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

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Is Wanted as a Bride*

Sidis

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

Lyse

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

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Character Profiles

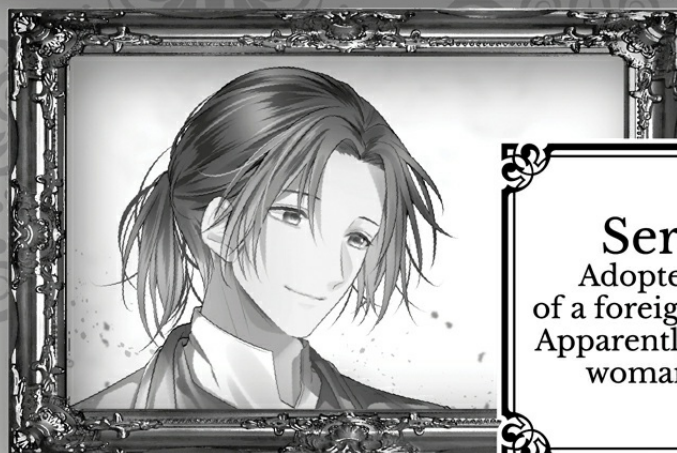


Alcede
An imperial duke and a friend of Sidis's who encouraged his engagement to Lyse. Has an insatiable sweet tooth.



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

Kirstin
Emperor Egbert's older sister and the current Duchess Lasuarl.



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

Glossary

The Light of Origin

A pillar of light said to be left by the gods following the creation of the world. Though it bestows blessings upon the land and people around it, it also attracts monsters.

Razanate Empire

Home to the Light of Origin, which grants most of its nobles long lives and magic powers. The emperor visits each of the nation's vassal states once every five years.

Kingdom of Olwen

A small kingdom to the southwest of the Razanate Empire. One of its vassal states.

Donan Faith

A new religion that's been catching on lately, though its extremist teachings are widely frowned upon. Its followers distrust the empire.

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Prologue: Following a Pleasant Hunting Trip

Lyse looked up at the birds singing and dancing in the blue summer sky overhead. She let out a brief sigh, then redirected her attention to what lay ahead...for barreling toward her across the parched earth was a black beast wreathed in mist. The beast resembled a boar with its four stubby legs, but as stout as the creature was, it still stood twice as tall as the average human.

Bracing to intercept the monster's charge were Lyse and her fellow noblewomen, all smiling with their swords at the ready. Today's excursion was exclusively for ladies of the aristocracy, and they'd made sure to dress for the occasion—the color of their dresses hid dirt and stains remarkably well.

As the beast approached, a few of the younger noblewomen fired off spells, striking the back of the giant boar with flame and wind magic. This barrage did little to slow the black beast, however, and it relentlessly pressed its charge.

"Take it down!" commanded Lyse, her brown hair fluttering down the back of her scarlet coat. A group of black rabbit monsters responded to her order, striking the boar's legs and toppling it over.

"Hraaagh!" With a greatsword heaved over her shoulder, an older noblewoman with laugh lines cleaved the boar in twain. It managed to stagger a few final steps past the women before—*Poof!*—it dissolved into black mist and was no more.

"It's been so much fun to go on a hunt rather than have our usual tea party! I'd love to do this again sometime, Miss Lyse," one of the young spellcasters standing beside her enthused.

"Thank you for joining us, Miss Karen. Likewise, I'd love it if you invited me along for any future outings as well," Lyse replied with a smile.

"Please keep me in mind too, Miss Lyse," chimed in the older noblewoman who'd brought down the boar.

"I've never considered a hunting party instead of a tea party. This novelty

must be a foreign custom!” mused a second young noblewoman as she sheathed her thin-bladed sword.

“It was a splendid time indeed. Lord Sidis must be quite pleased to have a fiancée who not only knows her way around a blade, but can also tame monsters,” yet another added, likewise sheathing her sword.

As Lyse was merely the daughter of a humble baron from a vassal kingdom, she’d bring shame upon the imperial family if she couldn’t perform to the expectations of the Razanate court. She was thus glad to earn such high praise from her peers. She’d readily found her place among the imperial noblewomen, as she was quite familiar with their mannerisms and etiquette. After all, she used to be one of them...in her past life as an imperial knight.

Her only concern had been that times might have changed in the hundred years since her heyday, but such worry proved groundless. Change happened at a glacial pace in the empire. Things were scarcely different from a century ago, perhaps owing to the exceptionally long life spans of the imperials. On average, nobles lived to be three hundred years.

Lyse’s invitations for a hunting party had been warmly accepted by many of her fellow noblewomen. As for where she’d gotten the idea, she knew all too well that she would’ve been terrible at hosting the alternative—a tea party. Moreover, Razanate noblewomen were trained in both magic and swordsmanship to do battle against the monster threat, and Lyse knew that many would rather put their skills to practice than sit down for a spot of tea. She thought it was the perfect excuse to arrange the excursion.

“The Donan Faith has been causing quite a stir lately, hence my inclination for today’s hunt,” she reasoned to murmurs of agreement.

“Who ever would’ve thought they’d grow brazen enough to attack a duke?”

“I’m very glad to have had the occasion for some hands-on experience today, just in case I might need it in an emergency.”

It had only been days since the Donan cultists had caused a disturbance at the palace. They’d captured Duke Lasuarl, transformed one of their agents into him, and then attempted to assassinate the emperor as well as Lyse (who was targeted for her ability to detect the Faith’s mind-altering black stones). It was a

great shock to the imperial court, and the terrifying event was still fresh on everyone's minds. The mood grew grave at the mere mention of it.

Oh no, we can't end on a sour note...

"Say, um...shall we head back now?" Lyse urged the ladies to return to the palace, bringing an end to the day's excursion.

The noblewomen mounted giant birds, the very same ones they'd used to reach the hunting grounds. Their unblemished white wings were larger than oxen, and each raptor could accommodate two riders. Their convenience made them a popular choice of steed in the empire—even more so than horses. They were especially prized for their combat potential against airborne monsters.

The Razanate capital was the epicenter of monster attacks as it was home to the Light of Origin, a pillar of golden light that towered up into the heavens from the palace. It blessed the land around it with bountiful harvests, and the people around it with the power of magic. The former had always made the empire a subject of great envy from other nations, and the latter had always kept their aggressions under control. Peace among men reigned throughout the land now that the empire's surrounding nations all had either been subdued or sworn fealty as vassal states. Yet the monster threat persisted, so the imperials continued to hone their battle skills to defend their nation.

With the Light in sight, Lyse and her party descended onto the palace grounds. They were greeted by royal bird handlers and servants who'd anticipated their masters' arrival.

"There you are, Lyse," called a man who came running from within the white walls of the palace. He had brilliant silver hair and eyes the color of spring buds, and he was dressed in a blue cape atop a majestic black coat delicately trimmed with fine silver embroidery. With long strides, he quickly made his way over to his fiancée.

"Is something the matter, Lord Sidis?" Lyse asked, concerned. It was unusual for Sidis to be worked up about anything.

"Please accompany me to your quarters at once. I shall explain the situation on the way," he urged her as he took her hand. He then announced to everyone else, "My apologies for the interruption, ladies, but do pardon us. The matter is

most urgent.”

The noblewomen all snickered mischievously when they saw how passionately Sidis clutched Lyse’s hand.

“By all means, Miss Lyse, please go if you have pressing business. I do hope you’ll invite me out another time,” one said.

“Why, yes, of course!” Lyse eked out politely as she was dragged off. “I look forward to seeing you all again!”

“They sure are intimate,” one of the ladies giggled.

“You can see the fire in Prince Sidis’s eyes,” sighed another.

Lyse could hear their hushed comments as she approached the palace.

I suppose...we are an intimate couple, aren't we?

Lyse and Sidis had met in Lyse’s homeland, the Kingdom of Olwen, while the emperor was there for an imperial inspection. At the time, Sidis had been posing as a knight, and he’d chosen Lyse to serve as the emperor’s lady-in-waiting during his stay. At first, Lyse had thought Sidis strange. Not only had he chosen her for such a prestigious position when she was infamously known as a sword-swinging barbarian, but he’d even happily whisked her away like a princess.

Sidis had treasured Lyse from the very beginning, and that affection held fast now that they were engaged. He cared deeply for her well-being, and he was always by her side if he could help it—both qualities that he was quite vocal about. In truth, Sidis had felt the same way about her a hundred years ago in her last life. Almost no one knew that Lyse was the reincarnation of a noble imperial knight. Or that she’d died saving Sidis. Or that Sidis had loved her long before she’d ever become the person she was now.

With a slightly flustered smile, Lyse followed Sidis into the palace.



Chapter 1: Matchmaker, Matchbreaker

“Lord Sidis? Would you mind explaining what’s going on?” Lyse asked as he led her down the palace halls.

“Shh,” he replied. “Hide behind this corner.”

When she saw the serious look on his face, she knew immediately to do as he said. Mere moments later, she could hear people rushing past in a clamor of murmuring and footsteps.

“I heard she’s supposed to be over this way...”

“I just have to meet her...”

They seemed to be looking for someone, but it was unusual for a group to be scuttling around the palace in such a fuss. Since imperial nobles were so long-lived, almost everybody in the palace knew one another and where to find them. Only outsiders and newcomers, like Lyse herself, were unfamiliar with the usual haunts.

“It seems we have guests,” Lyse remarked. She’d deduced that if there was such a group in the palace, they must be important visitors from abroad.

Sidis nodded in confirmation. “They all arrived from different nations simultaneously.”

“Simultaneously?”

“We knew they’d be coming at around the same time, but not all on the same day.”

“How curious.”

Travel by coach wasn’t entirely predictable. Setbacks like inclement weather could easily waylay a journey. Travelers in the empire were often provided imperial escorts for protection, but no one could predict when and where monsters might attack. It was therefore impossible to hold anyone to an exact itinerary, so a group of different guests all arriving together was a most

remarkable coincidence.

“The moment they arrived, they lined up for an audience with His Majesty. And then they set out after you.”

“After *me*?” Lyse reflexively pointed at herself. She didn’t understand why anybody would seek her out. She was just the daughter of a humble baron from a small foreign nation.

“You’re quite valuable. There are many from neighboring nations who’ve long wished but failed to marry an imperial noble.”

“Oh. *Ohhh...*” Lyse understood the implication.

There were always foreigners looking to make matrimonial ties with the Razanate nobility. Imperial nobles had more power and influence than the royal families of most vassal nations, so marrying one was a mark of great prestige abroad. Such a union could be considered highly desirable, but the dreamers who saw it that way tended to forget a few critical drawbacks to the arrangement. Firstly, the empire was frequently under attack by monsters. Marrying an imperial would mean having to deal with that, which was enough to make most people swoon...but not in a good way.

Secondly, imperial nobles were duty bound to fight the monsters—and that included noblewomen. Skill with a blade was expected of imperial ladies, as was combat training. Naturally manaless women from foreign nations would never be sent to the front lines, but sword training was still mandatory for self-defense in the event of an emergency. This ordinarily came as a great shock to anyone from a sheltered upbringing.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, imperial nobles were guaranteed to outlive their foreign spouses. The imperials maintained their youth for hundreds of years, whereas within a few decades, a foreign spouse would advance into middle age. Side by side, such a couple would look more like parent and child than a married couple, and not many women could take that. In a loveless marriage of convenience, the wife could simply bear children and then go about living her own life. But for a couple that truly cared for one another, or in a union where the foreign partner particularly cared about appearances, their future together would be difficult indeed.

Yet despite knowing all this, Lyse had willingly chosen to marry Sidis. She liked to pretend that her current life was simply a continuation of her past one, and she rationalized that it was only normal for her to age more quickly than Sidis. She also didn't consider her looks to be anything worth preserving forever, even if it would sting a little when people began mistaking her for Sidis's mother. Lyse subconsciously gripped his hand tighter, stopping him in his tracks. He was worried he might have given her cause for offense, but such wasn't the case.

"This way!" He broke into a run. Lyse barely managed to keep up in a sprint, yet ahead of them, there seemed to be even more of the search party. "I told the guards and ladies-in-waiting to send the visitors to the guest wing at once. What are they doing?"

"Given how big the group was, they must have split up to search for me. Surely it'll take time to round them all up," Lyse offered.

Indeed, the visitors had spread out through the building. The closest palace wing to the raptor landing was some distance from both the guest quarters and the audience chamber, yet it had already been infiltrated by the guests. That meant it was safe to assume the rest of the palace was compromised as well.

"Let's cut through the courtyard," Sidis suggested.

They had little choice but to make a break for it outside. The palace lawn was wide open, but there was plenty of greenery and shrubbery to hide behind as they snuck along.

"I was told that after hearing about you, nobles from other nations grew eager to marry their sons and daughters into the empire. I never expected them to be this desperate, though..." sighed Sidis.

"I'm sure they only want me to introduce them to other noble families."

Marriages of convenience were quite normal in other nations. If two families of similar social standing and comparable connections had children, then it was nearly a foregone conclusion that a union between them would be arranged. Lyse presumed these foreign guests were hoping she could find them similar matches in the empire.

Yet on the contrary, imperials usually married for love. While there *were*

arranged marriages, whether or not a couple actually agreed to go through with them depended on whether or not they developed a spark. This posed yet another hurdle for foreigners wishing to marry into imperial families, and failing to understand it frequently put them out of the running before the race even started. Lyse knew that well, so she wasn't interested in playing matchmaker.

"First things first, His Majesty would have to agree to all this, and both you and he are quite free to refuse," Sidis reminded her. "You are not their point of contact, and you shouldn't have to bear that responsibility."

He was quite right. Lyse was still relatively new to the empire, and she'd yet to actually marry into the imperial family herself. She was only Sidis's bride-to-be. She had no obligation to be anyone's matchmaker. She'd like to escape it if at all possible, but sneaking from shrub to shrub wasn't exactly the fastest way to travel.

"The sun will set before we even make it through the courtyard," grumbled Sidis.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than came a resounding reply...

"There they are!"

"I see them too!"

"Milord! It's Miss Lyse!"

It seemed that the guests even had their servants and attendants scouring the palace grounds for Lyse. When she and Sidis turned toward the commotion, they saw a large group of people pointing and shouting. The couple's attempt to flee had proven futile, and their pursuers now descended upon them.

"You are Miss Lyse, correct? Please, have a seat with me at the gazebo. There's something I would like to discuss—"

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Lyse! I am the chancellor of Drassel, and I would like to congratulate—"

"Would you care for some tea after this?" a young noble with dark hair asked amongst the fuss, taking advantage of the opportunity to address a noblewoman he fancied.

There was such a confused tumult unfolding that the overwhelmed Lyse hardly knew how or to whom to respond. The overeager crowd was even ignoring Sidis—which was perhaps a strategic choice, for if the prince turned them away, they'd have no choice but to oblige and leave. It'd be far easier to foist their wishes on Lyse.

That said, she couldn't simply succumb to their demands. Nor could she simply take the silent approach. Her and Sidis's silence could be understood as tacit approval, which would only complicate things down the line. Plus, there was no telling if the crowd would actually simmer down if they remained quiet, Lyse imagined. That left her with only one option—her last resort.

"Come on out and make yourselves big," Lyse whispered to the creatures in her pocket.

Two black lagomorph monsters and an avian monster then emerged and grew bigger than men in the blink of an eye. The visitors screamed in terror. Some even collapsed and trembled on the ground.

"Now's our chance!" Sidis immediately lifted Lyse into his arms and left the throng behind.

The couple ran into a few other visitors on their way to safety, but they had no occasion to stop and chat, for the visitors immediately turned tail and ran when they saw the monsters following Lyse and Sidis. At last, they reached Lyse's room with a great sigh of relief.

"Um, would you care to put me down now?" requested Lyse.

"Fret not. You're light as a feather."

"That wasn't what I was getting at... Erm, then how about we take a seat? You could still hold me then, if you'd like."

"Good idea," Sidis responded as he lowered himself onto a sofa...with Lyse in his arms.

"Lord Sidis..."

Sitting in his lap wasn't quite what she'd been hoping for either.

"I only returned from my travels a few days ago, and I had but little time to

see you last night. Now I finally have an afternoon to spend with you, so allow me this much,” Sidis pleaded as he buried his pouting face into her shoulder, unwilling to take no for an answer.

With a sigh, Lyse resigned herself to stay in his lap. It wasn’t as if this was unbearable for her. If anything, being with her beloved soothed her soul. They nestled closer in silence...until the door burst open without so much as a knock.

“Why, hello there! Glad to see that you two made it here in one piece,” hailed the raven-haired duke.

Handsome though he was, Alcede was a bachelor himself. He perennially failed to win over the ladies, primarily because his pockets and cheeks were constantly stuffed with sweets.

Or, actually, perhaps it’s because he can be so ruthless...

The ends justified the means to Alcede, even if that meant hurting people in the process. But since the emperor was a compassionate man, Alcede’s cruel ways made him the ideal advisor. The two of them struck a balance necessary for statecraft.

“Yeesh, getting all lovey-dovey in broad daylight? Get a room, you two,” chided Alcede, walking in on them.

“This *is* my room, so do knock before barging in, Duke Alcede! And please, Lord Sidis, would you let me go now?” she implored both men.

If only Alcede had knocked, this predicament could have been avoided altogether. Sidis acquiesced, however, allowing Lyse down onto the sofa beside him.

“Miss Lyse, I presume Sidis has informed you of the current kerfuffle,” began Alcede, turning back to the matter at hand without taking a seat.

“Yes. I heard there’s a group of foreign nobles here interested in finding imperial spouses, either for themselves or for their children.”

“Indeed. I believe one of the lot has stirred the group to act together. They must have met in a nearby town to coordinate their assault.”

“How suspect...” commented Sidis with a grimace.

Alcede nodded and continued, “No matter. I suggest dodging them until around noon tomorrow. I’ll shuffle the guards around so you needn’t run all over the palace like you did earlier.”

“Until noon, you say?” Lyse wondered. She was curious what would change by then.

“There will be an imperial council meeting tomorrow morning. Once we reach a consensus on how to proceed, our visitors will have to abide by our policy. Things should be quieter afterward. You’re invited to attend the meeting yourself, Miss Lyse.”

“Very well,” Lyse agreed, grateful for his consideration.

Though Lyse was not yet a part of the imperial family, she was the center of this mess. Her presence at the meeting would ensure she stayed in the know, but until then, all she could do was wait nervously for a resolution.

“That’s all for now, so I shall be taking my leave. I’m quite busy, what with nobles from ten different nations arriving in one day. Busy, busy...” Alcede grumbled as he turned to leave. “I know... I’ll get Sidis to help now that Miss Lyse is taken care of...”

It was easy for Lyse to imagine how much work must be involved with so many guests in the palace at the same time. She would have loved to lend a hand herself...if not for the commotion she caused. Rather than helping, she’d only create more hassle for Alcede with visitors chasing them down.

“Do these foreign dignitaries really expect to accomplish their goals just by coming to the empire?” Lyse griped to no one in particular.

The truth was that imperial nobles had little desire to marry from outside the empire, as their children were likely to be born with weak mana that way. Such children would have trouble protecting their own territories, leading to weakened rule and unhappy citizens. In the worst case, they might even lose their land. Still, these potential problems were second to the very real concern of longevity with regard to foreign spouses.

“Do they not fear growing old before their partners do?” Lyse wondered aloud. She’d come to terms with it personally, but she still had her

apprehensions.

Hearing this, Sidis silently embraced her from where he sat beside her. Perhaps he shared that very same worry. He would inevitably be left behind once again, just as he had with Qatora—Lyse in her past life. She'd died rescuing a much younger Sidis from the hands of a palace intruder when she was swallowed by the Light of Origin. Lyse didn't want him to lose someone he loved again, but she couldn't lengthen her life span by wishing.

Without a word, Lyse caressed Sidis's arm. He responded by lifting her hand and pressing her fingertips to his lips. Then he kissed her on the cheek, and it felt to Lyse as if he was trying to dispel her anxieties. She was almost embarrassed to know how much he cherished her, but he refused to let her go, both figuratively and physically. That warmed her heart, and they snuggled away all of her worries.

The council meeting was held the next morning as scheduled with key members of the imperial family in attendance. Important decisions in the empire were often made among this elite congress, and Alcede's role as chairman was attributable to his particular significance within the family. Other nobles were also invited when necessary, as with Lyse's inclusion today.

"We've been expecting various heads of state and other nobles from our ten neighboring nations," Alcede began, punctuating with a pause. "However, their visits this year aren't for the sake of courtesy or trade negotiations, hence this council meeting to discuss the situation."

After this opening summary, he then continued, "Their aim seems to be securing marriages with imperial nobility. They do not understand that Miss Lyse's engagement to Lord Sidis is because of the extraordinary power she holds. Rather, they now believe that imperials are interested in manaless spouses. That's why they've flocked to the palace."

A slender woman with her blonde hair tied up addressed the council next. This was Kirstin, the emperor's older sister. "I am sure there are those who wish to marry outsiders. The empire maintains a strong hold over its vassal nations, and establishing familial relationships may ease the friction."

“Be that as it may, it would affect the magical capabilities of our next generation. That would make marriage difficult, if it didn’t outright breed contempt between the couple. For even if...” Duke Lasuarl trailed off midsentence with a sidelong glance at his wife, Kirstin. Their eyes met, and they both immediately looked down bashfully.

Lyse thought it was cute. She’d noticed that Duke Lasuarl had softened somewhat after his capture by Donan cultists. She frequently saw him and his son Karl walking together and chatting amicably, which led her to believe that their relationship was improving. And now, it seemed the same was true of the duke and his wife. Lyse had heard that Kirstin personally confessed her crimes to Duke Lasuarl. Though there was initially a great deal of tension between them, they’d come out of it on better terms than before. Lyse was very glad to see people she’d known so well in her previous life happy together.

“Your thoughts, Your Majesty?” Alcede asked, turning to the man at the head of the long table.

Emperor Egbert wore his golden blond hair short, and the sharp look in his green eyes made him look like a conqueror. He appeared to be in his thirties, but in truth, he’d reigned for decades. The imperial family’s rich mana granted them exceptionally long-lasting youth.

“Find them matches, but under a few conditions,” the emperor declared in all seriousness.

“So the empire shall offer matchmaking services now, Your Majesty?” Alcede questioned. The entire council had expected the emperor to nip the situation in the bud, so he’d just surprised them all.

“Anyone seeking ties with the empire should first exterminate the Donan Faith within their borders,” Egbert explained.

“Exterminate? You mean...”

“Hmm, that would indeed be beneficial for us. We should be able to protect those we dispatch as well.”

The other members of the imperial family seemed to agree with Egbert’s solution. They knew that the heads of the Donan Faith were spread far and

wide across the land; they'd learned as much from a captured agent. In his confession, he'd divulged that he was a bishop and that other cult leaders were hiding amongst the aristocracy of other countries. He'd also confessed that the Donan Faith hungered for magic power, and that its membership was largely comprised of nobles who'd been cast out of the empire and their descendants.

But despite these leads, they'd learned nothing specific about the other high-ranking Donan clergy. The cultists used aliases and all of their communication was done through their churches. This was presumably to ensure secrecy and their survival, for there would always be plausible deniability. It was ordinarily difficult to form bonds of trust between, much less organize, groups of people who didn't even know each other's names, but for quite some time now, the Donans had been coordinating attacks on the empire.

"Other nations direct their discontent over internal issues at the empire. We've long been framed as the subject of their fears, so the Donan Faith is often a tolerated evil abroad," Alcede conceded. "Even if such nations are interested in furthering their relationship with the empire now, we must not allow this opportunity to be exploited by the Donans."

"Quite the opposite," interjected the emperor. "Whether or not any matchmade marriage comes to fruition, our message will be crystal clear. The empire wishes to have friendly relations with our vassal states. Their people are welcome to come here to learn more about us, and even find love. As their belief in us increases, their belief in the Donans will naturally dwindle."

The empire feared no open aggression from its neighboring nations, but assassins from the shadows? The Donan Faith made for a nasty opponent. If it could be eliminated, then hordes of foreign nobles pouring into the capital was no cause for concern. It wasn't like they could make such visits frequently given the empire's native monster population.

"Courting relationships, however, must be agreed to by both parties," the emperor continued. "We will strive to find our guests the best partners possible, but that will not mean shrinking our own pool of the most eligible marriage candidates."

For the sake of the empire's future defenses, the highest levels of imperial

nobility married with mana in mind. Otherwise, there must be some other extraordinary power in play—the Light of Origin, for example. That was the only reason Lyse was allowed to marry Sidis, the heir to the imperial throne.

“I am sure you all agree with me on this front. Therefore, I mainly foresee lesser nobles, those with weak mana, and those who do not care about their children’s mana participating in the matchmaking.”

“Does that mean Your Majesty won’t make it compulsory?” one council member asked.

“Of course not. This will all be voluntary. I have no intention of changing how we do things otherwise.”

The council member let out a sigh of relief upon hearing this, likely because he wasn’t interested in participating himself. “That being the case, will there be enough volunteers? If their children are destined to have weak mana, I doubt many imperials would be willing to give it a try, much less sincerely fall in love. I worry that the list of bachelors and bachelorettes would be too short for any meaningful matchmaking, Your Majesty.”

At this, a grim expression crossed Emperor Egbert’s face.

“Your Majesty, I have some insight on the matter,” Alcede piped up. “The imperials who agree to the matchmaking, as well as their spouses and future children, will be especially valuable in diplomacy with our neighboring nations. They’d treat anyone with ties to the empire well. We could use such families, regardless of their mana or social standing, as powerful emissaries. Their children would naturally be privileged by their connection to us as well, and they could easily make careers of diplomacy if they so wished. I believe that would serve us greatly.”

“Quite right,” Kirstin concurred.

The other council members seemed to be in agreement as well.

“If that’s true, anyone who wishes to venture outside the empire might also participate.”

“If we established titles just for diplomatic use...”

“The mana-weak generation will be taking matters into their hands, hmm?”

Alcede concluded, “Now, let us set about finding participants for the program.”

At this, Duke Lasuarl raised his hand. “This project may herald the weakening of the empire. Have you given any thought to that?” He was concerned about the increasing number of mana-weak children and what that meant for the empire’s safety in the future.

“Yes. Actually, we were hoping to entrust a certain matter to your son,” Alcede replied.

“To Karl?” Lasuarl was taken by surprise.

“We would like him to study the Light of Origin as a means of cultivating mana. Our mana, after all, was granted to us by the Light in the first place. If we can understand its workings, perhaps we can amplify the mana of those born without much. That’s what His Majesty believes, and we’d like Karl’s help making it happen as he’s the empire’s preeminent mana scholar,” explained Alcede.

Duke Lasuarl stood up from his seat and bowed deeply to the emperor. “You’ve generously granted me your forgiveness for my recent indiscretions, and now you’re granting Karl this honor. I am most grateful, Your Majesty. We shall devote everything to this cause.”

“We have high hopes,” Egbert replied.

Lasuarl bowed once more, and Kirstin smiled at him.

“Next, we would like to assign Lady Kirstin to take charge of the matchmaking project,” added Alcede.

“I humbly accept.”

“Miss Lyse, we’d like you to lend her your assistance.”

“Yes, understood,” Lyse acknowledged. She’d been expecting this, so she accepted the task without reservation. She was functionally the cause of this situation, after all.

“Lady Kirstin, proceed with the project after discussing the details with Miss

Lyse. Bear in mind that political marriages are the norm for foreigners.”

Kirstin smiled and replied, “Quite true. Our guests have not come to the palace in hopes of falling in love. Rather, first and foremost, they’ll be seeking anyone who’s receptive to an alliance of political merit. I imagine that they thought they could go straight to the top via Lyse, who might allow them access to the imperial family. Could you please correct our guests on this matter, Duke Alcede?”

“Happily, milady,” he agreed with a grin. “I will ensure that they understand marriage means something different here in the empire. That should thin the pool of matchmaking hopefuls by half.”

The council meeting concluded without a hitch. Lyse and Sidis waited for the emperor to take his leave before following suit. As they made to exit the room together, they overheard Lasuarl and Kirstin talking.

“Because of the way he was born, Karl now has a mission all his own. I’ve always done magic by feel, so I’d never be able to do what he’s doing no matter how hard I tried,” said the duke.

Kirstin nodded in agreement. She seemed extremely pleased to hear this, and Lyse was too. She couldn’t help the big smile on her face as she and her fiancé departed the council chamber.

“It warms my heart to see Lord Karl, Duke Lasuarl, and Lady Kirstin so happy,” she quietly commented to Sidis. Lyse took comfort in seeing Kirstin happy now the same way Qatora had when she was just a child.

“Them aside...” Sidis said, hesitating before he continued, “you’ll be attending the event yourself, won’t you?”

“As one of the organizers, yes.”

Lyse would be playing a role akin to matchmaker alongside Kirstin, who was far more familiar with matters of romance and marriage. Lyse thought all she’d really be doing was pointing out cultural differences between the empire and other nations. She’d just be observing the matchmaking process and stepping in to lend a hand whenever necessary. Sidis, however, seemed to have other ideas.

“Hypothetically speaking—and just hypothetically, you must understand—what if some of the noblemen attending the event are interested in *you* as a match? And, worse yet, what if they insist no one else will do?”

Lyse chuckled. Not because she found Sidis funny, but because she was astonished by his wild imagination.

“Do you not trust me?” she asked.

“I do. But you’re always so eager to extend a hand to anybody in need. People can be moved by your kindness,” Sidis explained. “Perhaps you could leave the men to me while you tend to the bachelorettes.”

“My job will be to ensure the matchmaking goes smoothly, remember?” That would involve assisting bachelors who didn’t know how to make conversation with the ladies in attendance.

“Lyse...” Sidis whined.

His eyes looked like that of an abandoned puppy. Since he and Lyse were already betrothed to one another, she couldn’t understand what was making him so anxious.

“I have no interest in marrying anyone else, you know?” she said, stroking his hair.

He took her hand and replied, “Please don’t treat me like a dog, Lyse.”

“I wasn’t, though.”

“Like a child, then. You know, I’m older than you even with both your lifetimes combined,” he said, lifting Lyse’s palm to his lips.

“Um, Lord Sidis, the others will be leaving the chamber any moment now...” She was embarrassed by the thought of anyone else seeing them so intimate.

“Then let us take this somewhere more private,” he said with a smile before lifting her off the ground and into his arms.

“Lord Sidis! This is just as bad!”

Being swept off her feet in broad daylight flustered Lyse, but Sidis paid that no mind as he carried her away. “Forgive me this selfishness, Lyse,” he said. “I

won't get to spend much time with you today either."

"Has something else happened?"

Whenever Sidis became unexpectedly busy, it was ordinarily because a task that only he could handle had fallen on his shoulders. He was often the first responder to any dangerous situation because of his powerful mana.

And it turned out Lyse was right to fret, as Sidis's response was terrifying. "People in the empire have been turning into dogs," he said in a low voice.

"Into dogs?!"

Lyse was reminded of how she'd first met the imperial men. Sidis and Alcede had accompanied Emperor Egbert on an imperial inspection to her motherland of Olwen, where the emperor had transformed into a dog. It was the work of Donan cultists who used their mysterious black stones to warp the imperials' mana.

"It's not the Donan Faith again, is it?" Lyse asked warily.

"Most likely. That's why I need to look into this," Sidis replied.

"Then let me join you."

As a Light bearer, Sidis was resistant to the mana-warping effect of the Donan stones. It stood to reason that Lyse possessed the same resistance, but Sidis was opposed to accepting her help.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said with a shake of his head. "If you accompany me, our visitors will suspect something is afoot."

"I see your point..." Even after being informed of the council's decisions, the foreign visitors at the palace would continue to stick their noses into Lyse's business. "Very well. I'll back down, then."

Sidis embraced her and said, "I want to spend more time with you alone when I return tomorrow."

He brought his face to her now bright red cheek. As they gently touched, Lyse couldn't help furtively scanning the area. She was relieved to see no one was around.

“I can’t wait until we can do this in front of everyone,” Sidis whispered.

“Not a chance. You’ll be waiting forever,” Lyse replied definitively, leaving no room for argument.

Later that afternoon, Alcede issued the following proclamation: *The Razanate Empire is welcoming of ties with its neighboring nations, and to that end, we shall be holding a matchmaking event. Imperial marriage candidates attending will be doing so of their own interest. With the mana of the next generation at stake, do not expect many members of the highest-ranking noble families to present themselves. Furthermore, matrimony in the empire is built upon a foundation of mutual love, therefore matches may not necessarily lead to marriage. The event is slated to be held soon. We look forward to your participation.*

When Kirstin showed it to Lyse the following day, an awkward laugh escaped her lips.

“I can practically hear the guests complaining now. ‘What’s the point of a matchmaking service when you imperials have no intention to marry?’”

Nevertheless, the proclamation was a necessary one. Making the terms of the arrangement quite plain would prevent any misunderstandings down the line, and Alcede would not have been so direct if not for that exact concern. A gentler invitation would have only invited the wrong idea.

“Duke Alcede certainly has chosen to be frank about the operation, hasn’t he? Well, rather than letting our guests stew in silence, I suppose it’s better to confront their complaints directly,” Kirstin responded with a similar chuckle, though she seemed satisfied with Alcede’s handiwork. “I heard that he even sent people emissaries along with the proclamation to answer any questions the recipients had, just to make it clear that there was nothing to be read between the lines.”

Lyse understood that Alcede meant to nip any trouble in the bud. “I wonder how many visitors remain...” she sighed.

If the most desirable marriage candidates—the upper echelons of imperial nobility and anyone with strong mana—wouldn’t be attending the event, would

the guests be so disappointed that they passed up the opportunity entirely?

“I hear that quite a few have already gathered for the preliminary meeting,” said Kirstin.

“What a relief. I was expecting the worst.”

“Indeed. Before we begin the matchmaking, we’ll be hosting something of a briefing session so that our foreign dignitaries may better understand the empire. The more that attend, the better, I say. We’ve picked an excellent location for it,” Kirstin said. She then muttered, “It would be a pity not to offer both the carrot and the stick, after all.”

Kirstin was still smiling, leading Lyse to blink twice. She wasn’t sure she’d heard her correctly.

The carrot and the stick...?

What would spur that on in a matchmaking? Lyse had to wonder, but decided against asking aloud.

“So, where shall it be hosted?” she inquired instead.

“Summer Hall.”

Lyse hesitated before repeating, “Summer Hall?”

This sparked more introspection on her heart. Tree-shaped pillars—not carved, but created by magic—encircled the close quarters of Summer Hall. Its walls were painted with scenes of oceans and lakes to give the impression of a waterfront forest. But the styling of the room wasn’t what gave Lyse pause. No, the problem lay elsewhere.

“Um, if we use Summer Hall, don’t you think the participants might panic if something happens?”

A unique feature of the hall was that it opened up into a terrace that was enclosed with glass in winter, but otherwise led straight through to the courtyard. The openness of it all allowed a pleasant breeze into the venue, and also made it rather indefensible. There was scarcely any shelter to be had if fighting broke out in the yard. When monsters attacked, foreigners needed to be hidden away deep inside the palace for their own protection and to keep

them out of the way in combat. Since monster attacks were unpredictable, there was often a great deal of screaming and fainting from anyone unprepared.

“If they’re to marry into the empire, they’ll need to adapt quickly,” Kirstin reminded Lyse.

“Ah, the aforementioned stick. So I *did* hear you correctly...”

Kirstin’s plan was to have the visitors experience what life in the empire was truly like before they entered matches, much less marriages. Lyse had her doubts about this as she crossed the threshold of Summer Hall. Within were ten foreign men and women. The ladies stood stiffly around the hall, while three young noblemen ranging from their teens to their twenties each sat alone at their own circular table.

Lyse had thought the remaining visitors would be women looking to marry into the empire, so the latter surprised her...until she realized what they were after. Rather than hoping to get in with an imperial family, they were hoping to take imperial brides back to their homelands for their combat prowess as capable mages. The empire would never allow that, however.

The things people do for greed can be far more terrifying than any nightmare. There are many problems that cannot be solved even with mana. Perhaps it would be best if we kept imperial maidens here in the empire for their own protection...

Regardless, it seemed quite a few of the guests had remained for the matchmaking event even knowing that members of the imperial family and other high-ranking imperial nobles wouldn’t be participating.

Maybe they’re fine with marrying anyone so long as they’re nobility.

Among the marriage hopefuls was a young man Lyse recognized with brown eyes and black, tied-back hair that was just a little too long. He was hitting on the noblewomen when the mob had descended upon Lyse the day before. How could she forget him? He was now standing over near the wall, chatting up a lady-in-waiting. Was he already looking for a match?

Presuming as much, the lady-in-waiting curtly rejected him, saying, “I’m already married and cannot be your match.”

Next, he approached a noblewoman standing at a table. “Say, where are you from? Ehrenberg? Your hair’s absolutely gorgeous,” he said to no response.

Does he not care if his future spouse is from the empire? Was he let loose here because his family had urged him to participate or something?

“Or maybe he’s simply a womanizer...” Lyse muttered.

It’s like he just can’t keep himself from putting the moves on the ladies.

Following that, Kirstin entered the room, excused the lady-in-waiting standing by the wall, and called for everyone’s attention.

“Thank you all very much for coming today. I am Kirstin Claire Lasuarl, and I’m here to aid all those seeking to make matrimonial ties with the empire.”

And gather their attention she did, for many of the guests knew the imperial duchy of House Lasuarl.

“Now, I’ve gathered you here prior to the matchmaking event so that I might explain a few things. As previously stated in the proclamation, here in the empire—even among nobility and the imperial family—we marry for love.” With that, Kirstin stared off into the distance. “Decades ago, before my significant other and I fell in love and married, I thought him stiff—fearsome, even—for he rarely smiled. It wasn’t until a certain incident I began to think of him differently. One day during an attack, I let a monster get past my guard. I was about to be its lunch when my now husband gallantly protected me at the cost of injury to himself. He’d always been so stern that I was certain he’d be angry with me, but when I saw the panicked look on his face, I realized that he cared deeply for me and—”

“Lady Kirstin, please!” interrupted Lyse, a touch of urgency in her voice.

She couldn’t let Kirstin recount the entire saga of how she and the duke first met, fell in love, and then finally married. They would be there for at least an hour. And as curious as Lyse was to learn how the two of them had gotten together, there were more important matters at hand.

Kirstin seemed to snap back to her senses and cut her tale short. “Erm, that is to say, we imperials pick our partners with our hearts. We rarely, if ever, strategize over marital ties. Even if my husband had been a mere knight, I still would have married him with the blessings of everyone around us. Perhaps it’s because of our life spans. Being stuck in an arranged marriage decided by our parents would be unbearable for centuries. Also, keep in mind when an imperial couple fights, they tear the house apart—and I mean that quite literally,” she said with a smile, not fully expecting the visitors to understand.

She then concluded, “An imperial spouse will be with you forever, so I hope that you all find someone with whom you wish to spend your lives.”

The veracity of Alcede’s proclamation finally seemed to set in upon the foreign noblewomen in attendance. And, perhaps at the thought of their homes being torn apart by their future brides-to-be, two of the young noblemen had turned a little pale. The third, the flirtatious young man, seemed indifferent. He’d stopped trying to chat up the female guests, however, so he was at least willing to listen.

Kirstin had surely noticed him by now, as there were only ten guests in the room, but she paid him no mind. With a big smile on her face, she turned things over to Lyse.

“As you all may have heard, I am Lyse Winslette from the Kingdom of Olwen. I myself am marrying into the empire,” she said in brief introduction.

She had the small audience abuzz. They were all looking at each other and asking, “So that’s her?” Lyse had become quite accustomed to being picked on since her reincarnation, however, so although this rush of attention frightened her, she steeled herself.

You’re okay, Lyse. Just remember what it was like learning to command as Qatora.

Imperial knights all underwent leadership training in the event that they might need to take command in an emergency. Qatora had never been any good at it, so she was often reprimanded by Duke Lasuarl and her other superiors. Right now, however, no one would do that to Lyse unless she said something well and truly out of line, so she decided to take it easy and relax.

“Now, I imagine you’re all thinking that the biggest drawback to marrying an imperial is the difference in your life spans. It may be of some concern to you that when you’re middle-aged, your spouse will still appear to be in their twenties.”

The women in the room looked a little nervous, as if Lyse had just stoked a great anxiety in them. Such an age difference wasn’t unheard of in arranged marriages and political marriages. In fact, it was relatively common for one partner to be significantly older. That wasn’t so in romance, however.

The men, meanwhile, were intrigued by this prospect. They didn’t seem to mind the idea of their brides staying young forever...except for the flirtatious guest. He seemed to have heard enough and had spaced out already.

“Um...” One of the ladies raised her hand. “There are rumors that you live longer if you also stay in the empire. Is that not true?”

I’d nearly forgotten. People back home also believed that, Lyse recalled. They all think they’ll be young forever if they move to the empire. Wishful thinking.

“Unfortunately, such is not the case. If you were born and raised in a foreign nation, then staying in the empire will not prolong your life, no matter how long you live here.”

The noblewomen weren’t very happy to hear this. Lyse empathized, but she couldn’t lie to them.

“The imperials are fully aware of this, so you needn’t worry about your matches,” she assured them. “It is simply something that you will all have to come to terms with. Now, moving on, I’d like to talk about the lifestyle in the empire—”

Lyse cut herself short when she heard the faint ringing of alarm bells from the city walls, but she didn’t particularly react otherwise. If the infantry and knights could deal with the problem, then there would be nothing for her to worry about. The keen clanging of metal accompanying louder bells rang out, however, telling her that monsters were now closing in on the palace grounds. The foreigners seemed nervous when they heard it too. Lyse looked to Kirstin, who nodded resolutely when their eyes met, indicating she was ready for the next phase of her plan.

“That, dear guests, is our alarm system. It means that, momentarily, there will be some fighting with monsters on the palace grounds, but I ask everyone to remain where they are. This is a good opportunity to experience a monster attack for yourself before the main event, as they are an everyday occurrence here in the empire,” the duchess announced with a smile, although the guests weren’t nearly as calm.

Knights on giant birds took to the skies to intercept the airborne monsters in the distance. They spat up balls of black smoke that exploded upon impact with the ground, causing the foreign nobles to shriek and squeal as if they had forgotten all propriety. Some crawled under tables while others hunched down in terror.

“Lady Kirstin, erm, about security...”

“I can assure everyone’s safety. There are troops stationed right next door, so worry not. I have even instructed them to take the battle nearby if needed.”

Lyse was flabbergasted by this. “Lady Kirstin, do you mean...”

“Any guests who choose to stay after this will certainly prove their worth as marriage candidates. We can’t have them all fleeing back home just because a monster attack scared them off. Besides,” Kirstin paused, “I had a feeling that monsters would appear today.”

“This is quite extreme...”

Lyse didn’t look pleased, unlike Kirstin who was giggling as though this were a great deal of fun. Like other members of the imperial family, she firmly believed that monster attacks were simply another facet of life in the empire.

Meanwhile, Lyse began seeing to the guests. She first approached a maiden with golden ringlets who looked like she might faint at any second.

“Are you okay?” Lyse asked.

“S-Save me...” the girl pleaded as she clung to Lyse.

“The monsters won’t come anywhere near us. And if need be, I shall drive them away myself, so fret not.”

“D-Do you promise?”

“The imperial knights and soldiers will protect us. The monsters are few in number too, so I’m sure they’ll be dispatched soon enough. Look up there. There are only a handful of them remaining now.”

The girl sighed in relief as she looked up at the sky, and the other noblewomen did the same. They began to relax as they saw the monsters felled one by one, but their comfort was short-lived...for one knight in the air let a monster slip past him, almost as if on purpose.

“What in the...?!”

As Lyse began panicking, the beast dove down toward Summer Hall. The noblewomen within all froze in place. Then came a sudden silvery flash, and the monster dissipated in a puff of black mist.



With his argent hair fluttering in the wind, a young man landed in the monster's place. It was Sidis.

"Are you unharmed, Lady Kirstin?" he asked, rushing over with a worried look.

"Of course, all thanks to you, Sidis. Oh, your fiancée is over there. Perhaps you should go speak with her."

"Are you not in the middle of your briefing?"

Kirstin, beaming with a sly smile, brushed him off. "Let me worry about that. I wanted to show our guests how well you and Lyse get along. Impeccable timing on your part, really."

I see. This was all part of Kirstin's plan, wasn't it?

Indeed, letting a monster slip through and making a spectacle of slaying it was all by Kirstin's design. The knight, who was in on it, had chosen a small monster for the part. He knew that the knights below would be able to handle it, and failing that, the guards stationed nearby would be more than up to the task.

The only person who didn't seem to be aware of their role in Kirstin's scheme was Sidis, who was now walking over to Lyse.

"Lyse, are the guests all right?"

"Yes, Lord Sidis. No monsters have made it into the building." And even if they had, Lyse could have used the little monsters in her pockets to defend everyone.

"Then if all is well..."

When Sidis turned to take his leave, Kirstin was there to stop him. "Now, now. Why don't you join us for the briefing since you're here already?"

Sidis had little choice but to stay after that, even with other urgent business hanging over him. "Well, if it means being able to spend even just a little more time with you, then I'm all for it," he said to Lyse, leaving her at a loss for words.

The noblewomen standing around Lyse then began whispering to one another.

"Gosh, I wish that were me..."

“I want somebody like him too.”

“So this is what it’s like in the empire...”

“I thought it would be safer in the capital.”

“Actually, monster attacks are much less frequent farther away from the capital,” Kirstin cut in to explain.

Unsurprisingly, someone followed up by asking, “Then, um, would it be possible to, you know, be matched with a young nobleman who lives in the countryside?”

Of course they want no part of this terror...

“Indeed, you’ll have options. Living away from the capital is rather comfortable compared to the regular monster attacks here. You could also marry a knight so that you have no territory to defend. Then you could simply retreat to your home in the city,” Kirstin explained. This seemed to put everyone at ease, not just the ladies.

“Pardon, but may I ask a question as well?” asked one of the two noblemen—who’d previously scurried from their seats to the interior of the hall for safety, and were just now returning to the group.

“From what I understand,” he said, turning to Lyse as one of the event’s organizers, “men like me would be expected to fight if we marry imperial noblewomen, yes? I’ve, erm, had training with the sword before, but I’ve never actually had to put it to use...”

As he had no confidence in his sword-fighting abilities, this young nobleman seemed worried about being sent to the front lines.

“Even as men, without mana, you wouldn’t be expected to fight like our knights do. If your wife happens to be the heiress of her territory, however, she may do so herself. Even young ladies in the empire are trained to fight monsters, so you have nothing to worry about. That said, you will be trained in leading troops in case your wife is ever injured.”

Lyse’s answer reassured the two noblemen, who were amenable to helping out from the rear lines. That left the third nobleman, the flirt who was once

again chatting up the ladies.

“Aww, don’t be scared. Everything’s all right now. The imperials are used to fighting monsters, so no harm will come to us.”

Not only did he have his wits about him, he was composed enough to be comforting the women too. When Lyse looked over at him, one of the other two noblemen piped up.

“No fear in him at all, is there?” he said with a sigh. “I hear he’s the son of an Alstran prince.”

That made sense to Lyse. The flirtatious young man wasn’t scared because monsters were relatively common in his homeland, the Kingdom of Alstra, compared to other countries.

“I believe he said his name is Seren,” the nobleman said.

After thanking the nobleman for the information, Lyse decided to speak to Seren. Sidis was busy answering the other nobleman’s questions, so she went alone.

“You seem rather unfazed by the monster attack. Is that because you grew up in Alstra?” Lyse asked as she approached.

Seren’s latest victim had just escaped his grasp, so Lyse hailing him from behind made him flinch. He turned to look at her, and perhaps he thought her strange...for he momentarily eyed her with suspicion before his smile returned.

“It’s so nice to meet someone as beautiful as you, Miss Lyse. I presume you’ve already won over the whole empire with your fair looks... Oh, that’s right. You were asking why I’m not afraid of the monsters. I suppose you’re right about the reason. I’ve seen monsters from a distance before back in my hometown,” he said.

Compliments flowed out of his mouth as freely as the answer to her question, leaving Lyse unsure how to respond. “I... I see. I suppose that would be a boon if you’re looking to live in the empire. I hope that the matchmaking goes well for you.”

“Oh, thank you very much. But truth be told...”

“Yes?”

Seren’s sudden sheepishness struck Lyse. Was he not really interested in finding a partner after all? Had he been forced into this for political reasons? Or...

He finally looked back up at her and said, “Truth be told, if only I’d met someone like you sooner... If only I could have protected you.”

Lyse had suspected as much. This man suffered from an incurable condition that left him unable to resist putting the moves on women. It was all she could do to smile politely.

“Don’t worry. Even if you had met me earlier, I’ve never had eyes for anyone but my husband-to-be.”

Her bluntness did little to hurt him. “Ah, guess I’ve been rejected. It was nice meeting you though,” he said casually, extending his hand.

Lyse maintained her forced smile and reached out to shake his hand. However, as soon as the tips of their fingers touched...a loud zap of electricity shocked the two of them.

“Yeowch. Sorry about that. You all right?”

Though Seren had been shocked too, his first reaction was to see to Lyse’s well-being. It seemed to her that he wasn’t necessarily a bad person—just a womanizer.

“Perfectly fine. Thank you for your concern,” she replied.

In truth, however, she felt that something was strange. She couldn’t shake the fear that had registered in Seren when he first laid eyes on her, so after the briefing concluded, she asked a fellow lady-in-waiting to pass a message along to Alcede.

Sometime after dinner the following day, Alcede came to visit Lyse.

“I didn’t expect you to ask for a favor, Miss Lyse,” he said as he walked into the room. Then he looked beside her, saying, “And I didn’t expect you to be anywhere else, Sidis.”

“She’s my fiancée, so I don’t see the problem with my being here,” Sidis replied from where he sat beside Lyse on the sofa, tightly holding her left hand.

Alcede saw this and gave an exasperated shrug before replying, “I suppose not. Anyway, I’m here about the nobleman from Alstra who’s taking part in the matchmaking event. Seren was his name, correct? And you said he’s the son of an Alstran prince?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Lyse. “There’s something about him...”

“What do you mean?” Alcede asked as he took a seat on the sofa across from the couple.

“He was incessant with his attempts to woo everyone, but it wasn’t overeagerness for the matchmaking event. He was chatting up ladies from other nations before the fact as well. I’m thinking that he’s not actually interested in it, but perhaps he was forced into finding a match. What did you think of him, Lord Sidis?”

Given how he’d hit on every single woman in the room, Seren seemed like he was extremely interested in getting to know people. But he was constantly hitting on ladies in front of ladies who’d turned him down, so he was clearly indifferent to what they thought of him. If he kept up at this rate, no woman would ever give him the time of day. This led Lyse to think that he wasn’t invested in finding a partner at all, and rather that he was simply going through the motions because he’d been forced into it.

“I found him odd as well, but that’s what philanderers do.” Sidis then grabbed Lyse’s hand, saying, “And I don’t like that he touched you, even if only briefly. I’d like to hold you till you forget his touch.”

“All right, all right. That’s all I want to hear coming out of your mouth, Sidis,” Alcede teased, his smile laced with dread.

Lyse allowed Sidis to clutch her hand and replied to the duke, “There’s something else too. While I appreciate that he wasn’t perturbed by the monster attack since he hails from the Alstran Kingdom, I nearly gave him a heart attack when I called out to him from behind.”

She was certain that there’d been a flash of more than just shock in his eyes.

It was genuine fear.

She continued, “That doesn’t really make sense to me, especially since I’m just a foreign woman myself... Do you think perhaps he was coerced with violence to come here? Or that he’s seen a lot of physical abuse? I can’t shake the feeling that he has problems at home. And if that’s the case, then will he be punished if he fails to find a match here? The possibility of something like that happening to one of our guests doesn’t sit well with me.”

To think that Seren would be beaten for failing to find a good match...

“Are you sure he wasn’t just taken by surprise by someone calling to him out of the blue?” Alcede asked.

Lyse shook her head. “If he were so easily startled, then he would have been beside himself when the alarms sounded. Yet he was as composed as could be, chatting with people around him.”

Alcede rested his chin in his hand. “Hmm, I see,” he said. “I did some digging on him like you asked, and it seems that he was recently adopted.”

“Recently, you say? Unusual for someone his age. Did the prince’s son suddenly pass away?” Sidis wondered aloud.

This time, it was Alcede who shook his head. “No, the prince never had any children to begin with. It doesn’t seem he has any relatives that age named Seren either. The official story is that they’re distant relations, but according to our ambassador in Alstra, rumor has it that Seren has never disclosed his lineage.”

Lyse was puzzled by this, wondering to herself if the prince suddenly needed a successor for some reason.

“Does Seren have some remarkable talent or gift, then?” Sidis asked.

“I’ve heard nothing of the sort. However, there’s speculation within the Alstran palace about whether the prince has adopted his illegitimate son.”

“I can see that happening.”

Alcede had only been able to collect so much intel on Seren on short notice. “Forgive me. I was busy attending to another mysterious occurrence,” he

apologized.

“Where someone turned into a dog, right? How did that turn out?” Lyse knew Sidis was investigating the issue, but she hadn’t heard any updates or results.

“More black stones. We don’t know how yet, but the Donan Faith has to be involved. And this time, there are even victims in the capital,” Sidis answered.

“Right here?!” Lyse exclaimed in surprise.

“That’s correct. Since we crushed one of their crime rings a few days ago, this has to be the work of new recent arrivals,” concluded Alcede.

“But there aren’t any of those black stones in the capital, are there?” Lyse recalled the dozen or so of those pillars placed in the Olwen capital that gave the emperor doglike features when he visited.

“That’s the troublesome part—there aren’t. At least, not that we’ve seen. We have no clue as to where the cultists are hiding them, so we may need Sidis on the move again.”

“At least I’ll only be in the capital. I could hardly bear being away from Lyse for even three days.”

Alcede shrugged, astounded again. “Who would’ve dreamed you’d ever get so clingy, Sidis? You were so indifferent to everyone I introduced to you that I was beginning to think you detested the company of women. Wouldn’t have believed this transformation if I weren’t here to witness it for myself.”

Lyse had seen the surprised looks other people had given Sidis too, but to her, he’d always been eager for attention. She felt no shock, seeing how she was coming back to this in her second life.

“You have a problem with that?” Sidis glared at Alcede.

“Not in the slightest,” he replied with a shake of his head. “You are, after all, a curio of a human being who one-sidedly pined over a late love for a whole century.”

“What do you mean by ‘curio’?”

“A rare curiosity. Anyway,” said Alcede, cutting that conversation short and moving on, “there you have it. We’ll be searching for those Donan stones in the

capital. Though I'm sure Sidis will be thorough, we'll likely be enlisting your help too, Miss Lyse. Oh, and I've already spoken with Lady Kirstin about this."

Lyse nodded. "Very well. It would be terrible if more people turned into dogs. The mayhem could only be worse than in Olwen."

Though not as proficient as the nobles, many imperial citizens were capable mages. Any fighting would spell trouble. If the soldiers were affected, then the city's defenses against the monsters would be compromised too.

"The nobility sure would be frazzled by it. Well, not that turning canine really bothered His Majesty," Alcede remarked.

At this, Sidis quipped, "If anything, His Majesty enjoyed it."

Even now, the emperor occasionally took his doggy form to go for walks with Alcede or Lyse.

Sidis continued, "You don't suppose the visitors would catch on if we took Lyse with us, do you?"

Hearing his concern, Alcede frowned. "Surely it will be fine. It's not as though we're leaving the capital. You two could even travel incognito as a married couple if need be."

As the costumes were his idea, Alcede made a special delivery to the couple the next morning. He brought a dress for Lyse, who would be posing as a merchant's daughter, and absolutely nothing for Sidis. All he would need was a knight's uniform, which he already had.

Before they set out for the day, Lyse and Sidis happened to pass a sullen-looking Kirstin in the hall.

"We went to the trouble of familiarizing them with monster attacks before the matchmaking began and everything..." The duchess was unhappy, but it had nothing to do with seeing the couple or their disguises. "Oh well. No matter. Since we've yet to get enough imperial registrants, we'll postpone a day. The count is at five as of this morning, so we could use a few more."

Kirstin smiled as she looked down at the papers—likely applications from the aforementioned registrants—in her hand. And judging by her expression, she

was hoping for more.

“I’ll do my best at tomorrow’s event, then,” Lyse assured her.

“I’ll be counting on your help.”

With that wrapped up, the couple departed for the capital. They sneaked out the rear palace gates by blending in with a group of traders.

“It really feels like we’re traveling incognito,” remarked Lyse.

“Until we rendezvous with the soldiers waiting for us, it’ll just be the two of us,” replied Sidis.

With that, they shared a smile and hurried their steeds along. It wasn’t far-fetched for an imperial merchant’s daughter to ride a horse, so nary a passerby batted an eye at the sight of Lyse on horseback. She and Sidis met up with a group of twenty or so knights and infantry before moving to the capital’s western gate. It was a quiet area off the main avenue—ripe for the incident that had occurred there.

“This is where we’ve gathered all the victims,” one of the soldiers informed them as he guided them to a merchant’s estate not far from a knight post.

Loud barking came from inside the manor, which was surrounded by a brick wall. Many of the soldiers grew hesitant upon hearing it, though a few conversely looked quite excited—it was fair to assume these were the dog lovers of the group. Servants were on standby at the elegantly engraved double doors, and when they swung them open, a single black dog rushed out of the house.

“Master, wait!” a young servant pleaded, chasing after it.

That servant was followed by a dozen or so more dogs chased by a man, presumably another servant. And even then, there was still more barking coming from within the house.

“What in the world is happening here?” Sidis asked, stunned.

To this, a knight waiting inside responded, “Apparently this all stemmed from a meeting the master attended.”

The master of the house had gone to a restaurant not a hundred meters away

from his residence. There, people at the meeting and in the immediate vicinity of the restaurant had suddenly turned into dogs.

“It all happened so fast that they couldn’t tell who was which dog. Given the size of their estate, the mistress of the house offered to take them all in here,” the knight continued.

That explained the load of pups in the manor. Lyse thought it was rather charitable of the mistress to take in the strangers as well, but she didn’t want to presume anything beyond that.

“Not everyone turned though, did they?” Sidis asked. The knight nodded. “So individuals with weaker mana fell prey to it, although they’re showing no signs of sickness. It seems to me that another mana warping is responsible for the transformation.”

Lyse agreed with Sidis’s diagnosis. These people were displaying the same mysterious symptoms that had plagued the emperor. Even as Lyse and Sidis discussed their condition, the pack of dogs zoomed by in the opposite direction this time. The servants chasing them were panting and wheezing now.

“Um, perhaps it would be a good idea to let the transformed people out to the courtyard,” Lyse suggested.

The dogs likely weren’t getting enough exercise just running around indoors. The emperor had loved playing outside too, and cabin fever could take hold of anyone cooped up for too long—canine or otherwise. Unlike the emperor, however, these dogs seemed to have almost no trace of their human faculties left. They likely just wanted to run for running’s sake in true dog fashion.

“That’s a good point. Take them for a walk in the garden if possible,” Sidis instructed.

With him insisting too, the knight in charge had no choice but to reluctantly do as he was told.

Lyse and Sidis then went to investigate the scene of the incident. The chaos had all unfolded within a matter of minutes, so everything seemed back to normal now. At worst, word had spread rapidly, so people were avoiding the area at the moment. It was delightfully free of traffic, Lyse thought.

“All right, time to look for those stones. But no nomming them just yet, okay?” She released the five monsters concealed in her pockets. There were palm-sized mice, rabbits, and wolves now scattering to hunt down their target. Before long, three of them—now one size larger—came back holding black stones in their mouths.

“Just as we suspected...” This raised a different question, however. The stones Lyse’s monsters retrieved were small enough to hold in her hand. “These are minuscule compared to the ones used in Olwen.”

“I found and destroyed similarly sized stones a few days ago, but that did nothing to abate the warping. The dogs didn’t immediately turn back to people while I was there either.”

It was taking time for the canine transformation to wear off, and the previous victims were still under observation.

“Then those dogs running around earlier...” Lyse figured they would need more time too.

“Two of your monsters have yet to return. Let’s go look for them,” Sidis said as he led the way.

Lyse agreed and followed behind him, but like a bolt out of the blue, she suddenly sensed danger. She swiftly drew the sword at her waist and whipped around. Steel met steel as she locked eyes with a knight—one of the very knights that was supposed to be protecting her and Sidis. She was aghast. The other soldiers seemed to be in a similar state of shock upon seeing one of their own ambush Lyse.

The knight ferociously attacked her without so much as an utterance. There was something about him—his gaze was distant, almost as if he was possessed. His build, training with a blade, and combat experience all exceeded Lyse’s severalfold. He bore down on her with every strike, but she refused to yield. The knight’s lack of mental acuity spelled his doom, for Lyse easily spotted an opening in his defenses.

“Hraaagh!” She parried an attack and landed a kick on the knight.

She then moved to take him from behind, but Sidis struck first. Her betrothed

flicked the knight's sword away from him and then pinned the man to the ground.

"Are you hurt, Lyse?" he asked.

"Not a scratch," she replied, touched by his consideration.

Sidis then turned his attention to the knight. "You there! What is the matter with you?!"

"Woof..."

"What...?"

"Woof! Grrruff! Bork, bork!"

The knight's response stunned the crowd around him. They knew they had a real problem on their hands when a grown man started making puppy noises. It was awkward enough when a dog owner imitated their pet, and this was much, much worse.

It dawned on Lyse that this had happened before. She reflexively turned to Sidis and, unfortunately, their eyes met as the knight was crying out and whimpering like a dog. The soldiers beholding the scene could scarcely believe it. Their mouths were hanging wide open. Even the knight in question looked mortified.

"What's with you, man? Have you snapped?" someone asked him.

"No, I'm almost certain this is the stone's power of suggestion," Sidis replied. He was able to keep his cool because he, too, had experienced a similar incident once before.

"It's those cultists!"

"They've infiltrated the palace?!"

"I can't believe it!"

Some of the soldiers in the crowd began clamoring, while others silently shuddered in fear. As for the knight on the ground, after bow-wow-ing like a whelp, he'd likely remember this long after he returned to normal. In fact, even if he tried to forget it, his peers would never let him live it down.

“How was the knight before we departed? Anything unusual about him?” Sidis asked one of the other knights.

“Nothing in particu— Er, actually, he was unusually quiet. I simply presumed he hadn’t gotten enough sleep.”

“Anything else of note? Did he speak with anyone strange before we rendezvoused?”

“No, Your Highness. He didn’t meet with any acquaintances either.”

“Hmph. Then it must have happened at the palace...”

Since the knight in question had been stationed at the palace and hadn’t met with anyone on the way to the rendezvous point, Sidis could only conclude that he’d been manipulated before setting out.

“Who would...?” Lyse began to mutter to herself, but given the short list of suspects, she arrived at an answer before she could finish asking the question. It had to have been someone among the visiting foreign nationals. “But there shouldn’t be any black stones in the palace...”

If there were any of the Donan’s stones within the palace grounds, Lyse’s monsters would have sniffed them out and eaten them. Yet they’d been quiet all this time.

Sidis furrowed his brow. “Then the question remains... How did they do this?”

“It had to have happened within the past few days. Perhaps he encountered a Donan follower on a trip?” Lyse suggested.

The knight they were speaking with nodded. “I shall look into the matter.”

“If all goes well, we’ll be on the culprit’s trail. Now we have to deal with these dogs here. Why aren’t they reverting even with no stone pillars around?” Sidis pondered aloud as he put the yapping knight to sleep. The soldiers’ restlessness had put Sidis on edge too.

As this was unfolding, Lyse’s two missing monsters—one mouse and one wolf—returned. They kept their distance, however, wagging their tails as if to beckon Lyse over to them.

“What’s the matter, you two? You want me to follow you?”

The monsters were behaving curiously, so Lyse and the others followed them. They ended up in a narrow alley some distance away where they made a peculiar discovery at the base of one of the trees lining the promenade.

“There’s a black stone with this tree?” Lyse asked.

Indeed, a stone was planted among its roots. There was no doubt in Lyse’s mind that it was Donan in origin, for as soon as she touched it, it splintered to slivers and fragments.

“There wasn’t anybody here at the time of the incident, but there may be other eyewitnesses. Let us regroup at the palace for the time being. We have a victim with us, after all.”

Following Sidis’s command, the soldiers tied the sleeping knight to the back of a horse, and just as they were about to depart...

“Hmm?”

In the distance, Lyse spied the group of foreign visitors. Seren and the noblewomen—all of whom were at the briefing—were out for an excursion in the capital.

Chapter 2: Proceed as Planned

Though the transformation incident had yet to be resolved, it was no reason to call off the matchmaking event. Doing so would only be conceding to the terrorists. The Donan cultists among the visitors would see their attack as a success and likely step up their activities accordingly. And so, the next morning, a delighted Kirstin visited Lyse to share the day's itinerary with her.

"We showed them how frightening monsters can be the other day, so now let's get our guests accustomed to the creatures. I was thinking we could hold something like a meet and greet with the ones under your control, Lyse."

"A meet and greet?" Lyse repeated uncertainly. "Interesting."

The matchmaking hopefuls were wary of monsters. They weren't to be taken lightly, of course, but remaining terrified of them would make it difficult to face them in combat—and subsequently make it difficult to live in the empire. Kirstin wanted to strike a healthy balance, hence her idea to get the visitors some exposure. She wanted the guests to understand that monsters were docile under control and that, ultimately, humans held power over them. In essence, Kirstin hoped to cultivate a certain reaction to monsters during the matchmaking event. Such was the social prowess of an imperial.

Is it just me or has the whole matchmaking thing become secondary?

Still, as hesitant as Lyse was about this, she couldn't object to it. She understood the realities of living in the empire.

"Now, the imperials who have already agreed to participate shall be joining us today. For anyone hoping to find a match, I say it's better to start early," Kirstin put forward. Much to Lyse's relief, the duchess actually seemed to care about the matchmaking and its participants too.

Lyse made her way to the venue that afternoon. The guests were scheduled to gather not at Summer Hall, but in the courtyard directly leading to it—right where the monsters had attacked last time. Kirstin chuckled to herself, fully

aware of what she was doing. She abided by the adage that experience was the best teacher. Kirstin prepared tables and crates to be placed around the yard, then directed Lyse to put her monsters in place.

“We’ll have one of you in this crate, and two of you in this one. Then we’ll have one of you at your original size. Come here, boy,” she called.

Lyse had chosen a lagomorph to be the full-sized monster. It was cute enough not to be frightening, since the point of this exercise was to acclimate the foreigners to monsters without scaring them. As she put the bunny in place, she felt something tug at her skirt. She was certain she’d only placed one monster so far, so she wasn’t sure who or what it could be. When she turned around, she found a snow white dog staring back at her. She could tell it was someone transformed—and there was only one suspect.

“Your Majesty?”

“Who else?” the hound replied in a whisper.

Lyse slumped her shoulders in exasperation. “Your Majesty, are you planning to join the event as a dog?”

“Not only is this our inaugural matchmaking event, it’s the result of a great deal of hard work. How could I not come see it for myself?”

“But in this form?”

“Coming as the emperor would only put people on edge.”

Lyse nodded, realizing he had a point. The attendees would be far too nervous if the emperor himself attended to poke his nose into things and see how they were going. “But Your Majesty, you could have spectated in secret, you know?”

“I prefer to observe up close. Now, have you finished preparations? What else are you up to?” inquired the emperor. His eyes were gleaming like an excited child’s.

Lyse responded with a pained laugh as she recalled him as a boy. She then took the remaining three wolves out from her pockets and bid them grow to the size of pet dogs at her feet. “I was thinking I would let these three loose so

people can play with them.”

“Brilliant idea. I shall play with them as a perfectly natural dog to show how harmless they are. Onward!” the emperor announced as he sallied toward the lupine monsters.

The wolves knew not to attack under any circumstances, but they weren’t sure how to respond when the emperor approached them. Lyse had to tell them to behave like dogs to get them to frolic.

Egbert paused and said, “Keep this between us,” before resuming play with the wolves.

Nobody could have stopped a dog of his stature even if they’d tried, although it wasn’t like he was particularly doing anything wrong. Still, to see the emperor living his best life in dog form was somewhat disheartening to Lyse. She turned away, leaving him to his own devices.

A while later, Kirstin brought the five imperial candidates to the venue—two male knights, two sons of the lord of a small fiefdom, and one female knight. This surprised Lyse. She hadn’t expected anyone with strong mana to join the matchmaking event, but it seemed they all had their reasons for wanting to marry people from outside the empire.

“We’ve accompanied His Majesty on inspections to foreign nations many times,” the male knights told her. They’d apparently been charmed by the outside world.

As for the other three imperial attendees, their reasons were much simpler.

First, there was the elder of the two brothers. “I like delicate ladies who can’t fend for themselves. I would love to be my wife’s protector,” he said. While there were women in the empire who didn’t excel in combat, he was looking for more of a shrinking violet—making this the perfect opportunity for him.

Next, there was his younger brother. “I heard that I’d be granted a post.” He was honest, if a bit blunt. It was the norm in the empire for the eldest son to inherit the family domain while younger siblings sought employment. Though this particular gentleman had already found work, he was hoping a foreign bride would be his ticket to status.

Lastly, there was the alluring female knight with raven hair and a beauty mark under one eye. Lyse was already familiar with this woman, as she was the sister of one of Qatora's colleagues. If she weren't from the empire, Lyse would have thought her to be in her twenties. Rumor had it that she'd only discovered her ideal partner after dating around.

"I'm interested in a more, um, sensitive man," she confessed. A manaless man would indeed be perfect for her to protect.

Though each attendee had their own reasons for coming, they all said the same thing about the event—that they'd need to feel a special something with a potential match before committing to marriage. Lyse expected no less from imperial suitors.

Meanwhile, a lady-in-waiting brought in the foreign guests. They were all transfixed by the imperial attendees, except for one of them who was looking the other way. It was Seren, who was again hitting on a court lady and again being ignored.

Still, nine out of ten isn't bad, thought Lyse. At least they seem excited for the event.

Nevertheless, Lyse knew she had to be vigilant. Someone among these visitors may have brought enemies to the empire's doorstep. Lyse was here to act as security and to observe any potential shady behavior from the guests. There might be a bad actor among them harboring ill will for all things imperial.

That said, Lyse also knew to be wary of anyone overly obsequious in their regard for the empire. It would behoove a cultist to play the part of a sycophant rather than a critic today. They might be eager to marry an imperial to masquerade as a fellow countryman within the empire.

Taking all this into consideration, Lyse's suspicions drew her to one person—Seren. He seemingly had no interest in finding a match. He was instead quick to hit on any court lady around him, and subsequently quick to be shot down. Yet his endless rejections never seemed to faze him. He was always laughing.

There he goes again...

The female knight of the group hailed Seren from behind, and suddenly, for

the briefest of moments, a grim look crossed his face. It was like he'd been unaware of her.

"I'm Freyja, a palace knight. May I ask you for your name? Where are you from?"

"My, you certainly are bewitching. My name is Seren, and I'm from the Kingdom of Alstra."

"Oh, you flatter, sir," she said, a beaming smile on her face.

Lyse had heard from Freyja's sister that she'd always been attractive and that men her age were always looking for reasons to speak with her. Lyse had thus been surprised to see her in attendance, but she understood why after hearing her reason.

"I presume you're well accustomed to fighting monsters if you're from Alstra," she said to Seren.

"No, I've never actually even held a sword before. I hate to admit it, but I always hide trembling inside my home," he replied bashfully, although Freyja was the one who blushed.

Lyse could hear what she was thinking: "*Bingo!*"

"I'd love to chat with you some more. Shall we have a seat here?" she asked.

Seren seemed happy to oblige, yet he invited two other ladies nearby to sit with them too. They accepted and happily joined the conversation, perhaps because they were interested in getting to know an imperial woman as well.

The other ladies and the remaining four imperial men began chatting as well. However, Kirstin was steering the conversation there. She first introduced herself, then asked the men to talk about their interests. From there, the ladies began approaching the bachelors they thought they might get along with.

"I was worried that some of them wouldn't return after the close encounter with the monsters, but I'm glad to see they're all still here. Though, to be fair, one of them might just be biding their time..." Lyse mused to herself.

She couldn't do much until the imposter revealed their hand. As Lyse was lost in thought, Freyja approached the other foreign gentlemen and took turns

sticking her hand into the crate with them.

“Oh, you’re so fluffy!” she fawned while petting the rabbit monster. Her adorable reaction made the men blush.

The foreign noblewomen individually approached different imperial noblemen. One couple was watching a monster run on a wheel like a regular mouse. Another approached the human-sized rabbit, listening to an explanation about monsters. A third yet was sitting at a table, the lady intently listening to her imperial partner. The matchmaking seemed to be going swimmingly. During this time, the emperor had tuckered himself out playing. He and the wolf monsters now lay dozing together.

“Your Majesty,” Lyse said under her breath, “are you truly so content being a dog?”

He perfectly looked the part of a canine right now. Not even Kirstin was able to tell it was him.

“A pup so friendly with monsters? How unusual,” she remarked.

Lyse longed to say, “That’s actually your brother, you know?” She knew better, however, and held her tongue. She knew Egbert would have to tell Kirstin the truth himself, and he could have easily done so even in this form if he’d wanted to.

For whatever reason, Seren decided to go see the pile of sleeping wolves. It was rare for him to approach anything besides a woman, so Lyse watched him closely. He knelt beside one of the monsters and, without hesitation, petted it along its back. The monster stared at him at first, then flopped onto its back and closed its eyes when it sensed no ill intentions from him.

The emperor now took notice of Seren as well and glanced over at Lyse as if to ask, “Doesn’t he care about the matchmaking at all?” He seemed concerned that Seren was ignoring his chance to mingle in favor of visiting the dogs by his lonesome.

After stroking all the wolf monsters, Seren finished off his petting tour with the white dog. It took only a moment before the emperor’s suspicious expression relaxed. He squinted his eyes, absolutely basking in comfort and

delight. He was in ecstasy.

If that's all it takes for the emperor to be happy, then so be it, thought Lyse. She wasn't about to let this opportunity elude her, however, so she crept up behind Seren as quietly as she could.

"Hi there. Do you like dogs?" she then called out.

Seren flinched at her voice and spun around with a stiff smile. He truly was overly sensitive to people hailing him from behind.

"Oh, good day to you, Miss Lyse. As lovely as ever, I see," he greeted her, managing to sneak in a compliment before answering her question. "Dogs, you ask? Sure, I like dogs. I wasn't allowed to do much other than keep a dog as a kid."

"Really? It sounds like you grew up in a strict household."

"Hmm... I guess so. Yeah, things were plenty strict." Seren laughed, brushing the topic aside, and kept caressing the emperor.

Soon, the emperor got even more comfortable and flopped onto his side.

"Your—" Lyse thought he was being too lax and unwittingly began to chastise him. Thankfully, she managed to stop herself.

Seren batted his eyes. "Something wrong?"

"Oh, erm, no. I was just going to say that you're really good with dogs. I didn't expect him—the dog, I mean—to take such a liking to a total stranger."

"I'm not good at much else. Dogs love it when you ruffle them right here. Give it a shot."

Lyse reached her hand out to do as Seren suggested. She couldn't act strange now, lest she blow Egbert's cover. The emperor, meanwhile, looked as content as always to be treated like a dog. He was as soft and fluffy as ever today. This was clearly His Majesty's ideal form—a white long-haired dog. He'd been hooked ever since his transformation in Olwen.

"Go a little rougher. Like this," Seren encouraged Lyse, reaching his hand out as she was rustling Egbert's fur. When their hands brushed against each other... *Zap!* A shock startled them.

“Yeowzers.”

“I’m so sorry!”

Lyse quickly tried to retract her hand, but Seren held it fast. Now it wasn’t pain, but anxiety that struck her.

Wh-What is he doing?

He examined her hand as she sat there wide-eyed.

“Guess I’m prone to static shocks. Where are you hurt? It doesn’t look like you’re red anywhere.”

“Um, probably around my pinky, but I’m—” Lyse was going to insist that she was fine, but before the final word left her mouth, Seren lifted her hand toward his lips.

“Eek!”

“Woof?!”

Egbert was every bit as blindsided by this as Lyse was. He rushed to jam his snout into Seren’s hand and kept him away. This attracted the monsters’ attention. They were all staring at Lyse. They moved to protect her, pushing Seren aside before licking at her hand.

“Ah, that tickles!” she said to stop them.

Seren laughed. “Oh, you’re adorable. Feeling a little jealous, buddy? Not over me, I hope. If anything, you should be jealous of her fiancé. But let me warn you, he seems quite strong,” he said to the doggy emperor. “Although, since she’s not married yet, perhaps you and I still have a chance.”

Lyse was weirded out. *What are you saying to a dog?* she thought to herself, as saying it aloud would have been uncouth. Egbert, meanwhile, looked startled. Similarly, the monsters stood down.

“Are you hurt?” Seren asked Lyse as she took a deep breath.

“No, not at all!” Lest he attempt to kiss her hand again, Lyse yanked it away. Thankfully Seren hadn’t succeeded the first time, and he seemed to take the hint now.

“If you say so. But this dog really seems to adore you, doesn’t he? Even the dog monsters are attached to you.”

“I suppose...” Lyse mumbled.

Sorry to burst your bubble, but there isn’t a single dog among them...

Moreover, it wasn’t accurate to say the monsters were attached to her. They were simply under her control. The moment she released them from her service, they would likely turn on everyone present.

“And here I was, going on about how great I am with dogs. I was always around them growing up since I couldn’t go out and make friends with other kids.”

“Were you prone to illness?”

“No, I was locked up at home as a child.”

“Wha—” Lyse was stunned. Her mind darted back to the abuse theory.

“My folks had their reasons. See, I look nothing like either of them, so they were terrified of what people would say to me. Imagine how sheltered, how little I knew of the world before I became an adult.”

Lyse didn’t know how to respond to his self-deprecating tale.

“After that, I took lessons to learn how to socialize. And look at me now, a world-class flatterer,” he jested, playing up how hopeless he was.

Lyse was relieved to hear him open up about his past, and she suspected his newfound freedom had something to do with it. Even if he was adopted, Seren was now nobility. The freedom that granted him, however, likely wouldn’t include the freedom to choose his partner in life. The price of his independence as the prince’s adopted son would be a political marriage—one that he’d presumably been sent to the matchmaking event to find.

“So, why did you part ways with that female knight earlier?” Lyse had to ask. She didn’t understand Seren’s actions. Even if he loved dogs, he should’ve gone back to Freyja after petting them.

“There’s something a little intimidating about her,” he replied. Lyse wondered if perhaps Freyja was *too* attractive. Seren continued, “But I find you much

easier to speak with. It just seems like I get through to you, know what I mean? I wish I could be by your side more, to feel you more.”

With that, Seren looked at Lyse strangely and reached out for her. The emperor, whom Seren was petting, stood up immediately. He glared holes into him with his round doggy eyes as if to say, “Have you lost your mind?”

Seren tilted his head quizzically. “Was I petting you the wrong way? Maybe you’ll enjoy this more...”

“W-Woof?!”

Seren began stroking Egbert from his back to his chest. This took Egbert by surprise, but surprise soon gave way to euphoria as he melted into a puddle.

Your Majesty... Lyse had to contain herself to keep from wisecracking at the emperor.

Suddenly, however, Seren suddenly stopped petting Egbert and gazed off toward where the guests’ servants were standing by. Lyse sensed fear in him.

Why is he...?

Hadn’t he already been freed from the family that kept him prisoner in his own home? Did his adoptive father keep him on a short leash too? Lyse couldn’t find any fault in Seren that would warrant such extreme measures. Plus, if his family really wanted to keep him under their thumb, they wouldn’t be forcing him to marry an imperial woman.

Seren broke the silence by saying, “I’d love to speak with you again. I know you already belong to another man, but...” He paused there before asking, “We can still chat, right?”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

Seren was happy to hear her response. He then made his way into Summer Hall, where he began hitting on the lady-in-waiting on duty. It made their heart-to-heart a moment ago feel rather disingenuous.

“Lyse!” the emperor barked at Lyse, who was still watching Seren.

“Yes, Your Majesty?” Lyse looked down as she spoke so no one would see that she was talking to the dog.

“What was that just now?” he demanded.

“Erm, how do you mean, Your Majesty?”

Egbert rolled his eyes. “You’re kidding me! That man kissed your hand, gushed about how easy you were to talk to, and then asked to chat more even though you’re already betrothed to another man!”

“Well, not everyone has compatible personalities, but we managed to have a nice enough conversation. I hope he’ll carry on pleasantly with the other attendees as well. Besides, I hardly see the issue with him acknowledging that I’m engaged.”

If anything, Lyse thought it would be worse if he’d said all that without knowing. The emperor lay down on the ground, and following his lead, Lyse kneeled beside him.

“How oblivious could you possibly be?” he scolded. “Two lives put together and you’re still so naive.”

“Qatora was definitely oblivious, and my acquaintances in this life have always left me in the dark.”

He heaved a sigh. “That explains a lot, but are you really all right with this?” The emperor grumbled and cleared his throat before continuing, “In any event, beware of that man and keep your distance if you can.”

“But Lord Seren has been imprisoned and still seems to have little autonomy. I worry, Your Majesty.” Given the way he’d looked at the servants, Lyse was concerned he might even be under surveillance currently.

“I sympathize. We cannot allow another nation to detain someone with connections to the empire without good reason. Perhaps we could protect Seren by allowing him to live here after marrying.”

“Very wise, Your Majesty.”

Even if Seren was being forced to marry an imperial, he seemed to be going along with the plot to ensure his freedom.

“Still, something’s bothering me...” the emperor said, squinting. “Why would the prince adopt Seren, then have him leave the kingdom right away? After

giving him a taste of freedom, why ship him off to the empire?”

“I don’t think Lord Seren is in full control of his circumstances.”

“Indeed. I cannot fathom why his people would treat him this way. If he’s just a pawn, they may have ulterior motives. We ought to look into it more,” he said while casting a sidelong glance at Lyse. “I cannot have you on his case, especially with Sidis looming. Next time, I shall personally—”

Egbert cut himself off mid-sentence. Lyse followed his example and looked behind them, having sensed someone nearby.

“Oh my! There’s a real dog here too,” a blonde noblewoman exclaimed, pointing.

Lyse recalled that this was the girl who’d been scared witless during the monster attack. She’d been chatting merrily with the other damsels and the imperial knights, but she now split off from the group. She must have been a dog lover too, for her eyes gleamed when she saw the emperor.

“Yes, these monsters found good company. Even with a doggy amongst them, they’re still docile under my control,” Lyse said. “Feel free to pet them.”

Though Lyse was referring to the monsters, the girl heard otherwise. She couldn’t take her eyes off of Egbert and happily began petting him. “So soft! What a cutie...”

Lyse looked to the emperor, who was hitting the noblewoman with his puppy eyes.

After stroking his head and back for a bit, she then turned to Lyse. “Since he already has his leash on, would it be all right if I took him for a walk?”

Lyse couldn’t say no to her sparkling blue eyes.

“That was a nice walk,” muttered Egbert when he returned some time later.

He didn’t seem offended in the slightest being treated like a dog by the damsel. In fact, Lyse worried that he might be enjoying it too much.

The following day, Lyse headed out into the capital. She scoured the scene of the transformation incident again, searching high and low, but found no new

evidence. It wasn't all bad news, however. After returning from her investigation, Lyse heard word from the emperor's office that warmed her heart. Apparently, the victims in nearby towns were gradually turning back into humans. She couldn't imagine how embarrassing that must be, however, as no one wore clothes while in dog form. Indeed, they'd all been running around in the buff together. Not everyone could be like the emperor, who didn't mind tromping around in naught but his mantle.

His Majesty is this close to being branded a pervert. And to think he used to be such a good kid...

"Now, we have no idea why people have been transforming into dogs given that there aren't any Donan stones around," the emperor declared. His displeasure showed on his face.

Sidis offered a theory. "According to today's observations, the mana warping has steadily subsided. While His Majesty gradually took on more and more canine features, the victims this time were transformed instantly. I suspect that they've been slow to recover because the warping is more powerful than before."

"I concur. Though I do wonder why people are only turning into dogs," Alcede pondered aloud.

Lyse had wondered the same thing. It wasn't as if the emperor had longed to be a dog back while they were in Olwen. The same applied to the current victims. They were transforming into dogs whether they liked it or not.

"Whatever the case, we ought to continue our search," said the emperor. "How is the investigation of our visitors progressing, Alcede?"

"We've been monitoring them for the past few days, but nothing unusual has cropped up, Your Majesty. Though judging from the knight who fell under the power of suggestion and attacked Miss Lyse, the culprit may be evading our surveillance. And much like the agent we captured before, a cultist handy with illusion magic could very easily hide in plain sight. I shall see to expanding our surveillance team." Alcede looked defeated and apologized for not being able to do more at the moment. He then continued, "To extract any information directly from the horse's mouth, we'll be reliant on Lady Kirstin and Miss Lyse."

Lyse nodded. Though she would have preferred a proper interrogation, fishing for information was her only recourse. Or so she thought until Egbert raised his hand.

“I shall lend a hand as well,” he declared.

“Might you just be looking for another excuse to go on a walk?” Alcede asked, glaring at the emperor who couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Perish the thought. The participants all seemed to like dogs, so they’d let their guard down around me. They’ll blabber all their secrets and I shall be there to eavesdrop on them.”

“Absolutely not, Your Majesty. We have no idea who has ties to the Donan church. You would only be able to help as a dog—an easily captured target, let me remind you.” Alcede swiftly rejected Egbert’s offer out of concern for his safety, but then immediately doubted himself. “Perhaps I’m overthinking this. You should, erm, do as you please, Your Majesty.”

“Alcede, you ought to stand your ground,” Sidis protested.

“I know! Why don’t *you* join His Majesty? Wouldn’t you like to chase down a suspect like you’ve just escaped a kennel? And when they’ve escaped our surveillance network, will you follow them around faithfully until they utter something incriminating? Would you like to be collared and taken away? It should be liberating to run around on all fours buck naked, if I had to hazard a guess,” Alcede pressed him.

“Hrk!” Sidis choked up, unable to argue.

Of course, the emperor had to take it one step further. “Fret not, Sidis. There are plenty of ladies who love dogs too.”

“I can see how some imperial men might be interested in being a lady’s pet, yes,” agreed Alcede.

“So any woman would do?” Lyse butted in.

That momentarily shut the emperor up, but he soon found another opening to attack. “That reminds me, Sidis... There was a man interested in Lyse at the event. Extremely interested, I might add.”

Sidis whipped his head around and locked eyes with Egbert. “Your Majesty...”

“He mentioned that he didn’t get on well with others, but that he had a great time chatting with you, didn’t he, Lyse? Even though you’re promised to another man, he said...” Egbert trailed off there and paused. “I wonder what he meant by that, hmm?”

Sidis tightly gripped Lyse’s shoulder and called her name.

“Yes?” she replied.

“Is this true?” he asked.

She took a moment to think about it before answering, “His Majesty is by and large telling the truth. The guest in question is aware that I’m engaged to you, so I saw no harm in chatting.”

“I volunteer, Your Majesty,” declared Sidis the moment he heard this, “if you would please keep the two of them apart.”

If Sidis could expose Seren, that would naturally remove him from the matchmaking event and Lyse’s company. But if Seren proved to be innocent, Sidis wanted some insurance that he could still keep him away from Lyse.

Egbert had anticipated this. “Very well. I shall see that Lyse is protected. If you come across anything suspicious, be sure to hurry and report back to us.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

Lyse wasn’t as happy with this arrangement as everyone else seemed to be. *In the end, His Majesty managed to find another reason to go on walks, huh?* she wondered, now saddled with a guard dog for the matchmaking event.

“You’d go to hell and back for Miss Lyse, wouldn’t you, Sidis?” asked an exasperated Alcede. “I suppose that’s what happens when you bottle up your feelings and let them sit for a century.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t liken my love to cellared wine. I have a request as well, and I won’t take a no for an answer.”

“And what is that?”

“Introduce me as Lyse’s dog,” Sidis demanded without any hesitation.

Alcede's jaw practically dropped to the floor. "I... I heard what you said, but Sidis, my friend, I frankly haven't the slightest idea how to respond to such a preposterous request."

"Simply agree."

With that, Sidis abruptly knelt before Lyse, lifted her right hand in his palms, and pressed the back of her hand to his lips. Lyse couldn't shake him off even in front of the emperor and Alcede, for she was powerless to his touch. Her embarrassment didn't last long, however, given what Sidis said next...

"I'd gladly forever be your dog."

"Um, Lord Sidis, I just can't bring myself to treat people like animals."

"Not even for me? If anything, you ought to do it in front of that man who tried to woo you."

"Lord Sidis, if you absolutely insist on going on a stroll with him, then I suppose I have—"

Before she could finish her sentence, Sidis licked the back of her hand.

"Lord Sidis!" she yelped.

"I am but your dog. I shall do this until you are accustomed to it."

"Um, that tickles..."

Just as Sidis was about to do it again, Alcede clapped his hands together with a thunderous boom through the office.

"Get a room, you two. You really don't care that other people are present, do you? Talk about puppy love, eh?" Alcede smirked before dropping a bombshell. "At this rate, we'll have tiny Sidises running around before we know it."

"Wha—?!" Lyse turned a bright shade of pink when she understood his implication.

"Just a matter of time, Alcede," Sidis replied nonchalantly.



Everything immediately following that went in one ear and out the other. Thankfully they'd nearly wrapped up the conversation already, so Lyse did her best to struggle through it. Sidis held her hand all the while, and once the meeting was over, he led her back to his room. She was incredibly flustered even though all they were doing was talking now.

And here I thought I'd just gotten used to his behavior...

Perhaps because they were both Light bearers, Lyse could never physically resist Sidis. She thought that was just the way things were between them. She thought it was normal. Or perhaps an effect of their betrothal. They were halfway to getting married, so it was only natural. It happened all the time as it was, and it would only happen more once they were wed. It wouldn't be long now before they were one...and the very thought was too embarrassing to say out loud.

"You seem more nervous than usual. Is something the matter?" he asked with a grin.

"Well, our conversation earlier..."

Sidis seemed to think something was odd. Lyse had been hanging her head all this time, embarrassed by even the euphemism, and now he was teasing her for it.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked.

"You know I'd never do anything you didn't want. So if it's still on your mind, it must be something you desire after all."

Lyse was at a loss for words, baffled and embarrassed. She didn't yet wish for anything Alcede had implied earlier. But if it was something Sidis truly wanted, Lyse was afraid that she was too opposed to it. She feared that he would come to resent her for it. Knowing that he wouldn't force her into it, however, she was a little irritated that he'd even brought it up.

"Let me see your face, Lyse."

"You've already seen it."

When Lyse refused to lift her head, Sidis kissed her temple.

“I bet that you’re making an absolutely adorable face right now. Show me, won’t you?”

With his left hand, he cradled her cheek. He raised her head and kissed her on the nose, then her cheek. With every touch of his lips, her heart melted a little more.

“You’re the most precious person in the whole world to me. That’s just as true now as it was a hundred years ago. I couldn’t bear it if you were to hate me, Lyse.”

As stubborn as she was, Lyse ultimately looked up at him.

“I teased you about it so you’d acknowledge it, but I’ll wait as long as you need. Will you forgive me?” He looked deep into her eyes, trying to hide the pain.

“I forgive you, Lord Sidis.”

Hearing her response, he smiled and placed his lips to hers.

Two days later, once all of the imperial participants had finally been gathered, it was time for the main matchmaking event—a garden party. Kirstin was bursting with excitement.

“Lady Kirstin sure does enjoy playing matchmaker,” Lyse softly whispered as she watched the duchess bounce off the walls.

As a younger princess, Kirstin had never been bold in matters of the heart, likely owing to her lack of confidence as a royal with little mana. To think that the surly Duke Lasuarl had transformed her so made the about-face all the more striking.

“I suppose love does change people,” Lyse said quietly.

“You’re no different,” replied Sidis, who was standing beside her in the courtyard.

Lyse looked down at him, and he looked back up at her—with his bright green puppy dog eyes. Indeed, the prince had now taken the form of a white dog.

“Qatora didn’t seem interested in dating at all,” he continued.

“Is that so?”

“You always had your brother or father escort you to functions. And even then, you were still complaining, saying things like, ‘Oh, if only I could attend these events alone. I wish I could pay someone to be my plus-one. That’d be perfect for perennial bachelors and bachelorettes like me.’”

Lyse covered her mouth and quickly looked away.

Gaaah! I did say that! I totally did!

She’d enjoyed her previous life as a knight to the fullest, forever trying to best Lasuarl in a duel or drive back some great enemy on her own. That was all she had cared about, and it had left no room for marriage in her mind. Given the naturally long life spans of imperial nobility, she’d always thought that she could focus on her chivalric obligations and put off romance until later.

“That’s why I thought I’d be safe waiting to grow up before pursuing you. And that’s not to mention the fact that you were completely indifferent to other people’s love lives as well. When your fellow knights came to you asking for validation, you’d stonewall them by saying, ‘Sorry, I don’t know anything about this kind of stuff,’” Sidis laughed. “If Qatora were asked to help today, I’m sure she’d request to patrol the grounds instead since she wouldn’t know how to lend Kirstin a hand. But you’re not like that now.”

“Right...” Lyse admitted. Qatora’s default response to anything related to romance had indeed been anxiety.

“If the change is attributable to me, I’d be thrilled—”

“Heads up. The others have arrived,” called out another dog with a white coat from Lyse’s left.

After the promise he and Sidis had exchanged, Egbert made sure that he attended the matchmaking—also in dog form, of course. Considering that he wouldn’t walk off with any strangers and that there were knights and ladies-in-waiting standing around on guard, the venue seemed more than safe enough for the emperor.

Meanwhile, the garden party was getting underway. In addition to the five previous attendees, eight more eligible imperials had joined their ranks. Among

the new bachelorettes, there were three female knights and one young noblewoman. Kirstin had heard that the noblewoman was an official and that she was participating due to her interest in the field of diplomacy.

So far, the party was bustling. Lyse scanned the garden and spotted the young lady with golden, curly locks who'd taken the emperor for a walk last time. She was standing with another girl, and the two of them were chatting with two male imperial knights. Seren was the next person to catch Lyse's eye. He was voraciously chatting with Freyja, who also seemed to be enjoying herself. Yet for some reason, the moment another woman called out to Seren, he turned his back on the beautiful knight. Lyse was hoping he could find a match for himself, but alas, Seren was fickle. There wasn't much Lyse could discreetly do to help him either, as she suddenly found herself swept up in a circle of the new imperial bachelors and the foreign damsels who were interested in them.

"Did you find it challenging when you first moved to the empire?" the damsels asked Lyse. Now that they were used to this kind of function, they handily made conversation and were almost badgering her with questions.

"Not in the slightest. I'm very grateful to have had Lord Sidis by my side, for I've learned so much about the empire through him," replied Lyse as politely as possible.

"How did you two meet? Has Lord Sidis told you what made him fall in love with you?"

Lyse couldn't help awkwardly chuckling at the question. Sidis had first fallen in love with her a lifetime ago, and he'd only revealed his feelings bit by bit after they were reunited in this one. Moreover, she couldn't say anything too left field since her fiancé was actually right there with her. She tried glossing over it with a laugh.

"I'm far too embarrassed to ask him about it myself. Ha ha...ha..."

"Is this one of the palace hounds? There was another one before, wasn't there?" Goldilocks joined the conversation as she reached down to pet Sidis without any hesitation. She saw him as nothing but a normal dog.

"Oh, he's my personal pet," Lyse introduced him, exactly as Sidis had asked. He flashed a smile as he rubbed his head against her hand.

You really wanted to hear that...

Lyse couldn't understand Sidis at all. Did people really want to be treated like pets when they fell in love? She couldn't imagine herself enjoying it if he were to do the same to her, and the thought that she didn't love him enough made her nervous.

As she fretted, she caught sight of Seren wandering away from the venue out of the corner of her eye. She glanced after him to signal Sidis. If Seren was going off on his own, she wanted doggy Sidis to mind him. Then, if anyone else sneaked away alone from the crowd, she'd know she needed to probe further. Sidis acknowledged her signal and tottered off after Seren.

Egbert was about to do the same himself, but before Lyse could stop him, someone else did so first.

"Um, I was wondering if it might be all right if I took this little fellow for another walk," Goldilocks, already cuddling up to the emperor, asked Lyse. Unable to break free, he looked up at her with pleading eyes.

"By all means. He looks like he'd enjoy that. Would anyone else like to go on a stroll too? This dog is a bit stronger than he looks, so it would be nice if someone could accompany her, just in case," Lyse responded with a smile.

The younger of the two brothers in attendance agreed to go along, so the two of them set off with their doggy companion. It was a sweet sight, but Lyse could barely hide her annoyance. Egbert had grinned ear to ear the instant the young lady had suggested a walk. He was definitely imagining how much devilish fun it'd be to reveal his identity to these unsuspecting victims. In truth, only three people knew about his shape-shifting ability at present and he had no intention of telling anyone else. Nevertheless, for better or for worse—probably worse—he enjoyed playing the scene out in his head.

On a more positive note, Lyse had done her part to get a young couple together. She'd had ulterior motives when she asked if anyone wanted to accompany Goldilocks. Plus, an imperial taking up the offer meant more protection for the emperor, even if no one knew who was really behind the canine mask. There were imperial guards all over the place too. Things were looking good.

All right. It might be better if I observed from afar rather than up close.

Lyse smoothly slipped away from the party, then summoned a monster and rode it to a balcony atop Summer Hall.

“This is a nice view of the grounds.”

From the balcony, she was able to spot Seren and Sidis casually strolling through a grove of trees in the distance.

“They seem to be enjoying themselves.”

Seren was clearly fond of dogs. He’d looked genuinely happy when he was petting the emperor too.

“I hope Sidis finds a good reason for us to protect Seren.”

Even if the matchmaking didn’t go well for him, the empire could rescue him from his adoptive father if there was evidence that he was being mistreated. Lyse continued to follow him and Sidis with her eyes, but she was abruptly taken by the feeling that she was being watched. She reflexively took a step to the left, and...

Fwsh! An arrow missed her by a hair’s breadth, instead striking the balcony’s handrail and bouncing off.

“Hmph!”

Lyse whipped around and laid eyes on a figure around a corner down the hall—likely the culprit.

“Attack!” Lyse ordered the lupine monster as she ran after the suspicious figure herself.

The man in question was a palace guard. He fired off a magic spell that obliterated Lyse’s wolf monster. Without another word, she closed in and threw the guard off-balance. She swung her sword...

“Hraaagh!”

And when the guard tried to parry with his bow, Lyse knocked it out of his hands. She then swept his legs out from under him, knocking him to the floor. He drew a knife tucked on his hip, but she stepped forward and pinned his arm

to the ground.

“Secure him!” Lyse ordered. Another wolf-type monster popped out of her pocket, grew a few sizes larger, and seized the soldier.

Lyse retrieved a palm-sized whistle from her coat and blew it, summoning guards and knights from the floors above and below. The whistle was originally meant to alert others of incoming monsters, but they’d started using it for other intruders in the palace as well.

“Take him in. He may very well be under the power of suggestion,” Lyse instructed them.

This was the first time she’d been attacked in such a fashion on the palace grounds. For something so outrageous to happen, Lyse could only assume that the man was being controlled, similar to the knight who’d attacked her a few days prior.

“He’s under control?” The bewildered knights moved the monster aside to arrest the guard in question.

He was a brawny man who looked to be over two hundred years old—in his prime as an imperial. He twisted and wriggled on the ground, forcing the knights to tighten their hold on him.

“Woof!”

When they heard that, everybody immediately stopped what they were doing. They were profoundly weirded out.

“That’s odd...”

Even after turning her attacker over to the knights, Lyse had to take care of the procedural follow-through. That meant she couldn’t immediately follow after Sidis, so she was relieved to see that he and Egbert were both back by the time she returned to the venue.

“How’d it go?” she asked. Surely Seren must’ve revealed something on his walk.

“Things have gotten complicated...” Sidis muttered, his brow furrowed. He then proceeded to debrief Lyse and Egbert on what had happened.

Seren gladly took up Sidis's leash and brought him along on his walk.

Taking a casual stroll with another guy...

Though he'd been the one to propose it in order to get Seren away from Lyse, Sidis wasn't exactly thrilled with the situation. Rather, he found it weird and a little depressing to be a dog following someone else's lead. Even weirder still, he thought, the emperor seemed to enjoy this kind of thing.

If only it were Lyse...

If Lyse were the one holding his leash, he could've tugged this way or that and she would've obliged with a smile.

I wouldn't mind hearing her say, "Down, boy!"

He'd obey every command as long as it came from Lyse's lips. After all, he'd first fallen in love with her as the woman who was always there for him. Qatora had been like a mother figure to the young Sidis who'd recently lost his own.

Ick. Get that out of your head. You can't have her treating you like a child. You've got to be her courageous guard dog!

Sidis was lost in thought until he realized they were heading somewhere peculiar. Seren was staring into the column of light that pierced through the clouds and stretched into the skies—the Light of Origin.

"What beauty. It's...exactly as I'd imagined." Step by step, Seren sauntered toward the Light.

They were now in a grove facing a glade quite some distance from the garden. To their right was the open space where Lyse practiced magic. It had been cleared to draw monsters during attacks, both in order to keep them from damaging buildings and to allow enough room for a proper battle. The imperial villa was just a short ways away.

I can't let him get too close. The Light would be too much for him to bear.

Sidis dug his heels in and tugged on his leash in an attempt to halt Seren.

"What's wrong, boy? Don't wanna go any farther?" he asked.

Though Sidis had managed to stop him, Seren seemed dead set on reaching his destination. He turned toward the Light again and narrowed his eyes.

“They say touching it will kill you. Well, if that’s the case...” Seren trailed off.

What is he saying? Is he trying to get himself killed?!

As Sidis frowned, Seren let go of his leash and continued walking.

Seren!

“Wuf, woof!” Sidis barked for his attention. His recent practice with Egbert made for a very convincing imitation.

He then cut in front of Seren to block his path, at which Seren could only laugh through a pained smile.

“Are you trying to stop me?” he sighed before squatting down to hug Sidis.

Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!

The tender embrace of another man made Sidis want to flee the scene, and he would’ve done so if Seren hadn’t begun spilling his heart.

“Good boy. But death is inevitable, so better here and now, I say.”

He came all the way to the empire not to find a wife, but simply to die?

Sidis was astounded. He couldn’t fathom coming to the palace for an act of suicide. It was like Seren was drawn to the Light knowing full well that would be the end, almost as if he were a monster. He showed no sign whatsoever of distress. If anything, he seemed disinterested in anything going on around him.

Wait... Is that a sign? Not caring about anything in the world?

But as Sidis’s imagination ran wild...

“When are you going to stop wandering about, you damfool?! I told you to stick to the plan!” shouted a voice from far away.

Approaching was a slightly hunchbacked man who looked to be in his forties. He was dressed in an ankle-length coat over white, baggy clothes. His fashion suggested that he was from the Kingdom of Alstra—Seren’s homeland. Judging by his tone, Sidis wondered if he might be Seren’s adoptive father. There weren’t many people who would dare talk to the son of a prince like that.

When Seren heard the man's voice, he stood up wearing a forced smile.

"I've been walking this dog and carrying on like a dog lover to get close without raising suspicion. Those were your exact orders, father."

"Don't you address me as your father when nobody is around!" Caldo, younger brother to the Alstran king, scrunched up his face as he reprimanded Seren. "You know we planted agents here today, yet you've squandered everything. I expected better with you here."

"You mean..."

"The target slipped right through our fingers. And here I thought we could take care of things properly..."

Something about the prince's words seemed to ease Seren. His expression relaxed a little. On the contrary, however, Sidis was deeply concerned.

Plans? Planted agents? And an escaped target?

Who were they talking about? Seren had only approached women so far, and pretending to be a dog lover was part of the plan somehow. That narrowed the list down to two people: the blonde damsel at the matchmaking and...

It can't be! Lyse?!

The very thought made Sidis want to run to her side immediately, but he decided against it so as not to blow his cover.

Hold on. That's what dogs do—they bolt. Shouldn't be a problem, then!

As that idea dawned on him, Sidis recalled that the prince said that "the target" had escaped. So even if the intended target was his fiancée, that meant she was safe.

There's no way she'd be captured so easily. Lyse can handle herself. If anything, His Canine Majesty is in more danger. And even if the target is one of the foreign noblewomen, whoever it was managed to get away safely.

That being the case, Sidis decided to stick with Seren to see if he could learn anything else. Caldo, meanwhile, was flying into another fit of rage.

"Blasted cur!" he shouted, winding his leg up to punt the dog.

Sidis was confident he could sidestep such a feeble kick. But just as he was about to do so, Seren threw himself in the way to shield Sidis.

“No! Don’t!”

He couldn’t quite shield himself the same way and ended up taking the blow from Caldo in the arm.

“Whoa!” Sidis yelled unwittingly. Being grabbed by the person he was supposed to be monitoring was quite a shock, but not nearly as shocking as what happened next—for a painful shot of static electricity ran through them where hand met fur.

Caldo took advantage of their daze. He tried again and again to kick his son, who gradually backed up. Caldo’s third kick caught nothing but air, splaying the man out on the ground. Sidis could barely hold in his laughter upon witnessing such a humiliating tumble, but the most remarkable thing of all was Seren’s reaction.

Why doesn’t he stand up to this man?

Seren’s build wasn’t much different from Prince Caldo’s—he certainly wasn’t any weaker. He was physically capable of defending himself if he so wished, but the prince’s next words shed some light on the situation.

“Stay still, you bastard!” Caldo screamed. “Do as I say to atone for your wrongdoings! Defy me and you shall pay!”

“Very well...” said Seren. His face was expressionless, but true to form, his love of dogs shone through. “Hurry home,” he whispered to Sidis.

Sidis took some distance after leaving Seren’s arms, but he hesitated to go far. Seren had taken a kick for him. Even if it was simply because he had a soft spot for dogs, Sidis now knew that he wasn’t a bad person.

“Come along for your next job, Seren. And this time, forget the dog,” barked the prince as he got up from the ground.

Caldo maintained his high and mighty attitude, either because he’d managed to gloss over his fall or because Seren meekly obeyed him. Either way, he continued yelling at his son as he marched back toward the palace.

As he stood up too, Seren turned around and looked at Sidis. “Hurry back to her now. And if you can,” he wavered, “tell your monster friends to protect her too, okay?” And with that, he departed.

Sidis now found himself alone and in somewhat of a dilemma. Seren was apparently following orders under some sort of blackmail at the hands of his terrible adoptive father. But what exactly were they up to? Since Seren had asked Sidis to protect Lyse, did that mean they were targeting her after all? With no solid evidence of anything, Sidis was left only with uncertainties about the evils they were scheming.

Seren was no diplomat, so even if he were in the empire for some plot, the only foreign relations he had would be ones he’d made at the event. Moreover, was Lyse really his target? If that were the case, then why did he want to protect her, a noblewoman he’d just met? Sidis lacked crucial information he needed to answer such questions.

Chapter 3: The Many Mishaps of Matchmaking

Following the garden party, Lyse, Sidis, and Alcede convened with Egbert in his office. Their first topic of discussion was what had transpired on Sidis's walk. Thankfully, the emperor agreed that they should protect Seren. Even Sidis, who was previously so wary of him, was no longer opposed to this. The disagreement came later, when Lyse told everyone about the attempted attack on her.

"Now do you see why I was so adamant about keeping you safe?" Sidis grumbled, turning sour very quickly.

He'd arranged for extra security at the matchmaking event knowing that potential threats were afoot. Unfortunately, however, there weren't many vantage points that commanded clear views of the premises.

"The cultists must've figured out a way to control people without their black stones, so don't blame yourselves for being taken by surprise. I assume that the guard Lyse apprehended was under the power of suggestion as well?" Egbert asked.

Sidis nodded in dismay. "Indeed. He can still only bark at the moment, though. I tried using my confession magic on him, but, well, he's not able to speak..."

"That reminds me. What about the knight who assaulted Lyse the other day?"

"He's finally able to talk, but it's rather strained. It will be some time before we can extract any useful information from him," answered Alcede with a sigh. "I suspect that his mana was warped, but we haven't uncovered any stone pillars—not even in his home. They must be using some new method."

When the Donan cultists transformed Egbert and sickened his imperial retinue, they'd employed massive stone pillars that were larger than people. Yet now they were turning large groups of people into dogs, and nary a pillar was to be found anywhere.

“So why are we finding smaller stones near the transformation sites instead?” Lyse asked, but no one had an answer.

“Perhaps,” Sidis paused, “because there are only a few cultists out there?”

“That would only fly if they were incredibly powerful mages with mana along the lines of imperial nobility.” Alcede dejectedly muttered something about how much of a headache this was before staring up at the ceiling.

Only those with magic could use the black stones to control others, but the Donans had many such cultists among their ranks. They were second-or third-generation descendants of imperials who’d been cast out of the empire for their weak mana. And in the present day, these now cultists used what power they had to manipulate people, incite violence, and terrorize the empire. That said, their magic was still weak in the grand scheme of things.

“Yet the agent who manipulated Karl and impersonated Duke Lasuarl was as powerful as any imperial noble. He used the stones as well, but not even he could turn people into dogs,” Egbert refuted, shaking his head.

While the cultists were clearly still reliant on the black stones, they were now using ones that were a fraction of the size—and to much greater effect.

“The problem remains that they haven’t brought any here to the palace, yet our people are still falling prey to their grasp...” mused Alcede.

“Then it must be happening outside of palace grounds. But it’s not as if we could impose a lockdown since most of our knights commute here,” remarked Sidis.

“What’s unfortunate is that we haven’t been able to extract much information from our prisoners or key members within their cabal. If only we had something to go off of, we wouldn’t be at such a loss right now.” Alcede sighed again. “I suppose our only choice is to screen everyone before they enter the palace. It’s a bit of a stopgap measure, but what say you, Sidis?”

Sidis wasn’t particularly thrilled with the idea himself. “Not much else we can do. But Lyse, you should cease attending the matchmaking events. They’re after you. We don’t know if or how many enemies are about, and I can’t have you seeking them out either. Perhaps I can find some knights who live here in the

palace to guard you,” he pleaded as he clutched her wrist.

“Come on, Sidis. The cultists can’t work their magic on her. Moreover, she’s got an easy way to detect their stones. We ought to make use of her strengths,” rebuked Egbert.

“But Your Majesty...”

“You don’t need live-in knights to guard her, Sidis. We’ve got something even better. These guys don’t eat or sleep,” Alcede offered as he retrieved a monster from his own pocket.

The small tiger stretched out with a yawn atop his palm, possibly because it was suddenly brought out into the light. Alcede and Sidis both carried monsters on their persons to alert them when they came into close contact with Donan stones or anyone carrying them.

“In that case, shall I bring in more monsters?” Lyse asked, but Egbert seemed confused.

“And do what with them?”

“I was thinking that if we brought a few along with us, they could serve as guardians and hopefully thwart any future attacks. As demonstrated yesterday, they make for good cover,” she explained. They were as effective as being surrounded by a group of knights. “I wish to see the matchmaking event through. I understand that the Alstrans may be suspect, but I believe that if we can win over Seren, we’ll learn much about the Donan Faith that we can put to great use.”

“Very well. If we can bring him to our side willingly, Sidis can stealthily use his confession magic on him,” suggested Egbert.

Seren was innocent. And as of right now, the only thing they’d witnessed Caldo do was kick his son. He hadn’t yet said anything incriminating about the attempt on Lyse’s life. To put it plainly, the empire had no solid evidence against them.

“Since I want to continue helping out with the matchmaking anyway, I was hoping I could convince Seren to part ways with the Alstran Kingdom and live within our borders instead,” said Lyse.

Sidis nodded in approval. He sympathized with Seren now, especially after the young nobleman had taken a beating to protect him from his adoptive father.

“I would appreciate your help as well, Lord Sidis,” Lyse said. She took his hand off her shoulder and clutched it in both hands. “I know I’ll be fine as long as I have you and the monsters with me at all times. You’ll stay by my side, won’t you, my lord?”

She thought that Sidis was worried about her blind spots, but she’d be fine as long as he was there to cover for her. And just as she suspected, he readily agreed to this.

“Understood. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“I see how it is. I’ll be sure to have Lyse work her charms the next time Sidis acts up. We’ll all have an easier time that way,” Alcede commented under his breath after seeing how convincing she could be.

Afterward, Lyse and Sidis headed out to catch more monsters.

“Hmm. Not many here today...” Lyse remarked.

Per usual, she and Sidis had come to a patch of barren land northeast of the capital. Even after lingering for a time, however, they only found three monsters. Dissatisfied with this result, they traveled a little farther out in hopes of finding more. After catching what they needed, the couple began the flight back home. From the sky, Lyse could see that it wasn’t just her imagination—the monster population here was particularly sparse.

“There were so many of them on our last hunting trip...”

“I wonder what happened.”

She and Sidis were both curious as to the cause, but neither was any the wiser. They hoped it wasn’t related to everything else going on as they returned home.

The matchmaking continued the next day. Kirstin was hosting back-to-back events so that the participants could maximize their chances to get to know,

and maybe even fall for, one another. After all, love was the foundation of all relationships in the empire.

“Since this will be our third formal event, I was hoping to give our guests an excuse to get together outside of the venue,” she proclaimed with much excitement.

Kirstin had planned everything down to her outfit. Her dress today was a deeper, darker shade of green than what she’d worn before. This was a strategic choice, as she believed that “the young men and women should be the stars of the show, while the matchmaker remains in the shadows.” She’d had Lyse, however, dress sharper and brighter than ever in a red court lady’s coat over a white and pink dress. That morning, Kirstin had visited Lyse’s room, rummaged through her closet, and selected her outfit. Lyse was self-conscious about it though, as she believed an assistant like herself shouldn’t stand out so much.

Kirstin put her hands together and smiled. “I’m planning to have you show off your swordplay to everyone today,” she said. “Since they’ll be living in the empire, wouldn’t you say that they should learn to love the sword? I want them to know that it’s important to be able to defend themselves in an emergency until help arrives.”

“I feel the same way,” Lyse agreed.

It didn’t matter if their spouses swore to protect them. The unpredictable and unexpected could always happen—like it had to Lyse yesterday. Sidis wasn’t by her side when she was attacked. She at least wanted everyone to be able to keep themselves alive until rescue came for them.

“Plus, it doesn’t seem that the foreign men truly appreciate how skilled imperial women are in a fight. I need you to show them that we—even our ladies-in-waiting—can do more than gracefully stand and smile,” Kirstin implored her.

The greatest power of all in other nations was political, but that was not so in the empire. There were still those who wielded their connections like weapons, of course, but the greatest proof of one’s power here was their ability to slay monsters. Networks and underhanded schemes meant nothing in the face of a

monster attack. Though Lyse thought it was rather uncouth, that was simply the way things were in the empire. Even if the rest of the world wasn't partial to the idea, imperials were proud to fight monsters and defend their country together.

I couldn't unlearn that way of thinking myself, which is how I ended up so ostracized back in Olwen...

It was hard for people from other cultures to warm up to the imperial way of living.

"That's why I've arranged for the foreign men to spar with our ladies today," said Kirstin.

"With swords?" Lyse asked.

"Indeed. And you'll be participating."

"You would have *me* participate?"

Surely it was just to make up the numbers, Lyse thought, but Kirstin beat her to the punch.

"Though it's true that we're short a person, I need our guests to understand that women marrying into the imperial family must be able to best a man with a blade," Kirstin explained.

Lyse understood the implication. "By any chance, has one of the ladies been so bold as to harass a royal or noble?"

"Unfortunately," Kirstin sighed, looking into the distance. "I'm not sure if she meant anything by it. From what I heard, it may have been innocent enough. In any case, she ran around the palace asking everybody if they were a part of the imperial family and then getting much too familiar with them. Even my son Karl was unfortunate enough to encounter her."

Kirstin had likely gotten complaints from others, but the matter also concerned her personally. As Karl was a royal with little mana, he wouldn't be allowed to risk his children being born with even less. Still, he'd be allowed to take a foreign woman for his first wife if he were absolutely fervent about her, as he would inevitably outlive her anyway. Nevertheless, Kirstin didn't want her son to walk such a difficult path.

“Neighboring royal families have also been invited to spectate today, so make sure to give it your all, okay?” Kirstin’s request was met with an awkward smile from Lyse.

The day’s event was naturally set in the garden, though the area seemed more like a training ground as it was far away from any pots or planters. The foreign participants on the scene appeared quite apprehensive—a far cry from the previous day’s event—while the imperial men and women were wise to what was in store. Judging by the wide-open space, even His Majesty’s musclebrain had likely already realized that sword training was on the schedule for the day. Meanwhile, the relatives of the foreign guests gathered at tables a safe distance away.

They’re going to witness imperial women’s skill with the blade, and they’ll definitely be talking about it long after they return home. With any luck, sword fighting might catch on abroad too.

If foreign women truly wished to woo imperial men, they would have to adapt to the imperial lifestyle like other women in the empire. That would mean being less shy about taking up the sword. And if all went well, Lyse hoped that other imperials reincarnated into other nations would have an easier time there.

“All right, everyone, we’re going to do a little something different today! Ladies, would you please hand them out?” asked Kirstin.

At her command, court ladies began distributing swords to everyone. The men thought little of it, but the foreign noblewomen seemed to grow even more agitated.

“This one should fit you well.” A court lady picked out a thin, light blade for a petite young woman, but she was too terrified to even hold it in her hands.

Kirstin, as cunning as ever, said to her, “If you wish to live in the empire, then you shall master the sword—especially if you’re nobility.”

“But I couldn’t possibly fight monsters...”

“No one is forcing you to fight monsters. But if you are ever in immediate danger, you ought to be able to defend yourself until help arrives,” she explained.

The young woman turned even paler. It was only natural for her to be frightened after hearing Kirstin make life in the empire out to be so dangerous. She was playing it up on purpose, however—if this young woman was going to give up on marriage, Kirstin would rather she do it now than later. The young woman glanced over to her relatives. They, too, must've heard what Kirstin said, but they kept quiet. This was her decision now.

Lyse heard chatter from among the other ladies. “What are they thinking? I don't know what I'm going to do...” they muttered.

Kirstin had expected such reluctance. She had no intention of forcing them to join first, so instead, she turned to the men. “Shall we begin with the gentlemen? Let's get you all into pairs to gauge everyone's skill level first,” she instructed.

At this, Lyse and the imperial bachelorettes stepped forward. The men were shocked.

“Erm, are we going to be fighting *the ladies*?”

“But of course. Not only are we well trained in sword fighting, we ladies-in-waiting are also expected to do battle against monsters,” one of the court ladies who looked particularly slender and petite casually replied.

But that was no more than an illusion. Beneath their uniforms, both the imperial court ladies and female knights alike were toned, if not outright muscular. The men were about to get a taste of that fighting them, but they'd only get to see for themselves after getting married.

“Fret not, everyone. If I were to marry a foreign man, I would be the one protecting him from monsters. Stand back and observe,” boasted a female knight—one of the matchmaking participants—which stunned the foreign ladies into silence.

Lyse approached one of the foreign men, yet he seemed terrified to have her as his sparring partner. “P-Pardon, Miss Lyse, but...”

Kirstin approached the two of them and put her hand on Lyse's shoulder. “Lyse here can hold her own against our male knights. If you wish to marry into the imperial family, you should become strong like her. Couples protect each

other here in the empire,” she said, giving Lyse her seal of approval.

But this hardly seemed to convince the man.

“To kick things off, how about a tournament against me?” Lyse suggested.

The foreign men were hesitant to agree, but the imperial men lined right up. Lyse proceeded to take a couple of easy victories. She disarmed one opponent with a single strike and toppled another to the ground. Her last opponent was tenacious, but he ultimately lost the duel when he found Lyse’s sword pressed against his neck.

The foreign men were naturally left dumbfounded by the demonstration. The foreign ladies could hardly believe their eyes either. Everyone sitting at a distance had their mouths agape too. Yet none of them could deny what they’d seen. Lyse’s opponents weren’t pulling their punches either. The loud clanging of steel on steel made it plain to all how hard they were swinging at each other. But above all else, everybody could see it in the imperial men’s faces—they’d given the fight their all and were shocked to be beaten. Following their defeats, the foreign men tried their hands at a few duels only to be defeated and disheartened in a similar fashion.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you from monsters until you master the sword too,” whispered one of the imperial noblewomen to her opponent.

“I’d have nothing to fear with someone as strong as you at my side,” he replied. He and his fellow men knew they’d be in safe hands if they were to marry women from the empire.

To Lyse, it looked like Kirstin’s plan to warm the guests up to the sword was working.

Yet are we really convincing them, or are we just seducing them into this?

Whatever the case, this should increase their safety in the empire. On the other hand, the foreign noblewomen didn’t want to duel and they couldn’t be forced to either. However, they were receptive to the imperial men teaching them how to hold a sword. Not only did it make for a good excuse to be physically intimate, it also gave pairs time alone to chat and see if there was a spark between them.

“If you have the time tomorrow, I’d love to show you a few more things,” many of the imperial men offered, and many of their partners agreed.

Lyse smiled to herself. If people were already meeting up privately, then they’d surely have full-fledged couples on their hands in no time. But there was an odd one out in the group. Seren wouldn’t even spar, let alone duel Lyse. Though he wanted to watch the event, doggy Sidis snuggled up to him and pulled him away from the crowd.

Did he catch a cold or something? Lyse wondered.

Seren didn’t look like he had a fever. If anything, he appeared pale like he was a bit anemic. Lyse wanted to go speak to him, but Kirstin had her on dueling duty and Sidis was currently in dog form. Lyse fretted that no one could really check up on him under the circumstances, so she was relieved when Kirstin concluded the training exercise and began collecting everyone’s swords.

“Why doesn’t everyone head to the courtyard for a stroll with their training partner next?” Kirstin urged.

Now relieved of her post, Lyse went to find Seren herself. “How are you today? How about a stroll around the courtyard if you’re feeling a little listless?” she asked.

“What a delight to have you invite me on a stroll. Have you finally fallen for me?”

Even though he was feeling poorly, Seren’s tongue was as silver as ever. Lyse actually found it rather charming.

“No, I just couldn’t help noticing that you’re looking unwell,” Lyse said, flatly rejecting him again. Given his nonchalant tone, she could take his words for little more than flattery.

Sitting beside Seren was Sidis, who looked like he was about to burst into tears. He stared pleadingly at Lyse, but she couldn’t understand what he wanted. She decided to ask him about it later. Sidis whined. With all his practice lately, his dog noises were getting to be quite convincing. Seren assumed he was begging to go for a walk.

“All right, then. Looks like the little guy here wants to get up and move too.”

Seren rose to his feet, and Sidis stared up at him now with mixed feelings. “Don’t worry about me, boy. But thank you.” Seren then patted Sidis on the head, but he still looked nervous.

The other guests had already begun making their way to the courtyard, and Seren ambled off after them in pursuit. Lyse noticed something else peculiar about him as he walked off.

The Light of Origin...

From time to time, Seren would glance up at the pillar yearningly. He’d said that he wanted to touch it, knowing that would mean his death, even though he’d never been to the empire before. Lyse had to wonder why.

Lyse continued to wonder about Seren. Alcede thought that he might have been lying, that he might actually have ulterior motives for getting close to the Light. Indeed, perhaps he’d just been spinning a story to a dog in case anyone overheard him. That seemed a sensible theory to Lyse and Egbert, who hadn’t been there to witness his confession personally, but Sidis didn’t buy it.

“No, it wasn’t like that. I’m almost certain that he was telling the truth,” he insisted. He believed in Seren. “I understand where he’s coming from. When I lost Qatora, I felt the same way.”

Both Egbert and Lyse were at a loss for words at this confession. Qatora was Lyse in her past life. She’d perished after being swallowed up by the Light, leaving Sidis to anguish over her death for over a century.

“She wouldn’t have died if not for me. If only I hadn’t encountered that kidnapper...”

His guilt had consumed and tormented him. That was why he now felt like he understood Seren, for he seemed to be going through something similar.

“How unusual for you to be so empathetic, Sidis. Especially after you were so up in arms yesterday upon hearing how he tried to woo Miss Lyse. Did something happen between the two of you?” Alcede asked.

“Even though I was a dog, he threw himself in harm’s way to protect me. He can’t be a bad person...” Sidis paused, looking troubled. “And I can’t help relating to what he’s going through.”

“Either way, Sidis, try not to get too close to him. Remember that he’s looking to end his life. I don’t want you getting too attached and tangled up in that. I can’t lose my brother,” Egbert said.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I’ve been lucky enough to reconnect with the person I cherish most, and I have no intention of squandering our future together,” Sidis replied, chuckling awkwardly. Hearing this, Lyse flushed bright red.

“All right, all right. I’ve heard enough of you gushing about your precious Miss Lyse. Keep it to yourselves, okay?” quipped Egbert.

This time, it was Sidis’s turn to blush. “Your Majesty, when you find someone for yourself, I’m sure you won’t mind so much.”

“Please, Lord Sidis, if you could keep it strictly between us...” Lyse blurted out unwittingly.

Sidis showered her with affection without a care for their surroundings. It wasn’t good for Lyse’s heart when he shamelessly dropped bombshells like that. The mere thought of anyone else overhearing him say such things mortified and flustered her enough to make her head spin. But Sidis didn’t care.

“I shall tell the whole world of my love for Lyse,” he proclaimed.

“What’s gotten into you?” the emperor wondered aloud.

“Lyse has caught the attention of several young men lately. I’ve decided to make my feelings known until no eyes remain on her,” Sidis said flatly.

“So you’re jealous? Or rather, possessive?” Alcede wondered too.

Lyse wasn’t interested in an in-depth analysis of Sidis’s inner workings. His declarations of love for her made her want to dig a hole and hide in it. She was currently in a conference with the emperor, however, so running away would be most rude.

“Too much competition, eh? I suppose we really ought to wrap up this matter sooner rather than later,” Egbert said with a sigh.

Oh, he sighed exactly like that when he was a doggy too! Lyse thought, gleefully retreating into her own head.

Lyse didn't foresee any danger in Seren getting close to the Light of Origin. The Light could withstand both large monsters and Donan stones being hurled into it, and it had always stood strong.

Its effects reach all across the empire and bless her with fertile soil. Nothing could sabotage something so immensely and magically powerful.

If anything, Lyse was curious to see what would happen if she brought Seren close to it. That should definitely get him talking, she thought. And if anything were to happen, she and Sidis would be there to step in.

Not to mention, Seren seems rather frail...

Perhaps it was because he'd been housebound his entire childhood or perhaps it was because he'd never had the chance to be athletic even as an adult, but Seren was scrawny for a man. It wasn't fair to compare him to well-trained imperial officials who knew their way around a blade, but Seren seemed even weaker than an Olwenian civil servant to Lyse.

"Why don't we head to the garden over that way, Sir Seren? There's a nice place for you to sit and rest there," she suggested, deliberately pointing toward the Light and the imperial villa.

"Woof?!" Sidis barked. He looked up at Lyse in surprise, but she responded with a gentle smile as if to say that everything was all right. Sidis didn't look convinced, yet he could tell that Lyse had something planned, so he didn't press the matter any further.

Meanwhile, Seren smiled when he saw where Lyse was pointing. "Sure, that sounds wonderful," he said.

Lyse had the feeling that he really wanted to see the Light, so she guided them toward the garden. A few chairs were scattered around a small pond there, and Seren quietly took a seat in one of them. He longingly, unwaveringly gazed upon the Light. No longer did he look like a hopeless womanizer.

"I didn't realize you admired the Light of Origin so much," Lyse commented from where she sat beside him.

“Yeah. No matter where you’re from, everyone can see the Light faintly glow in the distant night sky. It’s no wonder people exalt it as a vestige of the gods.”

“Does that include you, Sir Seren?”

“Do I exalt it? No...” He hesitated, at a loss for the right words.

Lyse held her breath in anticipation of what he’d say next. Yet minutes passed and he remained silent. Lyse was contemplating taking him back to regroup with the other matchmaking participants when he finally spoke up again.

“I have this vague memory from a long time ago of a warm, comforting light. I was a wee one in a well-lit room, basking in my parents’ love. It’s a fuzzy feeling in my head that just won’t go away...” He paused, feeling bashful. “It pops up every time I see the Light of Origin, so I thought that seeing it up close might help make that fuzzy memory feel more concrete. I thought maybe I could convince myself that I used to be happy.”

“Convince yourself...that you used to be happy?” Lyse questioned.

“Ah, how totally uncool of me. Forget I said that. Something so brilliant... You just have to go see it for yourself, you know what I mean? Much like how dazzling you are, it simply makes me want to get closer to you,” he said, reaching for Lyse’s right hand.

This displeased her, so she tried to shake him. “Again with your japes, Sir Seren. Might I remind you that I am betrothed?” she asked in an attempt to stymie his flirting.

“I can’t even hold your hand? How prim and proper of you. It’s delightful. Even though you always come to chat me up, the moment I turn things back onto you, you act all shy and blush bright red. You’re adorable, you know?”

Lyse was astounded by the realization of her own behavior. “Aren’t you the one always trying to woo the other ladies? Why don’t you turn your attentions on one of them? My charms are finite, so I’m sure you’d grow bored of me quite quickly anyway.”

Even if I could participate in the matchmaking, I doubt I’d be able to find a kindred spirit...

An ideal day indoors for Lyse would be full of push-ups—likely a turnoff for Seren. His slender arms indicated zero interest in strength training. He didn't seem to be the active type in the first place. Matchmaking certainly wouldn't be easy for someone like that.

Hmm?

A dark purple bruise somewhat hidden beneath the cuff of Seren's sleeve caught Lyse's eye, and she impulsively grabbed his wrist.

"Whuhn?!" Sidis let out a noise rather uncharacteristic of a dog at this development.

"Oh, how bold of you, Miss Lyse..." Seren's eyes shot wide open.

Lyse proceeded to roll up his sleeve and inspect the bruise. Realizing what she was doing, Seren smiled and tried to brush it off.

"Oh, that? That's just a birth— Ouch!" The pain, however, betrayed him.

"Birthmarks don't hurt from the slightest touch, as I'm sure you know. What happened to you?" Lyse decided to press the attack. "Yesterday, I saw— Er, I heard someone say that they saw you being attacked from afar and that you protected my dog. Is that how you were injured so?"

Seren was embarrassed by her frankness. "Oh, bother. There go my chances of you ever finding me charming."

"You saved my dog, Sir Seren. What isn't charming about that?" she said, shaking her head.

He blinked blankly. "You really do love dogs too, huh? People have always told me that I shouldn't risk my neck just to protect a dog, or that I should put myself first."

Though she found such notions absurd, Lyse understood where they came from. From the aristocracy to the common folk, there were people who had no qualms about treating dogs as lesser beings. But for Seren, who loved them, protecting them was only natural.

So he is a good person...

That confirmed it for Lyse. Someone so kind to animals almost certainly

couldn't be wicked in the heart.

"Pet dogs who learn to obey their masters don't fight back, no matter how savagely they're beaten. They also can't speak up for themselves when there's some kind of misunderstanding. I hardly see the shame in standing up for them yourself," Lyse chastised Seren.

Lyse had learned that from an Olwenian baron as a child. He was an experienced huntsman who was kind enough to raise a baby boar he'd taken in right alongside his own hounds. He was quick to get attached to animals, even though his way of life involved killing them. He was a bear hunter by trade, and Lyse had many fond memories of going hunting together with him.

Seren stared at Lyse blankly for a while before breaking into laughter. "Yeah, you're right. It's not like dogs can defend themselves, so that's up to us. We'd be hailed as heroes if only they were human."

"How true. It's outrageous that people treat them with violence in the first place." People who were cruel to dogs were liable to treat people they regarded as inferior the same way. "Now, are you all right? I don't know who could be so cruel as to attack my dog like that...but they're doing the same thing to you, aren't they?"

"I..." Seren stammered, looking emotionless.

Who would want to admit to being humiliated and beaten? Being treated as subhuman was a guilty secret to most people. Lyse understood that, which was why she wanted Seren to come clean.

This could be connected to the attack on Lyse, so she wanted him to join their side. But she needed him to open up before the empire could help him in turn. Razanate wielded great power over its vassal nations and could easily welcome Seren within its own borders. It didn't matter that Seren was a prince's adopted son—only that he was willing to make the change. That was why Lyse had to press him, even if it hurt to do so.

"His Majesty's benevolence knows no bounds. His strength is such that he can show mercy to those weaker than himself. I'm certain he can help you."

The arrangement should be mutually beneficial. The empire needed what

information Seren possessed about the Donan terrorists, which would go a long way to convincing the imperial nobility that he was worth protecting.

“I will do all I can to support you, and I’m sure my fiancé will do the same. I ask you to please put your faith in us,” Lyse implored him.

She’d been as forward as she could, and the ball was now in Seren’s court. Bombarding him with further questions would only befuddle him, so she quietly awaited his answer.

He stared at his lap before casting a sidelong glance at Sidis. Finally and hesitantly, he dared to speak. “I’m a sinner.”

“How?” Lyse asked for clarification.

“I’ve done terrible things. It’s atonement, I suppose. I deserve all of the abuse hurled at me—verbal and physical. It’s got nothing to do with this little guy,” he confessed, reaching over for Sidis. “I truly do love dogs. I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself for getting a real dog or even a canine monster involved in this, so I’ll keep you out of it from now on. As for you, Miss Lyse, thank you for caring.”

Seren put his hand on Sidis and began slowly stroking him along his back. As he did, Sidis whipped around to face him.

“Wha...oof...” For a moment, Sidis forgot that he was in dog form and opened his mouth to speak, but he quickly snapped it shut. Seren found this odd, but as he cocked his head suspiciously...

The alarm bells began ringing. Lyse stood up and looked at Sidis, who braced to break into a full sprint. She then turned to Seren. “Another monster attack, Sir Seren. It sounds like they’re still at the ramparts, but there’s no telling when they’ll reach the palace. We should retreat to safety.”

“Okay, lead the way.”

Seren calmly obeyed, and the three of them rushed back inside the palace. Sidis made a beeline for his private chambers to return to human form, as Lyse, armed with her sword in hand, waited for him by the door before heading back outside.

“Oh, Sidis and Miss Lyse!” Alcede called out to them as he came running. “I’m glad I found you two! Hurry at once to the city walls!”

“For what?” Sidis questioned. He and Lyse were both puzzled as to why he’d stop them from preparing to intercept the monsters.

“The monsters have just stopped there. More precisely, the first line of defense has relayed to us that they’re behaving strangely and won’t leave the wall,” Alcede explained before dropping into a hushed voice. “The truth is that monsters began gathering last night. But there weren’t many of them, so the soldiers have had it under control until now.”

“So the monsters have just kept coming?” Sidis asked.

Alcede nodded in response.

“That’s right. I heard the alarm ring last night,” Lyse noted. She’d readied herself for battle, but never heard the palace alarm go off or anyone whistle after the fact. The monsters must have slowly been building up since.

“That’s why I want you to check out the scene. I can’t spare any more people here, lest someone target the palace in a compromised state of confusion,” Alcede said.

“Good thinking. We may have enemies inside the palace as well,” agreed Sidis. “Would you mind coming with me, Lyse?”

“Let’s go.”

Time was of the essence, so Sidis and Lyse mounted a raptor and made for the city wall. Flying there would only take a matter of minutes, as well as offer them an aerial view of the situation.

“He was right. The monsters are...”

It was a rare sight. The monsters were swarming around one particular stretch of wall. Their goal was always the Light of Origin, so they hardly ever loitered elsewhere—unless they were stopping to make a meal out of humans along their way. Yet here they were, assembling nowhere near the city gates. Hopefully the civilians in the surrounding area had already been evacuated.

“What in the world is happening?” Lyse unconsciously asked aloud.

“No idea. But *something* is, and it’s up to us to find out what before dusk,” Sidis replied.

Sidis guided their raptor down toward the wall in front of the monsters, but the knights on the ground signaled him to the right. He followed their instructions, but the wall looked like it was standing firm to him. He wasn’t sure why they wanted him to land elsewhere. He brought the bird down in a clearing farther away from the wall, and the couple alighted.

“Oh, Prince Sidis! We’re glad to have you here!” called a knight as he ran over to them.

Sidis was more concerned about what had just happened. “Why was I stopped from landing on the wall?”

“We’ve been having problems there, Your Highness. Things have calmed down a bit at the moment, but a few of the soldiers standing near it have transformed into dogs.”

“Even here?” Sidis said, scowling.

People turning into dogs again was bad enough as it was, but the fact that it had now happened twice within the capital alarmed Lyse. It was far too frequent for comfort. The Donan threat was growing. This had to be their doing as well.

“How are your people handling the monsters?” Sidis inquired of the knight.

“I’ve assigned, erm, people who were fine with becoming dogs,” he responded coolly.

“That’s one way of doing things...” Lyse awkwardly chuckled to herself.

It was a commendable decision to select those who were willing to become dogs in order to defend the empire. The alternative was to turn the reluctant into tragic heroes, which wouldn’t be good for morale. Moreover, sending in those who weren’t opposed to the canine transformation meant it wouldn’t take them by surprise or shake their nerves in battle. Being prepared was one thing, but Lyse couldn’t help thinking they should’ve given more thought to the aftermath.

“Believe it or not, quite a few of them consider the transformation to be an extended leave of sorts,” explained the knight.

“And they know that they’ll retain their human memories?” asked Sidis.

“They seemed less concerned about the transformation than you do, so I didn’t mention that part.” The knight slyly snickered. “But hey, life is long. What’s the harm in trying out something new every now and then?”

What a brilliant knight, Sidis thought. He nodded in approval of appealing to the soldiers’ adventurousness, then approached the scene for himself.

“First, I’ll wipe out all the monsters here with magic. Then, Lyse, I want you to secure the area with your monsters and keep the others at bay.”

“Understood.”

The couple climbed the wall directly above where the monsters were congregated. After a quick count of their numbers, Sidis conjured flames and reduced them all to clouds of black smoke in a single strike. A sparkle of green light then caught his eye.

“Hmm?”

Right by the city wall where the monsters had just been incinerated, something was glimmering.

Lyse went to release her monsters, but they were fidgeting restlessly. Their wriggling tickled her hand in her pocket. “Um, Lord Sidis? My monsters are behaving oddly as well.”

“Something must be affecting them. Can you keep them under control?”

“I believe so, yes, but I doubt they can guard us in this state.” Lyse was disappointed to learn that she was ultimately useless at a crucial time like this.

“Worry not. We knew that something was attracting the monsters here, yet not even I foresaw your monsters being drawn to it too,” Sidis said in a comforting tone.

He then enlisted the help of several knights on standby and used his magic to lower their group safely down to the ground on the other side of the wall.

“What is this...?” he muttered.

The green light stood about the height of a person and was surrounded by a handful of black rocks. It slowly lost its brilliance before finally extinguishing.

“Oh. The monsters have calmed down somewhat,” Lyse remarked. They weren’t completely pacified, however. Their fur was standing on end like it had been ruffled on a dry winter’s night, and they continued to stir in her pocket. “They’re still wriggling around. Maybe it’s because of the stones?”

Sidis approached where the light had been, but with the first step he took, something shattered beneath his foot. Upon closer inspection, the ground was covered in what looked like a thin coat of dried black mud, but it was much harder.

“Is this...stone?” Lyse wondered.

“Seems like it. But what exactly...” Sidis paused, racking his brain before a eureka moment struck him. “I just had an idea.”

“Do you know what it is?”

“I do. I’ve seen something similar before, but I’ll have to confirm it first before reporting to His Majesty,” he replied.

Sidis then set about gathering the rocks. He grabbed a nearby shovel, hastily piled the shards of rock together, and bagged them up. Afterward, he used his magic to ascend the wall again with everyone.

“How are the soldiers who’ve been turned into dogs?” he asked.

The knight in command shook his head. “It doesn’t look as though they’ll be recovering soon, Your Highness.”

“Pity. I was hoping they would, given how quickly the other victims did.”

“We need to do something to prevent more cases in the future,” muttered Lyse without thinking.

She believed they needed to act quickly, before the whole city was overrun with dogs. If it came to that, casually asking soldiers if they wanted to try the doggy life would be out of the question. The city’s defenses would be left in shambles, and with the traders and townsfolk transformed too, so would the economy.

“In any case, this ought to stop the monsters from gathering here. Let’s return to the palace and report to His Majesty, Lyse.”

When the couple arrived at the emperor’s private office, they found Egbert and Alcede already waiting for them.

“What’s the story?” Alcede asked, getting straight to the point.

“The short version is that Donan stones were attracting the monsters,” said Sidis.

“And the long version?”

Sidis recounted the situation as they’d found it, including monsters gathered at the wall and soldiers turned into dogs. He then moved to the meat of the story—how he’d wiped out the horde and discovered a small pillar of green light surrounded by Donan stones.

“The green light seemed to affect Lyse’s monsters too,” he reported.

“It’s true. They were so agitated that I was worried they might jump right out of my pocket,” Lyse added.

Alcede turned to her and said, “The monsters were agitated? That almost sounds like...”

The Light of Origin! Lyse’s eyes opened wide in astonishment. *He’s right. They were acting like they do when they get near the Light.*

Lyse’s tamed monsters normally heeded the Light inside of her and behaved themselves within the imperial palace. But there was one thing that made them resist her control—and that was the Light of Origin itself. It enthralled the monsters, drawing them in and making them restless when they couldn’t reach it. It was like how they’d behaved around the green light, albeit much more intense.

“Is the green light something similar to the Light of Origin?” Lyse asked.

Sidis furrowed his brow. “I’d say so, judging by how the monsters behaved. But that doesn’t explain the transformations.”

“It could be something entirely different,” Alcede offered up.

“No, it’s similar,” Sidis argued. “Perhaps...it’s like a miniaturized version.”

“Do you have any evidence to support that?” the emperor asked.

Alcede raised his index finger. “The Light of Origin grants people mana. The mysterious green light turns people into dogs—that is to say, it warps mana. But mana is necessary in order to warp mana.”

Egbert stood up from his seat. “I see. You’re suggesting the green light emits mana.”

“It may not necessarily grant anyone mana, but it most certainly radiates it,” Alcede concluded.

“Interesting. That may explain this then,” Sidis added.

“‘This’ being?” Alcede asked.

At that, Sidis brought out samples of the rock he’d collected at the scene.

“Black rock, but thin sheets of it, almost like it’s been chipped... I believe this to be the Donans’ black stone as well,” surmised Alcede.

“The material and the texture match, to be sure. I found this plastered across the ground around the green light,” Sidis explained.

“Plastered to the ground? Like spent catalyst after using stones for magic?” asked the emperor.

“Its color is different, but I’ve seen something like this before. I see it frequently in fact—at least once a week. Does it not remind you of the crystals beneath the Light of Origin, Your Majesty?”

“Oh,” Lyse unwittingly gasped as she connected the dots.

Sidis was right. White crystal spread across the lawn surrounding the Light. If someone were to pick up a handful of it, it would be strikingly similar to this strange black rock.

“Could it be that the Donan cultists have managed to make a simulacrum of the Light of Origin?”

“They might just have...” mused Alcede.

Everyone fell into silence.

If that were true, then the Donan Faith posed far more of a threat than previously imagined. It wouldn't be so bad if the green lights popped up in foreign lands. It might dampen the empire's authority and change its relationships with its surrounding nations at worst. But the green light didn't nourish the soil—rather, it actively harmed people. It could prove a terrible weapon against Razanate.

Egbert sighed. “There is no doubt that the green light is connected to the Donan Faith. We now know that their black stones are mined from the bottom of a ravine far away from here.” The agent they'd captured recently had revealed not only information about the Donan leaders, but also critical intel like where they sourced their stones. “And right now, the Alstran Kingdom is at the top of our suspect list,” Egbert concluded upon sitting back down again.

Sidis agreed.

“To return to yesterday's events, the timing was just too perfect. They *have* to be behind the attempt on Lyse's life. We just don't have evidence or testimony to prove it, sadly,” Alcede sighed.

They had since looked into the knight who'd attacked Lyse, but there were no eyewitnesses who knew how he fell under the power of suggestion. The knight himself couldn't stand interrogation yet either, as he still couldn't speak.

“The stones must have been involved somehow,” said Sidis.

“Yet we still don't have the evidence to apprehend the Alstrans. All we have to go on at the moment are hunches,” said Alcede with a sour look before pulling out a paper bag of sweet treats. The sound of cookies crunching soon filled the office.

“If we could separate Seren from the Alstrans and get him to testify...” muttered the emperor.

“That should be easy. Seren seems like the type to succumb to guilt and start blabbering. But Your Majesty, how shall we approach this? Should we pin something on Seren, capture him, and force the information out of him?” Alcede suggested after finishing his cookies.

Sidis frowned at this idea. “Surely that's too coercive, Alcede. Remember, the

man is being abused by the prince. If anything, the empire should step in to protect him.”

“But he hasn’t confessed anything yet, has he? We need someone to pry it out of him.”

“He’d be too defensive if I approached him myself, but I doubt I could cast my confession magic on him in dog form. I *could* use regular magic though...” Sidis trailed off.

“I see. Your confession magic does stem from the Light, after all,” Alcede reasoned. Using it would therefore override Sidis’s transformation magic.

“But Sidis, watch this. I’ve discovered something quite interesting,” Alcede continued, pointing his index finger upward and moving it in a circular pattern before Lyse’s eyes. “You’re feeling sleepier and sleepier.”

“Your Grace...”

There’s no way that’ll work, thought Lyse...before suddenly losing her train of thought. A wave of drowsiness washed over her. At first, she’d looked at Alcede’s finger out of curiosity, but now she couldn’t tear her eyes away from it.



“Huh? What’s happening...?” she muttered.

“That’s enough! Knock it off,” Sidis snapped.

“What I’m doing is slowly releasing mana. See, the power of the Donan stones has really piqued my interest. I’ve developed a few theories,” Alcede said with a smug grin.

“Enlighten me.”

“I suspect that everybody—imperial or otherwise—has at least some innate mana inside them.”

“Oh?”

“Truly?”

Lyse and Sidis both responded in wonderment before sharing a look. Lyse wasn’t sure if they’d come to the same conclusion, but what Alcede had said had gotten her thinking. The first settlers of the empire *must* have had mana, or else they couldn’t have created the Light of Origin. That meant humankind inherently possessed mana, and naturally, the mana of imperials had been heightened by the Light.

Wouldn’t that suggest monsters attack people because they sense mana within them?

Perhaps monsters were attracted to the Light because they felt its mana even from great distances. That would also explain the trail of destruction they left in their wake, because they preyed upon the mana they sensed in people as they roamed.

This theory might be helpful to Lord Karl in his studies to amplify people’s magical abilities.

“Now, this little trick should work even for people other than myself and Sidis, so I propose we try it out on our visitors,” put forward Alcede.

“Are you seriously suggesting that we make them confess by going, ‘You’re feeling guiltier and guiltier’?” Lyse asked, puzzled.

“What? No, that’s ridiculous. You’d arouse everyone’s suspicion that way,”

Alcede said blankly.

“I suppose...” Given Alcede’s segue, Lyse had thought that he meant to follow his methods exactly.

“But with this, we can do more than get the truth out of Seren. We should be able to get our other guests to confess whatever they’re hiding as well,” said Alcede.

“Until we get something out of them, however, be absolutely vigilant around Seren,” warned Sidis as he fell into deep thought.

“It’d be great if he actually found a match and fell in love. Otherwise, we’ll have to find someone to play the part,” said Alcede.

“It’s a shame that no one is giving him the time of day. I suppose everyone at the matchmaking event is trying to find love for themselves, but at this rate, Seren is going to get left in the dust.”

If Seren remained the odd man out, the matchmaking event would be a complete bust for him. To complicate matters further, they needed someone who had Seren’s ear in order for this plan to succeed. Things would be much simpler if they had an agent participating in the event to get close to him.

“I guess the person he’s most interested in right now is you, Lyse,” Sidis admitted sulkily.

“Maybe it’s all an act so I lower my guard around him. Maybe he’s waiting to attack again. I don’t think he’s truly interested in me,” Lyse said, trying to laugh it off.

Sidis found no comfort in this. “I was somewhat joking when I said that, but how are you so sure? There’s a nonzero chance that Seren is serious about you.”

“I wouldn’t have known any better in the past, but I’m an engaged woman now. Compared to my loving fiancé, I can tell that Seren has no real feelings for me.”

That shut Sidis up. He covered his mouth and bashfully turned away.

“There you go averting your eyes. You always did that as a child when you

were embarrassed,” teased Lyse as Sidis bashfully stared at the ground.

“Anyway, I’ll see to it that the foreign dignitaries and the Alstrans are monitored closely. Your Majesty and Miss Lyse, do try your best not to arouse suspicion while extracting Seren’s testimony,” instructed Alcede, bringing their meeting to a close.

Chapter 4: Sniffing Out the Suspicious

Daylight found its way through the gap between the curtains and scattered across Sidis's face. The dazzling sunshine opened his eyes to a close-up of Lyse's soft brown bangs draped over her pale brow, just above the long lashes of her closed eyes. He sweetly smiled at the sight of her; she looked even more innocent in her sleep. Qatora must've thought the same of him back then. He lifted a lock of hair hanging over her cheek, but this roused her. She opened her blue eyes, which reflected Sidis's face as she blinked. She blushed a bright pink, and her mouth opened and closed with nary a word.

"Again, Lord Sidis?!" she protested in a hushed tone. If she shouted, her voice would reverberate through the halls and attract attention.

Sidis knew why she was angry—he'd fallen asleep beside her on her bed yet again. Lyse allowed him to stay with her until she fell asleep, but only in cat form. She demanded Sidis go back to his own room afterward, yet there he was.

"I said you could stay only until—" Lyse cut her scolding short when she sat up in bed and the blanket shifted...revealing Sidis's upper body. Her eyes glazed over as she called out his name.

"I anticipated that you'd be angry if you saw me in the nude," he said.

"Since when did you store clothes of your own in my room?" she asked, eyeing the nightclothes he was wearing.

"I had help from Atoli."

"You've enlisted a double agent!"

Lyse was about to lose her cool, but Sidis arose from her bed before she could. Recently, he'd been transforming into a cat so he could spend the night by her side. But when he awoke, he'd be back in human form wearing whatever he had been while feline. He knew that Lyse would be cross if he slept beside her naked, so he'd thought that wearing clothes would fix the whole problem.

Lyse lowered her hands from her face and heaved a sigh. "Wearing clothes

does *not* make this acceptable, Lord Sidis,” she said sternly.

“Why not?”

She turned away, revealing her blushing profile. “Well, because we’re not married yet...”

“I see no problem in staying by your side. I yearn to fall asleep each night chatting with you until all hours, then wake up with your face right next to mine,” he said.

Sidis took Lyse’s hand, but when she refused to look back at him, he reached out and touched his fingertips to her lips. That got the response he was hoping for—Lyse turned around in surprise, not anger. Sidis understood. He knew that Lyse was kind and quick to show it. She’d never say no as long as she wasn’t being asked the unreasonable... And so Lyse ended up forgiving Sidis today as well.

“Put on something proper, will you? And get out of here already. I’d die of embarrassment if someone walked in on us,” she implored him, standing up to push him toward the door.

Sidis couldn’t help smiling at his adorably pouting fiancée.

Sidis finished up his work by noon. Then after lunch, he transformed into a dog to go join Lyse, who was tasked with hosting another matchmaking event today as well. On his way there, he happened upon several foreign visitors and their imperial companions out enjoying the gardens together. Trailing behind the group were the guests’ attendants along with palace guards and servants—but Sidis recognized their faces. The guards and servants were actually imperial knights in disguise, no doubt planted by Alcede to test out his new plan. The duke was most proactive.

Sidis hurried along to the venue, Spring Hall. Supposedly today’s event was a tea party in order to give the participants a chance to chat intimately. It was a good way to capitalize on the sword training from last time, after which a few couples had gotten rather close.

As Sidis approached Spring Hall, a patrolling guard cheerfully greeted him.

“Hey there, doggy. Out guarding your owner again?”

With a big smile on his face, the friendly guard stroked Sidis along his back. The man was very fond of dogs, as demonstrated by how happily he’d petted Egbert a few days ago as well. He’d had no way of knowing the big, fluffy, white dog was the emperor he served, yet Sidis had felt a little sorry for his cousin for a random guard to get so clingy and cuddly with him. The guard apparently kept a dog at home as well, so if he ever learned that he’d snuggled the emperor himself, hopefully his own dog would be there to help him recover from the shock.

Sidis got past the patrol and made his way to Spring Hall. The two guards posted by the entrance had been apprised of the situation and let him through. He spotted Lyse as soon as he entered the hall. She had a pair of giant lagomorph monsters with her that had been under her control for a few days now, but even without them, Sidis wouldn’t have had trouble picking her out from a crowd. In his eyes, she shone brilliantly.

Today, half of Lyse’s soft brown hair was tied up and ornamented by the floral hairpin Sidis had given her. It complemented her fair, delicate face. Her neck—so slender that it belied her prowess with a sword—was adorned with a dazzling diamond necklace, also a gift from Sidis. Though she would normally refuse to wear anything that revealed so much as her collarbone, the palace stylist had convinced her to don a deep scarlet organdy dress. With her gown aflutter, it almost looked like she was standing in a bed of red roses.

I knew she would love this dress. Qatora used to always wear those flowers in her hair and Lyse said that she loved her uniform coat—both of which are the same shade. Deep scarlet is truly her color. And because it’s Lyse, not even the blackest monsters could detract from her radiance. In fact, she shines even brighter against the inky backdrop. She’s the light of my life, my beloved fiancée...

Sidis had been thrilled since the day of their engagement to call Lyse his fiancée. He would’ve loved nothing more than to announce to the world that she was his betrothed, but alas, they’d already held their engagement party.

Sidis made his way over to Lyse and whispered, “Is everything fine?”

She smiled when she saw him. “So far, so good. I certainly hope Alcede’s plan goes well,” she responded in an equally soft voice. Her eyes darted to a corner of the hall where Seren was eagerly hitting on a female knight on duty.

So that’s his type?

It was now a little clearer to Sidis why Seren was so keen on Lyse and other court ladies—they were all gallant warriors. Though imperial noblewomen were all trained with the sword, they did so for self-defense, whereas ladies-in-waiting and knights trained to protect the lives of the emperor and everyone else in the palace. There was a difference in the airs about them.

What confounded Sidis, however, was why Seren chose not to chat up the female knight who was also a participant. She was looking at Seren like she was hopeful for his attention, but ultimately, she gave up and went to speak with the other men at the event. Sidis could now see why Lyse didn’t believe that Seren was really in the empire to find love.

Past sins, hmm?

The other day, Seren had referred to himself as a sinner. And before that, Caldo—Seren’s adoptive father and younger brother to the Alstran king—had said that Seren must “atone for his wrongdoings.” Sidis had asked Alcede to investigate that.

If Seren is only obeying orders out of guilt, he might not deny the crimes—ones he himself may not have even committed. That could be an issue.

Sidis’s previous discussion with Lyse, Alcede, and Egbert had concluded in an agreement to arrest Seren under the pretense of lèse-majesté. If the Alstrans demanded his return, the empire could easily summon an eyewitness to their mistreatment of Seren. That way, the imperials could prove they were dedicated to protecting him. However, if Seren were to deny that any abuse had taken place, he’d be leaving the empire without a leg to stand on.

Sidis’s greatest fear was that the Alstrans might turn out to be uninvolved with the Donan cultists, though that was highly unlikely. The Alstrans had passed through the part of town where citizens were first transformed into dogs. And following that, they were spotted sightseeing in the capital before the next incident occurred. It was probably a matter of time before it was

confirmed that they'd also been around the wall where the monsters had gathered.

As for Seren, the plan was to secure him if Sidis and the others could manage to collect the necessary evidence today.

We have to keep him safe until then...

Yet no sooner had that thought passed through Sidis's mind than he realized the man in question was gone. He'd already moved on from the court lady he'd been hitting on, and when Sidis scanned the room, he caught a glimpse of him outside. He'd likely escaped through the balcony and down a set of stairs to the garden. He was moving away at a brisk pace.

"Ack!" Lyse exclaimed as she and Sidis gave chase.

Egbert had been peering through the windows of Spring Hall from the yard, and the couple watched as he now ran after Seren himself. Sidis wondered what in the world he was doing. They all knew the Alstrans were up to something, so how could the emperor be so reckless?

"I'll tail them," Sidis said to Lyse as he dashed away.

He gave a guest a bit of a shock when he sprinted past her, but the imperial nobleman standing with her let out a chuckle at the amusing sight of the speeding dog. The sliding door to the balcony was left open and, just as a lady-in-waiting grabbed the door handle, Sidis zoomed through it.

"Oh my! Out for a stroll with Lord Seren? You're quick to have made a friend already," the lady-in-waiting muttered to herself, but Sidis heard it plain as day with his doggy ears.

He could barely contain his laughter as he ran when he realized how canine he'd become. At first, Egbert had had to mentor him on how to run like a dog, but it was second nature to him now. The next realization to set in on Sidis was that he'd lost sight of Seren, so he did what any dog would and began tracking him by scent. After all, his magical canine features worked as well as any real dog's. Nevertheless, Seren's scent was nowhere to be found in the garden. Sidis returned to Spring Hall and picked up the trail inside before losing both Seren's and Egbert's scents in the palace halls.

“Where could they be...?”

“Neither Lord Sidis nor His Majesty have returned,” Lyse muttered at the matchmaking venue as her heart raced anxiously. She knew she needed to be patient. Sidis and Egbert couldn’t speak as dogs without blowing their cover, so it wasn’t like they could ask Seren to come back to Spring Hall. Moreover, if they were dead set on pursuing him, they might find themselves waiting for some time before he let something important slip. Lyse just hoped they’d be back before the matchmaking event concluded.

Let’s see if I can pick out a juicy conversation today...

Lyse was on her second cup of tea as she listened in on the dog-loving damsel with blonde ringlets chatting with an imperial knight about where they were from.

“Oh, so you’re a Razanate noble yourself? Aren’t you a little far from your home territory?” she asked with great interest. The knight in question was the second son of a baron.

“Well, it’s quite the honor to be an imperial knight,” he responded. “If we’re assigned to serve the imperial family, you’ll find us at the front lines fighting alongside the emperor against terrible monsters. And if we manage to slay one, we earn not just the respect of the nobility, but potentially even commendation from the imperial family. But yes, while it’s important that the heir inherit the family domain, many younger noble siblings like myself aspire to knighthood.”

Lyse couldn’t have agreed more as she nodded along internally. There was indeed great pride in serving at the palace, as they faced the strongest monsters that had already breached the city defenses. That was why Qatora had jumped for joy when she was assigned to be a palace knight—it was a testament to her strength.

“But I only escort the imperial family when we travel abroad on inspection tours, so I’m not all that special or anything,” the knight modestly added.

“No, you are! Being able to take down monsters is already quite an achievement. Where I’m from, people don’t know how to use magic, so braving battle with one is an incredible feat—or so I’m told. I suppose it’s quite

common here in the empire,” she said with genuine admiration as she sipped her tea.

“If I get married, though, I don’t think my children could become knights. That’s why I’m hoping they’ll grant me some sort of post, like they offered to.”

“Why couldn’t your children become knights?”

“Well, you see, that’s the going rate. An acquaintance of mine married a foreigner and their child only has the mana of a commoner. The child will likely live a long life, but nowhere as long as an imperial would,” the knight explained plainly.

“So their child didn’t inherit the imperial mana?”

“There are too many who judge people by their mana, but it’s not the end of the world for those who aren’t as blessed. There are plenty of other ways to be successful too,” he said, leaning toward her. “I hope that’s not too much of a concern for you.”

“No, that’s not what I meant...” Her gaze wavered as she hesitated. “I was just thinking of what they said before about how being in the empire won’t make someone live longer. And, well, it’s unfortunate that I won’t be with my future husband for long...”

“Oh, I see! So you were hoping we could be together forever, hmm?”

“I-I wasn’t talking about *you* specifically or anything!”

The knight delighted in seeing her turn red all the way to her ears.

Oh. I get it now. It dawned on Lyse why Egbert and Alcede had seemed so exasperated of late. It was cute to see the couple flirt from afar like this, but being trapped in a room with them would be awful, Lyse thought. She made a mental note to herself to keep Sidis from going too far in the future when they weren’t alone, even though she knew he’d be absolutely devastated by this.

“I guess I’ll be on my way...” Lyse said as she stood up. She left her seat and set off toward the garden with her monsters in tow to go find Sidis.

“Miss Lyse,” called one of the female knights standing guard outside. “May I ask where you’re headed?”

“The dog that just ran out hasn’t come back yet, and I was getting a little worried...”

“Please stay inside and allow me to go instead,” the knight instructed Lyse, who reluctantly obliged.

Duke Lasuarl had ordered the knights to guard Lyse at Sidis’s request; the special treatment was because Lyse was in the enemy’s sights. If she bolted outside in defiance, the knights would chase her down, compromising the security. Lyse didn’t want to cause any trouble, so she waited patiently inside as she was asked. However, no news came after ten, then fifteen minutes.

This is just...because the palace is so big, right?

Perhaps they’d gone all the way to the other end of the palace. That would explain why it was taking so long to find them. Lyse knew she just needed to sit tight and wait. As she started to grow impatient again, Alcede made an unexpected appearance at the matchmaking event. He called out to Lyse and waved her over. She had a bad feeling about this, but hopefully Alcede wasn’t here about Sidis. She walked over to him, and they left the matchmaking venue for a private room nearby.

“We’ve lost His Majesty,” Alcede said gravely.

“You heard word from Lord Sidis?” Lyse asked to clarify.

“Yes, he checked in to say that he couldn’t locate the emperor.”

Sidis had tried to search out Egbert himself, but had given up when the search turned up no results. He’d even returned to human form and set out with a group of guards and knights, still to no avail. Then, sensing how dire the situation was, he had reported to Alcede.

“Seren is missing too. Is it true that His Majesty chased after him?” the duke asked.

Lyse nodded. “Could it be that Seren kidnapped him?” The very thought sickened her.

“More than likely, I’d say. I haven’t seen the Alstran prince around either—at least not since he ventured out into the capital for some sightseeing. Granted,

he didn't have a dog or have any luggage that could possibly fit a dog."

"Where are they...?" Lyse wondered aloud.

They hadn't anticipated Egbert would be so easily abducted. His mana was second only to Sidis's and he could handily best any knight in a fight. But he *was* in his dog form, so perhaps he was afraid to blow his cover.

"Sidis is still tracking down Seren's scent as of now," said Alcede. That explained why Sidis had yet to return to Spring Hall. "But I worry. If His Majesty was so easily captured, then what of Sidis? I fear that his pursuit may lead to the same consequence..."

"Let me send my monsters to look!" Lyse exclaimed as she took out a pair from her pocket. A rabbit monster and a bird monster stirred atop her palm.

"They can do that?" Alcede asked.

"Since they heed the Light within me, I assume they can sense it within Sidis too."

Lyse released the monsters into the palace, and they came back after ten or so minutes.

"Did you find them?" she asked.

The monsters didn't respond, however. They simply stood there as if waiting for another order.

"I suppose they're not around then," deduced Alcede.

"Does that mean His Majesty was spirited out of the palace and that Sidis has gone into the city to look for him?" Lyse asked, a grave look on her face.

"I'd wager so. Perhaps they've set a trap for you, using your beloved pet dog as bait."

"No!" Lyse shouted.

Her mind raced back to her last moments as Qatora. An intruder had broken into the palace and grabbed Sidis—still a child at the time. She'd rushed to save the boy, but with a sword at his neck and his captor approaching the Light of Origin, neither she nor Sidis could fight back with magic. And now, the emperor

was potentially the one in mortal danger.

“I’ve got to go help!” Lyse cried. “I’m heading to the capital!”

Alcede placed his hand on her shoulder as she rushed for the door in a panic. “Take a deep breath, Miss Lyse. You needn’t run—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a knight barged into the room. “Your Grace! Please, take a look at this at once!” The knight handed Alcede a folded piece of paper. “We came across this in a hallway near Spring Hall while searching for the white dog.”

“In the hall, you say...?” Alcede opened the note and perused it, his expression turning grim. “How troublesome. Expand the search to the capital city,” he ordered the knight. “And Miss Lyse, please take a gander.”

With that, Alcede handed the note over to Lyse. She expected it had something to do with the emperor. It contained a hastily scribbled ransom note: *“You’ll be given a location later. Come alone to save Lyse Winslette’s dog, but consider it dead if you bring so much as a single soldier or monster with you.”*

“They took him...” Lyse said as she bit her lower lip. Internally, she kicked herself for letting this happen by not chasing after Seren. “His Majesty must be so scared...”

“What? No, no. His Majesty is a grown man.” Alcede shook his head, dismissing the notion. “But we needn’t wait for his signal to rescue him either. You’d best go at once.”

“I ought to, but how?” she asked, quizzically tilting her head to one side.

“Just as you did before—use your monsters. I doubt that they could ferry a dog away from the capital so soon, and they’re very likely to have a safe house in the city. If your monsters can’t find them by detecting their stones, surely they should still be able to track down someone with as much mana as His Majesty.”

That clicked for Lyse. The monsters could detect mana, and the emperor was a big target. Still, she wasn’t sure they should go out alone.

“If I use my monsters, then *I’d* have to go out to the capital too,” she said,

pointing to herself. She couldn't be too far away from the monsters lest they lose control, and the city was definitely out of range.

Alcede nodded. "Don't go on foot, then. Take a raptor. You'll be close enough in the air while being less susceptible to enemy attacks." Not only did Alcede have a bird already prepared, he brought out a pair of avian monsters from his pockets. The little chicks turned into gigantic, human-sized black birds.

"Could you guys look for people with lots of mana? And come back to me when you do, okay?" Lyse asked the monsters. They immediately took to the skies, and Lyse followed their lead.

Two knights escorted Lyse just in case anything happened. She didn't like the idea, but she didn't fight it. She knew she'd have to get accustomed to having a guard by her side wherever she went. After all, she would soon be a member of the imperial family.

"And here I thought I was strong enough to run off on my own..." she griped. She'd gone to the capital alone with Sidis on numerous occasions. Moreover, she had Alcede's blessing. He believed that she was at least as capable as a knight. She couldn't wait for things to be peaceful—to be normal—again.

"Just have to wait for the..." she began as both monsters changed directions. "Did you find someone?"

The monsters flew to a certain point and began to circle with no signs of landing. They then returned to Lyse before flying back to the same point to circle again. The monsters were hovering above the capital—the heart of the west side of town, to be precise—almost as if doubting themselves.

"Do we have them?" Lyse was sure that the monsters had picked up on Egbert's mana but couldn't pinpoint its location for whatever reason. "It seems like we have something in this area, but the monsters can't tell where exactly. It's possible that they're indoors or even underground!" she shouted to the knights.

"We should be above the West 10th district. Please return to the palace while we conduct a search, Miss Lyse!" one of them responded.

Lyse bit her lip again. She knew that she couldn't investigate alone on foot,

yet she also couldn't cause trouble for the knights by demanding that they let her tag along. She had no recourse but to wait patiently at the palace while they did their jobs. Lyse wasn't pleased with this, but she refused to let her selfishness get the better of her.

"Understood. I'll return at once," conceded Lyse. She recalled her monsters as she turned around and headed back.

Shortly after Lyse returned, Alcede summoned her to his office. Waiting alongside him there for her report was also Sidis, who was very much a sight for Lyse's sore eyes. She was so relieved to know that he hadn't fallen into enemy hands. On the other hand, however, his presence indicated that he hadn't found Egbert yet. The emperor was still missing.

"Feeling a little down?" Sidis asked Lyse.

She nodded in reply, though she hadn't meant to let it show on her face. "His Majesty isn't here right now, which shows how successful my search and rescue attempt was."

"He can still use magic in dog form, you know?" Alcede said with a chuckle. "I very much doubt that His Majesty is in danger, but that's not to say we shouldn't make haste to secure him..."

"His Majesty *is* in danger, Duke Alcede," argued Lyse.

"And why do you say that?"

"Well, if he falls asleep, his magic will dissipate." In other words, his canine guise would wear off, leaving the emperor in his birthday suit.

"Oh. *Oh*. That wouldn't do at all," Alcede said with sweat now beading on his brow. "I could certainly see the problem if His Majesty were to resist his captors *au naturel*..."

Considering how fearlessly he'd handled himself the last time he'd reverted to human form in front of other people, Egbert would almost certainly have no qualms with fighting in the buff either. However, it would be a calamity if he escaped alone like that.

“Imagine His Majesty’s reputation if the other nations caught wind of it. Any of their respect we have now would vanish right along with His Majesty’s doggy disguise,” warned Lyse.

If other nations didn’t respect the empire, there was no telling what they’d do. It would no longer be just the Donans looking to overtake Razanate’s throne. Driving them back by force at that point would do little to improve the empire’s standing; worse, it could escalate the situation and cause further tension. That would put the emperor in a dangerous position on any future inspections. No good could possibly come of it. The emperor losing his dignity would embarrass, if not outright compromise, the entire nation—much less any imperial citizens living abroad.

“Hmph. We can only hope that the enemy hasn’t put His Majesty to sleep...” muttered Sidis.

Suddenly, a knock came at the door. A chamberlain entered the room and bowed before Alcede returned the gesture. “A letter, Your Grace. It pertains to the abducted Light-resistant dog,” he said as he handed it to Alcede. The emperor’s kidnapping had so far been concealed as a very special dognapping. The information was far too sensitive for most ears, so they’d needed a cover story.

Alcede scanned through the letter. “Where was this found?” he questioned.

The chamberlain replied, “The same location as the previous letter, Your Grace.”

“The enemy has the power of mind control, yet they’re refraining from using it this time around. I’m sure they wanted to deliver these messages directly to Miss Lyse, so they must lack the resources to access her chambers,” deduced Alcede as Sidis dismissed the chamberlain. The duke sighed before continuing. “This can only mean one thing: whoever is working with Seren and the Alstran prince must have the power of suggestion.”

“How do you know the Alstrans don’t have it themselves?” asked Lyse.

“If they had more than one capable mage, they easily could have found a way to deliver these messages to your eyes only. Plus, judging by how you were attacked and what Seren said, it seems like they want to secretly eliminate just

you.”

“Me first, at least. Then they can hide their stones all over the capital and have everybody under their thumb.”

The Donans’ objective was to overthrow the Razanate Empire, the antithesis of what they stood for. That being the case, Lyse couldn’t be their only target.

“With the power of suggestion, they have the means to their end—be it total control or total annihilation,” Sidis mused. “Anyway, what does the letter say, Alcede?”

“Nothing unexpected. Here, give it a read yourself,” he said as he handed Sidis the letter.

Lyse peeked from the side and read the following: *“Building 13 in the West 10th district, two hours before midnight. Miss Lyse Winslette ought to come alone if she wants the dog back alive. Bring a single imperial soldier or monster and she’ll find its corpse instead.”*



“How very predictable,” Alcede said in a low voice.

“That’s where Lyse’s monsters sensed them too. No doubt they’re lurking around there,” Sidis added.

“What shall we do then, Lord Sidis? The enemy is already wary of me, so perhaps should I hide some monsters around the area?” Lyse had no intention of walking to the enemy’s trap unprepared. She wanted to plant three monsters right before going to the location in question. It wasn’t as though the Donans could tell whether she was concealing monsters.

“I expect that you’ll be attacked as soon as you show up,” Alcede said.

He had a point. Lyse could handle her own against opponents armed with swords and daggers, but fighting magic and Donan stones was a different story. There was no telling what surprises they might have hidden up their sleeves either, and that made for a risky solo adventure. But most importantly, Lyse didn’t want Sidis to be racked with guilt if anything should happen to her.

Regret has already haunted him once because of me. I can’t put him through that again.

At the very least, Lyse didn’t want Sidis to worry. So she needed to think of a way to rescue Egbert, skirt his captors’ demands, and ensure her own safety too.

“The problem is we don’t know where they’re hiding. Our knights should still be searching the area Miss Lyse pointed out, so hopefully they’ll uncover something,” Alcede concluded.

While the three of them anxiously awaited an update, Alcede absorbed himself in paperwork and Sidis left to attend to his own business. After a while, their patience was rewarded when one of the knights that had accompanied Lyse to the city earlier reported to Alcede’s office.

“I bring news,” she announced after bowing. “We’ve searched the area Miss Lyse designated, including the buildings in the district. However...” She hesitated there, averting her eyes. “However, we’ve yet to recover the dog. There are households in the area with pet dogs, some of which were small or white, but none of them fit the exact description of the one we are seeking.

There was no evidence any dogs in the area had had their fur dyed either. Subsequently, we have expanded our search to the adjacent 9th and 11th districts. You have my sincerest apologies for not finding anything.”

Rather than being upset, Lyse felt sorry for the knight. If only she’d been able to search the area for herself, the responsibility wouldn’t have fallen on the knight.

“Fret not. It is what it is. They managed to kidnap the dog even under our heavy security; it’s no surprise that they’re successfully eluding our search. Their base must be well hidden, so we’ll think of another way to uncover their whereabouts. Take it easy for now,” Alcede said, dismissing the knight.

When she departed, that left Lyse, Sidis, and Alcede alone again.

“I mean, I didn’t expect to find them easily...” grumbled Sidis.

“Not even Miss Lyse’s monsters could sniff them out. Still, we’ve got their general location, so it won’t be long. I just hope we’re able to find them before time is up.” Alcede placed his hand by his chin before continuing. “I’m actually somewhat concerned that if we expand our search too much, we might spook them. We should make sure that we don’t force them to make a move or cancel the deal.”

“Then should we restrict our search?” Sidis asked.

“That’s not wise either. Maybe if we’re lucky, His Majesty will come running home all by himself.”

“Maybe there’s something preventing him from doing so. For example, our magic doesn’t protect us from poison, and building up a resistance to the stuff takes years off your life.”

“Put it like that and our chances do seem awfully slim. Drugging His Majesty to make him black out would end no differently than putting him to sleep with magic.”

“Time is not on our side.”

As the two men lamented over the situation, Lyse was still trying to come up with ideas. “The West 10th district...” she murmured.

Qatora had been tomboyish and mischievous, but Lyse could recall that she had never played in that part of town. That left her without any sense of the neighborhood, and without that vital information, she couldn't simply charge out there on a rescue mission. It also struck her that the rambunctious Qatora—whose own brother had been appalled by her lack of care—had avoided the area for some reason. It was at the tip of Lyse's tongue, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

About then, Alcede looked out the window. "It's getting dark already," he said as he pulled the curtains to.

This caught Sidis's attention, but when he glanced up, he was visibly shaken for a moment.

"What's the matter?" Alcede asked.

"Oh, nothing. My eyes were just playing tricks on me," Sidis said.

But Lyse could tell otherwise. She'd seen Sidis flinch like that before.

He must've seen that flower petal float by and thought it was a ghost.

Lyse had caught a glimpse of the white petal herself. There was an adrenna vine coiled around a tree right outside the window. Sidis had been just as scared of the supernatural a hundred years ago, likely traumatized by the ghost stories the previous emperor had loved to tell. The rascally young Egbert had also been a victim of his father's storytelling, so the two boys had been very much adverse to anything occult. Recalling all this jogged Lyse's memory.

"Ghosts..." she muttered.

Qatora, too, had been afraid of ghosts as a child. Lyse now remembered the reason she'd avoided the West 10th district—otherworldly noises could be heard there. Later in her life, Qatora had learned that there was a cistern beneath the area. The supposed "otherworldly noises" were just reverberations underground.

"In that case, maybe they've dug around there... But wasn't that all shut down?" Lyse wondered to herself aloud.

"What's the matter, Miss Lyse?" Alcede probed, puzzled by her mutterings.

“Um, there might be something right beneath where we’re searching.”

“What do you mean?”

“There should be an old water storage facility that draws from a subterranean river. It was there a century ago, so maybe it’s still there now. I was wondering about it since the knight didn’t say anything about searching underground.”

“I wonder if people think it’s been filled since it hasn’t caused any problems, then.”

Lyse nodded, wondering the same thing. Perhaps rumor had it that the cistern was no more, but it might still exist. And because the Donans were active a hundred years ago as well, they could have used the power of suggestion to beguile its workers. That might mean the cistern was officially defunct on paper, so of course the knights wouldn’t have checked it.

“We should investigate,” Alcede suggested.

“Actually, Your Grace, I was thinking we should pull our soldiers back and use this to throw the terrorists off guard,” Lyse offered.

“Throw them off guard, you say? Let’s hear your plan.”

Lyse agreed and told them what she was thinking.

“In that case, then let me...” Sidis collaborated, finding a role for himself.

“I’ll provide all the support I can. Do whatever it takes to recover His Majesty,” Alcede said before mumbling, “before his magic wears off.”

The other two agreed. “I pray that he hasn’t been given any sleeping drugs and that his true form hasn’t been revealed yet,” Lyse added.

Chapter 5: Soon, the Rebellion Will Be Crushed

After the meeting, Lyse and Sidis were walking through the courtyard accompanied by two human-sized monsters. Though the enemy was supposedly lurking in the capital, they had no reason to believe the palace was entirely safe. It only made sense to have the extra protection.

The setting sun shone down on the dead-quiet palace grounds. Everyone was on high alert after the dognapping. The knights on watch were all the more vigilant against monsters and any possible internal threats. The foreign guests were also barred from leaving their rooms. They likely thought the situation was blown out of proportion for a mere lost puppy, but that was far preferable to them knowing the truth—that the emperor had been abducted in dog form.

Sidis and Lyse hurried along, but when they found themselves approaching their new villa mid-construction, Sidis stopped to behold the sight. The foundation and the frame of the building had already been laid, but the construction mages weren't around at this hour. And just beyond the site, a pillar of light towered into the sky between the rays of the fading sun. This would be where Sidis and Lyse lived in the future.

"We'll soon get a sense of what our home will look like," Lyse commented.

"It won't be long now," Sidis replied. Magically shaping stone according to blueprints required time, no matter how skilled the mage. But once the construction was finally complete, Sidis hoped to host a ceremony. "In truth, I'd still prefer it sooner than later."

"Even if it were finished right now, we don't have any of our furniture yet. You know, the carpenters said they needed extra time because of how particular you are."

Lyse had originally planned on using any old leftover furniture from the palace, believing it would be the most reasonable thing to do. She'd had to back down, however, after Egbert and Alcede objected, claiming that the new couple's new home should have new furniture, not hand-me-downs.

Capitalizing on this, Sidis had taken it upon himself to commission the finest furnishings. He was keen on Lyse's tastes, and had eagerly picked out cabriole legs, tasteful engravings, and more.

Lyse had wondered at first how he seemed to know everything she liked, but it hadn't taken her long to figure it out. Following Qatora's passing, Sidis had frequented her home to reminisce with her family. There was only so much to talk about, so after a hundred years, even trifling topics such as furniture preferences were bound to come up.

"I know that, but it wouldn't stop me from wedding you this very moment if I could," he said boldly, causing Lyse to bashfully turn away with a flustered smile. "But we have a few things to square away first, like retrieving His Majesty with his dignity intact and eradicating the Donan terrorists."

"Right you are," agreed Lyse before switching subjects. "By the way, would you explain why you had me bring my backpack and that shovel you're carrying, not to mention why we're heading toward the imperial villa with them?"

Indeed, Sidis had beseeched her to bring a rucksack, claiming that it was extremely vital. "I thought we ought to collect some of the white stones surrounding the Light of Origin," he explained.

"And why's that?" Lyse asked as the semicircular building surrounding the Light came into view. Lyse and Sidis walked through its empty halls and made their way toward the pillar.

"The Alstrans are behind the kidnapping, right? The prince and his men are likely Donan cultists themselves, meaning they're sure to gather and call forth monsters when we—when *you* go rescue the emperor," Sidis explained.

"Monsters *do* make for frightful opponents. But you mean to suggest that they'll use the green light to attract monsters and attack while I'm alone in hopes of defeating me?"

"Yes, and I was wondering if we can't use the white crystalline rocks to our advantage," he said as they approached the Light of Origin.

The Light was as wide as an ancient tree that would take ten people to encircle. Its sparkling particles flowed endlessly upward, gleaming bright white

against the orange twilit sky. And scattered around its base were the aforementioned white crystals. Lyse guessed that they spread for more than thirty paces around the Light.

“It’s just like the black stones around the green light,” Sidis remarked.

The white rock around the Light spread in a similarly thin sheet, although it was more crystallized. Sidis began breaking it up and gathering some with his shovel.

“Will I be bringing all of this with me?” Lyse asked as she helped stuff the rucksack. It was by no means a small amount.

“No harm in taking more. Besides, they specified that you weren’t to take anyone with you, but they never said you couldn’t bring *anything* with you.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“It’s not too heavy though, is it?”

“Not at all. I can still fight with my sword.” Lyse trained every day, so a load like this was nothing to her.

“I wish you would take a few monsters with you though. I mean, it’s odd...” Sidis trailed off.

“What is?” Lyse heaved the bag over her shoulder as she stood up, causing its contents to rattle around inside.

“Well, the monsters are voracious for the Donan stones, yet have no appetite for these crystals.”

“Huh. Now that you mention it...” Lyse hadn’t noticed it until now. She’d ordered her monsters to stay by the villa entrance, and their attention was locked on the Light of Origin. They seemed calm, however, whereas they’d been restless in the presence of the green light. “Perhaps they’re simply fixated on the Light.”

“Let’s go and run a little experiment,” Sidis suggested.

It would be problematic for their plan if Lyse’s monsters had an appetite for the white crystals, so the couple took a handful of them and slowly approached the awaiting monsters. The large feline one gave the crystals a few sniffs, then

rubbed its cheeks on them—nothing like the “Give me treats!” howling it would have been given to in the face of a black stone.

“Perhaps the Donan stones are different after all,” Lyse mused.

“Pass them here.”

Sidis took the handful of rocks and tossed them close to the monsters. One of them proceeded to flop on its back atop them and wriggle about.

“It’s acting like that’s catnip...”

“No, it seems to have settled down. Rather than playing with catnip, the monster’s behaving as if it’s warming itself against a hot stone,” Sidis said. It was like the white crystals emitted heat.

“Well, either way, I don’t think these crystals will impede the monsters at all.”

The couple left the matter at that. Sidis set off first, leaving Lyse at the palace to prepare for her mission. She changed into a dark-colored dress that was less voluminous and easier to move around in. On top of it, she wore her lady-in-waiting coat for a small bit of protection. She also donned her sword on the hip to match. Once ready, she headed for Alcede’s office where she found him with a big smile on his face.

“We’ve just received information about Seren from the Kingdom of Alstra,” he said excitedly, flapping a stack of papers at Lyse. It looked about twenty pages thick. Lyse could only assume it was the report. “Unfortunately, Sidis flew out the door before he had the chance to read it. And you must be in a hurry yourself, so allow me to give you a quick summary.”

“I’d appreciate that. Thank you.”

It’d take Lyse quite some time to plow through all twenty-odd pages. And since Alcede had already digested the report in its entirety, he could get straight to the important parts.

“To start off,” he began, “we’ve confirmed that Seren is not related to the prince by blood. He was born to a common family, but when he was a child, his parents got involved with the Donan Faith. Shortly thereafter, he was locked away in their home. Monster sightings are common on their land to begin with,

but attacks became more frequent with Donan stones thrown in the mix.”

“I presume that Seren’s parents blamed him for beckoning the monsters,” Lyse concluded. Alcede nodded. That explained why they’d treated Seren the way they had.

“They apparently kept a dog as well, and it was the only companion Seren was ever allowed. His fondness for dogs may stem from this. Now, during Seren’s childhood, Prince Caldo visited his village. Caldo was already heavily involved with the Donans at this point. And since locking Seren up had done little to remedy the monster situation, his parents were happy to get rid of him.”

“Did they perhaps have a green light, like the one we saw previously?”

“We don’t know, but it’s possible. Seren’s parents had sought help from the Donan church, and Prince Caldo caught wind of their situation. This is probably when they discovered that their black stones attract monsters. Perhaps they thought Seren had strong mana and came to discover some use for him. Thus Caldo adopted Seren and brought him to his territory.”

“If Caldo learned of the plight of Seren’s family, that suggests he’s a high-ranking member of the Donan Faith, doesn’t it?”

“I should think so, yes.” Alcede continued with a frown, “The previous Alstran king wished to have heirs with mana. Caldo is illegitimate, so there may be a chance that his mother is descended from imperial aristocracy.”

If that were the case, there was a chance that the prince was capable of wielding magic.

“He may be a dangerous opponent. Are you still willing to stand against him?” Alcede asked Lyse. She nodded. “Very well. The people you’ve requested have assembled with orders to proceed to the rendezvous point. You have my full support—and my wishes for good luck, just in case.”

Lyse bowed in thanks to the duke, then took her leave and departed the palace.

Splish, splish... Sidis had already lost count of how many times he’d heard the sound of dripping water. The cistern was supposed to be filled in, but evidently,

such was not the case. Sidis had infiltrated the facility by transforming into a rat and crawling through a draw shaft. He couldn't see anything in the darkness, but the dripping of water reverberated through his tiny skull.

"So it's true they fooled everyone into thinking this place was no more," he muttered to himself.

In his rodent form, Sidis was headed down below to get a visual on the emperor. If Egbert had already reverted to human form and his captors knew his true identity, the rescue mission would be that much harder. Sidis, too, would have to revert to human form in order to be of use in a magical fight. And taking the time to get the emperor new clothes amidst all that would be a setback, albeit a necessary one.

Please still be a dog, Your Majesty...

The shaft led Sidis to an underground corridor where burning lamps lined the walls, dispelling every shadow of a doubt that the facility was currently in use. Nevertheless, there was no one around, nor were there any rooms. The hall simply had two sets of stairs at its end, and Sidis decided to follow them downward. Just as he approached the top step, he froze in place.

"Hmph. They're late," a voice echoed.

It mattered little how nimble or quick a rat could be; a creature so small would never be fast enough to evade whoever was up ahead. Instead, Sidis turned into a dog and let his nose guide him. At the bottom of the stairs was another corridor, this one lined with doors and filled with the scent of people. Upon some further consideration, Sidis changed back into a rat to keep a smaller profile in case he crossed paths with anyone unexpectedly. He crept forward toward the sounds of people, as that's where the abducted dog—rather, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Egbert—was most likely being held.

For whatever reason, Sidis still had white hair as a rat. This was unfortunate under the circumstances, as his bright fur did little to camouflage him in the shadowy halls of the cistern. But alas, he couldn't change his coloration with his transformation magic. Instead, he opted to shroud himself in black mist. He thus advanced along the stone floor, which had no discernible joints—a telltale sign of magical masonry. He scurried along, until at last, he closed in on the

people he'd sensed earlier.

Who is that? Seren and the Alstran prince?

The two men were approaching the far end of the hall, which Sidis guessed descended to yet another level.

"Are you done preparing?" Caldo questioned.

"Yeah, I suppose..." Seren replied spiritlessly.

"That brat wouldn't dare come alone. She probably has her imperial men cleverly stashed nearby. But when we crush them all, we'll also be demolishing the palace's security. Then we'll kill the wench and devastate the imperial family," Caldo said, nearly bursting out in laughter.

Stealthily, Sidis moved closer to the Alstran prince.

"Here's hoping..." Seren muttered loud enough for Caldo to hear.

"What's that? Do I hear doubt about my plan? Just do exactly as I tell you, when I tell you, and keep your mouth shut! Don't you forget that I'm keeping you alive after you murdered my fiancée, you ingrate!"

Seren? A murderer?!

Sidis couldn't imagine Seren harming a fly. He hadn't so much as raised a hand in his own defense when Caldo kicked him around. But based on the gravity of their conversation, Sidis could only assume it was the truth.

"Forgive me," Seren apologized, casting his eyes downward.

"Just do as I say. I'll annihilate the Razanate Empire and be heralded as the head of the Donan Faith by the other leaders. My own brother the king and his scheme to cozy up to the empire don't stand a ghost of a chance against us!" With that, Caldo did indeed burst out in laughter.

So he is at the top of the organization! Sidis quickened his pace after gaining this critical piece of information. He wanted to know more about the trap they were laying for Lyse, but rescuing Egbert was his top priority. *If I can escape with His Majesty, then Lyse won't need to come here at all. Their trap will be for naught.* If he could manage that much, all that would remain would be cleaning up afterward and apprehending the enemies—a rather anticlimactic end to the

terrorist plot.

Seren and Caldo went down one set of stairs, and Sidis went down another. The steps were difficult for his small rodent body, so he switched back to his canine form. Below, Sidis found four cages of iron bars. In one of them lay a box big enough to hold a large dog, and when he approached it...the lid lifted from the inside, and out popped the head of a white dog.

“Your Majesty!” cried Sidis.

“Oh, Sidis! Am I glad to see a friendly face here,” Egbert said from within his jail cell.

“And I’m glad to see you unharmed,” Sidis responded with equal relief. He was also glad that the emperor was still in his furry form.

“I got careless. I was too successful acting as a dog, and they force-fed me something poisoned.”

Sidis’s eyes bulged. “Are you all right, Your Majesty?!”

“The strong anesthetic led to my abduction, but I’m otherwise fine now,” Egbert assured him as he hopped out of the crate to prove his vigor.

“Then let us get you out of here at once, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed, let’s hurry.”

Egbert accordingly transformed into a ferret to slip through the iron bars before turning back to his dog form. This was, after all, how he was most comfortable. The two of them then headed for the floor above and then back to the shaft where Sidis had entered.

“Please follow this back outside, Your Majesty,” Sidis instructed the emperor.

“Are you certain it’s safe above ground?”

“Yes, your knights and soldiers already have the immediate area surrounded. We suspect this is a Donan hideout, so I shall stay behind and investigate the terrorists.”

“All right. I’ll inform our people the enemy is here. And good luck, Sidis.” Egbert then transformed into a rat and disappeared up the shaft.

“Time to get to work,” Sidis said, peppering himself up.

He decided to pursue Seren as his next objective. The designated hour was quickly approaching, but Sidis wanted to find out what was happening down below. He followed the stairs down again, this time taking the set that Seren and Caldo had earlier. There was another corridor below where, after rounding a corner, Sidis found himself in front of a door guarded by two men.

“I suppose this is where it connects above ground...”

There wasn’t anything resembling an entrance on the floors above, so Sidis was confident about what lay beyond the door. As for the men posted there, they both donned plain, unbleached cloth shirts, dark pants that hid stains well, and swords on their hips. Their faces were unremarkable, neither intimidating nor brutish. Both men could easily walk around town without anyone batting an eye...except that they wore the vacant stares of the enthralled. They either had to be Donans or the prince’s men. In their hands were lanterns which, combined with the lamps on the walls, lit the area nicely. Sneaking through was out of the question.

Maybe I should turn into an insect... No, a single misstep would spell my doom.

Instead, Sidis chose to put the men to sleep. But just as he was about to chant his spell, he felt a force pulling him from behind. He turned around to find himself standing in a black haze with a voice calling to him from beyond.

“Now when did you manage to get out, little guy?” It was Seren, one of the two people on the other side of the haze.

When did they—?!

As surprised as Sidis was, he had no time to panic. Being caught ruined his plans to single-handedly destroy the Donans and their lair. He considered fleeing immediately before they could make a move, and thus made a mad dash for the door as the guards braced themselves upon taking notice of the white dog in front of them.

I’ve got to get past them before they can draw their weapons!

Sidis prepared an incantation to destroy the door as he ran, but when he was

a hair's breadth away, a green light appeared right in front of him.

"Hngaaaah!" he screamed out in pain upon coming into contact with the light. He felt like he'd been struck with lightning that coursed through him. His muscles were unresponsive, locking up and sending him to a slide across the ground. "What was..."

How had the green light appeared so suddenly, then disappeared just as quickly? The fog dissipated, and when it did, it revealed that the floor was now covered in familiar black stone.

"Calm yourself," said Seren as he approached Sidis to pick him up.

Gaaaaaaah! Sidis screamed again internally. Being caught by the enemy was unbearable, but being held by anyone other than Lyse was a punishment far worse. But Sidis knew that escape would be difficult if he knew nothing about his enemies. He wanted to observe and learn more about them, but he was taken downstairs to a room that shocked the wits out of him.

What... What is this place?!

It was all plainly visible with the lamps scattered on the floor. The room was decked in black stone—Donan stone—and there was a staggering amount of it.

"Good. At the rate we're collecting the stones, the day will soon come when we can fight back against the Light of Origin," cackled Caldo, the Alstran prince—or rather, the Donan hierarch.

The stone in the room couldn't possibly have all been generated by the green light. Some must have been brought in from elsewhere, Sidis surmised, leaving him to wonder how this had come to pass. Even if the collection had begun long ago, Lyse and her monsters hadn't detected it from the skies. How was it so well obfuscated?

"Keep it coming," Caldo continued. "We need all that we can get so that we can throw that wench and her knights in here to end them."

They're planning to use this all to kill Lyse?

Sidis could hardly believe it, as Lyse would instantly destroy any stone she touched. Still, they would be effective on the knights. If they were all dropped

into the same room under the effects of the Donan brainwashing...

Now I understand their plot...

Not even Lyse could hold her own against that many soldiers at once, and destroying the stones didn't immediately dispel the effects of the mind control. The enthralled knights would certainly kill her in their confusion. There was also a psychological aspect to the plan too. Once they came to their senses and realized what they'd done, they would either take their own lives or fly into a blind rage and destroy everything around them. Sidis could foresee this danger and knew he needed to put a preemptive stop to it.

For now, he watched helplessly as Seren set him down on the ground and moved to the center of the rather spacious room, where he put his hands on a black boulder.

What is he up to?

Sidis wanted to take advantage of the situation and flee, but Caldo suddenly began scolding Seren loudly.

"You worthless bastard! Your own parents didn't even love you! They told you that you were a monster, but you don't seem to get it! The beasts you bring killed my fiancée! You're trash! Absolutely worthless! And yet here I am, keeping scum like you alive! You should be grateful, you mongrel!"

Sidis grimaced at the onslaught of abuse.

"Yes... I'm a monster... I'm worthless..." Seren lifelessly fell to his knees, and all of a sudden, pale green sparks floated up from the boulder.

"What in the..." Sidis muttered unwittingly. *Did Seren create that?*

As Sidis was grappling with his shock, the particles of green light coalesced into a thin beam. With a cracking sound, black rocks spread out from the boulder.

"Repent! Embrace your guilt! Your pain is nothing but a fraction of what my fiancée suffered!" Prince Caldo raged, and more black stone came out from the boulder.

It crept along the ground and nearly reached Sidis. He grunted in exertion, but

he could still barely move.

“Good, good! More! We’ll throw them in here and turn them into mincemeat! It won’t be long before they all turn into dogs because of the light anyway!” Caldo guffawed and left the room in great satisfaction.

Sidis finally found strength enough to stand up shakily. Escape was no longer an option, however. He had to find a way to stop Seren. Snuffing out the green light would prevent more canine transformations. It would also allow Lyse and her soldiers to escape before they fell to the power of suggestion.

Or could I just destroy the whole damn room?

Collapsing the place would prevent Lyse and party from entering it at all. It likely wouldn’t harm anyone in the vicinity either—but alas, Sidis was powerless.

Why can’t I cast magic?! Is it just more complex spells?

While in animal form, Sidis was unable to cast advanced magic. However, even his simple sleep spell wasn’t working on Seren. In fact, it only made matters worse.

“I’m a monster...” Seren whimpered.

“Damn it all.”

Sidis had to pull out all the stops. He expected his magic would still work by touch, so he snuck up behind Seren and tried knocking him out with another spell. But Seren was rather resistant to his magic, and the effect was mild at best. He began nodding off as if he were very tired, but his eyes were still wide open.

“If only I weren’t around...” Seren mumbled sleepily.

Finally, Sidis swatted at Seren’s head with his front paw...and he tumbled over.

“Just like that, huh?” Sidis remarked to himself. That was one problem down, but he soon realized he had another on his hands. “It’s not stopping!”

Seren was no longer in physical contact with the boulder, yet the green light remained, steadily forming pillars around it. This was bad—bad enough that

Sidis knew he needed to warn Lyse and the others. He dashed out of the stone-filled room and raced up the stairs.

“At this rate, the rock’s going to smother me too!”

Black stones were sprouting from the walls and ceiling. They’d already encroached as far as the corridor directly above Seren. There, Sidis spotted the door cracked open with a hand frozen to it. One of the guards must have been caught unawares and petrified. Sidis used the power of the Light within him to blast apart the rock in an attempt to get through the door, but it was no use—the stones generated too quickly and pillars rose to fill in the gap before he could step through it. The other end of the hall was getting narrower and narrower too.

“Guess I’ve no choice but to convince Seren to put a stop to this madness.”

Sidis needed to return to the room to awaken Seren but realized that a talking dog wouldn’t be persuasive at all. Sidis thus reverted to his human form and stripped the unconscious guard. It took time to chip away the rock and he found the clothes to be ill-fitting, but they were better than nothing. He hurried back down the stairs and found the hall even rockier, but fortunately, a narrow path remained to Seren.

“Seren! Wake up!” screamed Sidis, but it did little to rouse him.

He then grabbed the Alstran and shook him to no avail. Sidis resorted to slapping Seren across the face, which finally caused him to stir.

“You’re the prince... Miss Lyse’s betrothed, aren’t you? Wait, what happened to her dog?!” exclaimed Seren, searching his surroundings as he came to.

Of course, Sidis kept silent; he was happy for Seren to be ignorant about the dog’s true identity. However, noticing that the dog wasn’t around anymore, Seren fell into a bout of self-disparaging laughter.

“So you’ve set the little guy free. Did your people swoop in already? I suppose you’re here to arrest me.”

“That’s the plan. But first things first—stop the light,” Sidis ordered.

“Now why would I do that?” Seren chuckled. “If things are this bad already, I

might as well trap you here with me. Let me atone for my sins.” The instant those words left Seren’s mouth, stone pillars bristled at Sidis’s back. “Sorry for all this. Let’s make it a double suicide.”

As sincerely sorrowful as Seren was, Sidis would refuse him—still, Seren wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“I’ve already made up my mind, though I do feel sorry for Miss Lyse...” He paused before continuing, “Short as it may have been, you must’ve been happy while you had a fiancée.”

“We just got engaged! How could I possibly be content already?!” Sidis rebuked him harshly. He and Lyse had only just had their engagement ceremony. They’d yet to have the wedding he’d been dreaming of for the past hundred years. He’d yet to see her wear the beautiful wedding dress he designed for her. He’d yet to have enough of holding her hand and seeing her blush. “I’ll have you know that I’ve been dreaming of spending every living moment with her for the longest time. And I’m planning on giving her flowers and going on trips with her on the weekends, since she’d hate it if it were every single day. The emperor has even granted us some time for a honeymoon after our wedding, so we’re going to stay in our room for at least a whole month.”



“Must be nice. Can’t say I don’t envy you,” Seren muttered after hearing Sidis’s to-do list. But that only caused the pillars to spring out at a faster rate.

“Whoa! H-Hold on, Seren! If you’re not happy, let’s talk it out. I don’t even know what your circumstances are, so why don’t you tell me?” pled Sidis. He had no insight as to the problems that had put Seren into his current mental state.

“You think I’m not happy? Well, I suppose that’s true enough. Since I’m taking you down with me, I might as well tell you that much.”

Seren dispiritedly opened up about his past. He shared how he’d been locked away for years with only the company of a dog. Waves of sympathy washed over Sidis as he learned of Seren’s traumatic past.

“While my adoptive father, Caldo, set me free, he’s only brought me to a different prison. Every day, I’m thrown into this underground facility to produce these damn rocks. Caldo’s never treated me like a son, and he’s only gotten worse. And the worst part is that he won’t even let me have a dog of my own.”

Based on the timeline of events, Sidis figured Caldo’s mistreatment of Seren had begun about a year prior.

“Caldo climbed to the top of the Donan ranks. With me steadily supplying stones for him, he’s gained more and more power. He’s even found a way to deal with you imperial folks,” Seren explained.

“With the power of suggestion?”

Seren nodded. In the incident a century ago, the Donans hadn’t used mind control. Their plan was to simply weaken the Light of Origin, and so they sent someone to throw themselves into the Light with a sword made of black stone. That was why they’d never manipulated Kirstin. It was only very recently that the cultists had somehow learned their stones held such power.

“The only reason why Caldo adopted me is so that I could use my status to go anywhere I want. More precisely, it was to get me into the imperial palace so I could go around unchecked,” he explained.

That made sense to Sidis. Foreign royalty had a lot of freedom and rights

opposed to servants. Using the matchmaking event for example, Seren came into contact with guards on duty and could easily control them. And if worse came to worst, he could use the power of suggestion on other foreign dignitaries to turn them into his scapegoats.

“But if you possess such power, why do you not stand up for yourself?” Sidis asked.

“Stand up for myself...?” Seren blinked blankly at that ridiculous statement. “I have far too much to atone for.”

“So it’s true, then? You killed the prince’s fiancée?” Sidis still couldn’t imagine someone so kind to animals was a murderer.

“Oh, so you knew? I only learned of it after they forced me to use the stones to make the green light. Apparently the monsters I lured wreaked havoc on the town where we lived,” Seren said, averting his gaze. His face scrunched up more with every word. “Caldo and his fiancée just happened to be in town when it happened. That’s how she died.”

After learning that Seren’s obedience to Caldo was out of guilt, Sidis hardly knew what to say in response. He wasn’t sure what he’d do to Seren if he were in Caldo’s shoes...but his brooding was cut short when an impact shook the cistern. Sidis scanned his surroundings, but it wasn’t apparent to him that anything had changed. That meant it had to be something above ground. Setting the mystery aside for now, Sidis scrambled to find the words to persuade Seren.

Lyse slipped from shadow to shadow, periodically checking over her shoulder to make sure she wasn’t being tailed. It certainly wasn’t the quickest way to get around town, but she managed to arrive at the West 10th district earlier than the ransom note instructed. She scanned the area for signs of life and heaved a sigh of relief when she found her own people.

“How did things go?” she asked them.

“We’ve scoured our records and it seems like you were right, Miss Lyse—the cistern really hasn’t been filled in,” replied a man dressed in casual commoner’s clothes. He was wearing a short blue coat, carrying a short sword on his hip,

and holding a folded map in his hand—nothing that would suggest that he was a knight or even a soldier. Rather, he was the overseer of the capital's waterworks department and a mage who specialized in crafting subterranean plumbing. He knew everything there was to know about the water beneath the city streets. "I showed Lord Sidis a map of the interior and told him the same. Judging by the draft from the vents and the fact that he hasn't returned yet, I'd put my money on the cistern being occupied and in use right now."

"I hope he's okay in there..." Lyse muttered to herself.

"We'll do all we can to ensure the plan goes smoothly, Miss Lyse," the overseer said encouragingly. "Just one thing, though. The currents have changed lately, so it seems like there's a new reservoir down there."

"Do you know where?"

"Right under where they've asked to meet you, actually."

Contrary to its name, Building 13 in the West 10th district was actually a bare plot of land. The residents in the neighborhood even took great care to keep it mowed, as letting it grow wild would attract insects. And, as the overseer reported, it turned out there was a pocket of water right below the lot.

"What are they up to?" Lyse wondered. Had the enemy planned a pitfall, perhaps? Did they mean to plunge Lyse and her knights into frigid waters, then slaughter them while they were in shock? "Well, no matter. First, let's drain the water. If we hide down below, we can catch the enemy by surprise and eliminate them if all goes well."

"Yes, ma'am. There's no existing infrastructure there now, but we'll get to work right away." Acknowledging Lyse's request, the overseer ordered his workers to start the construction immediately. They entered the service corridor and proceeded underground.

"Ah, hold on. Would a few of you accompany us? Just in case the enemy is lying in wait below," Lyse called out to the knights waiting behind her before they descended together.

As the service corridor led directly into the cistern—in other words, the enemy base—there was a risk that the terrorists might be ready and waiting for

Lyse. It was also possible that the terrorists planned to use the corridor as their escape route after they killed her. If a fight were to break out, she wanted reassurance that she could protect the construction mages.

“How predictable...”

Just as she anticipated, Lyse and her party encountered suspicious figures shortly after entering the underground. They swiftly defeated the lot of them and scoured their belongings, but nary a one was carrying anything to prove their identity.

“The prince isn’t with them either,” she said after examining the detainees.

This meant she wasn’t any closer to figuring out what was afoot, but she was nevertheless glad to be rid of the ambush so soon. Meanwhile, the plumbers went about their work.

“We just finished diverting the waterway, ma’am,” they soon reported to Lyse.

“Great. Could you bore a small hole through the wall next? We can use it to observe the situation on the other side,” she instructed.

From the service corridor, they could punch through to the main facility. Since Lyse had no idea as to the size of the enemy force, a peephole would make a good way to gather valuable intel. The overseer transmogrified a small circle of the rock and soil into sand only to find another wall just beyond it. He dug around with his finger, scratching at the new wall, but couldn’t make any progress—for it was made of black stone.

“Hmm... Can’t seem to get through this stuff,” he said apologetically.

“Do we need to make a larger hole, then?”

It was paramount that Lyse and her knights get a peek inside. But even when the construction mages widened the hole, all they found was a massive wall of black stone—or rather, stone pillars that stretched out to form a massive stone wall. They continued to stretch and grow, crystallizing black stone to fill in the hole that the mages had just opened before their very eyes.

“Be careful, Miss Lyse!” warned one of the accompanying knights.

“You’re right. Let’s return for now.”

Heeding the knight’s warning, Lyse agreed to cover up the hole they’d bored and regroup on the surface. Once they’d all hurried back above ground, Lyse dismissed the construction mages.

“This phase of my plan hasn’t gone quite as expected...” she mumbled to herself.

Lyse had intended to take her knights and rendezvous with Sidis to quash the enemy’s entire force in one fell swoop. But now she had little choice but to wait for her foes to show themselves.

“We can’t just sit here idly, though...”

Lyse knew Sidis wouldn’t do anything too rash, but at this rate, she was leaving him to fend for himself. Moreover, the black stone below was an unforeseen element. Lyse couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to her beloved.

“Miss Lyse, one of the captured terrorists has awakened,” reported the knight who was watching over the five cultists they’d detained in the service corridor.

“Does he know anything?” she asked.

“Not much, ma’am. They were just told to stand by for any of their allies escaping via that route.”

That meant there was no further information to be gained from the captured cultists. But all was not lost, for it was about then that Alcede’s troops arrived. They urged Lyse to come with them. She complied and was escorted to a nearby alleyway for a surprise.

“Your...”

She stopped herself short when she saw a white dog sitting beside Alcede. She could tell by their behavior it was Egbert and not Sidis. Observing them, it was clear to Lyse that the emperor had come back alone.

“Miss Lyse,” Alcede called out, “Sidis is still investigating the cistern below. We’ve confirmed that Seren and his cohorts are down there as well.”

Egbert nodded along and gave his account of what had happened, including

how he'd been poisoned and what he'd learned of Caldo's position within the cult. "I'm sure Sidis will be back shortly," he said to reassure Lyse, but she found no comfort in his words.

"I can only hope so. We failed to infiltrate through the passage underground. We tried tunneling through the walls, but the other side was covered in a layer of black stone," she informed him.

"Black stone, you say?!" Egbert and Alcede could hardly believe their ears.

"I saw nothing of the sort when I was down there..." the emperor protested.

"Are you sure you didn't simply hit a storage room chock-full of them? They could have spilled out of the hole you made if there were enough of them, and the cultists would need a *lot* in order to turn so many people into dogs," argued Alcede.

"The stones grew right in front of my eyes, like they were forming pillars," Lyse explained.

Egbert grumbled, "I suppose there's more going on here than we know. We still don't yet understand the green light by the city walls either."

"Well, let us wait for Sidis for the time being. Perhaps he may bring us more information," Alcede suggested.

The three of them stood waiting by the shaft that Egbert had escaped from, but even after ten minutes elapsed, there was no sign of Sidis following.

"The designated hour is nearly upon us," Alcede informed everyone with a glance at his pocket watch.

"Could it be...? Was Lord Sidis captured?" It was nearly unthinkable, yet Lyse couldn't help fearing the worst.

Egbert placed a paw on her lap. "He'll be fine if he remains in his canine form. It would be too rash to execute a dog, even for them."

In spite of his comfort, Lyse remained quiet.

"At any rate, there's little we can do but strategize about how to rescue Sidis as we proceed," Alcede said as he slipped his watch back into his pocket.

"There's some cause for concern, but sticking to our plan and attacking the

terrorists is the best way forward. We should be able to save Sidis along the way. I'll go ahead and inform our people that the enemy may have captured another dog."

Lyse nodded in agreement. It was their only hope of taking control of the situation. While they didn't know Sidis's current status, nothing would be resolved without taking down the Donan terrorists.

The clock struck two hours to midnight, and Lyse departed her hideout in the 11th district for the appointed meeting location. Building 13 was as barren as ever—Lyse could sense no presences upon her arrival. A few minutes passed before five figures approached. The man at the front of the group drew down the hood of his black cloak. The dark of night would have concealed his face if not for the lanterns he and his men were all carrying. Lyse recognized the middle-aged man. She'd seen him with Seren from afar before.

"As expected, Prince Caldo of the Alstran Kingdom," Lyse hailed.

"Welcome, Miss Lyse Winslette. I appreciate your cooperation in coming," replied Caldo with a grin.

"Show me the dog first, if you please. I'd like to make sure he's safe and sound."

"Bring the dog."

As instructed, a man stepped out from behind Caldo carrying a white dog. It was about the right size, but Lyse could see that the length of its fur and the shape of its tail were different. She let out a sigh.

"I see you're not sincere about this negotiation," she uttered coldly. "Goodbye."

"What are you... Hey!" Caldo panicked when Lyse turned to leave. "Cheeky wench. You want your dog?! Come over here!"

"And why should I? I can hear you just fine from here."

Try as the Donans might to pull the wool over her eyes, Lyse was no fool. Caldo wanted her to step into his trap. That much was obvious. And when she

wouldn't do it, he snapped his fingers, signaling five more men to appear around Lyse. They all towered over her, their swords drawn and at the ready.

"Be a good girl and do as I say, and nothing will happen to you. Now get over here," Caldo crowed when he saw Lyse surrounded, boldly assuming that she had no way out.

But he was wrong. Scornfully, Lyse clapped her hands twice. Caldo's triumphant smirk turned to a blank stare when he heard her own signal, and that stare turned to alarmed confusion when he heard a stampede of footsteps descending upon their location. It was not the thunderous stomping of boots, but the clacking of claws against stone pavers—complete with excited panting. It was a brief auditory foreshadowing of the twenty-some large dogs that were about to encircle the men surrounding Lyse. Taking down a single hound would be easy for them, but the possibility of Lyse siccing a dozen or more on them was terrifying. Naturally, the dastards shrank back.

"Y-You harpy! I told you to come alone!" Caldo barked.

Lyse shrugged. "You said not to bring anyone with me, but you never said anything about dogs," she quipped.

Caldo's eyes rolled back into his head. "What are you waiting for?! End her! End her now!" he bellowed to his men.

The ruffians trembling around Lyse pointed their blades at her. The instant they did, the dogs cast spells that blew them tumbling across the empty lot. They shrieked as one of many planted pitfall traps opened up, casting them down to the bowels of the cistern.

"Curses!" Caldo exclaimed as he attempted to flee the scene.

Unfortunately for him, Lyse had accounted for this. Knights emerged from the dark alleyways behind Caldo and immediately closed in on him. Fortunately for the Alstran prince, however, there was one easygoing imperial around...

"Okay, okay. That's enough," said Alcede. "That's one count of abducting a dog from the palace and one count of assaulting imperial royalty. You know, it's terribly hard to turn a blind eye to either of those charges, so I'll just have to arrest you and throw you behind bars," he informed Caldo with a smug smile.

The Alstran prince's face contorted as he jammed a hand into the breast of his cloak. "Imperial scum!" he shouted as he hurled some kind of sand at the knights in front of Alcede.

They crumpled to the ground as if their legs had suddenly given out. Lyse gasped at the sight.

"Everybody, get back! That powder will drain any magic you have!" she called to the dogs behind her.

It would be a catastrophe if the dogs had their magic dispelled, as they were really knights and infantry transformed by Alcede's magic. They *absolutely* could not revert to buck naked humans in the middle of the city. Fortunately their rear flank was uncontested, allowing them to fall back as instructed. Alcede, too, ordered his knights to retreat and the able-bodied to carry away the fallen.

"Alcede! Scatter them across the lot!" Lyse instructed.

"You got it!" The duke withdrew a few steps and blasted the remaining cultists with a spell.

Caldo was somehow able to counteract Alcede's magic with his own, but his lackeys were sent screaming across the grass. Unlike their comrades earlier, however, this wasn't the end of them—they stood up from the holes they'd fallen in, grinning. There was apparently some kind of trickery at play, but before the shock settled on Lyse, Alcede had already cast another spell to knock out the still-standing hostiles.

Yet, strangely enough, something else rose in their place. Pillars of black stone stabbed up from the ground like a flurry of swords—apparently what the prince's henchmen had used as footing.

Lyse furrowed her brow. "Are... Are those the Donan stones?"

Caldo cackled as he approached the closest spire, drowning out her mumbling. "Poor timing, but a wonderful development nonetheless! With this much stone, I'll turn every single person in the capital into a dog!"

Judging by Caldo's words, Lyse inferred that he'd planned to produce these black stone pillars all along. Whether that was supposed to happen before or

after capturing her was uncertain. With them, however, he could eliminate any resistance to his plan by turning everyone into dogs—and he would surely use that power to go after the imperial family. The prior incidents around the capital had likely been experiments to see how much power the Donans needed in order to transform imperials.

“Would that explain the incident at the city walls, then? Wait... This is no time for reflection,” she mused before coming to her senses. She reached into her pocket, then shouted, “Get big and carry me to the sky!” An avian monster she produced immediately grew in size and lifted Lyse on its back.

Meanwhile, Caldo began using the black stone pillars to warp the mana of everyone around him. The canine soldiers were unaffected since they’d retreated far enough. However, two knights with Alcede were too slow and got caught in the attack, sprouting doggy ears and tails as a result.

The Alstran prince showed little regard for himself despite Lyse swooping down at him upon a giant bird. “You too, girlie! Turn into a dog for me!”

“That’s not going to work!” Lyse shouted in response as she and her mount collided with Caldo, knocking him to the side of the road. He lay sprawled out and groaning atop the stone pavers, oblivious to the fact that Lyse retained her humanity in the presence of his dark power thanks to the Light within her.

“Seize him!” she commanded the bird after alighting. Its talons gripped the prince tightly, preventing him from even wriggling about. “Duke Alcede!”

“On it!” Alcede responded. He knew exactly what he needed to do when he heard his name, springing into action to put Caldo to sleep with magic. Lyse’s avian monster then carried the prince over to the knights, who promptly secured him.

“It’s still dangerous to linger here, so please get back, everyone,” Lyse instructed as she plunged her hand inside the backpack she was carrying. She withdrew a handful of white rock chips taken from around the Light of Origin. “I hope this works...” she muttered as she lightly pressed a piece against one of the black stone pillars. That was enough to cause a crack, and when she held the crystal in place, the crack grew larger and larger.

“How’s it working?” Alcede asked, checking up on her.

“Better than I expected. Would you mind helping me take care of the Donans first?”

The cultists Alcede had rendered unconscious would still pose a threat if they awoke and started using the stones’ power to control the imperial knights. Mindful of this, Lyse had them moved away from the pillars and asked the soldiers to secure them. She also had the forcibly transformed knights evacuated to safety. Then, one by one, she began pressing the white crystals to the black pillars.

“That looks like it will take a while,” Alcede chimed in. “Could I lend a hand?”

“If you would, please. Thank you,” Lyse replied graciously.

After gingerly poking the white rocks to make sure they were safe for him to handle, Alcede took a sample of them from Lyse. A few knights followed suit. The power of the Light within them was so strong, however, that holding the crystals for too long burned some of the knights. Instead, they opted to bag up the chunks of black stone for safekeeping.

Others yet cast light magic to illuminate the night and make work easier for those tending to the pillars. Alcede briefly paused in the task to revert the canine soldiers to their human forms so that they could help out as well. But even with everyone’s cooperation, progress was slow.

“If only this were quicker...” Lyse said under her breath.

Anybody with mana could use the Donan stones to control the minds of others, and Caldo had secretly produced the stones to exploit that power. Just thinking about it made Lyse restless. Even more nerve-racking, Sidis was still somewhere inside the cistern and might be in trouble because of it.

“I hope he’s all right. Sidis, I mean.” Alcede was worried as well.

“His Majesty made it out before any unsavory rumors started, and more importantly, we’ve now captured Prince Caldo. We just need to deal with these pillars and collect Sidis, then this whole mess will be wrapped up,” said Lyse, her thoughts pouring from her mouth. “Come to think of it, he could be right underneath us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if Sidis were safe, he should have made it out by now. If he’s been detained for some reason, don’t you think it’s because of these Donan stones —”

Before Lyse could finish her sentence, she lost her balance when a piece of a pillar gave way beneath her, sinking one of her legs into the ground. There was supposedly a pocket of water underneath the empty lot—in other words, where the pillars were sprouting from. Given their size and how many there were, she easily found some footing on another...but that, too, broke away under her.

“Miss Lyse!” Alcede called out as she plummeted into the cavern below with a scream. Thankfully, he finished his spell just in time to ensure her a safe landing.

Bewildered by what had just happened, Lyse noticed a chip of white rock at her feet. It must have fallen from her hand and, with her weight on top of it, cracked the pillar she’d been standing upon. Since they spired up at angles, she’d naturally tumbled downward into the pit beneath it.

“There’s not much room down here at all...”

The space was tight enough that Lyse couldn’t fully extend her arms. She sat in place for a moment while contemplating her next move. Should she continue her work from down there, or ask Alcede to pull her back up? As she pondered the answer, from out of the blue...

“Lyse!” someone called.

Lyse recognized the voice—it was Sidis, and he was close. She looked around but couldn’t see him anywhere. Though there was some illumination underground, the dense black stone pillars didn’t do much for visibility. Lyse squeezed her way between them to emerge on the other side of the pillar forest. There, she finally spied the silvery glint of Sidis’s hair.

He’d returned to human form but was dressed in unfamiliar clothes, which he must have borrowed off of someone’s back upon reverting. Gripped tightly in his hand was Seren’s collar, with the Alstran youth’s head dangling down. Lyse was glad to see him in one piece.

“Lord Sidis, thank goodness you’re all right!” she exclaimed. “And what happened to Seren?”

She saw his vacant gaze, but she was more astounded by what rose in front of him—the green light sprouting from the black boulder. Everything within their vicinity was colored by its glow. It was wide enough now that it would take both arms to encircle.

“This means the green light...” Lyse muttered.

“Yes. Seren created it,” replied Sidis. “This is how the terrorists have been acquiring their stones. But how did you get in here? I was trapped inside because I didn’t have enough power to break through the stones.”

Lyse thus shared her story with Sidis. She told him how things had gone with Caldo: how he’d planned to amass the stones, lure her out to capture her, use his stones around the city to control the knights, and eliminate her for once and for all. Then, after disposing of his chief obstacle—Lyse—he’d meant to use his stones to control the populace and launch an attack on the emperor.

“Though we captured Caldo without much problem, the stone pillars persisted. So I tried using the white crystals to destroy them, but as I was doing so, the ground gave way and I fell down here.” Alcede and the others should still be hacking away at the black stone, but it was regenerating too quickly because of Seren.

“Caldo has been...?” Seren muttered in concern.

“Yes, we’ve already arrested him. I suggest you help us resolve things now,” Lyse admonished.

“I see. I suppose I’ve lost the chance to atone for my sins,” he said, hanging his head low again. With that, the green light grew even larger and another pillar shot up out of nowhere, almost completely covering Seren. It was clear that the light fed on his state of mind.

“Please calm down, Seren! And what did you mean by that?” Lyse asked.

“This power of his attracted monsters that led to the death of the prince’s fiancée. He’s racked with guilt over it,” Sidis explained.

“The prince’s fiancée?” Lyse replied quizzically. “I don’t think Caldo has ever had one.”

This statement shocked Sidis. Even Seren whipped around in disbelief when he heard it.

“We dispatched imperial knights to investigate the Alstran prince and Seren, and we just received their report.” Lyse proceeded to divulge its contents. “The prince was the illegitimate child of the late king and a commoner, yet surprisingly, he was accepted into the royal family as one of their own. Because of his lineage, he was temporarily entrusted with some crown land. However, when the previous king passed away, that land was relinquished—meaning Caldo’s descendants would never inherit it. The part that *isn’t* a surprise is that Caldo never wed an Alstran aristocrat, as the king forbade him from marriage.”

Prince Caldo’s mother was supposedly a second-or third-generation descendant of an exiled imperial. She was used by the late Alstran king to produce heirs with mana. However, Caldo had proved to be less magically capable than desired. Still, the king had acknowledged the bastard as his son in hopes that his powers would grow with him. That was how Caldo had come to be a prince.

“So that’s why he has it out for the empire,” Sidis surmised. Caldo likely blamed Razanate for his situation, and he’d probably grown up listening to his mother’s grievances about the empire too.

“But... No...” Seren was at a loss for words.

Seeing this, Sidis said to Lyse, “I have an idea. Take out all the white rocks you have.”

She did as instructed and dumped the contents of her backpack out in front of them, forming a small mountain of crystals.

“Now put one hand on the pile and hold my hand with the other.”

Sidis’s hand pulsed warmth through to Lyse’s. It was the Light of Origin’s power. And when she then channeled that warmth to her other hand...a pillar of white light shone from the white rocks.

“Whoa...”

The beam was no wider than the grasp of Lyse's hand, but it was indisputably the Light of Origin. Perhaps because they'd created it themselves, the three of them felt all of its warmth but none of its force. The white beam bathed the pit in its light, crumbling the black pillars upon contact. They came crashing down into small white dunes like they were made of sand.

"I was certain this would work when I witnessed Seren do it. We just needed the rocks from the Light of Origin," said Sidis.

Lyse looked to Seren. With the stone pillars collapsed, the radiant white light made it easy for her to see him. He sat stock-still, staring at Lyse and Sidis's intertwined hands.

"Where could I..." he muttered. Lyse couldn't make out what he said, but that was all that came out of his mouth.

Even with the white light shining in the cavern, Seren's green light persisted, summoning more black pillars to replace the ones that had just crumbled. No progress could be made at this rate—they'd have to kill the green light.

"Lyse, I believe Seren's the same," Sidis said. It took Lyse a moment to understand what he meant.

"Seren!" she called out to him. He looked visibly shaken for a few seconds, expecting to be berated for causing this situation. Yet what Lyse said next surprised him. "Take my hand!"

He suspiciously eyed her outstretched hand before Sidis pulled him over by the arm. Seren then grabbed her hand in the heat of the moment. The very instant he did, a jolt of electricity ran through them. Seren reflexively tried to pull away, but Lyse was holding on tight.

"I'm sorry, Miss Lyse. I ran off with your dog all because I couldn't stand up to Caldo. I don't know if you can ever forgive me, but I'm so sorry for what I did..."

"I understand. I forgive you," she calmly replied, much to Seren's astonishment.

His shock was only natural. He'd never thought Lyse would so simply accept his apology and forgive him for stealing her dog. In truth, Lyse couldn't fully absolve him for that he'd done, but there were more important things right

now—they needed to purge the black stones. She'd merely said what she needed to in order to keep him focused on the task at hand.

"You..." Seren hesitated as though he thought he'd misheard her. "You forgive me?"

"Yes. But let me beseech you one thing."

"What can I do?" he inquired curiously.

"Could you touch that boulder for me?"

Seren paused, taking in what she said with a smile before responding, "Sure."

Lyse was referring to the black boulder producing the green light, and Seren, thinking nothing of her straightforward request, complied.

"I want to send my power into that boulder," she explained. If Seren were the same, as Sidis had said, then it should work without any problems.

"What do you mean by sending your—"

"Let's just give it a shot. Don't let go of my hand, okay? Here we go!"

Thinking that Seren would have his answer if she simply acted instead of explaining further, she ignored him and proceeded. If all went according to plan, it should extinguish the green light effortlessly.

Lyse channeled the Light of Origin from inside her to Seren. Normally, this would have had little effect on anyone, but the brief flinch of his shoulders indicated he felt Lyse's power moving through him. Needless to say, the unknown force surprised him and he would've jerked his hand away if not for Lyse gripping it with all her might.

And then—the boulder cracked. The noise reverberated through the cavern as a white light seeped out of it. Just as the trio braced for the soft light to turn into a blinding flash, it fizzled out, turning the boulder an ashen gray. With that, the green light was no more. What remained of the boulder crumbled into a mound of dust in the blink of an eye, and the pillars ceased growing.

In the middle of the now tranquil forest of black stone, Seren finally gulped and wondered aloud, "What was that?"

“That was the power within me—the power of the Light of Origin,” Lyse answered truthfully.

“So you really do possess the Light...” Seren muttered, seeming to understand. “That must mean my power to call monsters and conjure these controlling stones is fiendish in nature. Your Light destroyed what my darkness created, after all,” he said, hiding his pain behind a mask of laughter.

“You have it wrong. Since I could channel my power through you, you, too, possess the Light.”

“What...?” Seren’s mouth hung open in disbelief.

“There’s no doubt. Like us, you have the Light within you,” Sidis added.

“But I was producing those black stones...” Seren refuted, unconvinced.

“I believe your Light was warped when it passed through that boulder. Since your Light is weaker than ours, it couldn’t overcome the influence of the black stones and instead fostered their growth. Nevertheless, they’re fundamentally the same,” said Sidis.

This got Lyse thinking. Both the black stones and the Light of Origin attracted monsters, so it wasn’t hard to believe that they were similar.

Seren sat there, staring wide-eyed at Sidis and Lyse. Tears streamed down his cheek. Lyse panicked for a second, wondering if she’d said something wrong or if perhaps they’d overwhelmed him by saying too much at once. But such was not the case.

“I’d always thought my powers were demonic. It pained me to see the Light of Origin for myself, to think that what was inside me couldn’t be further from such beauty. But if they’re truly the same...”

“The exact same,” Lyse assured him. “The average human body would reject the Light, and certainly wouldn’t conduct it from one host to another.”

“We’ll switch things up and do it again to prove it,” Sidis said as he yanked Seren’s hand to the white rocks.

Seren wanted to pull away as soon as he touched them, almost as if they hurt him, but Sidis wouldn’t allow it. Once again, he and Lyse channeled their power

into the white rocks and created a bright white light. Like petals carried on the wind, particles of its luminescence scattered and blanketed the room. With every pillar they touched, another pile of sand formed on the ground.

“There they go,” Sidis said, watching the black stone pillars collapse to reveal a hole and twinkling stars overhead.

Like someone woken from a deep slumber, Seren squinted at the brilliant white Light of Origin standing thin and tall against the backdrop of the night. At last, he looked around, then at Lyse and Sidis. “You know, the truth is that I...”

“I know,” Sidis acknowledged.

Lyse added, “Lord Sidis and I are the same way. So, why don’t you come back to the palace with us? I’m sure that if you use your power to help us, His Majesty will be gracious with his forgiveness.”

Seren, his heart as pure as a child’s, nodded readily.



Epilogue: At the End of the Mystery, Hope

Three days later, Lyse was walking through the courtyard after receiving a summons from Egbert and Sidis. Though the main culprit behind the recent terrorist attacks—Caldo the Alstran prince—had already been arrested, Sidis remained anxious about Lyse’s safety and insisted that she use a full-sized monster as an escort, just in case. She strolled alongside it toward a knoll overlooking the gardens, atop which sat a gazebo that was little more than white pillars and a climbing rose canopy for a roof. There, three people were already waiting for her: Egbert, Sidis, and Seren.

Though Seren was once their enemy, he was now essentially benign without any Donan stones. Moreover, his reclusive childhood had left him physically frail—even the lady-in-waiting Atoli, who’d once monitored Seren, appraised him as no match for a whelp—hence the lack of reservation about him sitting unrestrained in front of His Imperial Majesty the Emperor. Lyse could hear the party talking as she approached.

“I can’t believe we were fooled...” Egbert said to a sullen Seren. “Then we got the report saying that the monsters you lured caused a bit of property damage but no casualties.”

The emperor’s words cleared away the clouds hanging over Seren. “Am I glad to hear that no one was harmed,” he responded in low tones.

“I apologize for my tardiness,” Lyse greeted the men. Seren snapped around when he heard her voice, looking markedly remorseful in her presence.

“Sit, sit.” Egbert beckoned to Lyse, and she took him up on his offer. Lyse and Sidis flanked the emperor, with Seren sitting directly across from him.

“I’m truly sorry, Miss Lyse,” said Seren. He bowed deeply in his seat for fear that standing up would set off the imperial knights standing guard off to the side. “Not only did I kidnap your precious pet, I placed you in grave danger. How, um, is your dog doing?”

Both Sidis and Egbert were doing quite well, actually—but since it seemed like they hadn't let Seren in on the truth, Lyse could only smile politely. "Oh, he's fine. Thank you for your concern. And I was in no more danger than I would've been battling against monsters, so you needn't apologize."

Seren finally showed a wholehearted, genuine smile; he must've been terribly worried all this time. Along with Alcede's report, Lyse had heard from Sidis why Seren so adored dogs. She was convinced that he'd simply been an unlucky victim of circumstance. If he'd been born into the empire, rather than locked up as a child, he would've been warmly welcomed into the palace, for...

"Now, about your power, Seren... As they've explained already, you have the Light of Origin within you. That is why you were able to propagate those stones and summon monsters, even though you aren't capable of magic," summarized Egbert.

Lyse and Sidis had come to that realization at the time of the incident and subsequently extracted his power to amplify the miniature Light they created. As they'd suspected, Seren's contribution strengthened the Light enough to destroy all the regenerating black stone in the vicinity. Sidis had had a sneaking suspicion after noticing an odd phenomenon when he and Seren touched, but it was slightly different than with him and Lyse.

"Since Sidis and Lyse have the same power and they claim that you have it too, we've no reason to doubt them. But the most compelling evidence of all is that you can produce Light with this," the emperor said, flashing a white rock chip before stowing it back into his pocket. It seemed that he'd had Seren demonstrate his powers while Lyse was absent.

"I can scarcely believe it. I've always thought my power was only good for attracting monsters and making stones for indoctrination."

"Hasn't sunken in yet, has it? Keep using your Light and I'm sure you'll recognize your own strength soon," Sidis said.

"I wonder if a sinner like me could ever..."

A tinge of awkwardness colored the emperor's chuckle. "In any case, you'll be staying here for a while. We can't just throw you out of the empire and have you fall into the wrong hands, and you can't defend yourself with a sword or

magic.”

“Does that mean I’ll be jailed?” Seren readily admitted his crimes, but he nevertheless looked defeated at his prospects.

Egbert blinked blankly. “Jailed? Whatever for? We ought to protect you since you possess the Light. We’re going to overlook any wrongdoing you’ve committed.”

It was now Seren’s turn to blink in confusion. “But why...?”

“The empire needs everyone who possesses the Light, and I might need you to marry an imperial if the opportunity ever arises. We can’t possibly publicly decry you as a criminal, now can we? Your crimes are easy enough to write off, since, well, you haven’t killed anyone.”

In the end, Seren had done naught but transform a few dozen people into dogs, assemble monsters that caused a bit of damage to the city walls, and give the imperial troops a hard time. There was also the dognapping, but the confrontation with Caldo had only resulted in minor injuries to a few soldiers. Seren visibly relaxed after hearing the emperor’s thorough explanation.

“Thank goodness you aren’t responsible for anyone’s death, wouldn’t you say?” Sidis added.

Seren broke into a smile when the gravity of those words set in on him. “I humbly thank you for your grace and magnanimity, Your Imperial Majesty. And to you as well, Prince Sidis and Miss Lyse.”

“Be that as it may, we’ll still have to keep an eye on you. Just think of your entourage as your bodyguards. You *are* far weaker than Lyse, after all,” Egbert said. Being told that he lost to a woman in terms of strength did nothing to boost Seren’s confidence, but he was keenly aware of just how strong Lyse was.

“I do have something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Sidis chimed in after a moment of respite. “I heard that when you approached the Light of Origin, you said it reminded you of something familiar.” That had been while Sidis was in dog form, so there was no way he could’ve inquired further at the time.

“Oh, that.” Seren anxiously laughed before continuing, “Before seeing the Light, I had what I thought was a fragment of a memory with my parents. It was

only later that I realized I was mistaken.”

“What do you mean?” Lyse encouraged him to elaborate.

Seren nodded and explained to the small, attentive crowd, “A voice replayed in my head: ‘Truth be told, I wish I could’ve been protected like so.’ But that doesn’t make sense if I were reminiscing about my parents.”

Rather, Seren recalled the grand, warm Light and his own feelings.

“I wanted to believe that pleasant memory was of my parents, because as long as I could convince myself that I was loved—no matter how fleeting that love might’ve been—I could keep going. Keep living to see another day. Perhaps that desire twisted the memory in my mind. It only occurred to me when we created that light together,” Seren continued.

His words weighed on Lyse’s mind. He possessed the Light, and its warm comfort was familiar to him... That all coalesced into a wave of *déjà vu* that crashed down upon her. Lyse, too, had memories of her past and remembered the warmth of the Light. And if Seren associated that feeling with a memory of someone trying to protect a child, then...

Was he the culprit back then?

The only other two people who possessed the Light were Lyse, who’d died previously after being swallowed by it, and Sidis, who’d come into contact with it through her. If people who died from touching the Light were reborn with its powers, then wouldn’t that mean the culprit had ended up just like Lyse?

That realization was heartrending. At the time, the villa intruder was nothing more than an enemy to her, and neither Qatora nor Lyse ever regretted their sacrifice to save the captured child. But what if that life was the only thing the captor knew? What if he’d had no choice but to follow orders? What if he just wanted some kind of warmth in his life? If people had to resort to such desperate measures, then the fault lay with the empire. Lyse strongly believed in treating the root cause rather than the symptoms of a problem.

“I mean, I’d never been to the empire before, so how was I to know what seeing the Light would do? I thought the whole journey was fruitless, and that got me a little depressed. But little did I know I would meet you and Prince Sidis

here.”

“What about me and Lord Sidis?” Lyse asked in puzzlement as Seren looked straight into her eyes.

“You and Prince Sidis taught me about my power and where it comes from. Knowing that it isn’t just for summoning monsters made me...” Seren hesitated before continuing, “It made me feel better about myself, so thank you.”

With that, he casually grabbed Lyse’s hand—and Sidis tugged him the other way.

“Hey. She’s *my* fiancée, you know?”

After the initial surprise, Seren reached for Sidis’s hand too. “I know! And I love you too.”

“What’s with you?!” Sidis demanded as he shook Seren’s hand off.

“I’ll admit that I was envious seeing you so happy with someone to cherish. But when you heard me out and sympathized with me, I knew that you have a lot of love to give.”

“That’s why you said you loved me? Even though we’re both men?!”

“Did I phrase that poorly?”

“*That’s* what you’re worried about?”

“Well, yes. I’m still not very socially adept yet. I haven’t had much practice until recently, and when I asked Caldo for help, he told me to learn from my servants...”

Such a request might have had his servants under the wrong impression, given how Seren’s only social skill seemed to be hitting on women. Even if he hadn’t been afforded many opportunities to socialize after being adopted, it hadn’t proved much of a problem before now.

“Hm, maybe we’ll have you serve as a messenger as part of your training. Anyway, you’re free to use your current room as your own for now. We’ll settle you into more permanent accommodations later,” Egbert said with a wave of his left hand, concluding the conversation.

A knight standing guard nearby swiftly came and escorted Seren away. As he departed, he twice turned around and bowed to thank the three of them.

“Lord Sidis, could Seren be...” Lyse whispered.

“I was thinking the same. He may have been my abductor in his previous life.”

“That would explain why he has the Light,” Egbert added.

“Precisely,” agreed Sidis.

Though they only had Lyse’s experience to go off of, it was a convincing theory—dying by the Light meant being reborn with its powers.

“In any event, this must bring you two some peace of mind,” said Egbert.

“Yes, very much so. Not only have we apprehended the Donan leader, but we’ve also solved another problem,” replied Sidis.

“And what might that be?” Lyse wasn’t sure what he was getting at.

Sidis smiled and asked, “Lyse, do you know how old Seren is?”

She shook her head. He looked to be in his twenties, but since Lyse hadn’t been looking for a partner at the matchmaking event, she’d never seen a reason to inquire further.

“He’s fifty.”

Lyse paused for a beat. “He’s *what*?!”

Seren was fifty—fifty years old—though he barely looked older than a teenager.

“Are you saying that Seren ages like an imperial?” she asked.

“Not quite. Up until his twenties, he grew like a normal human. But it seems he hasn’t aged a day since,” Egbert explained.

Sidis picked up after the emperor. “Caldo only learned of Seren once he was well past his twenties. However, his lasting youth was apparently intriguing to the prince. Since Seren also proved able to produce the green light, Caldo schemed to plant him in the empire. While the prince waited for the perfect moment to execute his plan, he adopted Seren for his strange powers.”

This was a lot of information to take in at once for Lyse. She'd known that Seren didn't have any mana, which was why he was unable to use magic, much like herself. But if he still had a longer life span...

"Does that mean I might get to live longer too?"

"It's a possibility. You're still in your teens, aren't you? If you take after Seren, never mind if he starts aging now, you still might reach a century." Sidis moved beside Lyse and held her hand. "And that means I get to be with you for longer than I'd imagined. Words can't describe how happy I am, Lyse."

"Me too, Sidis. Me too!" she said much to his delight as he embraced her. She had to bury her face in his shoulder to keep her emotions in check. But then...

"Come on. You two ever thought about getting a room? You know I didn't ask for a show, right?" Egbert heaved a sigh.

"Please excuse us, Your Imperial Majesty. Perhaps we shall take this elsewhere, where people would like to see us," Sidis said, chuckling to himself.

"You're telling me people *want* to watch that?"

"Duchess Kirstin instructed us to put our affection on display at the next matchmaking party. It seems two couples have started courting, and she thought our example might hasten things along for the rest."

Indeed, the matchmaking had continued all the while in the background. Though Goldilocks and Freyja had found matches, the others had yet to do so. Kirstin wanted everyone to be in a marrying mood by the end of the event, so she was still enlisting more imperial bachelors and bachelorettes.

"Go then, for your emperor and his empire." Egbert had a good laugh and sent the happy couple on their way, so they left their seats and the gazebo.

"By the by, Lyse," Sidis said as they began walking.

"Yes?"

"You said that when I hold your hand, you can't shake mine away, did you not? I had thought that was because of the Light of Origin." If that were the case, then it stood to reason that Lyse wouldn't be able to shake Seren either, but all that she felt from him was a spark of electricity, unlike the weakness she

felt with Sidis. “I think there must be more to it.”

“Do you?” Lyse had no clue what that might be, and as she smiled and waited for Sidis’s explanation, he took her hand into his. Per usual, Lyse was powerless to let go, but she did feel a sense of calmness.

“The Light comes from you and into me—the very Light that’s connected to your soul. That’s why you get a funny feeling when we touch.”

That made sense to Lyse. Sidis hadn’t received the Light straight from the source, or else he would have died too. It was natural that Lyse had a special connection to him.

He slipped his fingers between hers, interlocking their digits. “If I think about it like that, it wouldn’t have mattered when or how you were reborn. I’d still have met you one day. With the Light binding our souls together, I’m sure I’ll still be able to find you the next time around too.”

Sidis stopped in his tracks and pulled Lyse into his arms. “It destroyed me when you perished in the Light. But since it means that I can be with you forever, maybe it wasn’t for naught.” He smiled as he placed his lips on her cheek.

“Um, Lord Sidis...” They were standing in the middle of the wide-open lawn with nothing to hide them. Anyone out and about could see the couple, not to mention the people peering from the palace windows. “This is a little...”

Before Lyse could finish her sentence, Sidis sealed her lips with his own. She felt as though her heart helplessly melted in a puddle of bliss. She wondered if it might be because of the Light, but she could hardly maintain a rational thought as she let herself get swept away in the moment.



“We’re about to have an audience, you know? So we ought to practice alone until it becomes natural.”

“How can you be so sure no one is looking?” Lyse tried arguing, but she couldn’t overcome her shyness. It wasn’t as if she obliged Sidis, but at times like these, she couldn’t help indulging herself. There really wasn’t much she could do, fret though she might about prying eyes. She deeply loved Sidis, despite how he embarrassed her from time to time.

“Then let’s do something you don’t mind anyone seeing,” he said as he lifted her up into his arms.

“Wait! You’re not thinking of bringing me to the matchmaking venue like this, are you?!”

“We’re showing off just how intimate we are. This way, anyone can tell right away how much I love my betrothed.”

“Surely you can find another way!”

As much as Lyse objected, Sidis simply laughed and set off. Never did her feet touch the ground.

Afterword

Hi, everyone! Kanata Satsuki here. Out of all the books in the world, you chose to pick up the third volume of *The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting*, and I can't thank you enough for that.

This time around, even though Lyse and Sidis are already engaged, they get involved with an imperial matchmaking event. At the same time, there's a mystery for the couple to solve. Imperial and foreign nobles are mingling, and even though Lyse is only there to make sure things run smoothly, a foreign nobleman keeps approaching her.

Sidis thus gets jealous, which leads to a bit of an outburst. As you'd expect, the emperor turns into a dog. "Everybody's out there living their best lives" is the general feeling I wanted to depict. And since our couple's engaged, I also wanted to add in more lovey-dovey scenes between them. I hope you enjoy it!

The mystery behind the Donans also gets unraveled a bit. If you've read volume one, I hope you can connect the dots as to why the emperor became a dog! Or maybe it's just too obvious that I really like dogs...

Also, good news, everyone! *Lady-in-Waiting* is getting a manga adaptation, and I'd like to thank Akari Chikusa for her beautiful artwork. The way she draws Sidis is such a treat! My writing got touched up a little in the manga adaptation, and now it reads so much better. I'm at the edge of my seat every time I read the new chapters! It's published on Ichijinsha's Zero-Sum Online, and I'd be delighted if you'd give it a read there. My heart flutters whenever I see Sidis's expressions, and seeing the emperor the way he is in the manga brings me such joy!

As always, big thanks to my editor, even though I get questioned about the lack of cute fluff. Sorry about that... Also, I'd like to thank Ichige Yoru for the wonderful illustrations, cover, and the depiction of the love triangle in full color! I laughed so hard when I saw Sidis's fantasies drawn out.

This book wouldn't have come into being if not for the efforts and hard work

of the editorial department, proofreaders, and publishing team. And most of all, thank you, dear readers, for your support.

I've also included a bit of a postscript since I had the room to do so. It's set right after the matchmaking event, and it begins right after this afterword. I hope you enjoy it!

-Kanata Satsuki

Postscript: Love Gurus, Lyse and Sidis

Client 1

“Come in,” invited Lyse before the door swung open.

The visitor was a young man with short, black hair—one of the matchmaking hopefuls. He peered inside the small palace room, confirming its occupants on one of the sofas. Sidis beckoned him to come sit across from them.

“I heard that you are offering a counseling service today, but I hope my question isn’t out of bounds...” the young man anxiously probed.

Of course, Lyse didn’t discourage him from asking anyway. “We’re more than happy to listen to any concerns you may have regarding your relationship, and we shall help address them to the best of our abilities.”

“Thank you so much,” the man said, looking at her closely. She was a little puzzled by this.

Lyse and Sidis were offering relationship advice today, so she was expecting to field questions about people from outside the empire and their views on life. However, his inquiry was rather unexpected...

“Um, I’m wondering if Prince Sidis could help me with something,” he said.

“Shoot,” Sidis urged him.

After a brief moment of internal conflict, the young man entreated with all seriousness, “Prince Sidis, could you perhaps teach me an incantation to transform into a dog?”

“You’re asking me to teach you magic?”

Baffled by the question, Lyse stared at him blankly. She wondered how this had anything to do with the matchmaking.

The man explained, “Erm, the lady I’ve started seeing loves dogs...”

The only person that came to mind for Lyse was Goldilocks, as she'd enjoyed playing with the canine emperor and taking him on walks. Lyse also recalled that this young man had volunteered to go on one such stroll.

He continued, "And so, she asked me if it were possible to use magic to transform someone into a dog."

"She asked if you would turn into a dog for her?" Lyse never expected Goldilocks to have such a *niche interest*, but the young man shook his head.

"The other way around, actually. She wants to see what it's like to be one."

Lyse bit her tongue. To think that Goldilocks had such wild fantasies... Just what kind of repressed childhood did she have?

But Sidis was more wary of another aspect of the situation. "Did you tell her that there's a spell to turn into a dog?"

It wasn't public knowledge that such transformation magic existed. During the showdown with Caldo the other day, a handful of knights and infantry had learned of it, but the empire hadn't yet officially acknowledged that it could be used on just anyone. Opening up that dialogue ran the risk of people finding out that the abducted dog had actually been the emperor.

The young man, however, shook his head again. "No, I didn't. Though I did hear that such a spell was under development." Alcede must've thought up that excuse to explain why only a select few could use the spell. "I was hoping that you, Prince Sidis, could cast it on her."

"I have reservations about suddenly transforming a foreigner like that," Sidis replied. "Even healing magic often brings about side effects, so I worry that transformation magic would too."

"So it's potentially unsafe..." the black-haired youth acknowledged. Lyse thought he would let the matter go with that, but no. "Then, is it possible to cast the spell on me?"

"Say what?!"

Though Lyse was touched by his offer to become a dog for his love, Sidis was rather displeased. "Absolutely not. The spell has a major limitation."

“And what is that?”

“When the spell dissipates, you return to human form stark naked.”

It was hard to remain clothed as a dog because human clothes didn’t fit. Even if you could get them on, they were most uncomfortable.

“Is there no way it can be done?” the young man adamantly pressed Sidis.

Upon giving it some thought, Lyse wondered if it might be possible to slowly transform parts of his body, like what had happened to Egbert. That way, it would be feasible to stay dressed while partially transformed. “Um, how would you feel about keeping a humanoid form while having fur all over, doggy ears, a tail, and a canine head to match? Though you might more so resemble a bear standing on its hind legs...”

“I wouldn’t mind! Could we do that, please?” the young man practically begged Sidis.

After some difficult consideration, Sidis replied, “I’m not sure if it’ll work, but let’s give it a shot.”

Sidis’s spell was successful. According to him, the young man transformed into something like a dogboy, retaining his physique à la a bipedal dog. He and Goldilocks had actually just had a fight, and they were able to make up while he was in partial dog form. Shortly thereafter, they agreed to wed and live happily ever after in the empire. Goldilocks relayed this news with rosy cheeks, undoubtedly and genuinely happy with the outcome.

Huh. So there are people out there who are okay marrying dogs, thought Lyse. There were many boats in the world, and many ways to float them.

Client 2

“Please, come in,” invited Lyse.

With that, Freyja—the female knight with a beauty mark under one eye—entered the room. Lyse had heard that she’d started seeing the slenderest, most delicate young man from the matchmaking event and wondered what

kind of advice she was seeking today.

Freyja sat on the sofa across from the couple and got immediately to the point. “There is something I have been dying to ask you, Miss Lyse.”

“What is it? I will do whatever I can to help,” she responded.

Freyja blushed and nervously glanced over at Sidis. “I, uh, would like to inquire how I could carry a man without him objecting. I wish to go for a stroll with him in my arms.”

Lyse almost audibly gasped. She had expected questions about foreigners and their way of thinking, but this made two curveballs in a row. After collecting herself, she probed Freyja for more details. “Um, is there a reason why you came to me with that question?”

“If I’m being honest, I heard that you’ve carried Prince Sidis around before.”

“And from whom did you hear that?”

“Duke Alcede.”

Knowing Alcede, he’d spread the rumor for his own amusement. Lyse needed to get him back for that, and she plotted to replace all the sweets in his pockets with monsters. Getting back to the matter at hand, however, Lyse responded with a few ideas of her own.

“I understand, then. Well, I could only do so because Prince Sidis was happy to be carried...” That, and Lyse had sprung it on him by surprise. He never would’ve agreed otherwise.

“Did you not have any objections to it, Prince Sidis?” Freyja asked.

“I suppose that depends on who’s doing the carrying. I don’t think anyone would be fine being carried if they didn’t like or trust the carrier, no? I trusted Lyse, so I had no worries.”

“Worry? What could you have to worry about?” Lyse couldn’t think of any reason he’d be worried. At the time, Sidis had been more than happy to indulge her. He’d even said that it reminded him of his childhood with Qatora.

“So it’s all about trust, is it...?” Freyja ruminated aloud. “Thank you very much for your time.”

It seemed like something clicked for her.

A few months later, Lyse saw Freyja again and the knight thanked her. Freyja was now happily wedded to her man and they were living together in the capital. She said that she'd gradually earned his trust and was finally able to hold him.

"Whenever the chance arose, I demonstrated that I was strong enough not to drop him. Though it took some time, I was ultimately rewarded with the chance to carry him in my own arms."

"Oh. *That's* what you took from that."

It seemed like Freyja had understood "trust" to mean getting her fiancé to place confidence in her physical capabilities. But all's well that ends well.

"The way he was so bashful was adorable and it melted my heart," Freyja said with a blush.

To each their own, Lyse thought.

Bonus Short Story

Cleaning with Sidis

“I’ve *got* to do something about this mess...”

Sidis stood in the middle of a room littered with women’s clothing lying across the chairs, the bed—any available surface, really. The furniture was well worn, especially for the imperial palace. It was hard to believe the room was Sidis’s, but that was only natural given that everything in it—clothes and furniture included—had belonged to the late Qatora.

“I can’t possibly tell Lyse I have more than one room filled with her things...”

Everything Sidis kept in his personal chambers was particularly sentimental to him, but he’d received even more from the Harceval household. It wouldn’t all *fit* in his personal chambers.

“Lyse can never find out about this...”

As the couple would be moving into the villa in the near future, Sidis knew he needed to get rid of the evidence soon. Lyse would be absolutely disgusted if she ever discovered it. Even Sidis knew he’d gone overboard. He’d felt a need to surround himself with mementos of his late love, but his collection had grown to a mind-boggling scale over the years.

“But it’s not my fault, right? Qatora’s brother said that he couldn’t bear to throw out her things...”

Sure, Qatora’s older brother had had a hard time letting go of her belongings, but Sidis was the one who’d eagerly taken them off his hands. And now that it had accumulated into a liability, he now had to wonder how to get rid of it all. Giving it away would be difficult for him. Qatora’s clothes and wooden dressers could be taken outside and burned. Sidis figured he could melt down her swords and jewelry too. He didn’t care for the idea of them ending up in someone else’s possession.

“Now, how do I get this all outside without Lyse noticing?”

Sidis enlisted the help of the tight-lipped knights who guarded the Light of Origin, and they made a large bonfire to incinerate everything at once. He thus quietly managed to dispose of Qatora’s old belongings under the veil of secrecy. Alcede, however, still managed to find out about it a few short days later. He said nary a word to Sidis, but just knowing that he knew deflated the prince.

“Eugh...”



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The Emperor's Lady-in-Waiting Is Wanted as a Bride: Volume 3

by Kanata Satsuki

Translated by Osman Wong Edited by Megan Denton

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2021

Premium E-Book