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

Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Yoru Ichige

The illustration depicts a young man with long, flowing white hair and green eyes, wearing a dark blue and black military-style uniform with silver accents. He is looking towards a young woman with long, wavy brown hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a red military-style jacket with gold buttons and a white lace collar. They are holding hands, and the woman is looking at the viewer with a slight smile. The background features a large, ornate white archway and several large red roses. A pink diamond-shaped badge with the number '1' is in the top right corner. The title is written in a mix of elegant serif and cursive fonts across the middle. The author's name and illustrator's name are at the bottom.

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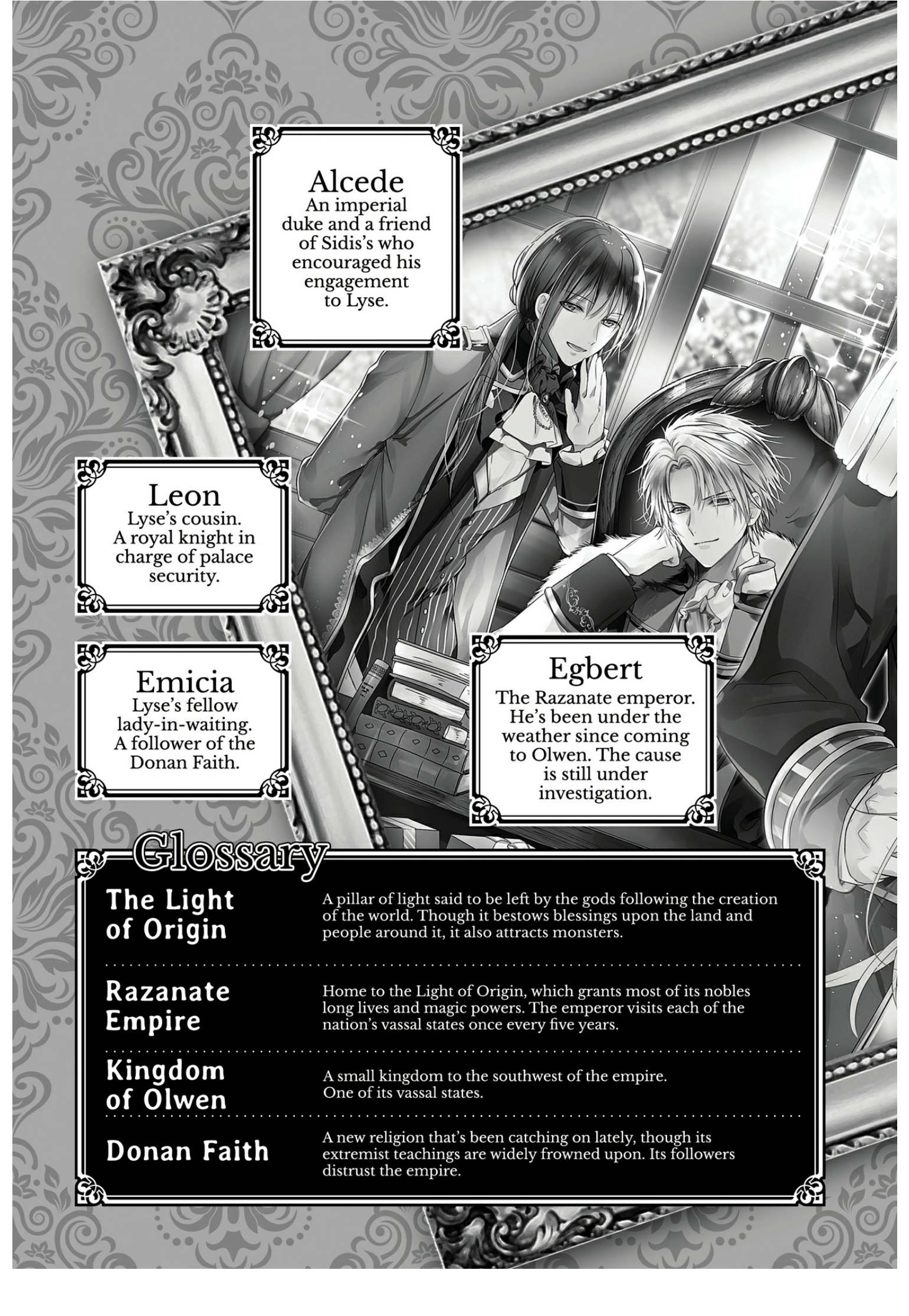
Sidis

An imperial knight.
He personally chooses
Lyse to be the emperor's
lady-in-waiting, and the two
of them wind up engaged
shortly thereafter due to a
certain incident. He wishes
to take Lyse back home to
the empire as his bride,
so he's actively pursuing her
as she tries to avoid him.

Lyse

The daughter
of an Olwenian baron.
Currently a lady-in-waiting
at the royal palace. She
remembers her past life as
a knight of the empire,
including a dark secret
that now has her avoiding
all things imperial.
This makes her especially
nervous when she's
selected as the emperor's
lady-in-waiting and finds
herself 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.

Leon
Lyse's cousin. A royal knight in charge of palace security.

Emicia
Lyse's fellow lady-in-waiting. A follower of the Donan Faith.

Egbert
The Razanate emperor. He's been under the weather since coming to Olwen. The cause is still under investigation.

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 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: Our Lady-in-Waiting Had Given Up on Marriage, But...

Closing her eyes, Lyse could just see it. The spiraling white pillars and grand walls of the palace. Swaths of blooming flowers. A veritable rainbow of magic in use. And all this against the backdrop of a golden, glittering pillar of radiance that beamed toward the heavens—the Light of Origin, the remnants of the light that the gods brought into the world at its conception. The beautiful scenery of the Razanate Empire was burned into her soul...

Even after she was reborn.

“I wanna go back...” she thought, but that longing whisper never left her lips.

The fact that she couldn’t return only made the feeling all the stronger. For, you see, Lyse now lived in a neighboring country, the Kingdom of Olwen.

And before her at present was a carriage waiting to take her to Olwen’s royal palace. She nearly let out a despondent sigh at the sight, but quickly suppressed it. Her uncle, Baron Winslette, was standing just behind her. She couldn’t have him thinking she didn’t want to go.

Lyse had managed to land herself a position as a lady-in-waiting through a most fortunate stroke of luck. If she were ungrateful enough to turn the opportunity down, Baron Winslette would be at the end of his rope and suggest *that* again: “If you’re not going to be a lady-in-waiting, I’ll just have to marry you off to the butler’s son.” He’d threatened as much before she was hired. As for the reason he’d selected the butler’s son, that was simple—he was in no position to refuse.

In essence, Lyse was more of a bad debt than a niece to Baron Winslette. No girl who spent her days swinging a sword, taking out boars and ruffians alike, would ever be considered a proper bride amongst the nobility. Thus the baron had sent her to work instead. Even though Lyse had been born in this very manor, her father’s death a year prior had put her uncle in charge of the estate.

He was the master of the house now.

Just as Lyse was about to board the carriage, the front door of the manor opened. Out stepped a thin, middle-aged woman wearing a dress made of beautiful fabrics.

“Oh, you’re still here?” she said. This was Lyse’s aunt, the current Lady Winslette. Not even trying to hide her contempt, she continued, “If you don’t hurry back, the lady-in-waiting position you managed to earn through your barbaric boar slaying might disappear. And you haven’t found anyone who would marry you, have you? The likes of you never will.” She laughed as she looked Lyse over from head to toe.

Lyse knew what she was trying to say—she was calling her plain. Her waist-length light brown hair and blue irises were common. Her large eyes managed to give her an air of attractiveness, but she wasn’t the kind of beauty that turned heads. And because her aunt kept taking a cut of Lyse’s finances, her clothing was of barely acceptable quality. Lyse had always wanted to object, but she knew it would only send her aunt flying into a rage. She’d kept her mouth shut accordingly.

“You should be a bit easier on her. She’s just lost her father,” Baron Winslette scolded, raising and lowering his arms worriedly.

“It’s been a year already. You’re the baron now. Just how long do you plan to keep babying her?” Lady Winslette replied with a glare, unhappy with her husband’s intrusion into the conversation.

Watching them, Lyse regretted ever coming back to the manor after her appointment to the palace. All she’d wanted to do was go to her late father’s grave.

Lady Winslette soon disappeared back inside the house, not wishing to get into it with her husband. The baron was a mild-mannered gentleman, however, whose timidity kept him from ever doing more than scolding his wife. He took her retreat as the end of the argument and smiled at Lyse, who said nothing more on the matter. Precisely because of her uncle’s personality, she knew that he would never throw her to the wolves.

“Well then, uncle, I wish you good health until we meet again,” she said,

bowing before stepping into the carriage as if nothing had happened. Once it pulled away from the estate, Lyse finally felt like she could breathe again. "There's no peace for me, no matter where I go..."

Ever since her father's death, Lyse had felt ill at ease in her own home. She'd managed to get a job as a lady-in-waiting after saving one of the king's magistrates from a wild boar in a decidedly unladylike way, but she felt no more at home at the palace than she did at the estate.

It pained her to hear her aunt speak of it, but Lyse had indeed hoped to find a suitor at the palace. Once she arrived, however, word quickly spread of the boar-slaying incident. The dutiful magistrate she'd saved had personally told the king all about it when he recommended her for the job, after all. And with that, Lyse instantly became known as the unmarriageable sort.

"I gave up on getting married a loooooong time ago... If I were in the empire, no one would treat me like a weirdo for using a sword."

The Razanate Empire welcomed women as knights, and it was considered quite normal for a noblewoman to wield a sword. Lyse dreamed of moving to the empire and living out her life as a commoner... If only she could.

She looked out the window and sighed, ruminating on the reason she would never be able to return.

Chapter 1: Chosen as the Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting

Strange as it was, Lyse could remember her past life as a knight of the empire. On the day she'd died, the imperial family had been in the middle of their annual stay at their villa near the Light of Origin. Lyse was brought along as a guard for the occasion.

And during the trip, an intruder appeared. Not only did he take a member of the imperial family hostage—he dared to approach the Light of Origin.

Lyse's past self had flown to the aid of the young boy who'd been taken hostage. But rather than be caught, the intruder decided he would rather jump into the Light of Origin. Lyse just barely managed to save the boy, and was drawn into the Light herself in the process.

Her memories of dying weren't very scary. She'd felt fear the moment she was sucked into the Light, but the Light had enveloped her like a warm bath. She recalled thinking, *"Ah...this isn't so bad."* And then it happened. That was the moment she'd realized the Light's secret.

The Light of Origin wasn't made by the gods after all.

As this was a discovery that could shake the very foundation of the empire, Lyse knew she couldn't tell a soul. If she ever let it slip to an imperial citizen, she'd be jailed the rest of her life for blasphemy. Her uncle's family might even be arrested as well. Any such talk in Olwen, however, would merely be dismissed as fantasy.

This was the true reason Lyse couldn't get close to the empire—it was dangerous. If it weren't for that, she would've found her way back by now.

"...Ngh."

On the verge of a sigh, Lyse hurriedly closed her mouth. Thinking back on her old self's death was a bad habit of hers. Two years earlier, on her way to the palace from the estate, she'd gotten lost in the same memories. But this was no time to daydream.

It was only polite to pay attention in the audience chamber, after all.

Still, Lyse couldn't help thinking about her old life when she saw the familiar face of the man on the throne. That golden hair, those keen, green eyes, and that attractive face with angular, masculine features... This was the man who stood atop the Razanate Empire and its vassal states, His Majesty Emperor Egbert.

Though he looked to be in his thirties, he was actually 150 years old. Imperial nobles were all amazingly long-lived thanks to the Light of Origin.

The Light bestowed many blessings on the land and the people around it. Yet not only was it deadly to approach, it also attracted monsters. The people of the empire knew this, but chose to stay near the Light anyway, using the magic and longevity they gained from it to defend themselves. In turn, they also offered their services to surrounding countries in exchange for tribute.

These were the so-called vassal states of the empire. The tribute they paid amounted to a protection fee—a cost the neighboring royals were happy to cover. Indeed, for mere money, a pledge, and putting up with an imperial inspection every five years, the empire would defend them from the plague of monsters. It was but a small price for safety. As such, the neighboring countries had voluntarily become vassals of the empire, the Kingdom of Olwen included.

And, as a vassal state, Olwen extended its throne to Emperor Egbert upon his visit. Before him knelt both the king and queen of Olwen, along with their entire retinue. Lyse, one of the twenty-odd court ladies in attendance, kept sneaking glances up at the emperor. Perhaps because she vividly remembered him as a child—shorter than her, even—from her past life, she was struck by how handsome he'd become.

Lyse's past self had served as an imperial guard to the emperor. She wished she could do that again, but unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be. She thought she'd given up after her trip home two years ago. She cursed her own stubbornness.

While Lyse was thinking to herself, it seemed the king of Olwen had concluded his speech. The raven-haired Imperial Duke Alcede, who'd been standing next to the emperor, then stepped forward.

“His Majesty is currently feeling ill, so I shall be handling his affairs in his place,” he announced. “We need only a single attendant.”

This news sent a stir through the court ladies gathered in the back of the room.

“They only need one? Oh, now I’ll never get picked!”

“I’ve heard that if you go to the empire, you stay younger longer! Please, pick me!”

All of the ladies around Lyse then quietly began praying. Each was desperate to be selected, which would increase their chances of marrying into imperial nobility. Such an arrangement would increase the standing of their families in Olwen as well. And some of the ladies also seemed to think they’d be blessed with the imperial secret to long-lasting youth. Lyse was jealous of their unbridled, earnest desire to go to the empire.

“Sidis, I leave the choice to you,” Duke Alcede declared.

At his command, a silver-haired knight began asking everyone in turn—starting with the chamberlain—how they felt about the emperor. They all answered with flowery praise.

“He’s an inspiring ruler.”

“I’ve heard he’s most wonderful.”

Could he really judge their aptitude from this? Lyse tilted her head in puzzlement. It was there that the silver-haired knight finally stopped in front of her.

The knight named Sidis was a tremendously beautiful man. He gave off an androgynous air, yet his features were sharp and angular. His black and silver coat and cape were like delicate adornments that further enhanced his looks. His nearly lake-green eyes were handsome as well.

Though this was Lyse’s first time meeting him, unlike with the emperor, he still felt strangely familiar to her. As she raised her right hand to her shoulder in an Olwen-style bow, she tried to recall him. Based on his appearance, he didn’t seem to be over a hundred years old. That meant Lyse couldn’t have known him

from her past life, so she brushed off the familiarity as a figment of her imagination.

As she silently came to that conclusion, she heard Sidis whisper, “Sword calluses...”

His eyes were fixed on her hands poking out from her sleeves. She’d been so wrapped up in thought that she’d defaulted to an imperial posture... She realized how awkward it was, but it would have been even more awkward to switch now.

She was also more concerned that the knight had remarked on her calluses. She’d gotten them by doing practice swings whenever she was upset—an advantage of having a large bedroom. Though she had worried Sidis would be suspicious, his stern look softened. Did he like sword calluses or something?

Sidis said nothing more on the matter. He simply apologized and asked her as he had everyone else, “What is your impression of His Majesty the Emperor?”

“I believe he wa—is a man very worth protecting.”

Because Lyse knew the emperor from her previous life, she had to stop herself from saying “was.” It would have been strange indeed to imply she’d protected him before.

When Sidis heard this, however, he suddenly gasped and grabbed her wrist. The moment he did, she felt something strange, as if his hand were pulling her in like a magnet.

She looked up to find him staring at her intently, as though he was beholding something he could scarcely believe. His mouth moved almost wordlessly, though Lyse thought she heard him say, “You can’t be...”

He then pulled Lyse to her feet and turned to the emperor upon the throne to declare, “Your Majesty, I recommend this woman as your lady-in-waiting.”

“Huh?!”

There was no reason for Sidis to choose her. Lyse thought as much herself, and she heard the other ladies around her echo the sentiment...

“Why would he pick the boar girl?!” they squealed.

But Sidis was most serious. He immediately began dragging Lyse by the hand toward the emperor. Stunned by all this, she could barely keep up with him and promptly stumbled. Sidis seemed to misunderstand the reason.

“Are you bad on your feet? My apologies for not realizing. This is a most urgent matter, however, so please bear with me for a moment,” he said before lifting Lyse into his arms.

“Eeeeeek!”

This was the first time she had ever been held by a man. She was shocked. So utterly, in fact, that she could do naught but screech like a mosquito. She couldn’t even get away. She would have suspected Sidis of casting some sort of spell on her, but she’d detected no sign of him doing so.

Sidis, meanwhile, arrived before the emperor and lowered Lyse to the ground.

“Your Majesty, please designate this maiden as your attending lady-in-waiting during your stay,” he implored the emperor. He then whispered to Lyse, “Give him your name.”

“Ah...”

If she gave her name here, that would be it—she would become the emperor’s lady-in-waiting. Lyse couldn’t help hesitating, but she caved under the stares and dirty looks the elderly prime minister and other nobles were giving her. At this point, she wouldn’t dare do anything as impolite as walk away without so much as a word.

“My name is Lyse Winslette,” she thus said with a bow.

The emperor stayed silent, but greeted her with a nod. Duke Alcede then stepped forward again.

“Very well. During our stay, Lyse Winslette shall be the emperor’s personal lady-in-waiting,” he proclaimed loudly to the court of Olwen, all lined up in front of him.

While Lyse was spacing out, Alcede next announced that they would be withdrawing. The emperor rose, and all of the knights and imperial nobility

followed suit.

“Miss Lyse, please come with us,” Alcede urged her.

But in spite of his words, Lyse couldn’t move. She was simply too stunned by this impossible turn of events.

“It seems that her legs are bothering her. I’ll bring her myself,” Sidis offered.

His kind words snapped Lyse back to her senses. This was bad. He was planning on carrying her again.

“No, thank you! I can walk on my own!” she assured him, only to be met with a pout. This puzzled her immensely. Did this guy have a thing for carrying people? Is that why he’d been so quick to pick her up when she’d stumbled?

On her own two feet, Lyse quickly fell into line at the end of the emperor’s procession. The entire happening was so surreal that she felt as though she were walking on clouds...and it was all because of the knight named Sidis. Said knight was quietly speaking with Duke Alcede as they walked in front of Lyse, most likely about why he’d chosen her. Hopefully it *wasn’t* because of the calluses.

As Lyse fretted, Alcede noticed her gaze and drew back a step to speak with her.

“My, you look quite upset, Miss Lyse,” he said. “Could it be that you didn’t want to be His Majesty’s lady-in-waiting?”

“P-Please, it’s not that! Um, it’s just such an honor that I’m not sure I’m worthy. Surely there’s someone more capable...”

“Wherever we go, people are usually quick to jump at the opportunity to make imperial connections, and yet... You’re certainly an odd one.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare hope as much for myself. Truly, I’m unworthy...”

“Is that so?” Alcede replied, cocking his head with a grin.

Once they arrived in the emperor’s quarters, Lyse was invited to take a seat on the sofa—the elegant, imperial, exquisitely-decorated-with-the-Razanate-coat-of-arms sofa—right across from the emperor himself.

Lyse sat there, tense with nerves, as Alcede whispered something in the emperor's ear. It seemed to be a very long something too, because even after his servants brought out tea, he still wasn't finished.

Lyse wondered what they were talking about. Her gaze fell to her lap as she trembled with anxiety. It was then that she heard...

"Woof!"

The cry of a large dog.

"Hm?" Lyse quickly looked back up, scanning her eyes around the room.

She wondered if maybe the emperor had brought a dog along, but there was no hound anywhere to be found. Both the emperor and Alcede were quizzically looking at the window behind them. It must have come from outside, despite how close it sounded.

"Is something the matter?" Sidis asked. It seemed he hadn't heard it.

Lyse thought it was strange, but asking about any dogs under the current circumstances would be even stranger. She simply chalked it up to her imagination.

"Oh, it's nothing," she assured him.

"I see. Please do tell me if you're feeling unwell. Truly, are your legs all right?" he replied. It seemed he was still stuck on the idea that something was wrong with her.

"My legs are just fine, thank you. I was merely surprised you took my hand like that..."

"I'm most sorry. Do forgive me," he begged, moving to kneel beside her in apology.

"Please, it's quite all right! There's no need to go that far!"

Lyse couldn't stand the thought of an imperial knight kneeling before her in front of the emperor. She reached out to assuage Sidis, and he grabbed her hand for the second time.

"Ah..."

Lyse was again seized with the same strange feeling as before. It was so calming that she found it hard to let go. Sidis seemed like he might be experiencing the exact same thing. He was staring curiously at their linked hands...but this was an imperial audience. It was hardly proper to stand around holding hands in front of the emperor.

“Ahem, Sidis...” Alcede interjected in expectation.

The emperor himself reacted in surprise—“Ruff!”

“Huh?!” Lyse exclaimed, her eyes wide.

She’d unmistakably seen the emperor’s mouth move, and unmistakably heard a dog bark.

“What...” she stammered.

As she wondered what she’d just witnessed, the emperor slapped his hands over his mouth. Alcede did the same. The looks on their faces just screamed, “*Oh damn!*”

“Your Majesty...” Sidis groaned, releasing Lyse’s hand.

As for Lyse, there was but one thing she could make of all this. “Don’t tell me...that was His Majesty...” she murmured.

The emperor looked troubled and let out a low whine, “Khahn...”

Lyse could only look on in shock. His voice sounded exactly as she’d expected—authoritative and commanding. And yet...here he was making doggy noises?

Turning it over and over and over in her mind, she realized that she shouldn’t jump to conclusions here. There *had* to be a dog hiding behind the sofa. As she craned her neck, trying to peer and see...

Alcede removed his hands from the emperor’s mouth, glowering at him as he hissed, “Why did you try to speak? We’ve managed to hide it so well...”

“Woo... Ruff,” the emperor replied, lowering his hands as well in resignation.

Lyse was certain of it now—the dog noises were *definitely* coming from him.

“Wh-What?!” she screamed in shock. “Why is His Majesty imitating a dog?! Is he teasing me?!”

“W-Wait! Keep your voice down!” Sidis urged her.

“Woooooohn,” the emperor howled in lamenting distress.

“Enough, Your Majesty. Try to contain yourself. We’ll have a problem if anyone hears from outside.”

The emperor zipped his lips at Alcede’s orders.

“I’m sorry, Miss Lyse. This must be quite a shock to you...” Sidis apologized.

“Um...” Lyse said, still quite confused. “I’m guessing not, but is this some kind of joke?”

To think that the emperor of the glorious Razanate Empire was making doggy noises... Was he teasing her because she was a lady-in-waiting of a vassal nation? No, the Egbert she knew would never do such a thing.

And yet, what if he’d undergone some kind of unthinkable transformation these past hundred years? What if—dared she think it—he’d learned to make fun of people? Actually, that would be the best case scenario.

But alas, Sidis shook his head and explained, “This is no joke, Miss Lyse. His Majesty, I’m afraid, is unable to speak in anything other than dog sounds...”

“Why...” Hearing this, Lyse teared up in pity. Egbert had been such a lively little boy, and she’d had such hopes for his future. She’d never dreamed the day would come when he was reduced to making doggy noises. “Why has this happened?”

“His Majesty’s mana has been warped,” Sidis said, responding to her whisper.

“Warped?” Lyse inquired.

“Imperial nobles like us live longer because of mana, which can be used for magic. But when our mana is warped, we go through physical changes. We believe that is why His Majesty can only make canine noises now,” Alcede clarified.

The emperor nodded along with this explanation, growling like a dog. A proper “grr.”

“This is the reason we’ve been saying the emperor is under the weather,”

Alcede continued. "To eliminate the need for His Majesty to speak in public."

Lyse had thought his face was remarkably bright for someone allegedly so unwell. At last, she understood why. Perhaps it *was* fair to say His Majesty was sick, in a manner of speaking.

"But what has warped his mana so?" Lyse asked.

"We're still unsure. But the change began once we started approaching the capital of Olwen. His Majesty first complained of feeling strange, and things worsened from there. Now he can only speak as a dog," answered Alcede with a deep sigh. "There are cases of provincial nobles having their mana warped by others. But with how strong His Majesty's mana is, it's unthinkable that someone else's malicious mana could warp it."

That much made sense to Lyse. In her past life, she'd heard stories of nobles who fought using magic and ended up growing horns or laid up in bed after the fact. She also recalled that the only treatment for it was time.

She thus began to nod sagely, but when she realized Sidis was still looking at her, she quickly donned a perplexed expression as if this were news to her. It would be strange, of course, for her to be informed of such matters. She needed to act the part of an ignorant outsider from a vassal nation.

"We know for a fact that the cause is somewhere here within the royal capital. His Majesty should recover once we leave, but we cannot simply leave the issue unaddressed. We've heard word of imperial nobles in other vassal nations falling sick. We're in the process of investigating."

"That's..."

"We believe that their mana is being warped using a similar trick. As such, we've decided to stay in the capital as planned in order to get to the bottom of things."

"Woof!" the emperor agreed in doggy speak, now free from keeping up appearances.

"We suspect that the perpetrators may be Olwenian nobility. And, as you may have gathered, this is a need-to-know affair. We'd intended to keep it from you by limiting your official duties..." Alcede glanced at the emperor, who looked

away awkwardly. “Yet because His Majesty opened his mouth not once, but *twice* in surprise, you now know the truth.”

What had the emperor been so surprised about? Lyse remembered that the first bark had come while Alcede was whispering to him. She was a bit worried. Was it because of her sword calluses?

“We’d like for you to remain silent about His Majesty’s condition, but it would be unfair to use stricture magic when we were the ones who failed to keep it quiet.”

Lyse gasped quietly at the mention of stricture. It was a powerful magic that restricted a target’s actions with a command. For example, someone under the stricture “you aren’t allowed to do anything but sit” would find themselves in agony should they try to stand. Within the empire, only nobles with particularly strong mana could use such magic.

As far as Lyse was concerned, she understood why the empire sought to hide His Majesty’s condition. Finding the cause of it would be especially difficult if word got out. But just as she resigned herself to her fate...

“Grr...” the emperor growled softly, giving Alcede a serious look before shifting his gaze to Sidis.

Lyse had no idea what he was saying, but it seemed that Alcede understood.

“Yes, that’s true. In which case, I have a good idea, Your Majesty,” he replied, then turned to Lyse. “His Majesty cannot bear having stricture magic used due to his mistake. It was an accident, after all, he says.”

The emperor was now looking apologetically at Lyse. It reminded her of how he used to look when he was scolded as a child.

“As such,” Alcede continued, “His Majesty would like to find another way to keep this a secret.”

“Another way?”

Lyse cocked her head quizzically at the suggestion, and Alcede simply smiled.

“Indeed. We’ll have you engaged to an imperial man.”

“E-Engaged...?” she stammered, eyes wide.

But it seemed Lyse wasn't the only one shocked by that word...

"What do you mean, engaged?!" Sidis demanded, shooting to his feet in a panic.

Alcede wagged his finger, answering, "Whatever has you so flustered, Sidis? You understand the situation, don't you? An imperial engagement is a matter of magical contract. If one party betrays the other, they *will* know. Also..." There, Alcede pointed his wagging finger at Lyse. "Miss Lyse here seems uninterested in...or rather, does not care for the empire. What do you think the cause of her dislike might be?"

A chill ran down Lyse's spine. He must have been suspicious of what she'd said earlier.

"It isn't that I dislike the empire..." she tried to clarify. "I only meant that I was unworthy..."

"You don't say... Well, it matters not," Alcede concluded with a meaningful smile. "When the consequences are severe, people try all the harder to keep their secrets. As someone who's frequently been proposed to in other countries, I don't think there's anything remarkable about such an engagement, either."

Lyse could appreciate that Alcede's plan was a sound one. An engagement wouldn't outwardly look bad, and it wouldn't harm either party involved.

What should I do...?

If she'd had stricture magic used on her, Lyse knew her uncle would have quietly accepted the situation for what it was. But engagement was a different story. If he found out Lyse now had a connection to the empire, Baron Winslette might use it to make demands upon Sidis or the emperor. The Winslette barony was poor, after all, and Lyse knew her uncle's eyes lit up whenever money was involved. And she certainly didn't have to think twice about what her aunt, who lived for luxury, would do.

She had to get out of this engagement somehow. First, she thought, she'd try seeming overeager. Maybe it would give them pause...

"Um, I would love to get engaged!"

No, that would have been too easy.

“No objections, then?” Alcede said with an amused smile, crushing Lyse’s hopes in a second.

“But Alcede, who—” Sidis stammered in a tizzy, leaning toward the duke. As he was the last holdout against this plan, Lyse silently cheered him on.

“Either you or I, of course,” Alcede replied matter-of-factly.

Hearing this, Sidis calmed himself and took his seat once again.

What?

“As you see, Miss Lyse, both of us are bachelors and thus free to get engaged. Which one of us would you prefer as your betrothed?”

“Which one...?”

Pressed for a choice she couldn’t make, Lyse shook her head. When she looked pleadingly at Sidis, he turned away in embarrassment. It seemed he was no longer opposed to the idea of her engagement, leaving Lyse at her wits’ end. How had it come to this? Kicking herself wouldn’t do any good now.

“I could never choose! It’s far too much for me! I’d feel guilty! Why don’t we call this off and you can use stricture—”

“Hwnnnnn...” the emperor whined cutely as he looked at her sternly. The adorable disparity between his appearance and his voice was so striking that she momentarily forgot what she was saying.

“Oh, you needn’t be so opposed... What are you worried about? Fret not—this is no mere superficial arrangement. We wouldn’t leave you high and dry. We shall take you back to the empire for a proper wedding to follow. Despite the strange circumstances that have begotten this engagement, I don’t think it’s a bad deal for you. I promise to devote myself wholeheartedly to you as your husband.”

Being taken back to the empire was precisely what Lyse wanted to avoid, but if she said as much, she’d only be playing into Alcede’s suspicions. She desperately racked her brain for a way out of this mess.

“Why are you so enthusiastic about this, Your Grace? We’ve only just met.

What would you do if I turned out to be some wicked woman?”

That would indeed spell trouble from a crisis management standpoint, but Lyse’s argument only made Alcede laugh.

“A wicked woman would never suggest such a thing, now would she? To do so would be adorably careless of you.”

“Ngh...”

Lyse was at a loss. Alcede had a counterargument for everything.

For now, she was left with no choice but to play along and find a way out of it later. Steeling herself, Lyse glanced between the two candidates. Alcede was looking back at her in amusement, while Sidis was looking at her most earnestly. Had either been against it, she happily would have picked him. Yet for some reason, neither man seemed to have qualms about the arrangement.

“It’s not a difficult question, Miss Lyse,” Alcede prompted her. “Which one of us would you rather kiss?”

“What?!”

Lyse felt like her head was about to explode. Even in her past life, she’d gone unwed. Any time she’d gotten close with a member of the opposite sex, the child of the imperial family she was tasked with looking after would get in the way. Thanks to that, she’d never been kissed in all her years.

“It’s a necessary element of the engagement, after all. Ah, but I suppose you wouldn’t know, would you, Miss Lyse? Imperial engagements take the form of a magic contract. They require a kiss to be sealed. So...care to practice with me?” Alcede asked, leaning forward and touching Lyse’s chin with the tips of his fingers.

“Li—!”

She was about to scream that he was a liar. The kiss required to seal an engagement was merely a kiss on the hand, so why on earth was he touching her chin? Nevertheless, Lyse had to stop herself. She couldn’t betray the fact that she had such knowledge—although holding back on it only mired her further.

Suddenly, Sidis grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her close, declaring, “If she cannot choose, then I shall take her hand.”

Lyse reflexively looked up at him.

“In order to hide His Majesty’s affliction, you’ll be attending many banquets and other events in his place, Alcede. And if you were engaged, not being accompanied by Miss Lyse on such occasions would warrant a breach of contract.”

“Ah, that’s true.” For some reason, Alcede now looked like he was having even more fun than before. “I can’t attend such events alone—I *am* filling in for His Majesty, after all. But if I were to take another woman, much less say that I didn’t have a fiancée in order to hide my relationship with Miss Lyse...that would indeed constitute a breach of contract, wouldn’t it?”

“And taking Miss Lyse along to avoid that would be all but naming her as your fiancée. She might just let His Majesty’s secret slip in desperation.”

Alcede nodded in agreement and said, “I wouldn’t mind accepting the punishment for breach of contract in order to keep our engagement secret, however. It’s a small headache at worst. Even if I breach the contract repeatedly, the mark of my crime on the back of my hand would only last for a few years. Not that anyone in Olwen would know what it meant anyway.”

“No!” Lyse cried in a fluster.

She knew the penalty for breach of contract—a shameful marking that branded you for your crime. Proof that you were a cheater. That was why the ritual of engagement was only performed once couples were serious about marrying. Lyse couldn’t stand the thought of Alcede suffering the suspicious gazes of others over an engagement that was just meant to shut her up.

But again, as an Olwenian now, she had to hide her understanding of Razanate ritual. She thought long and hard about how someone who was none the wiser would respond under the circumstances.

“Please, don’t recklessly endanger yourself...” she eventually said.

She’d come to the conclusion that most people would assume “the mark of one’s crime” to be a scar from some kind of punishment, and so she ran with it.

It finally set in on Lyse, however, just how much of a pain it was going to be to keep playing dumb like this. She wanted nothing more than to extricate herself from the situation and get away from these imperials at once.

“Worry not, Miss Lyse. He doesn’t mean any physical harm would come to him. But if it troubles you, then take my hand instead,” Sidis said soothingly, seeming to fall for Lyse’s presumed misunderstanding. He then turned to argue his worth to Alcede. “It doesn’t seem as if Miss Lyse is comfortable accepting the engagement right away. If you’re branded with a sigil of punishment before she’s even come to terms with the situation, the guilt she’d feel over your marriage would keep her from ever being truly happy. I’d like to give her some time, and let her choose to come to the empire of her own accord.”

That much was fair, but the fact that the scenario ended with Lyse going to the empire either way was a problem.

“Very well. I wanted to press her for an answer while she was still taken by surprise, but perhaps we shouldn’t rush things. We’ll be together for a long time, after all. As such, it might be good for you to be her fiancé first, Sidis,” Alcede yielded.

And thus Sidis was chosen as Lyse’s temporary fiancé.

“Is that really all right with you, Sir Sidis? We’re talking about betrothal here. Why would you want to marry me? And I must know—why did you behave so strangely when you chose me as His Majesty’s lady-in-waiting?” she asked him in a flurry.

Sidis had acted as though he’d no choice *but* to choose Lyse, and she wanted to know why. It couldn’t have been just because she had sword calluses. There had to be another reason he was so eager for this engagement.

Lyse stared intently at Sidis, who looked troubled about how to answer her.

“For some reason,” he finally said at last, “you have mana.”

“What? But I was born and raised in Olwen...”

It was impossible for anyone outside of the imperial bloodline to possess mana. Lyse had already experimented to see if she could use any simple magic, and not once had her tests yielded results. Nevertheless, Sidis seemed

convinced.

“That’s what’s so strange,” he said. “Since you have mana, I wanted to bring you back to the empire.”

“It’s also why I’d like to marry you,” Alcede added. “I brought up engagement to surprise you, but if possible, I’d like to wed you immediately and take you home with us.”

“That’s...”

If Sidis had known Lyse possessed mana, he must have shared this knowledge with Alcede and the emperor. As all three of them looked at her quite seriously, it hit Lyse. That must have been what Sidis was discussing with Alcede on the way here, and what Alcede must have explained to the emperor once they arrived.

Lyse now understood why they wanted her as a lady-in-waiting and as a bride. She didn’t really get why they were so fixated on taking her back to the empire if she had mana she couldn’t use, though. If they just wanted to keep her under observation, that would make sense...

But it was still a problem.

“I’d like to stay in Olwen,” Lyse said, looking straight at Sidis, “so if getting engaged will convince you that I won’t reveal the emperor’s secret, then I accept if you’ll allow me the option of calling it off once the matter with His Majesty is settled. Otherwise, I refuse anything other than stricture magic.”

Alcede looked at the emperor before replying, “So be it. During His Majesty’s stay, we shall do our best to win your heart. Sidis, please go ahead with the temporary engagement. However, Miss Lyse, should you reveal the secret...we’ll be forced to make the engagement public and take you back to the empire with us—no matter how you might object.”

Lyse nodded, then stood at Sidis’s behest. The emperor gave a little bark, and Sidis nodded in response.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Now, Miss Lyse, let us head to the next room.”

Leading Lyse by the hand, Sidis showed her to the room next door.

“Ah, this is a dressing room...” she remarked.

It was approximately one-fourth the size of the emperor’s quarters, and the walls were lined with clothing. There was a small, circular window for air about the size of Lyse’s arms held in a ring. A curtain hung over it to keep the sun from bleaching the garments. Sidis pulled it open, letting in a beam of light that cut diagonally across the room, illuminating his silver hair in a most otherworldly fashion.

Looking slightly nervous, he said, “It will be imperial style, but let us begin the engagement ritual.”

“Um, don’t we need a witness?” Lyse questioned, thinking that one was required.

“His Majesty would do the honor, but he cannot speak. And since this is only a temporary engagement, I thought that you might prefer that there be no witnesses. The ritual requires a kiss, after all, albeit only to the tips of our fingers.”

He had a point. The imperial engagement ritual required proof that participants would respect and honor their promises—a commitment on top of the oath. The token gesture was a kiss on the fingertips, and Lyse did indeed want to save a public showing of such for when she truly got engaged.

“Now, I’d like to make sure of something before we begin. Do you have anyone you’ve promised your hand to? Is that why you didn’t want to get engaged?”

This question flustered Lyse. She’d never promised her hand to anyone. The reason she didn’t want to go to the empire was purely because of her memories from her past life—something she couldn’t tell Sidis.

She thought up an excuse on the fly and answered, “I don’t want to go far from my late father’s grave. My uncle is tending it, but I’d like to be able to visit him sometimes.”

“So that’s why... I’m relieved,” Sidis sighed, his expression softening. He seemed to have been worried that things would get messy if Lyse already had a fiancé.

She prayed with all her might that Sidis wouldn't catch wind of her lie. The last she'd been there was two years ago.

But what a turn of events...

On her trip back home two years ago, she'd given up all hope of ever getting married. And now, to think she'd been proposed to by one of the imperials she so wanted to avoid...

Not realizing Lyse was lost in thought, Sidis began explaining the ritual, "I'd like you to forget for now that this is meant only as a temporary engagement. Imperial-style engagements are a magic contract, so there's a considerable chance that it won't work if you hesitate."

"All right," Lyse said with a nod, gulping hard.

There was no backing down now. Determined that she would find a way out of it later, she faced the ritual head on.

Sidis quietly began reciting the magic words: "I wish to marry this woman. As proof, I pledge this promise to her."

He held out his hand, and a round ball of light appeared in his palm. It glittered and shimmered with tiny stars and a sun inside. Lyse's gaze was drawn to it, and she felt herself getting sleepy as she beheld it.

"Touch this as you recite the same pledge," Sidis urged her.

Lyse did as she was instructed, reaching for the orb. It was slightly warm to the touch.

"I too wish to marry this man. As proof, I pledge this promise to him."

As she recited those words, she realized why the engagement ritual was such an effective alternative to stricture magic. She was pledging a magical contract to keep her promise.

And once she did, the ball of light burst into sparkles that showered down on the two of them. The ritual was complete.

"From this moment on, I will treat you as my fiancée. I swear to protect you," said Sidis, taking Lyse's still-extended hand and kissing the tip of her index finger.



The moment Sidis kissed her fingers, Lyse recalled her past life. Memories of seeing other people's engagement rituals. Back then, she'd dreamed of getting engaged and having one for herself, but she'd thought it impossible since being reborn in Olwen...

Lyse held her breath. The brushing of lips against her fingertips was much more ticklish than she expected. She flinched reflexively, but she would have to return the gesture next.

Yet before that, Sidis had to go and say something incredibly embarrassing: "Even your nails are dainty and beautiful..."

"What?!"

That's impossible! Despite Lyse's internal disbelief, the knight was staring at her fingers, entranced. *He cannot be serious...* She was aghast.

"Now, you do the same thing. That will complete the spell," Sidis urged.

Lyse steeled herself. She'd never even thought of kissing a man's fingertips before...but if she had to do it for the ritual to work, then she would. She quickly pulled Sidis's hand close, touching his fingers to her lips before she had a chance to rethink things.

A single second—that was all it took for her to be overwhelmed with the feeling of gears shifting into place. But at the same time, the sensation of another human's skin on her lips mortified her. She hurriedly pulled away...only to find Sidis smiling at her. She thought her cheeks might burst into crimson flames.

What was going on? Sidis looked genuinely happy to be engaged to her. It was unbelievably embarrassing.

As she burned with such feelings, he said, "As promised, if we're able to resolve the emperor's condition during our stay, you'll be given the choice of nullifying our engagement. If not, however, we shall ask that you accompany us back to the empire for a formal wedding. Until then, I'd like for you to think about whether you'd prefer it to be with me...or Alcede."

With a small sigh, Sidis slid a lock of Lyse's light brown hair between his

fingers. As she sat shocked by the sweet gesture, he made to leave the dressing room.

“Um, Sir Sidis!” she called in a rush to stop him. “I understand that this marriage is because of the mana I possess, but there’s something important I need to tell you...”

If Lyse would be forced into marrying imperial nobility, there was one thing they absolutely had to know.

“While it’s true that I was born to the Winslette barony, the current baron is not my father, but my uncle. And because our territory isn’t terribly well off, I could never ask him to pay a dowry for someone who isn’t his own daughter. As such, I had planned to stay unmarried. If you were to wed a woman like me just because I have mana, your social standing would...”

Lyse hoped that bringing up such a practical concern might get him to reconsider. No one wanted to marry a woman without a dowry—especially one who wasn’t in good standing with her own family.

But when he heard this, Sidis stepped back toward Lyse and took both of her hands.

“Huh?!” she squeaked.

“You needn’t worry about a dowry, Qa...Miss Lyse. If we are wed, it will be after we return to the empire. We shall pay for your clothing, living expenses, the ceremony—everything. All you need to bring is yourself for the wedding. Don’t worry about a thing. Not even about your family. I’ll see that everything is to your satisfaction. Should any issue arise, we can always cut ties with them.”

All I need to bring is me?!

Lyse’s eyes went wide. Why in the world would Sidis go so far for someone he’d only just met? She couldn’t believe it was all just because she had mana. Sidis seemed to realize she was wavering.

“You’re still worried, are you?” he remarked, releasing one of her hands and raising his fingertips to her face. “We are the ones who got you into this, forcing you into an engagement against your will. Still, I promise you this: I will work my hardest to ease your doubts about the situation.”

After stroking Lyse's cheek, he finally left the dressing room.

"Sir Sid—" she started, but stopped short when she realized that if she followed him, they would be back in front of the emperor and Alcede. This was far too embarrassing a conversation to have with an audience.

And so she backed down despite her misgivings, but the situation still didn't sit right with her. Unfortunately, the opportunity to ask anything else never arose. After a quick rundown of her duties as a lady-in-waiting, Lyse was sent back to her own room.

Chapter 2: Combat Is Part of a Lady-in-Waiting's Job

That night, just as Lyse thought she'd fallen asleep...she suddenly found herself walking in an unfamiliar place. It was much, much larger than the royal palace in Olwen. Miraculously, she couldn't see a single seam between the floor and the pillars. Something like this would have been impossible to build without magic...

And the moment she had that thought, she realized where she was. This was the Razanate imperial palace.

Oh, I'm dreaming...

As she walked through the nostalgic halls, a little boy who looked to be around the age of eight appeared before her. His hair was short and spiky, and his green eyes sparkled with curiosity. It was the young Emperor Egbert.

Back when he was still a prince, he'd asked her, "Are you past your prime, Qatora?!"

Upon hearing that horrifically rude question again, Lyse recalled her name in her former life—Qatora.

She then answered him in the same exasperated fashion she had all those years ago, "Where in the world did you learn that term, Your Highness?"

"Some guy from abroad said not to be fooled because everyone in the empire is past their prime. He said that no matter how young someone looks, they're older than your grandparents! That means I'll be past my prime someday too, and you must be past yours already!" he responded with a laugh. Only a child could get away with saying such a thing.

Qatora sighed. Those words must have come from the mouth of a foreign emissary. Someone had probably fallen in love with an imperial noblewoman, and their friends were using her age as ammunition to get him to give up on her. Imperial noblewomen couldn't marry out of the empire, after all, for they had mana. Should it spread outside the empire, Razanate would lose its edge

and open itself up to invasion.

The prince must have been eavesdropping on the conversation too, since no foreigner in their right mind would call an imperial “past their prime” to their face. Qatora, however, was indeed past her prime in the eyes of most outsiders. Though she appeared to be about twenty, she was already sixty years old. The prince had just turned twelve himself, so he likely didn’t understand the true meaning of the phrase.

While Qatora was thinking this, the young prince turned toward a large decorative flower pot, yelling, “Hey, you say it too!”

The boy he was egging on slowly, worriedly peeked out from behind the pot. He looked about a year younger than the prince, and he had longer, golden hair that wreathed his face, which was as pretty as any little girl’s.

“Y-You’re past your... Wahhhhh!”

Unable to even finish the sentence, the boy ran crying to Qatora. He clung to her waist, assuring her through his sobs that she wasn’t past her prime at all. It seemed he understood what it meant, and had only said it under the prince’s duress.

“Well, from a foreigner’s point of view, I *am* past my prime. But you mustn’t ever say that to your mothers, elder sisters, or any other women. Do you hear me, Your Highness?” Qatora warned the prince as she patted the boy’s head.

“Okaaaaay!”

A knight of Qatora’s station would never admonish the crown prince under ordinary circumstances, but she had the emperor and empress’s blessing. They were of the opinion that children should be put in their place by the adults around them, though Qatora was nearly the only one who took their directive seriously. The other palace servants still softened their tone, afraid to scold a prince so.

In truth, Qatora only spoke so freely to the imperial children now because she’d accidentally given them quite a tongue lashing once. They seemed to take to her afterward for some reason, so when she got the imperial couple’s blessing, she dropped pretenses with them completely. The prince loved

Qatora, and would do most anything she said.

After being scolded, he immediately switched back to play mode. "Let's go play over there next! Come on!" he said, beckoning to the golden-haired boy as he started to run.

"Your Highness, isn't it almost time for your studies?" Qatora called after him.

"I'll do them later!"

"Her Majesty will have you go without supper again!"

Qatora raced to catch the boy as he started to climb out of a window, declaring a game of tag. The golden-haired boy rushed to catch up, afraid he would be left behind.

What a nice memory...

That was when Lyse woke up. Bathed in the morning light streaming in through the window, she vaguely remembered her dream.

"It's been a while since I dreamed of my former life..."

It must have been because she'd met the emperor again that she was dreaming of him as a child. Back when she herself was a knight named Qatora. And then there was the golden-haired child whose name she couldn't remember.

He was the very same boy she'd sacrificed herself to protect. As she'd died in his place, he'd left a strong impression on her and yet, try as she might, she couldn't remember his name. Had the shock of her death purged it from her memory?

Speaking of shock, as she woke, Lyse recalled the current conundrum she found herself in and let out a sigh.

"This is awful..."

Despite her earnest wish to keep her distance, she'd somehow become the emperor's lady-in-waiting. Worse yet, she was also engaged to one of his knights.

She kept trying to tell herself that things would be fine if she kept their

conversations to basic pleasantries, but another new worry was inflicted upon her...

“I’m supposed to just sit around drinking tea like some guest, and I can just waltz off whenever I please? Seriously?”

That was the job briefing she’d been given upon returning from the dressing room the day before.

Imperial ladies-in-waiting weren’t tasked with cleaning up after their masters or helping with day-to-day affairs. They were simply supposed to stay with them at all times, provide conversation, and help brighten the mood at social gatherings. Other than being in charge of communication and dealing with guests, their only jobs would be maybe doing their master’s hair, giving fashion advice, and making their master stand out at parties.

But to just act like a guest in the palace... It was too much freedom. Did the emperor even need a lady-in-waiting?

That question must have been written all over Lyse’s face, because Duke Alcede explained that the assignment was at the request of the prime minister. With the emperor in his current condition, the imperial retinue had had no intention of taking on any Olwenian attendants while at court, but the prime minister had tearfully begged them to reconsider. At least one, he insisted, in case there were any issues.

The imperials had reluctantly agreed, deciding that they could just leave the chosen lady-in-waiting stationed outside the emperor’s room. They had no idea who was or wasn’t in on the plot to warp his mana at this point. Since Lyse had learned the truth, however, she’d now been removed from the list of suspects.

“I suppose as long as something like *that* doesn’t happen again...”

Being carried by Sidis was most humiliating for Lyse—primarily because of the looks she’d gotten for it.

Lyse had first become a royal lady-in-waiting after saving one of the king’s magistrates from a wild boar. It earned her a nickname—“boar girl”—that the other ladies mocked her with. (It was considered barbaric for a woman to wield a sword nowadays, after all.) Their sensibilities were so different that Lyse must

have seemed a monster to them, and it must have been hilarious to see her picked up and carried like some weak little girl. Lyse had even caught sight of a few ladies laughing at her from the shadows the day before.

She wanted to think such a thing wouldn't happen again, but now that she was engaged to Sidis, she was worried. When they were talking about marriage, he'd piteously grabbed her hand and told her she didn't need a dowry. That kind of thing only happened in novels.

"The only time you'd hear it in reality is if some rich commoner married a penniless noble's daughter for their title or something. That man's just weird..."

Whatever the case may be, Lyse put her mind to keeping her guard up from here on.

With that decided, she slipped out of her bed to get dressed. Since she couldn't do it alone, she rang the bell to call for someone. A moment later, both an elderly servant and one younger than Lyse herself came to help her into the heavy cream-colored dress she'd picked out.

They then handed her the coat that an imperial attendant had sent. It was made of a dark crimson fabric that looked like the warm, glowing embers of a fire.

This brings me back...

It was the same coat that ladies-in-waiting and female knights wore in the empire—a close-fitting garment decorated with modest golden braids and emblems. When Lyse put it on, she almost looked as though she were wearing a gown-style military uniform.

Back in the empire, she'd always had to be vigilant about monsters, even within the palace walls. The Light of Origin attracted them, and the palace wasn't far from it. Attacks were frequent, and because of that, the ladies-in-waiting who acted as the knights' rearguard in emergencies dressed similarly.

In her past life as a knight, Lyse had always worn pants herself, but the coat was the same. Thinking back on it, the golden-haired boy had always asked her why she didn't wear a skirt.

"Oh my, you look so gallant!"

Lyse couldn't help but smile at the compliment from the younger servant.

After that, Lyse had breakfast and made her way to the emperor's quarters. She'd been so relieved that the servants were treating her like normal that she'd completely forgotten how the other ladies felt about her selection as the emperor's attendant.

As she walked down the hall, two of the princess's ladies-in-waiting glared at her out of the corners of their eyes. They were both wearing gorgeous, warm velvet dresses decorated with the highest quality white lace, and their hair was adorned with bejeweled ornaments. They were dressed as magnificently as any high-ranking lady.

Lyse tried just giving them a little nod as she passed, but they stepped out in front of her to block her way.

"Oh my, if it isn't the boar girl. How in the world did you manage to get yourself set up as the emperor's lady-in-waiting?"

"Acting all meek to be carried like that... You're pretty crafty with your feminine charms."

As they laughed at her, Lyse considered her options. If she ignored them and kept walking, they might use their family connections to pressure her uncle's barony. And there was no use in complaining to the emperor. If she was just going to call off the engagement down the line, she wouldn't be able to depend on his backing once he returned to the empire. Moreover, the ladies in question would be furious that she dared to go crying to the emperor about them. It would only cause more problems.

That meant the best thing she could do was simply stand there and take it. Yet just as she'd decided to let the insult slide, she heard the buzzing of a crowd in the distance. Mere moments later, a group of armed soldiers and knights ran by.

"What's going on?!" the princess's ladies called out, unable to ignore the commotion.

They caught the attention of a knight with short, light brown hair. This man just so happened to be Lyse's cousin, Leon. He was her uncle's second son, and

two years her senior.

Looking rather disturbed, he responded, “His Majesty the Emperor is in the gardens. You men go on without me.”

Leon sent the men he was with ahead so that he could answer the ladies’ questions, but it seemed they were no longer interested.

“His Majesty is out for a stroll?!” shrieked one.

“This might be our chance to see him!” squealed the other.

And with that, they ran off toward the gardens. Lyse watched them go in relief.

“Come after you again, did they?” Leon asked. His familiar, somewhat exasperated tone was because he and Lyse had known each other since they were little.

She responded in a similarly relaxed way, “It’s because I was chosen as the emperor’s lady-in-waiting yesterday.”

It was inevitable such an appointment would kick up jealousy, and there was nothing Lyse could do but wait for the storm to pass.

“He actually picked *you*?” Leon said with a frown. “It wasn’t some joke, or...”

“If it was a joke, the head lady-in-waiting wouldn’t have warned me so sternly not to screw up.” After she left the emperor’s quarters the day before, she had been summoned by the head lady-in-waiting for a lecture on the very subject. “With the way things are, I’m worried just talking to me might bring trouble for you and the baron.”

“No, dad will understand if the emperor picked you. If his retinue tries to drag you back to the empire with them, he wouldn’t be able to act like it doesn’t concern him.”

Normally, Lyse likely would have thought the same—but nothing about this was “normal.”

“It’s fine. That won’t happen. But I am serving as the emperor’s lady-in-waiting at the moment, so I need to go attend him,” she said, waving as she left.

Although Lyse had been told she could carry on as she pleased, she felt it would be weird not to accompany the emperor in the garden. People would think she wasn't doing her job.

Since she wouldn't stand out amidst the crowd of servants and ladies, Lyse opted to take the long way to meet up with the emperor's party.

The unseasonal spring snow that had fallen the day before had already melted, leaving the lawn damp as Lyse walked through the budding greenery of the garden. She passed a few imperial guards on the way, but they readily let her through, for they knew she was the emperor's chosen lady-in-waiting.

Before long, she could hear talking ahead.

"Yes, I've foisted them on Sidis for now. You're worried? No, I understand why... You want me to go check on him?"

It was Alcede's voice. She couldn't hear anyone else, so she assumed he was talking to the emperor. As she got closer, she could see the two of them sitting together in a gazebo. Their guards were on standby just a short distance away.

But what was the emperor doing outside in his current...predicament? Moreover, it had snowed just yesterday. There was still quite a chill in the air for spring. The weather wasn't particularly conducive to sitting in the garden. Yet just as Lyse was thinking that, she remembered...

"Oh, they can use magic."

Imperial nobility could easily use their mana to keep themselves and the area around them warm.

The emperor and the duke quickly noticed Lyse as she circled around the gazebo.

"Well, if it isn't Miss Lyse. A fine morning to you," Alcede called.

"Good morning," Lyse replied, coming to a stop a step outside the gazebo. "Were you able to sleep well last night?"

"I was, and His Majesty had a good sleep as well. Ah, by the way, Miss Lyse..."

"Yes?"

The duke cupped his fist in his palm as he requested, “Sidis should be near the entrance to the garden. We sent him to disperse the crowd, but he hasn’t returned yet. Could I ask you to go see what’s going on?”

“As you wish,” Lyse responded with a short bow.

She then turned and headed back toward the palace as she wondered what could be keeping Sidis from returning to the emperor’s side. From what she’d heard, it sounded like Alcede had pushed a job on him.

“Is it dealing with people who seek an audience with His Majesty?”

Lyse looked around for the crowd Alcede had mentioned and, just as she suspected, found Sidis trying to direct a gaggle of merchants and nobles.

“The emperor is resting within the garden, so I cannot allow anyone to enter at present,” he declared.

“Then I’d like to have a chat with you, Sir Knight!”

“Please, chat with me too, Sir Knight! I would love to hear more about the Empire...”

The crowd included both ladies-in-waiting who’d harassed Lyse earlier. They were now hanging off of Sidis, trying to make an impression on an imperial. Lyse almost applauded the audacity.

There was a third lady-in-waiting among the crowd too. She was standing off to the right where no one would see her, wringing her hands. Lyse recognized her red hair. This woman was Emicia, who’d married into Olwen from abroad. Lyse wondered if that was why she’d always been so kind to her in spite of her reputation. She’d heard that Emicia had something of a complicated past, and that she’d been passed around by relatives in a few different countries before finally becoming the prime minister’s second wife.

Lyse overheard her muttering something in the direction of the imperial soldiers, and she was shocked when she caught the words.

“Aah, the devil... The Demon Lord has come to this country! Begone, demons... Begone, demons...”

Yet despite Lyse’s shock, she knew why Emicia would say such a thing. She

was a believer of the increasingly-popular Donan Faith—a religion that doubted the Light of Origin and preached that the gods’ true light came from the sun. They carried black stones, claiming they were gathering it.

When Lyse had heard that this was because the stones became warm in the sunlight, she was iffy. Of course anything black would warm in the sun... Did people really fall for that? Worse yet, the Donan faithful would spread propaganda, the likes of which read, “The Light of Origin Is the Genesis of Disease!” and “The Empire’s Dark Secrets You Need to Know!” Since Lyse was partial to the empire because of her past life, she wanted nothing to do with them.

That said, it didn’t seem Emicia was speaking directly *to* anyone. The soldiers regarded her with wry smiles and nothing more, so Lyse let it be. There was no reason to kick up a fuss. Sidis, meanwhile, was dealing with the ladies on his arms with a perfectly straight face.

“I’m currently on the job, ladies. If you’d like to speak with someone, I give you this gentleman,” he said, calling over an older imperial soldier who was standing nearby. “He has a wealth of knowledge and is an excellent conversationalist. I’m sure he’ll be able to tell you whatever it is you wish to know.”

The older soldier seemed to understand what kind of “chat” the ladies really wanted, because he looked a bit stumped. The ladies were mortified, and suddenly claimed to have a prior engagement as they ran off.

That wasn’t enough to free Sidis from his predicament, however. As soon as the ladies-in-waiting were gone, a few nobles stepped forward to take their place. It seemed Sidis had yet to return to the emperor’s side because the onslaught was nonstop.

Seeing how hard he had it, Lyse felt a desire to protect him bubble up inside her. She’d always liked caring for others, which was why she’d taken to the knighthood in her past life. It had been fun to take care of the imperial children under the empress’s orders.

Indulging in her memories of the past, Lyse quickly fell into line beside Sidis and announced, “I can help with any business you may have, but please

understand that we cannot promise any appointments with His Majesty the Emperor.”

The nobles looked daunted. Of course they would. They knew that it was difficult to get an audience with the emperor, which was likely why they were trying to sidle up to Sidis first... But now Lyse had nipped that in the bud.

“Th-Then we’ll come back some other time,” they relented, backing off when they realized they wouldn’t get anywhere with her.

Satisfied with this, Lyse turned to the silver-haired knight and said, “Sir Sidis, His Majesty awaits your return. I was sent to inform you.”

That’s what she’d presumed when she was sent to investigate, anyway. Alcede and the emperor were wondering what was taking so long.

“I see. I’m glad you came to tell me. Thank you, Miss Lyse,” Sidis replied as the cold look on his face melted into a small smile.

Lyse blinked when she saw the transformation. She would have thought it impossible given the detached expression on his face just a moment ago.

“Let’s get going, then,” he continued.

Though still somewhat taken aback, Lyse nodded and fell into step beside him. She felt something brush against her fingers.

“My apologies... Our hands bumped,” Sidis apologized, speeding up to walk in front of her.

“Oh, don’t worry about it...” Lyse said, now even more stupefied than before.

She hadn’t thought they were walking closely enough to risk touching hands. They weren’t snuggled up together, after all. But after apologizing, the knight looked somewhat embarrassed.

What’s this...?

As Lyse was wondering what had happened, they arrived back at the gazebo where the duke and the emperor were waiting.

“Ah, welcome back, Sidis. Took you long enough,” Alcede greeted him lightly.

“It was an ordeal to convince them to stand down, but Miss Lyse was very

helpful,” Sidis replied just as casually.

Lyse was once again struck by his tone. Shouldn’t a knight speak a bit more politely to a duke? Perhaps they were childhood friends. While she was busy thinking about that, Alcede waved her over.

“I apologize for keeping a delicate flower like you standing. Why don’t you take a seat and enjoy some of these delicious sweets?”

“Ah, yes, thank you very much.”

Lyse thought it would be suspicious to refuse, so she complied, reminding herself internally to play it cool if the Light of Origin came up in conversation.

When she stepped up to the gazebo, she discovered it really had been heated with magic. The slightly warm air embraced her as she entered. She then took a seat, and Alcede handed her a cookie slathered in cream. He then poured her a cup of tea and placed it in front of her as she sampled the cookie.

She thought at first that perhaps Alcede liked sweets, or maybe that the cream wouldn’t be terribly sweet...but it was positively cloying. The duke, however, very much seemed to be enjoying it. He must have had a massive sweet tooth after all. The emperor was watching him in disgust.

Lyse took a sip of her tea to wash the sugar out of her mouth. She was relieved to find her beverage unsweetened.

“Care for seconds?” Alcede asked.

“Er, I’d like to try one of these first,” she said, politely refusing more of Alcede’s cream-covered cookies and instead reaching for a cracker topped with bacon and cheese.

“Just tell me anytime if you’d like me to grab you another one,” Alcede offered with a smile.

But Lyse *really* didn’t want to experience that again. She thanked the heavens that the cream wasn’t within arm’s reach and thought she might try steering the conversation away from cookies.

She turned to Sidis, who was sitting beside her drinking tea, and asked, “What brings His Majesty out to the gardens?”

“His Majesty was ill at ease in his room. We felt it wasn’t good for his mental state, so we searched out somewhere he could relax away from other people. That’s how we ended up out here.”

“His Majesty was uncomfortable?” Lyse inquired. He was using the same quarters he always did when he visited, so she wasn’t sure what could be the matter.

Seeing her confusion, Alcede replied, “Here in the gardens, His Majesty doesn’t have to listen to anyone knocking at his door or the loud people outside of it.”

“I see...”

Lyse had assumed that the throng of ladies and nobles at the garden gate were exploiting the opportunity to be “just passing by,” but it seemed this behavior was nothing new. The emperor knew no peace, even in his own quarters. And when he was in his room, he couldn’t get but so far away from them.

It was like he was trapped. He was stuck in his room, victim to all of the noise and commotion that came with it. That must have been why he couldn’t relax, and why Sidis and Alcede had brought him out to the gardens for some peace and quiet.

“This is an oversight on our kingdom’s part. I will make sure the problem is known,” Lyse said with a frown.

Normally, the Olwenians would oversee the emperor’s visitors. Why in the world were they slacking off when the emperor was supposedly ill?

“Fret not, milady. That duty falls on me,” replied Alcede. “There must have been some miscommunication regarding His Majesty’s condition, so I will speak to the prime minister myself.”

This was a relief to Lyse. It would have taken ages for a single lady-in-waiting to get a meeting with the prime minister. An imperial duke should get much faster results.

“Why not summon him?” Sidis suggested.

“Good idea,” the duke agreed, waving over one of the attendants who was standing nearby.

The attendant then ran off, and quickly returned with the prime minister in tow. Olwen’s prime minister was a thin, frail man in his fifties. He looked like a stiff breeze might carry him away if he weren’t sheltered. There was a significant age gap between him and his wife Emicia, who had just hit her twenties.

“I have come at your request... I-Is something the matter?” he asked, shaking like a leaf over simply being summoned. He looked like the smallest poke would give him a heart attack.

Alcede seemed taken aback by his apparent fright and answered, “I have but one favor to ask, Prime Minister Solum. His Majesty is receiving too many visitors, so I’d like for you to be more selective about who seeks an audience.”

“Th-That... I’m so sorry! This is a shortcoming on our part, and I will see to it immediately that the visits cease at once! I will also see to it that anyone who defies this decree be dealt with posthaste!”

Alcede was barely able to stop the man from throwing himself to his knees and begging for mercy. After soothing him and sending him away, Alcede sat back down in his chair looking exhausted.

“Your Prime Minister is very tiring...”

Lyse nodded internally. She knew the nervous man was a handful.

“I’ll just relax for a bit myself...” Alcede murmured.

With that, he picked up another cookie and went to slather it with cream... And all of a sudden, Sidis rose to his feet and drew his sword from its scabbard.

“What?!”

Lyse reflexively put herself on guard, but Sidis threw a quick overhead slash that knocked something hard from the air. Lyse blinked as she saw an arrow fall to the ground.

We’re under attack!

No sooner had she thought that than the enemy came rushing. The attackers

split into two groups—one who was distracting the imperial guard, and the other who was charging straight for the emperor.

Sidis darted outside of the gazebo, and Lyse tried to follow.

“Stay back!” he yelled, cutting down the first of the attackers single-handedly.

“Don’t worry! Even I can handle this many,” Lyse replied.

A second attacker came at her, probably thinking that a woman would be an easy target. But Lyse lowered her stance and slammed her attacker in the chin with a strong blow, knocking him to the floor. And for some reason, Sidis looked forlorn as he watched this unfold. Lyse was left perplexed, wondering why he would be sad to see her defeat an enemy.

“Um, have I offended you in some way?” she asked, racking her brain for an answer.

Had things in the empire changed? Were lady knights now out of fashion? Lyse hadn’t heard any such rumors. Looking around, she even saw that a few members of the imperial guard were women.

Sidis waved his arm in a wide arc. When he did, a strong gust knocked the attackers back. It was enough to take most of them down. As they writhed on the ground, the imperial guard moved in to restrain them.

While that was resolving, Sidis hurried over to Lyse and held out his hand. She was worried he was angry, but he took her palm and looked it over front and back.

“Ah, um... Huh?!” she squeaked in surprise.

But Sidis replied with dead seriousness, “I was checking to make sure you hadn’t injured your hand.”

“What?!”

“You seem used to battle. I could tell as much from the way you move. But your hands also tell me that you aren’t conditioned for it of late. Doing something like that with these delicate, ladylike hands... You might get hurt,” he continued, turning her hand every which way to inspect it.

Lyse wanted to pull away, but her arm wouldn’t respond. Why was it so hard

to resist when this man touched her? As bewildered as she was, all she could do was stand there and watch.

“Fortunately, you’re just a bit red. Don’t push yourself, Miss Lyse. Next time, leave things to Alcede and me. If anything happened to you...I don’t know what I would do,” he said, squeezing her hand before finally letting go.

Taking care not to let her confusion at the romantic gesture show on her face, Lyse replied, “Thank you kindly for your worry.”

“You needn’t be so distant,” Sidis cut in, looking as serious as ever. “Of course I worry for you. I’m your fia—”

“HOLD IT RIGHT THERE!” Lyse shouted.

She clapped her hands over his mouth before he could say anything more. She knew the word “fiancé” had nearly left his lips, but she panicked when she realized what she’d done.

Though they were secretly engaged now, they still didn’t know each other well. And here she was, treating him like a child. It must have been because she’d dreamed of her days back at the palace when the emperor was young.

She pulled her hands back, about to apologize, but—

“I’m sorry,” Sidis said, beating her to the punch with a happy smile.

Lyse fell silent. Was he the type who enjoyed being infantilized?

While she stood there confused, Alcede ordered the imperial knights, “Make sure these insolent fiends who dared to attack His Majesty are all bound and questioned. And tell the count in charge of our public relations that we’ll be issuing a formal complaint to Olwen as well.”

It seemed the attack was over. Lyse was relieved, but she still had concerns. The emperor’s mana was being warped, and this was the first attack she’d ever heard of. Why was this all happening now?

“This was more than just the guard slacking off...” she mumbled. The thought genuinely bothered her. She was dying to investigate—probably her inner knight coming out.

Alcede seemed to understand the danger as well and replied, “His Majesty’s

illness, an unprecedented attack... And that's not to mention the lapse in security. There is no way this is just a coincidence."

Sidis nodded, adding, "It seems more like we were attacked *because* His Majesty isn't well. Though even if they thought they could assassinate the emperor while he was compromised, we only just arrived yesterday. This is far too soon for a sudden attack. They must have been planning it for a while."

If everything was connected as Sidis suggested, then it was possible they might be able to get to the bottom of whoever was warping the emperor's mana by interrogating the attackers. That would mean Lyse could call the engagement off all the sooner, which was great news to her ears.

Please, let this all be over soon!

She accompanied the emperor's retinue back to his quarters, and Sidis stayed glued to her side the entire time. He normally would have walked in front of the emperor or at the ready just behind him, yet every time Lyse looked over at him, he was looking back at her. Even more baffling yet, she could hear Alcede giggling from behind them.

Once the emperor had settled down in his room, Alcede called Sidis away, and the two gentlemen departed. The scheming look on the duke's face had Lyse worried, but...

The next morning, she understood why.

When she opened the door to exit her bedroom, Sidis was waiting outside.

"...Wha?"

"Good morning, Miss Lyse. I'm glad to see you're well. If you're on your way to see His Majesty, let's go together," he greeted her, extending his hand.

He wasn't asking to hold hands, was he? Lyse couldn't help wondering, and as she did, Sidis grabbed her right hand.

"Th-That's my dominant hand!" she objected. Just thinking about what could happen with it occupied in an emergency worried her.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll protect you."

Lyse wanted nothing more than to insist that that wasn't the problem, yet for

some reason, she couldn't let go of Sidis. There was some kind of weird mental block keeping her from releasing his hand.

And so she asked Sidis instead, "I'm sorry, but could I please ask you to unhand me?"

"I came because His Majesty told me that I should escort you...but I shall oblige if you find it unpleasant."

"Er... It's not *unpleasant*, but..."

She had to deny it when he put it that way. He wasn't hurting her—in fact, she found it quite calming. It almost felt as though she were holding hands with one of the children. That might have been why it felt nostalgic aside from the strange "right" feeling. She'd often walked through the palace gardens hand-in-hand with the imperial children.

Nevertheless, at Lyse's insistence, Sidis released her. When he did, he murmured, "This takes me back..."

Lyse was shocked. She thought for a moment that he'd read her mind, but that was impossible. He must have just been indulging in his own nostalgia.

"Do you mean that you remember holding hands with someone from your childhood?" she asked.

Sidis looked sheepish as he answered, "Yes. When I was little, there was someone who took care of me. Like an older sister..."

It seemed their thoughts were similar after all, but Lyse only nodded silently. It would have been hard to communicate.

Putting all that aside, why did the emperor ask him to do this?

Lyse wanted to avoid being seen walking with Sidis if she could help it. It would only incite more jealousy in those who wished to curry favor with the empire. She sighed, hoping that they wouldn't pass anyone along the way.

"Are you upset that I came to get you?" Sidis asked.

Lyse fretted for a moment before answering, "Acting too close with His Majesty or anyone else from the empire during your stay could make things difficult for me."

“I see...” Sidis remarked before explaining his side. “His Majesty and Alcede probably suggested this because they thought it for the best. Due to some family matters and the fact that I used to be adamantly opposed to marriage, I imagine they were worried.”

I see. So His Majesty tried to push us together in a hurry because he was worried about his retainer’s future marriage.

“I don’t think it’s such a bad idea myself. You looked worried after the engagement ritual, so I thought I should comport myself as promised.”

“Oh, you really don’t have to worry about that...”

Lyse wasn’t really concerned about it either. Just annoyed that she’d been stuck in a situation she couldn’t refuse. She would never admit that to Sidis, however, as she couldn’t tell him the truth about why.

When Lyse and Sidis entered the emperor’s quarters, Alcede took the initiative to greet them.

“You’re finally here, Miss Lyse! Chamberlain, kindly serve her some tea and confections.”

On his orders, Lyse took a seat on the sofa and was promptly surrounded by fragrant tea and sweet treats. She then listened as Alcede talked, mostly about the empire. Despite shuddering at how bizarrely familiar he was with all of the dessert shops in the imperial capital, she was very interested to know if any of the establishments she was familiar with from her past life had survived the test of time.

The emperor, meanwhile, sat silently at his desk, fielding reports from various imperials who came and went as well as looking through paperwork. If she were to be honest, Lyse found herself incredibly uncomfortable relaxing and drinking tea while she watched the emperor work. She thought to offer her assistance receiving visitors, but Alcede swiftly turned her down.

“That’s quite all right,” he said. “We have imperial knights at the ready. I’ve also given your prime minister quite a scolding, so there shouldn’t be any extraneous visitors coming to see His Majesty.”

With that plan thwarted, Lyse only had one option—she’d simply have to stick

with tasks within her power. And so she decided to gather a little information.

“Have you heard anything yet about yesterday’s incident?” she inquired.

“You mean the attack? The lead investigator will summarize their findings before they report to us, which could be as early as this afternoon,” Alcede replied.

“Then would it be all right if I took a short walk in the gardens?”

“Certainly,” he answered, sending her off with a great smile—and one simple request. “But if you wouldn’t mind taking Sidis with you and showing him around the palace...”

Lyse could guess from the grin on his face that he was trying to give Sidis some alone time with his new fiancée, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to accomplish her intended purpose with Sidis at her side. Thus she decided to beat Alcede at his own game.

“I apologize, but I’ve already promised another lady that we could have some girl talk,” she said as she walked outside.

Such a line was meant to heavily discourage a male escort, and her plan worked well. Alcede seemed to take the hint that he shouldn’t force Sidis to tag along, because no one followed after Lyse.

“Good, good!” she said to herself as she headed for the gardens. This was her chance to investigate the scene of yesterday’s attack.

The entire incident would likely be resolved with the attacker’s confessions, but the emperor would still be staying at the palace for some time yet. And should his voice return, he would undoubtedly be visiting the gardens again. Lyse had to make sure the emperor she used to babysit would be safe.

“If only I could go back to the empire with them...”

Upon fondly recalling the days she used to spend with the young emperor, Lyse was struck with an acute pang of homesickness. In this life, she was physically weaker and couldn’t use magic, so she knew she could never be a knight. But if she were to marry into the Razanate Empire, her life would be much easier. Beyond having mana, the wives of nobles would more or less train

themselves for combat. Swinging a sword was considered normal for an imperial woman, rather than something she was to be faulted for.

Yet, unfortunately, the knowledge Lyse had gained in her past life put such a future out of reach for her.

“I must keep silent...”

What she’d learned from coming into contact with the Light of Origin could never be repeated to any imperial citizen. The only person potentially aware of the truth was the emperor, who possessed the ability to touch the light without dying. If he knew what Lyse did, there was no telling what he might do to keep the secret safe.

While pondering all this, Lyse noticed a man moving suspiciously across the garden. It looked like he was doing something around the gazebo where the emperor had tea the day before. He didn’t seem to notice anyone was watching, because he made no attempt to hide himself.

Lyse lifted the hem of her skirt and approached the suspicious man. He noticed her as she got closer, and she took the opportunity to greet him with a running kick, followed by a stomp to render him unconscious. After that, she hailed a nearby soldier and asked him to investigate what the man had been doing.

The soldier called for backup—it was Leon who arrived on the scene with six other soldiers in tow. Once he gave them all his orders, he turned his attention to the unconscious man.

“You did this, huh?” he asked Lyse flatly.

“I didn’t kill him. All I did was kick him,” she replied.

She would never admit to the stomping part, although the obvious shoe print told the story all the same.

“Sir Leon, we’ve found a snake!” one of Leon’s men called.

Near the gazebo, the soldiers had discovered a cage containing a venomous snake. The man was presumably planning to set it upon the emperor if he returned. Lyse was relieved that she’d managed to stop this terrible little plot

before it was enacted, but Leon looked glum.

“What is it?” Lyse asked. “Is there a problem with the man you took in or something?”

“No...” Leon looked worried, but he didn’t seem inclined to talk about it.

So with that, Lyse decided to take her leave. There were other places she still wanted to investigate, after all. But for some reason, Leon followed her.

“Hey, Lyse... Are you okay? Being with the imperials, I mean.”

“What?”

“Like, are they reading your mind or something and forcing you to follow their orders, or...”

Lyse couldn’t think of any reason Leon would be concerned about such a thing, so she plainly replied, “Not at all.”

“Really? But this morning, you—” he began before being interrupted by some noblemen.

“You’re the emperor’s lady-in-waiting, aren’t you?” one asked Lyse.

There were three of them in total, all of whom appeared to be about Lyse’s age. She’d never met them before, but the delicate embroidery and fine fabric of their coats told her that they must be aristocrats.

“I am. Do you gentlemen have some business with me?”

“Just a favor to ask.”

Though the men were all smiles on the surface, Lyse was leery of what lurked behind those smiles.

Leon moved to step between her and the noblemen, but she stopped him. She knew the Winslette barony was weak. If they made the wrong move and picked a fight with a greater noble house, it would put her uncle in quite a bind. She couldn’t let Leon do that. He seemed to remember his position when she blocked his way, however, and stepped back with a bitter look on his face.

The three men then sidled up to Lyse, easily within arm’s reach. A couple of scenarios flashed through her mind. If they grabbed her by the arm, she had a

few tricks up her sleeve—including kicking.

Lyse braced herself for the worst, then politely asked, “And may I ask what this favor would be?”

“We’d like to see His Majesty.”

“His Majesty is currently convalescing. Duke Alcede is taking on all of his official duties. If you would like an audience with His Grace, please make a formal request through the prime minister,” Lyse replied with her stock answer.

“We’re asking *you* a favor because we know we’ll never get an appointment if we have to wait on the prime minister,” the closest man complained, running his fingers through his brown hair. “Even if we do get the chance to ask, he’d never agree to let *us* see His Majesty. And we want to see His Imperial Majesty himself, not the duke in his stead.”

“I’m afraid His Majesty is still under the weather,” Lyse said, knowing full well that he didn’t look it at a glance. “Why don’t you take the opportunity to chat with Duke Alcede at the next party?”

Lyse’s suggestion was quite reasonable, but she was yet again met with three men shaking their heads.

“There will already be a gaggle of people trying to do exactly that. The duke would never remember us. But you, on the other hand... You could get us in with him.”

“I don’t believe that would work unless we were close, like next of kin. I simply wouldn’t have the excuse to introduce you,” she countered.

Lyse thought she was refusing pretty directly, but the three noblemen wouldn’t budge.

“Then we’ll just have to *get* close, won’t we?” one said, taking her hand.

“What?”

Lyse hardly knew how to respond. It would’ve been a simple matter to beat the brazen man into the ground, but she would risk seriously injuring him. He’d mistaken her hesitance as interest in “getting close.”

“You’re actually pretty cute, so I wouldn’t mind courting you for a bit,” he

said.

Lyse frowned.

“I’d heard you were having trouble finding someone to take you as a bride, but I might just be able to set you up with a groom from one of my branch families...”

“No thank you,” Lyse replied, angrily withdrawing her hand from his grasp.

She absolutely did *not* want to be known as a woman who’d kowtowed for a husband. Especially not when she had plans to remain unwed. That was, of course, overlooking her current engagement. It would be rescinded soon enough, so she hardly believed it counted.

Lyse’s rejection, however, angered the noblemen.

“What?! How dare you act so high and mighty when we’re offering to *help* you!”

She was not at all being high and mighty, but it seemed that these men took anything other than happy agreement as being uppity.

“Hey, just leave it. Don’t make me call the soldiers,” Leon piped up as he stepped forward, unable to simply stand by any longer.

Two of the noblemen stepped forward to meet him, mockingly asking, “What’s the son of a baron gonna do?”

Leon looked incredibly perturbed, but he seemed to rethink putting up a fight at the mention of his father’s position. He promptly zipped his lips.

And while that was happening, the third man tried to grab Lyse. She reflexively snatched hold of his hand when he put it on her shoulder, then kicked his legs out from under him, slamming him to the ground.

The man hardly seemed to understand what had just happened. He was staring blankly into space. The other two men were gawking as well. Meanwhile...

Oh crap...

Lyse scolded herself internally. She’d done it now. This was bad. Things were

definitely going to get nasty. While the men were still dazed, she attempted to retreat.

“W-Well, good luck with that! Ohoho...” she said, turning to run. If she could just get away, Leon would have no reason to get into a fight.

“Just you wait, boar girl!”

“Don’t mess with us! How dare you kick an aristocrat like that?! I’ll be complaining to Baron Winslette about this!”

“I could use my family’s power to make life miserable for you and your barony!”

Such threats stopped her in her tracks, but she still didn’t want to introduce these men to Alcede. It would destroy his trust in her. Lyse wasn’t very good at refusals in the first place. She gritted her teeth as she tried to think of a way to calm the men down, but then someone came to her aid...

“What are you doing? Such rudeness to His Majesty’s lady-in-waiting is beyond unacceptable.”

It was Sidis who appeared, a stern look on his face. The moment the noblemen who’d threatened Lyse saw him, they went ghostly pale. And as he approached, their jaws dropped. All was silent. Even Leon and Lyse were in shock...

For the silver-haired knight was carrying a lady under each arm like he would luggage. You could hear their toes dragging along the ground as he walked. Both women looked dead inside, trying desperately to hide their faces. They must have been utterly humiliated.

But Sidis didn’t seem to care.

“It seems the impropriety here in Olwen knows no bounds. I’ll personally be informing the prime minister as such. And I’ll have you know that I’ve captured your likenesses with magic so that I can show them to others. Do not think for a moment that your offense will go unaddressed.”

“E-Eek!” the men screeched fearfully at this threat.

“U-U-Um, we’re so very truly sorry!”

“We’ll never bother her again!”

“We beg you! Forgive us!”

Since the people of Olwen were completely unfamiliar with imperial magic, the three noblemen took Sidis at his word without batting an eye.

“Please excuse us!” they all screamed, fleeing the scene.

There was nothing more that Leon, who was still standing there in shock, could do now.

“Leon, I’ll leave the cleanup to you,” Lyse instructed.

“V-Very well...” he replied, glaring at Sidis for some reason before heading back to where the suspicious man had been apprehended by the gazebo.

“Who was that?” Sidis asked curiously.

“Um, my cousin,” Lyse replied. But in her eyes, there was a much more curious matter at hand. “Is there, uh, something the matter with the ladies you’re carrying?”

“They told me that they were so tired that they couldn’t move an inch,” Sidis explained. “When I suggested that they rest, they insisted upon me carrying them. So that’s what I’m doing.”

“...I see...”

The ladies had surely been expecting a different payout. If a noblewoman asked to be carried, she wanted to be held like a princess—not like luggage. Sidis, however, wasn’t willing to play along.

Lyse wondered why. He’d carried *her* like a princess before. She also couldn’t remember this under-the-arm carry being fashionable in the empire back in the day. Maybe times had changed since she was reincarnated and now it was trendy to carry women like sacks. But even if that were the case, Lyse still felt sorry for the two ladies.

“Um, please put them down for now. I’ll carry them,” she offered.

“You will?” Sidis questioned, his eyes wide.

When Lyse nodded back, he obliged with a curious look on his face. The

moment the ladies' feet hit the ground, they ran off as fast as they could, yelling, "We're fine now! Have a wonderful day!"

Seeing them flee, Lyse applauded them internally. They must have been mentally exhausted after this ordeal.

"Thank you very much for saving me," she then said, turning to Sidis. She'd been in a real pinch, so she was genuinely grateful for his aid.

"It's my duty to protect my fiancée," he replied smoothly.

Lyse could only agree with a dry, monotone laugh.

Sidis continued with an intimidating look, "A woman shouldn't be forced to defend herself against a man. What would you have done if they'd injured you?"

"I..." Lyse didn't know how to respond. She'd never been worried about that, whether at the palace or back in her uncle's barony. "I would be more worried about injuring *them*..."

Even if Leon hadn't been there, she was quite certain she could have taken the three men in a fight. In fact, things would have been easier if she *had* been alone. The noblemen would've been loath to spread word that they'd been beaten by a woman, after all. And if her uncle decided to disown her in the aftermath, Leon would have been scot-free if he weren't involved. Lyse's last resort in the moment would have been forcing him to claim as much.

Still, Sidis looked upset. He continued, "But you're liable to injure your hands if you punch anyone. You haven't been doing any rough work lately. When I kissed your hand, your nails and fingers were so soft..."

"B-B-Bwuh?! What are you saying?!" Lyse screeched unwittingly.

"What has you so flustered?"

"Because that's embarrassing! Are you somehow *not* flustered?!"

Lyse found it unbearably awkward to talk about the kiss they'd shared over the ritual, but Sidis seemed perfectly unfazed by it.

"I think it's only natural to compliment your fiancée," he said. "I'd already decided that if we were to be engaged, I would take every possible opportunity

to sing your praises.”

“Every possible opportunity? Um...” Lyse felt a bit faint. Had imperials always been so lovey-dovey with their betrothed? Or had something changed in the past hundred years or so? “Anyway, thank you for saving me. I’ll be off now...”

Unable to think of any other way to respond, Lyse made to leave. But...

“Wait, Miss Lyse,” Sidis said to stop her. “I was looking for you. I have a request.”

“Oh? Is His Majesty calling for me?”

That was the only reason Lyse could think of that Sidis would be looking for her.

“No. When I walk around the royal palace alone, women keep hailing me and detaining me with conversation. I was wondering if you might stay with me to keep them at bay,” he explained with a sigh.

“You mean you don’t want ladies approaching you?” Lyse asked, puzzled.

Sidis frowned and replied, “I understand that they want to curry favor with the imperial court, but given the number of women coming at me... I can barely get anything done.”

Oh...

That much made sense to Lyse. Marrying an imperial—even a mere knight—would mean a strong tie to the empire. That was likely the reason so many women were approaching Sidis. When Lyse stopped to think about it, he’d been swarmed yesterday in the garden as well.

The desire to protect him welled up inside of her. She *needed* to protect him. Or, at least, that was the feeling that struck her until he opened his mouth again...

“If possible, I’d like you to be the only woman I carry in my arms,” he said breathily, touching her shoulder.

“Um...”

No way...

If he kept on like this, Lyse was certain he'd scoop her right up and walk around with her as a deterrent to the other ladies. But in the middle of her panic, a brilliant idea flashed through her mind.

"I think I have just the solution for you," she exclaimed with a smile, clapping her hands together. "Would you crouch down just inside the palace wall there?"

"Er... Like this?"

Though Sidis looked quite unsure about where this was going, he agreed to it nonetheless and bent down a little on the steps leading to the gardens.

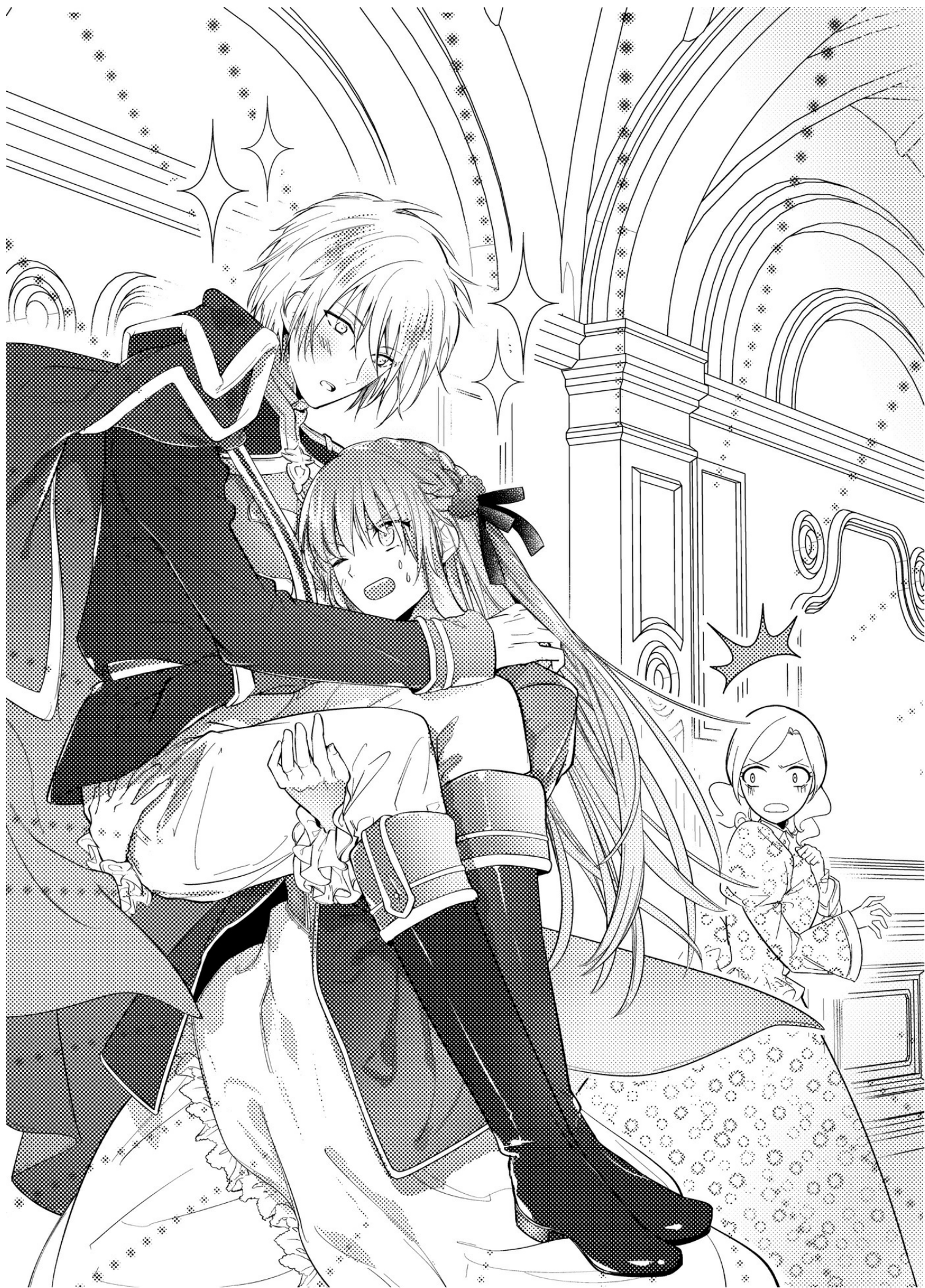
"Please don't struggle, all right? Once the ladies see you like this, I don't believe any of them will ever ask for your help again."

"What are you going to do?" he asked. And the second Lyse enacted her plan, his eyes went wide. "You're—! This is—!"

"Heh heh... Consider it revenge for the other day."

Lyse had picked Sidis up in both arms. As he was much taller than her, she couldn't see his face when she lifted him so. His uniformed torso took up the entire lower half of her vision. She internally groaned about how heavy he was, but she'd already decided that she wouldn't put him down—no matter what—and thus trudged forward one step at a time.

The palace halls were full of servants, nobles, and chamberlains. Each and every one froze on the spot when they saw Lyse walk by with Sidis in her arms. She figured that this would teach Sidis a lesson about how mortifying it was to be carried in public. But unfortunately for Lyse...



“This sure takes me back...”

“Wha?!”

Sidis actually seemed to *enjoy* being carried so. It was hardly a punishment in his eyes. Lyse gritted her teeth. She’d strong-armed Sidis into this and suffered through carrying him. Never once had she thought it would all be for naught.

“I remember being carried like this as a child... But you’re quite strong, Miss Lyse. It’s comforting that a lady like you is by His Majesty’s side,” Sidis said in a happy tone that only exhausted Lyse all the more.

As they talked, the appalled noblewomen they’d just passed walked off in the opposite direction. Lyse thought all was well, then caught sight of them glaring at her from the shadows of the doorway. They must have been jealous.

Then they should come carry him for me, Lyse thought crankily.

Finally, once the jealous noblewomen were out of sight, she put Sidis down.

“Over already?” he asked, clearly disappointed.

Her exhaustion instantly multiplied. She was nearly in tears. How in the world was he so unaffected? Lyse was so frustrated that she swore on the spot to add more push-ups to her daily training regimen.

“Yes, it’s over,” she said. “Several people have seen us already. So combined with news of what you did earlier, I do believe the ladies will leave you be now.”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

Lyse was taken aback by his reaction. Sidis looked genuinely disappointed. Did he really have that much fun being carried like a princess? It was...almost cute. Though Lyse had just been ruining her actions as a waste of time, she was now glad she’d gone through with it—even knowing that anyone who’d seen the sight would laugh at her.

“Was it so strange?” Sidis asked.

“Probably. Very strange,” Lyse replied.

She didn’t know of any other grown men who enjoyed being carried. If she’d done such a thing to Leon, he would have run away crying.

“That’s true. I suppose it *is* funny to see a woman carrying a grown man,” Sidis remarked, seemingly of a different mind than Lyse on the matter. “So to safeguard your dignity, shall I be the one to carry you now?”

“No! Why on earth would we need to do that?!” Lyse immediately shot down the offer. “I’m perfectly fine, thank you! And you don’t need to worry about my dignity. No man would marry me anyway.”

“I would have thought they’d be lined up for the chance...” Sidis murmured, reaching out for her as if infatuated. His fingers lightly brushed her hair, face, and shoulders.

Lyse froze. No one had ever treated her this way before. A sweet feeling welled up inside of her at the gesture, which seemed as though he were begging for his beloved to notice him.

Lyse had once longed to meet someone who would love her—someone she could start a happy family with. But that longing had quietly faded during her childhood without her noticing.

Strongly affected by her memories of the empire, she’d taken up the sword at a young age. Her father had allowed it, saying that it was good for her to stay fit. At some point, she realized it was odd for a noble lady of Olwen to have skill with a blade, but it was too late by then. She was already the leader of the local gang of kids, and everyone around her regarded her as most unladylike.

After that, her initiative in heading up hunting parties when the harvest was poor didn’t help at all. The entirety of the barony thought of her as rather manly, which quickly nipped any offers of engagement in the bud.

Lyse suddenly snapped back to reality from her trip down memory lane and replied to Sidis, “Strength makes for an undesirable noblewoman in Olwen.”

In the Razanate Empire, women were prized for their fighting skill. That was why Sidis didn’t see Lyse’s strength as a flaw—moreover, he thought it was strange that anyone else did.

“I heard the story of how you became a lady-in-waiting from someone, but I must ask... Is that really all it takes to make someone undesirable as a bride? When I told them your actions would have been lauded in the empire, they

looked at me as though I were mad,” he said with great consternation.

So that really is how he feels... There was nothing she could do if an imperial didn’t understand.

“That’s simply how things are in Olwen. But I would rather live unwed than be untrue to who I am,” Lyse replied with a laugh.

Sidis seemed to take her words an odd way, thus declaring with a smile, “Then we really do need to bring you back with us to the empire.”

“What?!”

That wasn’t at all what Lyse had intended—or intended to imply—but Sidis was most serious.

“In the Razanate Empire, your strength would be an asset,” he continued. “And if you wish to wield a sword, you would be free to do so. I would never stop you, nor criticize you for it.”

And it seemed that once he started, the daydream went wild...

“Ah, and if our future children also wish to take up the sword, you could be their first teacher. It’s common back in the empire, so no one would give it a second thought. Even in children with a non-imperial parent, raising them close to the Light of Origin will bring out their imperial strengths. They’re sure to live long, so you’d probably be able to care for them their entire childhoods—”

“Wait, wait, wait, just *wait!*” Lyse rushed to silence him. They were speaking quietly, but there was no guarantee a bystander wouldn’t walk up on them. “Our marriage isn’t set in stone yet, so we shouldn’t discuss such things. And please, don’t talk about me going to the empire in a place like this, Sir Sidis.”

“I’m sorry... I thought I had a good idea,” Sidis apologized, looking rather sad.

Lyse was confused. “Why is it that you want to marry me so much? You’re being incredibly assertive about it...” she asked, truly wondering.

But the only answer Sidis gave her was a bittersweet smile.

After that, the two of them returned to the emperor’s quarters. Sidis immediately began discussing the prior day’s attack with Alcede and the

emperor. Lyse listened from the side, shocked by what she heard.

“Unfortunately, none of the attackers remembered why they attacked in the first place.”

“Huh?” Lyse piped up unwittingly. She didn’t understand. How could the attackers not remember that?

After she interjected, Alcede explained, “Despite being questioned, all of the assailants claim they can’t recall anything about the person who gave them orders.”

“Are they not just hiding such information?” she asked, wondering if they might be playing dumb.

“The knights of Olwen gave them a double dose of truth serum, yet they still remember nothing.”

“That’s...”

The serum couldn’t force them to talk, but if they said they didn’t remember under its influence, then it had to be true. How strange, Lyse thought.

“Just to be sure, we had Sidis use his magic on them,” Alcede continued. “He can cast a spell that loosens men’s lips better than any torture.”

“Such magic exists?” Lyse didn’t remember any spell like that. It must have been newly created.

“But even that didn’t jog their memories... So wraps up the investigation, Your Majesty,” Alcede concluded, addressing Emperor Egbert who had been silent all this time.

“Even if they were under the power of suggestion, something like this would normally be unthinkable,” Sidis spoke up with a grave look on his face, indicating the serious nature of the situation. “If someone talked them into doing the deed, they should remember something from that moment. What they said, what they looked like, other details... I believe the fact that the attackers have absolutely no recollection of anything indicates they are under the effect of some kind of memory-erasing spell.”

“I’d very much like to believe that an imperial citizen is behind this,” Alcede

sighed at what Sidis was suggesting. “I just don’t think they’d have the opportunity to commit such a crime. The travel of citizens who can use magic is strictly controlled, after all. None of them would be able to sneak out into Olwen without us noticing.”

Sidis nodded upon hearing this, then yielded more information.

“I was able to learn, however, that a man hired the assailants for money. A knight charged with protecting the capital who was a point of contact with the city guard,” he declared.

Sidis had discovered this with his magic, so there was no doubt about it. And yet...

“A knight was the culprit...?”

Just the thought shocked Lyse. Knights swore their loyalty and their life to their liege. She was intimately familiar with this from her past life, and the very idea of betraying such an oath left her aghast.

Alcede raised an eyebrow when he heard her hoarse whisper. He then asked as he raised a cookie to his lips, “Are you surprised at the betrayal, Miss Lyse?”

She nodded. Alcede finished chewing and swallowed before responding.

“I can’t say I am. I don’t personally find the knights here to be of remarkable loyalty. There are few monster attacks, and Olwen hasn’t been pulled into any wars in recent memory. On top of that, there isn’t much crime in the capital. The royal knights don’t often have to fight to protect the people.” His mouth must have been dry, because he paused to take a sip of tea before continuing, “And in the absence of such danger, they can perfunctorily go about their knightly duties without a modicum of real loyalty.”

Lyse could think of no argument, so she silently contemplated Alcede’s words.

“Whatever the case, we should investigate the post in question and any guards there,” Sidis declared.

“But it would be trouble if the imperial soldiers we send to investigate fall under the culprit’s sway,” Alcede argued warily.

“Woof,” said the heretofore silent emperor.

Despite the fact that his barking completely dispelled the mounting tension in the room, both Sidis and Alcede stood at perfectly serious attention.

“Really, Your Majesty?” they asked.

“Boof,” the emperor replied—in his doggy voice—with a rather dire expression on his face.

Lyse felt like the odd one out. She was the only one who couldn’t follow the situation, and she found herself desperately wishing she could understand the emperor too.

Finally, Sidis filled her in: “His Majesty has ordered Alcede and I to continue the investigation since there’s no possibility of us being compromised. He’s also asked that we take you along.”

“Me?”

Lyse wanted to investigate, though she never expected the imperial men to ask her along for the ride. The invitation was a godsend, since it would allow her to see things for herself.

Seeing Lyse’s eyes light up, the emperor nodded and said, “Wuffwoo, whnnn.”

Sidis replied with an apologetic bow, “Thank you for your consideration, Your Majesty.”

Lyse regarded this all with a great deal of confusion.

Looking a bit embarrassed, Sidis explained, “His Majesty says he suggested it because we’re engaged...”

So this was another ploy to get them closer. Lyse thanked the emperor, albeit with a bitter smile.

With that, the emperor turned to walk back to his desk, looking rather satisfied with himself. As he walked, for just a moment, Lyse caught sight of something strange under his cloak.

“Hmm?”

It was a fluffy white tail.

She took a closer look at the emperor. It wasn't cold, so he wasn't wearing furs. Was she just seeing things, then? Lyse rubbed her eyes...and again spotted a floofy white tail near his waist.

"Um, Your Majesty... Could it be that you're becoming more like a dog?"

Was he actually turning into one?

Alcede answered her hunch with a nod and said, "The warp is worsening. At this rate, we're thinking that His Majesty will have canine ears within three days' time."

"Doggy ears..."

The image of the virile, thirty-year-old (physically) emperor with doggy ears popped into her mind. It was most alarming. If he barked at her in that state, she wouldn't know what to do with herself. He could hide his tail with his cloak, but what would he do about ears? They needed to get to the bottom of his ailment—and fast.

"Well, let's get going for the day, shall we?" Alcede said, rising from his seat.

"What? But who will hide His Majesty's tail?" Lyse asked worriedly.

"The knights and chamberlains. Fret not."

"Wauf," the emperor agreed as seriously as one could in doggyspeak. He then smiled and waved to make the message clear for Lyse.

"His Majesty is so kind..." she mumbled, the words slipping from her lips.

Even though the emperor was going through an ordeal as strange as growing an adorable tail, he still had consideration to spare for his lady-in-waiting.

"Let us away, Miss Lyse," Sidis called.

He gently pulled on her arm, snapping her back to reality. The group then left the emperor's quarters, but not the castle just yet. They all changed into lesser clothes, disguising themselves as common merchants before heading into town.

But unlike Lyse, who looked quite natural in the subdued vest and skirt she donned, Sidis and Alcede still stood out. They looked like noblemen dressing down to go play in the city. They were simply too eye-catching. She ended up

having to force hooded cloaks on them to hide their faces.

The trio then boarded an everyday carriage. Without any cushioning on the seats, Lyse bounced up and down on the hard wood bench every time the carriage rattled. Both the men, however, made no mention of it and sat there quite normally. Lyse had to wonder if her stamina was just lacking. She even had the most padding, given the layers of her petticoat under her skirt. She struggled to hide her discomfort.

At merciful last, the group disembarked the carriage not far from the main avenue in town. The imperial soldiers who'd accompanied them as guards stood by. The lady-in-waiting, the knight, and the duke then headed for the post in question.

In town, the city guard was in charge of keeping order. In the noble provinces, the townsfolk usually formed militias for safety. But here in the capital, the king's territory, there was a proper guard to maintain public order.

Their post was close to the market, as that was where most incidents usually occurred. The market was lively—so much so that it was hard to go without bumping shoulders with someone. Even the alleyways were crammed with shops and customers. Both the imperial men in Lyse's company looked like they were enjoying taking in the sights.

"Are you both all right?" she asked as they made their way through the crowd.

Alcede, who had his eyes on a candy stall, replied, "Perfectly. It's nice and lively here, just like in the empire. That said, the imperial capital has more foreigners in it, so the feel is somewhat different."

"Is that because of the Light of Origin?" she inquired, knowing the answer full well. It felt odd to ask, but she had to play the part of a lowborn noble who was none the wiser about the ways of the empire.

"Yes, that's right. Many countries worship the Light of Origin, so there are few travel restrictions. We get lots of visitors, but that also means citizens of countries that hate the empire sometimes cause a fuss too."

"I see," Lyse said with a sage nod.

Up until about two hundred years ago, other countries had always been grateful for Razanate exterminating the plagues of monsters that appeared. But things changed when monster attacks became less frequent.

With fewer monsters, even smaller countries were able to handle the attacks on their own. Many began to think that they too should be able to live under the blessings of the Light of Origin, and thus began revolting against the empire.

The reason the Razanate Empire was so rich and powerful wasn't just because of its magic; the Light of Origin also made the land fertile and bountiful. This caused resentment and eventually conflict. And once the empire had pinned down the aggressor countries with its overwhelming might, it decided to take the path of ruling over them as their superior.

"Ah, it's down this street to the right."

Once the trio finally made it through the market square, they arrived at the guard post. It was a two-story brick building. The group could only see one person enter and exit as they approached, so it didn't seem busy.

"Will you be going straight inside to talk to them, despite knowing they may be dishonest?" Lyse asked her imperial companions.

"Of course," Sidis replied. "There's no reason *not* to take advantage of the empire's standing. We've even sent official notice, so things should be fine."

As they were talking, an Olwenian soldier rode up to the post. He quickly tied his horse up at the entrance and scurried inside in a hurry.

"Would...that happen to be your official notice?"

"I do believe so," Sidis replied in amusement. He continued with a grin, "If we didn't send word, it would take time for them to verify our identities. And if we took too long to arrive after sending word, they would have a chance to get rid of any evidence. That's why I made sure word would arrive just as we did."

Lyse quietly came to the conclusion that Sidis was a tactician. The trio then entered the post to find the soldier who'd brought word still standing inside.

"Uh, welcome, Your Imperial Grace!" he shouted when he saw Alcede.

Thanks to that, the group didn't have to introduce themselves. The man

who'd gathered up staff behind the counter couldn't ignore their presence, and had no choice but to come greet them.

"W-Welcome! Wh-Wh-What brings you fine folks here?" he asked. He looked to be in the prime of his life, and seemed to be the post's representative.

"We've learned that the culprit who hired the good-for-nothings that attacked His Majesty the Emperor yesterday frequents this office. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Despite Alcede's smile, the representative was visibly shaken. Per Sidis's wishes, everyone presently at the post was to be interviewed one by one. Sidis himself, of course, would be employing his confession magic. Since he was the only one who could use it, Alcede had the guards set up their best chair for him in their reception room. His job was apparently keeping an eye on the other guards so no one could run. Lyse, meanwhile, was asked to sit in with Sidis while he conducted the interviews.

"Is it really all right for me to do this?" she asked.

Normally, a lady-in-waiting would never be present for such questioning. Lyse didn't personally mind because of her past experiences as a knight, but it wasn't something a noble lady would ordinarily be asked to do.

Once they'd entered the small room they were using for the interviews, Sidis quietly revealed the reason: "I don't want to leave my fiancée somewhere swarming with men. I'd like to keep you by my side where I can protect you."

"Uh, um..."

His words, along with the serious look he gave her, flustered Lyse. Was her heart flutter because she felt he truly meant it? That he didn't want her around other men? She was at a loss.

As she tried to collect herself, the first interviewee entered. He told Sidis that he hadn't noticed the culprit acting strangely. He mentioned that the man didn't stand out much, but that he seemed an ordinary fellow who took to laughter with a few drinks.

Sidis questioned the guard while walking circles around him, and Lyse sat off to the side watching. When Sidis was behind the guard, he used his magic. He

pointed his fingers at the back of the man's head. There was a spark of light, and the guard suddenly looked sleepy.

After peering over the guard's shoulder to confirm this, Sidis said, "I'll ask again: Do you know of anyone that the culprit has gotten close with recently?"

"...He says he's been getting on with his next-door neighbor Roseanna... And I hear he's gotten to be a regular at a new store... He says he and the owner are chummy..." the guard rattled off in an absentminded fashion.

This answer was different from what he'd said at first. Before Sidis used his magic, the guard had claimed not to know anything about the culprit's personal life. Lyse was surprised to see the spell at work.

"Do you ever recall a time you thought he was acting strangely?" Sidis asked.

He'd posed the same question just moments before, to which the guard had replied, "Never." Yet this time...

"He's been so fastidious lately... I was shocked to see him running around town in the mornings..."

What the man was saying had nothing to do with the incident, but it was at least the truth. Sidis's incredible magic compelled it. He dismissed it, however, after those two questions. The guard's expression stiffened up again, as if nothing had happened. Sidis then asked him to bring in the next man, and he immediately left the room.

"Why didn't you ask him anything else?" Lyse couldn't help inquiring.

"I can't keep it up forever," Sidis replied with a sour smile. "It takes a lot of mana to cast. It's a pretty unique spell."

If the caster himself said so, Lyse had no choice but to believe him. After that, Sidis used the same spell on the next ten guards. Once the interviews were all finished, he looked exhausted.

"Um, you did a good job," Lyse said, thinking it was only polite to recognize his hard work.

Sidis smiled. He looked almost relieved.

"Thank you... You're very kind," he said. Lyse thought that would be that, but

Sidis continued, "I'm sorry for having you sit through something so boring, though I am glad to have a little time together, just the two of us."

Lyse didn't know how to respond. She felt an awkwardness in the pit of her stomach when he smiled at her all the brighter. He walked over and held out his hand. She took it, thinking he was offering to help her stand...but he didn't let go once she was on her feet.

"Sir Sidis, my hand..."

"...I'm sorry," he replied somewhat forlornly, releasing her just before opening the door.

When he let go of her and apologized, Lyse felt as though this had happened before. But when and where? She had to wonder.

Lyse followed Sidis out of the interview room, still pensive.

"Good work," Alcede greeted them, rising from his chair.

"I was able to ask most everything I needed to," Sidis replied. "We're done here."

"All right. Then if you'll excuse us, Captain..." the duke said to the man he'd detained when they first arrived.

And with that, the trio left the terrified guards to the rest of their day.

"Now, were you able to learn anything?" Alcede asked as they walked.

"I won't know without digging deeper," Sidis replied, looking displeased. "What I *did* manage to gather was bits and pieces of information that won't necessarily amount to a decisive lead."

Lyse, who'd heard everything that the interviewees confessed, nodded along. They'd only mentioned the culprit's neighbor Roseanna, the new shop where he'd become a regular, and how he took good care of newbie guards. There was a good chance none of that would lead to the liaison who'd hired the attackers.

Nevertheless, they were tidbits the guards should've had no reason to hide. Sidis would be looking into all of it. The fact that the guards had gone out of their way to withhold such information implied there was *something* fishy about it.

After walking for a bit, the trio found themselves on another busy street flanked with merchants, although in a much more modest fashion than the market square. The avenue was lined with blankets on the ground, atop which sat crates of goods and vendors just waiting for customers. Many of them were women or children, as the street was quite close to the guard station. They felt safe here, even without men around. And among them was a woman selling minerals and such.

“Oh...” Lyse breathed, stopping in place when she laid eyes on the lineup of stones.

“Do you fancy one of those?” Sidis asked, though it wasn’t exactly the question on his mind.

“Ah, it’s just similar to something from back home. It took me back a bit...”

Lyse felt bad for the holdup and tried to urge the group forward, but both men began browsing the stall’s wares in an attempt to identify what had caught her eye.

“Er...that one. The farthest on the right,” she admitted.

“This? It’s a rock with starmetal ore,” Alcede hummed, kneeling to pick up a sample of the dark purple stone speckled with silver.

“Would you like one?” Sidis offered.

“No, it was just nostalgic to see it. I don’t actually want...” Lyse was about to refuse, but trailed off when she saw the look of disappointment in the shopkeeper’s eyes.

“I’ll take this one, please,” Alcede declared.

He then handed the woman a small silver coin. It wasn’t overly much, but it was certainly more than the asking price. He hushed the flustered owner’s objections with a wave of his hand, however, as he stood back up and departed. Sidis and Lyse quickly followed behind.

Alcede scrutinized the stone as he walked, remarking, “There’s a bit of starmetal mixed in here. Since it isn’t much, I suppose this is the sort of thing young children collect as treasures.”

Lyse blushed, as Alcede had hit the nail square on the head.

“It’s the only mineral you can mine in our barony,” she said. “And, yes, I actually collected and stored them in my secret treasure box when I was younger myself...”

“May I ask more about what your home is like?” Sidis inquired.

Thinking it a pleasant enough way to pass the time as they walked, Lyse replied, “There’s a deep valley with boulders at the bottom that contain this ore. Thanks to that, it looks like the ground is covered in stars when you look down into the ravine at night. It’s breathtaking.”

The starmetal sparkled slightly in the moonlight. Back when she was little, Lyse would secretly slip out of the manor at night with a few of the servant children to go see it.

“But starmetal is only worth anything in bigger chunks. And no matter how much they dug, they could never find any large deposits. The ruling baron a few generations back scrapped the mining operation entirely.”

And thanks to the debts incurred in the process, the Winslette family finances were humbled. Lyse’s uncle, the current Baron Winslette, was still paying off the debt to this day.

“Starmetal, huh? None of the stones we’ve acquired in the empire have worked, but...” Alcede murmured.

“Perhaps we’d have better luck with something sourced from outside Razanate’s borders,” Sidis suggested.

Lyse wasn’t following. Did the empire have some need for stone she was unaware of?

Alcede then asked if she knew any jewelers in the capital, so Lyse led the gentlemen to a shop she’d visited a few times before on errands. It was just around the corner by the gate, but because the owners had rebuilt it after buying out nearby buildings, the storefront looked rather classy.

When Lyse stepped inside, a young servant girl who worked at the store recognized her and asked her what she needed. Lyse informed the girl that her

companions would like to see the store's selection of stones. The owner himself quickly came out to help when he heard that imperial nobles were in the shop.

Alcede and Sidis were interested in the stones—not the beautifully cut gems, but the unrefined ores. The owner was rather puzzled by this at first, but eventually began taking notes. He was happy to show the gentlemen stones that merchants had ordered for the palace.

While Lyse breathed a sigh of relief that they'd be returning to the palace soon, the young servant girl who worked at the store approached her.

"Um, miss, the owner would like to express his thanks for introducing new customers to our shop," she said, producing a golden-chained necklace with a round, black stone pendant about the size of her fingernail.

"Oh, I could never take something so expensive..."

"The owner said it's a token of his appreciation for bringing such fine gentlemen to the shop. Please, do take it," insisted the servant girl, refusing to back down. "It isn't actually that expensive, but we're selling them because the color seems to be in style. We just received a large stock of them."

Upon being told it wasn't an expensive gift, Lyse found it hard to refuse. As she gingerly slipped it inside her pocket, the imperial duo finished up their talk with the owner. She thought they would be announcing it was time to leave, but they both approached her with small boxes in hand.

"Huh...? What is this?" she asked, confused.

"You've been such a help to us, while we've been such a bother to you. Please, accept this as an apology," Alcede responded with a smile.

"This wouldn't be an accessory, would it? You really shouldn't have..." Lyse reflexively tried to refuse.

Ladies-in-waiting were ordinarily accustomed to such gifts, but Lyse had never received anything of the sort before. It seemed no one saw a reason to butter up the notorious boar girl.

Despite Lyse's refusal, however, Alcede kept pushing and opened the box to reveal its contents. Atop a swath of black velvet lay a golden bracelet lined with

three gems no larger than grains of wheat.

“Something so modest should be easy to wear, no?” he said.

And he was right. No one would raise a fuss about something so discreet. Lyse, however, was worried it might be ripped off of her in combat.

“Um, but if I’m wearing this and there’s another attack, it might get broken,” she argued.

“It wasn’t very expensive,” Alcede said, brushing off her objections by stating a price just shy of what anyone would consider steep. “As you are His Majesty’s lady-in-waiting, I would have preferred to give you something more luxurious, but I knew you would refuse.”

“Urgh... Fine...”

It would have been rude to insist on refusing such a thoughtful gift, so Lyse obliged and accepted. Except now that she’d accepted Alcede’s gift, she was likewise forced to accept Sidis’s. Though it was only temporary, they *were* engaged. She knew he’d be disappointed if she refused.

“I as well, Miss Lyse... I thought this would suit you, so I absolutely had to get it for you,” he said, opening the square box himself.

What Lyse saw inside made her eyes go wide. It was a hair ornament, decorated with dark red gems arranged in the shape of a few small flowers. They looked just like the ones she used to put in her hair in her past life as a knight of the Razanate Empire.

Qatora had been a bit taller and harsher-looking than Lyse was now. She’d always thought cute flowers didn’t suit her and that boldly colored ones stood out too much, so she’d avoided them whenever she dressed up. But in the empire, it was customary to wear real flowers on special occasions, including parties where the emperor himself would be in attendance. Qatora had always picked these small, dark red flowers for such events. They were mature, just like her—both subdued and ordinary.

Thinking back on it now, Lyse recalled one time she’d worn a dress for a formal occasion and forgotten to put anything in her hair. The golden-haired child she watched over had produced a bouquet of the little red flowers for her.

"I think brighter flowers would suit you better, but these are still nice on you, Qatora. They're really beautiful."

He had been so bashful about it that Qatora couldn't help finding it adorable. She had given him a great big hug as thanks.

As for the flowers, the same species didn't bloom here in Olwen. They were likely indigenous to Razanate. Lyse had to stop herself from muttering anything about how they reminded her of her past.

"Do you not like it?" Sidis asked worriedly.

"Oh, it's not that," she quickly denied.

It wasn't as if she were unhappy. She just knew that the men would think it strange for her to say something nostalgic about flowers that only bloomed in the empire.

"She must love it. She's been staring at it all this time, you know? I thought I would be the one to win this round of gift-giving, but..." Alcede laughed.

Lyse felt small for being observed like that. That was when Sidis spoke up again.

"I'd be overjoyed if you like it. Just seeing you wear it once would be enough for me."

"Th-Thank you very much. Then maybe I'll wear it, just until we get back..."

Lovers often exchanged gifts in Olwen, but Lyse understood that wearing such a thing would subject her to scrutiny around the palace. Everyone knew that she came from a poor barony. It would be only obvious that such an adornment was an imperial gift, and that would only spell more harassment.

But if it's just for the trip home...it won't stand out that much, and it would make Sidis happy.

When Lyse nodded, he eagerly put the ornament in her hair. The gemstone flowers softly bloomed atop the lock of hair they held in place.

When Sidis's fingers touched Lyse's ear as he fixed the ornament in place, a shiver ran through her body at the tickling sensation. Sidis then leaned in close to get a better look at the piece, and whispered...

“How beautiful. Red flowers suit you perfectly.”



Lyse's cheeks instantly flushed crimson at those words. No one had ever called her beautiful before. She was certain she must have misheard him. But in the middle of her fluster, the servant brought her a mirror so she could see for herself.

Her light brown hair did look nice decorated with the inconspicuous red flowers. She felt they made her look a bit older, but her fondness for them from her past life made them feel right at home.

Sidis, meanwhile, was staring at Lyse. Almost yearningly. Did he really think she was beautiful? The moment Lyse began wondering that, she felt out of place. For a moment, she saw the golden-haired child in Sidis.

But that couldn't be, she thought. Their green eyes were quite similar, yet the color of their hair and their age didn't match at all. If that boy had grown up safely, he would be as old as the emperor now. What if, she thought, they were related somehow? That would explain the resemblance between them.

As Lyse stood there pondering all this, Sidis whispered to her again.

"The color red evokes strength... It really does suit you."

His slightly husky voice gave her déjà vu. Where had she heard that before? She pensively pursed her lips, but quickly recalled.

Sidis looked worried and asked if she was all right. He then found Lyse looking up at him earnestly.

She was sure she'd heard those words somewhere before...and it was from the little golden-haired boy. She could remember him saying something similar.

"Red evokes strength, and you're strong, Qatora. It's perfect for you."

Was it merely a coincidence?

"Let's be on our way," Alcede urged the two of them.

And with that, Lyse promptly exited the shop, dodging Sidis's question about her strange behavior.

Once they were outside, Alcede suggested that they stretch their legs for a bit. Lyse was pleased that he wanted to do a spot of sightseeing while they

were here in the capital. Why? Because it gave her an excuse to wear the hair ornament just a little longer. She might have been a bit giddy after being called beautiful by a man. She wasn't used to being complimented, so Sidis's words stuck with her.

"Do I just have no resistance to this?" she muttered, glancing up at Sidis beside her. When their eyes met, she swiftly looked back down. She was so incredibly embarrassed that she decided never to look up again.

Sidis then whispered in her ear, "Really, I'd love for you to wear it all the time. It makes me feel like you truly belong to me."

It was just like something a lover would say, but Lyse quickly shook that thought. She and Sidis were only engaged out of necessity, yet could he have come to adore her? Was that why he stared at her so, going as far as to call her beautiful? It simply didn't feel real. Lyse didn't think anyone had doted on her like this since her past life...

And that honor, too, belonged to the golden-haired boy—the very same one she'd given her life to protect, and whose name she couldn't remember now. He'd once told her that he loved her. It was unbearably adorable. He'd even made a ring out of flowers he'd picked in the imperial garden, which he'd slipped on her finger as he asked...

"Will you marry me when I get older?"

When she thought back on how cute he was, Lyse's heart felt a bit lighter.

Her pleasant thoughts, however, were interrupted when she spotted a strange stone pillar on the other side of the street. It was shaped like a crystal. Judging by the people around it, Lyse estimated it stood at least as tall as a person.

And it was black.

It was only once she and the gentlemen had returned to the palace that she realized why the color had stood out to her. She was on her way back to her room, rather than the emperor's quarters, and as she was walking down the hall, she recalled that she'd seen that same midnight purple hue somewhere before. It was the necklace the jeweler had gifted her.

She reached into her pocket for it, curious to see if they were an exact match, but...

“Hmm?”

She found the stone pendant cracked. She was sure she hadn't bumped it anywhere, so she could only assume it was defective. As she was confusedly putting it back into her pocket, she heard a voice...

“Oh, how terrible... Augh...”

“Huh?!”

Shocked, Lyse looked around and spotted her fellow lady-in-waiting Emicia standing just around the corner of the intersection down the hall. Emicia, with her plain face and red, tied-up hair, looked like she was peering at Lyse. It was actually something of an unsettling sight in the fading light of the setting sun.

“Um, Lady Emicia, why are you hiding like that?” Lyse asked hesitantly.

Looking afraid, Emicia replied, “Because I'm terrified of those imperial demons.”

Lyse knew there was no point in assuring her the imperials weren't actually demons, so she kept her mouth shut.

“Oh, you poor thing, Miss Lyse. Being forced to tend to the Demon Lord...”

“R-Right...”

Emicia wouldn't listen to anything Lyse had to say on the matter, so all she could really do was smile and nod indifferently.

“Please, at least take this to protect yourself. I'm worried sick about you. Here...” Emicia said, offering a bracelet with a black stone identical to the one she was wearing.

“Er, I'm fine, really. Now, I have somewhere to be, so farewell!” Lyse declared, refusing the bracelet and fleeing down the hall.

Once she was far enough away, she began wondering if the jeweler in the city was selling those black stone necklaces because more people were converting to the Donan Faith in Olwen. What was the nation coming to with so many

citizens buying into that cult?

Lyse was so caught up in worrying about Emicia that she'd completely forgotten that she looked like she'd just returned from sightseeing in the capital with the imperial duke and knight.

Chapter 3: Anti-Magic Is NOT Part of a Lady-in-Waiting's Job

The next day, Lyse discovered five frogs not ten paces outside of her bedroom door. She observed the sight silently. They weren't jumping much, but rather plodding along.

After contemplating this for a moment, she simply walked around them. Whoever had put them there could clean them up. And since it wasn't hot out yet, she figured, the little creatures were probably rather comfortable on the cool stone floor.

As Lyse headed for the stairs, she took a nostalgic stroll down memory lane. She'd had the same prank pulled on her before.

"I think that was right around the time I first became a lady-in-waiting..."

The other girls had taunted her, saying that frogs were perfect for a tomboy like her while smiling and giggling from a safe distance away. It had seemed to Lyse, however, that they might have liked frogs themselves, even if they hadn't been the ones to catch the critters. Normally, people who couldn't stand reptiles and such shrieked at the mere sight of them.

But as the prank had had absolutely no effect on Lyse the first time, a second occurrence could only mean one thing.

"It had to be Lady Olivia or Lady Marlene," she muttered, thinking of two women who'd joined the palace since the first event.

They wouldn't have been any the wiser about its ineffectiveness, and unlike back then, the culprits weren't here to watch the crime unfold this time. Instead, they'd sent a male servant to observe. Lyse had spotted him just outside the window. There was enough of an overhang for someone to stand on, but all it took was one glance to know that the man was clinging to the closest pillar for dear life.

This was the second floor, after all, and he was clearly afraid of heights. That

much was written on his ghostly pale face. Lyse felt a little sorry for him. The faster she left, the faster he could get back down to solid ground. She thus quickly made for the stairs. A sigh escaped her lips as she descended.

People hated her *too* much, even though all they really needed was a scapegoat for their jealousy...

And so she began to worry that Sidis might catch wind of this. He'd already heard tales of her swinging a sword around. She wouldn't be surprised if the ladies trying to get close to him were actively spreading rumors about her.

He'd said before that he didn't care, but it might be a different story if he came to find out that Lyse was detested so utterly that she was bullied in this fashion. No one wanted a black sheep for a fiancée. What if they got Sidis's ear, causing him to lose all affection for her?

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait..."

That would be a *good* thing. She had to stop and remind herself. It was weird to be worried about Sidis's affections in the first place. She'd long given up on marriage. What good would it do to start dreaming about it again now? This all had to be because he'd complimented her the day before.

Following the corridor that passed the garden, Lyse made her way to the annex where the emperor was staying. She frowned to find a long line of people outside of his door.

"Please give this to His Majesty the Emperor as he convalesces," said the man at the front of the queue.

"Thank you," the imperial knight at the door replied.

He then took the box from the man and handed it to a servant behind him. The servant put it in a pile behind them both, and the whole process was then repeated with the next guest.

The package pile was really more of a small mountain. It was still morning yet, but it was already stacked with more than twenty boxes. One was labeled as from the Marcrease Company, famous for their art and accessories. Another was imprinted with the seal of a jeweler so famous that even Lyse had heard of them. The whole pile stood as tall as a person. The servant was quickly forced

to start another for the packages that just kept coming.

Lyse had to wonder why the two men were receiving gifts in the hallway before it hit her... They couldn't risk anyone seeing the emperor with a tail. He could hide it under his mantle while sitting or holding still, but it was visible when he moved. It was wonderfully fluffy, yet it had to be kept secret to protect the emperor's honor. That was likely the reason for receiving gifts in the hall today—to prevent anyone from peeking in and seeing it by chance.

Lyse quickly tried to get past the line of people, but there were many who were eager to strike up a chat with the emperor's lady-in-waiting.

"Miss, please deliver this to His Majesty!"

Someone had grabbed her arm as she walked by. She nearly grabbed him back and threw him on the ground out of reflex. While she was focusing on restraining herself, the man shoved a box in her face.

"Do tell him it's from Count Monterege!"

"Er, I can only accept this on His Majesty's behalf. I can't—"

The Monterege territory was near Lyse's family barony. She had to choose her words wisely in order to protect her uncle, but the count wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Oh, don't say that! Please, give it to His Majesty personally!" the black-bearded Count Monterege pressed her with a smile.

Normally, nobles sent servants to deliver gifts, but unfortunately, the count himself had come to ensure his gift made it to the emperor. That made it extraordinarily difficult for Lyse to turn him down. And while she fretted over how to respond, the other nobles in line set upon her in a swarm. They all seemed to think it would be best to follow the count's example.

"Why, you're looking ever so lovely today, miss! I have some flowers here that radiate cool air. Is His Majesty suffering from a fever? If so, these should help. They're very rare, so do make sure to tell him..."

"I've brought some nourishing herbs..."

They pushed box after box and story after story on Lyse. She could hardly

carry them all, but it would look bad if she just ran away. She was still worried about what this might mean for her uncle, leaving her feeling trapped.

“We require that all gifts for His Majesty the Emperor be given through the proper channels. Govern yourselves accordingly, as gifts delivered any other way will not be accepted,” Sidis declared, appearing behind Lyse.

He then took the boxes foisted on her and shoved them back at the nobles they’d come from. All present knew Sidis served the emperor, so they had no choice but to heed him. They took their boxes and puttered back into line.

“I’m so sorry for causing trouble. Thank you,” said Lyse. She was overjoyed that Sidis had saved her, but she choked that back in favor of apologizing for adding to his workload.

He replied with a smile, “Don’t worry about it. But His Majesty is calling for you.”

With that, he ushered her into the emperor’s quarters. Lyse waited in the antechamber while Sidis strode over to the interior door and knocked politely.

“Your Majesty, I’ve brought Miss Lyse,” he said. After a quiet back-and-forth, he beckoned her over. “It seems the emperor would like to speak with you. Please have a seat.”

Sidis opened the door and pointed inside the interior room. It was being used as the emperor’s bedroom, but they’d added a desk and chair near the door. That was where Lyse found the emperor sitting, and she froze at the sight of him...

“His Majesty is getting even more canine...”

On top of his head now sat two doggy ears. They were twitching, so they had to be real, but he still had his human ears as well.

It was...actually rather cute. Not that Lyse would ever say that out loud, of course. She couldn’t help the surge of silly thoughts that ran through her mind. For example, which set did he hear with? Or was his hearing better now that he had dog ears?

“The situation is worsening. It doesn’t seem to be a threat to his life, but...”

Sidis explained with a bitter smile. "I'll just be next door."

True to his word, Sidis stepped back into the antechamber, leaving Lyse alone with the emperor. Oddly enough, however, he didn't close the door. And since the emperor could not speak for himself like this, what was Lyse supposed to do?

"Um, I heard that you asked for me, Your Majesty. Is something the matter?" she tried asking.

"Wauf," the emperor barked.

He then slid a piece of paper across the desk, along with a graphite stick wrapped in cloth.

"Ah, so you'd like to communicate through writing."

"Whhn."

Even Lyse could tell that was a "yes." But something was nagging at her. If he wanted to communicate via writing, did that mean he wanted to discuss something without Sidis or the attendants outside overhearing?

Lyse gulped, worried about what the subject might be as the emperor scribbled away. When he was done writing, he turned the sheet around for her to read.

"How are things going with Sidis?"

Lyse's eyes went blank. The Razanate emperor had asked for a private discussion with her...about his subordinate's love life. Did he really want to bring her back to the empire *that* badly?

"Based on your reaction, it can't be progressing much. Hmm... Should I tell Sidis to be a bit more assertive?"

Lyse struggled for a reply to any and everything the emperor was writing. She couldn't say a word aloud lest Sidis overhear, so she took up the pencil and began writing under the emperor's lines.

"I believe Your Majesty is well aware that I was against the engagement from the start," she penned, wondering why on earth he'd tell her that he was egging Sidis on.

“Of course. I’m purely asking because I’m worried about Sidis’s love being returned.”

“I see. But may I ask why you are so concerned with your retainer’s love life, Your Majesty?”

For the emperor to say he was worried about Sidis’s love being returned, that implied he was under the impression that Sidis was in love with Lyse. She was shocked at how much the emperor sounded like a gossip-loving lady. Moreover, why was he so gung ho about Sidis when he’d first suggested that she marry Alcede?

The emperor suddenly stopped writing and quietly whined to himself, as if deep in thought. Unable to understand him, Lyse was forced to wait in silence. Finally, he started writing again.

“To be frank, I’m concerned about him because we’re related.”

“Wha...?” Lyse unwittingly gasped.

The emperor’s investment in Sidis was because of a familial connection. This news was such a shock to Lyse that she couldn’t help writing...

“Why is a member of the imperial family acting as Your Majesty’s personal knight?”

It wasn’t unheard of for members of the imperial family to become knights. There were cases where the second child of a princess who’d married out became one, or the son of the emperor’s youngest brother took up the sword. But for a fellow member of the imperial bloodline to protect the emperor himself? That was unprecedented. After all, the strong magic nobles possessed usually landed them in charge of monster exterminations.

Lyse couldn’t act like she knew any of that, though she figured inquiring about the reason for the situation was safe enough. Any noble would ask the same thing.

The emperor swiftly wrote in reply: **“Even members of the imperial family need to get out and see the world, but we wanted to keep Sidis’s status a secret. It would be trouble if people tried to cozy up to him because of it.”**

Lyse understood that much. If people found out he was a member of the imperial family, they'd start lining up to see him too. He wouldn't be able to fend them off for the emperor anymore, because he'd be too busy fending them off for himself.

"I'd like for Sidis to get married one day," the emperor continued to write. **"Ensuring the future of the imperial family is necessary for the continued protection of the empire."**

Lyse nodded sagely. The empire was primarily protected by the magic of the imperial family. If their numbers dwindled and they lost strong magic users, the empire's defenses would weaken accordingly.

"I am in a bit of a political pickle and haven't been able to marry yet myself. But Sidis doesn't have the same problem... In short, I'd be forceful with anyone he developed an eye for. Yet he's always said that he had no inclination to get married," the emperor wrote, looking troubled. **"That is why his behavior since coming to Olwen and meeting you has shocked me."**

Lyse could only assume he was referring to how Sidis had quite literally picked her up and demanded that she become the imperial lady-in-waiting.

"He even volunteered to marry you. He must really like you. I don't plan to let a chance like this elude me."

"Urgh..." All Lyse could do was groan.

But that explained the way Sidis had been acting. As a former imperial citizen herself, Lyse thought it was most strange that he'd picked her up like that. The emperor had never said a word, however, so she'd mistakenly believed that such behavior was now the norm in the empire.

"He's never shown interest in a woman before. I was relieved when he said he'd be your fiancé. Alcede must have been pleased as well. Forgive me for spurring them both on out of my desire to see the matter settled."

Lyse was at a loss for how to respond. There was no way she could refuse an apology from the emperor himself.

"Honestly, it's odd to see Sidis be so affectionate with someone."

She couldn't calm herself upon reading the word "affectionate." She thought back to the way Sidis had held her hand at the guard station and the passionate look in his eyes when he'd put the ornament in her hair... She couldn't say he *wasn't* affectionate.

But the negative thoughts spoke louder in her mind. She had to be overthinking things. Including her past life, the only person who'd ever professed love for her was a child.

The emperor continued: **"Still, I understand that you disapprove of the engagement. If you want to break it off once our current troubles have been solved, I won't object."**

That reassurance was a relief. Lyse had been concerned that the emperor might force her hand in the matter for Sidis's sake, and if he chose to do so, she'd never be able to get out of it. Lyse didn't want to let her secret slip and wind up in jail after she'd managed to befriend Sidis and the others.

While she was thinking, he kept writing: **"But I would very much like to bring you back to the empire with us due to your mana. I've heard that the reason you don't care to marry into the empire is because of your late father, but..."**

There, Lyse's heart skipped a beat. Had the emperor surmised that she was hiding something? She felt the blood draining from her face, and took a discreet deep breath to try to calm herself. Then, with a smile, the emperor showed her the rest of what he'd written.

"Even if you move to the empire, of course we'd allow you to return home as you wish. So would you please at least consider coming with us?"

The instant she finished reading those words, the emperor picked up the paper and cast it into the fireplace, rendering it nothing more than ash. He then walked back over to Lyse at the desk and extended his hand. There was no way she could refuse such an invitation from His Majesty himself, so she took it.

"Oh..."

It was slight, but when their hands touched, she felt the same sensation she'd experienced when Sidis first grabbed her. She looked at their linked hands in shock, but nothing happened. And when she looked up to see if the emperor

had felt anything...

“What?!”

The doggy ears atop his blond head had vanished.

Thinking she must have been hallucinating, she tried rubbing her eyes with her free right hand. But they didn’t reappear. The emperor hadn’t seemed to notice they were missing, either. Lyse cupped her hands atop her head in the shape of ears, then shook her head.

The emperor lifted his hands to his head in shock, and...

“Wooooo!”

“Your Majesty, how many times have I asked you not to speak— Your ears are gone?!” Sidis immediately rushed into the room after hearing the emperor howl, thus beholding the disappearance for himself. “What on earth...?”

“Bow-wow,” the emperor explained.

“So it happened when you touched Miss Lyse’s hand?” Sidis asked, his expression now quite stern. He stared at Lyse’s hands for a moment before unhappily turning back to the emperor. “We have no way of knowing how long this will last, Your Majesty, so we shall continue refusing audiences for the day.”

“Khahn...”

His Majesty’s unexpectedly adorable whine tugged at Lyse’s heartstrings. Seeing such an intimidating man whimper so sadly inflamed her protective instincts. But the emperor was in the wrong here, so she did her best to refrain from letting her emotions get the better of her.

“Rrruff,” the emperor argued, earning him a nasty look from Sidis.

Lyse was concerned. Was it really okay for Sidis to regard His Imperial Majesty that way? Even if they were family, wasn’t that crossing a line?

“I suppose I have no choice. As her fiancé, I’ll allow it.”

Lyse had to wonder what Sidis could possibly mean by the “as her fiancé” part, but he explained immediately afterward. Since the emperor’s dog ears had disappeared when their hands touched, he wanted to see if his tail would

vanish and his voice would return if they kept holding hands.

And so Lyse and Emperor Egbert sat beside each other on the sofa, hands linked.

In awkward silence.

Sidis glaring didn't help. Lyse wondered if there was any way to get him to stop looking so upset that she and the emperor were holding hands. It made her feel guilty. She thus concentrated all of her thoughts on the emperor's transformation. After taking care of him as a child, she was genuinely invested in doing all she could to help him.

While the trio waited to see if anything happened, Lyse found herself thinking back on the emperor's childhood. He was much shorter then and would sometimes come running up to her, asking to hold hands. She recalled that and more, and the next she knew, quite a bit of time had passed.

Just as she began thinking this whole situation was something of a pain and reached out for her tea with her free hand, Sidis spoke up. He asked the emperor about his tail, but the disappointed growl he received in reply told him it was still there.

"I think we've seen enough, then," Sidis said, prompting the end of the hand-holding experiment.

Now that her business with the emperor had been tended to, Lyse departed his quarters. She simply couldn't settle down in Sidis's presence. But when she excused herself for a break, he followed her.

"Miss Lyse," he called.

"Is something the matter?" she replied, now just outside of the emperor's bedroom.

"I'm grievously sorry for asking you to hold hands with His Majesty."

Lyse was stunned by such a serious apology. What had him so concerned about it? That almost sounded like something a real fiancé would say.

"I, too, am hoping for His Majesty's swift recovery. It's the least I could do," she replied with a smile.

“I’m still sorry,” Sidis said with a displeased frown. “I’m sure it was unpleasant to hold hands with another man.”

Lyse felt bad to see him so dour. It had been a bit embarrassing, but she hadn’t truly given it that much thought. Yet just as she was about to tell him so, Sidis took her hand. Like always, she was transfixed by the magnetism of his touch. She’d gotten a little more used to it, so she was thinking of simply asking him to let go, but then...

Sidis bent down and pressed his cheek to the palm of her hand. And as she stood there stunned by the strangely romantic gesture, he kissed her hand. She flinched at the sensation of his lips against the center of her palm.

Wh-What is this?

She was dazed. She’d never imagined he’d do such a thing. Sidis, however, flashed a satisfied smile when she froze up.

“Did that leave a greater impression than His Majesty’s hand?”

“Ah... Um...”

Was that why he’d kissed her? On the palm, no less?

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said, not waiting for a reply before disappearing back into the emperor’s room.

Now left alone, Lyse couldn’t stop her heart from pounding. Of course Sidis treated her like a lady, but she’d thought he was just trying to play the part of a proper fiancé by giving her gifts and compliments. Yet...now it was almost starting to seem like he really was in love with her.

“H-He’s just playing the part of a proper fiancé... Right?”

Maybe he thought being jealous was just a part of the job. Maybe he was just imitating how he’d seen other men treat their ladies.

“That’s what it is. It has to be...”

Hoping to clear her mind, Lyse decided to do something rote and settled on patrolling around the emperor’s quarters.

“Someone’s making it easy for people to slip into the palace, so I need to be

on guard.”

First, she went to check the floor directly above. As it was where the soldiers and knights were staying, she assumed it would be secure, but she wanted to make certain for herself. And lo and behold, her eyes were immediately drawn to someone disappearing down a service corridor. It was a man in dark clothing different from what the royal attendants and servants wore.

Lyse chased after him and soon found herself on the roof. The man in question looked back, startled to see her standing upon the scarlet roof tiles he was scaling on his hands and knees. His all-black outfit, including a mask to keep the soot out of his face, made him look like a chimney sweep, but he couldn't fool Lyse.

“What are you doing up here?” she demanded.

The emperor's quarters weren't scheduled for a chimney cleaning. Moreover, the man in question didn't have a single cleaning implement on his person. He was clearly up to something suspicious.

No sooner had Lyse said something to him than he attacked. She'd expected as much, however, and promptly countered by kicking him off the roof. It was a three-story fall, but with the soft dirt below, she figured he'd get off with a few broken bones.

“I knew this might happen, so I wore shoes that wouldn't slip on the shingles,” she boasted quietly to no one in particular, pleased that her ordinarily pointless preparedness had come in handy for once.

Quickly descending the building, Lyse found the fallen man surrounded by soldiers in the gardens. As she instructed them to apprehend the man for attempting to sneak into the emperor's quarters, a group of knights came to see what the commotion was about.

“You again?” Leon sighed.

Lyse felt *she* should be the one asking that question.

“Why are you here, Leon?” she inquired.

“I've been appointed assistant to the supervisor of His Majesty's security

detail.”

That explained why they kept bumping into each other. And their barony’s low standing also explained why he’d been given the equally lowly position of “supervisor’s assistant.” Lyse wished that the men put in charge of the emperor’s security had been chosen by merit rather than station, but she knew that would only cause communications problems with other offices that relied on the pecking order of noble status. Reality was hardly ideal.

Nevertheless, since Leon seemed to be serious about the job he’d been given, Lyse hoped he’d do his best.

“I see,” she said. “Then do everything you can to protect His Majesty.”

Yet for some reason, Leon responded to her encouragement with an odd look. “Lyse...are you worried about the emperor?” he asked.

“Naturally. If anything happened to him, it’d fall on me as his lady-in-waiting.”

“Hardly. No one expects a lady-in-waiting to protect the emperor.”

This comment puzzled Lyse. She wasn’t sure why Leon would say such a thing.

“I earned my place as a lady-in-waiting by slaying a boar,” she reminded him. “People would say that I should’ve done something to lend a hand.”

She’d gotten such a scolding once before when someone had slipped inside the palace and caused a ruckus. People were quick to ask why the boar girl hadn’t been there to handle it. This was back before Lyse had given up on marriage. She’d been careful at the time to hold her tongue and not cause a scene over it, though it hadn’t helped her reputation any. It was something she no longer cared about, however, as she’d long forsaken the idea of marriage.

“That’s...fair...” Leon looked away awkwardly, probably thinking of the exact same incident. A new thought quickly seemed to enter his mind though, as he turned back to Lyse with a tense look on his face. “But that imperial knight is fond of you, isn’t he? Surely you’re not actually trying to protect—”

“Leon, I assure you there are no imperial knights weaker than myself.” Why should Lyse have to protect a knight, anyway? She began to worry her cousin might have a fever or the like. “Are you okay? You didn’t eat anything weird, did

you?”

At this, Leon stormed off yelling, “N-No! You’re so rude!”

“What on earth was he trying to get at...?”

As far as Lyse was concerned, he was the one who’d been rude. Suggesting she was stronger than Sidis *wasn’t* a compliment.

Putting Leon aside, however, Lyse decided it was time to get back to work now that she’d had a chance to blow off some steam and calm down. She turned to head inside the palace, but just then...

A torrent of shockingly cold water drenched her, completely obscuring her vision.

She knew it had to have come from one of the upper floors, though she’d never imagined the culprit would go so far as to dump water on her. They were already out of sight by the time Lyse looked up, but she could still hear giggling. She recognized the voices too—it was some of the other court ladies.

“So she’s not just flirting with His Majesty...”

“I still don’t know how she buttered him up.”

“And now she’s after the knights on the security detail! What a tart...”

Lyse listened as they walked away saying some incredibly insulting things.

“Did I do something to make them more jealous...?”

She had to wonder, but couldn’t think of anything.

More importantly, however, she now needed to get changed. The ladies must have had a servant fetch them freshly drawn water, as it was freezing cold. They’d doused her with an entire bucket of the stuff, too. This was truly going too far. Worst of all, it was still early spring. Lyse shivered uncontrollably as the seasonably cool air chilled her further.

As she hurried back to her room, she nearly ran into Alcede. He was coming down the hall, walking and talking with a few Olwenian noblemen. Thinking it wouldn’t be good for either the duke or the other nobles to see her, she quickly ducked into a nearby room. Alcede pursued her, however.

“Ah, so it really was you, Miss Lyse,” he said with a smile before noticing she was drenched. When he did, his eyes went wide in shock. “What on earth happened?”

“Um...” Lyse hardly knew what to say. Alcede would never believe her if she said she’d gotten hot, but she also certainly wasn’t about to confess to a visiting noble that she was being bullied.

“Let’s just get you dried off for now,” he insisted, murmuring an incantation. He then touched her hair, drying both it and her clothes in a flash.

“Thank you very mu— Achoo!” Lyse sneezed in the middle of trying to express her gratitude.

“Have you caught a chill?!” Alcede panicked. “People outside of the empire get sick so easily... I’ll cure you, so just hold on!”

“Huh? With magic?”

Lyse wondered how long Razanate had had a magical cure for the common cold. Back in her past life, they’d been reliant on medicine for that.

“The spell is currently in the clinical trial phase,” Alcede explained. “I’m almost ready. Just give me a moment.”

“What’s this about clinical trials?” Lyse tried to ask, but Alcede launched into his spell before answering.

She suddenly felt surrounded by warmth. The chill that had lingered even after Alcede’s drying spell was now gone. In its place, a sense of relief washed over her...as well as a wave of fatigue.

“I feel kind of floaty...”

At first, Lyse thought it was just the magical warmth encompassing her, but something was strange. The floating feeling only grew stronger, making it difficult to stay standing. She ended up plopping right down on the floor.

“Why am I...so sleepy...?” she muttered.

“You’re sensitive to magic, are you, Miss Lyse? Damn...” Alcede cursed.

Lyse frowned at this. Something had to be wrong.

“Did yew mesh up tha majik or sumthin?” she tried to ask, but she was slurring her words. Something was indeed wrong. Very wrong.

“Oh, it’s working—a bit too well, in fact. Ah, Sidis is going to kill me. But I can’t *not* tell him...”

As Alcede lost himself in a rare fit of panic, the door swung open and a new figure arrived on the scene.

“Are you in here, Alcede?” he asked.

It was Sidis, and when he saw Lyse sitting on the floor, he looked like a parent ready to scream upon finding their child unwell.

“What the hell did you do?!” he demanded of Alcede.

“I tried that cold-curing spell on her, but it seems it’s overly effective on her... She’s drunk.”

“She’s mana-drunk?! Haven’t I told you not to go around using trial spells willy-nilly?!”

“I’m sorry, Sidis, but someone had dumped water on her and she was sneezing...”

“Understood. The room next to His Majesty’s is vacant, so I’ll take her there,” he announced, scooping Lyse up in his arms.

She was so out of it that she could hardly resist. In fact, she was relieved to be held. What was this contented feeling?

Seemingly worried that she wasn’t putting up her usual fight, Sidis anxiously asked, “Miss Lyse, are you still conscious?”

“Eye’m conchuss...” she tried to say, but it was difficult to answer.

And it seemed her reply offered Sidis no comfort, for he picked up the pace in response.

The rooms on all sides of the emperor’s quarters were normally reserved for other imperials. Alcede occupied the room to the left, but the one to the right was only being used as a waiting room for soldiers on standby. Upon clearing them out, Sidis set Lyse down on the sofa. She couldn’t keep herself upright and

flopped right across it.

“Tha werld’sh shpinnin... Aha ha ha...”

“She might fall off it at this rate,” Alcede warned.

At this, Sidis lifted her up again and placed her on the bed this time. He then went to slip the shoes off her feet, which were dangling over the side.

“Not mah shooze...”

Lyse understood what he was doing—it was improper to get in bed with one’s shoes on. But the thought of a man touching her feet and seeing her toes flustered her, even in her current state.

“It’s fine. I’m your fiancé,” he argued.

She was about to quip back by reminding him the arrangement was only temporary and thus she’d much rather have a female servant do the job, but Sidis was already finished by then. She was about to give up on resisting altogether, but—

“What about your corset?” he asked.

Lyse’s eyes shot wide open as she shouted, “Gemme a feemail servhant!”

Though it was but a soft fabric one, she was wearing a corset. There was no way she would let Sidis remove it—even if they *were* engaged. She’d simply die of embarrassment.

Sidis relented at her request and called in a lady servant, who unfastened Lyse’s corset, removed her jacket, and helped her back onto the bed. Once this was done, the servant invited the two imperial men (who’d politely left the room) back in.

“I’m sorry Alcede has caused you such trouble with magic that’s still under research,” Sidis said forthwith.

“My sincerest regrets, Miss Lyse. The tests lately have all yielded wonderful results, so I thought I could spare you a cold...” Alcede dejectedly apologized.

Seeing one of the empire’s most important dukes so disconsolate made even Lyse feel bad.

“Will eye be better if eye sleep?” she asked.

“Most certainly. Just close your eyes now,” Sidis assured her, pulling the blanket up over her.

Lyse, however, wasn’t sleepy in the slightest. On the contrary, she suddenly burst out laughing. She was outright cackling, but she just couldn’t stop herself. Not even she herself knew why.

“What? This is the first time I’ve seen laughter as a side effect!” Alcede said, starting to panic again.

“We’ll just have to wait until it wears off. What does she find so funny...?”

The way Sidis sighed as he pushed his bangs out of his eyes only made Lyse laugh harder.

“Aha ha ha ha ha, yew’ve got five fingersh!” she hooted.

That simple fact alone was utterly hilarious to her. Sidis’s bafflement at it was equally fun to watch, too.

“Go to sleep, Miss Lyse.”

“Can’t— Bwa ha ha!”

When she wouldn’t stop laughing, Sidis had no choice but to ask Alcede to leave the room.

“I’m worried that if I cast something else on you, it’ll get worse, so I can’t force you to go to sleep...” he said, sounding pained as he took Lyse’s hand once they were alone.

“Shir Shidis...?”

Lyse felt like something warm was filling her from their linked hands. It made her recall being sucked into the Light of Origin, where her fear had been gently taken over by the light.

“Rest now, Miss Lyse,” Sidis whispered quietly.

As he did, she felt herself falling into sleep’s embrace. Just before she relinquished consciousness, she thought she heard Sidis say something else...

“Good night.”

That very word triggered memories of the moment just before Qatora's passing... The golden-haired boy she'd saved had grabbed her hand as she fell, his face contorted in despair. He was probably trying to save her, but she knew he would only get himself sucked into the light too. Without a second to spare, she'd said exactly that—*"Good night"*—to console him, as though she'd only be going to sleep.

When Lyse awoke, it was evening. She felt someone's hand on her face. That was probably what had roused her, but her eyelids felt so heavy that she couldn't be bothered to try to open them.

"The magic has mostly worn off, Your Majesty," she heard Sidis say.

"Thank goodness..." Alcede replied.

Lyse could imagine the emperor nodding in response.

"Still, this is the first time I've ever seen it affect someone so strongly," the duke continued.

Lyse then heard multiple sets of footsteps walking away.

"She's special, after all," Sidis said next.

What did he mean by that? Was it because she had mana? No, that couldn't be it. All of the imperial nobles possessed mana themselves, and surely Alcede had tested the spell on other nobles too. What could it be, then? Lyse had so many questions, but her sleepy brain didn't dwell on them too long.

"What happened with the stones?" Alcede asked.

"They came yesterday, and we tried all of them...but none were of much help," Sidis replied.

"Grrrr..."

"I thought that strengthening our magic would fix things," Alcede sighed.

Lyse recalled the men buying stones from the jeweler the other day. She hadn't been aware they could enhance one's magic. She was shocked at this revelation, but their next words outright stunned her...

"Even the soldiers' mana has started to warp as of today," the duke reported.

“If I split my light with them, they should hold out another few days,” said Sidis quietly.

“I know it will be a drain on you, but I’m afraid it’s all we can do...”

“What about yourself, Alcede?”

“I’m still fine.”

What on earth did Sidis mean by “splitting his light”? And what was this about the imperial soldiers’ mana starting to warp too?

“His Majesty’s new ears aren’t going anywhere now, are they?”

“Khnnn...”

“Please stop whining, Your Majesty. I’m trying to feel bad for you, not laugh.”

The emperor growled at Alcede’s retort. The three men seemed quite close in private.

“Whatever the case, we need to do something... At this rate, it may start affecting Sidis as well.”

“If it becomes a problem before then, I’ll switch with you, Your Majesty... What? Why not?”

“Come now, Sidis. His Majesty finds it most amusing when Miss Lyse can’t help staring at his tail... Oh, please, stop glaring at him like that. Now, what about Miss Lyse? Can we use her? She seems to react to the light, and the warping seems to recede around her...”

There, Alcede fell silent. Lyse suddenly felt overcome with drowsiness once again and fell deeply back into the depths of slumber.

Chapter 4: The Situation Keeps Deteriorating

Lyse woke up the next morning feeling refreshed and sat bolt upright in bed.

“I...”

She could remember her laughing fit from the magic. She knew it wasn't her fault, but she'd behaved like a drunkard.

“Hnnngh!”

The mere thought of it was humiliating.

Lyse quickly made her way to her own bedroom. It was unseemly to wear the same dress two days in a row, so she put on something fresh and fixed her hair. As she groomed herself, she found herself recalling the gentlemen's conversation she'd briefly overheard the evening before.

“What did they mean by using me?” she wondered.

Lyse possessed mana, but she couldn't cast any magic. So how *could* they even use her? She couldn't imagine the answer. There was something bothering her even more, however...

“Alcede said the soldiers were falling under the same effect too.”

The soldiers weren't nobility, but some of them possessed mana of their own. And now even that had begun to warp.

“This means it's not just His Majesty anymore...”

Lyse began to worry about Sidis and Alcede. Moreover, why wasn't she affected when she apparently had mana herself?

All such thoughts were banished from her mind when she returned to the emperor's quarters.

“All right, Miss Lyse, ready yourself,” Alcede warned her before nodding to an attendant on standby. Sidis, too, looked as if he was steeling himself for something.

Lyse wondered what in the world was going on. Had something happened to the emperor? After heeding Sidis's request to preemptively clasp her hands over her mouth, she nervously peeked into the next room. And there she saw it...

"Khhhhn..." Emperor Egbert whined.

He'd gotten much better at making whining noises—but that was only natural, for he now had the head of a dog.

Lyse was glad that she'd preemptively covered her mouth, because she nearly screamed in shock.

The emperor heaved a troubled canine sigh. Now that his head had transformed too, he couldn't show his face at all—literally. Lyse, however, had an idea.

"Can't you hide this with magic?" she asked.

She knew the emperor could use magic. It had been a hundred odd years since she'd last lived in the empire. Surely they'd come up with all kinds of new spells since then.

"We could use an illusion, but that would only work on people close by. The range isn't good, so anyone at a distance would still see his true form," Sidis replied grimly.

"We need to get to the bottom of what's causing the warping, and fast..."

In reply, Sidis turned his attention to the ongoing investigation of the attack in the gardens the other day: "I'll ask the imperial troops to step up. Olwen is formally handling the matter, but they're just too slow."

"I'll send a message to the prime minister, then. You're just His Majesty's knight right now, after all. Give me a moment to write up a missive to make things easier," Alcede asked.

He then moved over to the emperor's desk and took up a pen. He quickly scribbled out a note, completed with his signature, and handed it over to Sidis, who rolled it up and left the room. Lyse wanted to do something too, but...

"Miss Lyse, would you mind terribly just sitting with His Majesty? His dog ears

momentarily disappeared before when he was with you, did they not? I know it may not work, but I'd like to give it a try."

Alcede was asking her to hold the emperor's hand again. She looked over at Emperor Egbert, meeting his gaze. His green, truly dog-like eyes convinced her that holding his hand was the least she could do. She felt terrible for him. It was probably difficult to eat with the head of a dog. He still had human hands, so he could at least use silverware, but drinking had to be an ordeal. She teared up at the mere thought.

Since Sidis wasn't around to raise a fuss about it, Lyse agreed to Alcede's request. To see if she could get the emperor's head to revert to normal, she took a seat beside him on the sofa and clasped his hand. It was actually quite uncanny to hold the human hand of a person with a canine head.

But, unfortunately, no matter how long their hands remained joined, she didn't feel the same sensation she had when his dog ears had disappeared. Regardless, the emperor seemed to be enjoying himself. His mouth was curled into something like a smile, and his tail was wagging.

Alcede looked disappointed at the uneventful results, then asked Lyse, "What did you do last time?"

"I... I believe His Majesty extended a hand to help me out of my seat, and when our hands touched, his ears disappeared."

"Then let's try replicating that."

At Alcede's behest, the emperor got to his feet and held a hand out to Lyse. She took it, just as she had the last time, but nothing happened.

Alcede thought to himself for a few seconds and asked, "Did anything feel different back then?"

"Well..."

Lyse had an answer, though she was reluctant to share. That would mean explaining what happened when she touched Sidis. If she admitted that she couldn't let go of him or that she felt drawn to him, it would be like she was saying she was in love with him. She racked her brain for another way to express the sentiment, but all she could come up with was...

“Um, there was a kind of weird sensation.”

“Were you thinking about anything in particular?”

“Not really... Just that I was a bit nervous about His Majesty himself offering me a hand personally.”

Following this, Alcede instructed her to stand while holding the emperor’s hand. She had to wonder where this was going.

“Just close your eyes. Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything strange,” he assured her.

Alcede had never treated Lyse ill. The worst he’d done was accidentally get her mana-drunk with his cold-curing spell. And so she agreed to close her eyes —only to be shoved toward the emperor. She managed to brace herself and stay upright. She promptly opened her eyes and whipped back around to face the duke.

“What are you doing?!”

“I was trying to make you a bit nervous. I thought suddenly bumping into His Majesty might do the trick,” he explained with no hint of remorse.

“Wauuun...” the emperor whined. Even Lyse understood that he meant something to the effect of, *“I understand why, but what was that?”*

Alcede, meanwhile, was thoroughly unbothered and moved right on to suggesting something else.

“Then let’s try this. Do pardon me,” he said, grabbing Lyse’s free hand. When Lyse just cocked her head in confusion, he muttered, “Still not enough, hmm?”

And with that, he lifted her hand to his lips and planted a kiss on it.

“Wah!”

“Woof?!”

The moment Lyse and the emperor yelped in unified surprise, she felt a magnetic sensation between their hands. Instantly, Emperor Egbert’s head reverted to normal like the canine illusion had been dispelled. Unfortunately, however...

“The ears are still there,” groaned Alcede.

Indeed, a pair of puppy dog ears still sat atop His Majesty’s head. Nevertheless, he seemed thrilled, for his tail was wagging to and fro.



“So it actually worked. Now that we know that we need to make you nervous, let’s try it again, Miss Lyse,” Alcede said, gripping her hand tightly.

“Eeek!” Lyse instinctively pulled away, fearful he was about to do the same thing again. She jerked her hand back with such force that she nearly pulled the duke over as she withdrew.

“Oh, don’t be like that. This is for His Majesty’s sake,” Alcede chided her with a smile as he approached again. He wasn’t giving up.

“I-I really would like to help, but this is too much!” She didn’t like him kissing the back of her hand. “Please, let’s try another method!”

“If you don’t care for the polite way of making you nervous, I’ll have to try a suitable threat. Like...you wouldn’t want your uncle to lose his position, would you?”

It would be easy for an imperial duke to ruin a humble baron. When Lyse gasped, she felt the same magnetic pull from the emperor’s hand still clasped around hers.

Alcede looked pleased, exclaiming, “Wonderful, Miss Lyse!”

The emperor’s dog ears had now disappeared as well, though Lyse wasn’t sure how to take these results. She knew Alcede was desperate to return the emperor to normal, but his method was cruel.

“Ah, that was just an example, though it seems I’ve truly upset you,” the duke said, looking forlorn. “I apologize. I went too far. I would never do such a thing, so please do forgive me. I just wanted to make you nervous.”

Though Lyse was relieved to hear all that, it didn’t uproot the worry that his threat had planted in her heart.

“Wauu...” the emperor growled, still in doggy speak, as he released Lyse’s hand.

Just as she was wondering what he was up to, he quickly stepped beside Alcede and forcefully lowered his head. Lyse’s eyes went wide at the sight. The emperor was making the duke bow his head to her in apology. She was touched. She’d never expected him to go that far for her.

“Urgh... Yes, Your Majesty, I’ll apologize as much as it takes. I hadn’t imagined Miss Lyse cared so deeply for her family after hearing they weren’t close... Yes, Your Majesty, I repent the fact that I’m ill considerate of others’ feelings...”

“Um, it’s all right, Your Grace. You’ve already apologized...”

But the emperor still wouldn’t remove his hand from the back of Alcede’s head.

“Not enough, it seems,” Alcede said, translating Egbert’s actions.

The whole mess made Lyse nervous in an entirely new way. She felt the blood drain from her face upon having both an imperial duke and the emperor himself apologize so profusely to her. As she was trying to think of a way to stop them, Sidis returned to the room.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, shocked to see the emperor’s human head...and his hand firmly planted on the back of Alcede’s bowed head.

Upon seeing Sidis, however, Egbert finally released the duke.

“We were testing Miss Lyse’s special powers,” Alcede explained. “As such, we’ve found that making her nervous allows her to mitigate the warping of His Majesty’s mana. But my methods were a bit rude...”

“Mitigate the warping?” Sidis mused for a moment before saying, “Ah, I see...”

Lyse had no idea what it was that he’d realized.

“Do you know what’s causing it?” she asked.

“There could potentially be some sort of affinity between the mana the two of you possess...” he replied uncertainly. He then turned to Alcede and asked, “But how did you make Miss Lyse nervous? If His Majesty forced you to apologize, it must have been something terrible.”

Alcede averted his eyes, replying, “Oh, I just told her a little lie...”

The emperor, meanwhile, smirked and gave a short bark: “Woofun.”

Apparently, this was enough for Sidis to understand exactly what had transpired. The puzzled look he was giving Alcede became a dire stare.

“Alcede! How could you...?”

But contrary to his penitence with Lyse and the emperor, Alcede remained aloof with Sidis. “It was most rude, I admit, but I wanted to ascertain exactly what situations prompt the effect. Now, which part is it that you’re upset about? The empty threat, or the fact that I kissed—”

In the middle of Alcede’s sentence, Sidis made a flicking motion toward the duke that knocked him back a few steps with some unseen force. The angry knight then turned to Lyse.

“Which hand was it?”

“Huh?”

“Which hand did you let him kiss?”

“‘Let’?” Lyse asked, aghast. What an odd thing to say. He was making it sound much more suspicious than it really was. Lyse hadn’t *let* Alcede do anything. “He caught me off guard! I didn’t just let him do it!”

“But he did kiss you, my betrothed,” said Sidis, reaching for Lyse’s left hand.

She immediately made to leave, fearing he’d do the same thing. “Um, I’m gonna go take a break!” she declared in a near yell as she rushed out of the emperor’s quarters.

Lyse could hardly contain herself. Sidis seemed genuinely cross that another man had kissed her. It was touching, really.

“It was kind of nice...”

The real reason she’d fled was because she didn’t want to admit that. She couldn’t. After all, she would never be able to return to the Razanate Empire.

“Blessings of light be upon you.”

According to legend, that was what the gods had said at the dawn of the world. But the light that people believed the gods had created was actually just the result of a magical accident. That was the secret Lyse could never tell a soul, and she would be confronted with it every day if she went back to the empire. The Light of Origin was a subject of constant discussion there, and she couldn’t be sure she’d never let the truth slip.

But at this rate, she was afraid that her long-quashed desire to marry would flare up again. She knew it was out of the question, but she had no idea how to vent these feelings.

Lyse surveyed the area around the emperor's quarters and noticed that security was a bit lax. Olwen's soldiers were making their perfunctory rounds. The imperial guard was keeping watch in between, but they all seemed a bit sluggish.

His Majesty isn't the only one whose mana is being warped...

Lyse worried about what would happen if all of the imperial soldiers started barking one day. The only thing she could think to do would be to shove them all in the vacant room beside the emperor's.

"That would certainly be awful..."

Not only would there be a dozen or so grown men stuffed in a single room, but they'd all be talking in bays, whimpers, and howls. She didn't want to see—or hear—that.

But regardless, she wanted to see to it that Olwen picked up the slack in regards to security. She'd thought she could leave that to the imperial troops, but if they were now compromised, that would be a much harder task. Pondering what to do, Lyse suddenly thought of her cousin.

"That's right. Didn't Leon say he was now the assistant to the security supervisor?"

She thus decided to seek him out. Even if he was the security supervisor's assistant or some such, there was no guarantee that he'd always be posted near the emperor's quarters. He likely just coordinated the soldiers and came to check in with them at set times.

Lyse asked a soldier where she could find Leon, and the soldier directed her to one of the knight posts.

"I really would prefer to stay away from there, but..."

She'd once antagonized a group of palace knights who were teasing her with the court ladies over the boar incident. They'd grabbed her, and she'd

responded by throwing them. When they followed by drawing their swords on her, she'd knocked them all out. The knights in question had been summarily dismissed from palace duties for pulling their weapons on an unarmed woman, which made their court lady friends hate Lyse all the more.

She'd realized then that it was a mistake to take a job at the palace, but ultimately decided that it was still better than living uncomfortably under her uncle's roof back home. Not only did her aunt hate her, but she'd never been particularly close with Leon. She spoke with him more now that he and his father were basically her only family, but she didn't hesitate to ignore him when he suddenly got angry with her. She wasn't interested in seeing any other knights either, but with her luck, she was bound to run into some...

"Oh, if it isn't the boar girl," she heard someone say as she went to climb the stairs. Laughter followed. And it wasn't women. The soldiers wouldn't say something so overt, however, meaning it had to be either noblemen or knights.

Three men from a mix of places descended the staircase. She recognized the nobleman with them, who was likely an eldest son based on his doublet elaborately embroidered with silver thread and gems. Lyse knew him to be the older brother of one of the ladies she suspected was behind the frog prank the other day.

"Haven't you heard? She's His Majesty the Emperor's lady-in-waiting now."

"His Majesty must like rearing boars."

"Isn't it fun to catch them after you let them loose?"

Their comments irked her, but Lyse bit her tongue. They wouldn't stop just because she asked them to. Most likely, they were trying to provoke her into causing a scene.

But that wasn't the worst of Lyse's luck. Leon was now approaching.

"Ly—" He started to call out to her as he came down the hall, but stopped short when she signaled for him to stand down. He walked up to her nevertheless, however, and worse yet, stepped in front of her as if to protect her. "Did my cousin do anything to you, gentlemen?"

"Oh, it's Leon. Not really," one of them said before they all laughed together.

They'd insulted her on sight, but neither side had done anything physically.

Lyse prayed that would be the end of it, but things rarely unfolded according to her wishes.

"She could stand to be a bit more chaste though, you know," one of the knights said, approaching Leon and looking him straight in the eye. Based on the tone he took, he seemed to be of superior rank.

"I'm wondering if she snuck into that imperial knight's room and seduced him to get in with His Majesty, but... No, that would be too blatant."

"It's not like she could ever seduce anyone!"

The three men started laughing at her again. They were trying to suggest she'd gotten to be the emperor's lady-in-waiting by sleeping with Sidis, and she could think of a few reasons they might be under that impression. Someone might have seen Sidis carry her away when she was drunk on Alcede's magic, or perhaps they were still harping on the favor he'd shown her the day they first met.

Nevertheless, getting angry would only exacerbate the situation. She pinched Leon's arm in an attempt to get him to back down, but...

"Oh, His Majesty would never be interested in a bumpkin like her," he said, joining in.

Lyse tried twisting her pinched fingers to keep him from saying anything else, but just when she thought he was about to brush her off, he grabbed her hand instead.

"Huh?!" she gasped.

She had no idea what he was doing. Making a fuss would only make things worse, however. The men would start saying that she'd seduced her cousin too.

Leon, meanwhile, simply kept talking: "His Majesty probably just thinks it's amusing to have a lowborn country noble like her bow to him."

"You're saying he sees her as entertainment?" the knight asked.

If only Leon had shut his mouth there, or smiled and nodded. But no...

“Yeah, so your sister might get lucky if she grovels too,” he continued.

“What did you just say?!”

“Leon!” Lyse shrieked.

Leon was implying that the knight’s sister hadn’t been chosen because she wouldn’t do tricks for it, and that she should have debased herself like a bumpkin to get in. This had sent the knight into a rage, so Lyse tried apologizing on her cousin’s behalf.

“Er, I’m so sorry. Leon didn’t mean anything by that—just that I was uncouth for doing it...”

“So you think you’re special?!”

Unfortunately, her attempt at smoothing things over didn’t help one bit. Lyse had no idea what to do now, and the person who’d started it all looked like he couldn’t care less. Leon was horrible. He’d always had a bad habit of poking the hornet’s nest, but why had he felt so compelled to do it now of all times?

“There you are, Miss Lyse,” someone called.

When she turned around, she spotted Sidis. He looked like he’d been running—maybe even searching for her. Could the emperor have reverted already?

“P-Please excuse us!” the three men practically shouted, scrambling away as soon as they saw the imperial knight.

Lyse thought it odd. They should’ve taken the opportunity to try to make a good impression, but the way they fled just made them look guilty.

Lyse realized the reason for their hasty flight when Sidis got closer. When her gaze met his green eyes, she felt as though she’d been thrust into the middle of a snowstorm. It was warmer than the day before, but she suddenly felt cold.

“Miss Lyse, do you have business with this knight?” he asked, voice strangely icy.

Sidis had met Leon before he knew that he was her cousin. So there shouldn’t be a problem, she thought, and yet...when she looked over at Leon, he was as pale as could be and glaring right back at Sidis. She couldn’t understand the hostility between them.

Surely Sidis wasn't upset that she was holding hands with a member of her own family, was he? She tried to pull her hand away from Leon, but he only grasped her tighter. Was he so afraid of Sidis that he needed someone to hold his hand? That's what Lyse first wondered, but as a grown man over twenty, he was much too old for that.

Lyse ripped her hand away from him only to be met with a look of despair. She felt bad that he was so afraid, but she ignored him. He needed some tough love to grow up.

And the instant Lyse liberated herself of Leon, Sidis's demeanor changed. The chill of winter softened, and he smiled like a ray of sun in the spring. He must have really hated seeing his fiancée hold hands with another man, regardless of who it was. Maybe he was the jealous type after all.

"Um, I came to talk about His Majesty's security. Did you need me for something, Sir Sidis?"

"I need to speak with you. Do you have some time?"

"Yes, of course," Lyse replied with a nod before turning to Leon. "I needed to ask you something first though, Leon."

He was still giving Sidis a dirty look, but briefly glanced back at Lyse when she spoke to him. "Wh-What?" he asked.

"Could you increase the security around His Majesty's quarters? I'm worried. I'll ask Duke Alcede to send a request to the prime minister too, so I'm counting on you."

"A-All right..." he agreed, looking rather down. He seemed a bit emotional, so Lyse decided to leave him be.

After that, she and Sidis departed. Once they reached a stretch without anyone else around, Sidis stopped walking.

"Miss Lyse, why were you holding his hand?"

"I was having some trouble with some Olwenian nobles. Leon saw and came over out of worry, but the nobles in question outranked us. I think he was holding my hand because he was scared," Lyse sighed. "He's older than me, but

he's still a bit childish."

Sidis gave Lyse a piteous look before smiling bitterly and sighing, "If that's all it was..."

"Didn't you say you needed me for something, Sir Sidis?"

"His Majesty has already reverted, I'm afraid..."

"Already?!"

Lyse was shaken. After all that trial and error, Emperor Egbert was once again stuck with the head of a dog.

"He's a bit demoralized, so I was hoping to ask you to keep him company."

"Very well."

If all he wanted was for her to have tea with the emperor to cheer him up, Lyse was okay with that. It was far better than trying to get him back to normal. And with that, she devoted her full attention to the emperor once more, completely putting the previous incident out of her mind.

Leon, meanwhile, was still staring at the floor back where Lyse had left him.

"Why...? Is that imperial guy really that much better...?" he muttered, baring his heart because he believed he was alone.

Yet someone overheard...

"It's all the empire's fault," called a quiet voice.

When Leon whipped around to see who it was, he spotted the plain-faced Emicia.

"The empire extols the Light of Origin as good while using its evil power to gain transcendent abilities. Now that monster attacks are lessening, they're relying on its evil more and more," she said, coming closer. "The empire's Light of Origin is what's leading Miss Lyse astray. The only thing that can reflect its wretched rays is this."

There, Emicia held out a bracelet made of black stones. Even Leon grimaced at the sight.

"What's this? After eavesdropping on me, you're trying to tempt me into your

cult? I wouldn't stoop so low."

Leon knew that the Donan Faith and their bracelets were fishy business, and he doubted their claims about the nefarious nature of the Light of Origin. He'd seen the good imperial magic could do with his own eyes on a monster hunt before. But the fact that imperials were stealing Lyse away from him did make him hate the empire just a bit...

"Don't you wish those filthy imperials didn't exist?" Emicia asked, stabbing at the cracks in his heart.

Leon fell silent as he gazed at the bracelet.

"If it weren't for them, you would be your poor, isolated cousin's only friend. And one day, when she couldn't bear the loneliness any longer, she'd finally see you... Isn't that what you've been hoping for?"

"How did you..."

Emicia smiled at Leon in his shock and replied, "You'll understand once you put this on. A new world will open to you... You might even have a future with her. Just test it out. If you don't need it, feel free to throw it away."

That last sentence was the last push Leon needed to reach out for the bracelet. He could always throw it away, after all. Just taking it wouldn't do any harm. He'd seen merchants and other nobles wearing them, and nothing bad had befallen them... And so Leon took the bracelet from Emicia.

"If you like it, please do join us!" she said, a sparkling smile creeping across her pale face.

Chapter 5: And So, the Lady-in-Waiting Learns the Truth

“Will His Majesty ever recover...?”

A few days later, Emperor Egbert still had the head of a dog. Worse yet, he now also had the legs of one too. Despite Lyse’s ability to make him human again when she was faced with anxiety-inducing situations, Alcede had decided it wasn’t worth it, as the effect was only temporary. The emperor reverted back soon enough.

The emperor, however, was far from perturbed about this. In fact, he found the odd situation rather novel. Since he couldn’t wear shoes anymore, he would walk around his room barefooted. Looking at just his lower extremities, it was just like a large dog with fluffy fur was prancing around. Lyse hardly knew what to say.

With all of that swirling around her head, she headed back to her room for the night, but...

“...This is...”

Lyse was stunned the moment she opened her door. Inside were swirling plumes of feathers and lumps of cotton scattered about. Her mattress and pillows lay on the floor, all sliced up in a fashion that told her exactly what had caused all this mess.

It was far too late in the evening to call for a servant to clean it up, but the fact that a blade had been used put Lyse on edge. She would have no trouble dispatching any jealous ladies-in-waiting who dared to sneak into her room overnight. But one who was angry enough to use a knife would warrant a different approach.

“Guess I’ll just have to play it safe here...”

Lyse thus decided to sleep somewhere else for the night, and resolved to enter the room in order to get ready for bed and collect her valuables. She’d

stumbled upon a fresh crime scene, however, meaning that the culprit—or at least, the person who the real culprit had ordered to do this—could still be inside. Just as she was about to carefully cross the threshold, someone called to her.

“Miss Lyse?”

Turning around, Lyse saw the redheaded Emicia walking out of a nearby room. Her hair, which was usually done up, now hung down, loosely tied with a black ribbon. She was also dressed in a warm-looking woolen gown. It appeared she’d been getting ready for bed herself. And since Lyse had left her door wide open, Emicia could see the carnage from where she stood in her own doorway.

“Oh my!” she screamed unwittingly.

“Please, lower your voice, Miss Emicia!” Lyse begged.

The other lady-in-waiting nodded before rushing over to get a closer look. “Who could do something like this?” she muttered, shocked.

Lyse had a few ideas and admitted, “There are a lot of people who think I’m in their way.”

“It’s because you’re in cahoots with those imperials,” Emicia declared immediately, just as one would expect of the most fanatic follower of the Donan Faith in the royal palace. But for all her ardency, she still had a strong sense of justice. “Once morning comes, I’ll call for someone to clean this up. You should sleep in another room for tonight, Miss Lyse. You could even come stay with me—”

“Oh, no, I could never impose on you like that! I’ve got somewhere in mind, so I’ll just grab my things and be off! And thank you very much for offering to call someone in the morning. Good night then, Miss Emicia!”

Quickly refusing her fellow lady-in-waiting’s offer, Lyse urged Emicia back into her own room before heaving a relieved sigh. Emicia wasn’t a bad person; Lyse was just afraid of the Donan sermon she’d get if she stayed the night with her.

Happy to have avoided the issue, Lyse changed into a loose dress that she could sleep in and put her imperial red jacket on over it before leaving her room again. Her plan was to use one of the empty guest rooms for the night, but as

she mounted the stairs to the third floor, she found Sidis sitting there clinging to the railing.

Thinking that he must have been drinking, she called out to him, “Sir Sidis?”

He slowly lifted his head, pale as a sheet. He definitely wasn’t well.

“Are you all right?! What happened?” Lyse exclaimed as she rushed over, surprised to see Sidis giving her an uncharacteristically puzzled look. She felt her chest tighten to see him so weak.

“Miss Lyse... I’m just feeling a bit ill... Don’t worry...”

“How could I not worry with you looking like that?! Let’s get you somewhere you can rest. Here, lean on me.”

“No, that’s...”

“I’ll be fine. Or have you forgotten that I can carry you?”

“...All right,” he finally relented with a nod.

Adjusting to his weight on her shoulder, Lyse started walking. She couldn’t help thinking it was rather cute to see him so compliant. Most men would have loathed the idea of a lady supporting them. Lyse had once offered to do it for Leon, and he’d adamantly refused in disgust. But Sidis was quiet now, almost as though he was longing for something.

She helped him to an empty room nearby since not even she would have been able to manage dragging him all the way back to his own. If she tried to take him down the stairs, she would risk the both of them falling if she missed a step. Lyse figured he’d be able to make it there on his own after a little rest.

Sidis heaved a sigh as he took a seat on the sofa in the vacant room. “I’m sorry for troubling you, Miss Lyse,” he apologized.

“Oh, think nothing of it. You can rely on me when you aren’t feeling well. And besides, you took care of me a few days ago.”

He’d even seen her bare feet. Sure, Lyse had been working as a lady-in-waiting for three years, but before that, those feet of hers had spent their days romping through the countryside. They weren’t very nice to look at, and if she could purge Sidis’s memory of ever seeing them by getting on her knees and

begging, she happily would.

“I’m sorry about that as well,” Sidis apologized again. “It was thoughtless of me to take off a lady’s shoes.”

“Oh, please just forget all about that...”

“When I saw your snow white toes, I found myself panicking a little. I’m incredibly sorry.”

“Urgh...”

Lyse rued the fact that he remembered it and resisted the urge to cover her face in shame when he said she had snow white toes. No one had ever said that to her before, past life included. But she held out, not wanting to reveal how embarrassed she was in spite of her bright red face.

Fortunately, without any of the lamps on, the room was rather dim. But just as Lyse was thinking how relieved she was that Sidis couldn’t see her blushing...it set in on her that it wasn’t good for a man and a woman to be alone in a dark room together, even if they were (temporarily) engaged. Lyse found herself feeling more and more agitated, so she stood up to tend to the matter.

“It’s rather dark in here. Let me brighten the place up a little,” she said.

“I can do that much from here,” Sidis replied, the candlesticks above the hearth suddenly flaring to life and casting a faint glow over the room.

It was then Lyse realized how close their faces actually were. With a little gasp, she sat herself back down farther away—but only a little, as she didn’t want Sidis to take it personally.

“Um, was that magic?” she asked. She hadn’t heard him use an incantation to cast it, which should have been impossible, even for an imperial. She remembered him using one the last time he’d cast a spell in front of her, too.

“Yes, it was. I’m just a bit special, you see.”

“Special? You mean you’re especially powerful?”

When Lyse questioned him thus, he answered, “Somewhat. I don’t need an incantation when bringing forth light or fire. All I have to do is will them to

appear.”

That made him *very* special indeed. Even in her past life, Lyse had never heard of anyone being able to do such a thing.

“But if you’re powerful enough to do that, wouldn’t that mean His Majesty is...” Lyse trailed off, holding back the rest of her sentence.

The emperor’s crown was normally passed to the eldest candidate in line, but Lyse had heard of instances where it was instead passed to the most powerful heir. Would that mean that Sidis was next in line for the throne? He and Egbert weren’t far enough apart in age to be parent and child. It was almost strange that Sidis wasn’t already the emperor himself if he was this powerful.

Then again, a foreign noblewoman shouldn’t know anything about that. Reminding herself of this, Lyse changed her question a bit: “Is that why you’re able to use confession magic when Duke Alcede cannot? That was special as well, wasn’t it?”

It seemed Sidis had been the only one capable of using the truth-telling spell to get information from the attackers. Even if Sidis had been the one to create it, Lyse found it odd that a duke like Alcede, who had to be very close to the imperial bloodline, couldn’t cast it.

“That’s right,” Sidis said with a nod. “I suppose... I might as well just tell you. I’m His Majesty’s younger cousin, and he has no children of his own. If things go on as they are, I will become the crown prince.”

“That’s...” Lyse’s words caught in her throat.

She now understood why Sidis was so powerful. Moreover, the emperor himself had admitted he was having difficulty marrying. There were likely those who wanted Sidis to take the throne because of his strong magic, just as well as those who wanted to prevent the emperor from taking a wife.

Emperor Egbert’s future children would have mana of their own, certainly, but it would almost assuredly be weaker than Sidis’s incredible power. And even if Egbert himself accepted Sidis as the crown prince because of it, his wife would undoubtedly hope to see her own children on the throne. If that came to a head, it could spell civil war within the empire.

This was likely why Sidis had steeled himself against marriage. As Lyse had heard from the emperor, the people around him wanted him to settle down as soon as possible in the service of creating a powerful magic line. That might even explain why the emperor was more concerned about Sidis's love life than his own.

"I wonder if His Majesty thinks of you as a child, Sir Sidis..." Lyse mumbled. Perhaps the emperor was avoiding marriage himself to thwart any political trouble, she thought.

"There was a time when I fell ill and spent an entire year in bed. He took care of me back then. He's like an older brother to me."

"An older brother?"

Something about that struck Lyse. Indeed, Egbert and Sidis looked like they could very well be brothers, but there was nearly forty years between them. The imperial family and other nobles sometimes had trouble with viable pregnancies due to their mana, but given the age difference between the two men, it wouldn't have been odd if they were uncle and nephew. So for Sidis to say Egbert was like an older brother to him...

Lyse suddenly found herself wondering if maybe Sidis had an older brother who might be around the emperor's age. That would explain why Egbert fell in the brotherly rather than fatherly category in Sidis's eyes. But if Sidis had an older brother, could that have been the young boy she'd saved just before she died?

Thinking that, Lyse realized she might finally be able to learn what had become of that golden-haired boy. She hadn't dared to ask anything about him before because Lyse shouldn't have any knowledge about specific members of the imperial family. But she figured asking Sidis about his family should be safe.

"Do you have any siblings, Sir Sidis?" she tried asking.

Contrary to her hopes, Sidis shook his head and said, "No. I'm an only child."

Though she was a little disappointed, Lyse made sure not to show it. This cut off her only avenue for learning about the boy. It would be a different story if she could talk to the emperor about his childhood, but he was currently limited

to doggyspeak. They'd communicated via writing a few times, but the circumstances had never been conducive to asking anything personal.

Taking note of her silence, Sidis said with a bitter smile, "You must have surmised that the question of succession has the potential to make my relationship with His Majesty rather complicated. That's one of the reasons I've stood by my bachelorhood."

"Then why would you get engaged to me?" Lyse asked. It seemed to her the exact opposite of what Sidis would have wanted.

"Because I finally decided that I want to marry you," he explained with a sweet smile that made his words seem genuine rather than forced. "I plan to protect His Majesty no matter what. Whether he or I should marry won't change that, even if I'm forced to take the throne myself. But... His Majesty is above me in every regard but magic. That is why I believe Emperor Egbert alone should be the one to rule the empire."

These words were a relief to Lyse. The emperor was in a difficult position, but he still had people around him who understood. She was pleased Sidis was one of them. In the time she'd known him, she'd come to realize he was earnest above all else. He was a bit of an oddball, but Sidis always listened to and worked with Lyse. He'd even rescued her before.

"His Majesty must be heartened to have you by his side," Lyse said as she looked over Sidis's face. "You seem a bit better now."

Sidis had been ghostly pallid before, but he now appeared to have life in him once again. Lyse was confident he would be all right on his own now. If he was feeling better, he would certainly be able to fend off anyone who might come for the emperor. Moreover, even with the lights on, it wasn't proper for them to be alone together at this hour.

"So I'll be taking my leave now..."

"Please, Miss Lyse," Sidis cut her off, grabbing her by the hand to keep her from standing. "You were out walking the halls for a reason, weren't you? You're normally asleep by now."

"Huh? How do you... Ah, have you been spying on me?" Lyse asked

suspiciously. Sidis was always playing the part of a proper fiancé, so she wouldn't have been surprised if he were keeping an eye on her to make sure she wasn't seeing other men.

Unfazed by her dubious gaze, however, Sidis promptly replied, "I have no need to spy on you. I'm usually up at this hour and sometimes walk the area myself."

"Oh, I see..."

"So I thought it strange to find you up when I've never seen you awake this late before. Is there some reason you're not in your room?"

Lyse was at a loss for how to respond to this pointed question. She wasn't sure it was a good idea to tell him the truth. If he or the emperor found out what had happened, they would probably insist on doing something about it. Lyse, however, had every intention of calling off her engagement to Sidis. When all was said and done, she would be on her own in Olwen once more without any imperial assistance. Anything Sidis, Egbert, and Alcede helped to stave off during their time in the capital would only come to a boiling point once they were gone. Lyse could handle getting burned herself, but if her uncle's barony took any of the heat...

"All right, you don't have to tell me," Sidis relented, apparently intent not to press her for answers. "I just want you to know that the room next to His Majesty's is available should you need it for any reason. There are knights and soldiers posted nearby to protect the emperor, so it should be safe."

"Sir Sidis..."

Lyse was touched that he would offer her a haven for the night. Even though he was still somewhat unwell himself, he was first and foremost considerate of her situation. He was probably the first person since her late father to care so deeply about her. Moreover and above all else, she simply felt at ease just holding his hand. So, as she calmed herself down, she decided to take him up on his offer...

"Very well. I'd be much obliged—"

But Lyse cut herself off when she sensed people approaching the room. Sidis

likewise seemed to notice, and their linked hands separated as they stood in sync. Searching for where they would appear, Lyse looked to the window.

“Sir Sidis!”

The instant she tried to warn him, the shrill sound of shattering glass resounded through the room. Someone had kicked in the window. The door then burst open too as a group of men rushed inside. There were six in total—three from the window and three at the door—all of which were wearing Olwenian military uniforms and cloths to cover their mouths.

“What?!” Lyse couldn’t help screaming.

She didn’t know why these men would attack anyone other than the emperor, much less why *soldiers* were doing such a thing. All they’d concealed was their mouths, almost as if they weren’t even trying to hide their identities.

“I shall overpower them, Miss Lyse. Do not push yourself,” Sidis said.

Lyse nodded, then made the first move. She opened by sidestepping one of the attackers at the door, kicking his feet out from under him as she slipped past. Sidis then used magic to knock the attackers who’d come in through the window back outside, slamming them to the ground below. The remaining two interlopers were stunned by this display of strength, and both were defeated before they had the chance to flee.

After all the intruders were subdued, other soldiers came to investigate the commotion. Since the attackers had been Olwen soldiers themselves, Lyse and Sidis were initially on edge, but thankfully all the men who arrived on the scene seemed to be in their right minds. Their eyes weren’t empty, and they immediately rushed to see if Lyse and Sidis were all right.

Once that was confirmed, the royal soldiers sheathed their swords and quickly apprehended the intruders. They then called for imperial guards to handle the crime scene. Lyse breathed a sigh of relief after giving her account of the events. That would be the end of things for now.

Sidis then spoke up from beside her. “Just what I’d expect from you, Miss Lyse. Though I’m a bit sorry to see a royal noblewoman forced to engage in combat, your strength is most reassuring. I apologize for asking you to stand

back earlier,” he said with a pained smile.

“Sir Sidis...” Lyse had been called strong before, but no one had ever so honestly and apologetically acknowledged her strength. “Um, thank you. I...” She was so happy that she began tearing up. She finally felt like she’d been useful, and it made her heart swell.

“I’m sorry, Miss Lyse. Let’s get out of here for now,” Sidis said worriedly, shielding her from the eyes of the soldiers around them. Just as she was wondering where he was taking her, they arrived at the room beside the emperor’s quarters. “I bid you stay here for the night. After what just happened, I don’t care to send you anywhere that security isn’t guaranteed. Even you may find yourself in trouble if you’re attacked in your sleep.”

Lyse could only nod as Sidis talked her into it while still showing appreciation for her own strength. He then leaned in to wipe away her tears. As she blinked reflexively, his slightly cool fingertips stole away the warmth from the corners of her eyes. It made her gasp in surprise as her heart throbbed with a sweet ache.

“I’m sorry...” she said quietly.

“Don’t worry about it. I just want to do something for you. If a mere word makes you happy, then I’ll say as many as you’d like. But,” Sidis began worriedly, “isn’t it hard for you here in the palace? If it’s enough to make you cry, then come back to the empire with us. As I’ve said before, if you marry me... No, even if you don’t want to marry me, I’d still like for you to come.”

And with that, Sidis suddenly pulled Lyse into his arms.

“A-Ah!”

She hardly knew what to do. She would normally insist that he let go, but right now, he wasn’t holding her forcibly or making her feel like she couldn’t move. She genuinely wanted to stay in the arms of this man who both indulged and understood her. It felt so nice.

“Why do you want to stay somewhere that makes you so unhappy?” he asked. “If you come with me, I can protect you so that no one will ever hurt you again.”

Those sweet words were enough to make Lyse's mind boil over.

"But my father..."

If she could go to the empire, she would love nothing more. But the fact remained that she couldn't let anyone know what she'd learned in her past life. That was why she trailed off at the end of her weak objection, as it was the only reason she could give openly.

"I heard that His Majesty offered to arrange things so that you could return home to Olwen once every other year. Wouldn't that be enough? I wish you would say yes. Please don't say you can't."

Lyse felt a twinge of déjà vu as Sidis begged her, but before she could place it, he looked deeply into her eyes.

"Please, Miss Lyse, just think about it. I'm serious. I've...been waiting all this time for you to say you'd stay with me—" Sidis suddenly stopped, shaking his head. "I'll leave it at that for tonight. Good night and sweet dreams."

Having said his piece, he left, closing the door behind him. Now alone, Lyse gradually began to calm down, but her heart continued to throb. This was a first for her—the first time she'd ever enjoyed being held by a man who said he'd protect her. Because life in Olwen was so hard on her, Sidis's kind words were sweet temptation. When she thought on his offer, her imagination began to run wild in spite of her bashfulness.

It would be nice if I could marry him...

Lyse had once dreamed of marriage. She'd only given up hope because of how impossible it had seemed at the time. But now Sidis said he wanted to marry her, despite her situation. He even treated her like a lady. Had it not been for her memories of her past life, she would have fallen for his tenderness in an instant.

"I really wish I could go back to the empire..." The longer she spent with Sidis and the others, the stronger that feeling grew. "And I haven't actually blabbed anything so far," she muttered, beginning to let down her guard.

It was true that she hadn't uttered one word of the forbidden knowledge she possessed, so maybe she would be fine living there as long as she was careful.

And as she entertained that thought...it was like a dam burst inside her, and her desire to return home to the Razanate Empire came rushing over her like a torrent.

Lyse wanted to know what had happened to her parents in her last life, who might even still be alive. If they'd already passed, she at least wanted to put flowers on their graves. She also wondered if her older brother was doing well. Had he managed to get married himself after all these years? And...

"I want to know what became of the boy I saved."

If Lyse returned to the empire, she should have no trouble learning that since she remembered his face, the color of his hair, and that he was a member of the imperial family. There was just so much she wanted to do, so much she *could* do.

"Oh, but how should I handle myself?!"

Sidis might find it odd if she suddenly started regarding their engagement favorably. Just as she was turning over in her head how embarrassing that would be, she heard a sound from the next room over. When she looked that way, her eyes fell upon the adjoining door to the emperor's quarters.

When Lyse stopped to think about it, she realized the rooms were connected in this fashion to facilitate protecting the emperor. The rooms adjoining His Majesty's quarters gave the imperial guards somewhere to stay. That was why Alcede was set up in the room on the other side of the emperor's, while Sidis was staying across the hall.

But if she could hear them, did that mean they could hear her too? She'd have to keep it down to make sure she didn't disturb the emperor's sleep. He already had enough on his plate with his dog head, tail, and legs. She'd feel awful if she kept him up at night.

After double checking the locks on the door, Lyse decided to check the windows as well as the veranda too. The attackers from earlier had kicked in a big window from the veranda, so she wanted to make sure absolutely everything was safe. When she approached, however, she heard voices. Not loud ones, but just barely audible from the room next door.

“I was on my way back from healing them. Their numbers were such that it took quite a lot out of me, and I was attacked right afterward... That’s when Miss Lyse discovered me,” said Sidis.

It seemed he was reporting the evening’s happenings to the emperor. Lyse couldn’t help listening in, as she desperately wanted to know what Sidis had been up to. There were a few places where she couldn’t hear what he was saying very well, but she got the gist of things.

Sidis had been healing imperial troops earlier in the evening and was attacked on his way back. He managed to defeat them, but his attacker hit him with some sort of powder that made him feel ill. That was why Lyse had found him nearly collapsed on the stairs.

Now that her curiosity had been satisfied, Lyse went to close the window. It was impolite to eavesdrop, after all. But she froze when she heard what Sidis said next.

“Thanks to running into Miss Lyse, I managed to recover enough to move again.”

“I would expect nothing less from her,” Alcede replied in a voice Lyse could just barely make out. “I can understand why you insisted on making her His Majesty’s lady-in-waiting when you sensed her strong Light energy. It’s enough to turn His Majesty back to normal, even if only briefly. It feels like simply being near her regenerates my mana too.”

“That isn’t just a feeling. I’ve been continually pouring my power into slowing His Majesty’s transformation into a dog, and having her around alleviates some of the burden on me.”

Lyse unwittingly let out a puzzled squeak. What were they talking about? She didn’t understand at all.

“I wish it was enough to keep His Majesty normal, but alas, it’s only temporary. She can’t use it as magic... Can she, Sidis?”

“Not currently. It seems as though she’s simply full of energy from the Light of Origin.”

“That’s still important. Once we bring her back to the empire, she can take

her time figuring out how to use it.”

Lyse couldn't help gasping when she heard that. Her mind went completely blank.

“Whatever the case, I'm ultimately glad that His Majesty opened his big mouth that day,” Alcede said, seemingly amused. “Thanks to him, we should be able to take Miss Lyse to the empire as your wife.”

“Hey, Alcede...”

It seemed there that the men took notice of the open window in the emperor's room. After hearing it close with a slam, Lyse could no longer hear their voices. She silently closed her window in turn, though her shaking hands made the task take longer than it should have. She then took a seat on the bed as far as possible from the adjoining door to the emperor's room.

“I have energy from the Light of Origin inside of me...?” It now seemed Sidis had chosen her as the emperor's lady-in-waiting not for her mana, but because of the Light. “So his worrying about my room was just...”

What Lyse had just heard changed her view of the situation entirely. Had Sidis offered her safety just to protect their new mana battery?

“It might not have been worry that made him grab my hand...”

What if he'd simply stopped her from leaving earlier because he'd known he would recover with her around?

“Then there's the engagement...”

At the beginning, the arrangement had simply been to keep Lyse from spilling the truth about the emperor's condition. But now all three gentlemen seemed determined to take her back to the empire with them. If they were only interested in her because she possessed mana, they might have shown some passing amusement in the novelty, but they would have let her go afterward. Since she couldn't use magic, her mana was pointless, after all. Energy from the Light of Origin, however, was a different story.

In the end, Sidis hadn't been nice to her because he cared about her. He was just acting that way to pull her in more. Tears began forming in Lyse's eyes.

“That’s right... Father told me that you cry when you feel sorry for yourself...”

When she was little, Lyse had always hated bursting into tears at memories of her past life. But her father had told her, “When you feel sorry for yourself, the tears come easily. But tears are just sad feelings leaving you so that they can’t hurt you anymore. They’re nothing to be ashamed of.” And just as he’d said, feeling sorry for herself made Lyse tear up even now.

Because of the memories of her past life, Lyse had been something of a difficult child. She was mature and knowledgeable beyond her years. But it was in that moment that she first acted like a child her age should, amazed at the new thing her father had taught her.

Thinking back on it, Lyse realized that the reason she never cried when she was insulted was because she’d come to a resigned acceptance that there was nothing she could do about it. Even if she was bullied, it would just be petty things like finding frogs in the hall or having water dumped on her. It was nothing compared to the battles she’d fought in her past life.

But Sidis was different.

“I... I wanted to believe in him...”

The intense shock she was experiencing now came on the heels of the thought that, just maybe, she could lay her heart bare to him. She was ashamed at how intoxicated she’d allowed herself to get on his sweet words and his gentle touch. It was all a lie to use her.

And worst of all was the fact that she would most certainly be investigated for possessing power from the Light of Origin. They might even create new magic to that end and subsequently learn that she’d been reincarnated. Once that happened, Sidis might use his confession magic on her. He might ask what had happened immediately prior to her rebirth, and what she had learned...

Lyse bit her lip. The emperor had been a kind child. But as a statesman, he had no trouble making heartless decisions. He might have Lyse imprisoned to keep the secret under wraps. She didn’t want her life to end that way.

“All I can do is make sure that the problem is resolved...”

That was, namely, fixing the emperor’s mana and breaking off her

engagement.

Lyse put her plan into action the next morning. She was going to increase the time she spent patrolling the palace for any more would-be attackers. They were the only link she had to the mastermind. But, perhaps due to the botched operation the night before, Lyse went the next three days without spying even one suspicious individual.

“So in the end, they didn’t find anything near the capital’s guard post...”

A few days later yet, the report about the investigation in the capital came in. Both the guard post the mastermind frequented and the surrounding area had been looked into, but the search yielded nothing. Nothing had come out of checking in on the mastermind’s contacts, either.

“All we’ve gleaned is that the Donan Faith has more sway over the people than we’d previously believed,” Alcede said with a sigh.

Even after scouring the capital and using Sidis’s confession magic, they’d come up empty-handed. It was an annoying disappointment for a lead like that to turn dry. Lyse was getting rather impatient herself. Lately the imperials had been talking about extending their stay until the mana-warping incident was handled, and she couldn’t have that. It was too painful to be near them, so she wanted them gone ASAP.

“What about the powder? Have we learned anything about that?” Alcede asked Sidis, most likely referring to the substance that had made him sick several nights ago.

“Powder?” Lyse asked, playing dumb. It hurt to do so, but it was no different from pretending she didn’t know anything from her previous life. She kept telling herself that she’d stop hurting once she got used to it.

“It seems that our enemy has some sort of powder that drains mana,” explained the duke.

“Is such a thing even possible?” Lyse had to wonder. She’d never heard of anything like it in her past life.

“This is the first time we’ve encountered something like it. We examined what Sidis was able to collect, but we don’t yet know what the black powder is made

of. We believe it may either be something that doesn't exist in the empire, or something that just hasn't been discovered yet." It seemed that Alcede was genuinely baffled. "We need to return His Majesty to normal posthaste. If we can't solve the warping, just leaving the palace with him in this state will be an ordeal..."

Alcede sighed as he cast a glance over at the emperor, who was reclined on the couch as comfortably as could be. He normally wouldn't be able to do so with Alcede seated next to him, but there was nothing normal about Emperor Egbert. He was much smaller now, and worse yet, *much* more canine...

"He's completely transformed into a dog now."

Indeed, the emperor was now a large white dog who would wag his tail sometimes. He'd apparently decided that, as a dog, he no longer needed to wear clothes, so he lay on the sofa in nothing but his long, fluffy fur.

"Is that really His Majesty?" Lyse had to ask, although she'd guessed this much would happen after last seeing him covered up to his neck in bright white fur. "I kind of thought that he would retain his human form, just covered in white fur..."

"Did you *really* want to see that, Miss Lyse? I'd imagine it would be quite disturbing."

"It might have been funny at first, but I think I would have an easier time accepting his full dog form after seeing it."

"...What peculiar sensibilities you have," Sidis quipped, but Lyse had more to say.

"I don't know if it was appropriate to put a collar on His Majesty, though..."

Indeed, around the white dog's neck was a red leather collar. Hearing Lyse's opinion of it, he sat up and cocked his head before jumping down to the floor. He trotted over to Lyse's feet, coming close and lifting his chin. It was as if he was asking her to take a look at it, but the collar was half-buried in his fluffy fur. Lyse wanted so very badly to crack a joke and ask the emperor if he was really okay with being collared.

"It wouldn't do to lose him in a pack of dogs, now would it?" said Alcede

calmly.

“Whnnn...” the emperor whined, seemingly disappointed that no one liked his collar.

When he looked down sadly, Lyse felt a heart-wrenching pang in her chest. It seemed that he had no hesitation in acting cute to solicit sympathy.

Lyse had no idea how the emperor had taken to being a dog so quickly. While she was at a loss for how to respond, he rested his chin on her knees and gave her the full puppy-eyes treatment. Her hands helplessly gravitated toward his scruff, and she couldn't stop smiling at the silky feel of his floof.



It's almost as if he's a real dog... No, no. This is His Majesty...

Despite her internal tug-of-war, Lyse couldn't stop petting him. It was the emperor's fault for coming over and begging for scratches like that. He was about as small now as he'd been as a boy under Lyse's care during her past life, making her feel almost like she was just patting a child's head.

"Your Majesty..." Sidis groaned unpleasantly, but the emperor just snorted and gave him side-eye.

"Um... You can still understand him, right?" Lyse asked. She couldn't help wondering why the emperor had to wear a collar when the other men could pick him out by his voice.

"Yes, we can understand him just fine," replied Alcede.

"Then there should be no need for the collar..."

"But if he got out into a whole pack of white dogs, we'd have to look at them all individually to figure out which one was speaking. It would take ages for us to pinpoint his voice, so the collar is a must," Alcede explained as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

Even Sidis, who Lyse had thought was relatively sane, nodded along. "You may think it disrespectful to His Majesty, but we're focusing on safety," he told her proudly.

Apparently, the three men had discussed the collar and decided to prioritize ease of finding the emperor should any such unlikely situation arise. Lyse couldn't say anything to that.

"Whatever the case, let us continue to focus on the investigation," Alcede encouraged.

Lyse nodded in agreement. That was all they *could* do for now.

Hoping to tend to her own matters, Lyse took her leave early for the day. However...

"Miss Lyse," Sidis called, following right behind her.

She knew why. She'd been curt with him since overhearing the imperial men's

conversation that night. Yet despite her behavior, Sidis continued to treat her the same as always—except for one thing. He seemed to be under the impression that her displeasure was the result of him hugging her, because he'd stopped touching her hand altogether.

It hurt Lyse to think that it bothered him so, but after hearing what he'd said, she just couldn't be herself. The feeling was made all the worse as the revelation had come just as she'd started to open her heart to him.

"Do you need me, Sir Sidis?" she said bluntly.

"I want to ask you something," the knight replied, stopping to face her in the empty hallway. "You haven't been spending much time by His Majesty's side lately. Have we given you some cause for offense? Is it because I made you uncomfortable? It's almost like you're trying to get away from us as soon as possible."

Lyse didn't really know how to respond when confronted so directly. "No, it's just that all I can do when I'm with His Majesty is stare... And, um, when I see him, I just get the urge to pet him," Lyse managed, trying to come up with a lie that wasn't *entirely* untrue.

And indeed, now that the emperor was completely canine, Lyse wanted nothing more than to snuggle him. Emperor Egbert knew it good and well himself, which was why he'd tried to help. But thanks to his newfound doggy form, she just couldn't see him as human any longer. Whenever he came close, she couldn't help petting him. His fluffy fur was simply irresistible.

Sidis didn't accept this answer, however, and pressed Lyse further: "Still, you've been acting strangely the past few days. Is there something you need to get off your chest? Like maybe the way Alcede eats his sweets has been giving you heartburn, so you'd prefer to enjoy them on your own?"

He sounded like a husband desperately trying to stop his wife from going back to her parents. It also seemed that seeing Alcede slather everything with cream was giving *him* heartburn too.

"How may I help, Miss Lyse? I'll do everything in my power to make things right," Sidis continued, piling on the sweet words like a faithful fiancé.

But that only tied the knot in Lyse's stomach tighter. She could see the guilt written all over his face. It made her want to scream, cry, and throw rotten eggs at him. He and the others had lied to her when they told her that they wanted to take her back to the empire for her mana. They'd only gotten close to her because they wanted to use the Light of Origin inside her.

Lyse honestly felt bad for acting this way when Sidis was trying so hard to be nice to her, but she just couldn't bring herself to talk to him like everything was normal after what she'd found out. The hurt ran too deep.

"If I seem to be acting strangely, it may be because I'm a bit tired. I'm sleeping in an unfamiliar room, after all. And it's connected to His Majesty's, no less."

Lyse never knew when the emperor might flee to her to escape attackers. She'd intended to make it sound like she was always on guard, but...

"You mean— I'm so sorry, Miss Lyse! I'll personally see to it that His Majesty never runs into your room," Sidis said, pale as a sheet.

"What? His Majesty running in isn't the problem..."

Right now, it would be no different than a dog getting into her room. Lyse didn't think a dog could even unlock a door anyway. Perhaps if His Majesty could still use magic in doggy form, it would be possible, but the point still stood.

"No, I understand perfectly. This must have been a terrible worry for you. Do forgive us. I'll make sure the situation is corrected before nightfall," Sidis apologized, deadly serious.

Lyse wasn't exactly sure what had him so concerned, but she thanked him nonetheless. It wasn't until she'd walked out into the cool breeze of the gardens that it hit her.

"Oh... That's right. If His Majesty opened the door, he'd be in a lady's room..."

The way she'd spoken about her fatigue had made it sound like she was worried about the emperor barging in on her. That was why Sidis had taken the matter so gravely. But it was too late to take it back now, and if she tried, he'd realize she was lying.

Heaving a sigh, Lyse decided to cool her head off with a walk and soon found herself near the palace chapel.

“Hmm?”

She spied soldiers flitting out from the shadow of the chapel one after the other. They had the lower halves of their faces covered just like the attackers from the other night. Lyse wondered why they even bothered when their clothing immediately identified them as royal soldiers.

Still, she was elated. She'd be free again soon. Free of lying to Sidis. Free of having to be near the imperials. After all, the perfect chance to enact her plan had just popped up right in front of her.

Lyse immediately walked right out in front of the men and demanded, “What are you all doing here?”

The instant she appeared on the scene, the five soldiers laid their empty eyes on her and drew their swords. That settled it—they *had* to be from the same group who'd attacked the emperor.

Lyse swiftly ran in and knocked two of the soldiers out cold. It was immensely satisfying to see them hit the ground. After that, she chased down two more of them and intentionally let the fifth go.

This was her grand plan. Even if the attackers were under the power of suggestion, they'd be reporting back to *someone* about their mission. The mastermind would want to know whether their plan had worked, after all. Thus Lyse intended to follow the fifth man and investigate anyone he made contact with.

Such a scheme would have been difficult to pull off if the emperor were involved. If the attackers had come for him, it would have been an embarrassing misstep to let one get away—even on purpose. But since Lyse was alone, it was easy to feign not being able to handle all of the soldiers on her own.

She proceeded to discreetly tail the escapee, and though her investigation had only just begun, she already had a big lead.

“Huh...?”

The fifth attacker jumped right into the carriage of a merchant visiting the palace. And despite having some suspicious man who was hiding his face hop in, the merchant made no objection. This suggested he was the one behind the attack, or at least an accomplice. Lyse was a little disappointed that she'd discovered this so easily, but just then...the carriage started moving.

“Wha— Hey, wait!”

She wanted to stop them, but just claiming that she'd been attacked by the man in the carriage wouldn't be enough. Since she was the only witness, the soldier could take off his mask, change his clothes, and talk his way out of things.

Just as Lyse was about to inquire about the owner of the carriage, she heard someone call to her.

“What's up, Lyse?” hailed Leon from horseback. It seemed he was on his way out somewhere.

“Leon! Lend me your horse!” she pleaded.

“What?! No way. A noblewoman riding a horse alone? What are you thinking?! At least ride with me.”

With that, Leon pulled Lyse up onto the horse in front of him.

“Whoa!” she yelped, jumping when he put his arms around her waist. “Wait, Leon! I only asked for the horse!”

“Shut up. You intend to chase that carriage, don't you? We're gonna lose them at this rate.”

“You're right,” Lyse replied after a moment's hesitation. Humoring Leon was better than losing the culprit. “Thanks.”

After speeding away from the palace, the carriage in question continued to zigzag its way through the capital. It didn't seem like it would ever stop. Lyse was worried.

“Um, can your horse handle going this kind of distance with two riders?” she asked timidly.

“That's what you're concerned about?” Leon countered. He sounded

exasperated, but it was an important issue. If the horse tired out on them, they wouldn't be able to keep up the chase. "The horse is fine. It's used to carrying armor and luggage all day. Now, why are you chasing that carriage in the first place?"

Since Leon was involved now and Lyse needed his help, she felt he deserved an answer. She thus proceeded to tell him about the suspicious figures she'd discovered lurking around the chapel who looked like the last set of attackers. She told him that she'd pursued them in case they were after the emperor again, but that one had escaped. And she concluded by telling him that she was chasing the escapee down because she thought he'd lead them to the mastermind.

"Why are you going so far for those imperials? What would you do if you were mortally injured? This isn't a lady-in-waiting's job," Leon replied with a sour look when she was finished explaining everything.

And he had a good point. Neither chasing down the mastermind nor fighting off attackers was in her job description. Lyse was happy she had at least one family member who worried about her, but this was something she had to do in order to save herself from being dragged off to the empire. She couldn't tell Leon that much, however, so it seemed he'd taken things the wrong way.

"Is it because you're in love with that knight?" he asked.

"Huh?!" Lyse was instantly flustered. She was worried Leon had seen through her, which would mean trouble. If he told his father about what had happened or confronted Sidis himself, it would only cause more problems. As such, she desperately tried to change the subject. "That's not what we're talking about right now, Leon."

"Yes, it is," he insisted. "It was weird that you just let him carry you off like that when he chose you as His Majesty's lady-in-waiting."

Lyse had to suppress a groan when he brought that up. Her behavior that day wasn't because she was in love with Sidis. In fact, she still didn't know why, but she simply couldn't wrest herself from his embrace.

"And that's not all," Leon continued. "You were holding his hand."

He declared it with such confidence that Lyse was certain he must have witnessed it for himself. While she racked her brain trying to think of when that might have been, Leon grabbed her hand.

“What?!” When Lyse reflexively pulled away, Leon looked intensely hurt. “What’s wrong? Are you scared again?” she asked, recalling the time he was too terrified to let go of her in front of Sidis.

“See?” Leon said with a bitter smile. “You won’t let me or anyone else touch you like that.”

“It’s just... I can’t shake off an imperial guest. It would be rude,” Lyse explained.

But Leon wouldn’t hear it. He continued, “That knight doesn’t go around holding hands with just any lady. You’re the only one he carries around like a princess, too.”

Lyse went silent, unable to think of a response. Leon was right, after all. Sidis carried other women around at their request, but he did so underarm like they were sacks of potatoes. He only treated her differently because the empire wanted to use her...

Lyse cast her gaze downward at the thought, reminded of how much it upset her. But just as she did, the carriage ahead changed routes.

“We’re here,” Leon announced.

Looking around, Lyse could see that they were still within the capital’s walls, meaning the merchant hadn’t fled town. She watched as the carriage entered an old brick building of considerable size—most likely a storehouse. The wooden door at the entrance was more than large enough to let a single carriage inside.

Nearby was a plaza with a well and a large black-purple stone pillar like the one Lyse had seen in the city before. Children were playing around it in the light of the setting sun. It was a lovely scene.

“I’d like to check out inside for now,” Lyse said.

She was hoping to discover the identity of the merchant. She could then go

fetch Sidis and the others, who would investigate everything all at once. Lyse knew she couldn't handle it all herself, and she wanted to avoid losing their only lead at all costs.

So for now, she left Leon with the horse and began searching for a way to sneak into the building.

"Here," Leon said, quickly homing in on an open window.

It was fairly big, so they were both able to slip through it with ease. Lyse wanted to see what she could find just inside the storehouse.

"The Markreath Company?" she wondered aloud, reading a box.

She'd heard that name somewhere before. After rubbing her chin for a moment, she recalled it was a foreign trade enterprise that came from time to time to sell oddities to the queen. They'd also sent gifts to the emperor before. She'd seen their goods while she was helping out with the books to pass the time.

"This is odd. I've never heard of them having any trouble with the empire, and since they deal in high-class goods, they shouldn't be acting against Razanate."

If a merchant company caused such trouble, they would be summarily barred from the palace—and losing royal customers would be a terrible blow to business. And that's not to mention the wrath they'd face for going after the emperor himself. Moreover, since the Markreath Company sold such expensive goods, it seemed highly unlikely they'd use such an unguarded storehouse. They'd need top of the line security to keep their top of the line merchandise safe.

"Lyse, it doesn't seem like there are many people here," Leon reported, having scouted out things nearby.

And so they moved over to the door to the next room, which took up the majority of the first floor. It was connected to the front entrance and seemed to be the main storeroom of the facility.

Lyse peered through a crack in the door and couldn't see anyone, but she unmistakably spied the carriage they'd been chasing. This undoubtedly implicated the Markreath Company in the attacks on the emperor. Lyse was

pleased with the evidence, but quickly retreated back toward the hall when she noticed someone coming.

“Leon?!” she gasped when her cousin suddenly grabbed her from behind and held her arms fast. “What are you doing? They’ll catch us if we don’t run!”

But for all her questions, he offered no reply.

While that was happening, a door on the other side of the carriage opened and people began flowing out. Ten, twenty, thirty. They weren’t dressed like the attackers from before, or even carrying weapons for that matter.

There was a middle-aged woman with her hair tied up in a bandana. An elderly lady. A man who looked like a street vendor. A gentleman with a bad leg leaning on a cane. They were all just normal citizens. Only about ten of them looked like they could put up a fight. The men in their twenties and thirties appeared to be laborers with some muscle to spare.

But every last one of them was empty-eyed and completely silent.

“What is this...?” Lyse asked, wondering if Leon might know any of these people. When she looked back at him, however, she saw that he too was staring blankly.

“Think this through, Lyse. Don’t go anywhere. Just stay here...” he began rambling.

“What? What are you saying, Leon? Snap out of it!”

“I’m just telling you how I feel. I don’t want to let that knight have you...”

“Are you still on about that?!”

The wound was still fresh, so she wished Leon would just drop the subject. She wanted to tear herself away from him, but his grip on her arms was too tight. As she struggled, someone spoke up from the silent crowd in the storeroom...

“You can’t blame him.”

“Lady Emicia?”

“He loves you. It hurts your poor cousin dearly to see you with that imperial

dog,” Lyse’s fellow lady-in-waiting said as she approached.

Leon loves me? She can’t be serious!

Lyse shook her head. If Leon was spouting such nonsense, he had to be under the same kind of suggestion as the attackers at the palace. Lyse thought Emicia was too at first, but the redhead seemed to be completely conscious.

“Lady Emicia, what are you...” Lyse started to ask, but stopped before she could finish the question. She’d already realized the answer. “Are all of these people Donan believers?”

Emicia nodded and replied, “Yes. Your cousin too has sought salvation from the Donan Faith. That’s why I told him that he would never have you unless he ripped you away from those filthy imperials. I told him that he should act on his feelings.”

So Emicia is the one controlling Leon...

“No... Leon, snap out of it! You hate me, don’t you?”

He’d first said it when they were both children whose years counted in the single digits. Back then, Lyse wasn’t allowed to use a sword, so she practiced swinging a stick every day to train. Leon—who was two years older—came out to play one day and told her that he’d reward her with his wooden sword if she could beat him. Lyse gladly accepted the challenge, and proceeded to trounce him in their stick duel.

She still recalled the dumb look on his face when she’d knocked his stick out of his hand. He’d stared blankly for a moment before screaming that he hated her and running away. He never even gave her the wooden sword. Lyse regretted acting like such a child after the fact when she was a grown woman on the inside, but in all actuality, she still held a little bit of a grudge over Leon not making good on his promise.

And ever since that day, Leon had treated her in a manner that was hard to call friendly. Whenever Lyse had had to attend parties as the daughter of a baron, he would only very reluctantly be her escort in a rather hard-to-thank fashion. That was why she’d always thought he still hated her.

He’d softened up a bit now that they were both working at the palace,

however. He was a year her senior there, and she suspected that he felt sorry for her after seeing how the other ladies tormented her. He'd stopped being so belligerent whenever he struck up a conversation, and they'd even had a few normal ones. Still, she could never believe he *loved* her.

And yet...

"I'm sorry, Lyse. I just couldn't tell you the truth," he said, nuzzling his cheek against her hair as he held her arms behind her. He even dropped a kiss near her ear.

A cold chill ran through Lyse's body. "Wait, whaaaaat?!" She was more afraid of Leon right now than the crowd of enemies surrounding her. She struggled as hard as she could, but the stronger men came forward to help Leon hold her.

"I'll have to do *that* then... Give me her hands," Emicia ordered, fed up.

Leon and the other men obediently forced Lyse's arms out for her. Someone behind the redheaded lady-in-waiting then handed her a pair of black stone vambraces.

"First we'll show you the blessings of our God. Then you should understand what a danger the empire is... And you'll help us get rid of that nasty Demon Lord."

Emicia secured the black shackles on both of Lyse's wrists. They were quite heavy, and as soon as they locked shut, Lyse felt her mind start to go blank. Seeing this, Emicia slowly spun her index finger in front of Lyse's eyes.

"You're getting sleeeeeepy... You're getting very sleeeeeepy..."

"Wait... Lady Emicia?!"

Lyse was no lamb, so she didn't think that would be enough to hypnotize her. But after five spins of Emicia's finger, Lyse's consciousness went out like a snuffed candle.



Chapter 6: Destroying Things Is DEFINITELY Part of a Lady-in-Waiting's Job

Lyse felt light, like she was floating on top of water. She knew she was dreaming of her past life, but alas, it wasn't a pleasant dream this time.

No, she was dreaming of a man wielding a black sword, hurting people dear to her past self—Qatora. She wanted to defeat him as quickly as possible, but it wouldn't be easy when she couldn't use her magic freely. She was too close to the Light of Origin.

Ah, this is what happened just before I died...

The Light of Origin negated all other magic, so only knights who were strong with a blade were stationed at the imperial villa where Qatora was assigned. Only members of the imperial family with resistance to the Light could stay there comfortably.

But the man Qatora was chasing down wasn't one of them. He had to have *some* noble blood or else he would've been paralyzed by the Light's influence. In fact, the way he was running with a hostage in his arms and cutting down knights as he went was strange. He shouldn't have been able to move so freely.

Qatora wasn't particularly strong against the Light herself. Her body felt heavy as she ran. It was painful. The closer she got to the Light of Origin, the harder it became to even breathe.

Yet a single thought spurred her onward—she had to save the boy. He was Prince Egbert's best friend. Qatora had been taking care of him alongside the young prince. He might even be more attached to her than Egbert was.

Said boy, whom she doted on like a younger brother, was limp in his kidnapper's arms. The man must have done something to render him helpless. The moment Qatora had seen him like that, she'd run after him, unable to hold herself back.

Within the villa was a path to the inner courtyard that housed the Light of

Origin. By the time the kidnapper reached it, the other members of the imperial family had begun to gather after realizing that something was terribly wrong. That left the kidnapper with nowhere else to run and so, in an act of desperation, he decided to jump into the Light with the golden-haired boy.

Qatora wanted nothing more than to save the child. Ignoring the cries of everyone around her, she dashed at the intruder and reached for the boy.

“Lord—!”

Calling his name, she grabbed hold of both his hand and shirt. He was surprisingly heavy for someone the size of a ten-year-old child. Qatora ripped him from his captor’s arms and hurled him away, the recoil of which sent her tumbling into the Light herself. She made sure, however, to take the kidnapper with her.

As she fell, the boy sprang back to his feet and dashed over to her. He grabbed her hand and squeezed tight.

“No, Qatora! Don’t leave me! I don’t want you to go!” he screamed, breaking her heart. She hated to see him so sad.

Qatora was scared at first, but getting sucked into the Light of Origin wasn’t as painful as she’d expected. She could tell that it would flow through her and into the boy, however, so she quickly shook him off and let the lukewarm light take her as she held on dearly to the sensation of his small, soft hand in hers—

“Ah!”

The moment she regained consciousness, Lyse heard a strange snapping sound. Curious what it was, she looked down to see that she was lying atop a blanket across some planks... and more notably, that the black stone shackles had cracked and fallen off of her wrists. When she poked at them, they rolled harmlessly across the blanket.

“Why did they fall off...?”

Lyse was awfully curious about the reason, but she didn’t have time to waste sitting around and thinking about it. There were much more important matters at hand.

First, she inspected her surroundings. The room itself was small enough that five people lying down would have filled it completely. Lyse was still wearing her jacket, but she was cold. Shivering, she pulled up the blanket and wrapped it around herself. If she got too cold, she wouldn't be able to fight her best. She continued to look around as she warmed herself up.

There was a little window, through which she could see the sun setting in the sky. She could also see the roof of another house up above, so she judged from the angle that she was in a cellar or something. The window was made of glass and the door to the room of wood, so it was clear the place wasn't meant to be used as a holding cell.

"Not that I *want* to be up against an enemy with a proper dungeon..." That would have only made Lyse worry more. "Still, I haven't heard rumors about the Donan Faith kidnapping anyone."

The Donan faithful were the biggest question in all of this. Lyse glanced back at the shackles lying on her makeshift bed. They were made of the same black stone so adored by the cult. With them on her wrists, she'd lost consciousness to the hypnotism Emicia had cast on her.

Lyse knew her fellow lady-in-waiting wasn't of imperial blood and therefore couldn't use any magic. All she'd really done was recite the same kind of line you would to lull a child to bed. Perhaps the stones had the power to put people to sleep and the hypnosis was simply a trigger.

But still, why had Emicia done this to her? Lyse couldn't think of a reason, but one thing *did* seem to make sense now.

"The people who attacked His Majesty were all under the power of suggestion. The people with Lady Emicia were also mindlessly following her orders... Could these stones be why?" she murmured, picking up a broken piece of one.

If so, that would check out with everything they'd learned so far. When she and the imperial men had investigated the recruiter at the guard post, they'd discovered he was close to a follower of the Donan Faith. Perhaps he'd been invited to the faith himself and given a black stone bracelet like all the other believers.

“The stones must make people more prone to hypnotism. If the effect were more direct, people would notice the followers acting funny once they put them on.”

It seemed a sound theory, but it gave Lyse another rather large cause for concern.

“There are more of those black stone pillars around the city now...”

She’d seen one when she was out with Sidis and Alcede, and she’d seen another one just out in front of the storehouse. There were probably plenty more scattered around the streets. If there were too many in place, they could be having an effect on the entire city.

“Then His Majesty’s mana...”

That was when it hit Lyse. The imperials had said the emperor was reduced to barking as soon as they reached the capital. And if the Donan followers at the heart of the recent attacks were capable of using hypnosis strong enough that it might as well be magic, it was totally conceivable that the same power might be responsible for warping the emperor’s mana.

Lyse wanted to tell Sidis and the others about this discovery as soon as possible, but first things first—she needed to get out of here.

She searched the room a second time and was unable to come up with anything she could use as a weapon. She also tried the door, but it was firmly locked. After thinking a bit, she inspected the lock. If it was elementary enough, she’d simply be able to break it. Unfortunately, however, it was a two-fold lock that would make it difficult to strongarm the door.

Just as Lyse was thinking that she’d have to wait for someone to come in, she heard footsteps approaching and the jingling of keys. She quickly got into position behind the door. She then heard the locks being opened one by one. She held her breath and tried to stay quiet as the door slowly opened.

“Lyse... Huh, Lyse?” said Leon, sounding surprised not to see her.

I’m not letting you off easy for this...

Partially as revenge for restraining her before, Lyse attacked her cousin. She

kicked him, dragged him inside, and held his arms behind his back as she sat atop him. With that, she was in total control. Leon, meanwhile, still seemed unsure of what had happened.

“These hands feel like... Lyse?” After that gross comment, he started muttering like he was unconcerned about being pinned to the ground. “You’re getting sleeeeeepy... You’re falling in loooooove with me...”

He was trying to use the hypnosis trigger on Lyse, which only pissed her off more.

“That’s not going to work, Leon,” she said tersely. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“That’s strange. They told me my wish would be granted if I did as the God of Sun said...”

Instead of answering Lyse, Leon just kept rambling. It was as if he didn’t understand what she was saying to him. She looked around the room, disappointed not to have anything to tie him up with.

“Maybe I should just knock him out...”

Otherwise, he might chase after her and detain her again—and she couldn’t let that happen. As she was trying to decide what to do, Lyse noticed the bracelet on Leon’s wrist with a black stone the size of her thumb.

“This is probably the source of my problem,” she muttered. She then reached for the bracelet to yank it off and was surprised by a sudden snapping sound. “Huh?!”

When she looked closely, she could see that there was now a crack in the black rock. She stared at it in surprise as the stone split in two and fell to the floor. The only thing left on Leon’s wrist was now the cord that had held it in place.

“Wait... Was that because I touched it?”

Perhaps that was the reason her shackles had snapped off of her earlier as well. Whatever the case, however, Leon had stopped spouting nonsense and given up struggling underneath her.

“Are you back to normal?! Are you okay, Leon?” she asked.

She then gingerly tried letting go, and he showed no sign of putting up another fight. He just lay there quietly.

“Lyse... What have I been doing...?” he finally said, clutching his head. “I’m sorry.”

She could tell from his apology that he was back to his normal self, and thus heaved a relieved sigh.

“It’s fine,” she replied. “You didn’t actually hurt me. But where are we? Do you remember?”

“No. My mind is all foggy... I don’t really know where I am right now. I feel like someone brought me here, though...” he muttered, trying to piece together his memories. “Ah, this is the cellar of the building we snuck into. I remember that much. Maybe because it just happened...”

“So we haven’t gone anywhere, then.” Just knowing that was a big help to Lyse. Things would’ve been much more difficult if she’d been whisked away from the capital. “It’s only evening, so if we head back to the palace now, we might be able to raid this place overnight.”

Lyse was set on breaking out and heading home, but just as she suggested that to Leon, he wrapped his arms around her.

“What?!”

The feeling of someone else’s body heat repulsed Lyse. It made her skin crawl.

“I’m sorry for behaving so weirdly,” he began. “But if I don’t say this now, I don’t know that I ever will, Lyse.”

“Leon, did the hypnosis not wear off, or...?”

Lyse wasn’t sure why, but Leon was *definitely* acting strange. He wasn’t the type to apologize. He usually just forced her to listen to whatever he had to say. But after breaking his bracelet, she didn’t know what else she could do for him.

As she stood there bewildered, he let go of her and took a step back. Yet just as she was thinking he might listen to reason, he cupped both hands around her face.

Nope!

“Hold it, Leon!” she cried.

But before she could flee, he leaned in close. Lyse nearly shrieked in horror.

“Just give me something to remember...” he begged softly.

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” she screamed, shoving him away.

And as he staggered back, he was suddenly blown to the side.

“Huh?”

Leon was now lying on the floor, unconscious from the blast—which had come from inside the room. From a medium-sized white dog, in fact. Said dog didn’t seem to be satisfied with just knocking Leon out either, because it promptly proceeded to step on his face.

“Um... Your Majesty?” Lyse asked hesitantly.

The only white dog she’d seen lately was the emperor, but this one was smaller. It wasn’t wearing a red collar either. While Lyse was wondering what was happening, the dog began transforming. It first turned into a pale ball of light, then stretched vertically. And finally, Sidis appeared in his usual black and silver outfit.

“Sir Sidis?!” Lyse exclaimed. She was happy he’d saved her, but it hurt just the same.

The knight nodded in response. He then wrapped Leon up in the blanket that had fallen to the floor and tied the edges together so he couldn’t get free before asking, “I’ve dealt with him for now since it was an emergency, but are you all right?”

With that, Lyse realized Sidis must have seen Leon trying to force himself on her. She had no idea what to do with herself, but she tried hard to make it seem like she didn’t care.

“They just used some strange hypnosis on me to put me to sleep,” she replied indifferently. “Um, but it’s only been a couple of hours since I disappeared, right?”

Based on how thirsty she felt, she figured about three hours had elapsed. She just wanted to confirm that her sense of time wasn't screwed up and it wasn't actually the next night or anything.

"Indeed, it's only been a couple of hours. Once we got word of the attackers you took out, we realized you were nowhere to be found. Not long after, we heard that you'd ridden off into the capital with this man, so we came looking."

Sidis had apparently used illusion magic to disguise himself and sneak inside. If anyone discovered a dog in the storehouse, they'd simply chase it off. The spell only worked on people nearby, but Sidis had been certain the close quarters indoors would keep that from being a problem. Lyse was relieved to hear all this.

"Did you see anyone on your way in?" she asked. "They're all followers of the Donan Faith. It seems they're the ones behind all the attacks and the mana warping."

Lyse went on to explain how she'd let one attacker escape so she could chase them. She also mentioned the people she'd seen before she was put to sleep, including her fellow lady-in-waiting among their ranks. She then finished up by telling him how Emicia had forced shackles made of black stone on her, and that they'd made her so sleepy that she'd fallen victim to simple hypnosis.

"But they broke when I touched them," Lyse concluded, handing them to Sidis so he could see.

He took the shackles from her, but immediately dropped them.

"Yes, that's it. That's the same feeling I got when my mana was sapped. They must have used this stone in powdered form."

"Huh? So it drains your mana?" Lyse couldn't help thinking that was a terrible thing to do to someone, but then she suddenly saw the bigger picture. "The Donan followers really hate the empire, don't they? When you think about it like that, they should have been our top suspects."

Yet no one had suspected them at all. Lyse found that strange indeed, but Sidis had a theory.

"Everyone in both the capital and the palace might be under some

suggestion,” he offered.

“Really?”

“Do you remember seeing pillars made of this stone around the city?” Sidis asked. He seemed to think they were strange as well. “There are enough of them that they’re likely having an effect on the citizens even without direct contact. There’d be no reason to put so many of them up otherwise.”

He was right. There was no motive to erect so many of the stone monoliths if they served no purpose.

“And the more they put up, the stronger an effect they began to have on us imperials. That’s probably why His Majesty’s transformation worsened over time. Still, I imagine their true aim was to influence the townsfolk.”

After all, there were instances of imperials falling victim to mana warping in other countries as well. If the emperor was the Donan Faith’s only target, they had no reason to put up pillars elsewhere.

“And the power of their suggestion is why we didn’t suspect them, hmm?” Lyse said, nodding along.

The theory made sense to her. Frankly, it was weird that stone pillars popping up all over the city hadn’t freaked anyone out. She’d only given it a second thought herself after being hypnotized. The influence of the pillars might even be the reason more and more people were joining the Donan Faith.

“Now that we know this much, we need to destroy those pillars and unmask the Donan Faith. That might return His Majesty to normal,” Sidis declared, offering Lyse a hand to help her stand. “Let’s go.”

Seeing no reason to object, Lyse took his hand and immediately felt the usual magnetic sensation pulling them together. Sidis let go of her as they exited the room, as they were expecting a fight ahead of them, but Lyse couldn’t help wondering... Why did she only feel that way when she touched him?

She had one idea after overhearing Sidis and Alcede say she had light from the Light of Origin inside her. But if she was simply drawn to people with mana, it was strange that it didn’t happen with other imperials. Something similar had happened when Alcede made her nervous in order to revert the emperor—but

that was as close to it as she'd felt with anyone else.

That meant there had to be another reason for it altogether. What if, she had to wonder, it was because she'd fallen in love with Sidis at first sight? The mere thought made her heart ache, and she quickly tried to put it out of her mind. It *couldn't* be that. She'd simply thought he was weird for noticing her sword calluses.

There was no point in entertaining such fancy to begin with. Once they destroyed the pillars and resolved the warping, Sidis and the others would leave Lyse to return to the empire. She would never see him again. Sidis was the emperor's cousin, after all. He had a long life of imperial duty ahead of him that would bind him to the country for good, but she told herself that was okay. She just had to stop thinking about the ache in her heart, even though she knew exactly what was causing it.

When Lyse and Sidis left the room, they entered a long, narrow hallway, which they proceeded down as silently as they could.

"There weren't many people around when I was sneaking in, but let's just be careful for now," Sidis whispered. He then hurried up the stairs, wary of any signs of life nearby.

Lyse was fairly certain the cultists were all on the ground floor. The staircase they were ascending now led into the large storeroom. Peeking just inside, she could see the carriage that she and Leon had followed here. It didn't seem anyone was inside it, and she couldn't see anyone on the other side even when she bent down to look under it.

"If anyone is up here, we'll defeat them and leave," said Sidis.

Lyse gave his plan an affirmative nod, then quickly ran up the last few steps. They easily found their way to the large front entrance to the storehouse, but heard another door opening behind them just as they made to leave.

"Miss Lyse, you really mustn't stay with that imperial knight..."

Turning around when she heard that, Lyse saw Emicia clutching a large chunk of black rock to her chest. She was alone, however. Lyse also didn't think she had any combat skills, so she assumed her fellow lady-in-waiting would be safe

to ignore. Especially now that she knew hypnosis wouldn't work as long as she wasn't directly touching the black stone. Thus, without an answer, Lyse went to open the door.

"Wait," Sidis said, suddenly grabbing her shoulder to stop her. "There's a mob outside."

Lyse had realized it too. She could now hear the buzzing of a crowd. It sounded like normal townspeople, however, so Lyse cracked the door a little just to be sure.

"Sir Sidis, it's just citizens," she reported. "We should be fine."

Workmen, peddlers, merchants, a lady with a shopping basket. Children, too. Not one of them looked like they were waiting outside to catch Lyse and Sidis, and so the two stepped outside.

"Everyone, you're feeling like you want to capture the imperial and his accomplice!" Emicia chanted.

Instantly, a change came over the chattering townsfolk. Their smiles waned into hollow expressions. Then, albeit slowly, they all began closing in on Lyse and Sidis.

"What?!"

If they fled back into the building, they'd be sandwiched between Emicia and the mob. Thus they decided to take their chances outside, instead running through the thinnest part of the crowd. Unfortunately, however, people were now starting to pour out of the nearby houses too... all of them reaching for Sidis and Lyse.

Even if they decided to take a back lane, it was clear now the residents in the farthest reaches of the city would emerge to block their way as well. And Sidis, aware that they were being controlled, couldn't use his magic to cut them down or blow them away.

As he and Lyse circled around the street in an attempt to escape the mob, they found themselves in the plaza by the storehouse marked by its black stone pillar. Emicia was waiting for them there, smiling.

“You can’t run, Miss Lyse. Everyone wearing the mark of the Donan Faith in the capital is now under my control thanks to this,” she announced with a smirking glance at the pillar beside her. “It works even with my tiny bit of mana, after all.”

“Your mana?” Lyse parroted in puzzlement.

Sidis magically raised a wind barrier to keep the crowd at bay, and demanded of the woman, “Do you actually have imperial blood?”

“You didn’t know until I told you?” Emicia snorted. “How typical of you imperials. Even though you can use magic yourself, you don’t realize what’s creeping up on you until you’re in pain.”

“So you’re an expatriate? How did you manage—”

“We were thrown out!” the redhead screamed, interrupting him. Lyse was shocked to see her usually mild face twisted with such rage. “My mother was cast aside for being a disgrace who couldn’t use magic, all because her imperial blood was too diluted! Thanks to that, she was abandoned in another country, forced to do everything and anything to survive! And the empire didn’t lift a finger to help her!”

With that, Emicia began to tell her sad tale. Her mother was the child of a foreign woman and an imperial noble, but she was born with next to no mana. Being able to use magic wasn’t actually a prerequisite for becoming part of the extended imperial family, but sadly the idea that a child with no mana was a disgrace had long taken root in the empire given its usefulness in the perpetual fight against monsters.

And since Emicia’s mother was of mixed blood, any children she had would likely be without mana as well. As such, she was cast out of the empire into a foreign land where she worked hard to get by. Without anyone to render her aid or assistance of any kind, she was eventually forced to birth an unwanted child—Emicia.

“But I had a bit more mana than my mother did, so I was adopted by a regional noble. By then, my mother had already worked herself into an early grave. And after that, I waited... I waited until I had a chance to get revenge on the empire! That’s when I discovered the Donan Faith!”

Looking utterly enraptured, Emicia set the chunk of stone she'd been clutching on the ground, then snuggled up to the large pillar beside her.

"There were other Donan believers just like me. They showed me this stone and its ability to, with just a tiny bit of mana, control people and interfere with the Light of Origin. Thanks to them, I was able to come here to Olwen, where the emperor was due for an inspection in just a few years' time. I had these stones set up around the city and waited for him to come, all the while bringing more citizens in the capital under my control." In a fit, Emicia then turned to the mob and ordered, "Now get rid of this imperial and his follower! You're wanting more and more to kill them! You want to kill them so badly!"

A chill ran up Lyse's spine, both at the crazed tone of Emicia's ranting and at the blank expressions on the faces of the people under her control. At Emicia's orders, the mob—who'd only been trying to capture Lyse and Sidis so far—began picking up and throwing sticks and stones. One workman swung his hammer, and a woman charged forward with a cooking knife. It would have been dangerous had Sidis not magically created a wall of wind to fend the attackers off, but now they were essentially stuck in place. Worse yet, the crowd closest to the barrier was getting showered with the rocks being thrown by the people in the back.

"Stop! Stop this, Lady Emicia! Other people are getting hurt!"

"Shut up! I was so nice to you, and this is how you repay me?! You should've just been a good girl, taken the bracelet I offered you, and killed the emperor and his lackeys!"

"You don't mean..."

Lyse fell dumb with shock. She'd always been happy Emicia was so nice to her. There were tons of times she'd reached out to help. But now that she knew it had all been a ploy to get her to sympathize with Emicia's ideas and actions, Lyse thought differently of it.

She'd long wanted to repay Emicia's kindness, but hearing exactly what Emicia wanted her to do made her realize how utterly patronizing it was. No matter how much she wanted to respect Emicia's beliefs, Lyse couldn't abide a request to end another human life.

As she stood there gritting her teeth at the thought, Sidis reached over to hug her... No, he put his arm around her waist and picked her up.

“What?!” she yelped.

“We can escape overhead,” he said quickly. “Just bear with it for a bit.”

“Overhead?” No sooner had Lyse asked than the two of them flew up into the air. “AHHHHH!”

Rather obviously, Lyse had never taken flight before. The sensation of gravity trying to pull her back down to the ground made her shriek. Fortunately, Sidis touched down on a nearby roof just a few seconds later.

“We can avoid the townspeople’s attacks from here. Now we should be able to destroy that pillar,” he explained. Apparently, Sidis couldn’t attack the pillar and protect Lyse with magic at the same time.

After letting go of Lyse’s waist, he quickly got to work casting a spell. The wind whirled at his command, gathering around his outstretched hand. There was a brief flash from his fingers, and Lyse’s vision temporarily went white as a bolt of lightning descended upon the stone pillar with a great clap. Since Emicia was still touching it, Lyse hurriedly averted her eyes, thinking she would perish in the strike. But to her shock and amazement, not even the pillar was harmed after the fact.

“Huh...? Nothing happened?”

Emicia, who was alive and well, started cackling under Lyse’s stare. She then continued to incite the mob, “You all feel like you want to drag those two down!”

Lyse began to panic. If the crowd started trying to scale their way to the rooftop, they’d inevitably fall. There were both pregnant women and feeble elderly among them, too. Such a fall could be deadly.

Shuddering at the thought, she begged, “Sir Sidis, please! Let’s go back down to them!”

“I see. Magic doesn’t work on the pillars,” he murmured calmly before hurriedly turning to Lyse. “I’m sorry, Miss Lyse, but listen carefully. What I’m

about to tell you is very important.”

“Okay...”

Lyse was nervous. Sidis was likely about to tell her that they were out of options. Even if they managed to get away from here, Emicia would soon corner them again with the entire city under her control. Worse yet, with all of the stone pillars warping imperial mana around the capital, her control extended all the way to the palace. Lyse and Sidis would only be putting the emperor in danger if they retreated there. At least, that’s what she thought he was about to say.

“The truth is,” Sidis began, “you have the incredibly rare power of the Light of Origin inside you.”

“Huh...?” After he’d confessed the truth so matter-of-factly, Lyse couldn’t bring herself to tell him that she already knew. If she was surprised about anything right now, it was the fact that he’d admitted it so readily after hiding it all this time.

“You needn’t concern yourself with the details right now,” he continued. “I’ll explain everything later. For the time being, since you were able to destroy the Donan faithful’s stones, let’s presume that you and I can break those pillars if we work together.”

“Oh, I see.” That much made sense to Lyse. She just needed to crack it like she had with the smaller stones. “But you’ll be using magic, won’t you? How are we going to mix that with my Light or whatever?”

With a bittersweet smile, Sidis replied, “I have the Light of Origin within me as well.”

“What...?”

“I’m probably the only one in the world who has as much Light as you do. I told you, I’m a bit special.”

Seeing how plainly it pained him, Lyse found it hard to ask for details. And so she focused herself on the task at hand—they needed to stop the mob before anything else.

“Hold on to me,” said Sidis.

When she reluctantly wrapped her arms around his neck, he picked her up again. This time, they flew toward a pillar away from the one next to Emicia in the plaza. They found another only about a hundred meters away in a different square. Emicia had ordered the mob to pursue them, but it would take the crowd some time to catch up on foot. Sidis and Lyse would have to get the job done before then.

Sidis held his left hand out to Lyse, who knew what she had to do and readily placed her hand in his.

“Without touching the pillar, imagine a strong light,” he said.

At his request, Lyse conjured up memories of the brightest light she knew—the Light of Origin. It was warm like a nice bath, and in it, her mind unraveled into its gentleness. Lost in such thoughts, she felt something inside of her flowing into Sidis. It was a familiar sensation, for she’d felt something like it just before her death all those years ago. Except that had been with—

Lyse’s eyes shot open wide as she gazed up at Sidis, who was reaching out for the pillar. He had a soft look on his face, as if he were admiring his beloved.

“The reason I have the Light of Origin within me is because I was almost sucked into it once,” he murmured. “I lost someone very precious to me that day. She protected me, but I ended up bedridden for an entire year after the fact.”

The moment that last word left his mouth, a crack formed in the stone where his hand made contact with it. From the fissure came a soft light, which Sidis took as a signal to take off with Lyse once more. They quickly took to the sky, and not a moment later, the pillar split diagonally from within with a grating sound before loudly falling to the ground in pieces.



After watching it crumble, Lyse looked to Sidis. He was looking back at her as if desperately hoping for something.

When she'd felt the Light pulled from her just now, Lyse had remembered something. She recalled the last person she'd ever held hands with in her previous life. The feeling of sharing something, and how that had stuck with her all this time. That was why she was interested in Sidis. Thanks to that feeling, she felt something precious every time their hands touched. And after hearing what he'd told her, hope began to balloon in her heart.

Nevertheless, she still had her doubts. Until she could assuage them, Lyse couldn't be too sure about the situation.

"Let's get to destroying the rest of the pillars for now," Sidis urged.

Lyse agreed. If they waited any longer, the Donan followers would arrive on the scene. And so they hurried to the next pillar at the intersection with the main street. By the time they'd broken a second one, some of the faithful were freed from Emicia's control.

"Huh? That's funny... I thought I was on my way home."

"Mark? Mark, where are you?!"

"What's everyone doing?"

The people who'd returned to their senses were both bewildered by the situation and alarmed at the hollow expressions haunting the faces of their peers as they chased after Lyse and Sidis. The followers still under the effects of Emicia's hypnosis continued to throw rocks, which continued to hit the people in front of them.

"Watch out!" Lyse cried, but she was torn about stepping forward.

If she tried to save anyone, she'd be caught by the mob. It would be hard to get away from them without harming anyone, and Sidis would be likely to leap into the fray as well. All in all, it would bring their pillar-busting operation to a halt.

As Lyse fretted over what to do, a white dog and a man on a horse charged onto the scene.

“Sidis!” Alcede cried from horseback.

“Awooooo!” the hound with the red collar howled.

The next instant, a breeze blew through the group of followers, who all crumpled to the ground.

“Your Majesty?! What did you just do?”

The white dog was, of course, none other than Emperor Egbert. Though Lyse was impressed that he could still use magic in doggy form, she was uncertain what he’d done to the crowd.

“It was probably a spell to render them all unconscious. That sort of thing is His Majesty’s specialty, after all,” Sidis explained. Although it didn’t look like much, magic to make people stop fighting was extremely handy.

“Bowwow!” added the emperor, although it still just sounded like barking to Lyse. He looked even more like someone’s pet now that he was out on the street.

“What happened?!” Alcede asked Sidis.

“That’s what we’d like to know!” he swiftly replied.

The duke proceeded to explain thus, “Not only were you gone too long, most of our troops suddenly fell paralyzed. We decided that it was too dangerous to stay in the palace any longer, so we snuck out to find you.”

“The stone pillars scattered around the city are the source of the mana warping. We’ve been able to determine that this was all a plan orchestrated by the Donan Faith,” reported Sidis.

“And now you’re going around to destroy them all?” Alcede asked to confirm with a sage nod.

“They don’t break unless touched by the Light itself. Alcede, you stay here to protect His Majesty and mind the believers until they return to normal. It will be easier to destroy the pillars if we aren’t being chased down.”

With that, Lyse and Sidis made for the next stone pillar. Once they’d destroyed five in total, they returned to check on things. The cultists were still all on the ground. Most of them had returned to their normal selves and didn’t

seem to understand what they were doing together. And for the rest who were still under Emicia's control, Alcede had put them to sleep with his magic.

"Time to go capture the ringleader, then," announced Sidis.

And so two imperial gentlemen, one imperial canine, and one lady-in-waiting began their search for Emicia. They eventually found her standing in a daze by the first destroyed pillar. Yet the moment the group came into view, she immediately took off running. She must have realized she was at a sincere disadvantage.

Lyse gave chase, thinking about the pain it would be if she got away. The four-legged emperor and Alcede on horseback, however, quickly overtook her. Cornered in front of the broken pillar, Emicia sat down beside it as if she'd given up.

"Why... How were they broken? These stones are supposed to be incredibly hard to process. Even the higher-ups had trouble doing it..."

Something she'd believed to be indestructible had been shattered. It was easy to see why she'd lost heart.

Sidis said to her, "I've heard about your mother's circumstances. It's true that it's easy for those without mana to feel inferior in the empire, and I sympathize with you on that front. Razanate heavily regulates the movement of nobles closer to the imperial family, be it coming or going from the country. But those with weaker magic are free of such restrictions. The intent was to liberate those who might find themselves uncomfortable in the empire and wish to live elsewhere, although it seems we'll have to start regulating that as well..."

After looking up at Sidis for a moment, Emicia hung her head in a gesture of utter resignation. Did she understand that although her plan might have failed, the imperial family had actually heard and acknowledged her pain and suffering? Alcede restrained her with rope, but she'd stopped resisting completely.

Lyse finally felt like the strange case had been shut, but just as she was about to heave a sigh of relief, Alcede screamed...

"YOUR MAJESTY!"

“Huh?” When she turned to look at the emperor, Sidis slapped his hands over her eyes.

“Don’t look,” he said. “His Majesty is back to normal.”

“If he’s back to normal, then why shouldn’t I look?” The emperor had probably returned to normal because most of the mana-warping stones had been destroyed. That sounded like cause for celebration to Lyse. Or so it did at first. But the moment the question left her lips, she realized the answer for herself. “Oh...”

“I’m glad you understand. His Majesty took to going *au naturel* as a dog.”

That meant His Majesty Emperor Egbert of the Razanate Empire was now standing in the streets of the capital in his birthday suit—which was precisely why Sidis had covered Lyse’s eyes. But even then, she could hear what was happening loud and clear.

“Gimme that, Alcede!”

“I would, even if you didn’t try to rip it off of me, Your Majesty! You walking around in the nude is bad for us all!”

Alcede was panicking as Egbert forcefully tried to steal his cloak. And poor Emicia had a front row seat to it all, since Alcede hadn’t had the chance to cover her eyes.

“EEEEEEEEKKK! What is *with* you imperials?!” she screamed from the bottom of her heart, hurling curses at the men.

A few moments later, Sidis finally lowered his hands. Lyse found Emicia looking downward, red as a tomato.

“It’s your own fault, Miss Mastermind,” the emperor said haughtily, despite his rather uncomely appearance wrapped up in Alcede’s cloak.

Lyse couldn’t help smiling when she heard him talk the same way he had as a child. Seeing this from where he stood beside her, Sidis grinned too.

“The simple pleasure of getting to see you smile after so long makes His Majesty’s strange affliction worth all the trouble,” he said.

“That’s a bit mean,” she replied, averting her eyes from his sweet smile.

Epilogue: For Over a Hundred Years, I've Always...

Now that the emperor had regained his human form and the ability to speak, he summed up everything that had happened for Lyse in his usual, somewhat pompous manner.

“So the Donan Faith is comprised of people who were run out of the empire, huh?” she mused.

He sat across from her in the garden gazebo with a white porcelain teacup in hand. On the table between them was a freshly brewed pot of tea made by a chamberlain. It was still a bit chilly out, but the gazebo was nice and warm thanks to the emperor's magic.

It was now two days after the incident in the capital. After commandeering some clothes for him, the group had returned to the palace with a fully human, fully clothed emperor. They'd also brought along Emicia, who was summarily thrown in jail.

Though she was under investigation, she'd readily confessed everything even without magic being used on her. She repeated the same story she had in the city: she'd come to Olwen five years prior in order to wait for the imperial inspection. And in the meantime, she'd used her hypnosis to marry the prime minister and use his power to weaken the palace's defenses.

Given his involvement in endangering the emperor, Olwen's prime minister had voluntarily stepped down. He was a victim himself, but his own wife was the true culprit. The palace thus accepted his resignation and allowed him to return to his home territory to retire. The worst he'd personally done was weaken palace security, so the emperor saw no need to punish him further.

Emicia, on the other hand, had actively made attempts on the emperor's life. No matter what sad reasons she had for doing so, her crimes were of the highest order. She'd also manipulated the townsfolk and injured many of them in the chaos. Olwen couldn't risk leaving her in jail for too long, however, as there was no telling when the other Donan cultists might use the same tricks to

free her.

Not wanting to upset Lyse, the imperials chose not to tell her exactly what Emicia's sentence would be—just that she would be dealt with appropriately. After she'd confessed her last to the justiciars, she'd likely be given poison to take her own life. The Donan Faith would also be expelled from Olwen, with its churches shuttered and its priests arrested. The entire religion would be investigated.

Meanwhile, Lyse and Sidis had spent the entire day after the incident destroying the remaining pillars. They feared that if even one was left intact that it might be used again for evil. They collected some samples of the strange black stone to send back to the empire for research, and Sidis used his magic somehow to take care of the rest.

With all that in motion, Lyse had hardly had a chance to catch her breath, much less to talk to the imperial men. By the following afternoon, however, things had finally calmed down a bit. That was when the emperor took the opportunity to catch Lyse up on everything over a cup of tea.

“According to that woman, the Donan Faith is a religion created by people who the empire deemed not to have mana, as well as their children.”

“That's why they're so hostile against Razanate and say that the Light of Origin is a sham...”

Razanate society was such that even people without mana could live happy lives. The usefulness of magic against monsters, however, made it a highly desirable trait. It was much easier for those who had it to move up in the world. It wasn't uncommon in knightly houses for manaless children to be adopted out into common families. Emicia's mother had apparently been the child of one such house.

“They've been around for a while too. They were active as long as a century ago.”

Hearing the emperor say those words, Lyse recalled something. A century ago, an intruder with a sword made of black stone had broken into the imperial villa by the Light of Origin. He had probably been a Donan follower, and the sword he carried a Donan relic. If the black stone was big enough, it might have

even affected the Light itself. Its power must have been how the intruder got so close to the Light without fainting.

But in the end, both the intruder and his sword were sucked into the Light and destroyed. That stole any opportunity the empire had to investigate it and what it was made of, which was subsequently why they'd believed the black stones of the Donan Faith to be harmless all these years.

"We're very grateful for your help, Miss Lyse. It was thanks to you that we were able to hide my condition from outsiders, not to mention to destroy those pillars," Egbert continued. "Sidis told me that he gave you a basic explanation, so surely you must be aware of your constitution now, no?"

"That's correct, Your Majesty."

When Lyse nodded, Egbert scratched his cheek, looking troubled. "In all frankness, we realized it very early on. That was why Sidis chose you as my lady-in-waiting. The plan was to keep you, with your rare constitution, close to me to see if it would help rectify the mana warping."

"I gathered as much when I learned of it myself."

"I see," he replied, taking a sip of his drink.

Lyse took one herself. The tea was warm and delicious without any hint of bitterness. Once she set her cup back on its saucer, the emperor looked at her again.

He continued, "I'd like to apologize to you for that. We only meant to keep you close, but when my folly forced us to keep you quiet, I was the one who decided that we should bring you back to the empire. In fact, I'm the one who suggested an engagement in the first place. And for that, I apologize. I know that you didn't want to go."

Lyse nodded and replied, "It's all right. When I heard that the Light of Origin within me was strong, I understood that much as well."

Indeed, Lyse was well aware of why the men had been so adamant about the engagement. The emperor, however, shook his head.

"There's also another reason I insisted on the engagement rather than

stricture magic...and that's Sidis."

"Sir Sidis?" Lyse repeated, cocking her head to the side curiously.

"The truth is that I found it most unusual. It was the first time he'd ever been so taken with a woman. If he wanted to have you by his side, then I wanted to make it happen. I still do."

It seemed that the emperor was still under the impression that Sidis was in love with Lyse. She had mixed feelings on the matter. She was deeply hurt when she first began to develop feelings for him and then came to believe that he only wanted to marry her for her power. She'd talked herself into believing all of his affection for her was a lie afterward, but now that she knew more about him, her heart was beginning to lean in a different direction.

"The situation has changed a bit since then, however," the emperor continued. "There's yet another reason I'd like to take you back to the empire now."

"What might that be?"

"You have the ability to destroy the Donan Faith's secret weapon. There are believers scattered across the land in every nation. If word gets back to the cult leaders about you, odds are that they'll either try to recruit or kill you."

He was right. Given the rise in the popularity of the black stones, it seemed that the Donan Faith was actively trying to recruit more followers. And Lyse, someone who could break them and their spell, would be a big thorn in their side.

"I can order the king of Olwen to guard you. But once we've returned to Razanate, if the Donan Faithful should start controlling people again, you'd be on your own to deal with them. No matter how strong you are, it would be hard for you to run from a group of people too large."

Lyse couldn't argue with that. It was exactly how Emicia had caught her in the first place. Even with the power to break the black stones, Lyse couldn't fight against multiple controlled people trying to restrain her.

Emperor Egbert continued, "There's also a possibility that they might sneak their way into the empire, but if you were with us, you'd at least have me and

Alcede to protect you if Sidis can't."

That last comment made Lyse a bit bashful. In her eyes, Egbert was still the child she used to take care of. It was charming, really. She felt like her little brother was swearing to defend her. She couldn't help thinking it was curious, however, as she'd never felt that way with Sidis—despite how much he reminded her of the other golden-haired boy. Was it because his silver locks made him look like a completely different person?

"You'll be in danger until we can uproot the Donan Faith completely. So I'd like you to marry into the imperial family for your own safety. We can have the wedding as soon as we get back," the emperor said, looking Lyse straight in the eye.

The matter of the engagement entirely aside, Lyse felt like he was being utterly earnest with her right now. It gave her pause about her future. If she stayed here in Olwen, she'd eventually cause trouble for her uncle. Worse yet, she might get him dragged into the middle of things. For that reason alone, she knew she'd be better off in the empire.

"If I've made myself clear, after taking everything into consideration, I genuinely believe that's your best choice. However," Emperor Egbert said, suggesting there was another way, "there are other options if you're absolutely against marrying Sidis. You could be adopted into the imperial family, for example. Or become my mistress. Or even marry Alcede and have to put up with the mountains of cream he piles on to his desserts every day. The choice is yours." With that said, his eyes strayed to the right. "But whatever the case may be, you're engaged to Sidis right now. You two need to talk this out."

The emperor was now staring at Sidis, who was standing on guard just outside of the gazebo. He then took his chamberlains and returned to his quarters, leaving the engaged couple alone in the gardens.

Lyse had so much she wanted to ask him—things that she hadn't been able to over the past two days. Like why his hair was different when his eyes were the exact same color. She stared at his face long and hard, searching for nostalgic familiarity in his now masculine features. She just had to ask. She looked down at the ground and took a deep breath, preparing herself. But just then...

“Qatora.”

She looked up when she heard Sidis call to her, and it hit her when she saw his wistful expression—she’d just reacted to her old name. Lyse was sure of it now. She’d thought it was a possibility when they’d held hands to destroy the pillars, but now she was certain. She was confident she’d known this man in her past life.

He was the same golden-haired boy Qatora had last held hands with. The very same child she’d given her life to save. And given how casually he’d just used her old name, he must have realized it sooner himself.

Sidis began as he walked closer, “When I was little, I was always following you around. His Majesty and I would play pranks and annoy you...” When he reached her side, he looked at her longingly.

Deciding that there was no use staying silent, Lyse nodded. “Even when His Majesty forced you to go along with his tricks, your conscience would get the better of you and you’d come crying to me. Isn’t that right, Lord Sidis?”

When she said that, he smiled happily. “Ah, I knew it... You really are Qatora.” Overcome with emotion, he grabbed Lyse’s hand and squeezed it tightly. “Your words were always so close, I knew you must be her reincarnation. I’ve always wanted to apologize to you. If I hadn’t gone to see you that day...”

There, he trailed off into silence, but his words stirred Lyse’s fuzzy memories into focus. Back on that fateful day, he’d left the villa to come see her at the outer walls. That was when he’d gotten kidnapped by the intruder, and why she’d tried so desperately to save him. She was the one who’d told him he could come to see her at any time, after all.

And the fact that Sidis knew all this meant he *had* to be that little golden-haired boy. Lyse still had a couple of lingering questions, however.

“But Lord Sidis, your hair...”

It had been golden when he was a boy. Though people’s hair sometimes lightened with age, it was strange for its hue to change so starkly. That was why she’d never connected the dots, despite their strong resemblance otherwise.

“I think it’s because I got too close to the Light of Origin. I was bedridden for a

year after the fact... And by the time I recovered, my hair was silver.”

That explained it, Lyse thought. Sidis said that it was because he’d gotten too close to the Light, but she presumed it was really because he’d gotten a dose of it through her when he’d grabbed her hand. That simply left the question of his age. If Sidis was really the same boy she remembered, he should be as old as the emperor. But he didn’t physically look much older than Lyse.

“And what of your appearance, my lord? You should be around His Majesty’s age...”

“Also an effect of the Light. It stunted my aging, although I’m fine physically. I didn’t suffer like you did. What happened to me is nothing comparatively. I’ve always wanted to apologize to you,” Sidis said, his voice weakening.

Hearing him like that shot a pang of sweet pain through Lyse’s heart, like it was melting.

“What happened that day was my fault for going somewhere I shouldn’t have and making myself such an easy target. I let my guard down, thinking that no one but the imperial family could enter the villa. And you paid the price for my mistake,” he said quietly, squeezing her hand tighter.

It must have been devastating for a child his age to watch a loved one die in front of him. If it had been painful, even Lyse herself would probably scream and cry at the mere memory of it. When she thought about it that way, she wanted Sidis to know that she didn’t resent him and that she hadn’t suffered.

“It’s okay. I didn’t feel any pain or discomfort when I was swallowed by the Light. It was strangely calming, like dipping into a warm bath. I was more worried about you. But for some reason, I’d forgotten your name until we destroyed those pillars.”

“Wait... Is that why you were smiling in the end? I always thought you were putting on a brave face to make me feel better.”

“I’m sorry to crush your dreams, but it really was just because it felt like a nice bath,” she answered honestly.

At this, Sidis started chuckling. “No, that’s quite all right. I’m just glad you didn’t suffer,” he said between breaths.

With his laughter, Lyse was released of all regrets about the end of her last life. It was probably the same for Sidis.

Finally feeling like she could speak freely with him, she asked, “Did you realize I was Qatora’s reincarnation from the very beginning?”

Sidis thought about this for a moment, then replied, “At first, you just reminded me of an imperial court lady with your sword calluses and all. There are barely any noblewomen outside of the empire who wield swords, so I thought you’d be able to help us evacuate His Majesty if anything happened. But it clicked when you said the same things she used to.”

Thinking back on it, Lyse recalled that she’d also said the emperor was someone worth protecting in her past life when he was a child.

“Then, when I grabbed your arm... I felt the Light of Origin inside of you.”

“Really?”

“Since that dreadful day, I’ve had the Light inside of me as well. And in all this time, I’ve never met anyone else with it. That’s why I was sure you had to be Qatora, who was swallowed by the Light.” He continued, “Do you by chance recall everything about your past life? Do you have all of your memories intact?”

“Yes,” Lyse admitted with a reluctant nod. There was no point in lying about it now.

In response, Sidis asked, “Is the reason you didn’t tell us...because you learned the truth of the Light of Origin?”

“Wh-Wh-What?!” Lyse’s eyes went wide. Did this mean the Light’s secret had flowed into Sidis as well?

He nodded, guessing the question on her mind. “Indeed, I too learned about its creation then.”

“So...you knew...” With those whispered words, Lyse felt spent. She’d long believed she was the only one with this forbidden knowledge, that she would never be able to tell a soul. But here was a kindred spirit.

“Worry not. I’ve already told His Majesty everything. It’s a heavily guarded

secret, but you're not the only one who knows. It'll all be fine as long as you don't tell anyone."

"Even His Majesty knows..."

At this news, Lyse breathed a deep sigh of relief. That had been her main worry now that she knew the situation with the Donan Faith demanded her return to the empire. But now there was nothing to worry about. She'd also stumbled on the revelation that Sidis had thought of her as Qatora all along. And if that was the case...

"Lord Sidis, I'm sure you insisted on our engagement out of guilt over what happened in my last life. But now that you've shed that regret, it's no longer necessary, is it?"

"Miss Lyse..." Sidis looked at her, shocked.

Lyse had wondered as much ever since it first occurred to her that Sidis might be the golden-haired boy from her memories. Sidis had been so kind to her from the beginning. She'd always thought it odd. But now that she knew about the Light of Origin inside her and her connection with him, she understood his behavior. He wanted to make things up to her. That was why he'd been trying so hard to act like he was in love with her.

The emperor had already told Lyse that she didn't need to force herself to marry Sidis, so she now wanted to let him know that he no longer needed to force himself either. Ultimately, she was still under the impression that Sidis had never truly cared for her—that it would be a marriage of convenience for him. But she'd fallen in love with him, which was exactly why she didn't want to force him into a marriage with someone he didn't love. It would be far too sad a thing.

Yet in spite of Lyse's consideration, Sidis's expression turned hard. "You don't understand," he said, pulling her by the arm.

"Huh?!" As usual, she couldn't resist him. She was in his arms in an instant. "Um, Lord Sidis, please let me go. Why are you..."

"I told you, you've got the wrong idea." His pained voice puzzled Lyse, and she was downright shaken when he kissed the top of her head. When she gasped,

he let out a short laugh. “If it were Qatora, I would have let go the moment she told me to. I loved her a great deal, but I was terrified she’d hate me if I did anything to upset her. But you...” Sidis continued, brushing her ear with his right hand, “With you, I don’t want to let go, even if you hate me for it. I didn’t understand why at first. I thought it was because I’d spent a hundred years wishing I could see her again, but I was wrong.” He gently moved his hand, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You’re similar to Qatora, but you’re your own person. Qatora thought dresses were a pain, while you like dressing up. I thought it was adorable how happy you were with that hair ornament I gave you.”

“You thought that was...adorable?!” Lyse hardly knew how to respond to the sudden compliment. But she also couldn’t get out of his arms, so all she could do was stand there and take it. She hung her head, at least hoping to hide her face.

Sidis giggled. “If anything, you put on even more of a brave front than Qatora, making you seem so much weaker.”

Lyse knew that. It was so hard and exhausting to hide her true self. But she did her best, thinking she had no choice but to soldier on as a lady-in-waiting. If she’d been Qatora, she would have busied herself with a brazen quest to get permission to carry a sword as a court lady. And if that hadn’t worked, she would’ve moved to the empire as a commoner. Her father had already passed, so she would have felt nothing holding her back. She wouldn’t have suffered like Lyse had forced herself to, enduring the fetters of her obligations.

“I wanted to protect you because you *weren’t* Qatora. And I don’t want to let anyone else have you.”

Lyse replayed those words in her head. If Sidis didn’t want anyone else to have her, then...

Still, she didn’t know if she should be happy about this or not. If he kept going and said that he didn’t want anyone else to have her because of the Light of Origin inside her, she’d be plunged to the dark depths of despair for having gotten her hopes up. If that happened, she might just break off the engagement and disappear from Olwen. But just as she was thinking that, Sidis grasped her

chin and lifted it upward...

"I love you, Lyse."

Lyse thought she'd stopped breathing upon hearing this confession. Her heart was beating so loudly that she couldn't hear anything else around her. It was so bad that she had to wonder if she was unwell, let alone if she'd misheard him.

"Y-You do...?"

At this question, Sidis narrowed his eyes. "You don't believe me? Is it because of your memories of me when I was younger? That you can't see me as anything more than a child? If so, I'll do everything in my power to change your mind."

"You'll do *what?!'*"

"I need to work hard to make up for everything I've held back, so that you won't doubt my feelings anymore. Then you'll agree to marry me. I don't want to take you to the empire as anything other than my bride-to-be."

"Wh-Why...?"

"I don't want any pests clinging to you."

"Pests?!"

Lyse knew what he meant, but she'd never thought of herself the way he did. For a moment, her brain tried to deny it altogether. As she stewed over the situation, he leaned in.

"Lord Sidis—"

The rest of her words didn't have a chance to leave her lips before Sidis pressed his against them. The soft sensation and the warmth of his breath made her mind go blank.



“Marry me, Lyse, and let’s go home to the empire. Please say yes.”

When Sidis said the words “go home,” nostalgia welled up within Lyse. She so desperately wanted to. She’d always dreamed of returning to the empire, where she could breathe freely. It was a home she’d been cut off from, despite never wanting to leave. And, without a reason to deny herself any longer, she felt herself nodding.

“Yes...”

“You’ve made me the happiest man on earth. Now we just need to have His Majesty go tell the king of Olwen.”

“The king? Right now?”

Sidis nodded and replied, “But of course. You’ll be marrying into Razanate’s imperial family. I’m His Majesty’s cousin, a duke in my own right. We simply must tell the king.”

“Oh, that’s right!”

Although she’d agreed to marry him out of her desire to return home, her fiancé was indeed an important member of the imperial family. That recollection made her realize what a ridiculous thing she’d just agreed to, though it was too late to take it back now. But more than anything else, she didn’t think she could leave her first love—the first man to understand her, past life and all.

And so, despite her fears, Lyse decided to welcome her future with a smile.

Afterword

Thank you so much for purchasing *The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting is Wanted as a Bride*. Both last month and at the beginning of this month, *Iris* published a large physical edition of one of my web novels, so it's been a while since I'd published anything brand new.

Our noble protagonist was reborn in a country where women are expected to be weak, and, unable to reconcile her differences with her past self, she decided she might as well never get married. Then one day, upon catching the eye of the visiting emperor, she's proposed to by both the emperor's knight and an imperial duke. Normally, it would have been an honor and a privilege to marry either one of them, but our protagonist has a few secrets...

She ended up having a pretty frank personality, while our hero has to subtly emphasize his own strong points in approaching her. The emperor's, uh, "problem" was the funnest thing to write. You'll have to wait to read to find out what I mean... I hope you enjoy it!

I wanted to have His Majesty's big moment in a feature illustration, but I also had reservations about it since this is supposed to be an all-ages story for girls. In the end, I figured the scene is probably best left up to the readers' imaginations.

Now then, I'm eternally grateful to my editor, who did so much work on so many fronts. Thank you so much. I also want to thank the illustrator. When asked who I'd like to do the art, I immediately picked Ichige Yoru. I'm so happy the front cover turned out every bit as lovely as I had imagined it. I'm also incredibly thankful for all of the love they put into the protagonist's hairstyle.

Additionally, I'd like to thank all of the editing and proofreading staff who worked so hard on publishing this book, the printers for printing, and—more than anything—you for reading it.

As an aside, I have a little bit of space left, so I've written a short story to fill it. It starts on the next page, so I'd love for you to give it a read.

Extra Short Story

“I never thought it would actually happen...” Leon whispered, falling to his knees weakly. Both of his hands shakily clutched at the grass on the ground.

What had him so shaken? He’d just overheard a shocking bit of news: Lyse was going to marry the emperor’s knight. Apparently the emperor, upon recovering from his illness, had gone straight to the king of Olwen to tell him as much. Both the silver-haired knight and Lyse had accompanied him too.

“I knew something was off from the beginning...” Leon said, gritting his teeth.

Lyse wasn’t the type to humor a man flirting with her. She was dangerous. She was more than happy to throw—quite literally—any man who dared approach her carelessly. As such, Leon had believed himself to be the man closest to her since he was the only one who could have a normal conversation with her and touch her without reflexive violence. And he was right. She thought of him as family, after all.

“That’s right... We’re family...”

Lyse was Leon’s first love. Though he’d always thought she was an odd duck for her interest in swords, she was just about the only person who’d ever faced him without fear—even when he was a rascal as a child. He’d only meant to tease her back then, but she’d swiftly beaten him at his own game. Thanks to that, he’d felt something of a rivalry with her for a long time. He hadn’t realized he was in love until much later, when they’d begun attending parties together.

“Hahh...” he sighed heavily.

He’d thought he could take his time getting closer to Lyse, but that had turned out to be a mistake. He’d always given her her space for fear of being thrown or making her angry. Yet now that the king himself had given his blessing to the imperial engagement, there was simply nothing Leon could do. Rising to his feet with another sigh, he realized it was about time to send a letter home.

Meanwhile, a single white dog was watching him from across the garden.

“Hmm. Doesn’t look like he’s gonna cause any trouble. We can leave him be,” the dog said in the emperor’s voice, returning to Alcede as the duke frantically (and very quietly) shrieked for him.

Said duke was hidden in the bushes with an armful of clothing. “What is wrong with you, Your Majesty? Running around a garden naked...” he grumbled in annoyance as the emperor reverted to his human form and quickly dressed himself.

“Why, I was just looking into a certain pest who might have gotten in Sidis’s way. Don’t you think approaching him as a dog was the least suspicious way to do it?”

“Quite the opposite, seeing as how there are no dogs in the royal palace. Why not just threaten the lad with your power as the emperor?”

“I don’t want Lyse to hate me.”

The emperor was thinking of the woman who was to be his cousin’s bride. Despite her new life, he still saw remnants of her past in her. And even as the sovereign of the Razanate Empire, he didn’t want someone he’d loved like a sister to bear any ill will for him.

“Well then, problem solved. Let’s head back to the gazebo now,” he said, quickly walking off.



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The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride: Volume 1

by Kanata Satsuki

Translated by Emily Hemphill Edited by Megan Denton

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