24th February 2013.

Kontia, 2nd Public Maternity Clinic.

Tanya, High Queen of the Lepus.

Bringing new life into the world was among the most respectable of professions. From market expansion to the potential intellectual property that a child represented, each new life was inherently valuable. To compound that, reproducing often changed the psychology of the parents, making them more invested in the stability and security of their local polity, as well as incentivising a greater entanglement with market forces.

New life represented the growth of a whole civilisation, in the tiny hands of every baby came the promise of greater consumption, creativity, and, of course, taxable productivity. These manifestly positive elements of parenthood did however clash with the manifest reality of the biological process:

Giving birth was painful and undignified.

Even for a species I was almost certain was not a result of purely natural processes, a big thing going through a small hole was not a fun experience. However, I cradled little Elric as my son squinted out into the world he had found himself in, and I was consumed by what was doubtlessly an intense flood of hormones. The pain and indignity? It was fine, honestly; with the product of my 6th maternal suffering before me, I could already feel the temptation to go through it again.

"Buh," Elric babbled.

I felt my ears stand on end and my cheeks began to hurt. It was concerning; this drive to produce more and more children that was forced upon my mind by some questionably biological process. This very drive is doubtlessly present in all of my people... I would perhaps be less concerned if I did not suspect the Lepus were suffering from a magically engineered 'R-Selection' psychosis.

The current birth rate of my people was unsustainable. I wanted a birth rate significantly higher than the standard human rate, certainly, but my species seemed to enter a menopausal stage in the late fifties. Enya, my biological mother, whether she knew it or not, was only just approaching that stage now and still quite capable of having children at the moment.

Even if I was successful in delaying the pregnancy for younger Lepus until they were, at least, sixteen (but preferably until they were twenty), that still left roughly thirty years when a single woman could produce multiple children every year with seemingly no risk to her health.

The Maternal Houses I had constructed around Kontia did have a high standard for the people employed there. Hands were washed, equipment was sterilised with steam, training was provided, and non-Lepus were prioritised with little pushback from the Lepus owing to

their intractable egos. The benefits of what was effectively a brutal dictatorship at the current time was that I could rapidly employ medical reforms which would be difficult to enforce in a more libertarian political model.

The result of that is the manifest reality of not a single non-Lepus woman having died, despite some suffering from complications during childbirth, nor has a single non-Lepus baby perished in any of the houses. Building a reputation for reliability in the face of a dangerous event such as childbirth was a point of pride for me.

But the reality was that the total number of non-Lepus pregnancies concluded in this institution numbered one hundred and nine.

Total.

While I was campaigning to the north to secure that territory, I would have to consider ways to boost the birth rate of the non-Lepus while also managing to reduce the birth rate of the Lepus. Having such an imbalance would only lead to social strife.

I glanced over at Rory, only to see the woman frozen in the same position she had been since I had passed little Shinji over to her. By now he had finished feeding. Rory's eyes were wide, taking in as much information as she could as she held the snoozing baby, full and content.

"Rory," I prompted, getting no response from her. "*Rory,*" I said again, slightly louder.

"-WAH?!" Rory jolted in place and cradled Shinji closer to her chest, causing the boy to kick his little feet in his sleep. She blinked for the first time in an hour. "What is-"

"Are you alright?" I shifted in place, earning another flurry of babble from Elric as he settled into place, his face relaxing.

"I'm fine," Rory said quickly, looking back to the snoozing baby in her arms. "I never expected you would trust me..."

"Should I trust you?" I asked her as she began blinking more, the pain of having her eyes open for an hour having caught up to her.

"Of course!" Rory assured me in a whisper-shout. "Anyone who would dare threaten him will become rust upon my blade."

I snorted in amusement and had to hold back chuckles as Elric squinted out, confused at the sudden movement.

"How long were you working on that one?" I asked the entirely-sincere Chūnibyō.

"A little bit after you handed him to me... I think, how long was I-"

"An hour." I gently swayed Elric to calm him down.

"It felt like a single moment..." Rory mused.

"I can tell-" I formulated several shield spells and fed mana into my strength enhancement as the door to the small room I had commandeered burst open, only to relax when I saw it was my husbands.

"We came as soon as we heard." Furea hurried forwards, his ears twitching as he looked between the babies in our arms. "So, it was true," he said, looking in awe at the disturbed babies as they began to stir.

"Two boys from a single mother, from a single birth!" Art looked like he was about to explode in excitement. "We have to record this, I don't even think there is a dedicated tattoo, oh we have to design a ne-"

"Good, you are here," I interrupted, my voice wavering from a sudden jolt of fear. I stood up, no worse for wear despite the four-hour endeavour I had just endured. I gently placed Elric into Furea's arms. "We will delay their marking for a few days since I will be busy until then."

Furea frowned at that before he inclined his head.

"As my Queen commands," he offered in a low tone that made my chemical-addled body shudder with unwanted delight. I would have to redouble my efforts to produce a sexual barrier device, or I would be spending even more of my valuable time suffering under a barrage of chemicals that degraded my ability to rationally order the world.

"They have both been fed, and I have selected two wet nurses that have been given an acceptable diet and undergone rigorous background checks." They had been selected shortly after they had both given birth. After selection, the pair of goblin girls had been delighted they were given fruit, meat, and vegetables with every single meal. While it was for my own children, I did note their children were notably bigger and healthier than their peers' children. It made me more confident in choosing the pair of them.

"You are going?" Art asked, his ears drooping as Shinji clasped a tiny hand around one of his fingers.

"I have work to do. Come along, Rory," I ordered, earning a sad whine from her as she gently handed Shinji over to Art proper, whom I suspected was his father. It was honestly difficult to tell at this stage.

I lingered by the door as I watched Furea, Art, Colla, and Enna begin to dote on the newborn babies. A part of me wanted to stay... but there was a real possibility in me ending up looking like some Yakuza reject if I did.

Seriously, face tattoos? That was *not* going to happen.

Mabel Forn.

Royal Palace Vault, Kontia.

"I hate you." It was difficult, painful to breathe in through the compression against my chest and through the cloth gag in my mouth. But it was not enough to think about it, to project it with magic and thought alone.

I had to bring it into being, make it physical.

"I hate you." Gasp for air, fill my lungs as much as I could and gasp out that muffled mantra.

"I hate you." Rory was right, Rory was right, Rory was right.

"I hate you." They don't really care about us, they don't, they don't...

"I hate you." If we serve we are rewarded, but never as much as we deserve. Never what we earn.

"I hate you." It was impossible that He could not hear her; even now she could feel his seeping influence through the dizzying drone of power in her bones.

"I hate you." He could save her. There was a temple here. He could empower them. He could make her even stronger. He could call upon the many thousands of Temples across the land and begin a holy crusade against Tanya. He could command a million souls to march upon Kontia, and they would in a heartbeat.

Why not? Why not? Why not? WHY NOT? WHY NOT?!

"I HATE YOU!" I wheezed out, shaking with barely controlled rage.

...Because I was not worth it.

...Because I was a failure.

...Because Tanya could resist Diva somehow, because Tanya could insult the Gods themselves and violate every mortal law, yet the holy pantheon would merely condemn or employ token resistance against her.

Tanya did this to me.

I felt nothing.

Tanya did this to me.

I tried again.

Because I was dangerous, because I was a threat to her... Tanya did this because she could not ignore me, she could not abandon me.

I shifted in place with a nervous energy.

Tanya was scared of me, at least, a little bit.

I felt my heart thump slightly faster. The pressure I was under seemed more intimate. I could almost feel her pressing me into the earth.

She had to maintain me, that is what she said, she had to maintain her hold over me.

Because I was dangerous.

But she did not cut me into pieces, did not rip me apart and bury me in the earth. She would not...

Or could not...

Why? Why? *Why?*

Why promise better... 'Living arrangements'? Why promise me anything?

She could take anything from me.

If she kept the current arrangements, then I would be willing to give anything.

Why?

Did... she care about...

She was a savage beast, a creature shaped by war in the distant mists of time.

Why were her hands so soft?

I closed my eyes, from darkness to darkness.

But I could feel, for a moment, her arms and that faint soft fur, tightly wrapped around me.

I shifted, feeling my legs rub together in what little freedom I had.

Click

Wh-Whhat was going on?! This was too soon! I had... I was sure... I had count-

Click

What if it was not her? What if He had come to save me? What would I do?

Click

I squinted at the faint beam of light pouring into my world and through blurry eyes I saw her face.

Soft blonde hair that bounced slightly as she walked, her deep, brilliantly-blue eyes, the soft, pitying gaze that made my stomach flutter.

She had come again, like she said she would.

"Wakey wakey!" Rory Mercury skipped past Tanya, interrupting the High Queen of the Lepus before she could say a word. "Come on, Mabel! Time for walkies!" With that, she held up what looked like an oversized white tunic with long arms in one hand and a dizzying maze of metal and leather straps in the other.

"*Rory.*" Tanya chastised the woman in question with a harsh tone that made Rory falter for a moment.

"Whaaat?" She pouted, stepping away as Tanya walked forwards.

"Good afternoon, Mabel, I hope you remember our promise." She said softly, moving the bags of coins and jewels off of my body as she pulled me from the wall and began to unravel me. "It's somewhat undignified, but you have to understand the position you are putting me in. Still, I think you will find it a demonstrable improvement."

Like every time I was free, I felt weak and uncertain, utterly exposed before Tanya as she inspected me. I felt my cheeks flush and my ears burn as Rory leaned against a wall with a sly smile on her face. I tried to ignore the First Servant of Emroy and focus instead on Tanya.

"You have not been trying to escape. That puts my mind at ease, Mabel," Tanya said slowly as I held out my shaking hands for her to inspect my fingers. "Good girl," she added in what was almost an afterthought. She turned around as I took in a deep breath to calm my nerves.

"Would a good girl smell that badly?" Rory sneered as I wrapped my arms around my body and looked at the ground, taking another breath to try and calm down.

And another.

"Rory, behave yourself," Tanya ordered the Apostle of Emroy.

Another breath, another, and another.

Despite the pressure no longer making breathing difficult, I struggled to bring in air.

"I will, I will, I was just telling the truth. We had to stop everything for her..." Rory grumbled.

I felt dizzy, like the world was spinning around me as I tried to breathe. I squeezed my eyes closed, but even then it was not darkness but a faint light still stabbing into my eyes from the crystals Tanya and Rory carried on them. I tried to clench my fists as they shook more and mo-

"Stop." I let out a pitiful squeak, eyes opening wide as I saw Tanya staring at me with total focus, she was calm. I looked down to see she was holding my wrists with both of her hands. "You were beginning to hyperventilate," she said, seemingly to herself as she looked into my eyes, cocking her head to the side.

"H-Hyperventilate?" I asked, trying to steady my breathing.

"You are breathing too heavily, slow down and give yourself a moment. It's not your fault." I looked at her and forced myself to slow my breathing, but only managed to take a ragged gasping breath and hold it for a while before taking another. Yet even that seemed good enough for Tanya as she waited, and waited.

"I- sorry..." I said, looking at the ground.

I felt Tanya guide me into the warm water of the bath she would always bring and begin to clean me in her usual way. All the while, Rory simply watched us both with a blank expression.

I was dried off, I ate, I stood up on shaky legs as Tanya gave me one last look over before she collected all of the things and carried them out of the room, giving me a moment alone with Rory.

"Watch her." She gave another order and Rory Mercury nodded, her eyes meeting mine as Tanya's footsteps faded.

There was an awkward silence between us as I wrapped my arms around my body.

"Don't bother," Rory said with a sigh, "there's nothing interesting to hide."

I glared at her for a moment before looking at the ground.

"Mercury," I said at last.

"...Yes?"

"What would Emroy do... if..." I looked at the place where I had been stored for... I did not know how long.

"They would laugh at me. Every day, every hour, every moment, until I served them again."

"...You would serve Emroy again?" I asked, looking up into Rory's eyes as she blinked from my sudden movement.

"...This is your first time, besides it could be worse," she said softly, looking away.

I hate you I cast the thought into the power carved into my bones.

...

...

...

"I won't serve again." I spat as Rory looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Are you trying to convince *me*?" She asked as I could hear Tanya's footsteps approaching again.

I was in the middle of the room as I stepped into a pair of thick white stockings, next was the shirt with the sleeves so long they reached my knees. Tanya gently, yet firmly, pulled on the sleeves until my arms were crossed and tied them off behind my back. Rory and Tanya together then began to affix the straps and chains to the clothes. My hair was tied back, my mouth was covered with a gag, and last came a mask to disguise the gag.

"Can you move your arms?" Tanya asked and I shifted in place in front of her, earning a nod. "Is this too tight?" The pair of them fussed over the strange clothes I was clad in for a while before with a sense of finality. Tanya took up a long chain that was connected to the clothes in several places and gave it a slight tug, pulling me towards her.

When I felt my balance fail, I tried to throw out my arms to catch myself, only for the sleeves to make that impossible. Before I could topple over, Tanya stepped forwards and pulled me into her warm embrace.

"Don't panic, I have you." She practically whispered her reassurance.

I felt my face burn and was suddenly incredibly grateful for the mask.

"I will be traveling north on campaign; I could hardly leave you here and let you get into trouble. So, you will be coming with me like this."

"A good girl on a chain," Rory added with a grin. "Honestly, it suits you, I'm almost jealous..." She glanced over at Tanya as I was helped to my feet by the Witch Queen.

"Well, we are ready to-"

"Wait." Rory interrupted High Queen Tanya and stepped forwards, towards me, with a grin. "Wait, there is one last thing..." I looked down as she pressed a hand against the pure white of the clothes I was wrapped in, only for a faint blue to begin to ripple across the cloth. In an instant of unholy might, a servant of Emroy covered the clothes in symbols of Zufmuut. "There we go," Rory said with a smile. "Now you are perfect."

Tanya looked at me for a moment with a strange expression before she took up my chain and asked. "Are you ready?" I felt like I was naked once more.

Until I nodded, and was led by Tanya out of the vault.

BABU! Babies are fantastic, have you ever held a baby? They have tiny hands that are much stronger than you would expect. They grab your fingers and they won't let go. Brilliant little things.

The sudden presence of children is the herald for a shift in life circumstances. There is a lot of fear in how life changes, but even if things are not perfect, even if you have restrictions on your freedom, such changes can be a positive force for life. That might be a bit of a theme for this chapter.

One of the themes of this story is tradition and the rejection, refinement or longing for said tradition. It's something many characters deal with, these themes are quite personal and I am far from unique in coming to terms with such feelings. The world spins one way, how we deal with that is another matter entirely.

I am not sure Mable is dealing with her situation in the most healthy way, but who would in her position?

Thank you for reading to the end of this far more rambly AN than usual!

Edited by: Shirojacky

I want to thank my supporters:

רומן יריוציק, sim Kim, Matt babb, Nova, Waaaaaaaaaghboy, Kaordin, Logan, Tabitha black, Jerraco, Reuben Babcock, Ahmet Barış Özel, Pv2, Ian Dawson, Pablo, Fredrik Holmsten, GnashingBeef, Esculis, Echo54g, Mikołaj Jóźwiak, Boofer Dan, Antonio Dorey, Noire, Jose Hernandez, Ricardian, nathan holmes, Harvey Marks, kfrar, Hawkteer464, adam Beyene, emerot, Dplet, Mikkel ET, Caleb Bear, TUSF, Kevin Li, Ven, Cambstansa, G Sharp, Luis Castro, Dominique Glénat, Aloe Hussein, Alex Huynh, Dorian Grizzle, Yggdrasil, Xeno426, Manaia, Khepri90, Shrimperium, Markus, Sutton Jones, Mars, Groot, Russian_Doggo, Ryan Chapple, squish, joseph lizon, Dean, TransGothBunny, Luftritter, Nicholas Reilly, snips, BarrettSlayer, Moore605, Stx66, Alatoic, Sir Gideon Ofnir - the All-Knowing, Skyler Flores, Erick reyes, Maximillian, Know Map Game, Ultragamer_2017, Liaira, bnnuy, Oniix, Anna Parr, 8thKnightofKeys, Napoleon III, Alejandro C Gutierrezybriggs, Paradox, Gavril, Chavonne lawson, Yotam Bonneh, Lord Sturm, Dmitry Gumin, Birhaledin, Kingslayer, Worcestershire Sauce, Luis Ortiz, Lawngnome, Skulldragon7, Legion_13, Gremlin Jack, Sgt. Rock, Aifer, Marcelo Antonio Barria barrera, MagicDownUnder (MDU), bakkysak, Comics, test20201, Mowtine, Gryfonides, ----, Greenie Boi, TheChaoticTaco, Hamers, Loket, Berik Bekenov, Drill to the Sky, Jared, ReleeseTheKrakan, Kornelius Idland, Hornet, Pinky95, Lurker, xerixo, Tyrant615, Karene, Sweetlaxer, Carvor, Christian E. Y., DonPacific Bobcat9er, Karl, Lino, Glitchrr36, Sean, Lapiver, Dave Steele, Rakkis157, Rykia, Michael Zalesny,

INVRZ, Sir Baka, Aaron, Verified Mustelid, Daniel Ervin, Fabriz Gauthier, Tobias, Jason Langford, Mrn00b, Rhotisserie, Boghog123, matthew Hungerford, TheBlueBananaPig, Lothspell, fiva, Vanguard_D, Mulchmeat, Vyushia, Master Brave, Dickevin, Spade_Slick, Fouve, Mega Elite, Ty2bp, Mysterious89, Rimgaudas, Nicholas Hammond, Tony, Rouslan Fectchenko, Varisis, Mackenzie Buckle, BloodDraconius, Afforess, CommanderBrunch, D3ad0s, Unknown B, Lictor Magnus, Arcman, Andres Franco, Nathan White, Va, Endymion2314, Issac Norman, bertucchi, Kyle Kawahara, Aceter, Mortaldude, Hex, SerenaBlackburn, StrikebackXIII, Tinfoilmecha 11719, bkmy, JustAUser, Emdee Kay, Reese Apperson, ZD Lawson, atreids5, Amerdism, wawabi, Old Hammer, Xodarap4,

You can read ahead of the publicly released chapters on my Patreon.

I also have a public discord.