst.

What should she do? What *could* she do?

Once again, Angel-Rem and Devil-Rem clashed.

But this time, she didn't make the next move. He did.

"Mrgh…"

The single sleepy murmur escaped Subaru's lips, and just like that, all the tension in Rem's body evaporated. Shifting her head slightly, she peered up at him. His eyes were still closed, his breathing even.

"Yes. That's right. Subaru isn't that kind of person."

Her whispered words carried both relief and…a small pang of disappointment.

He had only hugged her in his sleep. It hadn't been intentional.

It shouldn't have affected her so much, and yet, a strange mix of emotions stirred within her. If he was going to do this, then surely… surely, she could indulge herself just a little, right?

Just a little.

A tiny, harmless convenience fee.

She nuzzled her nose and cheek against Subaru's chest, savoring the warmth and scent of him.

"If I must, I must. I tried my hardest to fight back, but Subaru wouldn't wake, so I couldn't move. So I'll just have to keep resisting until he does."

Leaving this flimsy excuse as a defense for herself, she let herself savor his embrace.

I have the perfect justification. A day like this now and then is nice.

With that final reassurance, little by little, Rem surrendered to sleep.

The next morning, Ram arrived to wake Subaru—only to be greeted by the sight of her sister wrapped in his arms.

There was no room for explanations.

And Subaru, still groggy from sleep, received a merciless thrashing.

To Rem, it was all a part of her ordinary, cozy day.

KARARAGI GIRL MEETS CATS

1

Hoshin of the Wasteland was a legendary figure, known to all across the world.

The legend of Hoshin began four centuries ago, during an era when the western regions were little more than a barren wasteland where numerous small nation-states vied for supremacy.

Among them was a nation so tiny that the other powers threatened to swallow it whole. Even by the most generous standards, it couldn't be described as fertile. And yet, it was in this desolate land that Hoshin first planted his flag—in Kararagi.

According to legend, Hoshin was not blessed with military prowess.

According to legend, Hoshin was a master of persuasion, possessing a rare cunning that allowed him to guide the hearts of others.

According to legend, Hoshin befriended the leader of Kararagi and, before long, took control of the nation's affairs from behind the scenes. In the blink of an eye, Kararagi had forged diplomatic ties with the other nation-states. Sometimes, Hoshin was friendly. Other times, he was scheming. And occasionally, he expanded Kararagi's sphere of influence through sheer business acumen.

The larger nations overlooked the subtle machinations of the tiny state, convinced that no western land could ever rise to power. But by the time they realized their mistake, it was already too late.

Through a brilliant and intricate scheme, Hoshin united most of the smaller states under one banner, forming a grand coalition that no force could oppose.

And so, the west bid farewell to the era of warring lords, ushering

in the age of the league of nations united under the city-state of Kararagi—forever associated with the name Hoshin of the Wasteland.

"Awww, no matter how many times I hear it, the legend of Hoshin always gives me tingles."

The starry-eyed girl sighed with admiration as the tale concluded.

She was a charming little thing, her fine features giving her an air of elegance. Around eleven or twelve years old and slightly shorter than average, she was remarkably well-developed for her age.

Her silky purple hair shimmered in the dim light, while her round, golden-yellow eyes sparkled with curiosity. With her flawless skin and aristocratic bearing, anyone would have assumed she was the daughter of some aristocrat.

And yet, this girl—Anastasia—had no such distinguished background.

"Hmm? What? Why're you staring? Rude much?"

Anastasia shot a suspicious look at the person watching her. There was nothing dainty or delicate in her mannerisms—no trace of a girl raised in a sheltered, luxurious home. Instead, she possessed cunning and wariness far beyond her years.

Class is as class does. Her shrewdness only confirmed his appraisal of her. He threw back his head, bared his fangs, and let out a hearty laugh.

"It's nothin'. Just thinkin' how that scrawny little street rat we found in some back alley sure turned out pretty. Mighty impressive."

"Stuck in the past again, old man? Anyone ever tell you you're annoying?"

"If you're gonna go there, you're way more annoyin', Ana! Always pesterin' folks to tell the same stories over and over. One of these days, you'll have to drag those old yarns outta me. We'll see how you like that."

Anastasia scowled, puffing out her lips in an exaggerated pout. A large, rough hand ruffled her hair with deliberate force. She made no move to resist, but the displeasure in her eyes and expression

remained. The man couldn't help chuckling.

Her strong, willful spirit was admirable indeed. Without it, she wouldn't have come as far as she had.

"Oh, whatever. Old folks love repeating themselves. I'll hold back for your sake," Anastasia said smugly.

"Ha-ha, you got a mouth on you, don't ya. Where'd you even learn that from?"

"From the bar matron. One of the regulars said it. Never did get to hear what that dead-drunk geezer's weakness was, though. Kinda regret quittin' that job before I found out."

Anastasia's words were laced with playful sass as she dodged the hand messing with her hair. Adjusting her robe, she headed for the door.

"Break time's over. Don't slack off, old man, or Chuden'll kick you to the curb."

"Oooh, I'm shakin' in my boots. We can't fill my belly with just your pay, Ana."

"Why do I gotta take care of your food, clothes, and shelter anyway?!"

"Ain't it obvious? You're gonna buy me and make me yours, ain't ya?"

His sharp fangs gleamed as he smirked and ran thick fingers against his neck. There, cold against his skin, was a simple metal ring—a relic of his days spent as a slave. What had once been a symbol of bondage was now a reminder of a promise.

That single gesture made Anastasia falter for just a moment. She caught her breath when she also recalled that promise, then nodded firmly.

"Yeah…I know, I know. But…that's why you better not go dying on me before I can earn my war chest. Got it? Take care of yourself!"





Anastasia rattled off a quick retort, stuck out her tongue, and darted out of the room. The man listened as her footsteps faded into the distance, a soft smile forming on his lips as he turned toward the window.

The sky outside was cloudy, and the slightly foggy glass reflected a faint outline of his own face. His massive frame was too large to be fully captured in a window's reflection, and his beast-like features bore no resemblance to Anastasia's in the slightest. With brown fur covering his exposed skin, Ricardo Welkin—unusually enormous compared to most dogmen—made no effort to conceal his inhuman nature.

Currently employed by the Chuden Company as a bodyguard, he was also a sort of guardian to Anastasia.

Though, of course, that was something Anastasia would never openly acknowledge.

2

The main branch of the Chuden Company was located in Banan, the second city in the city-state of Kararagi.

Kararagi was composed of ten major cities, each assigned a number. Every city had its own mayor, had its own laws, and functioned as a self-governing entity. In essence, Kararagi was a coalition of federalized states.

Based in Banan, the Chuden Company was a prime example of a midsize business, operating under the umbrella of Regret Company, one of Kararagi's many large companies.

While its business was not limited to any particular industry, Chuden primarily dealt in the transport of trade goods. Nearly everything that entered Banan passed through its hands at one point or another, and that meant many a merchant would end up going there.

This dominance over trade meant that every morning after the city gates opened, merchants would make a beeline for the Chuden Company's doors and start forming a line before business hours,

eagerly awaiting entry. The daily scene was one of relentless activity as company traders and haulers got down to business.

"Anastasia! We're running outta cash! Get me a copper box and a silver box, pronto!"

"You got it!"

"I ain't finished yet! I also need…"

"Your gunnysack! I know!"

As Anastasia's supervisor barked orders, she swiftly retrieved two wooden boxes, each filled to the brim with coins for transactions. The copper box contained copper coins, while the silver box held silver coins—both so densely packed that they were punishingly heavy for a girl her size. But she didn't complain.

Anastasia was a merchant who assisted with actual sales—or so she told herself. In truth, she was technically a cadet, running errands and following orders from the real traders—essentially, she was a caddy.

Without rest, she carried heavy boxes back and forth, delivering them to the merchants' feet.

On the Chuden Company trade floor, traders conducted business directly with traveling merchants arriving on wagons pulled by ligers—massive, canine creatures. These merchants brought their goods straight to the company, where long tables were set up for negotiations and payments.

Each employee specialized in a particular type of merchandise. That day, the merchant Anastasia was shadowing dealt in clothing and fabric—a field with wildly fluctuating prices, making negotiations a frenzied task.

"Next! Next in line! No time to waste!"

"As Hoshin says, time is money!"

There was hardly a moment to breathe. Anastasia wove through the crowded trade floor, crawling under tables, checking inventory against wagon contents, and organizing those waiting in line.

Several other caddies were on duty, each managing their own line, but none were as efficient as Anastasia.

Though she worked twice as hard as the older caddies, she never let it go to her head. And while some of the other caddies resented

her for it, she paid it no mind.

She efficiently handled her assigned queue, then moved to assist another. As she scanned the area, her gaze landed on one of the wait lines, where she noticed something was off.

A man stood near the wagons, pretending to jot down inventory.

"Hey, you! What're you doin'?!"

At Anastasia's sharp voice, the man flinched.

She had caught him red-handed trying to steal merchandise.

Realizing he'd been spotted, the scrawny man panicked and bolted. A nearby caddy attempted to block him, but the thief shoved him aside and sprinted toward the exit.

"Oh, no you don't!"

"Move it, pip-squeak!"

Before he could escape, Anastasia jumped in front of him, arms outstretched to block his path.

The thief sneered at the small girl's defiance and raised his fist, ready to strike. But before he could—

"A little greedy, aren't ya?"

A fist more than twice the size of the thief's came swinging.

It connected with devastating force, sending the man soaring high into the air, before he crashed headfirst into the trading floor. He crumpled into an unconscious heap on the ground.

Hearing the scream, Anastasia cautiously opened her eyes…and then broke into a bright smile when she saw who had come to her aid.

"Old man!" she cried, rushing toward the towering beast who had just sent the thief flying.

"Took ya long enough to notice, Ana," Ricardo chuckled, crossing his arms. "But you gotta be more careful. You almost got yourself hurt. That's a stupid way to lose big time. I thought you didn't like pickin' fights that ain't worth it."

Then, without hesitation, he grabbed the thief by the scruff of his neck and started dragging him outside.

"Come on, get a move on. You got some nerve, tryin' to steal on my turf. Guess you're ready to lose an arm for that."

Ignoring Ricardo's growled threat, the man turned wild, hate-

filled eyes on Anastasia and spat, "You little pip-squeak… If only you hadn't gotten in my way!"

His glare was feral, and it looked like he might lunge at her at any second. But Anastasia, utterly unimpressed, sauntered up to him and slapped him across the face.

A crisp, satisfying crack echoed through the trade floor. The man stared at her in shocked silence. The gathered onlookers gawked, and even Ricardo raised a brow.

"Your own foolishness got you caught, and now you've got the nerve to blame me for it? You're the worst. And where's your pride now? A little girl just slapped you across the face. What a loser."

The thief's face burned with shame as he swallowed his fury.

Ricardo watched Anastasia closely, his sharp eyes evaluating her cutting words and actions. But before he could say anything, the entire trade floor erupted in cheers.

"Well said!" "That was satisfying to watch!" "Serves that thief right!"

"Thank you, thank you!" Anastasia basked in the praise and waved to the crowd with a playful flourish. Her sudden return to childish innocence only made the onlookers cheer louder.

Meanwhile, Ricardo yanked the thief away, dragging him behind the building. He tossed the man onto the dirt and loomed over him with an unamused growl.

"If it were up to me, you'd lose your better arm and get thrown outside the city."

The man paled, trembling as he crawled along the dusty ground.

But then, Ricardo let out a sigh and scratched his chin. "But I'm lettin' you go today. Just remember this—I hit a hell of a lot harder than that pip-squeak. So use your head, man. Don't ever show your face here again."

With a lazy flick of his wrist, Ricardo waved him off. The thief scrambled to his feet and fled in a panic, vanishing in the distance.

Yawning, Ricardo stretched and turned back toward his post—only to hear an amused voice behind him.

"Do you really think that thief will mend his ways?"

"Oh, Chuden…it's you. You saw that?"

Ricardo turned to find a small man with sharp, fox-like eyes standing before him. Clad in an impeccably tailored indigo kimono, Chuden Agri, the chairman of the Chuden Company, carried himself with the air of a refined yet calculating merchant.

Lifting the hem of his kimono slightly, Chuden glanced in the direction the thief had run and sighed.

"A thief is supposed to lose his dominant arm and be banished from the city. That's the rule. Now, I find it hard to believe that a company guard dog like you wouldn't know that."

"It was just attempted thievin', thanks to Ana." Ricardo rolled his shoulders. "Besides, he got a smack upside the head instead of losin' an arm. If I were him, that'd scare me more."

"*Tch*. You don't actually believe people can change their ways and stay on the straight and narrow if only someone would give them a chance, do you?"

"Course not." Ricardo's voice darkened, his beast-like features sharpening. "I made sure to memorize his face. Next time I catch him causin' trouble, I'll take both his good arm and the other one, too. That enough for you?"

Chuden fell silent for a moment, then gave a slight nod.

"Excellent. For a minute there, I was worried that the Great Hound Ricardo had gone soft on me."

"*Tch*. Don't be sayin' embarrassing stuff like that. I'm still your loyal, collared guard dog. Woof, woof."

"If you truly believe that, it would ease my worries…," Chuden mused. "But for now, I'll let it slide."

"…That was cryptic."

Ricardo snorted, narrowing his eyes at Chuden's enigmatic tone. But the chairman only shook his head tiredly and moved on.

"By the way…"

"What?"

"I have a favor to ask. It's a bit troublesome—I'll give you more details in my office."

Ricardo's frown deepened.

From experience, anytime Chuden started a request like that, it was never "just a bit troublesome."

3

"Have you heard? There have been frequent attacks on merchant caravans near the outskirts of Banan lately."

In the chairman's office, Chuden broached the subject.

Ricardo had a wary look on his face when he replied, "Yeah, sure."

Reports of the uptick in caravan attacks had indeed reached Ricardo's ample ears.

"But it's only hearsay for now," Ricardo continued. "Word around town says it's more than what the usual merchant bodyguards can handle. And for one thing, all the victims have been outside merchants…so it ain't really our problem."

"True, it isn't," Chuden admitted. "However, these outside merchants are valuable customers. In a sense, their goods are meant to be ours. If they lose their wares and stop coming to Banan, they won't be the only victims anymore."

"Okay… So, I guess you want me to do something about these thieves or bandits or whatever."

Ricardo had quite the colorful past, but he wasn't fond of being burdened with grand expectations.

If a bandit gang was operating on this scale, it had to be at least fifty strong, maybe even more. Only a fool would try to take them on alone.

"If we're up against a big group, there ain't nothin' I can do, no matter how strong I am. You really think I can tackle this by my lonesome?"

"Oh, you needn't worry about that."

Chuden flashed a knowing smile—the kind only a swindler could wear. "The city council has already recognized this as a major issue… Starting with our company, the commerce league is putting together funds to hire mercenaries. You'll be their leader, Ricardo. Your job is

to locate the bandits and eliminate them. That's the gist of it."

"…That ain't gonna be a walk in the park, either. Just sayin'""

For all his complaints, Ricardo already knew deep down that there was no escaping this.

Ever since Kararagi's founding, merchants had been the most powerful figures in city governance. The majority of city council members were influential traders, and Chuden was one of them. If he was bringing this to Ricardo now, that meant the decision had already been made. The only thing left was for Ricardo to accept it.

"So you want a dogman like me to lead a ragtag team of mutts? What the hell were you thinkin'?"

"The talented are always given roles that allow them to best utilize their skills. That's just natural law."

With a smirk, Chuden spread out a map on his desk. It detailed the outskirts of Banan, with several trade routes circled in red.

"These are the surrounding trade routes and the locations of the caravan attacks. No survivors. Their cargo and even their ligers were stolen—far too thorough for your average bandits."

"With this many attacks so close by, their base has gotta be around these parts."

Ricardo studied the map, then marked two locations near the attack sites—a forest and a rocky ridge. If these were run-of-the-mill bandits, they'd be holed up somewhere easy to defend, and these two spots fit the bill.

The two of them studied the map and debated possible locations until—

"Excuse meee. I've brought the teaaa."

Anastasia entered the room, carefully balancing a steaming pot in her arms. She set down two cups of green tea in front of Chuden and Ricardo.

"Oh, Ana, you on service duty? Why aren't you caddying?"

"The rush died down, so they let me serve tea and take a break. So…what's up with the map?"

Anastasia plopped down at the table with the cup of tea she had brought for herself. She blew on the hot liquid, tilting her head in curiosity.

Ricardo pointed at the map and grumbled, “See these red circles? That’s where a whole lotta folks died. And Chuden here just gave me a crazy job to deal with it.”

“You…take care of it alone, Uncle? You gonna be okay?”

“Aww, you worried about me, kid?”

Ricardo’s face twisted into a teasing grin, but Anastasia simply shook her head.

“Nah, it ain’t that. Just…sniffin’ out criminals takes brains. Are you up to it, old man?”

“No need to worry about that,” Chuden interjected smoothly. “Ricardo’s job isn’t to sniff them out. His job is to bash their heads in once they’re found. That’s his specialty.”

“Oh, then I’m not worried at all. What a relief.”

Ricardo let out a long sigh as the two of them clicked perfectly in sync. The warm gust of his breath reached Anastasia, making her scowl.

“Hey, old man!” she huffed.

Ricardo smirked and poked her nose. “This ain’t a game. Now the adults got serious stuff to discuss, so be a good little girl and go chase butterflies or somethin’.”

“Butterflies won’t bring in a single coin, so I ain’t gonna waste time chasin’ ’em. And c’mon, you could let me in on the plan. What if I get in trouble ’cause I don’t know enough?”

“The attacks are all outside the city, so why would a caddy like you be in danger?”

“Now, now,” Chuden interrupted. “I think the girl has a point. I don’t know how long this matter will take to resolve, Ricardo, so we might as well let Anastasia in on it as well.”

Unlike the reluctant Ricardo, Chuden regarded Anastasia’s curiosity with favor. His keen interest in her potential was what had drawn him to her in the first place, and in moments like this, he tended to indulge her.

If Ricardo had any say in the matter, he wouldn’t let Anastasia hear anything about the dark, bloody side of the world. His overprotectiveness was often mocked by those around him.

“Hmmm. Well, looks like life outside the city’s pretty tough.”

That was Anastasia's candid response when Chuden repeated everything he had already discussed with Ricardo. It was the kind of answer an ignorant child might give—but then she followed up with something unexpected.

"By the way, what cargo were the victims carrying?"

"Their cargo?" Chuden raised a brow. "According to reports, the caravans were transporting all sorts of things they picked up before coming to Banan—jewels, antiques, magic stones and magic stone ores, even weapons."

"Huh, that's interesting." Anastasia tilted her head slightly, murmuring, "and weird."

Ricardo's ears twitched. He had caught her quiet remark, but rather than engage with her train of thought, he prioritized shutting the conversation down.

"C'mon, that's enough," he grumbled. "Chuden, stop fillin' this girl's head with strange ideas."

Anastasia pouted, clearly displeased at being dismissed. Chuden, though intrigued by her reaction, relented and ordered her to leave.

"Why?! You're a mean old man, you know that?!"

With that dramatic protest, Anastasia stuck out her pink tongue at Ricardo, picked up her half-finished cup of tea, and exited the office.

Once the door closed behind her, Ricardo shrugged.

"You really are overprotective of Anastasia, aren't you?" Chuden remarked, watching him carefully.

"Say whatever you like. I'm overprotective all right. Overprotective Ricardo. That's why I won't let anyone who'll be a bad influence for her anywhere near this town. So I'll do your damn job."

Growing tired of being mocked, Ricardo bared his fangs and turned his sharp gaze back to the map. His massive frame radiated an aura of raw power, a demonic pressure seeping from his towering body.

As the mood in the room grew heavier, Chuden stiffened slightly and exhaled.

"The Hound, living up to his reputation, eh?" he muttered. "You

terrify me, but every day, I'm all the more thankful you're on my side."

4

A few days after that little incident at Chuden Company…

In a tavern on the west end of Banan, a lone girl slumped over the bar, babbling endlessly to the bar matron about her troubles.

"Then he ditched me! Treated me like a nuisance, that stupid old man."

"Oh dear, I see… Now I know why I haven't seen that dog face of his around here for a while. And so now you've come here to drink away your feelings, have you, little Ana?"

"Yep. I've got a broken heart. Won't you comfort me? And gimme another round of milk, too."

The girl referred to as "little Ana"—as you might have guessed—was none other than Anastasia.

The bar matron, ever indulgent, had let her in before opening hours, offering her a safe place to wallow.

To her, Anastasia was a cute little former employee who had worked at the tavern until about three months ago. She had cared for her back then—though not quite as much as Ricardo did—and even now, she still turned a blind eye when Anastasia came in during prep time, lending an ear to the girl's complaints.

"But I have to say, I'm a bit surprised," the bar matron mused. "I always thought Ricardo's feelings for you were one-sided. Seeing you this glum over his absence? That's new."

"Well, he's *my* old man," Anastasia huffed, resting her chin on the counter. "That's supposed to be my collar on his neck, so he can't just up and run off. And he knows that, the stupid oaf."

A collar with a broken lock still hung around Ricardo's thick neck.

Once, it had been a symbol of his enslavement and denied freedoms. Now it was nothing more than a decoration, stripped of power. And yet, even as a free man, Ricardo still wore it as a silent reminder of where he had come from.

That was something Anastasia hated.

Someday, she would buy Ricardo at a fair price, remove that collar herself, and throw it away.

That was one of Anastasia's many dreams.

"Thanks to you and the old man, my dream is much closer to coming true. That's why I've gotta work much, much harder."

"Your dream? What's that, if you don't mind my asking?"

"My dream is to become just as big as Hoshin! So right now, I'm busy gatherin' all the power, knowledge, and money I can."

She snorted with confidence, puffing out her chest.

The bar matron had to stop herself from laughing.

Most merchants idolized the legend of Hoshin of the Wasteland. Every boy born in Kararagi dreamed of making it big like the legendary hero at some point in his life.

But for such a little girl to dream of becoming Hoshin?

That was something special.

"Ugh! Why do you have to laugh at me, too?! You and the old man are just the same!"

"I'm sorry, hon," the bar matron said, smiling. "But I actually don't think your dream is crazy at all. You've already been taken in by Mister Chuden and his big company… If you stick around and marry him, you'll at least become one of the top dogs of the city, won't you?"

"Me? Marry Mister Chuden? Nah, that'll never happen. Never ever never."

Anastasia chortled innocently, entirely unaware of her own charm.

She was already pretty, and someday, she would mature into a beautiful woman. When that day came, the bar matron's words wouldn't seem so funny anymore.

"Listen, little Ana. You might not believe this now, but I want you to keep it in mind: You're much prettier than most, and some people you meet might try to do bad things to you. If you ever get that feeling, tell Ricardo or Chuden right away. You hear me?"

"Aww, but I ain't—"

"Just remember it for later."

Seeing the serious look in the bar matron's eyes, Anastasia

nodded obediently.

Sensing a longer lecture coming, she gulped down the rest of her milk in one go.

"Thanks for the drinks. I gotta go. Still got work to do."

Leaving three copper coins on the counter, Anastasia hopped off the barstool and darted out of the tavern.

For a moment, the bar matron watched her go with a wistful look, but then she waved at Anastasia's retreating figure.

"Ana, swing by the next time you get some time off, ya hear?"

Her rarely heard Kararagi dialect slipped out as Anastasia disappeared into the streets.

"Hmmm, I've still got time to kill…and the old man isn't around, so what should I do?"

Stretching outside the tavern, Anastasia pondered how to spend her precious day off.

It was the one day a week she didn't have any work. Though she had implied otherwise to the bar matron, she actually had no plans.

But she could already picture the sour looks she'd get if she showed up on the trade floor to help out.

"I don't want people calling me a goody-goody again… Okay, guess I'll eat and walk around."

Puffing out her still modest chest, she strolled toward a busier part of town.

Walking the streets with a full coin purse and buying whatever street food struck her fancy was one of her secret little joys.

When she had lived in the slums, the open-air food wagons had been nothing but a cruel temptation, their delicious smells mocking her empty stomach.

Now she could enjoy them freely, and every bite tasted like victory.

"Mm…"

Stuffing her face with a doughcut, Anastasia ambled down the street, when suddenly she sensed a pair of eyes on her. It only took her a moment to find a dirty boy staring at the contents of her hand. She quickly deduced who he was. He was one of the hyenas, street urchins living in extreme poverty.

They had no home, no food. They scavenged the city's refuse, desperately scraping by however they could. These children of the slums were called "hyenas"—a name that had existed since Hoshin's time. And once upon a time, Anastasia had been one of them.

The boy staring at her doughcut, living from moment to moment with no certainty of tomorrow, was no stranger to her. Seeing him triggered a feeling deep inside her. However…

"How silly." She popped the rest of the doughcut into her mouth and deliberately flashed the empty wrapper at him. Startled by her gesture, the boy flinched, then scrambled into the alley.

The way he had opened his mouth like a baby bird, expecting a handout, irritated Anastasia more than anything. Because she had only escaped that fate because of a handout herself. And that realization gnawed at her heart with guilt.

She had Ricardo in her life. But what if Ricardo—?

"Ahhh?!"

A sudden pull at her waist snapped her out of her thoughts. She flailed her arms, but it was too late. A small shadow darted past her, snatching her purse from her pocket. She watched in shock as the figure dashed into the alley ahead.

She had been robbed—and so easily.

The victim is the fool. It was a saying she had known all too well as a former hyena. Ordinarily, she would have cut her losses and let it go…but this time, she couldn't bring herself to do that.

"Not so fast!"

She launched into pursuit, tearing into the slums after the thief. It had been a while since she'd last run these streets, but she had spent years in this place, racing through its mazelike alleys since the moment she could walk. Her muscles still remembered the way. Within moments, she closed the gap.

Her loud footsteps and sharp voice startled the thief, forcing them right into a dead end. The shadowed figure turned around bitterly, realizing they had no escape.

"C'mon, gimme my purse. I've spent way more years on these streets than you."

"L-like hell you have… Just look at your pretty clothes. A rich girl

like you could never…!”

Anastasia sighed internally. She could have told him that she used to be just like him, but he wouldn’t believe her. There was no point in saying it. She moved forward, reaching out to snatch her coin purse back. She was well-fed, well-trained, and she had learned self-defense from the merchants. Taking it back should have been easy.

However—

“That’s right. I’m not gonna let a little runt like you talk down to me.”

A rough voice growled from behind her.

“Hmmf?!”

Anastasia tensed, instinctively trying to turn around—

But before she could, something blunt smashed into the back of her head. Her vision spun. She collapsed onto the cold, dirty ground, her limbs refusing to move. Her consciousness began to slip away.

“Heh! Well done, kid. Now, take that purse and get lost!”

Through the haze, she heard the man speaking to the child. A trap. She had walked right into it. Someone had set her up.

That rough voice…it sounded familiar. Somewhere… She had just heard it.

That man’s voice—a voice that sounded like a curse—she could have sworn she’d just heard it in the trade plaza.

5

Meanwhile, Ricardo’s group of mercenaries was running into a wall with their bandit hunt. They had found some bandits in one of the locations marked on the map—the forest on the outskirts of the city—but the group was far too small to be responsible for the caravan raids. The dozen or so bandits they spotted scattered the moment Ricardo’s group arrived, fleeing in every direction. At the very least, they wouldn’t be causing trouble anytime soon.

Other than that, the mercenaries had uncovered nothing. No whisper nor trace of the caravan raiders.

“So the cave we found in the forest is another dead end. The

narrow entrance already gave us little to hope for…”

After a string of false leads, Ricardo marked another *X* on the map, his eyes dull with frustration. The hastily assembled mercenary group was rough around the edges, but Ricardo couldn’t shake the feeling that their failure was due to his own shortcomings. Even more frustrating was the vague, nagging sense that there was something off about this whole job.

“Maybe they’re targeting a different riverbank…?” Ricardo muttered. “The timing doesn’t quite match up with when we started this operation, but it makes a guy wonder…”

The city’s ruling body wasn’t a monolith. There was always a possibility that certain members were colluding with bandits to undermine their rivals. If that was the case, it would make things infinitely more complicated.

But something else was eating at Ricardo, something that gnawed at his instincts even more than his suspicions about the politicians.

“Ricardo, there’s a caravan departing from Banan. Might as well go meet with them.”

“All right.”

Ricardo looked up as his lieutenant called him from the tent. Stepping outside, he saw a caravan of ten liger-drawn carriages moving in a single-file line toward the setting sun. The caravan was well-guarded, with several sturdy-looking escorts walking alongside the wagons. For a group this large, it was clear they had substantial cargo to protect.

“Out traveling this late? Business must be booming,” Ricardo remarked.

“Well, if worrying about where the sun is makes you lose a business opportunity, you’re just a fool. Hoshin would laugh at you from the heavens,” the caravan leader shot back.

“Yeah, I get that… But I’m surprised to see so many guards.”

“We’ve heard the rumors about the raids. Isn’t that why you’re all out here, too?”

The brawny merchant gave an exaggerated shrug, but Ricardo didn’t answer. Instead, he stepped closer to one of the wagons and

flipped back its cover.

Iron chains.

And beneath them—people, crammed inside like cargo.

"…You're slave traders."

"Not a fan of what you see, sir? Guess not, with that ring around your neck," the merchant said, his eyes flicking to Ricardo's collar.

Ricardo didn't react. The metal band around his neck was missing its gemstone, which marked him as a free man.

"The slave business is still a business," Ricardo muttered after a pause. "As long as you're following the rules, it ain't my place to say anything."

He snorted at the lifeless expressions of the chained men and women, before turning his back on them. Then, addressing the caravan leader, he waved them on.

"Sorry for holding you up. We're keeping the roads safe, but you'd best watch yourselves, too. If you run into the wrong kind of bandits, they won't leave behind even a morsel of flesh on your bones."

"Well, that's terrifying. We'll definitely be careful," the merchant replied with a laugh.

At his signal, the caravan resumed its journey. Ricardo ordered his band to see them off, before preparing to move out himself.

As the last wagon rolled by, a deep voice called out from the rear of the passing caravan.

"Hey, Wolfie. Pretty face you've got there."

Ricardo turned his gaze toward the speaker. A towering man, even taller than Ricardo's six-and-a-half-foot frame, stood at the back of the caravan. Though Ricardo was broader, the sheer number of sword scars covering the man's body suggested he was no stranger to battle.

But what stood out most about him were the four arms extending from his shoulders—a distinct mark of the many-armed race.

"A many-armed, huh? Don't see many of you in Kararagi," Ricardo remarked.

The man with two pairs of arms let out a soft, amused giggle. "I'm sure you don't. Most of my kind migrated to Volakia, but my

ancestors settled in Kararagi instead. I'm one of their descendants."

With big, buggy eyes, the many-armed man brandished the axes in each of his four hands, his grin a mixture of arrogance and madness. Ricardo didn't like the way the guy smirked, but what unsettled him even more was his attire.

He wore light leather armor covering only his vital areas. This warrior was clearly confident in his strength. Draped over his shoulders was a cape of mismatched furs and skins, and the haphazard way they were sewn together made it painfully obvious what they were.

"Do you wanna know? You wanna know, don't you?" The man's voice lilted into a singsong tone, his grin stretching wider. "Tee-hee-hee, well, you're right. After all, I'm wearing the pelts of your kind, the wolfins. I clean the skins of the enemies I kill—and let me tell you, this sure was tough to peel off."

Ricardo didn't blink. "You seem to be mistaken, but I'm just a dogman. A kobold. I just ate a bit too much growing up and got a little big, that's all."

"Tee-hee-hee! Oh, I know. You wolfins are on the brink of extinction, so that's the story you've all agreed to tell." The man's voice dripped with mocking amusement. "Lying as an entire race to protect yourselves—compared to the extinct oni, I'd say you're doing quite well. Am I right?"

The many-armed man crouched provocatively, peering up at Ricardo with an almost childlike fascination. But Ricardo didn't take the bait. Arms still crossed, he jerked his chin toward the departing caravan.

"They're leaving you behind. You're a bodyguard, aren't you? Stop flirting and get back to work."

"Aw, too bad…yes, truly a shame. Tee-hee-hee, ohh, your loss."

With an exaggerated pout, the man stowed his four axes onto his back. Then, with his buggy eyes raking Ricardo up and down, he grinned. "I'm Didorii. If I see you again, I'd love to tell you more about these skins."

"That so, Didorii? Well, no thanks. If I see you again, I'm taking that head clean off your shoulders."

"Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

Satisfied with that answer, Didorii bobbed his head eagerly. Then, with an unsettling skip, he trotted after the caravan, quickly catching up before vanishing into the distance.

Ricardo watched him go, his expression carefully neutral until Didorii was out of sight. Then, with a loud crack, he twisted his neck.

"What a creepy caravan," one of the mercenaries muttered.

"That's slavers for you…," Ricardo replied. "But there was one particularly rotten bastard. Said his name was Didorii. You ever heard of him?"

"Nope. But someone else might have. I'll ask around."

"It has nothing to do with busting bandits…call it a personal curiosity. A fool with his kind of delusions is a bad influence on kids. If I see him on my day off, I'm gonna kill him."

Ricardo's lieutenant blinked at his matter-of-fact tone, then suddenly burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?"

"Just thinking how much you've changed," the lieutenant chuckled. "You've made quite a name for yourself lately, you know. The mercenaries have a new nickname for you—'The Mighty Hound That Got Defanged By a Little Girl.'"

"I'm surrounded by idiots. Y'all really need a hobby."

With a grumble, Ricardo stomped back toward his tent. He needed to focus on the bandits. If he kept coming up empty-handed, even Chuden's usual patience would start to wear thin.

"Besides, if I leave Ana alone too long, she'll get bent outta shape."

The moment he muttered those words, he frowned, realizing exactly what his lieutenant had meant. The rumor was inevitable. To say he was defanged was a mistake, but even he had to admit, she was on his mind more than she ought to be.

Which was exactly why…

"I hope she can just have a peaceful, uneventful life…"

His voice trailed off as he looked up at the sky.

The sunset painted the heavens in hues of pink and indigo, melting together into a shade of light purple—the same color as

Anastasia's hair.

It was a beautiful color.

6

Ricardo's wish was in vain, for Anastasia was facing the greatest crisis of her life.

"Mmm! Mmmm!"

A gag was pulled tight around her mouth, and her limbs were bound. She couldn't even sit up properly. It was a textbook-perfect kidnapping.

This is bad…this is really bad… Anastasia groaned, squirming with all her might.

The moment she woke, she immediately recognized the abnormality of the situation. Her realization was instant, and along with it came clear memories of what had happened just before she lost consciousness. Even so, she remained exceptionally calm for a hostage. Whether or not that would lead to any kind of breakthrough, however, was another matter entirely.

She thought back to the last moments before she blacked out—the voice of the man who had struck her on the head.

It was the same thief who had tried to steal from the Chuden Company a few days ago. The man she had caught, and the man Ricardo had punched into the sky. And to top it all off, she had slapped him in front of a cheering crowd.

It was crystal clear—this was revenge.

Thieves in Kararagi faced severe punishment. Had the laws been followed, this man should have lost an arm for his crime. Yet here he was, taking revenge instead. His tenacity was almost commendable, though Anastasia wished he'd found a better hobby.

"Hiff hi knew hith hould hahhen… Dhe holh man houldn't have hun hat…"

After reminding herself that Ricardo was partly to blame for this mess, Anastasia regained her composure.

Making a fuss won't accomplish anything.

There were no windows in the room, so screaming would be pointless. If there had been any chance of someone hearing her, her kidnapper wouldn't have locked her in there in the first place.

From the echo of her voice, she could tell the room was small. The floor was cold and hard, but not stone. It seemed like a makeshift hut built on top of natural rock. It wasn't well constructed, which meant it had probably been built in a hurry.

What is this man trying to accomplish?

Now that she had assessed her surroundings, her thoughts shifted to her kidnapper's intentions.

He's after revenge—that much is obvious. The real question is, what kind of revenge?

If he had simply wanted to scare her, he wouldn't have gone this far. If he had a short temper, he might just torture and kill her.

"Hell, it's hotta he hlavery."

The most likely scenario was that he intended to sell her into slavery.

Slave trading wasn't uncommon in Banan, or in Kararagi as a whole. Labor had obvious value, and enslaved people were used as servants, forced into hard labor, or put to work maintaining roads.

Back when Anastasia had lived in the slums, she had almost been caught by slave traders many times. Under Banan city law, nobody batted an eye when hyenas were enslaved. Well-dressed children, on the other hand, were left alone—an unspoken rule among slave traders.

"Hut's hun is hun…"

What's done is done.

No excuses or explanations mattered now.

But Anastasia wasn't some nameless urchin anymore. The Chuden Company could verify her identity and protect her. And more importantly, she had Ricardo. If anyone dared to sell her into slavery, Ricardo would sink his fangs into their throat.

That wasn't wishful thinking—it was a cold, hard fact. Though, she supposed, a little vanity was involved.

"I'm tellin' you the truth! She's the crown jewels. You'll get it

when you see her!”

Just as Anastasia had reached her conclusion, a cheerful voice approached. A scrawny man strutted into the dark room, his rough voice forced into a high falsetto.

His face and voice were both familiar. It was the thief.

Following behind the thief were two other men, both towering over him. When standing beside the scrawny man, the contrast they created was like two mighty oaks sandwiching a withered branch.

“We’d never doubt you, buddy,” one of the big men said. “It’s just that people tend to screw up when they’re desperate.”

The thief shrank under the big man’s intimidating gaze. “G-gimme a break. I’d never be so reckless. L-look! It’s her…!”

With a shaky finger, he pointed at Anastasia. Keeping her wits about her, she pretended to still be unconscious, focusing on keeping her breathing slow and steady. She could feel the weight of the two men’s gazes as they studied her.

“Dang, she really is the crown jewels,” one of them finally said. “A beauty that can be polished into a mega-beauty. She’s like the jackpot to end all jackpots, man.”

Anastasia let out a small groan as one of them grabbed her by the hair, forcing her head up for inspection. But they didn’t seem to notice that she was awake, continuing their rough appraisal.

The way they spoke made it painfully obvious they were slave traders.

Hearing the word *beauty* sent an unpleasant shiver down her spine. The bar matron’s warning came rushing back to her, and she cursed herself for having dismissed it so easily.

I hope I get to see her again someday…and apologize.

“O-okay, then…so, negotiation time? Right?” the thief asked, his voice shaking with a nervous attempt at confidence.

“Yeah, you wanted to bring us a gift to join our company… And you brought us the crown jewels. This’ll help us out a lot.”

“So you mean—?!”

“But that was only if this girl was some stray dog without a leash.”

“—huh?”

The thief barely had time to process the words before something slammed violently against the wall. A pained scream followed, along with the sound of something heavy collapsing to the ground.

Anastasia didn't move. But from the reverberations, she could tell exactly what had happened. The thief had just been punched. Hard.

That was the amateur's punishment for breaking that implicit understanding that all slavers shared.

"Ahh! Ahhhh! Oww…shit, that hurts! Gah!"

"Shut your trap. You'll wake the girl and scare her."

The slave trader released Anastasia's hair and turned away from her. She risked cracking one eye open, just enough to see what was happening. The two traders stood over the thief, one of them digging a heavy boot into his stomach, making him choke out a whimper.

"Got it? We traffickers have our rules. City officials turn a blind eye and let us do business—but *only* if we follow those rules. You really think we'll let some ignorant bastard like you work with us? Eh? Do you?"

"Agh—umf…s-sorry… Please…!"

The pressure on the thief's gut increased, and there was an awful crunching sound. He spat up blood, his pleas turning into broken whimpers.

The second trader crouched beside him, leaning in close. "You learned something today. Good for you. Don't worry. We'll teach you everything you need to know about our trade—on the job."

"Th-thank y—"

A metallic clink cut off his words. His fingers trembled as they touched his neck, his face twisting in confusion. Then, realization dawned. His expression crumpled into horror.

"Why…a slave collar…on me?"

The trader smirked. "We said we'd teach you on the job, didn't we? Much faster to learn the rules of the slave trade by being a slave. You're spineless, but still young. If you're lucky, you'll live quite a while."

"But…that wasn't the deal!"

A boot slammed into his ribs, sending him into unconsciousness.

The trader snorted and clamped shackles onto the now-limp thief, before tossing him aside like garbage.

"Amateurs," he spat. "The stupid shit they pull pisses me off. Ahh, but at least we got the crown jewels. The rule-breaker got his punishment, so nobody loses."

"I think the two new slaves lose," the second trafficker muttered smugly.

The first cocked his head and grunted, then turned his eyes back to Anastasia.

"Sorry, but I don't see slaves as people. They're merchandise. Just like meat and fish."

And with that, the two traders left the hut, locking the door behind them. Their footsteps faded into the distance, leaving the room dark and silent once again.

Anastasia finally let go of the breath she had been holding.

Her pulse was racing. Her body was drenched in cold sweat.

They hadn't noticed she was awake.

She had one chance.

"Hut hill…"

She was marked. By slave traders.

The thief had ended up as merchandise, too, but that was no consolation to her.

Whether karma came quickly or slowly for the thief, it was meaningless to Anastasia now.

Several hours later, she determined by instinct that it was night.

During that time, Anastasia lay on the cold floor. The urge to roll over assaulted her time and time again, but she had to resist it. And as for why—

"Why'd this have to happen to me…dammit…son of a…"

The thief had regained consciousness. He was sobbing, unable to accept reality. If he realized Anastasia was awake, she'd surely become the target of his misery. Her best course of action was to lie still and avoid making even the smallest noise.

That aside, feeling any resentment over sleeping on a cold stone

floor was something her past self never would have dreamed of. But that didn't mean her life of luxury had made her weak. Quite the opposite. She took pride in the fact that she had worked for the life she had now.

The more someone lived like a human being, the less they could tolerate inhuman conditions. That was how it should be. No one should aspire to be comfortable living at the bottom. Everyone should dream big and climb higher.

"Hey, you. Aren't you awake? C'mon, you're awake, right?"

Sick of his own pity party, the thief crawled over to Anastasia. From the resentful tone in his voice, it was clear he meant to hurt her. The slave traders must have assumed he wouldn't dare do something that stupid—but Anastasia knew better.

The thief grabbed the gag tied around her mouth and ripped it off roughly.

"…Yeah, I'm awake. 'Cause you wouldn't shut up."

"You—you—you're awake. Yeah, you're awake! You…little bitch… how dare you…"

"Just so you know, if you hurt me, you ain't gettin' a deal. You know how much I'm worth, right? If you lay a finger on me, those slave traders really will kill you this time."

"Urg—groo—grah!"

The word *kill* made the thief stiffen, swallowing all the emotions he had been about to unleash. The pain of being punched and kicked earlier returned with full force. Completely deflated, he clutched his aching ribs and whimpered.

"So…where are we?" Anastasia asked.

No answer.

"Got anything we can use to escape?"

Still no answer.

Hopeless. We not getting anywhere.

Deciding it was pointless to waste words on a defeated man, Anastasia slowly sat up. Her limbs were sore and stiff, but she twisted her joints and forced herself to crawl to the hut's entrance.

"Don't even try."

Ignoring the thief's pessimism, Anastasia propped herself against

the wall and hauled herself upright. Then, shaking the doorknob, she found it locked tight.

Lowering herself to the ground, she was about to rub her bound wrists against the stone floor to break free of the ropes, when—

"Sneak, sneak…mmm, yeah? There, like, seems to be somebody inside?"

Anastasia froze. There was a voice coming from the other side of the door. It was lighthearted and carefree, completely unlike the slave traders.

"Yes! I'm here! They kidnapped me!"

"Oooh, there *is* somebody! Woweeee! Just like Hetaro saaaaid! Okaaaay!"

The presence on the other side of the door retreated.

Anastasia barely had time to wonder what they were doing before she threw herself to the ground in panic.

Immediately after—

"Uyraaaah! Mimi KABOOM!"

With a cheerful yell, a pale blue light exploded through the hut's door from the outside. The hinges snapped off, sending the wooden slab flying into the room.

"All riiight, success! Mimi, you ruuuule! Uh-huh, uh-huh, uh-huh!"

A tiny figure stood triumphantly in the destroyed doorframe, bathed in moonlight. Then she started dancing, completely unbothered by the destruction, happily jiggling in place in excitement.

The silhouette was ridiculously small—barely half Anastasia's height, and she was already short for her age. And from what little she could make out in the darkness, the form wasn't even human.

With pointed ears, a tail, and soft fur, the figure looked just like a bipedal cat.

A catgirl.

"Oooweee, you got tied up real good, huh! Hang on juuust a sec!"

With a mischievous grin, the catgirl pounced on Anastasia's bindings. Sharp claws made quick work of the ropes, freeing her wrists and ankles with ease.

Anastasia blinked, rubbing her sore wrists as she looked at the strange girl before her.

"Um…thanks?"

"Good, always say thank you! You're a very good person for saying that. Hetaro and TB always remind Mimi not to forget to say thank you. What a good girl you aaaare, good girl, good girl."

"C-cut it out, that tickles. So, um…who are you exactly?"

The orange-furred catgirl was petting Anastasia's head without a care in the world, completely disregarding personal space. As Anastasia shrank away, she asked the question that had been nagging at her. The catgirl blinked her big round eyes and grinned.

"Hee-hee, purrfect question! Lemme seeeee… Mimi is a cat! That's it, a cat!"

She proudly planted her hands on her hips, as if expecting applause.

"Cat…?" Anastasia echoed, confused.





As in a regular ol' cat? Or is that supposed to be her name? No, she called herself Mimi…

"Sis, it's not *cat*, it's *cat burglar*."

The voice of reason came from the entrance of the hut, right where the catgirl had stood. Another small figure stepped into view—a second catman. He was practically identical to her, save for a calmer expression and a slightly different build.

"Sorry for the confusion, ma'am. I'm Hetaro, and this is my big sister, Mimi. There's no time to explain—just come with us."

Unlike his boisterous older sister, Hetaro had a rational, measured tone, bowing politely as he spoke. Beside him, Mimi puffed out her chest proudly, nodding along, as if his introduction had been a grand declaration.

Anastasia wasn't sure what to make of the two, but she could tell one thing for certain—they weren't bad people.

"As Hoshin would say, 'Decisiveness is mightier than the sword!' Sure, I'll come with you."

Women should have pluck, and men should be pretty.

The self-proclaimed cat burglars had appeared suddenly, throwing her entire situation into chaos, but Anastasia had already made up her mind to trust them. In her short life, she had developed a keen sense for reading people, and her instincts told her they were on her side.

"Okay, let's take that fine young man with us!"

Hetaro turned to the thief, motioning for him to join them.

But the thief just stared at the children in terror, his eyes wide with fear.

"D-don't be ridiculous! I can't run away with you kids… If they find me, they'll kill me! W-well, no thanks! I don't wanna die… Anything but that…!"

"But you can't—"

"Don't bother," Anastasia cut Hetaro off before he could press the issue. "Nothing you could say'll change his mind. The only folks who can live an honest life are the ones who've got the courage to walk on their own two feet."

Hetaro hesitated, but Mimi tapped his shoulder encouragingly.

"Mmm, tough break, huhhh! But it's out of our hands. The only people we can help are people who wanna be helped."

Surprisingly, Mimi had reached the same conclusion as Anastasia. With a tug of her brother's hand, she coaxed him into letting it go.

"Whereabouts in the city are we?" Anastasia asked.

"Dump Mountain, in the corner of town," Hetaro answered. "Those slave traders always use this spot."

"And Mimi's crew founnnnd it! It's justice time, wooo!"

Dump Mountain was the colloquial name for the city's dumping grounds, a place used for disposing of dirt, sand, and scrap wood. It was an isolated area, rarely visited, making it the perfect place for a secretive operation like slave trading.

Anastasia glanced up at the moon, heaving a small sigh of relief before checking her bearings. The city was still far away—even the slums were a good distance from here. She could walk long distances well, but there was no way she could keep up with the nimble catmen.

They couldn't call for help, either. That would only attract attention from the slave traders.

Their best option was to retreat quietly—

"What a baaad girl you are. Running away like that."

A smug voice rained down from above, shattering all of her carefully laid plans. Anastasia's body tensed as she stopped in her tracks. And then something massive landed before them, sending a tremor through the ground.

The moment she laid eyes on him, her breath caught in her throat.

A giant stood before them, clothed in mismatched beast leathers and furs. Four arms protruded from his shoulders.

Bug-like eyes glistened in the moonlight. And his voice was unmistakable. It was the second slave trader from the hut.

"You're gonna be a slave, so it's good that you've got spunk. I love 'em spunky. But too much spunk isn't exactly a good thing. Need me to cool your head off?"

Anastasia stifled a scream as he leaned in close, his breath hot against her face.

But it wasn't the man himself that terrified her.

It was what he held in his hand—a gruesome object she wished she hadn't seen.

"Oh, this? Yeah, guess that would give you a scare. Sorry, my bad."

He dangled it in front of her, the bloodied mass glistening in the moonlight.

"But you know, he let you kids escape, didn't he? Imagine, a slave letting another slave escape. This guy really didn't understand the rules now, did he?"

With a chuckle, the man waved the severed head in his hand side to side, the thief's lifeless face frozen in an eternal expression of horror. He had likely taken his final breath without even understanding why he was being killed.

Then, with a careless flick of his wrist, the man tossed the head aside. His hand, still dripping with gore, slowly reached toward Anastasia's neck—

"Preemptive attack!!!"

"Whoa, there."

Before he could grab her, Mimi shot forward, delivering a lightning-fast kick to his side. But the four-armed man effortlessly blocked the blow with his lower left arm, then snatched Mimi out of the air with his upper right.

"Mrrrg?! Huh? You've got extra hands? That's so coooool!"

"Yeah, it's super cool. Sorry, dear, but whoever has the most hands wins. It's a fact of life."

"Let my sister go!"

While Mimi flailed in his grip like an excited kitten, Hetaro slipped behind the man in an attempt to strike from his blind spot. But the towering man moved with an unnatural smoothness, dodging as if he had eyes in the back of his head.

Before Hetaro could react, two massive arms snagged him from behind, locking him in place.

"So! Coooool!" Mimi cheered, kicking her legs.

"Sorry, Sis, I'm so sorry…," Hetaro grunted, struggling against the iron grip.

With both Mimi and Hetaro restrained, the slave trader turned his smug, bug-eyed gaze on Anastasia. He didn't even have to say it—she could hear the mockery in his expression alone: *Look at that, my arms are all full. Maybe you should run while you still can?*

"The only moron who'd believe a too-good-to-be-true scenario like that is the guy who just died."

The man grinned, impressed. "How very true. Sometimes intelligence can be a curse, can't it?" Then he snickered. "Still, I gotta say, not a bad trade. I get two useful cat-kids in exchange for a dumbass? I'd call that a win."

Anastasia's ears perked up. She could hear the other slave trader approaching from behind.

They were about to tie her up again. This time, they wouldn't just lock her in a hut. This time, she would be sold.

Before they put a gag on her, she had one last thing to do.

"Let me just tell you one thing."

The man paused, intrigued. "Hmmm?"

"If you hurt me, a big, bad, scary wolf is gonna come after you. And I ain't as sweet as I look, either."

The slaver threw his head back and laughed, his shoulders shaking violently with glee.

"Ooh, nice, how very nice. Well, then, I'll be looking forward to that."

To him, it was just the last words of a sore loser.

Which meant the battle had already begun.

Never wage wars you know you'll lose before they even start.

Even as the slave trader grabbed her shoulders roughly and shoved a gag into her mouth, even as she was dragged away…

…The fire in Anastasia's eyes never dimmed.

7

According to the legend of Hoshin of the Wasteland, there was a tale of a fortress liberated without a single drop of blood shed.

According to legend, Hoshin infiltrated the enemy stronghold

alone and, using nothing but his eloquent words, convinced the leader of the garrison to pledge allegiance to him. Then, he flung the gates open, rescued his comrades, and secured victory.

There were many theories about how he sneaked inside in the first place.

Some said he boldly pounded at the front gate, others claimed he hid in a wagon of cargo, and some even believed he pretended to be a corpse and scared the soldiers witless.

But no matter how he got inside, every version of the tale agreed on one thing—Hoshin freed everyone without bloodshed and saved the tiny nation of Kararagi. From that moment on, his legend began.

Using that victory as a foothold, he plunged into the raging conflict between the warring city-states and would eventually found the modern nation of Kararagi.

With that anecdote lingering in her mind, Anastasia once again found herself awed by the extraordinary figure of Hoshin.

To infiltrate an enemy fortress alone…how much courage and calculation that must have taken. Hoshin was no warrior. He was famous for having no combat ability whatsoever. His tongue was his only weapon.

In that regard, he was just like Anastasia.

The only difference was probably that Hoshin never messed up so bad that he got a slave ring clamped around his neck…

"……"

With a mournful sigh, Anastasia felt the cold, hard collar pressing against her skin, a stark reminder of her own shortcomings compared to her idol.

She didn't even have it in her to joke about how she was matching with Ricardo now. But, ironically, the collar gave her a strange sense of calmness.

And that was because it told her something important.

Her captors were honest slave traders.

Now, some might ask: *What's the difference between an honest and a dishonest slave trader?*

There was a big difference.

The presence of a slave collar made all the difference.

These collars were a type of metia, embedded with gemstones that connected to their owner's Gate. With a single thought, the owner could inflict excruciating pain on the slave at any time. This system allowed slave traders to control their captives without resorting to brute force.

Without these collars, slaves had to be controlled physically, which meant they were often beaten, starved, or even killed if they resisted.

Because of this, "honest" slave traders generally took better care of their merchandise.

In other words, Anastasia wasn't in immediate danger of being beaten to death. That sliver of reassurance was why she could remain calm and continue plotting her escape.

"Hmmf! Hmmmmf!"

And she wasn't alone.

There were two other reasons Anastasia remained calm—or rather, two other captives.

Mimi and Hetaro were in the hut with her, each wearing their own slave collars.

"Mmmmmmm! Mm! Mmmm!"

Mimi had spent hours trying to break free of her restraints with her bottomless well of energy.

Beside her, Hetaro lay quietly on his side, but he was not wallowing in despair. His silence wasn't submission. It was strategic. Just like Anastasia, his keen eyes observed every detail, searching for a way out. There was no fear in them, no sign of giving up.

One sibling was watching. The other was fighting.

Which meant Anastasia still had hope. And it was a big, furry hope, at that.

"Homehow or anoher, dhe olh man hill home here…"

She had to let Ricardo know where she was.

If she could get a message to him, if she could just hold out long enough—

That was the key to freeing everyone.

"Oooh."

As Anastasia furiously schemed, the hut door swung open, and a new figure entered.

"Didorii told me the news, but my goodness, an idiot for two catmen sure is a great trade."

With a snort, a large, well-dressed man stepped inside.

Anastasia recognized him immediately. She had seen him the night before.

This was the leader of the slave traders.

Though she hadn't gotten a good look at him in the dark, now, in the light, she could see everything clearly.

His flashy clothes jingled with gold baubles, and his fingers were adorned with gaudy rings.

And he wasn't alone.

Behind him stood several armed bodyguards, including the four-armed bug-eyed man.

The moment Anastasia's eyes landed on him, the bug-eyed giant grinned grotesquely and waved mockingly at her.

With a leader, three bodyguards, and a berserker, it seemed like an awfully big party to bring just to inspect their goods. "Well, I heard somebody was a bad girl last night. I'm a worrier, you see. Because of that, this here li'l operation is doin' quite well." The leader politely answered Anastasia's unspoken suspicions. With a nudge of his chin and a grunted "You," one of his bodyguards undid the chains locking Anastasia and the others to the wall. But it obviously wasn't to set them free.

"We're on the move. It's about time we change the location of our operation in Banan." The leader roughly yanked on Anastasia's chain, making it clear in a roundabout way that she was about to be shipped off. He marched her straight out of the hut and toward the liger wagon.

But on the way—

"Mogagaa!!"

"Wah?! Hey, stop!"

Mimi, who was dragged out of the hut at the same time, threw a fit and swatted the arms of her bodyguard away. The kitten

pounced, flying right at the leader. She was targeting him not out of strategy but out of instinct. And yet, she had made the right choice. In a flash, the leader's smug face tensed.

"I told you, don't be a bad girl."

But Mimi's counterattack was stopped cold. The four-armed giant had stepped in between them and punched Mimi with two of his arms. With nothing to break her fall, she bounced off the ground hard.

"Gaah!"

"Argh! Hey, Didorii! That's too much! Don't damage the goods!"

As he watched Mimi plop flat onto the ground, the leader slapped the giant's back. The giant—the man called Didorii—shrugged his bigger-than-average shoulders and pulled back.

The leader crouched down and crooned to Mimi in a sickeningly sweet voice. "Sorry about that, little one. But you shouldn't've done that. We don't want to damage our goods, you know? Just be a good girl, and nothing bad'll happen."

"Oooh, Mimi won't fall for that, you big bad guyyy!" Mimi objected, undaunted. The attack had loosened her gag, and she made full, tenacious use of her now-free mouth. "Bad guys always get what's coming to 'em! You can capture Mimi, but Hetaro and TB'll make sure you pay!"

"Girl sure has spirit, after such a big punch… She'll be fun to break in."

"What're you—? MEE-GYAAAA!"

Mimi cut off mid-taunt in stupefied horror, all the fur on her body standing on end. Her eyes shot open as she screamed. It was the slave collar. The leader was using it to torture Mimi.

As Hetaro watched his sister writhe in agony, his face twisted with the same pain. Eventually, Mimi's muscles gave out. The leader reattached her gag and stood up.

"And what are you doing, letting them just run around, you idiot? If you feel like you can't focus, how 'bout you and I play with a nice collar? I'm sure it'll keep you sharp."

"S-sorry, sir! It won't happen again—!"

The guard who had blundered received a swift slap upside the

head. He then carefully restrained Mimi in his arms again. Anastasia, who was silently watching the whole scene unfold, realized then that they had been captured by a deeply troublesome group of villains.

They had a competent, attentive leader, and they were highly skilled as well. Things weren't looking good.

"Well, if you try to escape again, you'll just get hurt like that. Guess you learned your lesson… Well, shall we all head out? Better say good-bye to your home."

At the condescending words from the leader, Anastasia took a cursory look at her surroundings. Everywhere she looked, there was rubble and scrap. It really was a dump mountain. No part of her was going to miss this scenery. She just stared at the ground.

"Looks like you're ready to say good-bye." The leader gave Anastasia's back a little push. "Then let's— Hey, whoa there."

The momentum from the push made Anastasia crumple to the ground. "Hey, I didn't push you that hard. That won't do, dear. Gotta be strong."

A guard pulled Anastasia back up. Now on her feet, she shook her head and quietly balled her hidden hand into a fist. Then, as she nonchalantly trudged toward the wagon—

"……"

Her face shot up when she felt a chill. Standing right in front of her was the bug-eyed Didorii. As his big eyes seemed to swallow her whole, ice surged up and down Anastasia's spine.

He saw that…

The horrific realization made the skin on her neck beneath the collar prickle in fear.

They're going to torture me through the collar, just like Mimi—

"Tee-hee-hee."

But all that came was a soft, low chuckle from Didorii.

Without a word about Anastasia's behavior, Didorii and the other guards returned their focus to watching the surrounding area. It bewildered Anastasia, but with another push to her back, she was herded into the wagon.

They were shut inside the wagon in a way that made sure nobody from the outside could see them. This was likely to

distinguish between the slaves obtained legally and the slaves that were not. Naturally, the children were to be sold on the black market. If they were discovered, the slave traders would be in big trouble.

"……"

Unlike the hut, the wagon had windows, but the interior was cramped. The children were packed in like fish in a can.

"Be good, you hear? It breaks my heart to have to bully kids."

Pointing at his own neck threateningly, the leader lowered the flaps. And just as the slave traders slipped out of view, the last thing Anastasia saw was the grin on Didorii's face. It was unnerving, the way he seemed to see right through her. The man was impossible to read.

"Hey, Sis, Sis…"

"Mrrrrrg."

Inside the locked carriage, Hetaro called out to his knocked out sister in worry. Mimi's consciousness had not returned, but her life was not in danger. The collar was working as intended.

More importantly…

"How'd your hollar het off?"

Hetaro's collar was off. When Anastasia gave his neck an inquisitive look, Hetaro bared his sharp fangs and chomped the air.

"Our fangs are much sturdier than human teeth. When my sister wakes up, I'll tell her… Oh, wait…"

Hetaro's hesitation likely came from the fear that Mimi would throw a fit the moment her mouth was free. He and Anastasia could both imagine her screaming and cursing, earning her another collar–induced time-out.

Their limbs were bound, and there were the collars to consider, too. Hetaro was most suited to deal with them, but Anastasia already had a few schemes of her own in mind.

"Ohay, hep hun—pffha! Okay, step one, you and I trade intel."

"How did you—?" Hetaro gasped in surprise as Anastasia used both hands to untie the gag around her head. Anastasia opened her shackled fist before his eyes to show him the scrap of iron she had picked up off the ground when she'd fallen before entering the cart.

"I faked a fall so I could pick this up. Got a real scare when I thought somebody saw me…"

She did not understand why Didorii had let her off so easily. But his strange whim had saved them all.

The situation was bleak, but everything Anastasia needed was in place. She had Mimi, Hetaro, herself, and whatever they could see from inside the cart. The slave trade leader's flashy appearance, the map of a city still vivid in her mind—and Ricardo.

If she could connect all the dots, they could escape the fortress.

"Say, I got a question for you…that wound on your cheek, does it really hurt?"

Hetaro's expression tensed at Anastasia's question. Feeling a tangible confidence from his reaction, Anastasia smiled sweetly—and cunningly.

8

"Ricardo, I did a little asking around, and that Didorii really is a dangerous bastard."

As Ricardo squeezed his ample frame into a chair in his tent, staring at his map, his lieutenant returned and delivered the news.

Ricardo angrily bared his fangs. "Yeah, anyone could tell that from one look at that skin flayer."

"Whoa, *skin flayer*—that's quite a name. Then again, it ain't a bad one. He really is infamous for skinning his enemies and wearing them."

"Yeah, I figured it was some nasty business like that…"

Ricardo's nose wrinkled in disgust as he pictured the grotesque four-armed giant. Wearing animal skins was one thing, but wearing the skins of demi-humans he slaughtered? That kind of collector was never satisfied with just one or two pieces. He probably had several coats like it, switching them out depending on the weather or his mood.

"He hails from the north, but he's a rising star down here. That group we just passed… Razcrew's company, was it? He's on contract

with them right now."

"'Rising star' is an awful cutesy way of puttin' it. Still, I'm surprised you dug up so much on him."

"Somebody got into a fight with him once at a tavern. One of his ears got torn to pieces—sounds like he got off lucky."

The lieutenant shrugged, but Ricardo agreed. Walking away from a fight with Didorii with just a torn ear? That was damn lucky.

The thick stench of blood radiating off Didorii dwarfed any other mercenary out there. He could kill a man with just one arm—and he had four. The gap in power was glaring.

"That's some sneer you got there, Hound. I know you're angry, but this doesn't have anything to do with our job."

"I know that, dammit. Shit, I'm goin' out for a bit."

Still fuming, Ricardo left his lieutenant behind and stepped out into the cool night air above their camp. He absentmindedly played with the collar on his neck as he looked up at the starry sky.

They were no closer to accomplishing their mission or finding the bandits, and his failing sense of smell only deepened his frustration. As if that wasn't bad enough, now he had some four-armed creep rubbing him the wrong way.

Didorii killed Ricardo's kin and wore their skins from head to toe. And that affectionate, mocking way he called him "Wolfie"—Ricardo could just feel the smug, twisted evil behind it.

Aside from Didorii, there was only one other person who ignored his name and just called him a wolf—

Anastasia.

"Huh. I feel a twitch in my beard… What is it?"

As he stroked his beard, a sense of foreboding made him raise an eyebrow. Then he heard arguing voices in the distance.

Without thinking, Ricardo took off in that direction.

"Hey, runt, this ain't no place for a kid. Get back to town."

"I would, but I must speak with whoever is in charge. Please let me through."

A rough, tired voice and the voice of a young child that was polite, yet firm and intelligent.

As Ricardo approached, he spotted them. One of his mercenary

guards, standing firm, and—

A very tiny young catman.

"What's the ruckus? Big guy like you picking a fight with a kid—you should be ashamed of yourself."

The guard hastily bowed as Ricardo cut in. "Ah—Ricardo…er, well, I keep tellin' the kid to go home, but he won't listen…"

With a snort, Ricardo turned his attention to the young catman. He was small but clever-looking.

"Son, I'm in charge here. What's it you got to tell me?"

"You are the responsible party, sir?"

The boy, still in rags, widened his bright, determined eyes at Ricardo's towering figure. Then, without hesitation, he bowed deeply and dropped to his knee.

"I have a favor to ask, sir. Please save my big brother and sister."

"Your brother and sister? What happened?"

"It's slave traders, sir. They were captured by slavers… Can you help them?"

"Ah…so that's what happened. Yeah, sorry to hear that."

A pang of pity struck Ricardo's chest as he scratched his head, thinking it over.

The boy's older siblings—likely also catmen—were perfect prey for slave traders, especially if they were still young. Judging by the rags he wore, they were slum kids. Probably hyenas scraping by at the bottom of Banan.

And the ugly truth was, it wasn't illegal. Banan's laws didn't forbid slavers from snatching stray demi-human kids off the streets.

Asking Ricardo and his mercenaries for help was a mistake.

"If only the boy hadn't asked while I was on a job…"

A root of mercy took hold in Ricardo's heart.

But then—

"Please, sir, look at this."

Before Ricardo could completely reject him, the boy removed his cloak of rags. When he saw the boy's scrawny chest and stomach, Ricardo groaned quietly.

His skin was covered with dark red depressions—internal bleeding that formed a drawing. A closer look revealed that the drawing was

a map, one Ricardo recognized immediately. It was the same map of Banan's outskirts he had just been staring at in his tent.

"Son, those wounds…I mean, that map—what is it?"

"Somebody is hurting my brother or sister. For protection…we have the power of the blessing of thirds. We use it to share the wounds or pain we're experiencing between the three of us… That's where these wounds are coming from."

"A map…that's impressive. Okay, so that's how you know where they are—wait a minute."

The boy's kidnapped siblings were using self-inflicted wounds to give him their location. That discovery alone was enough to astonish Ricardo, but it still wasn't enough to force his hand. It did, however, make him raise an eyebrow in thought. There was something more to this map.

"This map…"

It showed Banan's outskirts. It was similar to Ricardo's…too similar. The same marked areas where bandits had attacked caravans, even the spots Ricardo had identified as potential bandit hideouts. It would be impossible to draw such a map without having seen Ricardo's own.

But there was one difference.

His camp.

Near Banan, there was a mark around his own camp, with a line connecting it to the city.

"This area…this road…and the bandit stronghold…it's all connected by…"

"Mister Ricardo? What are you—? Whoa!"

As Ricardo scrutinized the map on the boy's chest, a guard started to ask him a question until Ricardo grabbed the man's shoulder, bared his fangs, and growled.

"Gather all the troops and pack up camp! This little runt just dropped a great battle plan in our laps!"

The boy introduced himself as TB and revealed the reddish-black map of wounds on his body to the entire mercenary group. Supporting the boy by the shoulders as he stood on the table, Ricardo pointed to various parts of the blood map, addressing his men.

"Got it, crew? This kid's stomach here has a map, drawn by somebody carving these wounds into his siblings' bodies. It's crazy, but there's one thing we can glean from this."

"The slave traders' hideout, right? The ones who captured his siblings? But that ain't our—"

That ain't our business—was what the lieutenant was about to say, but everyone already knew that unspoken rule. Whatever a band of slave traders did—good or bad—wasn't their concern. Their job was to hunt down the bandits. Sympathetic though they might be to TB's plight, they couldn't neglect their mission. But Ricardo shook his head.

"No, you're missin' the point. Look at the marks on this map. They show where the caravans were attacked and where we assumed the bandit stronghold might be. Doesn't that strike you as strange?"

"Well, yeah, it does feel unsettling… But what does it mean?"

"Look again. The *X* marks on the caravan raids and the places we've been chasing shadows. Now, look at the *X* marking where the slave traders are… This map is tellin' us somethin'. You know what it is, right?"

"Whoa, wait, Ricardo, you can't mean…"

Finally catching the meaning behind Ricardo's savage smile, the lieutenant widened his eyes in shock. Most of the other mercenaries hadn't put the pieces together yet, so Ricardo spoke loudly for all to hear.

"The thing we're lookin' for ain't bandits. It's slave traders *posing* as bandits… Really, it's criminals disguising themselves as merchants and ambushing real merchants."

They'd been looking for bandits all this time, but there never were any. The attacks were carried out by a criminal outfit masquerading as legitimate merchants, attacking trade caravans

under the cover of night. They stole everything—the carts, the cargo, and even the merchants themselves, who were enslaved and later sold in distant cities. That was how this criminal enterprise operated.

"Anyway, these slavers…once they left Banan, they've been loiterin' around these parts this time of night. Judgin' by the speed their wagons are movin', there's only one group they could possibly be."

"The Razcrew Company!"

The lieutenant spat the name of the caravan that had passed by their camp earlier that day, causing a stir among the mercenaries. He panicked, worried it was too late to catch them, but Ricardo shook his head.

"Stay calm, man. Didn't I tell you? This map shows the roads they're takin'. And before long, they'll have to stop and make camp for the night."

Once they knew that location, all that remained was for the Hound to live up to his name.

"Take down the tents! We ride now! To get Razcrew—to catch those bandits!"

With an invigorating cry from the lieutenant, the mercenaries flew into action. Ricardo watched them move, then turned to TB—the little boy who had accomplished his mission with extraordinary courage—and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Son, that was a damn brave thing you did. You're a hero."

"It was nothing, sir… I would do anything for my brother and… sister…"

And with that, the last dregs of strength left TB's body. Ricardo quickly caught him. He could tell immediately that the boy's tiny frame was burning with fever, and his breathing was erratic. It was no surprise. With wounds like those, the pain must have been agonizing beyond belief. And if his blessing was working the way he described it, his siblings' suffering had to be far worse.

Which was exactly why they needed to give this battle their all.

"Ana, your message came through loud and clear."

As he held TB in his arms, Ricardo muttered the name of the girl

who wasn't there. She had memorized a map after seeing it only once, connected the dots between the bandits and the slave traders, and sent that message to Ricardo at his campsite. She was a key player in this battle.

"I'll get you out of there safe and sound…and after that, we're gonna have a long talk about how exactly you got kidnapped by slave traders…!"

She was supposed to be safe in the city. So how the hell had she fallen into their hands?

Ricardo hadn't even considered that the man he let get away was behind it.

10

The clash between the mercenary group led by the Hound and the Razcrew outfit began late at night.

The uninhabited ghost town along the highway connecting the cities was one of many places upstanding merchants used as a campsite to rest themselves and their pack animals.

Once a farming village, the site had been abandoned and repurposed as a communal rest spot. Scattered farmhouses, remnants of days gone by, provided shelter, and those with intact roofs made the campsite even more appealing.

For a band of unscrupulous criminals to dare to use such a place only fueled the Hound's and his men's anger.

Late in the night, the Hound and his forty-odd mercenaries infiltrated the ghost town. A lookout fire burned at the camp's edge, and drunken, vulgar voices echoed in the darkness. The linked wagons bore the target merchant company's name, confirming their prey.

The map engraved on TB's chest was flawless. Leaving the boy behind in his tent before the operation began, the Hound couldn't shake the memory of his pleading voice. Even so, he gave the order to his lieutenant, instructing him to position a smaller platoon at the

village's landmark.

The lieutenant nodded in confirmation. Then, at his signal, the Hound lifted his head to the sky—

"AWOOOO!"

His howl tore through the night, so fierce, it seemed it might reach the full moon hanging in the sky.

An instant later, the Hound dropped to all fours, bounding toward his target. The battle had begun.

"RAAAAAH!"

"Aw, shaddap, jackass!"

With a single swing of his massive machete, Ricardo struck down the crazed man charging at him. The thick iron blade sank into the man's skull, splitting it open like a ripe fruit. As the corpse keeled over, spilling blood and brain matter on the way down, the men behind him gulped in unison.

"Eep…"

"Don't just stand there, shit for brains!"

Freezing up in the face of such a grisly scene was beyond amateur.

Ricardo cleaved one man in two, then crushed another's windpipe with a single punch. With all his might, he kicked a third into a wall, cracking the stunned man's skull with the hilt of his machete, silencing him for good.

The criminal outfit had disguised themselves as a legitimate trading company, systematically raiding merchant caravans along the roads. But despite their notorious record, they crumpled the moment the tables were turned.

"Ricardo! How's it looking on your end?!"

As Ricardo kicked aside a bloody corpse, his lieutenant ran over, his sword dripping with fresh blood. When he took in the carnage at Ricardo's feet, he groaned and slapped a hand to his forehead.

"I wasn't worried about you, but damn, you went overboard. You trying to kill everyone?"

"These bastards ain't worth keeping alive. I'll tear 'em limb from

limb and toss ’em into a pot of boiling oil.”

“I get it, but think about the aftermath. We’ve got to answer to the council. If you wipe ’em all out, they won’t let you off easy.”

“What, you sayin’ they’ll want me to pay for it with my life? Fine, I bloody will! But only after I’m done with ’em. And if Ana and those kids ain’t safe, the deal’s off.”

While the lieutenant worried about the city council, Ricardo only burned with fury. The criminals’ true identity wouldn’t have been exposed if not for Anastasia’s quick thinking and the catmen’s help. Those poor kids had been pushed far beyond their limits. It was their duty to make things right.

The lieutenant’s scowl deepened. He threw his head back and howled, “Agggh, dammit! This is why I hate working with you. You fire everyone up too damn easily. At this rate, we won’t have enough survivors left to testify—”

“I told ’em to leave the leader alive. That’ll be plenty. But what matters more is—”

“I know. The skin flaying bastard, right?”

The skin flayer, Didorii. That many-armed man was the real muscle behind this operation. Sneak attacks and tricks wouldn’t work on him. He was on a whole other level.

“I’m the only one who can take him down. No one else is touching him.”

“Yeah, otherwise we’d just end up with more dead men. So isn’t it about time—?”

Ricardo had ordered the mercenaries to signal him with a whistle if they spotted Didorii. Once he took him out, everything else would fall into place. He stood still, ears sharp, waiting for the sound—

“Hellooooooooo! Oh, Wollllllfie! Come out and plaaaay!”

The smarmy, chilling voice cut through the blood-soaked ghost town, shattering the tension with unwelcome cheer.

11

The Hound’s surprise attack devastated Razcrew’s company in an

instant.

The drunken—or in some cases, sleeping—crew were slaughtered by the mercenaries, nearly a third of them wiped out in the opening assault. But the ones who survived that first onslaught were the true members of their criminal outfit. To Ricardo, however, they were nothing more than weaklings.

But it was important to note that they were only weaklings compared to Ricardo.

"Pieces of shit! They think they can screw with me?!"

As his men cut down the mercenaries, Razcrew snarled at the growing pile of corpses before him.

Five mercenaries had stormed into his quarters—the most intact house in the ghost town—while he was sleeping. Now, every last one of them was dead, cut down by the swords of his entourage. But judging from the clash of steel and the screams echoing across the village, the ambush wasn't limited to that small squad.

"This ain't the work of some brain-dead bandits…it's those assholes we ran into on the road."

Razcrew had heard rumors that the city council had set up a mercenary task force to put a stop to the caravan attacks. That had been enough to convince him to wrap up business in Banan early and skip town before the mercenaries started sniffing around. So how the hell had they found him—?

"Boss, what should we do with the others?"

"We got Didorii, remember? We don't gotta do shit. Let those arrogant bastards meet their doom. We've got something more important to check on."

The mere mention of the berserker many-armed man silenced his entourage. No doubt Didorii was already having the time of his life, twirling through the battlefield as heads flew around him.

But Razcrew had bigger concerns—what had triggered this whole bloodbath in the first place? If everything had gone as usual, yet chaos had erupted, then something had changed. And the key to that mystery always lay in the unusual.

He ran his fingers over the bracers on his forearms, ensuring the jewels embedded in them were still in place. Those were the ones

that controlled the all-important slave collars. Then, he led his entourage toward the cargo.

"The girl… She's in this crate, yeah?"

He stopped before a large wooden crate and gestured for his men to open it. The moment they did, the heavy stench of blood rushed into his face. Razcrew scowled, bracing against the metallic tang in the air.

"…!"

A faint gasp came from within the crate. He stepped inside, peering into the darkness as his eyes adjusted. And then he saw—

"Now I get it." He let out a low chuckle, tucking his chin. "Those little runts had a blessing…crafty little buggers."

The young female catman's abdomen was soaked in blood. Her brother lay behind her, bearing the same wounds. And there she stood, arms spread protectively before him, defiant despite her injuries.

Razcrew was genuinely impressed.

What form. What beauty. Of all the cargo he had handled so far, she was a gem.

"Well done, especially with your limbs bound. Those wounds…let me guess. You found yourself a shard of glass at Dump Mountain?"

"You sound awfully confident," Anastasia shot back. "Hasn't a big, scary wolf come to rescue me?"

"My own rabid dog's probably fightin' him as we speak. Anyway, you'll pay dearly for all the money you're costing me."

Razcrew smirked as he lifted his left arm, flashing the bracer at the defiant girl. With just a thought, he could unleash unbearable pain on any slave wearing a collar—a lesson he had already taught the catgirl once before.

Even her strong-willed expression faltered at the memory of that agony. Satisfied, Razcrew kept his gaze on her as he slipped a twisted dagger from his pocket, one of his favorite torture tools.

Not that he'd use it on her. That would ruin her value. No, the dagger was meant for the children behind her.

"Listen, sweetie, you've been a very bad girl. But you ain't the only one who has to pay for what you did. This'll be a great lesson

for you."

With a small tilt of his chin, his men reached out to grab Anastasia. He planned to make her watch as he tortured one of the catmen, forcing her to repent. After that, Didorii would make short work of the mercenaries, and this little mess would be neatly wrapped up.

"Gotta pay…for what you did…"

"Hmm?"

Lost in his own thoughts, Razcrew barely registered the girl's hoarse voice. He turned around, only to find her staring directly into his eyes.

Her pale yellow gaze burned with something…something unnerving.

"If that's true…then it's you… You gotta pay for what you did!" she spat, her voice fierce.

In a flash, a catman sprang forward, fangs bared in a sharp grin.

"Evil never prospers!!!"

Before Razcrew could react, the catman's foot slammed into his face.

12

In the blink of an eye, the situation inside the crate shifted at a dizzying speed.

Anastasia's shout spurred Mimi into action. Despite her own wounds, she leaped forward and kicked Razcrew square in the face. But in the very next instant, he retaliated, activating his bracer.

Mimi's small body trembled violently as excruciating pain coursed through her—but it wasn't enough to stop her. Because Hetaro was the one taking the brunt of it.

The blessing of thirds, the protective magic shared between Mimi and her siblings, distributed pain among the three of them. Normally, the suffering was divided equally, but they could deliberately shift the burden. Just as Hetaro had done when they engraved the map on his abdomen, he now absorbed the

punishment meant for Mimi, taking on virtually all the pain.

"I'm not as strong as my sister…so this is all I can do."

The fierce determination in Hetaro's eyes when he had agreed to Anastasia's plan had been blinding. Even now, weakened by pain and blood loss, he endured the agony to shield his sister.

"Whooo! Cho-yaaah!"

Picking up on her brother's resolve, Mimi's attacks became sharper, faster, stronger—far beyond what anyone could have imagined. Razcrew's entourage stood frozen, stunned by the sight of their leader sprawled on the ground. That hesitation gave Mimi just enough of an opening.

With a short, brutal kick, she sent one of the bodyguards flying into the wall.

These men were Razcrew's elite, his most trusted enforcers, trained to be ruthless. But against the hyperactive kitten, their so-called strength meant nothing. Mimi's raw combat ability elevated her above them.

"Yah!"

The second bodyguard snapped back to his senses, drawing his blade—a katana with a gleaming, razor-sharp edge. He swung, his strikes flashing deadly fast.

But Mimi was faster.

"Ay-you-yaaah!"

She bent backward to avoid his slash, twisting to land a tail attack. Then, with a sudden, explosive headbutt to his abdomen, she knocked the wind out of him. As he stumbled, she unleashed a flurry of rapid punches and kicks to his throat. A final slam to the ground left him unconscious.

"There! Did you see that?! Mimi! Flawless victoryyy!"

With Razcrew and his men completely demolished, Mimi cheered, breaking into a cocky victory dance.

Anastasia's eyes widened. She had only meant to stall for time, yet somehow, Mimi had wiped out Razcrew's whole escort.

"Well…I guess that's all taken care of."

Though still in shock over the unexpectedly perfect outcome, Anastasia wasted no time. She hurried to Razcrew's unconscious

body, prying the bracers off his arms.

Escape would be impossible if they remained shackled. Securing their freedom first was the safest plan. Then they could simply wait for the big scary wolf to come find them.

"Whoo-hoo! Mimi's collar is off! Hetaro's collar is off, too!"

"Yes!" Anastasia cheered. "These things come off way easier than I thought. Okay, now…"

Using the bracers as a key, she quickly unlocked all their collars. Then she snapped the shackles back onto Razcrew and his men instead.

A low, gravelly voice interrupted her.

"Insolent…brats…you're gonna pay for this—! AGHH!"

Anastasia activated the bracer. Razcrew screamed in agony before slumping into unconsciousness again. She had meant to punish only him, but his bodyguards shrieked as well. At least they were safe now.

"Now all we need to do is wait for the old man… I trust you, so don't let me down…"

As Mimi knelt beside Hetaro, tending to his wounds, Anastasia ran her fingers over the bracers. She murmured a quiet prayer, hoping that the next person to open this crate would be someone familiar.

"AGGGH!"

"Oops. Clumsy me."

Razcrew's garbled wail filled the crate because Anastasia had accidentally triggered the bracer again.

13

The powerful demand for attention led him right to a sea of blood.

"Ahaaa, you finally came to see me, Wolfie."

The berserker gazed at Ricardo, snorting with excitement. Corpses lay scattered at his feet, brutalized beyond recognition.

But even among the mangled remains, Ricardo could tell at a glance—

"That guy, that guy, and that guy—those ain't my boys. They're

yours."

"Oops… You think sooo?" Didorii chuckled, tilting his head. "They were just loitering around in front of me, getting on my nerves, so I wasted them. But that sorta thing happens, right?"

"Not to me, it doesn't, jackass."

The joking brute before him, bloody battle-axes in hand, was Didorii the skin flayer. One of his four arms adjusted the human-skin coat draped over his hulking frame, his bug-eyed glare fixed on Ricardo.

"So my hunch was right. The Wolfie that girl talked about was you."

"…And you're the dumbass who let Ana run circles around you. You ain't eccentric—you're just stupid. And that stupidity has wiped out almost your entire crew. You still got that goofy grin on your face, or is reality sinking in?"

"Oh yeah? Well, as far as I'm concerned, all I wanna do is have fun with you, Wolfie."

Now it all made sense. That was classic berserker logic.

Hiring pure muscle without giving a damn about their brains was a colossal failure in judgment, but Razcrew's standards were so atrociously low, it almost felt cruel to expect him to notice.

"Ricardo…"

His lieutenant arrived, panting from battle fatigue. Ricardo's massive machete pointed toward a different battleground.

"Once I pin down this bastard, his friends'll crumble."

"I guess he could say the same about you."

"Shut it. Just go deal with the rest and pray I win."

Ricardo gave his worried lieutenant a shove and turned back to Didorii.

The man waited in silence until the lieutenant had fully retreated. Ricardo raised an eyebrow.

"If you don't use good table manners before a big feast, doesn't it make the meal taste worse?" Didorii grinned, adjusting his axes. "I'm Didorii—I like my meat juuust right."

"That so?" Ricardo scoffed. "Well, I don't waste time slapping 'delicious' or 'disgusting' labels on the bastards I kill. And I ain't

letting you lay a single filthy finger on Ana."

"Oooh, would that have lit a fire in your belly if I did?"

"I'd already be slamming your ugly head into a vat of boiling oil, bastard."

Their mutual insults were the gong that signaled the start of the battle.

In a flash, Ricardo lunged, closing the gap instantly.

Didorii roared, swinging his four battle-axes from different angles, aiming to tear Ricardo apart.

Ricardo sidestepped the low swing, batted away two of the incoming axes with his machete, and before the final blow could land, drove his boot into Didorii's gut, sending the skin flayer flying.

"Gworyaaaah!"

With a savage howl, Ricardo swung his machete down, aiming for Didorii's skull.

Two of Didorii's axes shot up, catching the deadly strike just before impact. The force shook the ground, sending sparks flying as steel met steel.

But before the fight could turn into a contest of brute strength, the many-armed man's remaining two arms came for Ricardo's sides, axes sweeping in from left and right.

Ricardo braced himself as the blades slammed against his breastplate.

His ribs screamed, and even the organs beneath them felt the impact. Spitting out blood, Ricardo used the momentum of Didorii's attack to spring backward.

"Kahhh! Peh! Peh!" He coughed, spitting crimson onto the ground. "Shit, you've got moves, you bastard!"

"Not too shabby yourself, Wolfie. Okay, I think we're finished warming up now."

While Ricardo spat blood, Didorii simply grinned, his smarmy satisfaction unwavering. Then, in an instant, his massive form vanished into the darkness.

"Invisibility?! With that huge body?!" Ricardo's voice rang out in frustration as he strained his eyes against the night.

A brash, attention-hungry brute like Didorii shouldn't be able to

blend into the darkness so seamlessly—but he had. His scent had vanished, too, likely masked by the overpowering stench of blood pooling around them. Clever. Surprisingly clever.

Ricardo went still, focusing. Then—*whoosh*. A sharp gust of wind. Instinct kicked in.

He raised his machete just in time—*CLANG*—as three consecutive blows hammered against his weapon. Neutralizing three of the giant's attacks at once was one of Ricardo's greatest abilities. But if a fourth attack landed, it would mean Didorii's tactics were superior.

"Gnnff!"

The final ax struck his left shoulder, splitting through his wiry fur and tearing into thick muscle. Bright red blood spurted forth, and a deep, guttural growl of pain and fury rumbled in Ricardo's throat.

"Ooh-hahhh! Guess it'll take more than one ax to cut you down, honey!"

Didorii howled with delight, flipping lightly backward, vanishing once more into the void. No footsteps. No breathing. Just darkness.

Didorii was a nightmare. A predator cloaked in the flesh of his victims, wielding death and destruction with four bloodied arms.

"Well? What do you think, huh? Huh? Did you enjoy my lovely dance?"

The sound of stomping feet didn't seem to come from the same place the smarmy voice did. His strange way of moving around was deliberately confusing.

He was confounding Ricardo's eyes with invisibility, tricking his ears with his voice, and distracting his nose with all the blood.

Didorii himself moved unpredictably—advancing, retreating, crawling, leaping. Left, right, up, down. An erratic, death-dealing kaleidoscope that landed more hits as time went on.

At most, he could defend against three strikes, thanks to his senses—but the fourth always landed. And each one bit deeper than the last. It was only a matter of time before one last attack made his head fly.

"Damn you!" Ricardo snarled, staggering. "Okay, fine… I'm gonna end that stupid dance of yours!"

With a feral roar, he shouldered his machete and hurled himself

high, soaring through the air before landing in front of an abandoned hut where he put his back against the wall.

He couldn't predict when or where Didorii's attacks would come from. This way, he could at least eliminate the where.

A brilliant tactic, but Didorii only chuckled in amusement.

"Oo-hoo-hoo-hoo! Ooh, you went over there! I knew you'd go there! But listen, baby—!"

And then Didorii's massive frame appeared in the distance. Not for close combat.

For a throw.

Four axes hurtled at Ricardo from four directions.

Ricardo's last resort had been to plant himself against a wall, but he hadn't accounted for long-range attacks. To block this…he'd need four arms.

And Didorii's grin widened.

"I'll kill you," the berserker cooed, licking his lips, "then I'll show your pelt to that little girl. Oooh, I wonder how she'll take it?"

The smug cruelty in his tone snapped the last thread of Ricardo's patience.

Ricardo opened his mouth wide and played his ace in the hole.

"GRAAHHHH!!!"

A devastating howl ripped through the air.

The atmosphere itself trembled. The earth cracked, peeling apart beneath the force of his voice. The shock wave surged forward, blowing aside the spinning axes and slamming into Didorii, bathing his giant body in brilliant red.

"Uh—huhhh?"

Blood poured from his body, his bug eyes wide in stunned confusion.

"Raaaagh!!!"

And then, Ricardo struck.

With one breath, one mighty swing, he poured his entire being into the final blow. His machete slammed down, sinking deep into Didorii's thick neck.

A stunning arc of blood blossomed in the air. The skin flayer's massive form—coat of flesh and all—was sent flying.

"Oagh."

The sound of muscle and bone being torn apart echoed across the battlefield.

Didorii's body crashed into the ground, limbs twitching and head barely hanging on.

"Oooh, baby…that really…stung."

And with a chuckle in his raspy breath, he fell forever silent.

And thus, the criminal enterprise that plagued Banan met its end.

14

The day after the incident, Ricardo and Anastasia visited the chairman's office at the Chuden Company. Ricardo sat on a sofa, sipping his green tea as he finished delivering his report. Taking a deep breath, he added, "Anyway, we pulled that scum out by the root. We rescued Ana, too, and our losses were…well, they ain't so bad."

"Appears so," his boss replied. "Though it seems you did commit a string of illegal acts…"

Chuden, seated across from Ricardo, nodded deeply after hearing the story from start to finish. Ricardo, dissatisfied with the vague response, wrinkled his nose. "Hey, that's a pretty murky way to put it, eh? You got a complaint for me?"

"Of course we do! Do you have any idea how scared I was because of you, old man? You're getting a pay cut—a pay cut, you hear?! Mister Chuden, tell him!"

Ricardo grunted awkwardly. "B-but I said I was sorry, Ana…"

As Anastasia wailed and yipped beside him, Ricardo's expression darkened slightly. Chuden merely shrugged in exasperation. This was one of those times Ricardo had to own up to his mistakes.

Thanks to Anastasia's cunning, the criminal operation had been spectacularly dismantled. But the only reason they got that chance was because she had been captured by slave traders—a grim reality that left Ricardo apologizing profusely once he learned the details.

He had never imagined his kindness could backfire so horribly. Every danger Anastasia faced was his fault.

"Still, because of that, we got to crush Razcrew's company—"

"Apologize!"

"Yip—I'm sorry! I'll work hard to make sure this never happens ever again…"

As Anastasia hopped in anger, Ricardo's ears flopped in guilty apology. Chuden, watching the exchange, couldn't hold back his laughter anymore.

"You guys are really somethin'… Okay, okay, I get it. Anastasia, you were the hero of this story. And Ricardo…well, I guess heroics and failure cancel each other out."

"You're way too soft, Mister Chuden. This old man is gonna let it go to his head."

"Then you'll just have to knock him down a peg, Anastasia."

"Ahhh—all right, understood. I'll knock him down a whole bunch!"

With Chuden's permission in hand, Anastasia shot Ricardo a side-eyed smirk. It was a look that made Ricardo uneasy about what she had in store for him. At the same time, this was the look of "The Girl Who Opened the Gates." And he was proud that she was. He had been right about her all along.

"But Anastasia, my lady, I'm mighty impressed you linked the slave traders with the bandits. How'd you even figure that out? Did you get one of the goons to spill the beans?"

"Uhh, well… It wasn't anything so grand, really. It's just, they had a leader, right? And that guy had this jingly-jangly shiny thingy that looked real familiar to me."

"You recognized an accessory of his?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd seen it while doing caddy work. Anyway, the guy sellin' 'em mentioned bein' attacked by the bandits you two were talking about. So I just thought…maybe that's why the old man and his mercenaries couldn't find the bandits. Just seemed to me like all the stuff the merchants were selling would be tough for bandits to get fenced."

"……"

As Anastasia brushed it off like it was just a lucky guess, Chuden

drew in a sharp breath. Beside her, Ricardo was speechless. The way she'd connected the dots seemed outlandish, yet somehow, it had led her to the right answer.

And she had managed to communicate that information to Ricardo right when he needed it.

"When Hetaro and Mimi—oh, those were the catmen kids captured with me—anyway, when Mimi got hit, I thought, huh, why did her brother's cheek turn red, too? Just seemed like maybe they were connected by a blessing. Then I heard them talkin' about a third sibling on the outside."

"So you…cut wounds into the other siblings so they'd appear on the third sibling as a map?"

"Yeah, sure was lucky I happened to catch a glimpse of the map in here. That helped us draw a pretty good one."

Committing a complicated map to memory and replicating it after seeing it once was no big deal for Anastasia. Neither was calculating their exact travel distance and triangulating their position simply by watching the sky through the small window in the wagon, noting the sun's position, and counting the wheel revolutions.

By pinpointing the exact location of the enemy camp for the mercenary night raid, she had essentially cleared the way to victory —excluding the wild, unpredictable variable known as Didorii. From start to finish, Anastasia was a key player.

"But how did you do all of this from inside a wagon…?"

"Even the walls of loading platforms get hot when the sun hits 'em. Also, I counted out the time ever since I heard the midday bell. I dunno, with all that information, it was easy to figure out where we were on the map."

"Y-yeah…guess so…" Ricardo nodded tentatively. She kind of had a point—each individual action wasn't groundbreaking on its own.

But to count time by the second, calculate her position based on the sun's angle, formulate an escape plan, and perfectly carve a map onto a child's stomach from memory—most people could never do all those things.

And Anastasia did it all by herself.

He had no idea what to make of it.

“Holy… You really are more than I imagined.”

“Hmm?”

As Anastasia tilted her head innocently, Chuden looked thoroughly pleased. He was the one who had seen potential in her, pulling her from a bar where she ran errands and turning her into an apprentice merchant.

Her work had already started giving him a return on his investment, and now he had solid proof that his judgment was right. Who could blame him for grinning like an idiot?

But Ricardo remained wary. Chuden’s high hopes for Anastasia’s future were dangerous in their own way.

So, with a particularly rough hand, he tousled Anastasia’s hair and muttered, “Well, can’t argue with that. She’s more than anyone could imagine. Never dreamed that before I got the chance to rescue her, Ana’d wipe out the boss. I’d be terrified to be that slave trader!”

“W-well, I did what I had to! It was dangerous outside, so I figured we should at least make sure we were safe inside…and slave traders deserve every bad thing they get— Hey! You’re tangling my hair!”

By the time Ricardo had arrived, Anastasia had already collared the head slaver and forced him to suffer the same punishments he had inflicted on them.

He couldn’t think of a more poetic revenge.

“I know I promised I’d let you hold my collar…but maybe I said that too soon.”

“Hey, don’t be stupid. A promise is a promise, come hell or high water. Seriously, what stupid stuff are you spouting now?!”

As Anastasia blushed and yelled, Ricardo bared his fangs in a wide grin. He had left this part out of the report, but when he’d shown up to rescue her, Anastasia had flung herself into his arms and sobbed. He figured it was best to keep that a secret.

Chuden watched the pair, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of his sails. Still, Anastasia’s merits aside, it was time to wrap up the conversation.

“By the way, about those catfolk kids who got captured with you

and helped out…where'd they go?"

He inquired about the other heroes of the story, who were mysteriously absent. Ricardo and Anastasia exchanged identical puzzled expressions.

"Well, we don't know," Anastasia admitted. "The oldest sister could use healin' magic—I know she healed the other two boys, so they should be okay…"

"She said somethin' like, 'Champions of justice *neeeever* ask for payment!' and then ran off somewhere."

"…How could she possibly say that?"

Chuden's question hung in the air, because it was the same question tormenting Ricardo and Anastasia.

Those three siblings had suffered great harm helping to take down the criminal outfit, yet they hadn't asked for a single coin in compensation. The girl had just grabbed her brothers and disappeared into the rising sun—well, not exactly. They had gone through the city gates, so they were probably still in Banan somewhere.

"Callin' themselves champions of justice…do those little runts even understand what they're talkin' about?"

"Oh, they understand, I'm sure of it," Anastasia replied confidently. "I can't deny that their justice and courage saved my hide… And one other thing I'm sure of is we'll meet again someday."

As loud as those siblings were, tracking them down wouldn't be difficult. But that wasn't what Anastasia meant.

Ricardo crossed his arms. Anastasia smiled beautifully, and he gave a simple nod in return.

"You're probably right."

With that, Anastasia straightened up and announced, "Okay! I got an extra day off, so back to work."

"Whoa, hold up! But for the past two days, you were—how can you be so—?"

"All I did was lie there. C'mon, old man, you're on guard duty for the company! And no blunders like last time, you hear?"

The tiny girl tugged on his arm fur and then started pushing Ricardo toward the door. He had hoped to spend the day drinking

himself into oblivion after filing the report, but it seemed even that humble request wasn't going to happen.

"Your price dropped because of your last blunder, right, old man? Now it won't be long until I can afford to buy you!"

A smile burst onto her face as she boldly dreamed of trafficking people herself.

And when Ricardo saw that smile, he sighed pathetically, feeling utterly defeated.

But…it wasn't a bad feeling.

It would be natural for people to call him a fence-sitter. Scratching his head at that thought, Ricardo turned and followed after Anastasia.

SUNLIGHT ON THE WATER'S SURFACE

1

It happened on a fine afternoon, with a sudden declaration.

"I'm bored, Al. Let's do something amusing."

"Whoa, easy there, boss. One out of three tyrants would say that's a shocking way to start a conversation. You've gotta slow your roll or I won't be able to keep up. What'd you say again?"

"*I am bored*. Let's do something amusing. If you can't deliver, your head will fly."

"Huh?! So we're just gonna fully embrace being a tyrant now?" he cried, his voice muffled as he shot both arms to the sky.

Leaning against the iron railing of the balcony, he gazed up at the big blue sky and noticed the clouds drifting by a little faster in the wind. Just as the thought *Might rain tomorrow…*crossed his mind, his chin was suddenly pushed firmly inward.

"Dah! Wah! Grah!"

With nothing to support him, he tumbled halfway over the railing. His body was flung into the air, and just as his right arm instinctively reached out, it caught on to something. After desperately flailing, he realized he was gripping on to a soft, supple sensation for dear life.

As he stared down at the garden directly below the balcony, his breath caught in his throat. "That—that was close! I was *literally* standing on the edge between life and death just now…"

"Sorry to inform you, but your crisis isn't over. Actually, I'd say you're in much more danger now."

"Huh?" he yelped stupidly, shifting his gaze upward. And there, on the other side of the metal railing, was the owner of the white arm he had grabbed on to—and she was wearing a sadistic smile.

She was a young woman with coppery hair, lustrous skin, and a bold, revealing red dress. With him still hanging on to her left arm, she stretched out her icy-white fingers toward him.

"P-Princess?! Princess! Please, might I suggest a moment of mercy?"

"For a few seconds, you dared to touch my treasure-like skin. Accept your glory and die."

"AGGGH!"

With her merciless declaration, the fingers of her right hand flicked outward. In a certain time and place, such a gesture might be akin to a playful forehead flick, but the speed and force behind it were on a completely different level. With a resounding impact, the blow sent Al flying.

He tumbled backward, at the mercy of the air currents, flipping upside down right before he slammed headfirst into the water and sank.

"O-o-oh no! I believe that Sir Al has just fallen into the pond!"

"Ah, Schult, good timing. I want tea. Go prepare it—quickly. That's your job. Don't make me wait."

"Y-yes, Princess! Of course, I will! But I also worry about Sir Al!"

Al sank into the rather deep water, blowing bubbles as he went. The boy's troubled voice echoed in the distance, mingling with the loud laughter of a girl enjoying herself.

Ahh, what the hell am I even doing?

With that thought, he kicked off the pond floor and shot back up to the surface.

2

The southwest of the Dragonfriend Kingdom of Lugunica was home to the Bariel baronry, ruled by Baron Lyp Bariel. Lyp himself was a tyrant, despised by his citizens. Burdened by heavy taxes and grueling labor, the Bariel baronry was, for a time, regarded as the kingdom's penal colony.

However, in recent months, Bariel's dreadful reputation had faded

into the background. If anything, rumors now suggested that the baron and his subjects had grown surprisingly amicable.

All of this change was attributed to Lyp's young, wise, and beautiful wife, who had supposedly reformed his heart for good—a treasure of a woman who devoted herself entirely to serving her people…

But everyone in the baronry knew that was a lie.

The transformation hadn't taken place in the baron's heart. The ruler of the barony itself had changed. To put it plainly, Lyp had fallen ill, and his wife had taken over the management of the land.

The sickly Lyp was out, and the fate of the baronry now lay in the elegant hands of its baroness—hands that seemed as if they had been lent by the gods themselves. In one fell swoop, she had captured the hearts of her people.

Where the former baron had been nothing but an exploiter, the new baroness ruled with a hands-on approach, treating her subjects with much greater care. With her striking noble beauty and the reassurance she provided through her frequent visits to the farmlands, the people of the Bariel baronry had become utterly enthralled by her.

They hailed this merciful young woman as the Sun Princess.

"…I wonder what your people would think if they knew their precious Sun Princess kicked me into a pond and tried to drown me."

"Slander doesn't suit you, Al. Besides, the dead can't talk… And tell me, who would the people believe? You, a sketchy, gruesome thug? Or me, beautiful and beloved?"

"That—what you just said—that's the most slanderous thing of all. Mark my words!" Al declared, giving her a thumbs-up.

He sat cross-legged in the mansion's garden near the pond, completely drenched from his fall, soaked through to his undergarments. He had removed his straw sandals to let them dry in the sun and sat shirtless, struggling to wring the water from his coat.

Pond scum had worked its way between his chin and his helmet,

and he vigorously tried to scrub it off with his right hand. Of course, he was having a hard time—Al didn't have a left arm.

"Sir Al, I shall help you wring out your clothes! Please, leave it to me!"

Noticing Al's struggle, a young boy called out to him. His round, lovely face made him look about ten years old, and the way he tried to stand tall in his tiny butler's uniform was endearing.

But that preciousness was fleeting—

"Don't, Schult. I can't have your skin drying out from working with water. If you became unpleasant to hug, I would have no choice but to strip you of your title as my personal bed sharer."

"Wha—wha—wha—! Princess Priscilla, when you hug me out of nowhere like this, I don't know what to do with myself…!"

Schult's face turned bright red as he shrank in embarrassment, caught in her embrace. The once endearing moment had suddenly taken on an oddly scandalous air—funny how those things could happen.

"Why the foolish look, Al?" the fiery-haired woman asked, flashing a daring smile as she continued hugging Schult to her chest.

She truly was like the sun—staring at her for too long would surely destroy any man's eyes. Her coppery hair shimmered under the sunlight, her eyes burned with a fierce and untamed fire, and her allure was nothing short of hypnotic. Her ample, exposed curves left little to the imagination. She captivated the hearts of all who laid eyes on her, men and women alike.

Even the striking red of her dress seemed dull in comparison to her overwhelming presence. This was the Sun Princess who had taken over the baronry in her husband's stead—Priscilla Bariel.

Under Priscilla's piercing, serpentine gaze, Al shook his head, pushing down his irritation.

"Ahh, nothing. I was just remembering how nice the older woman/younger boy subgenre is. Thanks for the eye candy."

"Again with the gibberish. More words from your homeland?"

"Yeah. Also, there's water in my helmet, so I can't see very well. That about sums it up."

After a string of random excuses, Al clutched his head and gave it

a shake. The rattling sound came from the hinges of the black helmet he always wore.

"Helmet! Oh, Sir Al, your helmet will rust if you leave it on! And without your helmet, Sir Al, you'll be headless! Terrifying! Let me dry it right away!"

"That's a cute misunderstanding, Schult, but I'm not actually made of metal above the neck, so I wouldn't be headless, okay? Besides, this helmet won't rust."

"Huh? It won't? And you have a head… Oh, that's a little disappointing."

"I don't get why that's such a letdown for you."

With a cynical chuckle at Schult—who, unless he was mistaken, sounded a bit melancholy—Al tapped his helmet and let some water drain out.

"This helmet's special. And I've got a personal connection to it."

"Ohh, that's news to me," Priscilla said. "Where did you steal it from?"

"Why's that the first thing you jump to?! Have a little more trust in me!"

"A fine piece like that? I doubt you had the means to buy it on your own. So, where did you steal it?"

"At an arena when I was a gladiator! But I didn't *steal* it, okay?! When I escaped, a nice guy gave it to me. It was hanging in the arena as a decoration, so I figure it's decently well-made."

The word *gladiator* quickly colored Schult's face with sorrow, but when Priscilla didn't bat an eye at it, Al felt a small sense of relief.

"You were a gladiator in Volakia, if I recall correctly. That would mean your escape point was Gladiator Island, Ginonhive. That helmet likely belonged to a gladiator master—or was a replica of one."

"Damn, no secrets from the knowledgeable, huh? You got me. I was put to work forever on Gladiator Island. Lost my left arm there. This helmet was like my severance pay."

Al's voice carried a bitter edge as he casually rattled off his life story after it had already been exposed. Still, regardless of how he obtained it, the helmet was special to him. There was no need for

him to remove it just to dry it.

"That overly curious expression isn't gonna work on me, Schulty."

"Oh—um—but I'm not really curious! Being a man is about more than just looks!"

"Not helping, dude! Now you are just hurting my feelings!"

Schult, realizing his attempt at consolation had failed, hung his shoulders. Priscilla patted his head, then turned a sidelong glance toward Al.

"Well, a man's worth is not solely decided by his looks," she said. "But a person's face *is* one of the criteria by which they're judged. Schult, never forget that it was your cuteness that first made me take a liking to you. Try your best to delay growing up. Also, no body hair allowed."

"Geez, at least give the kid a command he can actually follow with effort, boss."

Schult clenched his fists and declared, "I-I'll do my best to make that happen, Princess…!"

Al cast him a pitying glance. "See that? Schulty is so gullible, he actually believes he can do it."

But working hard for Priscilla was Schult's life's calling. It would be cruel to try to stop him.

And with that, after making a lighthearted decree that set the course for her servant's dedication, Priscilla retrieved her fan from her cleavage. Every time Al witnessed this, he couldn't help marveling at what a daring yet aesthetically pleasing place it was to keep a fan.

But as she covered her mouth with it, she sighed.

"Hmm… It seems my momentarily dispelled boredom has returned. Al, on to the next event at once. The drowning amused me. So next… Yes, why don't you dance on a bed of fire for me?"

"Oooh, nice, I *did* want to dry my clothes—said the dumbass!"

"You already agreed to it. Why did you suddenly regain your senses? What was that just now?"

"That was sarcasm. Please don't make me explain it to you; it'll break my heart."

As Al curled into a little ball of dreariness, Priscilla's mood began

to spiral downward. She was as fickle as a cat, but even crueler—that was the most dreadful thing about his master.

Al wanted to get her back in a good mood, but he had no idea how to do that.

"Hey. You. You are my clown. At the very least, you should possess the basic knowledge to fulfill that role. Learn from Schult. No matter what I say, he is always ready to follow me."

"Talk about unreasonable requests."

"It's not at all unreasonable. Schult, speak to me. Entertain me. Right here, right now."

"Huh?! U-um—yes! I shall try! Umm…ummm…"

Schult racked his brain, desperately trying to make up for what Al lacked in satisfying Priscilla's tyrannical request.

This was too much for Al's conscience. He was just about to step in, when—

"Aha! I remembered something! I heard the maids gossiping earlier!" Schult's face lit up brightly as he clapped his hands and began speaking. "Apparently, in a village south of the baronry, there've been lots of missing persons cases! And there is a forest near the village, and when people go near the stream there, they often don't come back! They call it Nightmare at Ladrima. Oh, oh, I'm so scared!"

"What's this? First, you think I'm headless, now this—Schulty, do you like ghost stories?"

Al smirked at the boy's odd fascination while emptying the water from his helmet through the slits. Then, with a clang from the hinges, he turned to Priscilla and said, "Hear that, boss?"

"Nightmare at Ladrima…people go missing by a stream in a village to the south…," she murmured listlessly.

Al felt a bad premonition stir within him.

And that bad feeling quickly became a reality before he could do anything to stop it.

"Amusing," Priscilla said as she snapped her fan shut. Pointing its tip at Al and Schult, she declared, "That's how we'll pass the time. I shall solve this mystery myself!"

With a bright, sunlike smile, she charged headfirst into the

pointless and troublesome affair.

3

Ladrima, the village in the south of the Bariel baronry, was a small, ordinary village that could be found anywhere.

Far from the main roads connecting the kingdom, it showed little indication of future development. It was just another small farming village in the dominion, known only for its specialty in flowers. The villagers led simple, unchanging lives, and they liked it that way. Because of this, Ladrima was in an uproar over the major departure from the ordinary.

"Um…like, this is why I said we should go in disguise," Al complained.

"Nonsense. Why must I disguise myself and hide from the public eye? I have nothing to be ashamed of. These commoners are free to etch my glory into their memories."

"It's not about shame, it's about being discreet…but that ship's sailed now."

Scratching his neck, Al sighed at the collective stares they were receiving. The people of Ladrima, startled by the sudden visit, were understandably curious.

After all, the dragon carriage that had arrived in their village was a gaudy hunk of gold, silver, and jewels. First, the glittering gold carriage's arrival, then the ultimate beauty stepping out of it—it was only natural the villagers would wonder if something momentous was about to occur.

The villagers were just as surprised as Al had imagined. Most were focused on the carriage and Priscilla, but he didn't notice that many of the gazes were also directed at the eccentrically dressed one-armed figure in the iron helmet.

When it came to drawing attention, like master, like servant. That being said…

"Every good investigation starts with asking around to get a lay of the land," Al said.

“Making such inquiries does not suit me,” Priscilla replied curtly. “Let’s go straight to the stream in question.”

“I knew you’d say that! Schulty, mind taking care of the princess for me?”

His mistress, who hated the sound of knocking on doors, had no intention of following proper investigative protocol. So when she ran out of patience, Al decided to pawn her off on Schult.

But there was no answer from Schult. Al turned around to find the little butler staring somberly at an open book, his eyes eagerly dancing over the words.

“Schulty?”

“Augh! Oop, I’m sorry! I got too engrossed in my book!”

“I’ll scold you for slacking later—what’s that book?”

“Princess Priscilla let me borrow it! If I memorize these stories, I can amuse her whenever she’s bored… She commanded me to learn them by heart.”

Smoke rose from Schult’s little head. To the boy who had only just learned to read and write, it was a gargantuan task. Priscilla’s fickleness and selfishness were constants in their lives, but Al still felt bad for Schult, who was always at her mercy.

“Um, Princess? Why did you get that stupid idea into his head? Don’t you feel sorry for him?”

“Knowledge is life-saving. Schult has so much to learn—things you couldn’t even begin to measure with your short measuring stick. Though I won’t deny, I do love watching Schult struggle with tears in his eyes.”

Priscilla’s fan obscured her lips as she peered at the hyper-focused Schult. Deciphering her grand design was a daunting task (this included deciphering whether there was even a grand design in the first place).

“Okay, Schulty’s getting by in life aside, I think the villagers are reaching their breaking point. Just tell us your big plan already.”

“And that means asking around, I suppose? Oh, very well. Until Schult finishes his reading, I’ll grant you the honor of my company.”

When Al timidly broached the subject, to his surprise, Priscilla was cooperative. Before she could change her mind, Al raised his

hand to address the people circling them at a distance and said, "Sorry to scare you all. We're not sketchy people, I promise. We don't look it, but think of us as a team of investigators. There've been some mysterious disappearances near this village, right? We've come to get to the bottom of it."

As Al indicated his small party of three and explained their objective, the villagers exchanged glances. To be blunt, Al wasn't at all convincing. His claims of them not being sketchy—a team made up of just a woman, a child, and a man in a helmet—had too many dubious points. Al braced himself, realizing even basic information gathering was going to be a huge obstacle.

But then—

"That woman with you…pardon my asking, but is she the Sun Princess?"

"Oh?"

It was an older man who timidly stepped forward and asked the question. He had short, salt-and-pepper hair and was acting as a sort of representative of the village as he indicated Priscilla with his eyes.

Priscilla steadily met his gaze. With a proud snort, she replied, "I have never once assumed that name for myself. But it is true that the peasants in my domain worship me under that name. One look at my noble beauty, as bright as the sun, and that urge is perfectly understandable, of course."

"Ahh, I knew it!"

The man's eyes sparkled at Priscilla's shamelessly self-centered declaration. His surprise and wonder spread to the other villagers until they all fell to their knees.

"O—O, Sun Princess! You humble us with your presence in our village! The stream… We've been discussing what to do about it with the neighboring villages…"

"And news spread all the way to me," Priscilla finished. "I have come personally to deal with it. I do hope you are not about to say it's all over, making my journey here completely pointless?"

"N-no, Princess!"

Having grasped the village's consensus in an instant, Priscilla

looked down at the prostrating villagers in satisfaction. Then she turned to Al, who was standing idly nearby, and said, "Al—what do you think you're doing? The task of surveying the people is your responsibility. I shall leave my majesty on full display. While I do this, carry out your task."

"Sure, I can do that…but something doesn't sit right with me!"

Being with Priscilla often made Al seriously question whether he was the crazy one. That was because not once had he ever seen Priscilla's plans fail.

"But of course. After all, this world bends itself to suit me."

After saying her favorite catchphrase, Priscilla cackled loudly as Al got to work.

Thanks to the cooperative villagers, Al's interviews actually went quite smoothly. Once he gathered enough information, he summed it up for Priscilla.

"There's a forest near the village—the stream's in there. So just in the past two months, people who go to that stream have been turning up missing. At first, it was villagers, then people who went to look for them, then people who happened by, and then…"

Priscilla frowned. "Then the strange rumor spread, and now every few days, someone who goes near the stream disappears. It's just a peculiar and absurd story."

She sounded terribly bored, and the feeling was mutual. It was nothing more than the classic tale of a mummy hunter turning into a mummy.

Al went on. "The village sent out search parties multiple times, but their results varied. Some say a mist appeared in the forest, and before they realized it, there was only one person left. Some managed to return, but others didn't. It's just a mishmash of unsolved mysteries."

"But that doesn't explain why people keep disappearing. I suppose the fools who enter the forest aren't limited to only the villagers. What lured the outsiders there?"

Al whistled at Priscilla's insight but failed to make any sound. Before the raspy breath he blew could upset her, Al cleared his throat and said, "Okay, get this. Right around the time the rumors

were spreading, some strange lore about the spring surfaced. Apparently, anyone who goes near it gets swallowed up by mist. And in that mist…you can meet the dead."

"Ohh. Meet the dead, you say?"

"People say it's a bridge to the afterlife, but it's all bullshit rumors. The only thing is, more idiots have been falling for that rumor than you'd think. For now, there are about fifteen victims, but if this gets any bigger, we'll have a crisis on our hands."

Unless they got to the bottom of the rumors and whatever was causing the disappearances, the crown getting involved wasn't out of the question. If it came to that, even if the problem was solved, Priscilla's position as lord of the land would come under scrutiny.

As someone involved in the royal selection, that was a scenario she needed to avoid. In that sense, Schult was absolutely right to bring the rumor to Priscilla's attention. Thanks to him, they had a chance to address it.

"So, what's the plan, boss? We could form a random scout party and crush the problem that way…"

"Of course we'll go into the forest right now and see this spring for ourselves," Priscilla replied. "If it's a problem that can be solved, then I shall solve it myself. No objections?"

"Are you shitting me? Go into the forest…you personally? That's where the creepy-crawlies are, you know?"

"Nonsense. Why would that be a reason for me to hold back? For a start, my glory repels vermin."

After making claims that couldn't definitively be called lies, Priscilla looked perfectly eager to venture into the forest. And there was no way it was for a laudable reason like solving the problem as quickly as possible. However, Al found her approach oddly aggressive. She was eager to put in the work herself, which was very unlike her.

But of course, Al's surprise couldn't even begin to compare to how the villagers reacted when they caught wind of Priscilla's plan.

Their lord approaching them directly and venturing into the forest herself was as shocking to them as if heaven and earth had switched places. They flew in a panic as they tried to stop her.

“B-but, Sun Princess! You can’t put yourself in such danger!” the mayor implored. “If you insist on going, we’ll come with you! The entire village will help—!”

“Hold up, hold up, hold up, hold up!” Al sputtered. “I understand that you’re worried, but the entire village?! Don’t be stupid! If we go with such a big crowd, nobody’ll even be able to move!”

But it seemed the mayor’s crazy idea wasn’t limited to him. All the villagers looked eager to go with Priscilla. The mayor clenched his fist, his voice shaking as he said, “Life under our former lord was a living hell. There are no words that can describe how grateful we are for the Sun Princess taking his place and bringing order to these lands. At least let us serve as her shields!”

“Mmhmm, your devotion is not half bad. Quite admirable for commonfolk like you. Do not forget this pledge of loyalty and service you offered today.”

“Is that really the most responsible reply?!”

Priscilla was enjoying this, but there was no point in bringing along a swarm of villagers who would ultimately hold them back. Al dug deep, somehow finding the words to try to convince the villagers not to assist.

“We really appreciate the sentiment, guys, but there’s no point in having this many meat shields. The Sun Princess’s greatest wish is for you to just stay here and wait for news.”

“A rather convenient distortion of my wishes,” Priscilla muttered under her breath.

“All the Sun Princess wants is for you villagers to be safe! Yes, oh yes! All hail the Sun Princess!”

“A-all hail the Sun Princess!!!”

As Al led a cheer out of sheer desperation, the villagers followed suit. It was all a bit more forced than he would have liked, but at least he had managed to prevent martyrdom today.

All that remained was to get out of there before Al’s spell wore off.

“Let’s go, boss. Life is short, the possibilities are endless. For a hopeful tomorrow—it’s time to skedaddle.”

“Hmm—skee-dattle? Another new word, I suppose. I like it.”

Al tugged on Priscilla's hand, and she let it happen without getting angry. Meanwhile, Schult trotted closely behind, still reading the book, with a puffed face that looked like it might deflate any minute.

"And now, let us settle this matter handily. Skee-dattle!"

In the highest of spirits, Priscilla whipped out her newly acquired vocabulary as she got the dragon carriage moving. As the golden carriage whisked the trio away, the villagers bid farewell to the refrain of "All hail the Sun Princess!"

4

The very air in the forest that was home to the problematic stream had a peculiar quality that repelled people from entering. It was unclear whether this had anything to do with the spring making people disappear or if it was something innate to the forest. Either way, some malevolent force had spread through it—that much was clear.

"And here we are, brazenly marching into it anyway," Al quipped quietly, stepping on the grass and straining his eyes through the thick trees and brush around them.

About thirty minutes after departing Ladrima, the party arrived at the forest and began their investigation as they tromped through the grassy earth. Naturally, since their dragon carriage couldn't enter, they were exploring on foot.

Al took the lead, clearing the path with his liuyedao as they walked. Every footprint his sandals made in the grass was followed by the two behind him. And still…

"Don't ya think we should have left Schulty behind in the carriage with the driver?" Al asked, turning only his head slightly to look at the two—Priscilla, who was marching through the forest in her high-heeled shoes without hesitation, and Schult, who was nervously hopping along as he clung on to her arm.

Schult looked apologetic at Al's question, but Priscilla glared at Al and said, "Nonsense. If we left Schult behind in the carriage, what

would be the point in bringing him in the first place? I realize you're eager to be alone with me in the dark, but stop thinking with your lower half."

"My suggestion didn't come from there! If anything, it came from the upper half!"

"D-don't worry! I will do my absolute best not to burden the Princess or you, Sir Al… Oh! I'm falling! Hmmf! I'm okay now!"

"Good boy, Schult. You have my praise."

Unlike Al, whose suggestion was ignored, Schult looked awfully happy to receive Priscilla's praise despite nearly taking a tumble. And Al wasn't at all jealous. Probably not. Maybe.

But that aside, their slow progress and the tension in the air were big problems for Al. He wasn't even all that interested in the spring, yet all those little things were starting to pile up and stress him out.

"Wouldn't it be faster to just set the forest on fire and just get rid of the spring entirely?" Al asked.

"Your ability to keep spewing nonsense astounds me, Al. For a start, what would we gain by solving the problem that way? That's as good as a loss."

"Is this a competition?"

"I consider all matters a competition. You fail to realize this and keep losing—a loser has that stench on him before he even enters a fight."

After her fiery retort, Priscilla folded her arms and said, "For that matter, I love fire. Setting things on fire really gets me hyped. However, setting fire to a forest just because people like to approach a certain spring is an incredibly uncouth reason to start a fire. Simply ridiculous."

"Your hang-ups never make sense to me, Princess… But understood, milady. We march on."

Realizing that arguing was a waste of time, Al returned his focus to clearing a path with his liuyedao. They were proceeding along a path that did not exist. It was the sort of overgrown forest where people could easily go missing, which only raised further doubts that the spring had anything to do with it.

The forest wasn't all that large. There wasn't much reason to

bother going into it—a fact that was self-evident, as there wasn't even a proper path.

As Al cut a trail through the underbrush, Priscilla muttered under her breath to dispel her boredom. "Lured into the forest by a spring, eh… What a cliché."

Al couldn't agree more. "Sure is. The first guy who disappeared apparently saw some pretty lights dancing in the forest. His curiosity got the better of him, and he wandered in… That would explain why a bunch of other poor saps followed in his footsteps, hoping to be reunited with the dead."

"'Hoping to be reunited with the dead'—this is steadily becoming even more cliché."

Al sensed something amiss in Priscilla's words. Boredom, anger, dissatisfaction, cheer, joy—Priscilla's ever-changing moods were always difficult to grasp, but none of those emotions could be heard in the sentence she had just muttered.

It sounded more like envy or jealousy.

"Princess…is there some dead person you want to see?"

"None come to mind. The only person in my life who died recently is my beloved husband."

"Um, he's not dead yet. If anything, you could say he's on the mend."

"The man needs help using the toilet. He might as well be dead."

There were no signs of Priscilla's strange mood in her openly hostile reply. Al ignored it, shrugged, and turned his attention to the silent Schult.

The conversation they'd just had might have been a bit too hard-core for a little kid. And sure enough, Schult was green in the face as he remembered the man mentioned in the conversation.

"Oh, Master…he was such a bad person…wasn't he?"

"The opposite of justice is another brand of justice—that's how the saying goes, at least. But even if we're being generous, Lyp was no saint. He was definitely a villain. Not that we can call ourselves saints, either."

Lyp Bariel was Priscilla's husband and the true lord of the dominion. He had plotted to use Priscilla as a puppet to gain control

of the kingdom. Unfortunately for him, Al and Schult unmasked his plot, then his psyche was destroyed, leaving him a shell of a man.

"A whole lot of people cheered when he became a vegetable. A testament to our princess's popularity. Poor bastard."

"But I…I have been praying that Master's spirit at least can rest in peace."

"Again, he's not dead…"

Al was going to elaborate, but when he saw the hands clasped in prayer in front of Schult's earnest little face, he decided not to say anything. Lyp could have at least one person mourn him. Hopefully, that would give him a slightly better deal in the next life.

"Oh, knock it off, both of you. Praying for that ancient bag of bones is a waste of time."

Priscilla did not seem to appreciate Al overlooking Schult's little prayer. She grumpily raised the corners of her eyes, shook Schult's head as he hung on her arm, and said, "If you have the spare time to concern yourself with such trivial matters, I suggest you read that book instead."

"Er, oh, yes, Princess. I have been memorizing it! Umm, the first part was…"

"Dude, don't bully simpleminded kids…"

Al commented on her childish attitude, but Schult quit his prayer and immediately went back to memorizing his book. With a silent *Lyp, you poor bastard* in his heart, Al slashed through the next thick branch in his way.

"By the way, Al, you seem oddly resistant to the idea of meeting the dead."

"That's 'cause they aren't there. Once you die, it's over. You can't meet the dead, and trying to meet them is wrong. It'll only bring you misery and bad luck. Don't you agree, boss?"

The spaces between the trees were very narrow. He cut a notch into a tree and kicked it. It refused to go down, so he kicked it a second time. He was surprised it was so stubborn.

"Our conclusions may be along the same lines, but the way we reached them is completely different. You cannot meet the dead—I agree that this is true."

"……"

With a third dull crack, the tree finally broke. He lifted it with his shin and kicked it out of the way to make a path.

"Don't tell me, Al… Is there some dead person you'd rather not see?"

When those words reached him, he ground his teeth, tensed his leg muscles, and sent the tree flying way farther than he needed to. The violently tumbling tree shook the canopy as Al sighed long and hard.

Man, this chick really doesn't pull any punches when she pushes people's buttons, does she?

"Listen, Princess. Do you honestly think I can participate in such a serious conversation?"

He forced his heart to stop racing, offered up an easygoing remark, and looked over his shoulder. But his words didn't reach Priscilla. Schult, either.

He was surrounded by mist. And before he realized it, Al was all alone.

5

Al checked his surroundings. His vision was obscured by a thick curtain of white. He still seemed to be in a forest, though the details were vague. He couldn't sense the two people who should have been beside him. Frowning, he struck his shoulder with his liuyedao.

"You've got to be kidding. This is exactly how they said it would go."

He had taken the villagers' testimonies with a huge grain of salt, only half believing them…and now they had come true.

Anyone who entered the forest with the spring would be enveloped in a thick mist, leaving them completely alone. Some people had managed to make it back, but if they were unlucky, the spring would pull them in, and—

"Meeting with the dead… Sorry, but I'm not exactly thrilled about that."

Some thought the chance to reunite with the dead made the risk of disappearing worth it. To Al, that idea was nothing but unsettling.

"Never mind that. I'd have much rather gotten lost in all this fog with my princess and gotten lucky."

Prioritizing his more primal urges over the mysteries of the universe, Al reached out with his liuyedao, stirring the mist. His sword tip met nothing. The once-dense trees were nowhere to be found. It was decidedly unnatural.

The general advice for people who got lost was to stay put. But his two companions—a rule-breaker and an ignoramus—would never follow that advice for their own reasons.

"I should go find them—wait, I can't. Man, throw me a frickin' bone…"

Realizing he had no choice but to be proactive, Al sighed in defeat and stepped forward into the mist.

The belief that fog and mist were bad omens was present in this world as well. While this mist wasn't explicitly branded as inauspicious, its eerie nature was impossible to ignore.

His skin tingled with the tangible sensation of the mist's "touch." He strained his ears, hoping to reconnect with the others, but hesitated to call out. His reason? Intuition. A bad feeling gnawed at him—

"—Who's there?"

He froze. Heavy breathing echoed somewhere in the mist. The sound clearly didn't belong to Priscilla or Schult. It was unmistakably a man's. Not one of his companions.

Al's nerves tensed. He readied himself for battle as faint footsteps approached—direct, deliberate.

Very soon, a dead person would truly appear in that very spot—

"I found you—you filthy traitor."

"……"

A burly old man emerged from the mist. He wore fine clothes but had a savage, muddy look in his eyes.

Al recognized him immediately. The man's murderous gaze locked onto him.

"You…"

“Again—he’s. Not. Dead. Yet!!!”

Before the old man could unleash his wrath, Al swung his blade.

The old man didn’t react in time, and Al’s attack bit deep. Then, as if melting into the mist itself, he vanished without a trace.

Al, still breathing erratically, held his liuyedao high. His blade was spotless.

“So the rumors were just bullshit! Come on, at least show me a dead person. Bring me a dead guy!”

At the sight of the old man who had just come up in conversation—an apparition of a man who was still alive, no less—Al railed at the half-assed supernatural phenomenon. The plausibility of that meeting was what made it so absurd in such an obviously paranormal situation.

Not that Al’s opinions seemed to have much bearing on the situation. As he screamed and swung his weapon, a new collection of silhouettes emerged from the mist to take the fake Lyp’s place.

A towering man clad in full armor, a black-clothed figure gripping a longsword, a shirtless little man whose fist was a fusion of hand and blade—one after another, familiar faces appeared before Al. He sighed.

“A gladiator reunion is nice and all, but what is this? Did you guys all die while I wasn’t looking?”

“……”

There was no response. Instead, the black-clothed man’s blade flashed as he swung horizontally.

Al dove into the opening, crouching to dodge the silver streak of light. He had faced this exact attack thousands, millions of times before. His body still remembered what came next. He would line up a follow-up attack aimed at the knee, then skewer his opponent once they lost their balance.

The armored giant always lifted his arm before committing to a heavy attack. The little man would jump back in fear if charged recklessly. They hadn’t changed. If anything, they’d regressed.

“What a crappy reboot!”

As expected, the armored man raised his arm, and Al struck before the attack could land. The little man flinched and leaped

back, just as Al predicted, and his liuyedao met him midair. But instead of blood, they both dissolved into mist, their false forms vanishing.

The next figure that emerged wasn't a gladiator, but it was still someone Al knew. He gripped his sword tightly, feeling a surge of gratitude.

"Thanks for the helmet—what a lovely parting gift!"

With that, he lopped off the head of the guard who had given him the helmet as a farewell gift when he escaped the arena. The guard's vulgar grin melted into the mist, and Al confirmed that the second wave of challengers had retreated.

"Way to creep a guy out… And hey, all of them were alive when I escaped. No wait—not Gajeet, I killed him."

That perfect replica of his old acquaintance had been run through the stomach and was unmistakably dead. Maybe the rumors about reuniting with the dead were true after all.

"I smell bullshit… I mean, what's the point in meeting the dead if you can't choose which ones you see?"

If the dead were summoned at random, it would only torment those seeking them. Besides, even the living were appearing, completely invalidating the entire premise.

"But look at me, tearing this rumor apart piece by piece. What's next? The afterlife?"

If that happened, Al would definitely end up on the missing persons list. The only way that could happen was if the mist itself killed him—or if something even worse happened.

"Oops, spoke too soon. Here comes the third wave…"

Grumbling, he readied his sword. The mist writhed unnaturally before him. A silent vortex of fog began to take shape, twisting into something new.

At this rate, nothing's going to surprise me.

Or so he thought…

"……"

The being that emerged from the white mist was black. A darkness so complete that it seemed to swallow his whole field of vision.

A thin form, draped in an abyssal shade. The swirling mist was devoured by its presence, its mass swelling grotesquely. Within moments, all traces of mist were gone, consumed entirely, and the world before Al's eyes was engulfed in an impenetrable black.

What stood before him was a taboo existence. Something that should never be.

"—Ah."

A raspy breath escaped Al. He had never in his life felt such an oppressive gaze upon him.

He had pieced together that the mist revealed those with significance to him, whether they were living or dead. But this—this was different. This was wrong.

To show him this went beyond the boundaries of life and death. It was sacrilege to existence itself.

"Ah—AHHH!!!"

A deep, boiling rage erupted from within him. Al roared, giving in to his emotions.

Fueled by fury, he charged forward and slashed at the shadow with all his might. He had to.

But his scream cracked. His feet trembled. His sword slipped from his fingers and hit the ground before he could strike.

I can't move. I still can't move. There's no way I can move. How could I? It's impossible.

Not in a thousand…a million…a billion years. Even now—it's still impossible.

His teeth chattered. His knees were about to give way.

As Al cowered, the shadow slowly advanced. The silhouette, shrouded in black, wore a dress of the same abyssal shade. The hem of the dress fluttered within the darkness as a pair of thin arms lifted gracefully.

One by one, her delicate, lithe fingers came into view, reaching for Al's neck—quietly, gently, tenderly.

If she touches me, I'll be at peace. This pain will be over. So…

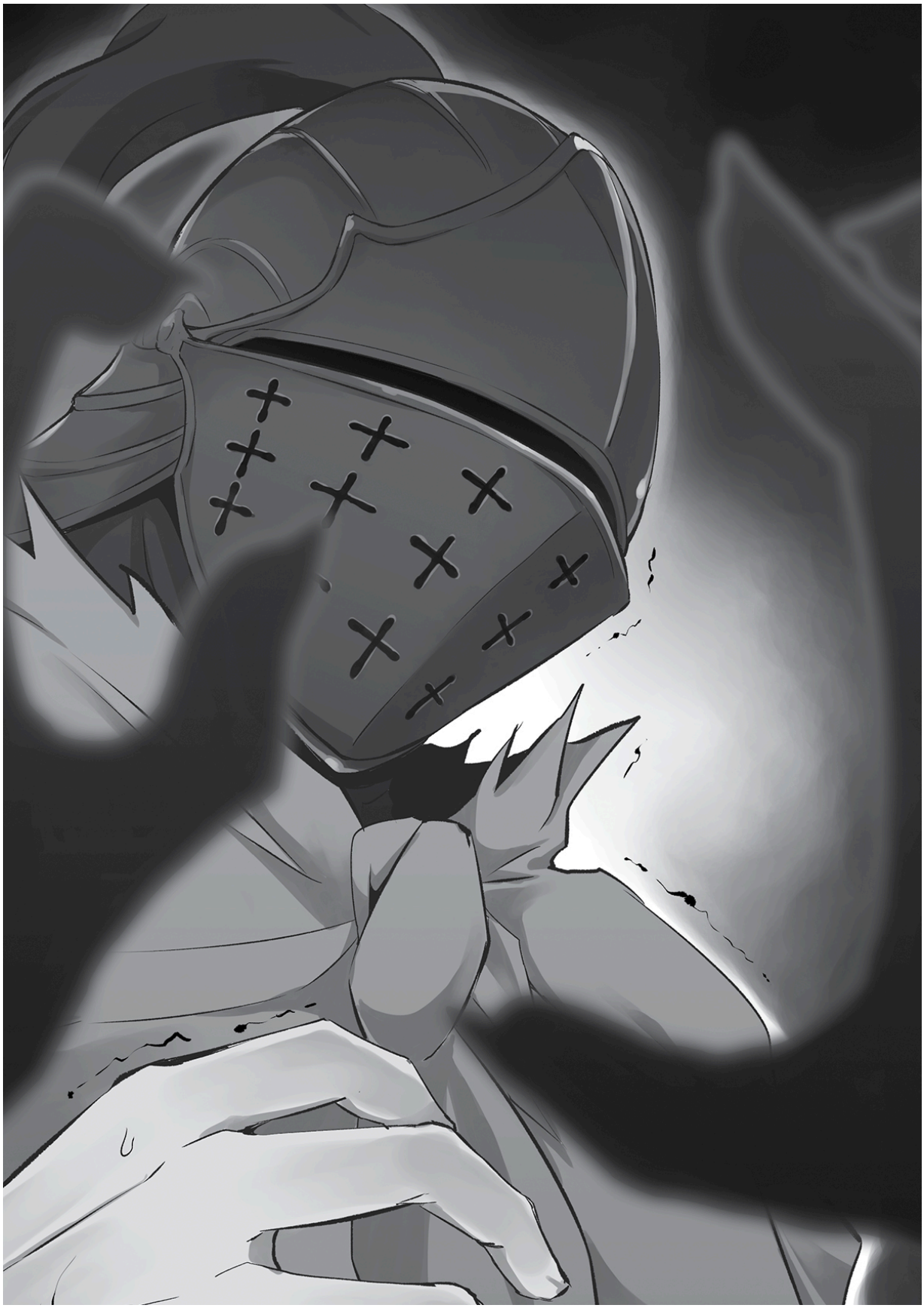
His body had given out from sheer terror, and he had collapsed onto the ground. But in that moment, the subconscious paralysis gripping him loosened just enough for him to scoot backward,

desperately trying to escape.

"Stop…no…I…I…!"

His voice cracked. His scream never fully formed.

The shadow paid no heed to his pleas. It drifted forward, undeterred, the distance between them closing once more.





Al was about to scream in despair, when—

"Huh?"

In the next instant, a shining crimson blade pierced through the black shadow's chest from behind.

As Al sat there, stupefied, a beam of light emerged, swelling into a brilliant mix of red and white. The misty shadow burst into flames, the fire engulfing it completely until no trace remained.

"How absurd. That's all counterfeits will ever amount to. Pathetic."

A bored voice rang out from the other side of the crimson blaze. Standing beyond the flickering embers was Priscilla, her sword still gleaming.

The power of her blade burned away the mist-forged shadow until nothing remained. Right before Al's very eyes…

"How…dare…?"

"……"

"How could you do that? Right in front of me… How dare you…? Gagh?!"

"Shut up. Don't misdirect your anger at me, simpleton."

As Al ground his teeth, seething with rage, Priscilla mercilessly swatted him with her sword. The impact flipped him over, his vision rolling as his head slammed against the ground.

"Agh—red… P-Princ—ooah! Hot! Gaaaah! Fire—I'm on fire!"

"A fitting punishment for your insolence. Let the fire of my sword singe your hair and teach you some humility."

In a show of anger, Priscilla let her flames lick at Al's helmet. He tumbled across the ground, frantically trying to extinguish them. When he finally put it out, he lay shamelessly sprawled out on the dirt.

"The more constraints a person has, the more spellbound he becomes by such amateur magic. This is what you get for pretending to be disinterested. Truly pathetic, truly droll."

"P-Princess, Princess, are you real? You're not another fake, are you?"

"If I step on you like I usually do, would the euphoria of it jog your memory?"

“It’s a perfect match! The real princess is here!”

Looking up at her cruel yet breathtakingly beautiful, tilted expression, Al sighed in relief, realizing he had returned to reality.

Echoes of terror from moments before still clung to him, but with the mist now dissipating, he reassured himself that the apparition had been nothing more than an illusion. No problems. Hopefully.

For now, he allowed himself to feel relief at reuniting with his companions, grateful that they were both safe.

“Didn’t you see anything in the mist, Princess?”

“From this low-level magic? I would never fall victim to it. You—stay still. The mist will clear in time. Schult will take care of it.”

“Schulty? But how?”

“I taught him the method. As long as Schult’s stupidity isn’t bottomless, there should be no problem.”

Al was bewildered by Priscilla’s confident declaration regarding the currently absent little butler. But his confusion wasn’t just about Schult—it was about how exactly the mist was going to be cleared.

“……”

With a sensation so undeniable, it could only be described as bendy, Al’s vision warped.

The world lurched, but only the scenery twisted and distorted. Priscilla remained firm, her arms still crossed. The surroundings started bending and breaking apart—but both Al and Priscilla were spared from those violent contortions. The mist tangled and unraveled in chaotic disarray until…

“No way.”

In the blink of an eye, the dense mist had vanished entirely, leaving Al and his companions standing in the forest. What’s more, they had somehow moved to a grassy knoll near a spring.

Before Al’s dazed eyes lay a small spring, its crystal-clear waters teeming with floating aquatic plants. Flowers swayed gently in the breeze, adding an almost picturesque serenity to the scene.

And right in the middle of the spring stood a young boy, submerged up to his hips, both hands raised high in the air.

“Schulty?! What the hell are you doing?!” Al gasped in shock.

Priscilla scowled at the spring in annoyance. “Schult dispelled the

magic encircling the spring. It spewed mist, lured the lost, chained their souls, then dragged them to their watery graves. That was the evil magic at work here."

Noticing the two of them, Schult's face lit up, and he eagerly swam toward them.

"P-Princess Priscilla! Sir Al! I found it! The water mirror—I sank it into the water just like Princess Priscilla told me to!"

"Just like she told you to…?"

"The book she gave me—it was written in one of the old fairy tales!"

As Schult swam and chattered excitedly, Al's breath caught in realization. The book. The very one Priscilla had given Schult to memorize, the one she had made him pore over even while they traveled. It contained—

"There was no shortage of legends about springs, lakes, and anything remotely riparian. In short, anywhere water flows can be a gathering point for mana. So natural phenomena like this happen from time to time."

"It was written in the book—a secret on how not to fall under the water hollow's spell!"

"It's a silly fairy tale meant for children," Priscilla remarked with an unconcerned wink. This did little to dispel Al's shock.

Basically, Priscilla had figured out exactly what was wrong with the spring just from hearing snippets of village gossip.

"Princess Priscilla, it's the water mirror. Break it, and the mist disappears."

Schult waded out of the stream, soaking wet, and ran up to Priscilla. In his outstretched hands was a faintly glowing white crystal—the water mirror.

"Well done. You have my praise."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! I am so happy to serve you well, Princess!"

As Priscilla took the water mirror with a nod, Schult's face practically glowed with joy.

Watching the exchange from behind, Al scratched his neck grumpily. "Well, then, case closed? So the culprit was just too much

stagnant mana…”

“If we were talentless, yes, we would make that conclusion and go on our merry way.”

Something in her voice made both Al and Schult freeze. A cruel undertone lurked beneath her words.

In the next instant, the water mirror burst into flame in Priscilla’s hand. The seemingly harmless mana crystal smoldered in the fire, and then—

“—!!!”

The water mirror suddenly transformed. It leaped from Priscilla’s grasp, twisting and contorting in midair. Four insect-like wings unfurled from a tiny blue body, its many beady eyes darting wildly in panic.

A grotesque fusion of human and insect, the abomination let out a shrill, inhuman shriek and tried to flee.

However—

“Did you really think I would let you escape so easily, evil spirit?”

With a flick of her sword, Priscilla sliced off its wings. The creature writhed as it was skewered through the stomach and pinned to the ground like an insect in a collection, its tiny limbs twitching helplessly.

“—!!!”

“Stop that incessant whining. You’re such a gruesome sight, your very existence makes me want to vomit.”

With a disgusted twist of her sword, Priscilla drove the blade deeper, eliciting another shriek from the abomination.

Witnessing this brutality up close, Schult’s legs gave out beneath him.

Al, on the other hand, let out a loud gasp. “Princess, is that a spirit…?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. The impudence, the arrogance—it deserves a thousand deaths.”

“So this is an evil spirit, huh? First time seeing one of those…”

Al grimaced at the pitiful sight of the writhing creature. Evil spirits were still spirits, strictly speaking, though they were given the name because of their malicious nature. Spirits were primal life-forms

drawn to mana, not bound by human concepts of good and evil.

However, some rare spirits displayed clear malice, just like this one. They were enemies of humanity, no different from demon beasts, and had thus earned their name.

"This thing used the power of the water mirror to lure people to the stream, drown them, and absorb their Odo. That's how it gained strength. No better than a carnivorous plant."

Over and over, all the missing persons had fallen prey to this evil spirit. Hoping to reunite with their deceased loved ones, they had followed a glimmer of hope into the mist. If they at least managed to see their dearly departed before their deaths, that might have been a small silver lining. But if their hopes remained unfulfilled even as they met their doom…

"Princess Priscilla, this evil spirit… What are you going to do with it?" Schult asked hesitantly.

"Execute it, of course. For the crimes it committed on my lands, no number of executions could possibly atone for it. However, I am merciful and magnanimous—it deserves a thousand deaths, but I shall reduce the sentence to just one."

As the evil spirit wailed pitifully, the still-young Schult felt a pang of sympathy. But such a thing had no effect on Priscilla.

Perhaps sensing a final chance, the evil spirit ceased its desperate flailing. It cocked its head, fixing its many eyes solely on Schult, and began chirping in a pitiful, pleading tone. Its cries, almost intelligible, begged for his help, promising to do anything in return.

"……"

Schult's throat tensed, and his eyes welled up with tears. But as he silently looked to Priscilla for guidance, her crimson gaze remained utterly unwavering.

Before any tension could build between the two, Al interjected.

"Even if what the evil spirit did now was just a passing whim… even if it swore it had a change of heart and would never do it again…"

"Sir Al…?"

"You heard the same story I did back in the village. The first victim was lured into the forest by some pretty lights. In other

words, it was always this thing's intention to target humans."

An evil spirit was evil by nature—that wouldn't suddenly change. There was no rhyme or reason to their hostility. They were simply natural enemies of humanity.

There was no need to sympathize with such a being.

As Schult fell silent, absorbing Al's words, Priscilla drove her sword in further.—

"Burn slowly. Your death shall serve as a requiem for my fallen people."

Her Sunlight Blade glowed, radiating a deep crimson light. Then flames burst forth from the tip, engulfing the evil spirit in a brilliant blaze.

The spirit let out a final shriek. But its voice was drowned out by the flames, growing fainter and fainter—until it abruptly ceased, never to be heard again.

And with that, the curtain fell on the serial missing persons case—ending the Nightmare at Ladrima.

6

"They keep unearthing more and more bones from the poor missing bastards at the bottom of that spring. Mostly just bones now, but from their clothes and belongings, they can tell who's who."

Several days after the mystery of the spring had been solved, Al relayed the latest news to Priscilla. They were on the second-story balcony of Bariel Manor, having midday tea. Priscilla's expression twisted into a frown as she was interrupted mid-sip by Al's arrival.

"That spring? What spring?"

"Dude, it's the epilogue of the evil spirit story from just the other day! It's scary how plausible it is that you actually forgot…"

"Spring…evil spirit…oh, you mean Ladrima. And don't bring up a story I've already lost interest in. I suppose you think there's something more to it."

"Oh, so it's my fault? Did I do an oopsie? Well, I'm so sorry, milady!"

After offering an exaggerated apology to the now-bored (and slightly annoyed) Priscilla, Al sat down across from her. A warm breeze swept through the balcony. The gentle sunlight made the air so comfortable, it practically dared Al to take a nap.

Seeing his lazy posture, Priscilla placed her teacup back on the table with a snort. "Frankly, I'm surprised you were able to dig up that old story in your sorry state. Just for the record, your performance that day was below Schult's level."

"I can't deny that, so please stop! And why is *that* the part you remember?!"

Al wished he could forget how he had fallen for the water mirror's illusion and weighed down the team. Now that she had brought it up again, his face burned red beneath his helmet. Frustrated, he jabbed a finger at Schult, who was quietly pouring more tea.

"For that matter, why didn't the water mirror's illusions work on either of you? Princess, you're not normal, so that makes sense, but Schult's just your run-of-the-mill boy toy bait!"

"Ooh—yes, sir. I am just boy toy bait…"

"The way you blushed kinda proved my point, but FYI, 'boy toy bait' is *not* exactly a compliment."

As Schult giggled nervously, Al roughly tousled his hair and pressed his cheek against the boy's, scrutinizing him. Schult looked puzzled as he lowered his head.

"I didn't do anything all that special, sir," he said. "And what do you mean by illusions?"

"We have to start from *there*?!"

"It isn't all that complicated," Priscilla interjected. "Unlike some people I could mention, Schult simply didn't have any dead loved ones he longed to see yet pretended he didn't for the sake of his ego. He simply did not meet the preconditions necessary to be affected by the water mirror's curse."

Snatching Schult away from Al's grasp, Priscilla buried the boy's face into her chest. As Al watched the utterly unfair scene, he frowned behind his helmet, still mulling over what she had said.

Schult hadn't been trapped by the illusions—because he had no memories capable of trapping him. He was an orphan, picked up off

the street on the brink of death. He had no cherished memories of family or a past life from before Priscilla had taken him in. That was why the illusions had no effect on him.

And if that was the case…was he lucky or unlucky to have escaped the mist's grasp? That was difficult to say.

"At the very least, I sure don't feel that lucky…"

Every encounter in the mist, whether with the living or the dead, had been unwelcome. None of them had been real, anyway.

"……"

Hiding his emotions behind his helmet, Al stole a glance at Priscilla, who was still holding Schult close with an air of casual amusement.

When she had skewered the shadow with her flaming Sunlight Blade, she hadn't asked Al what he had seen in the mist. She hadn't even seemed curious about what she had burned to ashes.

But it wasn't out of kindness or tact—it was simply part of her nature. And even knowing that, Al had to admit that her actions had saved him. Beautifully.

"Al—why are you staring at me? I won't let you trade places with Schult."

"Though I *do* envy the kid, that's not why I'm staring! Right—Princess, be honest, did you really not see anything in that mist?"

"Sorry to disappoint, but the only dearly departed in my life is my beloved husband."

"For the last time, he's not dead! Sure, I met him in the mist, but that's beside the point!"

Speaking of unwanted reunions, running into Lyp had been particularly awkward.

Priscilla chuckled at Al's frustration, but Schult looked utterly shocked. After her brief laugh, she tilted her head and asked, "By the way, Al, where did you hear that most recent village news?"

"Oh, right. A messenger from the village stopped by. Told me how things turned out and asked me to pass on their regards…oh, and they left some flowers at the front door."

"—! You big oaf, why didn't you say so sooner?!"

"Waaagh! P-Princess?!"

Al's last remark made Priscilla hoist Schult into her arms and leap right off the balcony with an unmistakable sparkle in her eye. Without hesitation, she took off at full speed.

Al quickly scrambled after her.

He didn't catch up with them until they reached the front door of the mansion—where a giant bouquet awaited.

"Mmhmm! Magnificent, elegant, and lovely. People of Ladrima, you have my praise!"

With her hands on her hips, Priscilla admired the bouquet—a wild, chaotic array of the finest bright red flowers that had arrived with the village's report.

Her reaction was eerily similar to how she had admired the gorgeous golden carriage, the assortment of bizarre art, or even Schult when she was in a particularly affectionate mood. In other words, she was utterly delighted.

"It's just flowers. Are they really that great?" Al muttered.

"Hah! Oh, you poor ignorant soul. These are crimsons. They only bloom in one part of Lugunica—the forest with the spring in Ladrima."

"I had no idea—wait, what? Did you just say they only bloom in that forest with the spring?"

"And only this time of year, too… You might as well say it's the one thing that makes that little backwater noteworthy."

She folded her arms, unintentionally lifting her ample bosom as she nodded to herself, clearly satisfied with her own reasoning.

Watching her, Al finally put the pieces together. Priscilla's unusual eagerness to solve the village's mystery, her strong aversion to burning down the forest—it all made sense.

The answer was right there, in the perfect smile on her face.

"Let me guess… These flowers were the reason you wanted to help that village all along?"

"Nonsense. Ladrima is in my dominion. I would never extend my mercy for *that* reason alone—though I won't deny that it was why I acted immediately."

Completely unfazed, Priscilla strode boldly toward the bouquet. If the villagers, who worshipped her as a merciful goddess, ever

learned her true motives, they would undoubtedly be shocked. Naturally, there was no point in telling them. Ignorance was bliss; they were happier that way.

"And in the end, she *did* save them. Even if personal greed was her main motivator…"

Her desire to behold a giant bouquet of flowers had led her to save an entire village, and in doing so, she had secured their livelihood. It was a true testament to her claim that the world bent to her whims.

"Princess, where shall I take the flowers?"

"To my room for now. Decorate the entire manor with them. As long as these flowers live, their beauty shall entertain my eyes. Take good care of them so they won't wither."

"Understood, Princess! I shall do my very best!"

At her command, Schult eagerly hopped to action, rushing off to gather every vase he could find in the mansion. After watching him scurry away, Priscilla turned to Al.

"Al, what do you think you're doing? If you have time to stand there looking stupid, go help Schult. Each one of these flowers is worth more than your life—don't ever forget that."

"…Taking it a little too far, Princess?"

She was beyond cheerful, yet still as sharp-tongued as ever. Al could only let out a bitter smile at her cutting words.

And as the red-clad woman stood before the brilliant red bouquet, Al sensed it would be dangerous to delay any longer and hurried to tend to the flowers before his cruel and merciful mistress had a chance to give him a kick in the ass.





AFTERWORD

Well, hello there! This is Tappei Nagatsuki, and this just might be your second time hearing from me in one month! I also go by Mouse-Colored Cat! If this is your first time hearing from me, I do hope the opportunity for a second time comes.

Now then, some of you may be scratching your heads right now, so I'll just explain—Volume 3 of *Re:ZERO Short Story Collection* goes on sale at the same time as Volume 15 of the main series!

Everything's been piling up—I had to write two afterwords this month—so for those of you who also bought Volume 15, this will be your second time hearing from me.

As the synopsis states, "*The main character doesn't die!*"—this is incredibly rare! So if you've ever thought, "*I'm too scared to read the main series because Subaru keeps dying, but he doesn't die in the short stories, so it's way more relaxing!*"—then this book is for you!

I mean, readers with that kind of taste probably wouldn't even touch *Re:ZERO* in the first place, but hey, anything is possible!

That being said, the chaotic wave of two volumes at once really was a formidable foe. I think I touched upon this in the afterword for the last volume of short stories, but the short stories in these books come from the ones serialized in *Comic Alive*. This means I already have a finished manuscript, so it should be easy, but as these are stories I wrote years ago, the urge to rewrite them drives me insane! There's never enough time! But I'm going to rewrite them anyway!

So yeah, I ended up making a ton of revisions to this volume, too, meaning it was just as much work as usual.

That said, I think the extra effort made it much better, so I sincerely hope you enjoy this polished collection of short stories!

By the way, I haven't had much space for afterwords in the main series lately, and there hasn't been much room for announcements, either. But this time, I've got three whole pages! That means—announcements!

I actually mentioned this briefly in my author profile, but before this book came out, I spent some time in Hyogo Prefecture. Sightseeing? I wish. Nope, I was there for my health.

I'm sure my clever readers already know this, but artists have a terrible habit of neglecting their health. Of course, it varies from person to person, so I can't speak for everyone. But as far as I know, most of us are guilty of it. (Naturally, that includes me.)

But in order to keep making good art, good health is a necessity—so I took the plunge and went for a checkup. And for that, I flew to Hyogo!

While I was there, I thoroughly enjoyed Sun Park, took tons of pictures, and triumphantly returned home in high spirits! There's no place like home!

So how did my health checkup go? Ask me again next year!

Anyway, it was in that spirit that I finished writing this short story collection! I sacrificed my health for it, so you'd better like it!

Now, since I've probably harmed all of your mental health with my rambling, let's get back to your regularly scheduled apologies and acknowledgments.

To Editor I—publishing two books at once is something that should never be done. Not only me but everyone involved almost died, so let's make sure our HP bars are fully restored before we try this again! That said, thank you so much for all your hard work!

And now, I have a different person to thank for the illustrations! Makoto Fugetsu, who does the art for the second part of the

Re:ZERO manga, provided the illustrations for this volume, too!

It was amazing seeing all of Fugetsu's illustrations—starting with Natsumi Schwartz (who did appear in the manga), and even the royal selection candidates who never made it into Part 2. Seriously, thank you so much!

To my designer, Kusano—thank you as always for going above and beyond! Designing two covers this time must have been a huge challenge, and yet each one is uniquely gorgeous!

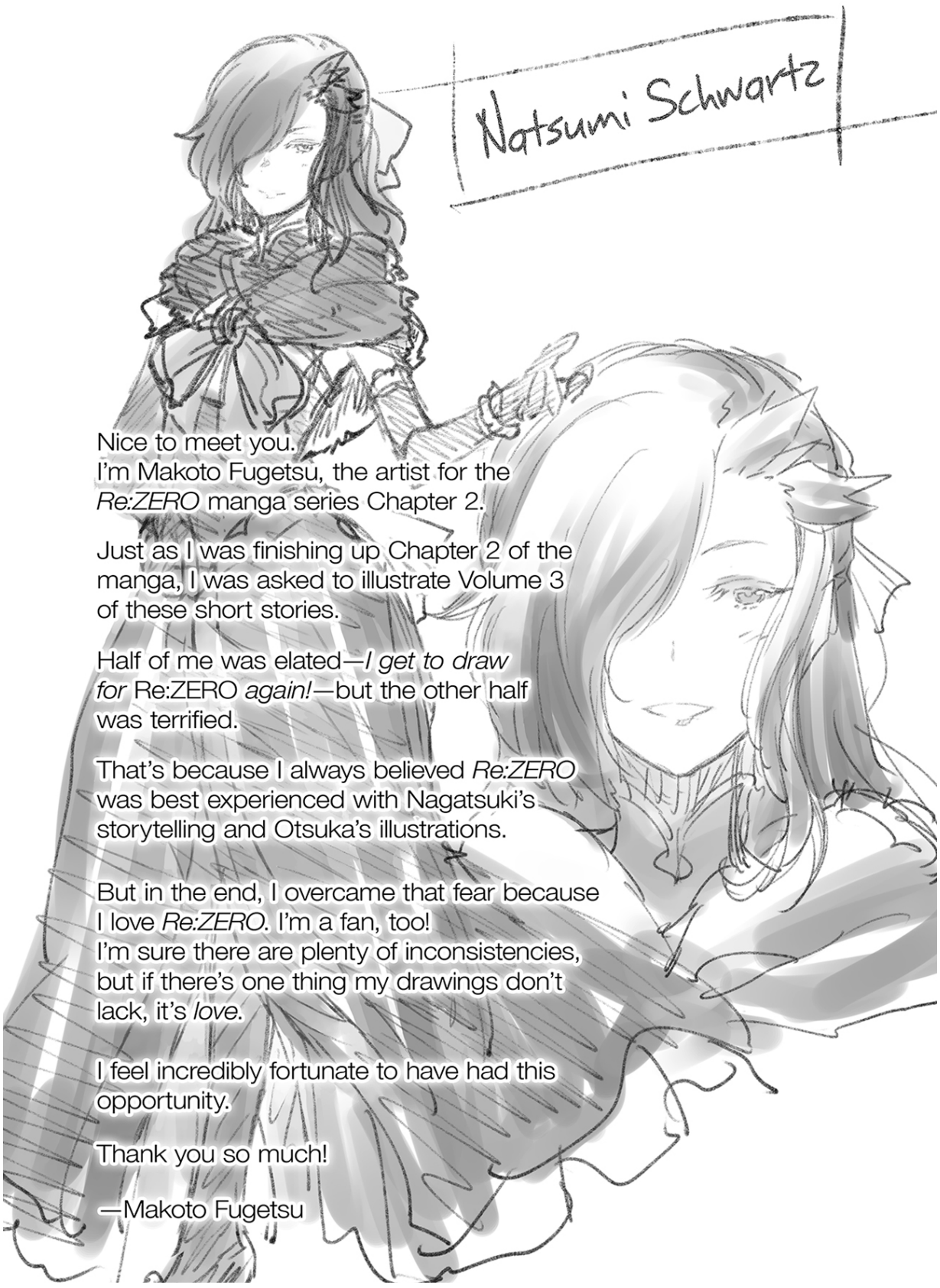
And of course, to everyone at the MF Bunko J editorial department, to manga illustrator Daichi Matsuse, and to Otsuka Shinichirou (who I think it's refreshing to thank at this point), as well as to PR, sales, and everyone else involved—thank you so much for all your support!

Releasing two volumes at once isn't something I could've done alone. Thanks to all of you, it was a fun challenge.

And above all, I owe everything to my amazing readers. Thank you, always. With the novels, manga, and new episodes of the anime on the way, there's still plenty more *Re:ZERO* to enjoy!

I hope you stick around with us!

(November 2017—just thinking about the year almost being over sends shivers down my spine…in fear.)



Nice to meet you.
I'm Makoto Fugetsu, the artist for the *Re:ZERO* manga series Chapter 2.

Just as I was finishing up Chapter 2 of the manga, I was asked to illustrate Volume 3 of these short stories.

Half of me was elated—*I get to draw for* Re:ZERO *again!*—but the other half was terrified.

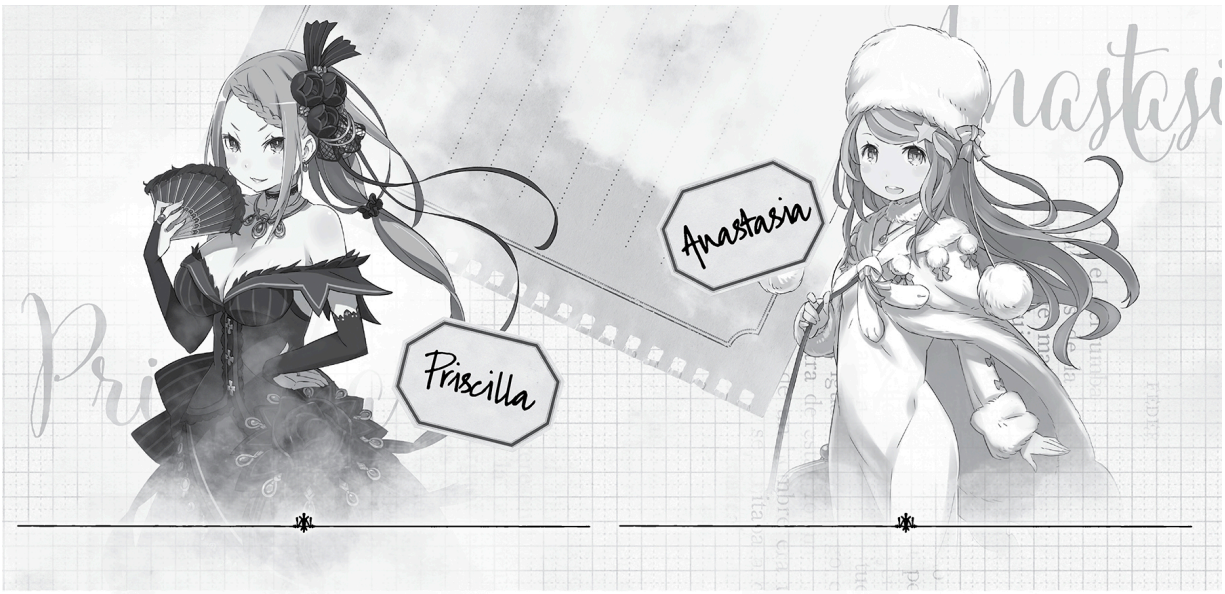
That's because I always believed *Re:ZERO* was best experienced with Nagatsuki's storytelling and Otsuka's illustrations.

But in the end, I overcame that fear because I love *Re:ZERO*. I'm a fan, too!
I'm sure there are plenty of inconsistencies, but if there's one thing my drawings don't lack, it's *love*.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have had this opportunity.

Thank you so much!

—Makoto Fugetsu


Priscilla
Anastasia

"All righty, then, the very important announcement time has arrived…"

"How ridiculous. Why must someone such as *I* participate in such a farce? And with a savage she-fox like you as my partner? Don't make me laugh."

"Dang, egocentric as ever, aren't you? But a job's a job. So stop your griping and pull yourself together, you hear? And if you can't do that, then I'll just have to take care of everything by myself… What do you say?"

"A spirited display of hard work for my sake…an auspicious suggestion? Hardly. Knowing you, you'll consider me in your debt and use it as leverage to pressure me into some distasteful trade—I can practically see it. Very well. Just this once, I shall comply with your initial suggestion."

"Sure, fine. Since the preamble got a bit long, let's breeze through this. First, Volume 15 of the *Re:ZERO* main series should be coming out at the same time as this book. The very long fourth arc should finally be wrapping up, so it might be nice to start over at the beginning and do a reread—that's just me, though."

"The audacity, releasing one thing after another without a break. Anything else?"

"Well, also in the same month, the fifth volume of the *Re:ZERO* Arc 2 manga comes out in Big Gan Gan's last volume, so I'm sure there's gonna be long lines at the bookstores for that."

"And the artist is…hmm, appears to be the same commoner who drew the art for this very book. Very good. This artist did a beautiful job drawing me, so I shall permit their continued employment."

"You really are pompous, aren't you…? Also, Volume 16 of the main series is scheduled to be released in March 2018. That'll mark the start of a new arc, so here's to hoping there's gonna be more scenes with us in that."

"Oddly enough, I am of the same opinion as you, she-fox. Those foolish peasants are simply hopeless. No matter how I try to paint my brilliance into their memories, their respect wanes by the day. Even if I grace them with my presence now and again, thanks to their puny brains, they are constantly in danger of forgetting the

glory and ecstasy of my presence."

"Uhhh, I wouldn't go that far, okay? Just for the record…"

"Additionally, in the coming year, the ever-popular oni maid sisters are going to hold a birthday celebration. A servant will provide you peasants with details at some point in the future."

"I don't really like the way you said that, but… Huh, this announcement section went much better than I thought it would. Y'know, Priscilla, you and I just might be compatible after all."

"Hah! Don't make me laugh, she-fox. As long as you and I are in competition, I shall never show any magnanimity toward you whatsoever. Kindly direct any further inquiries to your own scarf."

"Ugh, and here I thought we were making some progress… I can't ever let my guard down around you, can I?"

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