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*The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting
Is Wanted as a Bride*

Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: *Yoru Ichige*

The illustration depicts a romantic wedding scene. A young man with long, flowing light blue hair and green eyes is shown in profile, leaning towards a young woman. He wears a white royal uniform with gold embroidery and a blue gem on his collar. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and blue eyes, and she is wearing a white lace wedding dress with a full veil. She holds a bouquet of white flowers. They are surrounded by falling red petals and purple wisteria flowers hang from the top. A pink diamond-shaped badge with the number '4' is in the upper right corner.

4

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Sidis

Next in line for the Razanate throne. Lyse's fiancé. He knows her from her previous life, and he's aware that she has retained her memories even after being reincarnated. Acted as the emperor's knight while in Olwen.

Lyse

The daughter of an Olwenian baron. Now serves as a lady-in-waiting at the imperial palace. She remembers her past life as a knight of the empire, including a dark secret that had her avoiding all things imperial... until she ended up engaged to Sidis.

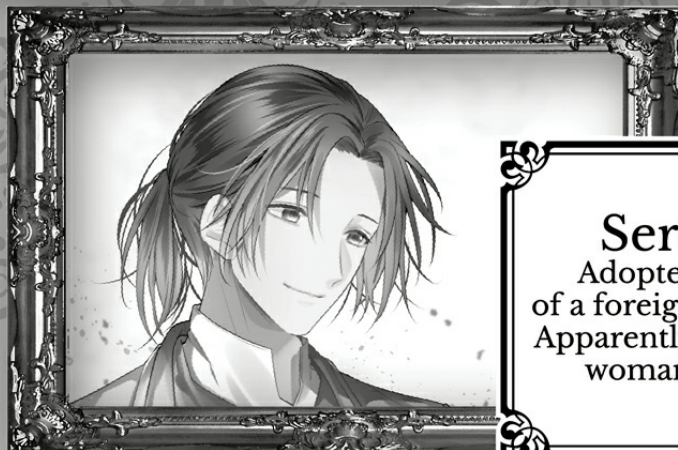
The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride
Character Profiles

Alcede
An imperial duke and a friend of Sidis's who encouraged his engagement to Lyse. Has an insatiable sweet tooth.



Egbert
The Razanate emperor. Fell ill in Olwen because of the Donan Faith, but has since returned to normal.

Karl
Duke Lasuarl's son. A devoted magical researcher.



Seren
Adopted son of a foreign prince. Apparently a serial womanizer.

Glossary	
The Light of Origin	A pillar of light said to be left by the gods following the creation of the world. Though it bestows blessings upon the land and people around it, it also attracts monsters.
Razanate Empire	Home to the Light of Origin, which grants most of its nobles long lives and magic powers. The emperor visits each of the nation's vassal states once every five years.
Kingdom of Olwen	A small kingdom to the southwest of the Razanate Empire. One of its vassal states.
Donan Faith	A new religion that's been catching on lately, though its extremist teachings are widely frowned upon. Its followers distrust the empire.

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Prologue: A Strange and Sudden Occurrence

“You’re absolutely beautiful, Miss Lyse. Here, take a look for yourself.”

Thus beckoned by the court lady attending her, Lyse stepped in front of the mirror. Pure white silk draped her from head to toe. Her brown hair and blue eyes stood out against its sparkling beauty. Indeed, Lyse’s image reflected in the glass was that of a young bride in her wedding dress.

Layers of lace and organza formed the gentle, sweeping curve of the train, and the garment was studded with countless small pearls and diamonds that glittered every time Lyse so much as stirred. Perhaps because of the corset tightly binding her waist, she seemed even more delicate than usual. To make up for her bare arms, the long gloves added a sense of modesty to the ensemble.

I’ll be wearing this when Sidis and I wed...

The thought that she’d soon be married flustered Lyse to no end as she anxiously fiddled and twirled the ends of her hair. Her family back home in Olwen would have undoubtedly been shocked to see her now. No longer did she look like the sword-toting Boar Girl, but a perfectly ordinary wife-to-be.

“Your fiancé commissioned this necklace and matching tiara bejeweled with yellow topaz and diamonds. They’re guaranteed to complement your beautiful fair skin, Miss Lyse,” explained Atoli, who was overseeing Lyse’s fitting session. “Your veil was handwoven as well over the past few months. With the dress finished, everything will be complete.”

Lyse nodded. “All the furniture that Lord Sidis has been fussing over has been crafted now too. Once that’s moved in and arranged...”

“I heard something about a room for a dog in the villa.”

This brought an awkward chuckle forth from Lyse’s lips. “His Majesty said he wants to go for plenty of walks, so...”

“Not even I knew His Majesty adored dogs so much,” remarked Atoli, who’d

attended the emperor from a young age.

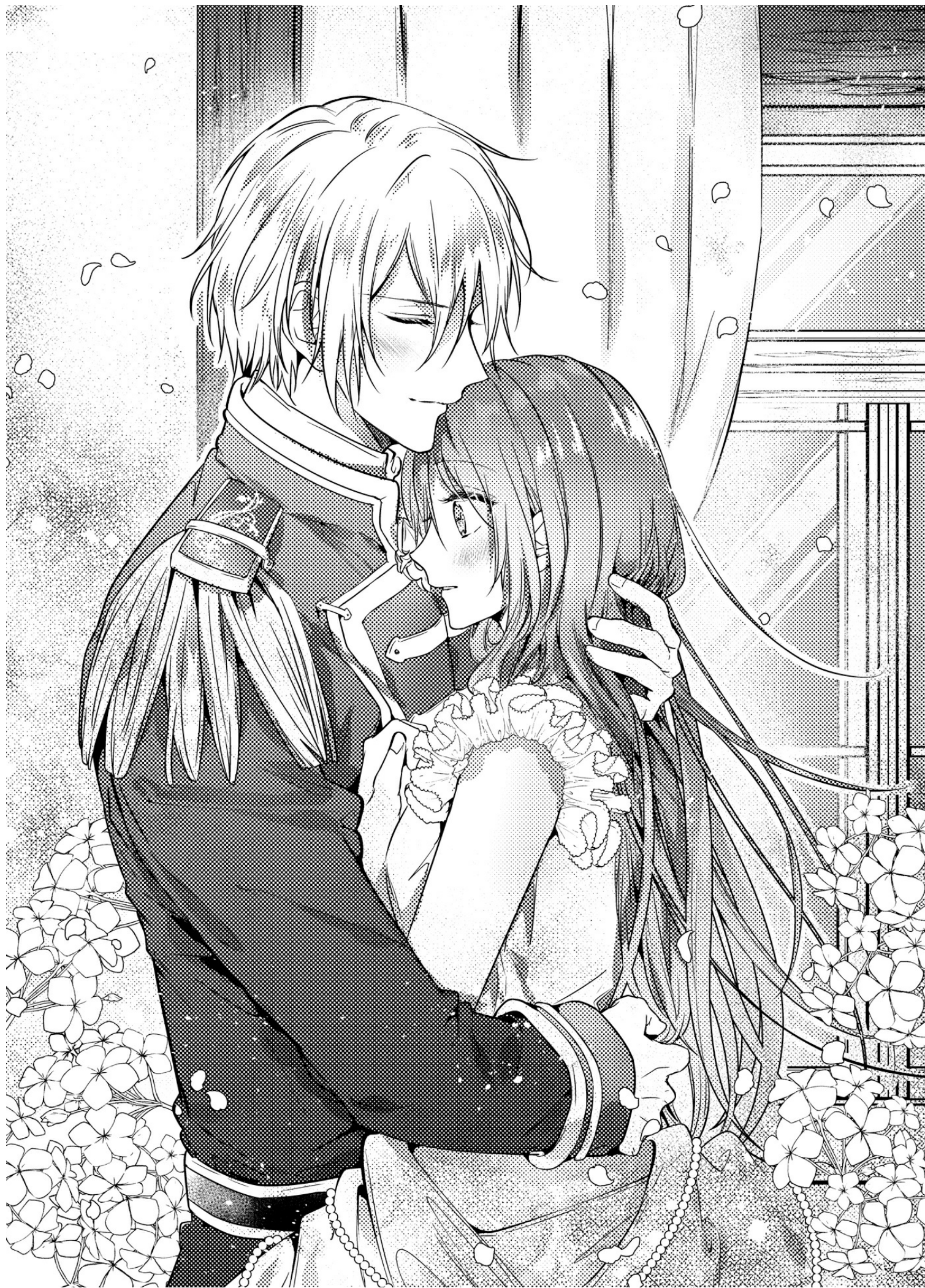
Does he like dogs? Or does he like being a dog? Lyse had to wonder. After all, Emperor Egbert hadn't asked the couple to add a room for a new pet puppy. He'd asked it for himself so that he could freely frolic in doggy form away from prying eyes—not that Lyse could reveal this detail to anyone.

Just as she was about to take off her dress, a silver-haired man walked into the room. “Oh my, how gorgeous,” he muttered, pressing his hand to his mouth and visibly trembling as tears welled in his green eyes. Atoli and the other ladies giggled as they swiftly left the room so the couple could be alone. The new arrival—Lyse's fiancé, Sidis—drew close, extending a hand to stroke her hair and caress her cheek. “I came as soon as I heard you were trying on your dress. You're exquisite perfection, Lyse.”

“Thank you...” As if she'd caught the burning blush from her groom-to-be's cheeks, Lyse, too, turned bright red. She looked down at the ground as Sidis wrapped his arms around her.

“Knowing I'll have you all to myself makes our wedding day seem even further away...”

Accompanying those passionate words, Lyse felt a gentle touch atop her head. She blinked in surprise at the sensation. *Huh? Did he just kiss me?*



“I wish you’d resign from your position as a lady-in-waiting once we’re married,” Sidis continued between showers of smooches. With every one, Lyse couldn’t help squirming from embarrassment.

“Lots of imperial women continue to serve after marriage, so I don’t think it’s out of line.” That much was true. In the empire, even married noblewomen worked as knights. “Moreover, we’ve planned to announce at the ceremony that I’m a Light bearer.”

It wouldn’t look good if Lyse spent her days lazing around the palace once everybody knew she had special powers. The empire was a meritocracy, after all. *More importantly, I can’t overstate how happy I am to be able to keep protecting Egbert.*

Lyse wanted to defend the imperial crown as a lady-in-waiting just as Qatora had as a knight a century ago. She’d longed to return to Razanate after her reincarnation, and her dream had finally come true. That overjoyed Lyse. The empire ordinarily only enlisted court ladies who were skilled with both magic and a blade in order to ensure their safety against monsters, so she was especially grateful that she, too, was allowed to serve even as a manaless foreigner.

As familiar as I am with fighting monsters, I don’t have any magical power. That means I’ll never be able to fight shoulder to shoulder with the imperial knights. Lyse didn’t lack combat prowess, but magic was a different story. She’d thus resigned herself to life as a lady-in-waiting. Still, being close to the people she wanted to protect meant that she would be their last line of defense. That honor thrilled her.

Sidis heaved a heavy sigh. “Do as you please until you are with child. That said, I wish you’d stay out of harm’s way. I cannot bear the thought of losing you again.”

Lyse’s face flushed even redder. *He’s thinking about children? I suppose it’s only a matter of time...* The topic had her on tenterhooks. It was all she could do to stammer, “I’ll be fine. Things are different this time around since I know I have you to protect me.”

Sidis embraced her tightly. “But of course. I’m not a boy anymore. I’ll keep

you safe.”

While in his arms, Lyse recalled her checkered past. She’d perished protecting a younger Sidis a hundred years ago—and now she had a second chance at life as his wife. Preparations for the wedding day were progressing steadily. The invitations had already been sent and now the couple’s attire would soon be completed. After the wedding, it was only natural that children would follow. Still...

“Still, I have to ask... What’s the reason for announcing I have the Light of Origin at our wedding?” she inquired.

“Oh, that? It’s so people won’t bother you,” Sidis explained, though that didn’t clarify much for Lyse. “If our children aren’t born with the Light, there are those who would take it out on you, as everyone currently believes you have the power to control monsters but do not possess the Light itself. They will feel differently once they know we are both bearers, however.”

“I see. I appreciate the consideration,” Lyse said, then hesitated for a moment. “And I’m sorry for the bother...” She knew this was all for her sake, but she didn’t see the reason for the fuss.

Sidis separated himself from her, staring deep into her eyes as he smiled. “So fret not and bear many children. I hope one will be like you,” he said without batting an eye. His lack of shame was unfathomable to Lyse.

“What if they take after His Majesty?” she asked, avoiding eye contact. It was a valid question too, as Sidis was Egbert’s cousin.

“Having a rascal like him *would* be quite the headache. But even so, any child of yours is bound to be adorable.” Sidis’s straight face tickled Lyse. She was familiar with Egbert’s mischievousness—and the many headaches it caused—from her last life.

As she reminisced about the past, her eyes wandered to the window. They fell on the grove of trees that separated the palace from the villa, then moved on and up to the Light of Origin—the beautiful beam of light stretching into the sky. This radiant pillar blessed the empire with fertile soil. Its power was coveted by other nations and this had incited many a war, but because the Light also bestowed the imperials with magic, Razanate remained undefeated. She

pacified her neighboring nations by annexing them or making them vassal states. However, the Light brought more than just blessings to the empire; it also lured monsters to her doorstep. The imperial capital and the palace were frequently beset by the beasts, necessitating that the nobility be well trained with sword and sorcery alike. For all of these reasons—not to mention the awe-inspiring spectacle of its beauty—the Light of Origin was revered as a gift from the gods.

“Huh?” Lyse’s eyes went wide as she stared at it...for the normally perfectly straight Light had just undulated. Accompanying it was a loud, piercing ring. “What’s happening?”

“What in the—?!” Sidis noticed too, clamping his hands over his ears.

The pillar of light was now rhythmically waving like a beating pulse.

Chapter 1: That's News to Me!

Though the Light had piqued Lyse's interest, she whipped around when something scurrying in her peripheral vision now caught her attention. "Whoa!"

All of a sudden, there were black creatures scampering about the room—the monsters she'd taken from her pockets and placed in a basket while she was trying on her wedding dress. The Light within Lyse gave her the ability to tame monsters. They were normally most obedient, yet something had stirred them into a frenzy. They were shrieking as they bashed against the window in an attempt to break outside.

"Stop! Calm down!" Lyse called out in a panicked voice.

The two avian monsters slid down the glass and tumbled to the floor. The other three were still frantically trying to claw their way up to the sill. Lyse knew it was a mere matter of time before she could contain them no longer, so she unlatched the window in preparation to let the two birds loose.

"If you promise to stay small and to not go anywhere else, then I'll allow you to go to the Light, okay?"

As soon as Lyse offered the compromise, the bird monsters darted out of the opened window and made a beeline for the golden pillar. While the Light attracted monsters to the capital, they rarely went straight for the beam. They would ordinarily go for any people in the area first—yet the Light seemed to be the birds' only focus as they rushed toward it.

"What in the world...?" Lyse muttered to herself, prompting Sidis to try to make sense of the situation.

"Did you feel any changes, Lyse?" he asked.

"Nothing until just now. But..." She hesitated to finish her sentence, fearful that Donan holdouts had committed another act of terrorism.

The Donan Faith was a cult that despised the empire and demonized the Light of Origin. Its membership was primarily expatriates and foreigners of imperial

descent who resented Razanate and her demand for magical strength, which inherently restricted positions of power to those with greater mana. This system left the unfortunate mana-weak children of nobles cut off from following in their parents' footsteps, damning them to a life of ostracization and sometimes even abandonment. Such exiles eventually had children of their own, who in turn grew up under the influence of their hate for all things imperial. The resentment was fundamentally inherited.

Even with only a minuscule amount of mana, however, such imperial descendants were highly prized marriage partners in foreign lands. That was largely how they'd gained power and come to form the Donan Faith. Once the religion was established, they took to indoctrinating innocent populaces with the power of suggestion, arranging attacks on the emperor himself, and other such nefarious acts. Fortunately, just a few days ago, Lyse and the others had managed to capture a Donan leader in a serious blow to the cult. Given that, there was very little chance that they were responsible for whatever was happening now.

"It's impossible to know for sure that we routed every last cultist. All that we can do now is to examine the scene," Sidis suggested.

Lyse hurriedly got changed, and the couple made their way to the imperial villa. As the building surrounded the Light of Origin, knights posted there had to be particularly resistant to its effects. That being the case, Lyse and Sidis were stunned to find the guards doubled over on the ground when they arrived.

"What happened here?!" Sidis demanded, rushing over to one of them.

"Right after that shrill noise earlier...all of my power..." The knight could scarcely choke out an explanation, but the effects of what happened were quite apparent—not just by his suffering, but also by the small, dark horns that parted his black hair.

After a brief moment of consideration, Lyse came to a realization. "Lord Sidis, their mana must be being warped!"

"What makes you think so?"

"Look at the top of his head—horns," she said, pointing.

Sidis was stupefied. “Those who can still walk, evacuate the villa immediately! Those who just arrived on the scene, carry away the immobilized! Lyse and I are going to investigate the Light of Origin!” he commanded.

Though the knights around were visibly in pain, they began dragging themselves away according to orders. Satisfied with this, Sidis entered the villa with Lyse. It was utterly silent inside. The couple followed the seamless, magically constructed white walls deeper within.

“All clear,” Sidis muttered to nobody in particular.

The lack of anyone present suggested that this was, in fact, not a terrorist attack on the Light. He cautiously cut through the semicircular building with Lyse until they reached the golden pillar of light at its heart. The twenty-meter-wide beam—too thick for even a dozen adults to encircle with their arms outstretched—towered into the heavens. It looked just like it always did, and there was still no sign of anyone else around.

“A hiccup with the Light, perhaps...?” Sidis wondered aloud.

With no trespassers in the vicinity nor any evidence to suggest it had been an inside job, the prince was left to suspect there was something awry with the Light itself. Lyse was of a similar mind too. The Light of Origin had no history of instability—not even during the Donan mana-warping incident, the attack when cultists threw black stones into it, or when Qatora was swallowed by it.

“If there was some kind of hiccup, then I wonder what instigated it,” Lyse said pensively. The cause of all this was still unknown. But more importantly—in that moment, both she and Sidis suddenly sensed a presence beyond a pillar in the atrium containing the Light. “Lord Sidis...”

“Allow me,” offered Sidis. Lyse nodded in assent, entrusting the matter to her fiancé. Inhaling sharply, he hurled a fireball in the direction of the presence. Casting magic near the Light was a great feat that only Sidis was capable of. His spell struck the pillar and engulfed the area in a loud, booming blast.

Rather than returning fire, his opponent should opt to make a break for it and thereby reveal themselves. Sidis and Lyse anticipated that much, but they never expected what emerged—for Sidis’s opponent stood there, looking up at them with big, round eyes while panting. The breathy sound echoed through the

atrium as the couple froze in shock.

“Why is there a dog here?! Is that you, Your Majesty?!” bellowed Sidis upon collecting himself.

The fluffy, white, amber-eyed hound tilted its head to one side. Adorable as the gesture was, it did little to answer the question at hand.

“It must not be him,” Lyse mused. The dog simply kept panting—and wagging its tail. It seemed to want attention. “You sure look like His Majesty, though...”

Sidis had no other explanation himself. “There’s no way a normal dog just waltzed in here all on its own, let alone made it this close to the Light of Origin,” he said, shaking his head.

“That’s true...”

Lyse couldn’t make heads or tails of the situation either. Any ordinary canine would have succumbed to the Light’s influence, as it was almost toxic to normal humans and animals, exemplified by the knights outside the villa. Only the Razanate imperial family could withstand the magnitude of its power. The couple was right to be wary of the unfamiliar hound, and they began attempting to capture it.

“Lyse, corral it from the other side. I’ll nab it when it runs this way,” Sidis suggested.

“Got it,” she said as she went around. When she did, the dog began to grow and morph as it transformed into a man with short blond hair and amber eyes, all wrapped up in a white robe with gold accents. “That has to be His Majesty!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Sidis demanded.

But he received no response from Egbert save for a smile and another quizzical tilt of the head, all just as cute as when he was a dog. As Lyse and Sidis stared at him wide-eyed, they heard footsteps approaching from behind. When they turned to see who it was, they spied Emperor Egbert with Duke Alcede in tow.

“What just...” Egbert stammered when he saw his doppelganger. “What in blazes is the meaning of this?!”

“He looks exactly like you,” Alcede said calmly, glancing back and forth between the twin Egberts. “Since when did you have a clone, Your Majesty?”

“I don’t, you dolt,” Egbert quipped in all sincerity after a beat. “I’ve never cloned myself.”

“Hmm, that’s right,” Alcede mused. He was just as shocked as the couple as he stood there comparing the two emperors some more. “If even Your Majesty has no clue—”

Interrupting the duke, the Light began screeching once again. Lyse knew whatever happened earlier was about to happen again—and this time, they were right beside the source. The last moments of her previous life flashed before her eyes, and anxious what-ifs about what came next ran through her mind.

As Lyse realized she needed to run, Sidis called her name and extended his hand. She took hold of him, and he dragged her in a sprint toward the villa entrance. Alcede and Egbert followed close behind. The moment they made it indoors, the Light unleashed a burst of energy strong enough to be felt physically. The heavy feeling crashed over them in waves. When it was over, Alcede righted himself as Egbert wobbled in place.

“Are you all right, Lyse?” Sidis’s first concern was his fiancée. Both of them were thankfully fine.

“Oh, don’t worry about me or anything,” Alcede groaned as he sat on the ground, clutching his head. “Ugh. It’s as if I’m seasick, but it all hit me at once. How are you doing, Your Majesty?”

“Not great either,” Egbert responded. “But we’ve got two big problems.”

“What, Your Majesty?” Lyse asked.

Egbert pointed at the Light of Origin on the other side of the door. “My clone’s got a clone now.”

Indeed, standing before the Light was a pair of fake emperors with their hands on their hips.

“How uncanny,” Sidis remarked.

“They’re exactly like His Majesty too...” added Alcede.



The likeness was striking, and Egbert couldn't deny it. "More importantly, even if we know the Light is causing this, what's making it happen? Any ideas, Sidis?" he tried asking.

"I've pored over volumes upon volumes on the Light, yet never have I read about anything like this. But you should know that, Your Majesty. You read all the same books."

"I was hoping you'd remember something I didn't. Guess we've got nothing." Egbert folded his arms, and by some mysterious facet of the Light, his clones did the same.

It was so outrageously weird that Lyse wanted to say something, but she was too dumbfounded to do so. "Until just now, the first one was a dog. Perhaps Your Majesty was..."

"Indeed, I was out and about in my dog form until I heard that noise. I panicked and transformed back to normal, then rushed over here."

"And where exactly did you hide your clothes, Your Majesty?" Sidis looked defeated as he asked.

"Why, in the new villa, of course. I have my own room there, remember?"

Already putting it to use, Your Majesty...? Construction had only been completed on the new wing a few days ago, and here Egbert was already using "his" room before the owners had even moved in. It was all Lyse could do to smile politely. *Still, for what it's worth, we've learned the copies imitate the real thing.*

"In any event, it doesn't seem like Your Majesty's mirror images are going anywhere anytime soon," Alcede said as he glanced over to the clones.

"Fine by me. Imagine all the trouble if they got out," said Sidis.

"I wouldn't want to bump into His Majesties around the palace, that's for sure," Alcede agreed.

"You two jesters are acting like this doesn't concern you at all," Egbert cut in with a sigh. "It would be a major incident for all of us if anyone finds them roaming about."

“Then we ought to investigate more. Perhaps studying the Light will illuminate Your Majesty’s situation,” Alcede suggested.

“Who’s going to do it, then?” the emperor asked.

Alcede responded as if he had an answer prepared already, “It must be someone prudent and, preferably, part of the imperial family. I recommend Karl, as he’s well versed in mana, Your Majesty.”

“He’ll have to do,” Sidis concurred.

“I suppose he’s our only option,” Egbert conceded.

“We wouldn’t want word of this getting out, Your Majesty. If you’d like the extra insurance, we can bind him to silence by magical contract,” suggested Alcede.

“I agree. At this rate, we’re going to end up with more. A couple of copies is one thing, but a couple dozen is a different story entirely...” Lyse imagined it and could barely contain her horror. She pitied Karl, who would undoubtedly be boggled by the sight of the multiplying Egberts. “Er, anyway, we can assume this was caused by the Light of Origin, yes?”

“Mm, but I wonder why it happened out of the blue. The only person who could even influence the Light like that would be...Seren?” Alcede threw his hands up in despair.

“But he’s been here for months now. I don’t see why he’d act out suddenly,” Egbert refuted.

As a precaution, Sidis volunteered to look into Seren while Alcede hurried to enlist Karl’s help. Thus, without a job to do herself, Lyse was left to her thoughts.

“I mean, I know ladies-in-waiting aren’t responsible for investigations...” Lyse sighed to herself in the emperor’s empty office.

Egbert was busy with councils to assuage the imperial family amidst the ruckus caused by the previous day’s events. Lyse wasn’t normally invited to such meetings unless she was personally involved in the matter being

discussed. Sidis also had his own aides to assist him, so he required no help in his own affairs.

“No, I need to get a hold of myself. It’s times like this that I need to watch out for His Majesty most.” Lyse kept her head down as she concentrated on her lady-in-waiting duties. As she patrolled the palace, she came to realize that it was more desolate than usual. “Huh. I suppose that’s because of the Light.”

The knights posted at the villa had fallen ill first, and more and more of them had gradually followed suit. Those stationed farthest were fine, especially since the Light hadn’t acted up again in the past twenty-four hours. Most of the court ladies also seemed to have held up fine, although that wasn’t the case for the servants with weaker mana. Lyse inquired with colleagues and confirmed that more and more victims were turning up.

The spreading Light sickness left the palace shorthanded, and the court ladies had to pick up the slack by adding domestic chores to their knightly responsibilities. They carried clothes to be laundered and served meals—although most of the manual labor was readily handled with the use of magic. Lyse did lose out on her afternoon training, however. It was about then that the Light rang out once more. Lyse looked toward the shaking beam with concern.

“Does this mean another copy of His Majesty?” Though everyone had been barred from the villa, Karl was there to study the phenomenon and was surely surprised by what appeared before him. “I wonder how Sidis’s investigation is going too...”

Lyse hoped that her betrothed would be able to find any lead at all, however small. If he did, he would be sure to let her know as soon as possible. She thus anticipated he’d drop by sometime that afternoon, so she returned to her chambers after completing her tasks for the day. She occupied herself by baking some not-too-sweet pastries, as she expected Sidis to come for a spot of tea before dinner. Time ticked by as she waited.

“No sign of him.” Lyse could only assume he was too busy for a visit. “If only I could help...”

Though Lyse was normally allowed inside the villa as a Light bearer, she wasn’t formally part of the imperial family just yet. That made it tricky for her to

accompany Karl for his work. All Lyse could really do was offer Egbert her assistance the next day.

Since Sidis didn't come for dinner, then he'll at least come before the night's out, thought Lyse as she prepared for bed. She changed into her sleepwear and threw on a robe over top of it, torn between wanting Sidis to see her in her nightclothes and being embarrassed by the thought. Her only other option was staying in her dress, but then she'd simply have to kick Sidis out while she changed once he arrived to watch over her as she slept.

"That'd be super embarrassing too..." she muttered to herself. "Still, sitting around in my pajamas when I'm expecting to see him?"

Being dressed this way made her feel uneasy and vulnerable, so she checked under the pillow for her dagger. It wasn't to be used *against* Sidis, of course. In the event anything happened, she wanted to have a weapon at the ready. Without it, there'd be little she could do but buy time.

Lyse entertained the thought of pretending to be asleep. It no longer seemed Sidis was coming, so she slipped between the sheets and pulled the duvet over herself. As soon as she bedded down, her mind began to wander. *What if Sidis comes while I'm sleeping? He has a key to my room, so he might see me like this! Wouldn't it be a little awkward if we start cuddling or kissing while I'm dressed this way?* Yet more for Lyse to be anxious about.

"Maybe I'm just too worried about being defenseless. He's my fiancé, so it's fine, right?" She had trouble letting go of her chivalric sensibilities. Since Sidis wanted to be as intimate with her as he possibly could, she believed she had good reason to be on guard. "But if I can fall asleep with him by my side, that means I trust him, right?"

She was sure of that—she would be too tense to let her guard down around him at all otherwise. In reality, she appreciated that Sidis returned the gesture. Lyse liked waking up with a cute little animal at her side, which meant Sidis had to spend the night as a house pet. He couldn't possibly be any more vulnerable than that. Lyse found it amusing that she'd only notice him after waking. And the next thing she knew...

"Good morning, Lyse."

She awoke to a gentle whisper calling her name. She opened her eyes to see her betrothed, fully dressed and ready for the day ahead.

“Lord Sidis! Since when did you get here?”

“Only just now. I apologize for leaving you alone all day yesterday.” He looked genuinely remorseful as he planted a kiss on her forehead. He then cradled her in his arms as she sat up in bed. “I wish to spend more time with you, but I’ll be busy today as well. If only things weren’t such a mess...”

Lyse embraced his affection. “Don’t be sorry. Duty calls. If anything, I wish I could help since this involves the Light of Origin.”

“I’ll let you know if I could use your assistance. With our wedding on the line, I’m determined to wrap this up as quickly as I can.”

“Huh. I suppose you have a point.” With the Light misbehaving, it would be difficult for them to proceed with their wedding plans. At this rate, the ceremony might even be delayed.

“Hey, do you actually want to be together with me?” Sidis asked her.

“Of course I do. What makes you think otherwise?” she replied.

“It seems like it never occurred to you that this could be an impediment to our wedding. I’m not asking that you love me as much as I love you. I just wish you were more cognizant of it all,” he said, placing his lips to her ear.

“Eek! I am, I am!” she yelped. She didn’t need to be reminded like this. After all, she’d fallen asleep thinking of nothing but Sidis.

“Do you love me?” he asked.

“I... I...” Lyse struggled to summon the courage to put her feelings into words.

Sidis chuckled at her desperation and pulled away. “I haven’t much time left, so I’ll bid you farewell for now,” he said as he made for the door.

Lyse watched him go as he hurried but did not sneak away. “‘For now’? Does that mean he’s close to solving things?”

Unfortunately, she had quite the wrong idea, as that would be the only time Sidis stopped by to see her for the day.

Time passed without any new developments, both regarding the Light and the mystery behind it. The pillar would only shriek and shake twice a day, causing a bit of a disturbance to the people in the palace, but ultimately returning back to normal. By the end of the fifth day...

Let's see, there should be about ten now. Lyse counted up the emperor's clones in her mind. She hoped that some sort of discovery was nigh given that the Light continued to scream. Lyse placed her cup and saucer back onto Egbert's desk and stood up to excuse herself, but he stopped her in her tracks.

"You look awfully glum, Lyse. Is it because you had to postpone your wedding?" the emperor asked. "I know that progress has been very slow. You have my apologies for that."

"Oh, please don't apologize, Your Majesty," Lyse replied, flustered. "It's not as though the wedding has been called off. It's merely been delayed slightly, so you needn't fret for me." She'd already made peace with deferring the happy occasion for a single year. If it was pushed back by several more, then sure, Lyse would definitely be worried. But after learning that she might live longer because of the Light she possessed, she'd begun to feel more like she had during her previous life.

"I'm glad to hear you're taking it in stride. Rest assured that I'll do my utmost to ensure you have your happy day—both for Sidis whose love has endured for the past hundred years, and also for Qatora who dearly cared for us, despite all the trouble we caused."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said a blushing Lyse.

"No need to thank me. It's the least I could do," he said. "But back to Sidis, he's been bouncing around left and right without reporting to me." Egbert was just as concerned as Lyse was about him.

"Erm, does that mean he's gotten himself wrapped up in a lead?" Lyse understood that Sidis was waist-deep in the incident, but it bothered her that he hadn't apprised the emperor of the situation. She didn't want Sidis to bottle things up or to be too hard on himself.

“I heard the interviews went fine, but I haven’t heard anything concrete about what he’s investigating at the moment. You might be onto something, though—perhaps he’s on the verge of a breakthrough. I assume that means he hasn’t had much time to see you either, however.”

“That’s correct, Your Majesty.” Lyse was touched that Egbert was not only thoughtful, but perceptive of everyone around him.

“Perhaps Alcede knows something,” he suggested.

“It’s my understanding that Lord Sidis is attending Lord Karl, but I was hoping I might be able to take over that job. I’d like to take some of the burden off his shoulders if possible.” Lyse implored the emperor, but he seemed hesitant.

“Hmm. You don’t think Sidis would be upset?”

“Would he?” Lyse didn’t understand why.

“Well, remember how you and Karl were set up together? You and I might think that’s well behind us now, but, well, you know how Sidis is. He’s had feelings for you for over a century, after all. I don’t think he’d be happy if you got too close to Karl.”

Lyse knew well Sidis had his own anxieties. “In that case, is there anything else—”

At that moment, Alcede barged into the emperor’s office. “Oh, what a bother. The pâtissiers are taking time off too, which means that I have to bake everything myself.” He placed the platter of baked treats he’d whipped up in his free time atop Egbert’s desk and forced the reluctant emperor to try one.

“I haven’t seen Sidis since yesterday. Do you have any news about him?” he asked between bites.

“Hmm,” Alcede hummed as he looked up at the ceiling and racked his brain. “That’s right. He mentioned that there were still Donan followers within our borders, so he took a raptor to investigate for himself—or so I’ve heard, at least.”

“We haven’t rid ourselves of them yet?”

“I think there are a few devout hangers-on here and there is all, Your

Majesty,” answered Alcede, gobbling down cookies before stuffing his cheeks with another round. The rate at which he was inhaling them made Lyse wonder if he was using some kind of magic to do it. “As far as I know, he doesn’t have any other jobs on his plate, hence why he hasn’t been showing his face much around the palace lately.”

“Then I suppose asking him to mind the situation at the villa is too much. We could put Lyse on the job. What do you think?”

Alcede was in the middle of reaching out for another handful of cookies, but stopped partway with his hand extended for the tray. “That would mean she’d be with Karl, which wouldn’t please Sidis. Perhaps it would be all right if I accompany her when I can. I think Miss Lyse should take a gander too, and I just so happen to be free tomorrow,” he said as he turned to Lyse with an odd expression on his face. “Do be warned, though—there are more of them.”

“I’m prepared, Your Grace. I’ve been keeping a mental tally.” Lyse nodded, assuming that the duke was referring to the emperor’s clones. There should be about twenty of them by the following day, which she imagined would be most unsettling indeed. “How is Lord Karl holding up?”

“He was quite shocked at first, but he grew to ignore the clones after a while. Which is fine, as they don’t really get in his way either,” Alcede replied, intuiting the true intent of her question. As far as Lyse was concerned, Karl was doing the right thing by pretending the extra Egberts didn’t exist. “I shall come fetch you after lunch tomorrow. And since you’re inquiring about what’s keeping Sidis, I presume that must mean you miss him.”

Lyse didn’t know how to respond to his teasing smugness. “I’m just, erm, worried about him. That’s all...”

“So you’re not lonely even a little bit, hmm?”

“It’s not as though I don’t see him at all, so I at least know that he’s safe. Still, I fear for the toll this might take on his health.” Sidis had looked somewhat pale this morning but tried to gloss over it by blaming the lighting in Lyse’s room. She didn’t buy that excuse, but she couldn’t hound him either as he was too stubborn to be honest anyway.

“I see. Well, I suppose he could be replenished via other means... *That* could

work...”

“What do you mean?” Lyse found Alcede’s choice of words odd.

“Oh, never mind me. I’m just talking to myself. In any case, you’ve got lots to look forward to later.”

“I do?” Lyse asked, but she chose not to press the issue further for fear of whatever absurdity Alcede had in mind.

If there’s anything I can do to help Lord Sidis, I’d be happy to.

At least, that’s what she thought at the time.

The next morning began just as the several before it—with Sidis by Lyse’s bedside, waiting for her to rouse. Today, however, he had a request.

“Will you stay with His Majesty, Lyse?” he implored her.

“What? Is he in danger?!” she gasped, afraid that the current oddities with the Light of Origin had gone past simply duplicating the emperor.

Sidis shook his head and assured his pale fiancée, “No, he’s fine. Nothing has happened to His Majesty—well, except the fact that there are more of him now.”

“What has you so concerned, then?” she asked.

“I...” Sidis hesitated before continuing, “I just don’t want you seeing Karl after they tried to set you up with him.” He was against Lyse going to the villa to assist Duke Lasuarl’s son.

“We’ve been through this already,” Lyse reminded him. “I have no intention of marrying anyone but you.”

“Oh, Lyse!” The moment Sidis heard her response, he could no longer contain himself. He pulled her close in a snug embrace. “Never part from me again, my adorable, precious love. Let us scorn the outside world and never see another soul again, for I cannot bear to have anyone else lay eyes upon you...”

“Um, Sidis, you have business to attend to, don’t you? I heard that you finished questioning the Donan holdouts, but isn’t there more for you to do?” Lyse asked, quickly changing the topic on him.

His expression immediately soured. “Listen, Lyse. Just stay away from the Light,” he warned.

“Duke Alcede and I were actually planning to visit the villa today.”

“You could say no...”

“I begged His Majesty to allow me to do this. It would be quite selfish to go back on that now, wouldn’t it?”

Though Sidis grimaced, taken aback by her bluntness, he respected her resolution. “Lyse, just know that I have eyes for no one but you.”

“I know it well,” she responded with a warm smile.

Satisfied, Sidis thus left her room. Their conversation, however, lingered on Lyse’s mind and nagged at her. On her way to Egbert’s office, she happened to pass Atoli in the hall and asked her for a spot of advice.

“I can understand his not wanting me to be alone with a man I was once expected to marry. What I don’t understand is why—even though we’re in the middle of preparing for our wedding—he felt the need to tell me that he only has eyes for me,” Lyse explained. She was leery of the way Sidis was carrying on.

“If he were any other man, I would question his fidelity...”

“You think he’s cheating?”

Neither Lyse nor Atoli believed that Sidis would do such a thing.

“Sidis cannot even hide how obsessed—er, dedicated he is to you, so I truly cannot imagine him stooping to that. Moreover, His Majesty has already given the two of you his blessing. No one would dare intervene with your marriage,” Atoli answered before wavering. “It’s just that...”

“What is it?”

“It’s just that Prince Sidis’s imagination can run wild sometimes. Especially where it concerns you, Miss Lyse.”

Lyse couldn’t help but groan. She recalled how Sidis had behaved at their engagement banquet when she was invited to dance by other noblemen. Even

Qatora would have understood that the gesture was mere social courtesy. *"Today marks the first day of our betrothal, and I want you all to myself,"* he'd whined to Lyse—and to everyone within earshot. The guests present at the time had all smiled awkwardly in reply and deferred to the prince.

"Perhaps something unexpected has inspired this spate of jealousy," Atoli suggested.

"Perhaps indeed..."

Lyse had no idea what the cause might be, but she knew she wanted to put him at ease during this stressful time. She hadn't been able to help noticing the dark circles under his eyes that morning from a lack of sleep. Thus she decided to proceed with her plan.

That afternoon, Lyse accompanied Alcede and Karl to the imperial villa. The sight that met her there was shocking, to say the least. One of the wooden columns in the atrium now had a protrusion jutting from it, just like a branch growing from the trunk of a tree.

"How is this possible?" she muttered.

"Warped mana from the Light of Origin, I'd say," replied Alcede.

"Could one of the Light's discharges have caused it?" Lyse theorized, thinking about how the Light's intensity spiked every time it rang out.

Alcede nodded in agreement. "That would make sense. The columns here would be quite susceptible to it as they were crafted with magic, and the non-magical furniture shows no change whatsoever."

"I had never imagined this would happen." Lyse could understand people having their mana warped, resulting in sprouting horns or transforming into dogs, but wood and stone being warped? She'd never expected that.

"I mean, the Light *is* made of mana," Karl remarked as he beheld the sprouting column. "Still, it doesn't cease to astound me even after hearing the truth about it and all my research into magical formulae." With that, he took a pen and notepad out of his pocket to sketch the mutated column.

“Is that for your research notes?” Lyse asked innocently.

“No, it’s simply a hobby. I like to keep a record of what I see.” After a few strokes of his pen, Karl stowed his stationery away. “The Light both amplifies and morphs mana. The only possible explanation is that it’s magical, yet there are many who believe it to be the power of the gods. They should be skeptical since there’s no evidence to support that.”

Unsurprisingly, the truth about the Light had profoundly affected Karl. After all, everyone believed it to be divine. Learning that it was simply a product of imperial magic was world-shaking. In fact, it was impressive how well Karl had taken the news. Lyse had learned of it when she was reincarnated. If she’d told anyone before now, they would have written her off as a liar or, worse, imprisoned her for blasphemy against the state.

“Anyway, how goes the inquest?” Alcede inquired.

“It’s hardly going at all. I’ve tried all sorts of metals, ores, and formulae, but I can’t really get a good grasp of what I’m seeing,” Karl replied, shaking his head. This was worrying for Lyse, as the lack of progress would only prolong the current situation. Karl, however, was rather delighted. “That said, learning about the Light of Origin is a great honor for me.”

There was an even bigger secret at play here. One so well guarded that Karl had been magically sworn to silence from even his parents, the duke and duchess. One that allowed him to be here in his element, granting him not only rare access to the villa but also the opportunity to research the magic that had given birth to the Light. Karl was wearing that very secret on his wrist—a bracelet of Donan stone. Such was not its proper name, but the black crystalline rock had no official designation. Wearing it while out and about would draw the attention of monsters, but here in the villa, it provided Karl with protection against the energy emitted from the pillar of Light.

“But, erm, will she be all right?” he asked. Lyse had no idea what he meant.

“Oh, yes. You did mention that in your report. Well, Lyse has been granted permission to be here, and it’s something she’s bound to find out eventually. Just a matter of time, I’d say,” replied Alcede with a smile.

“That may very well be true, but...” Karl hesitated before continuing, “Well, I

suspect it will be a bit of a shock.” His concern and sympathy only served to worry Lyse further.

“It shouldn’t be a problem. She’s not alone.”

“I’m not alone?” Lyse asked, hoping for some answers.

Alcede laughed awkwardly. “Ah, not to worry, Miss Lyse. This extraordinary surprise will be the experience of a lifetime,” he said, adding yet more fuel on the fire of her anxiety.

Lyse prepared herself as best she could, then laid eyes on the so-called surprise.

“I... That...” Her words caught in her throat.

Fourteen Egberts surrounded the brilliant pillar, some standing nearby and some silently sitting in the shadowy corners of the atrium. That was shock enough, but amidst the emperor’s clones...was a woman carrying a young boy on her shoulders. They looked frighteningly like Lyse and a younger Sidis—rather, they were *unmistakably* Lyse and a younger Sidis. That said, Sidis seemed to be having a great deal of fun.

“Oh, woe is you. How terrible it must be to possess the Light. That must be why this has happened, methinks,” quipped Alcede.

“You don’t say...” Lyse was able to deduce as much based on the presence of a clone for both herself and Sidis—but that didn’t explain the increasing number of Egberts. The emperor wasn’t a Light bearer, so what had triggered all this and why was he the first affected?

“See? You’re not alone. It’s fine, right?” Alcede prodded.

“While I do see that Lord Sidis is here too, I fail to see how any of this is ‘fine.’”

“You know, Sidis was *more* than okay with this. He was practically overjoyed.”

Lyse glanced back at her doppelganger with kid Sid still on her shoulders, still clinging to her and still beaming broadly. That’s when it clicked. *This is why Sidis didn’t want me to come.* Sidis had already seen his younger self indulging in his fantasies, and he’d surely basked in it too since he—as Lyse knew for a fact—

still loved to be carried. *He didn't want me to come here because he's embarrassed by how much he cherishes such memories from all those years ago.*

"I can't exactly carry him on my shoulders anymore, but I would definitely carry him in my arms." Lyse didn't think it was something to be bashful about. All he had to do was ask, and she'd be happy to oblige.

Her muttering caught Alcede's attention. "Miss Lyse, did you truly mean that?"

"Being held isn't so unusual. I'm more than strong enough to do it, so I don't see why I shouldn't make him happy."

"Well, usually that's a man's job. I'd imagine that even most imperial men would be embarrassed to be carried so, but I suppose we are getting a glimpse of Sidis's true desires."

"He *was* rather happy when I carried him last time," she said. She was recalling the time she'd tried to give Sidis a taste of his own medicine—a plan that had backfired spectacularly.

"You mean..." Alcede trailed off before he mumbled to himself, "His condition is even worse than I thought."

As they chatted, Karl set about his work for the day. His first task was to determine what kind of magic had been used. For this, he had two options: either cast a spell to detect the formulae, or use ores that reacted to them. The ore route required continuous testing, as different minerals reacted to different magic.

There was an empty spot in the white stone that covered the ground near the Light of Origin. Karl tossed a rock upon the barren patch. A blue light radiated from it, spreading to illustrate spell formulae that were presumably part of the Light. They were extremely complex, consisting of many interconnected magics and various writings. More tellingly, it was precisely what Lyse had seen upon falling into the Light.

"Earth magic for fertile lands..." Karl muttered as he deciphered the text.

The illuminated words were woven into a spell to bless the fields—but the

light flickered, fading away the first part of the formulae before the entire display vanished. This clearly wasn't enough to get the entire picture.

"This happens every time. This is the only stone that produces that much information, yet it's still not enough. What am I to do?" An exasperated Karl looked over to Alcede, who had apparently brought some special ores for experimentation.

"Does it always fail there?" the duke asked.

"Yes, along with a few other hard-to-make-out spots. I don't know if I'll ever be able to revert the Light at this rate."

Alcede looked every bit as pained as Karl. "In that case, we might have to try mending it instead. And failing that, we might even have to try producing a second Light of Origin. *If* His Majesty can accomplish such a thing, that is..."

Lyse couldn't think of any alternative herself. It was thanks to the Light that Razanate was blessed with bountiful lands and magic. Without it, the empire would lose everything. If the imperials were stripped of their magic, they would have no way to stand against the nations that would seize their land from them. The empire would be plunged into the ruinous days of old. Better to revere Egbert as a divine emperor than that.

"By the way, what kind of mineral is it reacting to?" Lyse asked. The process had piqued her curiosity.

"This," Karl said as he held out yet another surprise—a fistful of black stones. Not only was he wearing some on his wrist, but he was carrying great chunks of the stuff for his research. "I've tried everything here in the palace and even some stones imported from our duchy, but nary a one reacted as I'd hoped. Given the sensitive nature of this inquisition, however, I haven't been able to requisition much more than that. Since we don't want anyone to find out what's going on here, I can't ask for anything too extraordinary. What I *did* manage to get my hands on were these black stones, so I decided to give them a try."

"You're exactly right. We ought to be vigilant, lest anyone else realize that the Light is magical in nature," replied Alcede.

Everyone involved knew that Karl's testing needed to be kept secret, yet hardly anything else would require the amounts of stone he was using. Karl in particular was very concerned that the logistics of the operation would give it away.

"So, just yesterday, I received permission to try the black stones from Prince Sidis," he explained.

"From Sidis, you say? I suppose we *did* leave him in charge of the investigation here," Alcede muttered.

He couldn't fault Karl for what he'd done, but he nonetheless grumbled about how he would've appreciated being informed. Lyse, meanwhile, was rather surprised that Sidis hadn't mentioned a word of it to her. Perhaps he'd assumed that Karl would follow up with the emperor's team.

"My apologies," said Karl. "I should have reported to you as well, but I knew I couldn't leave a paper trail."

"No, you needn't apologize. That aspect slipped my mind as well. We didn't have time to check in with one another yesterday, so this is as good a time as any. But, more importantly," Alcede began, "how much longer do you think it will take to analyze the Light's magic?"

That appeared to be a difficult question to answer. "At this rate? I'll have to test every possibility, so I don't have any clear estimates. Besides..." Karl stopped short to look up at the pillar. "The Light is believed to be remnants of divine power. How could a mere mortal like me comprehend its inner workings?" he wondered aloud, looking dumbfounded.

"Well, if you need to run any experiments, then we'll find a location for you. In the meantime, do whatever you need to learn as much as you can."

"How much time do I have?" Karl asked, quite reasonably. The longer this drew out, the more restless the people would become.

"I can buy you a month," replied Alcede. "We'll erect thicker mana barriers in the palace to help the staff. The only real problem so far is the multitude of His Majesties, and I don't foresee anyone else being an issue."

"Very well, Your Grace. I'll do my best to get us results." Karl burned with

determination as he looked toward Alcede. For a split second afterward, he glanced at Lyse.

She couldn't help wondering why.

Following that, Karl continued with his investigation. He tried using the black stones again with his own magic, this time adding his own tweaks and modifications. The outcome, however, was unfortunately the same. The illuminated formulae were consistently incomplete, making it impossible to decipher them completely.

"I'll try again tomorrow," Karl announced. He seemed to have ideas on how to improve on his methods and didn't let the lack of results get to him.

With the day's work finished, the group departed the villa and went their separate ways. Lyse was briskly headed back to her chambers, but she came to a stop near the service corridor when she happened to overhear her name. It instantly perked up her ears.

"How long until..." someone mumbled.

"The imperial family said they'll have the others working tomorrow," someone else replied.

"Ugh, it's about time. We're all being run ragged. I'm glad the ladies-in-waiting and knights are pitching in, but it's hardly enough to cover everything."

Given how shorthanded the palace was at present, Lyse understood that the exhausted servants had plenty to grumble about. *What does this have to do with me, though?* As soon as that question passed through her mind, she got her answer...

"All of this madness *has* to be 'cause of them foreigners marrying into imperial royalty."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Who cares if she can control monsters or whatever?"

"The nobles are supposed to kill monsters, aren't they? I'd understand if they tamed the beasts for battle, but they're keeping them like pets. Gives me the creeps."

“Weren’t your relatives attacked by monsters? They still haven’t recovered, have they?”

I see how it is. Lyse now understood why her name had come up. The serving women were looking for something to blame, and their eyes naturally fell on the most obvious reason they could think of—Lyse herself. It was unprecedented for a manaless foreigner like her to be marrying into the imperial family. Moreover, her ability to control monsters was unheard of. People were naturally afraid to see her so close with them.

“This’s all gotta be her doing. She’s even encouraging other foreigners to marry our nobility.”

That much is true. Lyse furrowed her brow. The matchmaking events had indeed been a way for the empire to make connections with its neighboring countries. And since the foreign participants were all of noble birth, the empire had put forward knightly and noble suitors in turn. Some of the imperial participants were even outranked by their foreign partners, hence the dissatisfaction amongst the servants about the arrangement.

I don’t think Qatora would’ve been sympathetic, though. Lyse could understand why the servants felt the way they did, but she didn’t believe it was right. *Still, now I know why they’re upset.*

Lyse knew what it was like to be vulnerable. Most women weren’t solely focused on training and becoming stronger, but rather wished to be protected. *That can go for both sexes, I guess,* Lyse corrected herself as she recalled the matchmaking event a few days ago. There were a few foreign men who sought safety in the arms of an imperial woman.

Lyse figured that was fundamentally what motivated the servants’ dissatisfaction. They craved safety because they served dependable masters—people they trusted to protect them, their families, and the empire at large. They needed bastions of security to ward off their worries.

The only servants in the palace now were those with mana enough to withstand the Light’s effects. They weren’t necessarily from noble families, but marrying into nobility wasn’t out of the question for them. Hence their apprehension regarding Lyse and what the future had in store. Lyse knew her

only shot at assuring them was to resolve the trouble with the Light of Origin.

Maybe Sidis was acting weird because of this...

With Sidis wanting nothing more than to marry his love, any opposition to their marriage represented a huge blow to his sense of security. The Light misbehaving certainly didn't help either. Lyse was now convinced that the confluence of strange circumstances had shaken him.

Leaving the service corridor, she wondered to herself, *I can see why Sidis wants to hurry and find a way to fix everything, but isn't there anything I can do to help?* Lyse wanted to contribute, but she lacked Karl's masterful command of magic. She also didn't have Sidis's authority to go poking her nose into things. Overstepping her boundaries would only bring more trouble.

"Maybe I simply ought to visit His Majesty and Alcede to see what they think."

After all, three heads were better than one.

Chapter 2: Sidis, Imperial Man of Mystery

For yet another night, Sidis didn't visit Lyse. She thought his absence might be the result of imagined awkwardness now that he knew she'd seen their clones in the villa, but that didn't make her feel better.

"Maybe I've gotten spoiled," she sighed. Sidis came to see her nearly every day without prompting, so Lyse entertained the idea that it might be her turn to visit him for a change—and then quickly shot it down. "He's probably tired and sleeping already. I wouldn't want to be a nuisance."

What could be more important than a good night's rest for a hardworking knight? Without enough sleep, the cogs in his head wouldn't turn quickly enough for him to get his work done. Moreover, fighting monsters while fatigued was a deadly proposition. Lyse decided that Sidis's well-being meant more to her than seeing him. If he hadn't stopped by already, there had to be a reason for it.

"Guess I'll go to sleep, then..."

With that, Lyse climbed into bed—but she found herself awake again before long. She kept her eyes closed, yet morning just wouldn't come. As she tried to drift off again, she became aware of something soft across her midsection. She wondered if one of her monsters had crawled in to snuggle up for the night.

No, that can't be... I left them all in the basket. So what is this...?

Lyse could sense no danger, which suggested that, whatever it was, it was no assailant. She opened her eyes, but that didn't help much. She'd snuffed the candles in the room and drawn the curtains before retiring. A mere sliver of the moonlight pierced the darkness and cut across the bed, revealing a head of silver hair atop her midriff when she looked down. Stealing into her room in the middle of the night was fine—expected, even—but just what was he doing?

"Lord Sidis?" Lyse called.

Her voice made him flinch but failed to peel him off. He continued to rest on

her, his warm breath tickling her tummy. At last, Lyse's embarrassment gradually overpowered her drowsiness. *Gah! Why is he sleeping on top of me?!*

"Lord Sidis, you're making me blush!"

Push as she tried, Sidis wouldn't budge. If anything, he snuggled even closer. Lyse was literally powerless against her love. Her strict training regimen meant nothing when it came to his touch.

"Just a little longer..." he mumbled, flustering her even more.

"S-Sidis! That really tickles!" she squeaked as she wriggled. It was surely obvious to Sidis that she was quite ticklish, but that didn't stop him.

"What's wrong with that?" he said. "I'm not hurting you, am I?"

"No, you mustn't! Please stop talking!"

"Okay, I'll just whisper."

"That's not any better!" Lyse's pleading did little to help her, so she resorted to raising her voice. "Lord Sidis, do you want me to hate you?"

"No! Anything but that! I'm sorry. I'll cut it out," he quickly apologized as he shot up from the bed.

The glint of the moonlight made his ruffled silvery hair sparkle. Lyse could see his face too, even in the dark of the room. She sat up and reached out for Sidis, who was kneeling at the edge of her bed.

"Come here," she said, gently stroking his cheeks. "You've got dark circles under your eyes. Are you getting enough sleep?"

"I'm getting some. I just need to absorb some more of you and I'll feel better."

"What?" she asked, wondering what in the world there was of her to absorb.

Alcede had said just the other day that contrary to everyone's hopes, Sidis simply wasn't the type to relax after getting a lover. For whatever reason, he was pushing himself even harder instead. Lyse could see that better than anyone, but she didn't necessarily think it was a bad thing. She felt loved and needed. *What if he's brainwashed me into thinking that way?* Perhaps she

didn't mind his clinginess because it reminded her of him when he was young.

"It's tough, Lyse, when I don't get enough of you," he said as he grasped her extended hand and pulled her into his arms.

"You can't even take a single day off?" she asked to deflect his words. "If there's anything I can do in your stead, please do tell me."

"No, the work falls on me, so please..." He tumbled onto Lyse's bed with her still in his arms, fully intending to fall asleep together. He pulled the blanket up and cuddled up to his bashful fiancée. "Please just indulge me. This is all I need from you."

"Just promise not to pull anything funny..." she mumbled as she became too sleepy to keep her eyes open any longer.



Lyse wondered if she felt so comfortable with Sidis because of the Light they shared. That was undoubtedly part of it, but the Light was only one of many things binding them together. Lyse drifted off into a sweet slumber as she reflected on its warmth.

The next Lyse knew, bells were chiming outside her window. It was the second morning alarm—when she usually started her day. Sidis had already departed and was presumably engrossed in work by now.

“I can tell by the bags under his eyes that he’s running himself into the ground...”

Lyse worried that her husband-to-be had too much on his plate. It was probably why she’d been allowed to take his place at the villa the prior day. Even more telling were his midnight visits just to steal glances at her as she slept. If that was the only time he could spare to see her, he was most certainly overworked.

“Let’s see. He at least still reports to His Majesty daily, doesn’t he?”

She wondered if she might lie in wait for him there. Even when Sidis was supposed to be on palace grounds, she hadn’t bumped into him even once. That meant it was time to start staking out key locations to get a glimpse of him. If Lyse could see he still wasn’t looking well, then she would privately pull Alcede aside to discuss balancing his workload.

Lyse got dressed as quickly as she could and inhaled her breakfast before rushing to Egbert’s office. Even if Sidis was already there, she could sneak into the next room and take a peek. When she reached the hallway outside of the office, she hid herself on a balcony that overlooked the traffic outside. She was deliberately avoiding loitering around the stairs lest Sidis find her, as she imagined he felt awkward about having to slip away that morning before she woke. As she waited to catch sight of him...a familiar shriek rang out, followed by a strong shock wave.

“Is it just me, or is this earlier than usual?”

For the past few days, the anomalies with the Light had occurred like

clockwork. Lyse found it weird for one to happen off schedule. The thought, however, didn't last long—for it was immediately followed by another surprise. Lyse's monsters began bouncing around inside her pocket. They stirred from time to time, of course, but never this frenetically.

"What's going on?" she mumbled to herself.

Lyse was sure that something most strange was afoot, but nothing could have prepared her for what she saw when she looked outside. For a split second, the Light of Origin was aglow in multicolor splendor. It was like a rainbow bridge into the heavens, both wondrous and brilliant. Then, from up in the clouds, a black mass began closing in.

"Monsters?" Lyse wondered aloud. The tiny beasts in her pocket were growing even more restless. "Hush, hush..."

She reached her hand into her pocket, hoping to feed them some Light to calm them down, but it only seemed to work on half of the creatures.

"Now, let's see... Which of you is being good?" She retrieved a lupine monster that sat in her palm and looked up at her with big puppy eyes. Something was off and Lyse couldn't quite put her finger on it, but having even one capable monster meant she could join the battle. "The two of us can do this."

One of her avian monsters continued to kick up a fuss, so Lyse released it. She then allowed the wolf to grow bigger, climbed up on its back, and leaped from the balcony. Riding the beast, however, wasn't exactly straightforward. Horses made for stable mounts, but monsters were especially responsive to commands. Lyse made do by having the wolf coil its fur around her legs and waist, which looked rather unsettling but made for a comfortable ride. She had no time to fret about the details, and this was the most practicable solution. The wolf was instinctively holding on to its rider. It even helped Lyse keep her dress down for modesty, for which she was extremely appreciative.

Lyse thus rode toward the Light and the fight unfolding around it. Aerial monsters flew straight at the glowing pillar, leaving the imperials to focus on the monsters attacking surrounding buildings and people. Given the current state of affairs in the palace thanks to the aberrations with the Light, however, there weren't many knights and court ladies around to defend the place.

“Hey, you have ears sprouting out of you! Get out of here!”

“Eek! This tail is hiking up my skirt!”

Anyone whose mana began to warp retreated in order to prevent the situation from worsening, but that reduced their fighting forces even further. Lyse and her wolf were a most welcome sight by the time she joined the fray.

“If your mana is being affected, please fall back at once!” she ordered. A handful of fighters heeded her.

Lyse then proceeded toward the Light, slicing and dicing monsters along the way. She couldn’t help wondering why her lupine steed seemed to be the only beast unaffected. She saw waves of boars and insects, and even rabbits and raptors in the mix—yet there was nary another wolf. It was odd. There was always at least one when the monsters attacked in swarms like this.

As she surveyed the monsters, Lyse decided she needed to capture an avian for herself. The problem with the eagle-like and crow-like beasts was that even after taming them, they still showed a proclivity for diving into the Light. Her only other option was a chicken-like bird flying about overhead, so she grabbed it and put it in her pocket.

Suddenly, a voice called out to her, “Miss Lyse, please fall back!”

With that, a great white bird—one even larger than a horse—glided overhead like a beacon in a sea of black monsters. Such raptors were employed by the palace as aerial mounts, and on this particular one rode the raven-haired Duke Lasuarl and his wife, Kirstin, who was dressed in a close-fitted jacket with her blonde hair braided into a crown. The couple cleared away the monsters around them with magical fire as they began a rapid descent.

The knights and ladies-in-waiting below let out a collective sigh of relief, but the fight wasn’t over yet. There were still monsters on the ground that couldn’t be blasted away with magic for fear of collateral damage. Lyse gripped her sword tight as she watched the duke and duchess land. That was when the next surprise came.

“Woof! Bowwow! Ruff!”

There was barking from afar, which was disquieting, to say the least. There

was usually *a* dog around the palace (Egbert in disguise), not *dogs*. As far as everyone knew, there was a special dog who was resistant to the Light—but this was something else entirely.

In short order, a stampede of nearly two dozen dogs rushed out from the villa and into the fray. Lyse instantly recognized their white coats. “Y-Your Majesty...?”

Beholding the sheer number of emperor-turned-dogs was a blow to Lyse’s sanity, but she quickly rationalized that this was for the best. At the very least, it was better than a horde of Egberts in human form. *That* would give the imperial soldiers some serious pause. Nevertheless, the pack of pups were raring to go. Each of them zeroed in on a target and began unleashing flashes of flame and blasts of blizzards to eradicate the monsters. All the while, one dog stood out in front to lead the group.

That must be His Majesty...

Whatever the pack left behind was swiftly disposed of by a silver-haired swordsman. Sidis’s moves were clean and precise—he showed no sign of fatigue apart from the obvious dark circles under his eyes. Moreover, he had the assistance of Lyse and the other soldiers who were now beginning to recover from their shock.

Together, the force made quick work of the monster swarm. The Light of Origin even claimed a few kills. Lyse looked up at it doubtfully and came to the conclusion that monsters had had nothing to do with the earlier aberration, as they’d been swallowed up without any unusual disturbances.

Putting that matter aside for the time being, she then approached Sidis. “Thank you for your help, Lord Sidis.”

She seemed to startle him a little, as he looked to her with a tinge of awkwardness. “Oh, um, Lyse, sorry about everything last night...”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. I’m happy if you’re feeling a bit better now.”

“Lyse, I would happily push myself for your sake.”

“Even if you live for hundreds of years, you only have one body. We still need

to be breathing to spend time together,” she persuaded him before turning her gaze on the dogs. “Now, more importantly, what’s all this?”

“It went exactly as we hoped.”

“So they’re controlled by His Majesty?” Lyse whispered softly so that no one but Sidis could hear. Seeing a pack of dogs pour out of the villa had been startling, but knowing that they were under Egbert’s command was even more astounding. “When I first saw them, they didn’t seem willing to listen to anyone.”

“That’s what I thought too. But since the aberrations of the Light have produced so many clones, we thought we might as well try some experimenting.”

Sidis’s first test subject had without a doubt been his younger self. Lyse was curious as to what kind of “experimenting” they’d done, but she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to know the answer. Oblivious to her inner conflict, however, Sidis took the matter out of her hands and began explaining the details in a hushed voice.

“First, I commanded him to not leave your clone’s side. That went well, so I encouraged him to hold your hand next.”

As embarrassed as he was to tell Lyse all this, she was equally embarrassed to listen to it. Nevertheless, she understood that Sidis was merely trying to vicariously relive precious childhood memories of someone he’d lost. She couldn’t fault him for that—but it was still embarrassing.

At that point, the dog at the head of the pack walked over to the couple. It was quite obvious who it was. There was no way they could discuss the day’s events out in the open, so Sidis signaled Egbert by patting his thigh and turning toward the villa.

“Let’s find some privacy,” he said, leaving Duke Lasuarl to handle the aftermath of the battle.

“Prince Sidis, these dogs...” the duke protested.

“I’ll explain later. It’s quite the shocking story, so if you’d please, come to the villa once you’re done here.”

The way Sidis said it only served to raise suspicion, Lyse thought, and Lasuarl was of the same mind. “Erm, I suppose if that’s what it takes, then very well,” he said before departing to get to business.

As a long-time retainer of the emperor, the duke was quite used to Egbert’s eccentricities. Still, Lyse worried that someone so straitlaced might have an extreme reaction to what was to come.

I pray that Duke Lasuarl doesn’t faint later... she thought to herself as she, Sidis, and the hounds made their way to the villa.

“Boy, who’d’ve thought that would pan out so well?” Egbert, still in his canine form, exclaimed as soon as he stepped onto the villa grounds. It would have caused a spectacle if anyone else were present, but, for better or for worse, both Lyse and Sidis were already used to such scenes. If anything, it was easier when Egbert talked and acted like a human rather than pretending to be a dog.

Behind him was quite the sight too. His pack—consisting of about twenty or so dogs—stood silently at his beck and call. Lyse actually found it quite admirable that His Majesty could so easily accept this crazy situation and calmly command his clones in battle.

“How did this all come about?” she asked Egbert hesitantly.

“Well, Sidis’s experiment to see if clones would obey their originals was a success. Isn’t that right, Sidis?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And there were a dozen copies of me here, no? So I started to think about how to put them to good use.”

The idea of employing them had never even crossed Lyse’s mind. She’d been more concerned that people might think her a monster if they saw her with her clone. *They’re already wary of me as it is...* She hated the thought.

“Lyse, I imagine you’re worried about people seeing your clone—especially how they might treat you afterward,” Sidis said thoughtfully. “So we decided to make a demonstration of His Majesty in canine form instead. Better than the alternative, we thought.”

Lyse agreed that was the best move. “But shouldn’t the clones be kept locked up and out of sight in the villa?”

“The royal family is bound to find out sooner or later. We’ve got no good reason to bar people from entering the villa either. In that case, we thought we may as well find a way to use them instead of wasting their potential,” Egbert said nonchalantly.

“Yes, I suppose it would be a waste to have them do nothing at all,” agreed Lyse. “Erm, has Alcede been caught up on all this too?”

“Not yet. But I’m sure once he learns that a pack of dogs bolted from the villa, he’ll be able to piece it together.”

Indeed, there was no way Alcede *wouldn’t* figure it out. There was only one possible explanation. Lyse could already imagine the stressed-out duke stuffing cookies in his face to soothe himself as he shouted, “*You should have consulted me first!*”

“Anyway, Lyse, I was thinking today would just be a little trial. Sooner or later, I’ll try walking around with all my clones in human form,” Egbert informed her.

“Have you gone mad?!” Lyse unwittingly blurted out in shock. “My apologies, Your Majesty. That was incredibly rude of me.”

Egbert wasn’t fazed one bit, however. “It’s understandable to be alarmed, so I don’t blame you one bit for that response. That said, I have my reasons. Isn’t that right, Sidis?” he asked as he looked up from Sidis’s ankles.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the prince replied. “If the clones are bound to multiply anyway, then it may be a good way to showcase His Majesty’s new powers. If all goes well, then we can put people at ease about the aberrations.”

“You think so?” Lyse wondered aloud.

Sidis nodded. “Currently, we don’t know what’s causing the anomalies with the Light, meaning that we don’t even know where to begin fixing them. The imperial family is thus worried about the Light’s longevity—and that’s to say nothing of what the populace thinks,” he explained. “Doubt has been cast over His Majesty’s reign, and we simply cannot have that.”

“Certainly not,” Lyse replied.

Knowing that Sidis bore the Light within him, Egbert had repeatedly asked him to take the throne—a job Sidis wanted no part of. That explained why he was so desperate to remedy the current situation. That, of course, combined with the fact that people were beginning to fault Lyse for the anomalies as well.

“By framing the aberrations as something unharmful—by saying it was something I did to increase my power—it should help alleviate some of the people’s anxiety,” reasoned Egbert.

“So the plan is to make it sound as if this were all intentional?”

“You’ve hit the nail on the head, Lyse,” the emperor declared as he puffed out his furry chest. It was cute, but not exactly reassuring. “Whenever monsters come attacking, I shall be there ready to meet them.”

“In human form though, Your Majesty?”

“Indeed. I want impact.”

That might be too much impact, Your Majesty. Anyone seeing the gaggle of emperors for the first time would be dumbstruck—but Lyse had to agree that it *was* effective. No one would ever be able to forget witnessing the Egberts descend upon a swarm of monsters. They’d see his power manifold, which should increase their confidence in him as a ruler. And if this was all said to be thanks to the Light’s aberrations...

“That would certainly paint it in a positive light,” Lyse agreed. Because the knights near the Light when it acted up fell ill, it was a big stretch to say that it was *entirely* a good thing. But with the right spin, Sidis would have less reason to fret over what people were saying about Lyse.

“To boost my image, I’m planning on going to the city walls whenever monsters appear. That should buy us some more time too. Well, hopefully, at least,” announced Egbert.

The group briefly stopped to open the northern door of the villa before entering. Once inside, they stopped again when they beheld the courtyard housing the Light of Origin.

“They’ve multiplied again,” the emperor muttered.

Lyse nodded, for there were now *two* of her giving young Sidises piggyback rides around the Light. Sidis glanced over at his fiancée, concerned about how she would react to the sight, but she’d already seen the worst of it the day before. Lyse had accepted this as a testament to Sidis’s desire to be loved and to be the center of her world.

“There are definitely more of them. But...” Lyse trailed off before continuing, “at least it isn’t as bad as Your Majesty’s situation, I suppose?” For some reason, there were only two of her and Sidis’s clones.

“I’m sure this is a clue that will help explain what’s going on, but as of right now, I’m completely baffled,” confessed Egbert. “Wouldn’t it make more sense if it was duplicating the two of you first and foremost?”

Lyse had wondered the same thing herself.

“Oh, look, Your Majesty. Over there,” Sidis said, pointing to a brunet man clinging to a pillar and staring at the group from the shadows. It was Seren.

“That’s not the real Seren, is it...?” Egbert questioned.

“I don’t expect he’d trespass here. He’s been diligently working on his communication skills, and it’s not as though he’s completely socially inept either. I don’t think it’ll be long before he can fit in on his own,” explained Sidis. “If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say he’s probably busy with the chickens at the coops right now.”

“The coops, you say?” Lyse couldn’t imagine what Seren would be doing there.

“You see, there aren’t really any animals on the palace grounds to pet or play with. Aside from the coops near the kitchen, the only other animals on palace grounds are the raptor mounts, right? I mean, I suppose His Majesty counts when he’s transformed,” Sidis began to explain.

Egbert picked up from there. “Seren says that playing with animals soothes his soul, but I’m not exactly keen on other men touching me all over. So we gave him permission to visit the coops instead, thinking he might enjoy it. Little did we know just how much he’d enjoy it, and now he spends all his free time

there happily watching the chickens.”

“I see. So they’re the next best thing,” Lyse concluded after hearing the story. Seren’s only friends for the past fifty years were his dogs, so it was perfectly understandable that he was so affectionately attached to animals. Still, was he truly content with chickens?

“Yes, they’re a substitute for a dog. Seren seems happy enough, however, so I think it’s fine,” Sidis asserted, but Egbert looked conflicted.

“It’s almost a little creepy to see him so elated to be pecked at by those birds. I mean, Alcede’s words, not mine,” Egbert clarified, deflecting the blame. “His clone, though, is definitely staring at me.”

Seren’s clone emerged from behind the pillar and slowly slinked over to the group. Thus, with a brief sigh, Egbert ordered one of his clones, “Keep him company, will you?” A white dog reluctantly approached Seren, whose face lit up when he got his hands on the fluffy beast.

“I can’t imagine how disappointed Seren’s clone would be to know that that’s really His Majesty...” remarked Lyse just as the door behind them creaked open.

“Prince Sidis, I’ve come to hear your—” Lasuarl was rendered speechless as soon as he laid eyes on the dogs and the Lyses. His hair was a mess, likely owing to the aftermath of the battle. “What in the...”

“Thank you for coming, Duke Lasuarl,” Sidis said with a smile. “I was hoping to explain everything about the dogs earlier—rather, the dogs here right now. Would that be all right?”

When asked to, canine Egbert dragged his clothes over to his cousin. Sidis shook out the emperor’s coat and trousers before putting them over the white dog and finally covering him with his cape. Lasuarl’s grimace betrayed exactly how he felt about this.

“If I may have your attention, please,” pronounced Sidis. With that, there was a bright flash as the dog beneath the clothes began to grow and shift shape, ultimately becoming a blond man lying on the ground. “All finished?”

“Indeed,” affirmed Egbert.

Lasuarl's eyes nearly popped out of his head upon hearing the emperor's voice. Save for his shoes, Egbert was somehow fully dressed after transforming, and he wasted no time getting up off the floor. Lyse watched in wonder as well.

Oh, the other dogs are...

After a few seconds, Egbert's clones began reverting to their human forms as well—albeit with slightly ruffled collars. Seren's clone was rightfully astounded when the dog he was petting suddenly became a grown man. He tumbled over onto his backside in shock.

"You've...multiplied?!" The words practically stumbled out of Lasuarl's mouth.

"Hey, you don't have to say it like that, Duke Lasuarl. I've harnessed the power of duplication," Egbert quipped dryly.

That's really not much better, Your Majesty... Lyse didn't care for the emperor's choice of phrasing, which made it sound like some kind of demonic ability. The duke, however, offered no additional comment.

Egbert conceded defeat, smoothed out his clothes, and began explaining the circumstances. "I'm not exactly sure how, but the Light of Origin has been producing clones when it acts up."

"And this happens every time?" Lasuarl asked.

"Indeed. Now, more importantly, I've learned how to control and use the clones."

"What even...?" After the emperor's explanation, Lasuarl stared off into the distance before uncomfortably focusing on the horde of Egberts. Perhaps because they were before the Light once more, they stood shoulder to shoulder and broke out into some sort of dance. "Are they doing that on your orders too, Your Majesty?"

"Nope. That's all on them," said Egbert.

His clones apparently had some degree of sentience. If they were dancing on their own, surely that reflected Egbert's inner desire to do so. It was the same reason Sidis's and Lyse's clones were playing together. In Sidis's case, he wanted to relive the lost days he missed with Qatora; and for Lyse, she wanted

to ease her lingering regrets about leaving the young prince. She knew she would've been happy to do anything she could for that boy.

Seren, too, was likely the same. There was no doubt in Lyse's mind that his greatest desire was canine companionship, evident by the complete lack of interest in Egbert after he turned back to a human. Now that all the dogs had disappeared, Seren's clone sat alone in a corner of the atrium, hugging his knees and watching the sparkling pillar of light.

"Prince Sidis and Miss Lyse are here too..." Lasuarl remarked, now getting a better look around after the initial shock of the Egbert pack had passed. "This would suggest that the Light is cloning Light bearers."

"We think so too," Sidis agreed. "That said, though, His Majesty is the exception—yet he was the first one to be affected. The reason for that remains unclear."

"Has anyone witnessed the phenomenon?" Duke Lasuarl asked the party.

It was only then Lyse realized she hadn't actually seen it for herself. Apparently, neither had Sidis. Egbert likewise shook his head.

"Perhaps Karl has?" the prince offered.

To this, a voice replied from within the villa, "It's true. I've seen it happen once." It was Karl, who entered the atrium with Alcede in tow.

"What was it like, Karl?" his father asked him.

"The clones come from within the Light of Origin. Or, more accurately, lumps of light come flying out and morph into humanoid shapes."

"Incredible..."

"The clones seem to be made of the Light, hence why they're capable of fighting with magic-like powers similar to His Majesty the Emperor's," added Alcede. Word of the earlier battle had already reached him. "What did you mean to accomplish with that display anyway, Your Majesty?"

Egbert, Sidis, and Lyse explained the thought process behind the stunt—to put a positive spin on the anomalies with the Light by claiming it was all to empower the emperor.

“Speaking as your retainer, I must say it’s not a terrible plan,” said Lasuarl approvingly.

Alcede pensively stared off into the distance before responding, “Hmm, I think it’s fine too. We should try anything that can buy us time until we come up with a concrete plan.”

“In any case, this monster attack *must* be related to the aberrations,” Sidis said as he turned to the Light. Bar the emperor’s clones surrounding it, the pillar was as enchanting as ever.

“Indubitably. Still, in a sense, it’s not all that different from normal. Monsters have always come for the Light of Origin, so His Majesty’s plan isn’t bad at all,” Alcede said, pausing to roll the stiffness out of his shoulders.

“If people think there are more monsters coming for the Light, who could blame them for being afraid?” he continued. “But if His Majesty publicly defeats said monsters without breaking a sweat, it *would* look good. There are those who already fear regular attacks, after all. Plus, I’ve been trying to find a silver lining in all of this...”

Alcede trailed off in a way that the group found worrying. Was he trying to say that he *hadn’t* found any good in the situation? It didn’t bode well. The duke, however, flashed an ambiguous smile. “Whenever the aberrations occur, plants within the capital grow much quicker.”

“Much quicker, you say? As in, they’re instantly harvestable?” Lasuarl questioned.

“Not *that* quick,” Alcede replied. “But seeds sprout the day after being planted and mature within a month. I’ve even heard that gardeners are having trouble keeping trees pruned.”

Sidis’s expression soured. “That’s hardly a silver lining, if I must say.”

“Yes, well, that’s why I’d like some good news to please the masses. It’d be nice if we could get to the bottom of this already.”

“I shall do my best, Your Grace,” Karl said stiffly.

“Fret not, Karl. Being too tense won’t help anything. My clones and I will find

a way to buy you time, so do what you can. Oh, and Sidis..." Egbert turned to his cousin after comforting Karl. "I know you've been up to something else. Any news on that front?"

"Um..." Sidis hesitated, which was unusual for him when speaking to Egbert. Equally uncharacteristic, he continued through gritted teeth, "I'm still in the hypothesis stage, Your Majesty. May I present my findings after collecting and confirming some results?"

Egbert seemed to notice his cousin's odd behavior and did not press him further on the matter. He trusted Sidis. "Fine. If you can think of anything to help the situation, give it a shot. Since we don't have any leads, I'm open to anything as long as it's not too radical."

"Very well, Your Majesty. If our primary concern is easing the aberrations, then perhaps I'll have something for you."

Given the day's attack, the group's mood was rather somber. They all pretended not to notice the emperor's clones skipping around them.

Lyse, Egbert, Sidis, and Lasuarl departed the villa after their tête-à-tête, leaving Alcede to assist Karl with his experiments.

"I should go update our defense strategies to prepare for increased monster activity," Lasuarl declared, excusing himself and making for the palace. His gait suggested he was exhausted, but Lyse thought it only natural after what he'd just witnessed.

Meanwhile, Egbert didn't seem to worry one bit about his clones' eccentric behavior. "Oh, I forgot something," he said, turning back toward the villa that would soon be Lyse and Sidis's new home.

Rather than seeing Sidis off, Lyse decided to accompany him for a while longer.

"You'd best return too, Lyse," he said. "Aren't you tired after that battle?"

"Surely you don't think me so frail that I'd wear myself out with a stroll, do you?" Lyse asked back. She knew he was merely concerned for her, but he didn't need to fret over her health just because she wanted to walk with him.

As they walked, Lyse realized that Sidis was intentionally taking the long way—he didn't want her to hear nasty comments whilst walking through the palace halls. Such talk hardly fazed Lyse, however. After all, back in Olwen, it was rare for there *not* to be gossip about her. She knew how to deal with it, and she knew that took time. Moreover, with no immediate threats to her safety, she knew it was simply best to endure it.

What did concern her, however, was the possibility that it might affect Sidis. *What if he can't be with me anymore? I'm sure he would do whatever it took to stay by my side, even if that meant eloping. But, well, since I bear the Light, I think Egbert and Alcede would plead for me to stay. Maybe the two of us should hide out in the villa for the time being.*

Lyse wanted more than just to be with Sidis. She cared for Egbert like a baby brother and wanted to be able to protect him. That meant she would need to stay close to the Light but out of the public eye. If she could do that, there would be no reason to elope.

Either way, Lyse figured, the rumors about her probably hurt Sidis more than they did her. Just as she expected, he continued to plead, "Please, Lyse. These are unprecedented times. You never know what might happen to you."

"Very well." Lyse chose to swallow her pride. After all, worrying Sidis was the opposite of what she wanted to accomplish.

He looked relieved hearing her answer, but his soft smile soon faded too. "I have to apologize, though. I don't think I can make time to see you again today. But tomorrow, I promise I will find one way or another to see you. Wait for me, Lyse."

"Very well," she agreed once again.

But come the next morning...Sidis was nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 3: Chasing Answers

Never had Sidis been so utterly entangled in his work. Even when Emperor Egbert had sent him all over the empire to monitor things following his engagement, the prince had still had time to himself whenever he returned to the palace.

“I hope this isn’t taking too much of a toll on him,” fretted his fiancée.

Though imperials were exceptionally long-lived, they were still susceptible to illness. There were even cases of nobles suddenly fainting when their health failed them. Word in the palace had it that Duke Lasuarl would be the next to fall prey in that regard.

“Except Duke Lasuarl isn’t as busy as he is prone to losing his cool... Meanwhile, Sidis is the type to brood over things. Combine that with his workload, and I’m afraid *he* might be the one passing out next.”

Lyse found herself thinking of her betrothed’s well-being as she made her way across the palace. When she hit the courtyard, greenery and blossoms alike were dancing in the morning sunlight. Gardeners tended to the verdure as other workers bustled to and fro under the covered walkways. Things were busy both indoors and out. Many palace servants had been able to return to work thanks to the extra shielding against the Light of Origin. Lyse couldn’t help smiling to see the place coming back to life.

It was a welcome change all around. The past few days had been trying for everyone left to pick up the slack. Alcede had had to do his own baking, and the court ladies had been tasked with doing the wash, to name a few examples. Even with the help of magic, the work had been exhausting.

Lyse—who’d awoken this morning earlier than she would’ve liked—strode through the courtyard in hopes of finding Seren. It had been some time since their last chat. She thus made her way toward the chicken coop, which was situated a ways from the palace proper because of the noise, and more importantly, because of the malodor.

“Oh my,” she exclaimed at the sight of it.

Lyse didn't think the palace had changed much in the past century, yet the coop standing in a grove of trees was much larger than she'd envisioned. The hutch itself was made of solid walls and accompanied by a vast wire-enclosed pen that made good use of the wide-open space, allowing the chickens to roam freely. And beside it stood a mild-mannered brunet talking with the silver-haired prince.

“So Sidis came to question Seren again today...” Lyse remarked, though their interaction looked more like a friendly chat than an interrogation. She wondered what they were discussing.

Seren had essentially been locked up for the past fifty years, so his common knowledge and social etiquette were lacking. He had a lot to catch up on. In light of that, he'd recently been assigned a knight who would accompany him into the capital periodically so that he might have occasion to learn and grow in those regards.

“I'm sure they're talking about the Donan situation, so I guess this *is* work-related...”

Lyse didn't want to butt in if the men were talking business. Anything she did to waylay Sidis here would only cramp his already busy schedule further. So, instead of risking that, she chose to wait patiently until they were finished, which didn't take long at all. Sidis soon departed with a wave, and Lyse approached Seren once her fiancé had disappeared into the distance.

“Good morning, Seren,” she called out to him.

He quickly whipped around, caught by surprise. “Is that you, Miss Lyse? Fancy meeting you here.”

“I heard that you've developed quite a fondness for the chickens, so I decided to swing by.” Lyse was quite frank about her motives. “I saw Lord Sidis here just a moment ago. What were you two discussing?”

“Oh, we were talking about the Donan Faith,” Seren answered coolly. “Little did I know how complicit I was, but I was apparently some sort of key figure in the organization. Rather than try to pry answers out of Caldo in his jail cell, Sidis

drops by to question me now and again.” With that, Seren reached a hand out toward Lyse. “How about you? What would you like to know from me? More about the Donans? Or perhaps you’re curious about me personally?” he asked with a smile.

I guess it’ll be a while before he learns to outgrow that part of his personality... It’s too ingrained in him.

“The Donans for sure, but I’m honestly more interested in your conversations with Lord Sidis,” Lyse confessed.

“Let me be clear—he wasn’t hitting on me,” Seren replied, cutting straight to the point.

It was all Lyse could do to force a smile. Seren seemed unsure of how to interact with her, likely because they hadn’t known each other long, but he was entirely mistaken in assuming that Lyse was lonely and jealous from being neglected by her fiancé.

Well, maybe the lonely part is true...

Still, Lyse knew that she’d been the only person in Sidis’s heart for over a century. She was certain he wouldn’t cheat on her.

“The thought never even crossed my mind,” she insisted. “It’s just that Lord Sidis has been so busy day in and day out. It has me worried he’s carrying too great of a burden alone. If you two were discussing something private, then I won’t pry. But I *am* hoping you’ll tell me if it’s something that I can help resolve.”

If Seren was privy to confidential knowledge, it had undoubtedly come from Sidis—but Lyse also knew that Sidis was exceptionally tight-lipped. She wasn’t sure if the young Alstran was just being considerate or if he’d truly come to learn secrets he couldn’t divulge. Either way, she wasn’t going to force him to talk.

“Erm, hrm...” Seren was audibly conflicted. Lyse waited quietly to hear why.

“I *want* to tell you, but a man has to keep his word. On the other hand, there are others who know—believers, even. And I think it’s only natural that imperial knights and court ladies should know about it too. Maybe you already do? I just

can't say anything about *that one specific part*, right?" Seren mumbled to himself for a spell before finally looking at Lyse. "Um, since you bear the Light, I presume that you're familiar with all classified information regarding the Donan Faith. Er, is that right?"

The particular way he phrased the question was odd, but Lyse played it straight and nodded in the affirmative. There weren't many details regarding the origins of the Light that she *didn't* know. Moreover, there was nothing about the Donan Faith that Egbert or Alcede needed to keep from her.

"What exactly are you getting at?" she pressed him. "Judging by what you said, I can only assume that this is something only those close to the Light should know."

"Ummm... How much do you know about the black stones?"

Seren was referring to the Donan crystals—the catalyst for their powers of suggestion. Lyse and the imperials were more than familiar with them. Plenty of citizens within the capital had recently been transformed into dogs because of them, but thankfully, that was the extent of the damage.

"I know the stones can be used to control minds, attract monsters, and summon pillars like you did."

"And what do you know about where they come from...?"

"I've heard that the cultists harvest the raw stone from a mine." Given how much of it the cult had spread around the city, Lyse figured they must have a reliable supply.

Seren nodded before continuing hesitantly, "The truth is that there are small veins of the stuff all over the place. More than you might think. My home... Near the town where I was born and raised was a considerable deposit. That's probably why monster appearances were so frequent there." Alstra was second only to Razanate in terms of monster attacks, and Seren's story would indeed explain why. "The black stones come from the bottoms of deep ravines where sunlight is scarce. The deeper the fissure, the bigger the veins."

"I suppose the darker, the better," Lyse surmised, prompting a nod from Seren. Only then did she realize Seren was taking a very roundabout approach

to the subject at hand. “Is Sidis touring the ravines and fissures of the empire in search of the stones?”

After learning what Seren just told me, he’s been busy flying all over the country... He’s just not sure he’s on the right track. That’s why he hasn’t told His Majesty what he’s doing, and that’s why he was so evasive when the emperor asked for an update back at the villa.

“I, um...” Seren hesitated again. There was clearly more he was uncomfortable saying.

And so Lyse decided to change her line of questioning. “Did Sidis say what he was planning to do with the stones?”

Seren paused before answering, “He said there was something he wanted to find out regarding the aberrations of the Light.”

“The aberrations and Donan stones...” Lyse mulled to herself. The stones had never had an effect on the Light—neither now nor a century ago. Cultists had tried to cast them into the radiant pillar and ultimately accomplished nothing. So what was Sidis so intent on doing with the two of them together? “Did he say how he intended to use them?”

Seren immediately covered his mouth with both hands. “Please, no more, Miss Lyse. Forgive me, but a man’s word is absolute. If I go back on it, death awaits—so said His Grace Duke Alcede.”

Lyse had to wonder what on earth Alcede was teaching the poor boy. But either way, it was apparent that Seren didn’t want to continue the conversation.

“I understand,” she said before taking her leave.

At the very least, she’d learned a little bit more about Sidis’s recent behavior. Once he found the Donan mine he was looking for, she was confident he would report to Egbert. He would then surely tell her everything and she could come up with a way to help. Thus she would wait for her beloved.

Three days later, Lyse received a summons from the emperor. Once the other court ladies and chamberlains were dismissed from his office, he issued her a

simple covert order: “Pursue Sidis.”

“Are—” she began, but her confidence faltered before she could finish the thought. “Are you afraid that Lord Sidis is working against the empire?”

Surely Egbert wouldn’t issue such a directive unless Sidis was hiding something dangerous. Something that stood to harm the empire. Its sovereign leader, however, shook his head.

“There’s nothing he could do now to hurt us. As long as the Light is acting up, everything else is trivial,” he said plainly before heaving a great sigh. “But unfortunately, the palace isn’t entirely on the same page in that regard. There are those growing suspicious of his whereabouts the past few days.”

“I see...”

“It wouldn’t be a problem if we weren’t in the middle of a crisis with the Light. And being a Light bearer, he’s got more than a few pairs of eyes watching his every move.” Seren would fall under the same scrutiny if his true nature were ever revealed. “What’s worse, on the day after the first aberration, the damn thing happened again the instant he set foot in the villa. In hindsight, at least we now know it’s ticking on a schedule.”

“Oh no...” At the onset of the incident, everyone had feared a second occurrence. And it had come just as Sidis had entered the villa, which understandably struck dread in the hearts of many. “What poor timing.”

“Just bad luck, I guess. That said, even I don’t have a clue what Sidis is thinking right now. How am I supposed to cover for him when he won’t tell us what he’s up to?” Egbert complained, aggrieved. “That’s why I need you, Lyse. Track him down for me.”

“Very well then. Please entrust this matter to me, Your Majesty,” Lyse readily agreed. She was already concerned about Sidis’s behavior, so this made for the perfect opportunity to investigate.

“I don’t think it helps that he’s been frequenting the coops to talk to Seren either. Asking a foreigner for help with this whole mess is only putting *him* in a deeper mess.” Egbert sighed once again.

“It’s hard to blame him. We all want to resolve this as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, even though Sidis and I possess the Light, neither of us have the ability to interfere with it directly,” Lyse commiserated. The radiant pillar was simply that strong—lethally so, even. “However, it seems like Lord Sidis is searching for Donan stones, or so I heard from Seren.”

“He is? Seren said that?”

Lyse nodded. “Yes, Your Majesty, though he wouldn’t explain why. He insisted he couldn’t go back on his word as a man or some such.”

“Interesting. I figured the stones might play into the aberration somehow...” Egbert considered that perhaps Sidis had gleaned something from the formulae display. In a show of poor manners, the emperor planted his elbow on his desk. “I mean, I understand his desperation, but I just wish he were more keen on how this all looks. Hard not to worry about what’s going to happen after I abdicate, you know?”

“Sorry?” Lyse made an unwitting gaffe by inquiring further. “Are you still joking about that, Your Majesty? I was certain that Alcede and the others are quite opposed to the idea.”

Egbert had suggested relinquishing the throne to Sidis many times, citing his stronger mana and inner Light. It was indeed customary for the strongest noble to take rule of Razanate. And more than anything, Egbert simply wanted to be true to himself. His greatest wish was to spend his time frolicking as a dog whenever he pleased. That desire for freedom was truly what pushed him to turn the crown over to Sidis, even if no one else agreed with the decision.

The emperor’s expression grew grave before he spoke up again. “What makes you think I was ever joking? Each and every day, I can only hope that they’ll find me unfit to rule because of this whole aberration nonsense. It’s just that...” Egbert paused before continuing, “Up until now, I’ve never had a serious reason to step aside. Sidis abhorred the Light because of you-know-what, which he claimed made him unsuited for the job. But I, too, was there when you—when Qatora—died, though I didn’t take it nearly as hard as he did. Because of that, and because I couldn’t bring myself to hate something so foundational to our lives as the Light, I resigned myself to this fate.”

Egbert had always spoken in a half-kidding tone about the matter before, but

Lyse sat straight up as she listened to him now. He couldn't have sounded more sober.

"Sidis's resentment for the Light should have softened now. I'm sure his reunion with you has helped mend those old wounds. He's perfectly capable of succeeding me now, and that should solve everything."

"You mean to say the situation will resolve itself if Sidis takes the throne?"

Sensing Lyse's doubt, Egbert explained, "If the aberrations continue at this rate, it would be difficult to maintain and defend the imperial capital. It would shake the very core of the empire, and her people would suffer for it. But should it come to that—before it comes to that—I plan on extinguishing the Light."

It might indeed be simpler to destroy the Light rather than restore it to normal, but the repercussions of doing so would be monumental. Lyse trembled imagining what chaos it would bring to the world. The mana of the imperial nobility would gradually wane, rendering the empire weak in the inevitable wars to follow.

"By extinguishing the Light, the imperial family would undoubtedly lose face. After the Light is destroyed but before people lose hope in it too, Sidis should take the throne and announce that you—his empress and pillar of support—also possess the Light. The people will be relieved, if only temporarily. If we use that borrowed time to create another Light of Origin...I'm sure it'll work out."

Passing off a resurrected Light as a demonstration of the new emperor's power was indeed a clever plan. Lyse understood it to be Egbert's contingency plan in the event they couldn't solve the mystery of the Light or save it. But in truth, she wanted Egbert to remain emperor. Everyone did. That was why Karl was studying as hard as he could and Sidis was searching every crevasse of the country. And yet...Lyse found herself lost for words. She was downcast, disappointed in herself for not being able to come up with another plan.

"When the time comes," said Egbert, "promise me that the ascension will be grand and lavish. Having the ceremony in front of the Light of Origin is a little lackluster, don'tcha think?"

"Lackluster, Your Majesty?"

The thought that an ascension ceremony would ever be lacking in grandeur had never once crossed Lyse's mind, but when she stopped to think about it, she'd never actually attended one before. The previous emperor had ascended the throne before Qatora was born, and Egbert had done so after she passed.

"There really isn't much to it. The imperial family prances around the Light, then they all stare at you while you dump some mana on the lawn. You plant your hands on the ground, let out some magic, and Bob's your uncle. Then you say your goodbyes."

Putting it like that, the ceremony did actually sound quite humdrum. "But isn't that Razanate tradition?" Lyse asked.

"It's what they've done generation after generation without fail. There *is* celebratory feasting and drinking in the capital, but us imperials are too stuffy to party for more than one night," lamented Egbert. He then clapped his hands together as if he'd had a grand idea. "Oh, I know! Why don't you have your wedding at the same time?"

"Our wedding?!"

"Indeed! Have the coronation and wedding together, and you can throw a three-day banquet or something. That'll make a lasting impression on the people for sure," he declared, his face alight. "Plus, if you reveal that you're a Light bearer and say it's all for the sake of the relighting ritual, they're bound to eat it up."

Lyse could get behind the idea. The tricky part would be getting Sidis on board as well. She feared that would be quite an undertaking, but Egbert's enthusiasm only grew.

"To that end, we must dispel the suspicion cast upon Sidis. If anyone catches wind of him looking for black stones, there will be trouble."

"Quite true, Your Majesty..." Lyse, too, had considered that danger. Even with Egbert still in power, his confidant-cum-successor coming under such scrutiny wasn't exactly a good thing.

"So go track down Sidis, Miss Lyse."

"Understood, Your Majesty," she said with a bow, then excused herself.

“But what’s he going to do with the stones?” Lyse mused.

She couldn’t imagine anything other than excavating the deposits and using the lode to extinguish the Light, but Sidis would never do something like that. As she figuratively scratched her head, Lyse spied a white bird flying ahead of her. It was only a smidge shorter than she was and carried a lone rider—Sidis. It was still before noon, but the great raptor’s wings in the clouds shone brilliantly in the sun.

Lyse had taken the day off from her lady-in-waiting duties to commit to her mission from the emperor. She’d first spied Sidis visiting Seren again for another talk, and she’d then watched as he went to fetch a raptor and took off. She’d thus mounted a bird of her own and taken flight after him.

“I wonder where he’s going...”

Lyse had prepared two days’ worth of rations just in case this trip turned out to be a long one. Sidis was headed directly northeast, where only the sea lay ahead.

“Perhaps he’s searching the coastal cliffs?”

It wasn’t particularly dark there, unless there happened to be caverns along the rock face. Lyse watched as Sidis landed by the ocean, just as she’d predicted. She did the same some distance away and tucked her avian monster back into her pocket. A sharp wind kicked up suddenly, sending Sidis’s mount back into the air. He gazed down at his fiancée with a troubled look.

“Lyse?”

She’d been discovered. The jig was up, so she steeled herself and looked straight up at her beloved. “I apologize for sneaking after you, but I needed to see what you were up to, Lord Sidis.”

“His Majesty’s doing, no doubt...” Sidis muttered to himself dejectedly, realizing that Lyse had followed him under orders. “And here I was thinking you missed me.”

“*That’s* what you’re upset about?!”

It was true that she'd been lonely, but that was no reason to get in the way of his work. (In fact, if she'd been busy enough with her own work, she never would have hounded Seren over Sidis's whereabouts.) But this was just who Sidis was. Lyse had been so concerned over his behavior lately that she scarcely realized how relieved she was to see him unchanged.

"Hurry," he urged her. "We've little time. Come with me. I can't bear the thought of leaving you all alone and vulnerable, so stick by my side."

"Very well," she responded simply. She had a bone to pick with what he'd just said, but his permission for her to tag along trumped everything. She happily took out her avian monster again and followed after Sidis.

"There," he called out. The couple then touched down and dismounted, following the unremarkable coastline for a ways.

"Lord Sidis, are you not searching for Donan stone deposits?" Lyse couldn't help asking.

"I am... Did Alcede infer that?"

"Actually, Seren indirectly clued me in and I pieced it together myself."

"What do you mean?"

"He wouldn't tell me outright, claiming he had to keep his word as a man on pain of death."

"Seren..." Sidis stared bleary-eyed up into the sky. "Well, I suppose I *did* tell him to refrain from revealing everything."

"I believe it was Alcede who filled his head about 'a man's word' and all that."

"Seren..." Sidis muttered to himself again, but a sage expression overtook his face when he looked back at Lyse. "It's true that I'm searching for deposits, but not because I'm after the stones themselves." He pointed to the bottom of the cliff. "Look over there. It's about to begin."

Sidis indicated a cove, the curvature of which made it unnecessary to stare straight down for a full vista of the reefs bathed by the tide. And then...the shrieking began.

"Ah, right on time," Lyse noted.

Though they were a great distance from the Light of Origin, its cry was unsettlingly unpleasant all the same. Lyse worried that it might be taxing for even Egbert and his army of clones to annihilate the horde of monsters that would soon descend upon the capital. She didn't have time to give it much more thought than that, however, for her attention was quickly captured elsewhere. The waters below began to churn rough and foamy before spitting masses of black stones upon the shore as if to overtake the cliffs.

What?! There's a deposit underwater and it's reacting to the aberration?!

She watched as the stones cracked and shattered before her very eyes, producing black beasts that flew up into the sky. "Monsters..." she muttered.

"Spawned by the black stones," Sidis replied matter-of-factly.

The couple began their descent down to the water—Sidis chanting a spell while Lyse summoned her trusty wolf and readied her sword. Arachnid monsters crawled up toward them. They were headed for the Light, but as soon as they laid eyes on Lyse and Sidis, they changed course to attack. Sidis handled most of them, leaving the stragglers for Lyse.

The monsters kept coming, and each and every one of them met their doom. The couple fought off ten waves before finally reaching the shore, which was now covered in black stones. Lyse sighed, relieved, as Sidis picked up his explanation once more.

"We know that the monsters come from the seas," he said. "And as you are familiar, we've always assumed that they live underwater and crawl onto land."

"Yes, that's what I've heard. If it weren't for how quickly the stones multiplied just now, I never would have expected that there were deposits below capable of spawning them," Lyse said with a nod. No one in the empire had ever witnessed such a thing.

The dark seabed, untouched by the sun's rays, was precisely the ideal location for the black stones. Though people fished along the coast, no one had ever surveyed its depths. It would have been a dangerous proposition. Furthermore, there weren't any spells to facilitate such diving.

"But the aberrations have made the truth apparent," Sidis declared as he

gazed upon the bulwark of black stone, which now shielded the cliffs from the crashing waves.

“Hasn’t it shrunken a bit compared to before?” Lyse asked. At its peak, the stone had nearly reached the top of the cliff before.

“I’m not certain of the conditions that trigger it, but some of it did turn into the monsters we fought.”

“Wait... The black stones...turning into monsters...”

It suddenly dawned on Lyse that the black stones augmented magic, and monsters were magical manifestations. The stones actually contained trace amounts of mana, which was what allowed even mana-weak Donan cultists to control the minds of others. That same power also enabled people to get close to the Light without suffering any ill effects. Essentially, the stone’s mana counteracted the Light. So what power, then, did the white crystals generated by the Light possess? Lyse was curious, and it seemed like Sidis already had an idea.

“Seren and I hypothesize that within the vicinity of the Light, its mana is too condensed to do anything.”

“Too condensed? You’re saying it’s too powerful?”

“Correct. The white crystal is merely a surplus byproduct of the magic that makes the land fertile. We think the mana condenses and crystallizes, hence why it appears nowhere else. And because it’s tuned to the Light, it’s stable and doesn’t deteriorate.”

That much made sense to Lyse. It would explain why the white stone didn’t spawn monsters. “But what brought you all the way out here, Sidis?”

“I wanted to see how the black stones spread and how they correlate with the Light, hoping that it’d give me some clues as to how to deter the aberration. But, well...”

Destroying the black stones had had no discernible effect. And even after feeding large amounts of it into the Light, it simply grew back with the next anomaly.

“I’m at a complete loss now,” he said, sounding defeated. His leads had run dry.

Lyse snuggled up to him. “It’s okay. I’m sure you’ll find something soon. We have Lord Karl’s help as well. He’s putting his all into researching the matter as we speak.”

“But we don’t have time,” Sidis replied, shaking his head. “If this drags on for another month or two, His Majesty will face the brunt of the fallout. He might even be forced to abdicate.”

Lyse recalled her conversation with Egbert. She understood that giving up the crown was one way to handle the situation, but she believed it unfair to place the burden entirely on his shoulders. Moreover...

“Even if he were to abdicate, I can only imagine how ridden with guilt he’d be after the fact.”

The matter wouldn’t be taken lightly. Harming the Light of Origin would brand Egbert a malefactor. Lesser nobles who didn’t know the details of the situation would vilify him, and the knights would feel betrayed by their brother-in-arms. And with how recognizable he was, Egbert wouldn’t even be able to show his face in the capital for fear of being stoned on sight. He would have to live the rest of his long life as a man who betrayed his empire. Lyse couldn’t stand the thought.

I hope we can figure out the Light somehow.

She hoped that something in the ancient texts might be of use, but Sidis and Egbert had already pored over them. It was because the texts had yielded nothing that they’d been forced to turn to Karl for help.

If only the creator of the Light had left some kind of notes or log...

If they had, His Majesty wouldn’t be in the predicament he was in now.

Wait a minute!

If it was information about the Light they needed, Lyse knew exactly where to get it. After all, she knew someone who’d had a *very* close encounter with it.

The instant that thought occurred to her, she asked, “Lord Sidis, can you

search through my memories?” She was thinking of his confession magic—a special Light-based spell only Sidis could cast that forced the target to reveal the contents of their memory. It was just what they needed now. Qatora had caught glimpses of the Light’s provenance when falling into it, and Lyse could still faintly recall them even now. “There’s nothing clear in my mind, but maybe I’ve seen the formulae we’re missing. Maybe your confession magic will unearth something.”

Though Lyse couldn’t precisely recall what she was hoping for, that didn’t mean it wasn’t buried in the depths of her mind somewhere. She thought trying to excavate the memory was as good a plan as any, but Sidis didn’t seem so confident.

“Hmm. I’m not sure if I can get you to share anything you can’t actually remember.”

“I’ve heard rumors that hypnosis can cause older memories to resurface. Perhaps we could try incorporating both techniques? If I really have seen the formulae, then we’ll be able to fix whatever is currently ailing the Light.”

Even if Lyse couldn’t recreate the exact formulae, simply being able to relay their constituent elements should be enough. Sidis paused a moment to look down at the black stone bulwark before turning back to his fiancée.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go discuss it with His Majesty.”

The couple made their way back to the imperial capital, slaying the monsters they could on the way. A few airborne and distant foes eluded them. Though Egbert would defend the city with his clones, they knew it would be hard for him to handle so many enemies at once.

As Lyse rode tandem along with Sidis on his raptor, they spied a horde of black monsters advancing toward the city walls, where armed infantry and knights awaited them at the ready. A flock of raptors from the palace descended in front of the walls, kicking up a tumult of confusion.

“That’s got to be His Majesty...right?” they wondered aloud.

Sidis and Lyse figured it would be best to land quickly. As soon as they

touched down, a squad of knights came rushing over.

“Prince Sidis! Wh-What’s going on?!”

“One, two, three... There’s a whole bunch of His Majesties!”

“Am I hallucinating, or have I been afflicted by some form of monster magic?!”

Nobody was sure what they were seeing. The situation was chaos, to put it mildly.

Sidis, however, answered calmly, “Your eyes do not deceive you. That is indeed His Majesty.”

Two dozen or so identical Egberts stood there, their arms crossed and their capes flapping in the wind. They then marched on the incoming monsters in unison.

“Only target the monsters that His Majesty misses! Now spread out!” commanded Sidis.

Though the knights were still uneasy, they did as instructed. Lyse decided to join the fray beyond the walls to shore up their defenses. Meanwhile, the vanguard of Egberts simultaneously raised their right hands. That in itself was a sight to behold, but then came a great wave of flame that tore through the monsters in a fell conflagration. The men and women at arms were awestruck, torn between being impressed and feeling like they were dreaming—but then their training kicked in, and they rushed the monsters that had survived the fiery assault.

How could I describe this battle as anything other than His Majesty demolishing the enemy?

The emperor and his clones swarmed their foes, eliminating two-thirds of the monster force at once. Lyse hardly had a chance to help before it was all over. Only the smug emperors and the gobsmacked knights were left standing on the battlefield.

“Good teamwork from all of us, I must say,” the real emperor congratulated his doubles.

“I really must be dreaming...” groaned a nearby female knight. Lyse felt the same way.

“Before I return to the palace, my dear knights, I thank you for your service. I hope to have the chance to fight alongside you all again,” exclaimed Egbert before taking off on his raptor as quickly as he’d arrived.

His subjects could only stare blankly as he took off into the sky. Everything unfolded so quickly that they had no time to process their undoubtedly complex feelings before they had to return to their duties.

“We’d better go too, Lyse,” said Sidis.

“Very well,” she agreed.

And so the couple followed the emperor(s) back to the palace.

More confusion awaited Sidis and Lyse when they arrived at the palace. The imperial raptor handlers were still slack-jawed as they touched down immediately following Egbert and his two dozen clones. The jaws of the servants, knights, and court ladies who were awaiting the emperor’s return hit the ground as well. Abject disbelief was writ across their faces. Even Lyse and Sidis, who had seen it all before, deeply empathized with their bewilderment. While the knights kept quiet (likely because they were accustomed to Egbert’s shenanigans), the servants were much more apprehensive. Nervous murmurings could be heard amongst them.

“They all flew out of the Villa of Light, right...?”

“I never expected so many copies of His Majesty, that’s for sure.”

“Are you sure they’re not monsters? You don’t think that the anomalies with the Light caused this, do you?”

Lyse was worried such speculation might lead to trouble, but in short order...

“Welcome back, Your Majesty,” pronounced Alcede as he and Lasuarl arrived on the scene. The two dukes then took a knee before Egbert, apparently able to pick him out from his clones. Confusion remained in the crowd, but this gesture silenced the servants’ chatter.

“I appreciate the warm reception. So, what do you think? My clones sure

came in handy, didn't they?" replied Egbert, projecting his voice. It was obvious he was speaking so that everyone could hear him.

"They certainly did, Your Majesty," Alcede loudly agreed after raising his head. "Never did I expect the Light of Origin to make Your Majesty the Emperor even more capable on the battlefield. Truth be told, I was worried about the aberrations at first, but it seems there's a silver lining after all." Then, raising his voice even more, he added, "Perhaps the Light is growing even stronger than ever too."

An audible gasp could be heard from the knights and ladies-in-waiting—and also from Lyse.

I see... Alcede is driving His Majesty's plan home for everyone.

The original plan had been to make it seem as though Egbert had grown stronger with the aberrations, but now they were suggesting that the Light itself had become stronger. That should be easier for people to accept. Many palace servants had grown horns, fallen ill, or otherwise been put out of commission because of the aberrations. Worse yet, the aberrations were drawing monsters in by the drove. But if that was all happening because the Light had grown in strength, it would actually make a great deal of sense.

Perhaps because he'd seen how effective his improvisation was on the crowd, Alcede was all smiles when he waved and hailed Lyse and Sidis. "Shall we return to the Villa of Light to dismiss the clones, Your Majesty? Do come with us, Sidis and Miss Lyse."

And so the three of them retreated from the courtyard alongside the gaggle of Egberts.

"That was quite the performance, Duke Alcede," Lyse offered in praise after seeing the positive reception.

Egbert, who was walking behind them, chuckled. "No one's craftier than Alcede, mark my words. His spiel was exactly what I'd hoped for and more."

"Indeed, Alcede really outdid himself. The excuses we've sown now can be reaped if or when the Light normalizes or diminishes in power. We could even say that it sensed a surge in monsters, hence the temporary spike in power,"

added Sidis.

“We can fool the people for another few years at this rate if the situation drags on. I mean, a few years might be pushing it, but still.”

“Agreed. That said, I have a proposal I’d like you all to hear,” began Sidis.

And with that, he moved into an explanation of his plan to invoke Lyse’s memories of her death. It was no surprise that she could recall so little of it after all these years since her reincarnation. But by the same token that childhood memories could be recalled with the right prodding, Sidis believed Lyse should be able to remember something from even further back than that.

Alcede was immediately in favor of the idea. “If there’s even a chance it may work, then we ought to try it. Let’s do so at once.”

That left the question of where the experiment should take place.

“We’ll need to conduct it somewhere we can have privacy. I would suggest the villa, but I’m afraid the Light’s interference may prove problematic,” reasoned Lyse.

“How about using our new home?” Sidis recommended their freshly built wing, as it was conveniently out of the way. With some guards to prevent any intruders from entering, it should be the most secure choice.

“Brilliant idea, Sidis! Let me summon a detail so we can be on our merry way,” chimed Alcede. It took him mere moments to make the arrangements. With only four people in their party, things were simple enough to account for.

The plan was to use a room on the third floor so that anyone who happened to waltz in on the ground level would be none the wiser as to what was going on upstairs. Furthermore, the group magically soundproofed the room so that no noise would escape through the windows or floor and reach the guards’ ears. They were also stocked with Donan stones they’d confiscated from cultists. Everything was in order—save for a small debate about who, exactly, should use the power of suggestion on Lyse. Whoever used the stones’ power on her would delve deep into her memories, beyond her childhood and into her past life. It required immense trust on her part. She trusted both Egbert and Alcede implicitly, but having no strong preference made it difficult to decide.

“Suggestion— I mean, psychological manipulation is your forte, isn’t it, Alcede?”

“But if this is a matter of trust, then wouldn’t you fare better, Your Majesty? After all, you knew Qatora personally, and it’s really her memories we’re after.”

“We can always keep trying if it doesn’t go well, although that’s something I’d prefer to avoid,” replied Egbert, worried that repeated failures would take too much time and put too much strain on Lyse.

“Worry not,” Alcede boasted. “I’ll be there for you every step of the way.”

“Fine.” Egbert clapped his hands together. “Then it’s settled.”

And so the discussion drew to a close as everyone began preparing for the task ahead.

With such a delicate ritual about to take place, the newly constructed wing was heavily guarded. Serious-looking knights surrounded the outside of the building as others carried a bed, some chairs, and a table to a medium-sized room on the third floor. With that, the preparations were finally complete.

As the sun started to set, Lyse and the imperial retinue assembled. The waning sunlight seeped through the windows, illuminating the room with the help of a magically burning lamp. At the center of it all sat the bed that the knights had brought in.

“First, I’ll have you lie down here, Miss Lyse. We can’t have you swooning and hurting yourself when you’re under the spell,” Alcede urged her.

As she reclined upon the soft mattress, Lyse finally understood the bed’s purpose in all this. “Okay, I’m ready,” she confirmed.

Egbert nodded repeatedly.

“Now, let’s have Sidis give it a shot and see if his magic alone is enough,” Alcede instructed.

On cue, Sidis cast his signature spell...and slowly but surely, Lyse surrendered herself to the haze swirling in her head.

“How far back does your memory go?” Sidis asked.

“To when I was three...” Lyse was barely conscious, and her response was more reflex than it was a thought-out answer. Nevertheless, she understood the question being asked of her—which was a most impressive feat for a target under the influence of Sidis’s confession magic. Lyse had to wonder if that was the work of the Light inside of her.

“I’d like to ask you now what you remember of your past life. Can you recall anything about the Light of Origin’s formulae?”

“I...can see glimpses. But nothing clear...” She couldn’t quite grasp the blurry lines of light that formed the spell circles.

“Try asking her about her childhood first,” Alcede whispered.

“What is your first memory from when you were three years old?” Sidis inquired on the duke’s advice.

“I revealed things from my previous life, but my father chastised me for telling tales...”

“Why did you do that?”

“Father was telling me about the empire... I thought I could tell him the truth.”

At the time, even reincarnated, Lyse had only had the cognitive ability of a small child. She’d believed that telling her father would please him, but unfortunately, the baron had thought she was fibbing. The sting of that experience discouraged her from sharing her memories of her past life again after that.

“Did you ever tell anyone else?” Sidis asked.

“My cousin Leon... He wanted to know more about the empire. When I told him what monsters were like, he called me a liar. I was frustrated, so I beat him in a duel.”

“Well done,” Sidis praised her.

“Oh, for the love of...” Alcede groaned in exasperation. “Would you please hurry it up? Try asking her about the Light again.”

“V-Very well. So, Lyse, do you remember anything else about the formulae?”

“It’s still...all blurry.”

“Can you sense or feel anything about the nature of the magic?”

“It combines water and earth magic...”

“I don’t think this is enough. The black stone, please, Your Majesty.” Alcede made the decision to expedite the experiment. Lyse then felt something cold and studded with stones in her hand—a black stone bangle. “Now, please repeat after me. ‘You’re slooowly becoming Qatooora. You’re becoming mooore and mooore conscious of when you were Qatooora.’”



“Come on. I don’t have to say it like that, do I?” quipped Egbert, although he honestly wondered if it was necessary. “You’re slowly becoming Qatora. You’re becoming more and more conscious of when you were Qatora...”

Lyse was drawn in by his gentle whispering voice, all while the bangle seemed to be cladding her body in a gentle lightness.

“You’re gradually becoming Qatora. You’re recalling time you spent with two blond boys in Summer Hall...”

Egbert’s words tickled a loose thread in the back of Lyse’s mind, grabbed hold of it, and unraveled her memories before her inner eyes.

It was springtime. Qatora had originally been posted in the capital, but she worked her way up into taking a position at the palace. One early afternoon about a week after her transfer, she was passing by Summer Hall. That was where she met young Egbert and Sidis.

“You’re a fresh face around here. New addition to the royal knights?” asked the emperor at the time—Egbert’s father. He was a large but mild-mannered gentleman who sported the same golden blond hair as his son. “You’ll be part of the force to whom I entrust my family. Do us all proud, okay?”

“I promise to do my utmost, Your Majesty,” Qatora responded and returned his smile.

Egbert, clinging to the emperor’s legs, imitated his father. “Do me proud!” he ordered—perhaps a little pompous but very much endearing.

“Of course, my liege,” she said, bringing a smile to Egbert’s face.

Meanwhile, Sidis stood timidly beside them and could only stare at Qatora. He was much more reserved back then, too shy to even greet her.

“Oh, Lord Egbert and Lord Sidis are absolutely adorable!” Lyse exclaimed, eliciting a chuckle from the room.

“That’s right. We had you play hide-and-seek with us that day, and I never did find Sidis...” said Egbert.

“Lord Sidis fell asleep crying under a bush in the garden, so I carried him back to his quarters.” Lyse could still remember how snugly the young Sidis had fit in Qatora’s arms, and she could even recall how the late emperor had thanked her for taking care of him.

“Do you remember the time you were struck by a ball of mud?” Sidis asked.

“Yes, Lord Egbert aimed right at me. Just prior to that incident, Her Majesty the Empress requested that I reprimanded him when it was called for too...” mumbled Lyse.

Qatora had been quite cross with the mischievous emperor-to-be. He’d managed to evade her, only to be caught by his father in the end. Sidis had bawled, begging for forgiveness for his role in the crime. Apparently Egbert had asked him to make the mud ball, so Qatora lectured the young prince for being an accomplice.

“Both boys were so fond of me, even when I got angry at them...”

There, Lyse heard the voice of someone else’s heart in her mind—*“That’s because you were genuine with us.”*

Was that...His Majesty? She wasn’t quite sure who the thought had originated from, as she was under the effects of both Sidis’s magic and Egbert’s suggestion.

“Hark back to the day the intruder stormed the villa. Qatora was posted at the door. Do you remember meeting me and Sidis as we entered?”

“Yes, I waved to the two of you.” Lyse transported herself back into Qatora’s consciousness again. “My fellow knights and I took turns guarding and patrolling the villa that day. I remember Lord Sidis waving to me in the hallway.”

“Sidis was always trying to catch your eye.”

“But then...I saw him taken...”

Lyse could recall all of Qatora’s vivid emotions as she’d tried to chase the intruder down.

“Halt!”

“Step away from him!”

“He’s just a boy!”

“You fiend!”

The pressure from the Light had been oppressively stifling, but Qatora had only grown angrier as her vision diminished.

“Why didn’t you stop when you were ordered to do so?” Sidis asked. Egbert and other members of the imperial family had tried to call Qatora back from the danger.

“Lord Sidis was snatched right before my very eyes. I couldn’t forgive myself,” she answered honestly. Every fiber of her being had implored her to do whatever it took to save the boy. The two young princes were like children to her—and she chose to sacrifice herself. “Lord Sidis and Lord Egbert were so dear to me. I had no regrets as I fell into the Light of Origin.”

“When Qatora reached her hand into the Light, what did you feel?”

“The Light...of Origin...” It had all happened in a split second. “It felt like a pool of warm water.”

“What did you see?”

“Light... Nothing but light.”

“What about the formulae?”

“The formulae...” Though Sidis had walked Lyse to this memory, the picture in her mind was still too unclear to envision the particulars. “They form...a circle...”

“Sidis, let His Majesty take over here,” prompted Alcede.

“You’re in the Light of Origin now. You’re beginning to see the spell circle. It’s becoming less and less blurry, and now it’s completely in focus...” Egbert said, guiding Lyse’s mind.

On the heels of this, Sidis asked, “What’s in the circle?”

Lyse suddenly felt her consciousness shift, sinking deeper into the memory. She could see herself within the Light. It washed over her and into her mind. In a snap, everything became clear.

“May the soil be abundant and fertile so that we may thrive... May it last for generations to come... May the light pierce the darkness of the land...”

The hopes of the Light’s creators fueled the magic.

“Mana strengthens all. If it reaches out to every corner of the world, then surely the earth will remain bountiful...”

The Light diffused mana into its surroundings, blessing both the land and the people near it. Though its mana also attracted monsters, that risk was offset by the capable warriors it produced. It was a symbiosis only possible because the Light dispersed and harvested mana ad infinitum in addition to its powers of light, earth, and water magic.

“It both sows and reaps mana, does it?” mused Egbert.

“That explains a few things,” said Alcede.

As the fuzziness subsided and Lyse’s consciousness returned to her, she began to see someone else’s memories.

Is this from the Light too...?

Rather, it was something Qatora had seen when she was swallowed into the Light. Her arm had been extended, reached out, as she’d disappeared into its depths.

Oh, this is how I died...

Following that came the pain and sadness.

“Don’t go!”

“You mustn’t, my lord!”

“Nooo! Come back! I promised I’d protect you when I’m strong enough... Please...!”

That voice, so desperate, wasn’t that of a young boy calling out for his parents... But the images in Lyse’s head faded as she awoke in a dim room. The air was crisp, like a smothering blanket had been torn from her in her sleep.

Oh, the magic wore off... She realized she was back to reality when she opened her eyes and saw her fiancé.

“Are you okay, Lyse?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.” She nodded and smiled, much to his relief. “My memories are much clearer now, but were you able to learn anything about the Light?”

“Indeed. We should be able to fill in the blanks now. Boy, am I glad to have someone with memories of the past!” exclaimed Alcede with a big smile on his face.

Egbert, sitting by her bedside, smiled too, although he remained quiet.

Oh, he’s right there... That must be why I sensed his feelings too. Lyse wondered if she should feign ignorance as, after all, what she’d seen and heard was from over a hundred years ago. Surely neither she nor Egbert still felt the same way, not to mention that Lyse was a completely different person now. Thus she decided to spare Egbert the embarrassment.

“I’d like to discuss what just happened with Lyse privately. Excuse us for a moment, gentlemen,” Egbert announced as he escorted Lyse to the next room.

The room they’d used for the ritual was to be a guest room, and the smaller room beside it was intended for the servant of said guest. It wasn’t cramped by any means, however—especially without any furniture in it. Lyse couldn’t help thinking Egbert deserved a grander setting to discuss anything important. After all, he’d been born and raised to be the emperor. That was how she’d seen him all his life.

Egbert stepped into the room and let out a sigh. “There’s something calming about small, cozy rooms like these,” he said. “Do you remember how I used to always pester you to play hide-and-seek?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. You would always try to sneak up on me...”

It was less of hide-and-seek and more a game of cat and mouse to him. So Lyse thought, though she didn’t dare say so out loud. It wasn’t that she thought Egbert would take offense. Merely that she didn’t want to be disrespectful to the emperor.

He stared longingly out the window. “All through my childhood, everybody told me that my mana was even stronger than my father’s. I always felt that I

had to prove my strength by besting the adults around me. How wrong I was..." That was something he'd come to realize over time.

"Most wise, Your Majesty. The only foes you need to best are monsters and the enemies of your subjects," Lyse said with a bow.

"That's not wisdom. An emperor ought to understand that much implicitly, but it eluded me as a boy. Foolishly, the only thing on my mind at that age was beating Qatora—the ultimate glory in my mind."

"Boys will be boys, after all." Lyse believed it would have been worse to have no mettle. The only people who'd ever outranked Egbert were his parents, and most folks would have been satisfied with such a peerless existence—complacent with their abilities and happy to stagnate. But Egbert sought to be better, as befitting a man destined to take the Razanate throne. "As a child, I was always desperate to best my brother in sword fighting as well."

"That's right, isn't it?" Egbert said, laughing. "I suppose I only had defeating Qatora in mind, but Sidis... He was too good at hiding for his own good. He'd always crawl out of his hiding spot teary-eyed, and you'd always be there to console him. I was envious. I... I couldn't bring myself to admit that I wanted to be spoiled too."

From the day Egbert was born, great expectations had been placed on him. Had he been a more delicate child, he might have gotten the affection he longed for. But he was strong and obstinate. Qatora had sympathized with that.

I thought I'd let him have his way.

Young though he'd been at the time, the emperor-to-be was still deserving of respect. Chastising his stubbornness might have wounded his pride. But in the end, he was only human, and humans—especially children—can harbor great loneliness.

"And so I made a promise to myself back then. If I could best Qatora, I would allow myself to be pampered. But just as I thought I was on the cusp of success, I began to have doubts." With that, Egbert turned to Lyse. "Would I be satisfied with being spoiled? Sidis wouldn't have objected, though I doubt he would've expected me to be pampered all my life. My parents were still alive, after all."

Lyse nodded sagely in understanding. Sidis had already lost his mother by the time Qatora was taking care of him, which was why he lived at the palace. He grew attached to her as a mother figure, even if it was only for a short amount of time. He soon came to realize his love for her was of a different nature. Still, he was but a child and knew there was nothing more he could do than indulge in her affection. Sidis had always assumed that Egbert simply saw Qatora as a playmate—and so he'd paid no heed to Egbert's feelings when they were younger. But the adage about making assumptions is all too true.

"I initially thought of Qatora as an older sister, and like many younger brothers do, I wanted her attention all to myself. But from time to time, I realized that I was jealous of how she doted on Sidis. I was bitter, and it wasn't because I felt like he was the favorite child. The love in the way he spoke to Qatora was special, and I didn't want her taken from me. I..." Egbert paused there briefly before muttering, "Well, any way you cut it, that doesn't sound much like sibling affection."

Lyse didn't know what to say, but it wasn't as if Egbert was expecting a response.

He continued, "I considered all sorts of what-ifs back then. As the emperor-to-be, I needed to find an empress of imperial blood with strong mana. But Qatora's magic was never all that. Though she was resistant enough to the Light to be posted at the villa, she never could have been empress. The people around us wouldn't have stood for it. And I knew that."

"You really did think about everything..." Lyse unwittingly mumbled.

"I guess so," Egbert said with a shrug. "But after that, I could no longer see being the emperor as a privilege. It's why I'm happy to give it up to anyone who has enough mana and a desire to protect the empire."

Lyse had heard over and over since their reunion that Egbert wanted to abdicate. Ultimately, it apparently wasn't because Sidis bore the Light. It was because the position had denied him a life with the woman he loved.

"Giving up wasn't the hard part, but keeping quiet about how I felt was. Who knows? Maybe there was a part of me hoping that being honest would change her mind. But that would've meant breaking my promise and failing Qatora,

so...”

“I promised I’d protect you when I’m strong enough...”

That was the meaning behind young Egbert’s promise—his desire to get stronger, to best Qatora, and to show his love for her. Judging by Lyse’s reaction to his words, Egbert knew that she understood.

“But I’m glad I kept quiet in the end. I almost lost Sidis, my dearest friend. Though he miraculously recovered from the incident that day, he never got over Qatora. It was all too obvious that he felt far stronger for her than I did, and so I quickly made peace with my feelings,” he said with a chuckle.

Hearing that, Lyse smiled again. For Egbert, it had been over a century since he’d resolved his feelings for Qatora. Lyse finding out about it now was little more than an unforeseen consequence of the magic. He looked relieved to have the chance to share such old emotions, even if he no longer dwelled on them now.

“But it was hard to forgive myself too. No matter how hard I trained, I was but a wee lad with no real fighting experience. Sidis was nearly killed, yet I just froze in my tracks. I couldn’t even save Qatora, a knight of mine. The whole damn tragedy was over before I could even react. It deeply made me question how strong I truly was. And while I was wallowing in despair, it was Alcede who came and verbally slapped me back to sanity.”

“Is that so? Speaking of, I don’t think I ever met Duke Alcede back then. When did he come to the palace?” Lyse asked. She’d been wondering about that for some time.

“He was physically weak as a child, so he never visited back then. It wasn’t until soon after that fateful day that he became healthy enough to show his face frequently.”

“Oh, so that’s why I didn’t know him.” Even imperial nobles weren’t immune to illness, especially as children. It wasn’t uncommon for them to get sick.

“It’s also how he got his sweet tooth. He couldn’t keep much down, but he always had an appetite for dessert.”

“So that’s how it came about...” Lyse had always figured he’d been born that

way.

“Yup, so, now you know the whole story. It’s nothing to worry about,” Egbert assured her, bringing the conversation to a somewhat swift end.

Lyse gave a soft, polite chuckle and bowed to him.

Meanwhile, Sidis was a little anxious.

“All right, with the help of Karl’s research, we have a complete spell circle now. That means it’s time to look into how to fix everything!” Alcede announced as he carefully tucked his memos into his breast pocket before leaving the villa.

“Whew, I’m tuckered out too. Maybe mind control just isn’t my thing after all,” Egbert joked as he took a big stretch and made for his office.

Lyse and Sidis saw them off, then suddenly found themselves looking at each other.

“What did His Majesty want to discuss, Lyse? Was something the matter?” he asked, a hint of nervousness in his voice.

Lyse smiled and replied, “Not at all. It’s just that when His Majesty used the power of suggestion on me, he also inadvertently gave me a glimpse of his memories from back then. He realized what happened, so he pulled me aside and asked me to keep it a secret.” She wasn’t exactly lying, but she was far from telling the whole truth.

Sidis didn’t seem entirely convinced. “Did His Majesty perhaps tell you about his feelings for Qatora?” he asked anxiously.

“Wha—” Lyse was stunned. She hadn’t expected him to hit the nail on the head like that. Still, she couldn’t confirm or deny anything. “What made you think that? I don’t think His Majesty’s love for Qatora was the romantic kind. I was more of a big sister to him, wouldn’t you say?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that at all. The look in his eyes back then... I’m sure that he loved Qatora,” Sidis declared quite emphatically.

What is this? Do men in love have some kind of sixth sense? Lyse had to

wonder if she was the only person who *hadn't* known. She knew better, however, than to confirm Sidis's suspicions. There was no point in dredging up something from over a century ago.

“What a vivid imagination you have, Lord Sidis. His Majesty had thought himself strong and capable. He regretted not being able to do anything back then, so he just offered me an apology,” she fibbed with a smile.

Chapter 4: Trying Everything

Three days later, Alcede's assistant approached Sidis during his midday meal with Lyse. The silver-haired prince had been spending more time with his beloved and less time investigating the black stones since the ritual at the villa. He was sitting right next to her as they ate, but he stood up to receive the letter the assistant handed him. He then dismissed the servants and workers in the room before breaking the seal. Whatever message was contained therein, it put a wrinkle in the prince's brow and stunned him to silence.

"Has there been some kind of problem, Sidis?" Lyse asked after waiting for him to finish reading.

"We're being summoned to the villa immediately—by His Majesty, no less. I think we both know what that means." Something had undoubtedly happened involving the Light of Origin. Sidis summarily burned the letter and threw on his cloak. "Let's go."

The couple then departed for the villa. Soldiers and knights were dotted about along the way, both inside the palace proper and out in the courtyard, on standby for the next monster attack. They'd been occurring without warning lately as frequently as once every other day—often in time with the aberrations, but also at erratic intervals in addition to that. As Lyse and Sidis neared the villa, however, the number of guards dwindled considerably. A great many of them were still sickened with Light poisoning.

"Come to think of it, I heard that Lady Kirstin can no longer get this close to the Light," commented Lyse. The duchess had been born with barely enough mana to enter the villa normally, but the aberrations with the Light had changed that.

"Yes, I hear she's refraining from approaching the Light at all to avoid growing doggy ears," Sidis replied. In truth, Kirstin could have worn a piece of black stone to protect her from the Light's effects. When Alcede had spoken of how proximity to it could cause even nobles to sprout a second set of ears, Duke

Lasuarl had intently stared at the top of his wife's head—perhaps hoping to see it for himself.

When Sidis and Lyse finally reached the villa, they were met by Alcede and Egbert.

“Finally made it, have you?” the emperor chided, arms crossed, as the couple entered.

Sidis bowed in greeting. “Apologies for our tardiness. We came as soon as we received the letter...”

“Oh, I see. So it's *Alcede's* fault.”

“My instructions were to deliver the message at an opportune moment so as to prevent drawing too much attention, but I see now that that may have lacked a sense of urgency,” Alcede responded, shrugging off Egbert's remark.

“Should we have been discreet? If you'd said so, we would have sneaked our way here instead. Will it be a problem?” Sidis had assumed the letter to be of great import and accordingly made straight for the villa.

“No, it's fine as long as no one saw me come. I brought a special guest with me, you see,” Alcede announced, pointing down an unlit corridor at a faint, rather gloomy-looking figure—Seren.

“Whoa! I didn't know you were there,” exclaimed Sidis.

“I didn't notice him at all either...” murmured Lyse.

“Ha ha ha... I suppose I'm even more invisible today,” joked Seren.

Alcede chuckled, while Egbert sighed.

“Perhaps it's just as well, given what you saw your clone do earlier...” he lamented.

“Huh? What did you see?” Lyse wondered aloud. She knew that Seren, too, had a clone at the villa, but she was hard-pressed to think of anything outrageous his clone might be doing. Everything paled in comparison to seeing her own clone giving Sidis a ride on her shoulders.

“Oh...” Sidis, however, seemed to have an idea as he looked at Seren with pity

in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Lyse was still stumped.

Seren began mumbling in explanation, “Well, there were dogs here...but they turned into people...and my clone was still embracing one of them...while they were all...”

“Long story short,” Alcede cut in, “all of His Majesty’s clones transform too when he reverts to his usual self, no? Well, Seren here got to see his clone snuggling up with a cute doggy one minute...and His Majesty in the flesh the next. Not only that—”

“Ngaaaaah! Please! No more!” screamed Seren as he crumpled to the ground. Lyse now understood his pain and would’ve interrupted Alcede if he hadn’t.

The steely-nerved Egbert, on the other hand, didn’t look bothered at all. “I mean, I’ve already seen his clone petting me in dog form, and it’s not as if he were directly touching *me*. I suppose I can spare one of thirty clones.” After giving the situation some thought and realizing that only one of his many clones had been victimized, Egbert had already accepted it for what it was.

“Er... So, why have we brought Seren here today?” asked Sidis.

Alcede, all smiles, replied, “Oh, you know. We’ve already unraveled the mystery of the Light’s formulae, so we now ought to understand why it’s acting up despite everything.”

“And what of this meeting?” Sidis failed to understand why everyone had been brought together.

“Well, we need to inspect what’s underground, Sidis. I don’t have enough mana to get close enough, so get digging.”

“Wait, what?!” Sidis yelled.

Alcede hushed the prince as he dragged him by the hand toward one of the villa’s many rooms. It was devoid of carpeting and furniture alike, but what it *did* have was a large hole in its stone floor. The hole was about an arm’s length deep and had hit the raw earth below. A pile of soil was sitting next to it. The culprits, a pair of shovels, were leaning against the wall nearby.

“That’s as far as I got, but I’m sure you can do much better, old friend,” Alcede declared.

“I mean, probably. But how far do I need to go?” Sidis asked.

“Until we strike gold.”

“And what is this metaphorical gold?”

“There should be black stone beneath the Light of Origin.”

“Come again?!” Lyse unwittingly blurted. She was under the impression that the black stone was the very antithesis of the Light. “What makes you think you’ll find it there?”

“As I said earlier, we’ve now deciphered the spell circle of the Light. Karl and I both agree that it would take immense mana to sustain. That got us wondering what powers it, as this area used to be a barren patch of dirt before the Light. But after hearing what Sidis said, it finally hit me,” the duke explained. “First off, we know there were monsters here before the Light was constructed. And now we know that the black stones spawn monsters. Throw in the fact that Seren can use the stones to create a simulacrum of the Light, and it all makes sense. That’s how I arrived at that conclusion.”

“I see. So the black stones fuel the Light. There must be a large deposit beneath it, then,” Sidis surmised after hearing Alcede’s logic.

“Right you are. Supposing everything we just reviewed is true, there must be a good load of the stuff around here,” the duke agreed with a nod. “And when you stop to think about it, isn’t it strange that the capital of the Razanate Empire is located right here? Not only is this a drainage basin, but there aren’t any geographical features that make it a good location to settle. They even had to redirect a river to this place to sustain life here.”

“Our first task is to test our hypothesis. So, if you would please, Sidis,” Egbert requested, as magically excavating himself would be difficult this close to the Light.

“Your wish is my command,” Sidis readily agreed. He had, after all, pledged his undying loyalty to the emperor.

After a quick bow, the prince cast a spell to bore into the ground. Earth kicked up around the opening of the hole, and Lyse busied herself with shoveling it onto the mound that Alcede had created earlier. When Seren lent a hand as well, Alcede decided to use his magic to help too. The only thing he accomplished, however, was scattering the dirt all across the room, for which Egbert admonished him. But before long...

“Here we go.”

Sidis hopped down into the hole he’d dug and disappeared from sight. The others rushed over and saw only the silvery glint of his hair at the bottom of the hole that was about as deep as a well.

“Is anything down there?” Egbert bellowed, his voice echoing down the shaft.

“It’s too dark to tell, but there seems to be a cavity,” Sidis replied as he cast a spell to illuminate his surroundings. It revealed that he was standing atop some kind of white crystallization.

“Is that...” Lyse peeped down the hole and wondered aloud, “Is that the same white stone that surrounds the Light?”

“I’d wager,” answered Egbert. “Let’s go down ourselves.”

The emperor thus helped Lyse down while the duke helped Seren, and the four of them joined Sidis below ground. The walls surrounding them were covered with white crystal like frost upon windows on a cold morning, helping scatter Sidis’s magical light all around. It was arguably brighter down here than it was up above.

“It’s like a winter wonderland!” Alcede remarked in astonishment as he took in the sight. “Though I have to say it’s closer quarters down here than I expected.”

“Really?” Lyse asked. The cavity stretched farther than any of them could see—well beyond the bounds of Sidis’s magic, meaning it extended for over a hundred meters.

“Well, the Light of Origin has been active for hundreds of years. I would have thought it’s consumed far more stone than this cavern could possibly hold... Hmm, perhaps it’s very efficient?” Alcede crossed his arms and pondered the

matter.

Sidis turned to him and said, “Maybe it’s regularly refreshed with supplementary mana.”

“What do you mean?” the duke inquired.

“The Light gets plenty of free food, so to say. The monsters fly straight into it.”

Alcede clapped his hands together excitedly. “Oh, that makes a great deal of sense. But since the monsters spawn from the black stones, I wonder if they’re as energy-dense...”

“Indeed. What if the Light isn’t getting enough mana to sustain it?”

“If that’s the case, then all we have to do is fill this hole back up with black stones,” deduced Egbert.

“I considered that, and that’s precisely why I invited Seren here,” Alcede said as he walked over to the young man in question and patted him on the shoulder. “Sorry to foist this on you, but do you think you could lend us your help?”

Seren possessed the ability to generate black stone, which was what Alcede was hoping to tap into. Seren looked less than confident as he agreed to the job, however. “I can try, but I need a catalyst of sorts.”

“Like what? If it’s stone you need, then we have plenty of it. We need to do something about all this white stone around here anyway.”

“No, not that,” he confessed hesitantly. “I need to feel sad.”

“Ah...” Lyse and Sidis remarked in unison as they remembered their last encounter with Seren’s power. If that needed to happen again, it raised an important question.

“Sorry, Seren, but might I ask how we’re to accomplish that?” she inquired as the other three men took a step back to form a circle. “I’m not sure what exactly we should say to upset you, much less how we should say it in order to keep your power under control.”

“Lyse has a point,” Sidis agreed. “I’m thinking the rest of you should get above

ground before we start. I'll stay behind to rescue him if anything goes wrong."

"In that case, shall we make preparations? Would you two like a little snack or a late-night meal for later?" The task at hand would take quite some time, so Alcede was concerned about provisions for Sidis and Seren.

"Water will suffice," the prince answered curtly.

"I think we'd best do this under the cover of night. Sidis, stop Seren once you have enough black stone. Then we'll observe what happens during the next aberration," Egbert ordered. "Take the rest of the day off since you'll be burning the midnight oil."

"Now, the question of how to conjure a negative state of mind still remains," Alcede continued. "Could we use *that* against him? Now that he's a changed man who feels indebted to us, I think it'd hit him quite hard."

Lyse could read between the lines. "We mustn't, Your Grace. I'm doubtful we could pull him back if we send him into that kind of spiral."

Indeed, Alcede was suggesting that the group guilt-trip Seren for his past life as the intruder who'd nabbed Sidis and indirectly caused Qatora's death. Even if Seren had been indoctrinated to believe he'd done the right thing a century ago, he was an entirely different person now. Berating him for what had happened was too cruel.

"You're right. It wouldn't be good to get Seren stuck in that headspace," Egbert said, rejecting the proposal.

Alcede, however, had another plan up his sleeve. "Then how about this? I remember Seren feeling rather poorly about himself when the topic of romance came up. Perhaps we could try that angle?"

The emperor was much more receptive to this idea. "Yes, Sidis should have no problem gushing about his love."

"I don't mean to gush or anything of the sort..." Sidis looked absolutely shocked after being blindsided by the request.

Lyse looked at Egbert and Alcede, unable to do anything else but smile awkwardly.

That night, the weeping and wailing of a grown man echoed throughout the villa. Though Seren was deep underground, his voice carried up through the shaft and into the room above where Lyse, Alcede, and Egbert were chatting while they awaited the results.

“Ugh. I’m getting depressed just listening to him,” moaned Alcede. Luckily, he had a basket full of cookies to comfort him and began shoveling a handful into his mouth.

“It pains even *my* heart,” muttered Egbert, drowning his sorrows—and hopefully Seren’s voice—with a bottle of liquor.

It was all Lyse could do to force a chuckle.

“I knew it the moment I held her hand when we met again. She was the woman for me. You too, Seren, should be able to find yourself somebody to love this century,” came Sidis’s voice, also echoing up from the hole.

“There’s only fifty years left... No, I’ve got another fifty years to go!”

“But, I mean, if you can’t find anyone, then that’s that,” Sidis replied, twisting the knife.

“Nooooo! Don’t say that!” Seren screamed.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to learn to socialize like a normal person before anything else. You’re going to find yourself in serious trouble since you only know how to get along with animals.”

“What are you saying?”

“Well, I guess you’ll be fine as long as your partner can transform into a dog. I mean, just look at how well your clone *gets along with His Majesty*.”

“No, it’s not like that! I like human women—although being able to transform *would* be a big plus!”

“Maybe you could ask a court lady really nicely. Candidly, it’s not true that only the imperial family can cast the transformation magic. We just didn’t want to deal with the hassle of other people using it.”

“I’m doooooomed!”

Sidis didn’t stop at bragging about his fiancée. He took the extra step of shattering any confidence that Seren had left.

“It’s frightening how naturally this seems to come to him. Doesn’t that make Sidis worse than me?” asked Alcede, to which Egbert nodded.

Lyse neither confirmed nor denied it. It was still all she could do to force a laugh.



Just before daybreak, Seren was relieved of his miserable duty. The interceding hours had run him haggard, but he'd managed to cover about half of the underground cavern in black stone.

"Don't worry, Seren. I'll host a tea party sometime soon so you can meet new people," Lyse said in an attempt to cheer him up. Seren flashed a tender smile before leaving. She felt badly as she watched him slink away.

"Now then, let's see how long this lasts. Maybe we've fixed the Light for good," Egbert suggested. But before noon, the next aberration came right on schedule.

Lyse was headed to rendezvous with Alcede upon being summoned once again. On her way, she happened upon servants chatting amongst themselves. Using magic lessened the burden of the housekeeping, but it was hardly a panacea. Wind spells could sweep surfaces clean, but they also blew dust everywhere. And though magic could be used to wet and dry towels, scrubbing anything with them still required manual labor. All the waxing and polishing was done by hand as well. Water magic made washing laundry easier, but drying clothes with magic set wrinkles into the fabric and thus wasted all the hard work prior. Keeping the palace clean took a great number of hands, even if fewer than most other grand residences in the empire. The palace servants having and being able to use mana did indeed make their jobs easier. And now that more of them were back at work, things were less stressful than they had been in a while—as evidenced by the leisure they had now to stand around and talk.

"Do you know when the Light of Origin is going to return to normal?" one asked.

"They say His Majesty is working on it, but I'm not sure how much more of this we're in for," replied another.

"I don't recall this ever happening before. It's gotta be those foreigners marrying our people, right? I bet they're anti-imperialists sabotaging the Light."

"But the Light isn't even affected by the monsters. How could mere mortals cause this strange phenomenon?"

Nearly a month had passed since the first aberration. Save for the increased effects of the Light in close proximity to it and the increased monster attacks, everything had since returned to normal—but that didn't negate the people's heightened tension or the vitriolic comments.

I suppose we can't discount the frequent monster attacks either...

The more fighting there was, the more fatigued the fighters. Though servants were exempt from combat, the sword hanging over their heads didn't make daily life pleasant. The longer the stressful situation dragged on, the greater their discontent grew. And who were they to blame if not the emperor and the imperial family who were supposed to be the protectors of the nation?

But everyone reveres Egbert. Respect for the crown has been drilled into them from childhood. I doubt anyone truly blames this all on His Majesty, which is why they're looking for something else to pin it on.

The most obvious target was the recent influx of people from abroad. These people were strangers with no one to stand up for them. Still, it wasn't right to make manaless foreigners into scapegoats.

I suppose now's not a good time to announce that I'm a Light bearer, huh?

Lyse briskly made her way toward the aviary where the knights' raptors were kept. She'd grown familiar with the place, as she frequented it from time to time to borrow a bird. When she arrived, she found Sidis and the others waiting for her.

"Ready yourself straight away, Miss Lyse. We must hurry there and back," instructed Alcede. He had a backpack slung over his shoulders and was mounting a raptor.

Lyse didn't even have time to ask about their destination. She simply did as she was told and prepared to take flight with the group. Alcede led the flock at such speeds that Egbert, Lyse, and Sidis chasing after him couldn't communicate with each other.

"Perhaps Alcede is heading to the same cliffs where Sidis visited the other day," she wondered to herself as she noticed him swoop eastward toward the shore after flying north for a time.

Ahead of them now was indeed the beach where Sidis had observed the spawning monsters. The group descended upon the very location. Lyse could tell because the black stone cliff face was scarred by Sidis's magic from their battle.

"As we all now know, replenishing the black stones beneath the Light failed to stop the aberration," Alcede announced with a straight face after everyone alighted from their raptors. Lyse had already read the report, and being reminded of the results put a damper on her spirits. "However, the invading monsters have decreased in number."

"Really?" Lyse looked up from the ground.

At least their efforts hadn't been for nothing. If Seren kept at it, the Light might even revert to normal eventually. This was promising news, to say the least. Even Egbert and Sidis seemed to take heart.

But then Alcede crushed the seeds of hope that had begun to sprout. "That said, it's a negligible difference and, more importantly, we've now detected a new problem. At this rate, the Light of Origin is bound to collapse."

"What?!" cried Sidis. Alcede affirmed that he'd heard correctly with a nonchalant nod.

"Now that's a shocker. But why? It's not like we're missing anything from the formulae, right?" Egbert asked for clarification with a blank and stunned look on his face.

"It seems the spell circle they formed was a temporary one."

"Temporary?!" Lyse, Sidis, and Egbert shouted in the same breath. It was but a small sign of how flabbergasted they were. A temporary spell circle was unheard of.

Even Alcede was showing signs of consternation. "Hey, don't ask me, okay? I haven't got the slightest clue myself," he responded with a defeated sigh, figuratively throwing his hands in the air. "When we put the spell circle together, we noticed a few unnecessary elements. Karl spent yesterday deciphering them bit by bit." That explained why Karl hadn't been present at the experiment. "Based on how the formulae are assembled, we reckon that

the magic was never meant to last. There's a time limit on it, basically, so the Light will eventually extinguish."

Sidis looked grim. "Is this, by any chance, related to the black stone reserve under the villa?"

Alcede nodded. "It sure seems like it. I'd hazard a guess and say that the deposit was sized to the duration of the spell."

"Fair enough, I suppose. I mean, it was originally to enrich the earth anyway. But if you overwork the land that way, you'd risk depleting the soil and returning it to a wasteland again," groaned Egbert.

"That does make sense..." Lyse agreed.

Razanate's soil was originally poor, but it had been enriched with centuries of the Light's blessing. As the Light's spell circle drew mana from the earth, however, it would eventually exhaust the land after long enough.

"Our ancestors could've at least given us a heads-up. There's no way they didn't know to tell us something so important," grumbled Egbert.

"I wouldn't rule it out." Sidis gave a half-hearted, pained laugh. "It's possible they never predicted any of this would happen. Even putting the inadvertent fuel from monster attacks aside, it's possible that the black stone deposit and the Light were far more effective than they ever imagined. It's also possible that they knew but couldn't find a way to spread the truth."

"I suspect Sidis is right on the money. They crafted the spell circle to make the land fertile and likely thought that it would last maybe a century tops. I'm sure they never dreamed the Light would turn into what it has," Alcede said with a shrug. "Whatever the case, we only have one choice now—and that's to create a new Light. So, in order to make sure we get that right, we'll start small and have a trial here today. I beseech you all for your aid."

Everyone nodded in agreement. "What is it exactly that we're helping with?" Sidis asked.

"I need your magic. We'll be making a small version, about as tall as a person, but even that will consume a great deal of mana. I should also mention that this is all an experiment. I don't know what will happen, and if anything *does* go

wrong, well, I shall beseech your aid then too.”

Egbert furrowed his brow. “It is safer that we get a feel for it by starting small. If we succeed here today, then we can hammer out the details for the real deal.”

“Understood, Your Majesty,” Lyse agreed. “Would you please allow me to watch the operation in case I could help in the event of an emergency?”

“Miss Lyse, you were instrumental in deciphering the spell circle and you’re here today because you ought to bear witness to our little experiment,” Alcede explained, finally smiling.

Lyse thanked the duke but couldn’t help feeling something was wrong. Alcede definitely seemed worried. He usually smiled constantly, so Lyse could only assume he was rather anxious. The duke, however, appeared to put his worry aside as he proceeded with the experiment.

“First, we’ll need this stuff,” he said as he tipped over his backpack, spilling a load of black stone. The bag must have been filled to the brim with the stuff. Alcede arranged the stones in a central pile and, grabbing a stick from the shore, began tracing a spell circle.

“You’re drawing it directly into the dirt?” Lyse remarked unwittingly.

“Yes. If the spell is to provide the land with mana, then it’s crucial to etch it directly into the earth.”

“Is there anything I can help with?”

“No, but thank you for offering. Even drawing the circle consumes mana.”

Without any way to contribute, Lyse stepped back to let Alcede work. After drawing the circle, he finished it off by placing pairs of gemstones in three locations—jade, rubies, beryl, and diamonds, all about half the size of a fist. They were undoubtedly quite precious.

“Alcede, are those...?”

“Oh, you’ve noticed, have you, Your Majesty? I borrowed them from the treasury. They were gifted to us by Alstra as an apology for the whole Seren thing, and we’re putting them to good use.”

“I mean, I guess ex post facto approval is justified here...” Egbert sighed. “Just make sure you backdate the documents, will you?”

“I already have, Your Majesty. I just didn’t quite have the time to get your signature...” Alcede said, explaining the matter away. “There, it’s complete.”

“So this is the Light of Origin’s...” Sidis muttered to himself as he beheld the circle. Lyse couldn’t help staring herself, as it was the most elaborate spell circle she’d ever seen.

“Everything probably leads back into this. This is what scatters mana throughout the land and empowers us,” Alcede said as he, too, keenly observed his handiwork.

“It uses light magic... Now I get why the pillar is so radiant,” mused Sidis.

“It seems so purposeful at first, but it’s more likely that the various formulae of the circle interacted in unforeseen ways. I’ve heard that happens from time to time,” noted Egbert.

“Yes, quite right.” With a clap of his hands, Alcede moved on to the next step of the plan. “Now then, to activate the circle, I shall need everyone’s help. Place a hand upon each gemstone and stream your mana into them.”

“So we’re all doing double duty, huh?” muttered Egbert as he grabbed hold of two gemstones. Sidis did the same beside him, leaving the remaining pair to Alcede.

“Let us begin.”

As soon as Alcede gave the signal to start, sparks crackled and flew from all the gemstones. Lyse watched from a safe distance. The gems began to glow, their light trickling into the circle in the sand. Progress was slow, as it took a considerable amount of mana.

“Hmm... This will take five minutes, I think,” predicted Alcede.

Not a moment later, Lyse sensed a presence behind her and whipped around. She saw nothing, but she was sure she’d *felt* it. The uneasy feeling lingered.

Sidis seemed to have sensed it himself. Keeping hold of the stones in his hands, he warned her, “Be careful, Lyse.”

“Of course,” she replied as she scanned the area. She couldn’t hear well over the crashing waves on the shore, making it difficult for her to get a grasp of her surroundings. But then, at the bottom of the cliff, she spied shadowy figures clambering up the rock face. All she saw at first were long antennae, followed by many little legs, and fishlike tails. “Shrimp...?”

Indeed, a black mass of shrimp-like monsters were now scaling the cliff. Lyse hardly found their presence delectable. She half hoped to see crab monsters among the crustaceous bunch. Those might have actually enticed her, but their inky black appearance *was* decidedly unappetizing.

“Is the spell circle causing this?” Egbert asked upon sighting the monsters himself.

“Very likely so, but we’re not about to let them interrupt us!” Alcede called out in a bit of a fluster.

Lyse peeked at the circle, which was now partially illuminated. Monsters would be an essential part of fueling the trial Light, but an influx of them too soon would simply interrupt the ritual. They’d have to start all over if it fell apart now, so Lyse stood her ground to defend the three men.

“Allow me to handle this,” she said as she drew her sword. “Come on out and protect us, okay?”

With that, a lupine and an avian monster leaped from her pocket and rushed to face the incoming foes. The bird soared ahead and launched a fireball at the troupe of shrimp, the resulting explosion of which annihilated a third of them.

Up next was Lyse, who cut down foe upon foe with a single sweep of her sword. “Wow, what an upgrade!” she cried in excitement.

The day before, she’d conducted a little experiment of her own by melting down some of the white stone that surrounded the Light of Origin and applying a thin layer of it to her blade. As she almost exclusively fought monsters, she thought the coating would give her an edge in combat—and her theory had proved correct. She was pleasantly surprised with how well it worked during this test run. The monsters she missed were readily tackled and mauled by her wolf.

Lyse let out a sigh of relief as the battle waned, pleased with having cleared out the shrimp. That joy, however, was short-lived. More black figures soon began creeping up the cliff. Just as she readied her sword again, she heard Alcede's voice calling out to her.

"We're ready here, Miss Lyse!"

She looked back to see the spell circle aglow and the men standing about ten paces back from it.

"I'm activating it now!"

The glow of the circle grew to be nearly blinding as the pile of black stones at its center melted into the ground. The next instant, a light the circumference of a young tree sprouted in their place. It quickly grew to be twice Sidis's height.

"You did it!" Lyse exclaimed as she and her tamed monsters retreated to the scene.

Crab-like monsters now emerged on the shore and made a beeline for the small Light. With each beast it consumed, the Light grew visibly brighter, taller, and wider.

"Just as we theorized, monsters do in fact feed the Light..." Alcede murmured.

And then, suddenly...came a familiar screech. Everyone instinctively covered their ears as they grimaced at the intense cacophonous sound.

"Gods, that noise must mean the Light..." Lyse trailed off as she looked in the direction of the capital. "The Light! It's...swirling?"

"The flickering must mean it's becoming more unstable," Sidis added. The Light had always stood like a pillar to pierce the heavens, even through previous aberrations. Yet now it spun like a stationary tornado.

"Is that because of what we've created?" Egbert wondered, as the timing suggested it was no coincidence.

"I don't know for sure, but we ought to extinguish this Light here anyway!" Panic permeated Alcede's voice as he ordered the destruction of his infant creation.

However, just like crafting it, dismantling the spell circle required a substantial

amount of mana. Alcede launched a magical attack to take care of the job—but it merely bounced off the circle.

“Allow me!” shouted Sidis, who channeled his inner Light to blast it.

It broke the circle immediately, extinguishing the model Light. The encroaching monsters took a moment to process the sudden loss of their target. Some then turned to attack the group, while others headed for the palace. Their precious Light was—

As Lyse brandished her sword again, she observed the Light of Origin shining straight and true once again. The good omen buoyed the group’s spirits as they dealt with the remaining monsters, but Egbert in particular wasn’t entirely relieved.

“I didn’t expect having two Lights at the same time would cause this much interference...” he griped. The trial hadn’t gone as smoothly as he’d hoped.

“At least we’ve learned that we can create one, and we know it works. It’s just that...”

“We’ll have to extinguish the original Light first,” said Sidis, completing Alcede’s thought.

“That’s easier said than done, though.”

“It’ll wreak havoc. But thinking about the aberrations scares me too, honestly.” Sidis looked toward the capital and sighed.

“They’re also causing chaos,” Lyse said sympathetically. She feared leaving the current situation to fester would result in even more distrust for foreigners in the empire. They needed to mend the Light one way or another lest the prejudice grow. She’d rather bear the brunt of ill rumors than have that happen.

“If we’re to extinguish the Light of Origin, we need a good reason that people will accept. But the question of how to do that still remains...” It was uncommon to see such a scowl on Alcede’s face, but he retrieved a bag of treats from his bosom as if to soothe that very problem.

Lyse began picking her brains for any inkling of an idea but alas came up dry.

Sidis stayed quiet and focused, apparently pondering the matter himself.

Then, Egbert spoke up. "I could just abdicate."

"What?!" the other three shouted, all staring at the emperor.

"You heard me. I'll abdicate and Sidis can take the throne. He bears the Light, and if we announce that his spouse does too, we can frame it as a way for them to stabilize the Light," he explained, unfazed. "And since Sidis can control the Light, we can feign ignorance and shrug this all off thanks to his oh-so mysterious powers. It's not like anyone knows what he can and cannot do, so no one could call our bluff."

"That *sounds* simple enough, but I don't know if it'll go as smoothly as we hope..." mulled Alcede. He reached into his breast pocket for another cookie to counteract the frown that had reappeared on his face.

"Wh-Whoa! Hang on a tick, Alcede! Are you really just going to roll with that plan?!" For once, Sidis seemed panicky.

"I'm inclined to agree that we need a real wallop like an abdication to justify rekindling the Light, else everyone will be up in arms. I'm just not sure that'll solve everything, is all."

"That's not the point! His Majesty shouldn't abdicate in the first place!" Sidis asserted.

Lyse nodded vigorously, believing that they should start by considering whether to accept such a course of action. Alcede's approach was too practical. He only cared if it would help revert the Light. Worse yet, Sidis was opposed to the idea that he should naturally be the one to assume the throne.

Regardless of Sidis's feelings, however, Lyse believed it was a matter that he would have to talk out with Egbert. But she kept that to herself, as she was personally against the abdication. If Sidis were to become emperor, he would have even less time to spend with her with an increased workload to show for it.

I'd miss him all the more...

Lyse would be able to stand by Sidis's side as a capable fighter and Light

bearer, but there would frequently be times Sidis had business to attend to on his own. She'd never be able to accompany him on every single foreign inspection and visit. If anything, as the empress, she'd likely be the one left to house-sit the palace. She'd be torn from him for months at a time, leaving her worried and lonely all the while. Still, objecting to his ascension for such personal reasons was selfish. If he chose to take the crown, she would do everything to support him.

Sidis has always told me to give it some thought, just in case he ever does take the throne, but I'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

The couple had to be ready in the event Egbert were to suddenly pass from illness or in an accident. Magic was powerful, but it wasn't a cure-all. As the crown prince, Sidis might one day have to ascend the throne regardless of his personal wishes. If that happened, Lyse understood that she would become empress. Egbert wasn't currently forced to abdicate, however, so they had the luxury of considering other options.

What would His Majesty do if he ever were to step down?

Previous emperors had only abdicated when their mana waned due to old age or when injured from battle. Egbert's father was one such case. The late emperor had promptly passed rule to his son after being wounded during a once-a-century massive monster invasion, knowing that his recovery would take time due to his advanced age. His condition ultimately took a toll on his immune system and claimed his life, even though he should have had decades ahead of him. It hardly mattered what excuse Egbert might use to abdicate, however. He would never be treated as an ordinary retiree. Never mind the pressing need for his strength in battle. The suspicion and speculation his abdication would arouse would be worrying enough.

"No need to get so worked up about it, Sidis," Egbert quipped sarcastically. "I know you hate that people say your mana is stronger than mine, even though we both know it's true. I'd tell you to not sweat it if that'd make any difference, but it wouldn't so I won't. Honestly, if you can't already tell, I'm chomping at the bit for this chance to abdicate."

"And why is that?" he asked.

“I’ve got my own life to live, and the throne keeps me from doing that. I’ve always said I’d give it to you anyway, and now’s a better time than any. Come on, Sidis! Take the crown and let me have my freedom!” Egbert shouted as he reached up and grabbed at the sky.

Sidis wasn’t nearly amused. “What is it you’re so dying to do?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out!” Egbert was all smiles when he lowered his arm. “But at this rate, I’ll never find love for myself either.”

“Surely, Your Majesty, that isn’t true...”

“Oh, but it is. There isn’t anyone within the royal family with strong enough mana.”

“Eh, if you expand your target age range a little...” interjected Alcede.

“And be labeled a menace for targeting someone too young or too old for me? I want someone around my own age, thank you. Besides,” Egbert paused before expanding his point, “other people might find fault in my spouse not bearing the Light when Sidis’s bride-to-be carries it. Even if they don’t, the lingering anxiety sure won’t convince anyone to marry me.”

That truth pained Sidis too. “I wouldn’t want to be the only one to find my happily ever after while forcing you to bear the sadness of being so alone...”

“Hey, ease up on the pity a little. You’re making it sound like I’m dying of loneliness,” chided Egbert. He certainly hadn’t been looking for Sidis to agree, much less rub salt in the wound. “But in all seriousness, I don’t know when I’ll ever have an opportunity to abdicate like this ever again. It’s not the kind of thing you can do casually, you know? Plus, I want to retake my freedom and enjoy it while I’m still in good health!”

Alcede shrugged in defeat, exasperated by Egbert’s feverish excitement. “Well, you certainly have a point, Your Majesty. If the emperor is to abdicate, then he should have the ceremony in front of the Light of Origin. No one would suspect a thing if we take some extra time with it behind closed doors, as I expect extinguishing and reigniting the Light won’t be quick. The spell circle will be far more enormous than what we used today.” He paused before turning to Egbert and saying, “Not that I would call you a free man after the fact, Your

Majesty. It would take quite some time to get Sidis up to speed with his official duties, among other reasons.”

“I’m sure that won’t take long. He’s stood in for me countless times. Plus, I’ve already got plans to bask in my freedom as quickly as humanly possible,” Egbert responded swiftly. His resolution, for whatever reason, made Lyse worry more. “Let’s head back to the capital first. After Sidis and I discuss everything there is to discuss, we’ll deal with any other lingering problems and then I’ll put my secret plan in motion.”

Sidis looked none too pleased—unlike Alcede, who’d already given up all hope.

Chapter 5: The New Light

As Lyse, Sidis, Alcede, and Egbert flew homeward on raptorback, all was peaceful up until they spotted what appeared to be inky splotches upon the landscape.

“Are those...” Lyse began.

“Monsters,” Sidis said, confirming her suspicion. “Alcede, let us attack from the air! We’ll halve their numbers before they reach the capital.”

“You got it,” Alcede responded.

Lyse could do little but watch as the imperial men hurled magical lightning and flame to devastate the swarms of monsters below. The airborne monsters, however, were a different story. When they struck, Lyse unleashed her own tame avian monster to counterattack. Working together, the party cut down even more of the monstrous swarms than they’d hoped. Only two hordes reached the city walls, where imperial soldiers were ready and waiting for them. After a volley of spells from the palace, the monsters were no more.

“Looks like we’re all good here, but...” Sidis sighed as he glowered toward the palace. He’d spotted another flock of flying monsters, which was smaller than the hordes on the ground but still cause for concern.

Egbert and Alcede made a beeline for the flock, breaching the swarm where the imperial soldiers couldn’t reach and launching large flourishes of magic to clear out swaths of the avian monsters. Sidis and Lyse followed their lead and headed straight for the wretched birds. Sidis fired lightning from his fingertips, frying his targets to a crisp. The palace knights quickly moved into position to offer their assistance as well. The monstrous flock quickly dwindled from sparse to nonexistent, finally allowing Lyse and the men, followed by all the knights on raptors, to land in the courtyard.

“Your Majesty!” shouted Lasuarl as he came rushing.

“Any damage to the palace?” Egbert inquired.

The duke looked somewhat troubled. “I’ve only received word of minor collateral damage, so I shall have it repaired right away. However—”

Amidst Lasuarl’s report, they overheard a knight grumble, “When are they going to figure this crap out? Gods, it’s never been this bad before.”

It was hard not to be sympathetic, as monsters were flooding the palace nearly every day now at twice their usual strength. The soldiers were understandably exhausted. Lyse couldn’t help noticing that this particular knight had his uniform slightly out of order and deduced that he was a fresh recruit. The moment Lasuarl whipped around, the young knight started and turned pale.

“Get those repairs squared away,” said Egbert. “And Duke Lasuarl, I’ll get you details about improving the situation very soon.”

“Truly, Your Majesty?” probed the surprised Lasuarl. Lyse wondered how Egbert was going to justify himself. Sidis, meanwhile, looked displeased, and Alcede looked concerned over what was to come. “When shall I expect to hear from you?”

The emperor looked at the stern duke and replied, “I’m going to pull some strings tonight. If it goes well, I’ll have an explanation for you then.”

“Very well, Your Majesty.” Lasuarl then left the scene following a valedictory bow.

“All right. We’ll be setting things into motion tomorrow, so let’s hurry up and get to work,” Egbert declared as he turned to the prince. “Sidis, you come with me. We’ve got lots to talk about, don’t we now?”

The emperor beckoned for his cousin to follow along, and Sidis obliged. Lyse saw the two of them off, which was really all she *could* do under the circumstances.

It was the middle of night, yet Lyse couldn’t sleep a wink. She gave up on trying and crawled out of bed to sit on the sofa. The cause of her restlessness was obvious—the discussion between Sidis and Egbert still weighed on her mind.

“What are they going to decide...?”

She was hopeful for a resolution that wouldn't involve Egbert abdicating. It wasn't as though they were out of other options. He simply saw this as the perfect opportunity to shed his shackles, and disregarding his wishes in all this would pain Lyse just as much.

“As the saying goes, heavy is the head that wears the crown. Perhaps it's too heavy after all.”

As the previous emperor's son, Egbert had been born under the expectation that he would one day ascend the throne. Had that tormented him all this time? Lyse felt guilty for not being more considerate. As she heaved a sigh, a knock came at her bedroom door. She shot up from her seat and rushed over, but to her surprise, Sidis let himself in before she could reach it.

“You've been awake this whole time, haven't you? Here I was thinking I'd update you if you had already fallen asleep...” Sidis had apparently knocked, not expecting her to answer.

“How could I?” she said. “Come, Lord Sidis.” This conversation wasn't one to be had whilst standing around, so Lyse promptly ushered her fiancé inside. She offered him a seat on the sofa and something to drink, but all Sidis wanted was to sit and hold her hand. “So? How did the talk with His Majesty go?”

Sidis stared at the floor. “His Majesty has made up his mind...” he began, then recounted the details of their conversation to Lyse.

That afternoon, Sidis had followed the emperor to the villa to get away from any prying ears. They settled into Egbert's room, where he brewed a pot of black tea for the two of them to share.

“Allow me, Your Majesty,” Sidis offered.

To this, Egbert replied, “My room, my rules.”

The two of them thus sat down together, each with a cup of tea in hand. It made Sidis realize how long it had been since they'd had the chance to enjoy one another's company in private. The last time was when Egbert had dismissed his guards and taken a stroll with Sidis instead during the inspection in Olwen.

And before that, it was likely before Egbert's coronation.

When the late emperor had decided to abdicate, it had cast the palace into a hectic flurry of preparations for all the appropriate rituals and ceremonies. The exhausted Egbert had been lucky to find a moment to himself, and since Alcede had been busy at the time, he'd decided to enjoy it by having a spot of tea with Sidis. He'd even dismissed all of his attendants so he could have some pure peace and quiet with his cousin. Things had been comfortable then, unlike the awkward silence that permeated the room now.

"Remember the last time we had tea together, just the two of us? Must've been right before I took the throne," Egbert said to break the ice, likely intuiting the unease.

Sidis was touched that he remembered it as well. He thought of Egbert like a brother, always there by his side when the going got tough. That was why he wanted to keep supporting Egbert as emperor, and also why he took his desire to cede the crown so poorly. He wished for a way to make it known to everyone that he wanted Egbert to remain on the throne.

"We were so busy back then, yet you somehow found a sliver of time for us to catch our breath. It seemed so natural that you were ascending back then that I wasn't anxious at all."

"But you're anxious now?"

"Not so much anxious, but..." Sidis took a moment to think before answering, "I'm baffled, I suppose."

Egbert looked troubled. "As natural as you felt it was for me to assume the throne at the time, it's now natural for me to step down. I knew from the beginning that I would one day relinquish the crown, and I knew I was going to pass it to you. That's why I shrugged and accepted it in the first place."

The two men looked at each other over their teacups.

The emperor continued, "You don't want to succeed me so you can keep protecting me, and I understand that. But you should also understand that because I have no progeny of my own, you *have* to take the throne. You've been avoiding this for so long, hence your reluctance, right?" He paused for a

beat. “If I weren’t sovereign—let’s say Kirstin was and *she* proposed to abdicate, you know you would think nothing of succeeding because, naturally, the person with the strongest mana should have the throne.”

Sidis remained silent. Everything Egbert had said was entirely true, but he felt the alternative—agreeing with him—would be worse.

“It’s not that I despise my duties as emperor. Hell, I take pride in being able to protect my empire. But I want more freedom. I want to stretch my wings. And what do you think is the best way for me to do that?”

“I don’t know...” Sidis shook his head. He didn’t *want* to know.

“It’s to let someone else take the crown while I offer support as emperor emeritus. It’s just the right balance between working and living my life. I’ll have time to pursue my own dreams! Is that not a wonderful thing?” Egbert beamed as he held his teacup aloft. “Not to mention, you stand to gain plenty from this.”

“Do I?” That statement piqued Sidis’s curiosity, as he couldn’t imagine reaping a single benefit from this arrangement.

“You normally never get the support of a former emperor. After all, you can’t ask someone on their deathbed—much less a corpse—to lend you a hand, am I right? But here I am, healthy as a horse. When unexpected work piles up, you can call me in. That means you and Lyse will *always* have time to go all smoochy-smooch. You have my word.”

Now Egbert really had Sidis’s attention, for that was a valid point. If they waited to pass the crown until Egbert met some kind of misfortune, Sidis would immediately be deprived of all the personal time he spent with Lyse. If he didn’t have Egbert around to tag in whenever needed, he would have to sit through every last meeting and stay on top of every last detail personally.

Sidis could still remember how busy Egbert had been following his coronation. There were rites and procedures, and by the time everything was all sorted out, countless hours of sleep had been lost. Even Sidis, who was only helping out at the time, had been wrapped up in it all. Thinking about it now, he expected to lose out on *at least* a month of personal time with Lyse following his ascension—which was simply unacceptable.

“Most important of all, we ought to think about Lyse. If something happens to me, that will make Lyse empress overnight. And that won’t be easy for her since Qatora wasn’t part of the imperial family. She has no familiarity with the role. Moreover, Mother is long gone, so she can’t exactly pass anything down to Lyse,” Egbert explained.

The transition would indeed be a burden on Lyse. And if she grew busy herself, she would have less time for Sidis. In his eyes, that was a tragedy all its own.

Egbert continued, “But if I’m still in good shape when I abdicate, I can help her out too and make her life easier by serving in an advisory capacity. I could even live in the villa as a dog so you can call me whenever you need me!”

The more Sidis thought about it, the more he saw Egbert’s point. The soon-to-be-wed couple would have a lot more time to spend with each other as long as Egbert was around to help out. Still, Sidis pursed his lips as he mulled it over.

“I don’t want anyone to speak ill of His Majesty if I ascend the throne,” Sidis said with a stubborn look on his face as he wrapped up his explanation of his conversation with Egbert. Lyse nodded sympathetically. “Imagine the vitriol if we can’t mend the Light and he abdicates. Then if I were to put my foot down against the naysayers, they would be forced to hide in the shadows and would say even worse things yet.”

The harder people were pushed against, the harder they pushed back. Even those who might be outwardly amicable could still harbor negative feelings for the emperor and his cousin. Sidis knew that.

He continued, “I really hope we can solve the mystery of the Light while His Majesty still reigns. The only problem is that, well...”

“The truth about the Light of Origin wouldn’t be much of a secret anymore.”

People both inside and outside of the empire believed that the Light was a gift from the gods rather than a man-made blessing. To not only challenge that firmly held belief, but to disprove it entirely... That was bound to spark a whirlwind of problems. Once the world knew the truth, one reaction was guaranteed: *“Imperials are using their magics to rob our lands of their fertility!”*

Those who coveted the empire's bounty would undoubtedly jump to that conclusion, and populists would gobble up their drivel. It would open the floodgates of hostility for Razanate and wash out the rickety foundation of the current peace. Just as the empire had contained the Donan threat, the nation would be once again plunged in peril because of the Light. Imminent war would jeopardize the stability the imperials had fought so hard for.

That was why the secret of the Light could never be revealed. Yet at the same time, Lyse and the others saw no way to reconstruct its spell without inviting questions about its true form. The most reasonable course of action might well be to claim that the current emperor was unfit to support the Light, have him abdicate to quell the people's fears, and then instate Sidis who bore the Light after all. That plan might arouse suspicions of its own, but nothing that couldn't be stamped out.

Sidis understood all of this, yet he looked so conflicted as he bit his lip. "Is it possible to fix everything while keeping the Light's secret *without* having His Majesty abdicate...?"

If Sidis fixed the Light, Egbert would go down in history as an incompetent emperor. *Is there really no other way?* Lyse racked her brain. If someone as clever as Alcede couldn't come up with a better solution, she certainly didn't think she could—still, she had no intention of giving up.

Sidis's shoulders slumped as he continued, "Anyway, His Majesty once again implored me to take his place but made me promise to seek your opinion first."

"Why me?"

"If I become emperor, you shall be empress. If that idea repels you, I vow to remain single for my entire reign. I will then step down and ask for your hand again," he said with furrowed brows. "If even marriage is off the table, I cannot bear to be without you. You are my one and only love. If we cannot officially marry, I nevertheless beg you to stay by my side. But rest assured that my tenure will be short. After I resolve the current situation, I shall figure out a way to restore the crown to its rightful owner and cause my own disappearance."

"Um, Lord Sidis, I'm sure you don't have to disappear..." To have an emperor abscond for marriage would be extreme, to put it politely.

“I don’t know how I would relinquish the throne otherwise. Of course, I will discuss this all with His Majesty beforehand. And if he has no choice but to be reinstated as emperor, the people’s disdain will turn to me upon their relief to have him back. They’ll reswear their fealty and, in time, regain their confidence in his rule.” Sidis’s plan was to set himself up as a scapegoat, the thought of which didn’t please Lyse. Any scorn that befell Emperor Sidis would taint the Light as well, as he would be the one reigniting it.

“If that’s the case, you should at least claim to have lost your Light, Sidis. That would be a much more favorable excuse than your sudden disappearance.” It was awkward and desperate, but Lyse could think of no better plan.

“You’re right. I could pretend as if my mana waned.”

“Yes, that’s even better. If they’re placing you on the throne *because* you have the Light, losing your magical strength would justify you abdi—” Lyse gasped as something suddenly clicked in her head. “Wait. What about this?”

“Did something come to mind?” Sidis asked her, only to be hushed. Lyse needed a moment to gather her thoughts.

Couldn’t a Light bearer just temporarily assume the throne for the purposes of restoring the Light? No, better yet...

“I think we can make this work even without crowning a Light bearer. For example, we could claim to have a vision or some other divination that the gods have bestowed Light bearers to the emperor as aides, and that’s where we come in to assist His Majesty.”

“Then we could create some sort of special position?”

“Yes, that’s exactly it, Lord Sidis!” Lyse jumped to her feet. “You wouldn’t need to become emperor in that case. And even though we bear the Light, it’s not as if we use our powers normally. They’re only really called upon in emergencies.” Aside from helping with problems involving the Light of Origin, all having the Light within them did was potentially increase their mana. The empire favored magical supremacy, but that was the extent of the influence.

“That’s very true. If a non-bearing emperor cannot preserve the Light, that would set a precedent. No subsequent emperors would be judged by their

characters, but solely by whether they possess the Light. And that's a grim future I'd like to avoid."

It just so happened that Sidis and Lyse had both acquired their powers by freak accident and that neither of them wished harm against the empire. The same was also largely true of Seren, despite being a late bloomer. With more life experience, the Alstran ugly duckling was sure to grow into a fine swan, although Alcede's interference may yet wreak interesting twists and turns in his path.

It would be a problem, however, if anyone born with the Light harbored ill will against the empire. If they kept their evil intentions hidden and managed to become emperor thanks to their extraordinary power, it would surely herald the collapse of the great Razanate, and her citizens would be the ones to pay the price. Neighboring nations would even be in danger if a Light-bearing warmonger were to take the throne. Demanding that all future rulers bear the Light was simply asking for trouble.

"There's another rub. What if we put this plan into play, yet His Majesty refuses to do anything but abdicate? How would we counter that?" Sidis asked, eager to make sure they had all their bases covered.

Lyse reached her finger out to smooth away the wrinkle on Sidis's brow. "What *would* His Majesty do, I wonder?"

"If I had to guess, he would..."

Lyse softly laughed at what Sidis suggested. "If that's the case, then I shall brandish excuses of my own and try to win over His Majesty."

Her confidence surprised Sidis. "You have something in mind?"

"You see..." Lyse proceeded to explain herself.

In the end, Sidis gave his blessing. The silver-haired prince thought his beloved's plan just might work.

The next morning, an ear-splitting scream rang throughout the palace when a chamberlain went to wake up Egbert—"Y-YOUR MAJESTY?!"

Knights and court ladies flooded his chambers as soon as they heard the commotion for fear of a threat to the emperor's well-being. Rather than chaos, however, what they found was stark silence. All of His Majesty's attendants were simply staring wide-eyed...at a dog as white as the purest snow—unadorned, as Egbert preferred—lying atop the cream-colored sheets of the royal bed.

The middle-aged chamberlain fell on his behind, too shocked to stand back up. He pointed at the dog, stammered out, "His Majesty has transformed!"

One of the knights who'd rushed to the scene chuckled. "Oh, did His Majesty use magic to transform again? He turned into a dog during that last monster attack too." The other knights who'd witnessed the battle concurred, much to the relief of the servants who'd never seen it before.

The chamberlain on the floor, however, shouted, "No! I thought His Majesty was playing a practical joke as well, but try as I might, I couldn't dispel the magic!"

"Are you sure His Majesty isn't just overpowering you?" a lady-in-waiting chimed in.

"I wondered that myself, but His Majesty seems to be transformed by something far more powerful. See for yourself!"

Multiple onlookers took the chamberlain up on his suggestion, but nary a one was able to dispel the transformation.

"Is that really His Majesty? What if, you know, it's just a dog?" a knight muttered aloud.

This elicited a gasp in the room. Perhaps His Majesty had simply put a dog on his bed to fool everyone before sneaking out. Perhaps the chamberlain had simply been fooled. Everyone was wondering the same thing—but Egbert beat them all to the punch.

"No, it's really me," he said, drawing all eyes to the white furry canine. The crowd could hardly believe their ears. "Sorry for the commotion, everyone. It seems like I'm stuck in this form for now...unless one of you can return me to human form," Egbert entreated with an adorable tilt of his head.

The crowd simply stared for a moment, and then...

“Whaaaaat?!”

“You’re kidding!”

“Your Majesty?!”

Emperor Egbert had become a dog—and word spread through the palace grounds like a wildfire. Such news would be kept top secret under ordinary circumstances, but it was necessary for everyone to be informed of the situation lest anyone mistakenly try to throw His Majesty in a kennel.

“What’s wrong with throwing him in a kennel?” Alcede quipped, unimpressed. “We could make a slightly bigger one and then slap on a sign that says ‘Emperor.’”

Lyse made the mistake of imagining it in her head. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“Hey, now there’s an idea,” Egbert—still in canine form—said with a snort. “We agreed that no one would be able to argue with my stepping down if I’m stuck as a dog, but honestly, this is going better than I expected.”

“You were perfect, Your Majesty.”

“I think it’s because I got everyone to try to break the spell. That made it all the more convincing. Not bad, huh?”

“I suppose a skeptic who couldn’t dispel the magic themselves would have no choice *but* to believe...” said Alcede. He then heaved a sigh that reverberated through the nearly empty council chamber.

Members of the imperial family and a select few nobles were soon to gather for an emergency meeting. Because of His Majesty’s seemingly unbreakable transformation, many an urgent task now needed to be reassigned, hence the call for an assembly first thing in the morning. As Alcede was decidedly not a morning person, everything had already been set in motion by the time he was fully up and awake. Sidis and Lyse had likewise been invited to attend, of course, and the four of them were now waiting in the council room.

“How did you come up with an unbreakable spell anyway?” Alcede asked Egbert, presuming it was something new he’d discovered.

“I had Karl’s help.”

“Eugh...” Alcede reacted in true disgust. “That’s why no one can undo it?”

“That’s correct. This unique combination of transformation magic and anti-dispel magic means that no one can break this unless their mana was stronger than mine,” he explained with a smug grin.

“That’s how badly you wish to abdicate, I see...” groaned a troubled Alcede.

As Lyse nodded sympathetically along, someone knocked at the door and promptly entered the room. It was the raven-haired Duke Lasuarl with a grim look on his face. He marched directly to Egbert and kneeled before him.

“Forgive me for casting magic upon you, Your Majesty,” he said, bowing his head low.

Before the emperor could even finish nodding in assent, Lasuarl cloaked him in a bluish-white flame. Lyse wasn’t expecting it and it gave her quite the start, but she was assured when she saw the emperor unharmed and still transformed the very next moment.

“You truly are stuck in this form...” Lasuarl gasped.

Does that mean even the duke also had his suspicions? Either way, this little experiment seemed to convince him. Egbert took it rather graciously.

“Indeed, Duke Lasuarl. My apologies for summoning you to this meeting on such short notice. The others have yet to arrive, so please take a seat,” Egbert directed. Lasuarl accordingly pulled up to the table, still visibly distressed.

“Your Majesty! What tragedy!” exclaimed Kirstin—Egbert’s older sister and Lasuarl’s wife. She came running in and squeezed her brother in a tight hug.

“Dear Sister, please do not fret. Though I may be in a dog’s body, I’m rather comfortable like this. Better yet, I can even speak normally.”

“Why *is* it that you can speak in human tongue?” Kirstin questioned as she stared at his little snout. “Or rather, why are you like this at all? Do you have any ideas, Your Majesty?”

“I’m not terribly certain,” Egbert began, “but I presume that it’s related to the aberrations. You’ve seen my clones, right? It might be something similar, except now it’s affecting me physically.”

“Oh, my poor brother...” Tears welled in Kirstin’s eyes.

Even Egbert felt bad to make his sister cry. “A-Anyway,” he stammered, “I’ll save the details for when everybody arrives. Please, take a seat by Duke Lasuarl.”

“All right...” she said as she dabbed the corners of her eyes.

Lyse and the others felt extremely awkward. Sensing this, the emperor said to them, “Don’t think I’m taking back what I said though.”

“Of course, of course. I know you’re not one to go back on your word, Your Majesty, given how obstinate you are...” After muttering that, Alcede shot a curious look at Sidis, who’d been quiet all this time. He then turned to Lyse and broke out into a grin. This made Lyse flinch.

Did he notice something? This was Alcede, after all. Lyse wouldn’t be surprised if he’d caught on to anything Sidis and Lyse had planned. This wasn’t the time or place to ask, however, and he would much rather catch Egbert off guard with whatever he’d sussed out. Lyse was just happy the sly duke was willing to keep feigning ignorance for the time being.

Eventually, the council assembled. All of the imperial family was accounted for, but a few nobles were absent due to business abroad—keeping Razanate’s diplomatic lines open was especially critical at the moment given the situation at hand. Everyone in the room sat staring at the white dog at one end of the long conference table.

Egbert stood in his seat and put his front paws on the table, which was covered by a yellow cloth stitched with an intricate rose pattern. Why he chose to stand was a matter of practicality, for if he’d sat normally with his chin table-height, His Majesty would lose the little majesty he had left and be reduced to naught but a precious, heart-melting puppy. Still, even as Egbert tried to maintain his dignity, some of his council members seemed to be given to warm and fuzzy feelings. At any rate, they’d all already been informed of Egbert’s condition. They knew this doggy was His Majesty the Emperor.

“It is obvious why I called you all to convene today,” Egbert finally said, breaking the silence. “Ever since the Light of Origin began behaving strangely, monsters have come attacking in droves, among other oddities and issues. I had thought that it might be some kind of blessing, as it was also producing clones of me. But, oh, how wrong I was.”

His downturned face was enough to bring pangs to everyone’s chests. Lyse steeled her nerves and heart, doing her best to imagine Egbert’s real face. Others, however, were not so sharp. They were putty before his canine charm.



“Oh, he’s doing this on purpose...” muttered Alcede, his voice quieter than a whisper. He, Lyse, and Sidis were all standing behind the emperor, however, so Egbert caught every last word with his pointy doggy ears.

Lyse wholeheartedly believed Alcede was correct. Egbert had been crafty ever since he was a child. He knew how to work his charms, to which Qatora had fallen victim many a time. Lyse could thus easily see that he was intentionally eliciting sympathy from his retainers with his furry little face in order to get what he wanted.

Egbert continued his pouting act, saying, “Perhaps also an effect of the Light, I am now stuck in this form. I believe it will not only hinder me from fulfilling my duties, but also draw contempt from those from other nations.” He paused briefly to take a deep breath. “We ought to rectify this as swiftly as possible, yet no solution has presented itself. I therefore believe someone who can handle the Light should take the throne in my stead.”

“Your Majesty, are you saying...” An imperial who looked to be about fifty years of age could barely choke out the words. “Are you abdicating?”

This caused a clamor in the room.

“Abdicating?!”

“Someone who can handle the Light? Does that mean Prince Sidis?”

“I suppose that does make sense...”

“Will a Light bearer be able to do something about this situation?”

Just as Egbert was about to speak up and calm the hubbub...

“It wouldn’t be necessary for His Majesty to abdicate,” someone asserted loudly.

The room was shocked to hear it, as he never used such a forceful tone of voice outside of battle. The royals, nobles, and even Duke Alcede—who worked with him on nearly a daily basis—all looked at Sidis in surprise. He now commanded the attention of the whole room.

“His Majesty entertained the idea, but we’ve now learned that we can preserve the radiant pillar with the power of the Light,” Sidis declared. “Based

on the evidence we've found, we believe that a protective spell was applied when the first emperor of Razanate discovered the Light of Origin. We also believe that spell is what's causing the aberrations now."

His audience was understandably shocked.

"A protective spell, you say?!"

"The Light of Origin has magic applied to it?"

"Why would something that powerful need protection?"

"Does magic even work in close proximity to the Light in the first place? Think of how hard it is to use in the villa."

Lyse had anticipated this reaction. It was surprising enough to learn there was magic to protect the Light; they might just faint on the spot if they learned the Light was a magical construction. That needed to remain a secret to everyone but the next emperor—and this plan of theirs depended on that secrecy.

Egbert, meanwhile, snapped around and glared daggers at Sidis. He knew he couldn't openly question what Sidis was trying to pull, and since Sidis had accounted for that, Egbert also knew he was powerless to stop him.

"What kind of magic is powerful enough to bring about the aberrations?" asked Lasuarl after calming down a bit.

"It is a spell nearby that encircles the Light. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it stabilizes the Light rather than giving it any form of defense," claimed Sidis out of thin air. Given how the Light swallowed up anything that so much as touched it, it was certainly plausible that it had some form of protection. It was important to emphasize, however, that this spell (not that it actually existed) wasn't to ward off the dangers of monsters. "We believe that the Light of Origin was unstable until this spell was cast."

"Then that means this spell is the reason the Light has remained unyielding for so long..." a council member speculated.

"Yes, and it's most likely that the stabilization spell has deteriorated because the Light has worn away at it for centuries."

"Just like the Light provides us with mana, it must have been affecting the

magic all this time,” said Lasuarl, seeming fully convinced.

“But what about His Majesty’s affliction? Prince Sidis, have you learned anything about that?” another member of the imperial family chimed in.

“We believe it’s an effect from the ascension ritual,” Sidis answered.

“What do you mean?”

“In the ascension ritual, the new emperor gives some of his mana back to the Light. That process may have registered His Majesty as the custodian of the stabilization magic.”

“I see. And it’s waning?”

Sidis nodded and affirmed the duke’s theory with all seriousness. Only about half of what Sidis had said was true, but how else could they explain why Egbert was the first to spawn a clone before the Light bearers? That was where the ascension rite came in. If the new emperor’s mana supported the Light, then it was indeed possible he shared a connection with the radiant pillar.

Whatever the case may be, Sidis’s audience bought into the explanation. His suppositions sounded credible enough to them. Some were more convinced than others, but everyone at least seemed relieved that the Light could be remedied. And rightfully so. It was naturally the wish of every imperial to see the Light return to normal. Furthermore, the thought of passing the crown in such turbulent times only caused them more anxiety.

People, in general, found comfort in familiarity. That was especially true for the long-lived imperials. It was only natural that they craved the status quo. Under the circumstances, they wouldn’t immediately call for Egbert’s abdication even if blame for the aberrations fell on him. He’d proven himself as a ruler by extinguishing the Donan threat, and the council members believed he’d come through for them again. That faith and desire for stability were exactly what Lyse and Sidis had capitalized on.

Even those who want to see Sidis on the throne know it’s too risky to have a change of rule during such turmoil when we don’t even know if it would change anything. On the other hand, the concrete steps we’re suggesting will definitely have an effect...although I do feel sorry for His Majesty. Lyse couldn’t see

Egbert's expression from where she was standing. He was still and quiet, but he eventually stood down from the table and planted himself back in his seat.

"Why, oh why, Sidis, was I not informed of this beforehand?" the emperor asked.

Sidis had a slight smile on his face. Surely this meant Egbert wasn't all too angry. "Do forgive me, Your Majesty. We only ascertained as much before daybreak, and with the situation this morning, I did not wish to burden you unnecessarily. But worry not. Our nobles, knights, and soldiers are of the utmost skill and have successfully defended us in situations far more dire. We can rely on their strength." He was flattering everyone in the room, and they were grateful. The nobles looked noticeably more relaxed.

"These are our capital and palace as well, of course. We are proud to defend our home with our fighting prowess. That said, given the frequency of the recent monster attacks, our supply lines have been affected. It would be most favorable if we could mend the stabilization magic and the Light at once," Duke Lasuarl added.

Egbert nodded. "How shall we proceed then, Sidis?"

The silver-haired prince took the cue given to him by the emperor along with a step forward. "First, those of us who can approach the Light will enter the villa. This will of course include Your Majesty and Duke Alcede for his assistance. Then, to calm the Light and lessen the interference of the Light on magic, I shall be borrowing the help of my fiancée, Lyse."

A member of the imperial family's hand shot up. "Excuse me for asking, but couldn't you do everything yourself, Prince Sidis? For example, if *you* were to go through the ascension ritual..."

"I'm afraid not," Sidis said flatly. "First, His Majesty already has a connection with the Light. If I were to pair myself with the magic as well, I fear what negative consequences that might bring."

"Hmm, that might make it even less stable than it is now," said Alcede in support.

Sidis nodded before continuing. "If the aberrations continue or worsen, we

may yet need to take more drastic measures. But it's possible that the magic is stable enough now for His Majesty, with our aid, to repair the spell."

"I see. Thank you." The imperial family member who'd asked the question—along with everyone else in the room—was sated in knowing that this was the only choice.

"However, the preparations for the ritual are extensive. Not only will it use various special rocks and minerals, but setting it up will also take a few days. In the meantime, I beseech everyone to keep up the fine work in maintaining the integrity of the capital and palace defenses, as well as protecting His Majesty's domains." Sidis finally turned the command of the conversation back to Egbert. "What say you, Your Majesty?"

"If this is the best path to take, then it shall be our way forward," he assented. "Since we need to prepare, let us break for today. Please pass word to everyone who was unable to attend. Let it be known that we're proceeding with the ritual to mend the Light."

With that, the emergency council meeting was adjourned.

Emperor Egbert and his personal entourage departed the meeting chamber before the rest of the council. Once they were out in the hallway, Sidis tried starting a conversation.

"Your Majesty..."

"You three come with me," ordered Egbert, turning his head to glance at Lyse, Sidis, and Alcede. He looked sternly pensive, but it was hard to see past his endearing puppy charms. Lyse still felt pangs in her chest—perhaps an attack of her conscience for causing him so much trouble.

I can't say I regret anything though, since we've managed to prevent His Majesty from abdicating. She shook off the guilt and followed Egbert at his request.

When they arrived at the emperor's quarters, he immediately dismissed his chamberlains before nimbly hopping up on the sofa and sitting down in one swift motion. "Take a seat," he invited, imploring the others to do the same.

"Don't mind if I do," said Alcede, who seated himself next to Egbert.

Meanwhile, Sidis and Lyse sat across from them.

“So, care to explain all this, Sidis?” urged the emperor in a half sigh. He was neither weary nor stupefied, nor did he sound angry. If anything, there was a glimmer of hope hidden in his tone.

Sidis bowed his head. “First, let me apologize for selfishly ruining what you had planned, Your Majesty.”

“Hmph. You really don’t want me to abdicate, huh? Hence all the excuses, like how I’m supposedly connected to the Light and we shouldn’t have an emergency ascension?”

At this, Alcede chimed in to say, “No, actually, I don’t doubt either of those points. When you poured your magic into the ground during your coronation, Your Majesty, I believe it may have bound you in some way to supply mana to the Light of Origin. Though it’s said that the ritual offering is for the gods, I do believe it’s functionally replenishing the Light with mana.” He paused there, demonstratively holding up his index finger. “However, we *are* about to relight the pillar, so it’s not like that really matters in the grand scheme of things.”

“Precisely, Your Majesty,” concurred Sidis.

The emperor sighed again. “So you’re really just making a mountain out of a molehill?”

“These half-truths *do* stem from the truth, and that makes them believable for our audience,” Sidis answered nonchalantly.

Egbert plopped onto his belly and shot a piercing stare Sidis’s way. “Do you really hate the idea of me stepping down that much?”

“Absolutely, Your Majesty,” he answered with nary a hint of hesitation. “I don’t want my long-awaited wedding to be marred by any sort of trouble or woe. And once Lyse and I are married, we’ll live happily ever after in the wing built just for us.”

“Wha—” Egbert instinctively rose to his feet upon hearing this. “Would handing over your villa wing really be so terrible?”

Sidis quizzically beheld his cousin’s reaction. “Isn’t that obvious? You *do*

understand I had it designed specifically for Lyse and myself, right? Why should I happily surrender our happy future home to anyone?" he asked brazenly. "I already compromised by allowing you the pet room. I shan't cede the whole wing."

"Aha ha ha!" Alcede interjected through his laughter, "How very like you, Sidis. Still, part of me is relieved *that's* your motivation in all this."

Lyse, on the other hand, was none too amused. Naturally, she was already aware of Sidis's true motives—but listening to the men openly discuss how his every move was all to safeguard his dream wedding made her squirm.

Nevertheless, Sidis paid no heed to her embarrassment and continued fervently, "Listen, Your Majesty. The first floor is open concept so that when Lyse and I have children, they can play in the courtyard while we watch over them from the dining area inside. Meanwhile, the bedrooms are all on the second floor. And the third is closed off to the outside so that our children may —"

"Please, Lord Sidis, say no more." Lyse begged for him to cease his monologuing, though he didn't seem to understand why. She knew this was simply his nature. It was how he'd been for the past hundred years. And she was fine with that—as long as he stopped gushing.

"Okay, I get it. You're fussy about your upcoming marriage," Egbert said to calm Sidis down.

"Remind me never to bottle up my love for a century..." Alcede quietly quipped to himself. "Anyway, getting back to the topic at hand, I don't think we need to worry about keeping this all a secret since we've already established that only those with very strong mana—like His Majesty or myself—can withstand being so close to the Light. All in all, my thoughts on the plan are that it's brilliant. Well done, Sidis and Miss Lyse."

He flashed a smile at the couple before continuing, "However, the biggest question now is how to preserve and retain the Light of Origin." He pulled a bag of cookies from his pocket to keep up his energy and offered some to everyone.

"I'm good," said Sidis.

“Not in the mood for anything sweet,” responded Egbert.

“None for me either, thank you,” said Lyse, rejecting his offer.

“Well, more for me then.” Alcede began gobbling up the treats by the fistful. “For now, we’ll get Seren to fill up the underground reserve. Then in the future, if we can make it easier for monsters to fly into the Light, that should buy us another millennia or so of fuel. We should also think about how to discreetly leave the truth behind for future emperors.”

At this, Sidis raised his hand. “Um, I have a request, if I may. Could we perhaps prevent people from making contact with the Light as well?”

“Making contact with it?” Alcede asked.

“What do you mean?” Egbert pressed. Both men were rather confused.

“I understand that we’ll need to ensure monsters can reach the Light, but I’m hoping we can encircle the pillar itself with a wall about human height just to make sure that no one can touch it from inside the villa,” Sidis explained.

“Ah, right...” Egbert nodded. “You make a good point. We’ll be rebuilding the Light anyway, so we might as well take precautions against anyone else becoming a living sacrifice like Qatora.”

The three imperial men all looked at Lyse, who smiled in return.

“I think that’s smart. If the Light had been inaccessible back then, I—and everyone else there, I’m sure—would have found a safer way to save Lord Sidis. Perhaps we could include something in the magic?” The Light’s spell circle was intricately complex as it was, so what would a few modifications hurt?

“Hmm, good idea. We could include different magic for situational contingencies. We could even use your made-up protection ritual as a cover to do it,” said Alcede as he polished off his bag of cookies. “The only potential ramification is that cutting people off from the Light will prevent any new Light bearers in the future.”

“As long as Lyse and I pass it on, that shouldn’t be a problem. We can simply say that the gods have deemed that we no longer need the assistance of new Light bearers. We just need to ensure that future emperors know the truth of

the matter,” replied Sidis.

Egbert agreed. “Very well. Then let’s have Seren keep up the good work while we remake the Light.”

“There *is* one potential problem in that regard, Your Majesty. And if things don’t go according to plan, it might be a really big problem,” Alcede said, crossing his arms. “Our scale model worked well, but making a full-sized Light is still something of a question mark. We ought to prepare an excuse we can fall back on if it comes to that.”

“Better safe than sorry...” Just imagining the fallout if the operation went awry sent shivers down Lyse’s spine. Trying to pick up the pieces from there would mean a great deal of trial and error.

She, too, put her mind to wondering what kind of excuse might buy them the time they’d need in the worst-case scenario. If the Light was extinguished for anywhere between a few minutes and half an hour, it would be easy enough to write off. But if the outage lasted for days, it would undoubtedly cause a major scene. And the scariest part of all, as Alcede had pointed out, was that none of them knew what outcome they’d be in for until they took that courageous step forward.

“If we flounder for a day or two, then we can blame the failure on me being a dog. Then I’ll abdicate and install Sidis on the throne, which should prevent any tarnish to the Razanate name,” Egbert proposed casually.

Sidis looked thoroughly disturbed by this idea. He loomed over Alcede, begging, “Do *not* allow that to happen! Please! I beg you!”

“I know, I know! Just give me my personal space, will you?” the duke pleaded, physically bending over backward as he tried pacifying the despairing prince.

Following that meeting, Seren toiled ceaselessly day and night to fill the farthest reaches of the underground chamber with black stone. Alcede, meanwhile, turned the treasury upside down in search of the necessary gemstones for the spell circle. Finding ones of suitable size was proving difficult.

“Your Majesty, may I borrow the gem on this staff here?” he requested

before swapping the ruby on the royal scepter out for a fake.

“Your Majesty, may I borrow this jewel from the empress’s heirloom necklace?” he petitioned as he replaced the large chunk of jasper with a glass counterpart.

Egbert had no problems with any of this for the sake of mending the Light of Origin. They would have plenty of time to find new precious stones afterward. Besides, it wasn’t as if anyone looked at the scepter but so closely anyway. All they had to do was keep the chamberlains silent and no one would be any the wiser—or so Egbert told himself. His practical approach to the matter helped Alcede complete all his preparations for the ritual, save for double-and triple-checking the spell circle personally.

Progress with Seren, however, wasn’t so smooth. It was now apparent that the Light had been consuming black stone at a much higher rate since the onset of the aberrations, and it was nigh impossible for him to keep up. To help out, Lyse and Sidis traveled to the seaside cliffs three nights in a row to gather enough supplementary stone to fully pack the underground reserve.

“Why do we need to fill this place all the way up to reignite the Light anyway?” Sidis asked as he was tending to the job.

Alcede, who was there in a “supervisory” capacity, replied, “It behooves us to replicate the conditions under which the Light was originally created. And since we don’t know how many times it’ll take before we finally succeed, we really ought to minimize opportunities for things to go wrong. It’s important to make sure everything is in order for a project this grand in scale.”

“Can’t argue with that. Let’s eliminate any uncertainties that we can then.” Thus convinced, Sidis got back to work and carried another load of black stones underground. While there, he also made sure to stoke the flames as well. “I feel for you, Seren, having to drudge like this for our happily ever after. Hey, when everything’s all done, maybe I’ll ask you to come over for dinner or something. I mean, I spent so much time perfecting our home to make Lyse happy, I really should show it off a little, right?”

Seren’s expression betrayed his heart. He was dead inside. “Why can’t that be meeeee?!” he wailed, clutching a chunk of black stone as more of it sprouted

from all corners of the cavern.

Lyse felt absolutely terrible, but she wasn't about to jump in and risk jeopardizing the whole plan. She silently apologized to Seren and made a mental note to make this up to him in the future.

The moon rose and fell another four times, finally giving way to a bright, cloudless day—the perfect weather to execute the plan to reignite the Light. Everyone in the palace had been kept in the dark. They were simply told to stay as far away from the pillar as possible. This helped to ensure that no one would detect the magic being used. Citizens of the capital were only told that a ceremony to restore the Light would be held and that they should go about their daily lives per normal.

As for citizens who lived farther out than the capital, that was where the weather came into play. Razanate worshipped the Light, and religious services were typically held in the morning and the evening. The beaming midday sun often made the Light too difficult to see at a distance on clear days—which should make it all the harder for anyone to notice it going out. The nobles of outlying domains would only need to be reassured if and only if something went wrong.

Lyse, Sidis, Egbert, and Alcede went to meet up with Seren in the depths of the Villa of Light. They brought him food and water, as he'd be stationed underground to keep an eye on the reserve through the process. It was his responsibility to keep the black stones topped up.

“Thank you very much for your participation, Seren. If all goes well, we'll fast-track the construction of your new accommodations so that you can have all the dogs you always wanted,” Alcede assured him.

This was music to Seren's ears. Keeping dogs was his heart's greatest desire, but he had to wait for his own villa for that dream to become reality. “How many can I have?! Would maybe ten or so be okay?”

“You can have twenty if you'd like, so long as you take care of all of them. Servants can help you out with all the cleaning, but keep in mind that everything else falls to you.”

“Hrm... Walking more than three dogs at once would be rather hard, I think. I could have a yard for them to run around in, but taking them on longer walks would still be good. And I’ll be playing with them all day too...” Seren muttered to himself as he headed back into the cavern.

It was then time for Egbert to change clothes, as he could only revert to normal once inside the privacy of the villa. “Whew. The human body sure is uncomfortable,” he said as he rolled his right shoulder.

“Is being a dog that much better, Your Majesty?” Alcede asked, genuinely curious.

“You bet it is! I don’t deal with all these bulky clothes and gaudy decorations.”

The emperor didn’t always need to dress the part, Lyse thought, but she decided to keep that to herself. It *was* odd to see Razanate’s highest-ranking nobleman walk around in a poncho like a commoner. Anyone who came across him like this would never be able to tell he was the leader of the country. Sidis and Alcede must have thought the same thing, as they awkwardly chuckled to themselves and held their tongues.

The four of them finally approached the Light but stood in silence as they beheld it. This reaction was only natural, as the sight was quite a lot to take in. Fifty or so copies of the emperor stood side by side with their arms around each other’s shoulders, looking like a line of cancan dancers. There were more than a dozen Lyses now as well, all happily linked arm in arm with grown versions of Sidis’s clones for whatever reason. There were also ten or so Serens skipping along with the Egberts.

“Surely they’re duplicating far too quickly...” Lyse remarked. The atrium that housed the Light was packed like a bustling garden party with a few too many guests. Over the past several days while everyone was preparing for the ritual ahead, the clones had indeed been generating at a swifter rate than before.

“The worse the aberrations, the more they replicate,” muttered Sidis in explanation. “But, boy, would I like to be surrounded by all those Lyses...”

She didn’t exactly know how to respond to that. On one hand, she was pleased to hear that he treasured her so, but on the other, she was disgusted by the thought of him basking in her mysterious doubles. “Extinguishing the Light

should make them all go away, right?”

“I can only assume so. The clones were created by the Light’s power, after all,” Alcede answered. “Now, as we discussed, that task is all yours, Miss Lyse.”

“Understood.”

Lyse stepped toward the Light of Origin with a spear clad in white crystal. Whereas the Light absorbed and destroyed black stone, white crystal was strong enough to withstand it. That was why she’d chosen a weapon reinforced with the stuff to destroy the spell circle of the current pillar. The spear gave her a little bit of extra reach—and thus safety—over a sword, as getting too close to the pillar was dangerous even for the highest-ranking members of the imperial family. Lyse thankfully had the extra protection of the Light within her, which was chiefly why she’d been assigned the job.

Alcede completed all the final checks, then gave the order, “Let us begin!”

Lyse made eye contact with Sidis, and together, they approached the pillar. About ten paces out from it, Lyse was suddenly struck by the recollection that Qatora hadn’t had the luxury of giving herself over to fear in such close proximity to the brilliant beam. There might have been a brief flash of it when she’d burst into the atrium, but that was it. As for Lyse, however, the pressure of the situation was bearing down on her with full force.

“Do it,” Sidis prompted her.

“Right.”

Lyse gripped the spear with both hands and tried to breach the beam, but the recoil of steel and stone crashing into the pillar shook her very arms. The tip of the spear was eroded away by the Light.

Hrgk...

Lyse felt sicker by the second, flexing her core in an attempt to still her churning stomach. She then dug her heels to brace for her next attack, but stabbed at the Light again to no avail. The damage she inflicted to the spell circle was superficial at best.

“Just a little more!” Sidis shouted.

She clung tighter to the spear and tried a third time, but the Light deflected most of her force back at her. Sensing that brute strength was futile, she took a moment to recover before channeling the power of her inner Light and thrusting with all her might.

“Hngraaaaa...?”

The spear sunk deeper this time, its tip making contact with the soft dirt beneath the Light. The pillar instantly dimmed, for part of its spell circle had been broken. Sidis now grabbed hold of the spear and began attacking the edge of the circle. Again, the beam became more and more translucent. Its golden hue dulled as the floating particles of light dwindled, almost like an apparition vanishing into the air.

A strange feeling welled up within Lyse. It was like she was trudging and stumbling through a dense fog, but it all suddenly lifted and she found herself back in front of her future home. The Light of Origin disappeared, revealing a ring of formulae on the ground where it had stood for centuries. The spell circle was a mere two hands in diameter—much smaller than Lyse had expected. Its arrangement, however, was spot on. It looked almost identical to the scale model they’d ignited by the beach, right down to what appeared to be the gray remains of gemstones in three key locations, which Sidis cracked open with Lyse’s spear.

The sight was a heavy burden off of Lyse’s heart. *Thank goodness nothing’s there...* She’d dreaded the absolute horror that would have been finding Qatora’s corpse or the shredded tatters of her uniform, but fortunately, there was nothing of the sort.

“Okay, let’s fix the spell circle!” Alcede ran over and began redrawing the lines on the ground.

Lyse had almost forgotten the whole point of this operation. As she came back to her senses, an unpleasant realization dawned on her. “Wait. *They’re* still here,” she said, staring at the clones—who were all staring at where the Light had been.

“How horrifying...but forget about that for now! We’ve got work to do!” Alcede hollered, spurring Sidis and Egbert to jump into action.

The three imperial men endeavored to complete the formulae, which didn't take long with most of the framework still in place. Alcede then spent a few moments making modifications and additions. Following that, they swiftly swapped out the gemstones. All in all, the whole process took less than ten minutes.

Alcede stood up and stepped out of the circle. "Now it's time to relight the pillar. Everybody, get into position."

Egbert did as instructed but kept glancing over his shoulder. "You sure they'll be all right?" he asked, creeped out by the clones staring back at him.

"I mean, all we know is that they mimic people who are connected to the Light in some form. They may just disappear when the new Light comes on. And if they don't, well, I suppose we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." For once, Alcede didn't have a clever plan.

"We don't have much time anyway," the emperor announced as he prepared himself for the ritual.

"Very well. Let's do this!" At Alcede's behest, the three men each grabbed a pair of gemstones and began pouring their mana into them. This was a larger version of their scale experiment at the shore, so it was even harder to pump enough magic into the circle. Lighting it would take some time.

But as they'd only just begun, Alcede yelped. "Gah!"

"What?"

"What's wrong, Alcede?!"

Egbert and Sidis whipped around to find the duke sheepishly smiling.

"Oops. Forgot about the thing I brought to help refill the mana supply quicker. Miss Lyse, would you please fetch the big ol' rock from my bag and huck it in the spell circle?" he asked.

The others were visibly relieved to hear nothing was wrong.

Lyse reached into the large backpack Alcede had brought along and retrieved a brilliant white rock. "Hmm? Just what kind of mineral is this?" she muttered. When she felt it cling to her hands and saw it dimly glow, she realized it was no

ordinary rock.

As Alcede continued to channel his mana into the spell circle, he answered, “It’s one of the bigger crystal chunks we were able to get our hands on. When I was helping Karl with his research, we discovered that when we condensed the crystals into large pieces, they started to absorb mana. So I thought that might help us today.”

“You sure about this thing?” Sidis asked, a discernible hint of worry in his voice. Lyse was similarly unsure of the oddly glowing rock.

Alcede shrugged. “Eh, it should be fine. Just gotta put some mana into it and...” When he looked to Lyse, he quickly trailed off and his smile transformed into a look of fright. “Miss Lyse! Get over here!”

“Huh?” Alcede wasn’t looking at Lyse; he was looking past her. When she glanced over her shoulder to see why, the very sight made her gulp...for the clones, who’d been so docile before, were now shuffling toward her with outstretched arms. “Wha—!”

“Lyse! Run!” Sidis shouted.

Lyse readily obliged. There wasn’t much distance between her and the clone army. They were practically clawing at her by the time she tried to break free of them.

What in the gods’ names is happening?! Did I get thrown into a game of tag or something?!

Lyse had little idea what was going on, but she wasn’t about to let herself be overrun. She deftly eluded the clones’ grasp, slid to the edge of the ritual site, and chucked the glowing boulder into the middle of the spell circle with a grunt.

It was then that she gasped in terror. *Oh no! What if it’s so big that it ruins the formulae when it hits the ground?!* As she panicked, the white stone landed squarely in the center of the ring with a thud, and instantaneously, the spell circle began glowing as the stored mana dispersed into it.

“Get back!” called Alcede.

Lyse heeded his command and retreated toward the villa. The magic was

firing up and would soon reignite the Light. They couldn't afford to stay so close to it any longer. Fortunately, as the boulder activated the circle, the clones calmed down once again and let Lyse be.

"Are you okay, Lyse?" Sidis rushed over to her and embraced her.

"I'm fine. Let's hurry away from here."

As the white stone dissolved, the spell circle grew brighter and brighter. Once the crystal was entirely gone, an intense light flooded the area. Sidis turned away from the dazzling brilliance and buried Lyse in his chest, shielding her from the rays.

"All right!" Egbert shouted. Though Lyse couldn't see him, she knew his voice. Then, shortly after his exclamation, the blinding flash was gone.

"Excuse me?" Sidis said, turning immediately to behold the new Light.

Lyse pulled away from him and turned toward the spell circle herself.
"Huh...?"

The new Light of Origin stood as wide as it had before, but it didn't even reach the roof of the villa in height. Everyone watched in quiet shock as a ball of light whistled up into the sky before popping and dispersing midair.

"What was that? Fireworks?" Sidis was baffled by the phenomenon. Lyse was too.

"Any ideas why it's like this, Alcede?" Egbert asked.

The duke shook his head. "I tried my supposed improvements to the formulae on the small-scale version, but I guess they didn't work here."

"You mean they did before?"

"Of course. I wouldn't have employed them here and now otherwise, but, well..." Alcede seemed to lose the rest of his sentence. The Light now looked nothing like it had before.

"Does it need more mana?" Sidis suggested.

"That might be it. I think we can still make a few edits to the spell circle if we take it down right now," replied Alcede.

“We were prepared for this to take a day or two anyway, so let’s take our time and get things right,” insisted Egbert.

Hearing the emperor’s words brought to mind memories Lyse had rediscovered the other day. They’d gone through all the proper steps to recreate the Light, but the original Light was the product of a magical miscalculation that had overloaded the pillar and sent it towering into the heavens above.

“Hmm... So what are we missing?” she mumbled to herself.

They were lacking a key element of the equation—whatever it was that had overloaded the magic. Lyse ran through the whole process in her head again. What else *was* there besides scribbling out the formulae and dumping in some mana? Sidis stepped toward the circle with the white crystal spear in hand, and just then, everything clicked for Lyse.

“Um, hold on!” she cried out.

Sidis, with the spear already raised overhead, lowered it immediately. “What’s wrong, Lyse?”

“I think I’ve figured out what we’re missing.” Sidis, Egbert, and Alcede walked up to her as she continued, “Duke Alcede, do you have any black stone?”

“Not a whole lot, but here,” he said as he dug a handful of black pebbles out from his pocket. “I had a stash for protection just in case anything happens. His Majesty should be carrying some as well.”

“Could you please share them with me and Lord Sidis, then go hide inside the villa?”

“Sure thing. I don’t have anything else up my sleeve, but it sounds like you do, Miss Lyse, so let’s give it a shot.”

Lyse gratefully took the stones from Alcede and turned to her fiancé. “Lord Sidis, come with me to the spell circle. Bring those rocks with you too, please.”

“Okay. What shall we do after that?”

“When our ancestors poured their mana into the circle, they wished for bountiful lands so that their children and children’s children would never go

hungry.” They were exiles who’d fled from another country and settled in the once-barren lands that became Razanate. They hadn’t just poured their magic into the spell, but all their hopes and dreams into the creation of the Light of Origin. “The Light was originally to bless the land with fertility, but things didn’t quite go as planned.”

Egbert gasped. “That’s right! We’re not really getting this right unless we go overboard too.”

Lyse nodded in agreement.

“That’s far too dangerous, Lyse. Allow me to handle it,” Sidis insisted.

“No,” she firmly objected. “I believe I am the most resistant to the Light. After all, I’m the one who passed it on to you. It might be weaker secondhand.”

“But...” Sidis wanted to protest, but he knew Lyse was right.

“What about Seren?” Alcede asked.

“I doubt he feels as protective of the empire. Moreover, I doubt that his recently induced bout of melancholy makes him suitable for the task,” she explained.

“Okay then, Sidis, stay with Lyse and keep her safe,” ordered Egbert.

“Understood,” the prince agreed, his concern hardening into determination.

Lyse and Sidis approached the not-quite-complete beam that was still throwing fireworks into the afternoon sky. *This would be beautiful at night*, Lyse thought as she looked up. If they waited until nightfall, however, it would cause an immense headache. Everyone across the continent would be able to see the Light behaving oddly once the sun went down. That said, its newly reduced size was the entire reason Lyse was able to approach it so calmly now. She and Sidis were safely able to walk up to the pillar with the protection of the black stones they were carrying.

“So, what exactly is the plan, Lyse?” he asked.

“Do you remember how we could generate a similar light with the white stones around us? My plan is to cast them into the Light while offering our wishes and prayers.”

“I see. We’re going to overload it with mana from the outside. And so the black stones are just for our protection?”

“Precisely.”

The Light of Origin wouldn’t truly be the Light of Origin without being immense and powerful. Getting it to that state, however, was a potentially risky endeavor even for Lyse and Sidis, bearers of the Light. They would be right next to the pillar when it happened, hence the black stones to keep them safe.

Sidis grasped his beloved’s hand as they stood before the Light. “Lyse, once you throw the stones into the pillar, promise me you’ll flee as quickly as possible. Or rather...” Sidis paused to kiss the back of her hand. “I’ll be here to whisk you away. No more being swallowed up by the Light.”

“That sounds good to me,” she replied with a smile, bringing one to his face as well.

“So, what shall we pray for?”

“I think the same thing our ancestors did when they first made the Light.”

Lyse believed it was most prudent to replicate the circumstances of the Light’s creation as closely as possible. Sidis agreed. The couple thus looked into each other’s eyes and began gathering the white stones by their feet.

I pray that the empire’s land shall become bountiful. Lyse pictured the pillar stretching up into the sky as she imbued the crystals with her Light. That was better than the alternative, even if something was lacking, causing it to be weaker than before. Before long, small rays of light shone from her clenched fist.

“What the...?”

The next thing Lyse knew, the clones were staring at both her and Sidis’s hands. There was something awfully unsettling about the size of the audience, even if they were just clones. However, stare was all they did.

“L-Let’s just ignore them,” Sidis suggested, and so they began hurling crystals into the small pillar. It grew taller in the process, but it was still a far cry from its former glory.

“It seems like this may take some time, but at least it’s getting bigger...”

“I don’t know how much we’ll accomplish even if we keep at this for a day or two.”

As the couple continued tossing crystals into the Light, the clones merrily sauntered toward it before jumping right in. Each time one of them did, there was a metallic clang as fragments of light fell to the ground and the shards of white stone piled up. One by one, all the Egberts, Serens, Sidises, and Lyses disappeared into the pillar.

“My Lyses...” Sidis whimpered as his fiancée’s clones vanished too.

Lyse fought back laughter. When she held her hand out to catch one of the falling white shards, she heard the whispers of somebody’s inner voice. *“Soar to the skies, O pillar of light... Protect our children and their children too...”*

“Lyse!”

Sidis lifted her into his arms as she stood there dumbstruck and ran toward the villa. She was powerless in the moment, but the muscles in her back tensed up as she felt the strong pressure of mana bearing down on her. Egbert and Alcede threw the doors open for them with nary a moment to spare, then closed them with a slam just as quickly. When they banged shut, Lyse felt a breeze blow over her. She then felt naught but the pressure of gravity on her. She scarcely even paid any mind to the screeching explosion outside, for that almost felt normal now.

The four of them looked at each other before Sidis gingerly creaked the door open. “Ah...”

“Back to its former glory,” mumbled the emperor.

A radiant pillar now stood in the atrium, towering up into the sky just like it always had. The beauty and familiarity of the sight soothed the very depths of Lyse’s heart.



Epilogue: A Dazzling Wedding Day

Petals and glittering sparkles of all colors rained down from on high. Imperial knights on great white raptors floated the flowers down with wind magic while they shone light into the air each time the bell in the palace cathedral rang. As today was a special day, the front garden was open to the public and citizens of the capital thronged before the central terrace.

The emperor, clad in his crimson cape, stepped before the colossal congregation as the light cast down from the sky changed hue. He unconsciously heaved a sigh, betraying his sublimity and solemnity. Egbert waited for the bell to stop ringing, then addressed his subjects. "I thank you all for gathering here on this wonderful occasion. Today, Light bearers Lyse Winslette of the Kingdom of Olwen and Duke Sidis of House Álfr, who I have always considered a younger brother, are joined together in matrimony. I ask for your blessings upon the happy couple."

With that, he turned to signal the couple to step forward. Lyse was waiting in the shadow of a nearby building with her stomach in knots just from thinking about the crowd.

"Let's go," Sidis said, reaching out to take her hand as they ambled onto the terrace to greet the audience. The palace walls shielded them from any big gusts, but the lace train of her white dress fluttered in the breeze, glimmering as the silver threads caught the rays beaming down from overhead. The sight of it overjoyed Sidis, his eyes narrowing into thin crescents. "Oh my, how gorgeous. You're absolutely ravishing, Lyse."

"Goodness, Lord Sidis... How many more times are you going to say that?" she asked, heaving a sigh of her own. He'd first said as much before the wedding when he came to check on her. He'd then whispered it during the ceremony, and once more again upon leaving the cathedral.

"I wouldn't be able to stop myself, even if I wanted to," he replied in all earnestness. "I finally get to see you in your wedding dress. How could I not be

happy?”

Sidis truly looked enamored with his bride, and when his words and actions spoke so profoundly to his love for her, how could Lyse not be happy as well?

“Pushed all the right buttons, did she?” chimed in Alcede, who was standing off to the side.

Sidis graciously ignored that comment as he and Lyse walked to Egbert’s side. They were met with loud cheering when they revealed themselves to the people. A royal wedding was a good excuse for a bit of partying for the common folk. Of course, Sidis’s wedding wasn’t nearly as grand as the emperor’s would be, but this happy day for the stalwart and beloved prince of the empire warranted the lavishing of wine and desserts. The same would go for Alcede if he were to marry.

“He ought to consider getting wed himself soon. I’m sure even *he* must feel something with all the joy in the air,” Sidis said as he waved down at the crowd.

“I’m sure Alcede will find someone for him sooner than later. He still has more than a century to live, after all,” Lyse replied. Given the long life spans of imperials, there wasn’t really an age considered “too old” for marrying. There was no rush in that regard.

“Congratulations!” yelled out the crowd. “All the best to you two!” Smiles filled everyone’s faces, likely aided by the fact that the Light of Origin was back to normal.

The scene had Lyse thinking. Ever since recalling memories of her previous life at a young age, she’d thought she would spend the rest of her life alone. Never had she truly considered marriage—and certainly not a wedding so opulent. Though she was seized with trepidation on the occasion, seeing Sidis’s joy brought her some too.

“A song for the newlyweds!” shouted someone. The crowd then broke out in a chorus extolling the Light of Origin.

Sidis and Lyse listened intently, and after a time, he turned to her and said, “Oh, that’s right. Alcede and Karl stripped some of the white crystal off the ground and found another spell circle buried beneath it.”

“Really?” Lyse was genuinely surprised. “What does it do?”

“We’re not quite sure, but you know how every new emperor performs a rite in front of the Light? Well, they think it’s powered by the mana overflow and records their wishes too. It seems like it was added after the Light was created,” Sidis explained. “It also seems to be where the clones came from. Karl said he caught faint glimpses of what looked to be ghosts.”

“So the clones are an effect of that magic?”

“Yeah. They believe it dates back to the third Razanate emperor. Alcede concluded that the circle was put in place to figure out a use for the abundance of mana. It was likely intended to be a record for later emperors to see what they should pray for or some such.” However, the spell circle was ultimately affected by the Light. “Because of the aberrations, it also became supercharged with mana. That was probably what caused it to produce copies of people with ties to the Light—or, at least, that’s what Karl said.”

“Oh, so the clones weren’t directly created by the Light.”

“Either way, they helped restore the Light, so I guess there’s always a silver lining to everything. And that applies to you too, I think.”

“How so?” Lyse asked quizzically.

Sidis embraced her. “You know, I don’t think Qatora ever would have returned my feelings. It was painful to see her perish before my own eyes, but having you truly helps ease that pain.”

“Lord Sidis!” Lyse yelled out as he leaned in so close that she couldn’t see anything but his face. She couldn’t believe his audacity given the extraordinarily huge crowd watching them—but precisely because of the crowd, she couldn’t push him away for fear of how it would look.

Sidis kissed her before she could finish panicking, drawing a deafening cheer from their audience. It embarrassed her so badly that she could just run away, yet she smiled in satisfaction when she saw how gratified he was.

“I don’t want to hear any more complaints about how saccharine my baking is,” mumbled Alcede.

“They sure are sugary sweet, all right,” agreed Egbert.

What do you mean “they”?! It’s all Sidis! So Lyse wanted to quip back, but she held her tongue. She looked up at her husband, who was still beaming.

“You’re cute when you pout like this too, Lyse. I can’t help but grin knowing that I’ll get to see it for the rest of my life,” he told her.

If anything, hearing this helped her calm down. If Sidis adored even her angry scowling, that just proved how hopelessly in love he was. Sidis, meanwhile, took her silence as consent and went even further, lifting her into his arms. As she gasped in surprise, another round of cheering broke out.

“Lord Sidis! Please let me down!”

“Hold still, Lyse. I’d like to carry you now,” Sidis announced. Lyse felt this was quite out of the blue, but it wasn’t as if she could resist him anyway, so she let him do as he pleased. “Your Majesty, we’re just going to take a short rest, so please excuse us.”

“Sure. You have until the reception. Make sure you don’t miss it,” Egbert replied, although Sidis had already started walking away. The emperor could only laugh at his cousin’s eagerness as he saw the happy couple off.

“Prince Sidis! To where are you headed?!” hollered shocked members of the imperial family, nobles, and servants.

Sidis simply breezed past them all, calling in response, “We’re heading back home for a moment to prepare for the reception. We’ll be back soon.”

It was a fine excuse that no one could possibly refute, as there was a two-hour break between the afternoon ceremonies and evening reception. Sidis thus surprised the guards posted to the villa as he proudly walked inside with his new wife in his arms. He took her to the living room on the first floor, which faced the garden. The climbing red roses that snaked around the hedges were in full bloom.

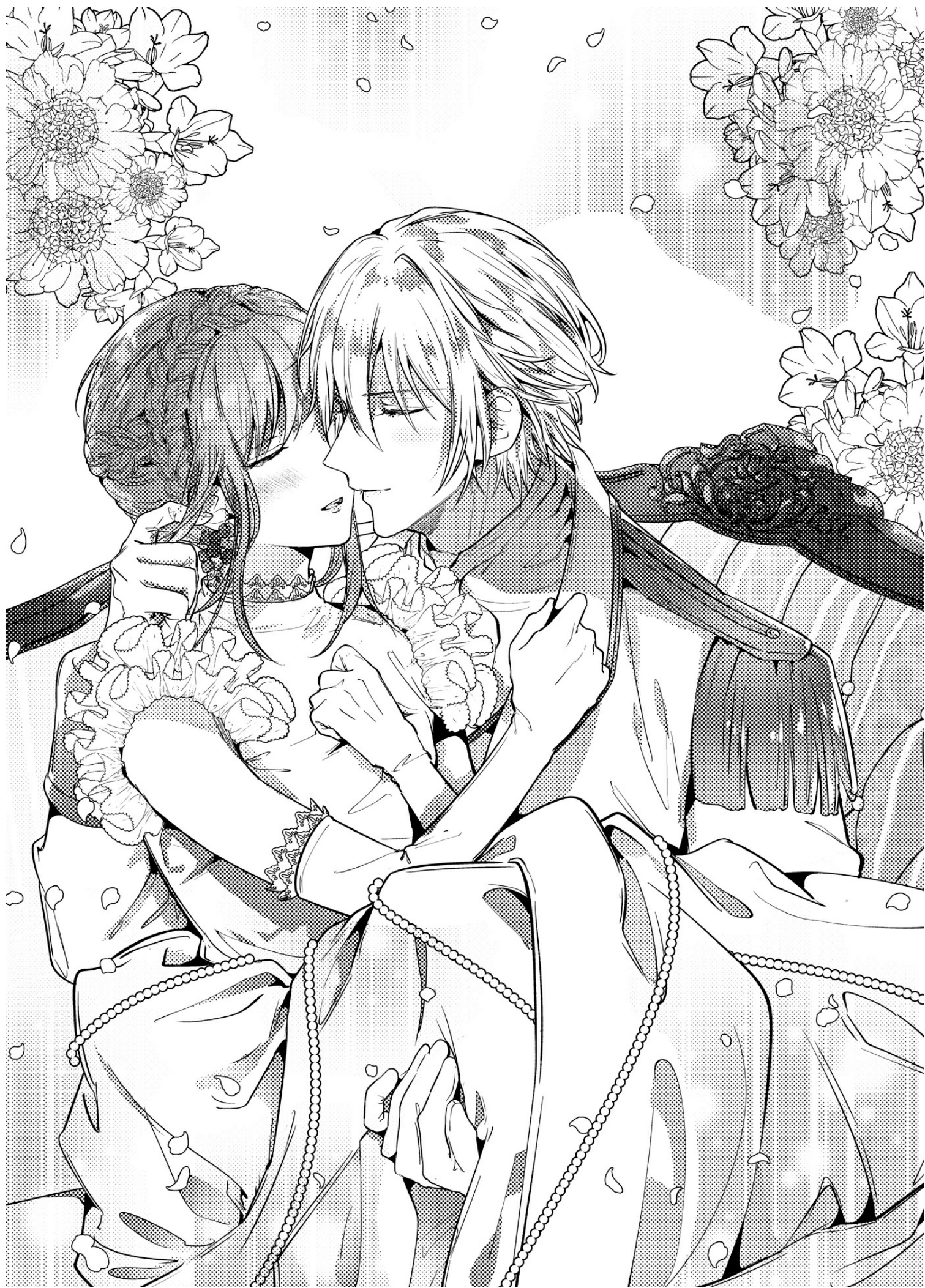
“Oh, the flowers are beautiful,” she remarked.

True to its purpose, the garden was a spectacle to behold. The sight of it soothed Lyse’s soul. The flowers had yet to bloom when she’d last checked on

them. Since she and Sidis would formally move into the villa after the reception this evening, they'd both been popping in and out of the new wing as their belongings were moved in over the past few days.

“But why did you bring us here now, Lord Sidis?” It would have made more sense, she thought, to go to their chambers in the palace to prepare for the reception.

Sidis sat on a sofa with Lyse still in his arms. “I wanted to get a taste of our future together,” he said as he planted his lips against hers.



It felt so natural and so good that Lyse had no intention of refusing him this time. She slowly surrendered to his warmth as her heart quieted down, although butterflies were aflutter in her stomach. It would be some time before reason got a hold of her again. “Hm? Um, we can’t exactly talk about our future like this, now can we?” she asked when Sidis pulled his face away after satisfying himself with the prolonged kiss.

“Don’t worry. I’m not planning to do anything more, so we can talk all we want,” he said cheerfully, kissing her again on her temple this time. “First, we’ll get rid of His Majesty’s room...”

“Do I sense some deep-seated resentment?”

“Not at all. But who is His Majesty to demand his own room in a newlywed couple’s home? I’ll just be removing the third wheel.”

“Sounds like resentment to me,” chided Lyse.

Sidis smiled. “I stand by what I said—your pout is adorable.”

“Of course you would say that.”

“You seem disapproving. But that’s okay. I’ll find joy with you by my side, even if you’re peeved with me at times,” he said as he embraced her snugly.

As flustered as she was, Lyse couldn’t help smiling back at Sidis.

Afterword

Hi, everyone! Kanata Satsuki here. Out of all the books in the world, you chose to pick up the fourth volume of *The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting*, and I can't thank you enough for that.

As you might have gleaned from the front cover already, are Sidis's dreams finally going to come true?! After being engaged for so long, he's at last getting the bride he wanted—or, at least, he *should* if not for those pesky aberrations! Thankfully, my editor made up for it with additional cutesy scenes. The sweet stuff gets away from you if left up to the author, so I'm so grateful that my editor has my back.

In addition, I'm so blessed to have a manga adaptation of this series. The second volume is already on sale, even! You can read it on the web at Ichijinsha's Zero-Sum Online, and I'd be delighted for you to see how Akari Chikusa brings Lyse, Sidis, Egbert, and Alcede to life.

As always, I'm deeply grateful to my editor. Thank you sincerely, and I'm sorry for never being sure how to write the story! I'd also like to thank Yoru Ichige for the art. You can really feel the love radiating from Lyse and Sidis on the front cover! The illustrations of Egbert truly tug on my heartstrings every time I see them. I'd believe every word he says in doggy form.

This book couldn't have happened if not for the hard work of the editorial department, the proofreaders, and the publishing team. And most of all, thank you, dear readers, for your support. I hope that you found even the tiniest bit of enjoyment reading this book.

-Kanata Satsuki

Bonus Short Story

Just Before the Wedding

“Lyse...”

“Yes?”

The couple stood at the entrance to the grand cathedral. In mere moments, the silver doors engraved with a climbing rose pattern would swing open and the ceremony would begin. Sidis had called out to his fiancée, but nerves prevented any further words from escaping his parted lips.

Lyse squeezed his hand in anticipation. Whatever he had to say now had to be important. “Is something the matter?” she asked quizzically.

“Er, um,” he sputtered. “Lyse...”

“Yes?”

Call and answer, the exchange repeated. He began fidgeting with his beloved’s hand, eliciting an involuntary giggle from her at the tickling sensation. This, in turn, softened his stiff expression.

“I know this timing leaves a lot to be desired, but something’s been nagging me for a while,” he started in a mumble. “You still, um, want to marry me, right? So much has happened that, you know, I wouldn’t blame you if you were simply standing by me here and now out of obligation...”

You really can be a worrywart, she thought as she stared straight up into his eyes. “Lord Sidis, if that’s how I felt, I wouldn’t have gone through the hassle of so many fittings for this dress. And it’s not as if I’m some foreigner ignorant of the empire—I know I have the right to object and call the whole thing off.” She took a deep breath before continuing. “I didn’t just get swept up into marrying you. I’m standing beside you here and now because I *want* to marry you.”

“Lyse!” His face was positively glowing as he embraced her tightly, drawing soft chuckles from the knights and servants standing by at the door.

“Oh, Lord Sidis! Not now!” she pleaded in embarrassment.

He released her immediately “Fine, we’ll pick up where we left off later.”

“We will?”

Before Lyse could inquire further about what Sidis had in mind, a knock came from the other side of the doors. That was their cue. The couple quickly looked themselves over one last time, then crossed the threshold into their new life together.



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The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride: Volume 4

by Kanata Satsuki

Translated by Osman Wong Edited by Megan Denton

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