

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnation

I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends

THE FIGUREHEAD QUEEN IS STRONGEST AT HER OWN PAGE~

2

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SAKURAI

illust. KASUMI NAGI



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Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy
Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 2

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Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy
Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 2

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Natalie
West Villa
Queen
Candidate

**Glenreed
Wolfvarte**
Wolfvarte's
Silver Wolf King.

I-Liena
North Villa
Queen
Candidate

Kate
East Villa
Queen
Candidate

**Laetitia
Gramwell**
A Duke's Daughter
who Remembers
Her Past Life as
an Office Worker
who Loved to Cook



Melvin

Glenreed's aide
and childhood
friend.

Hayruth

An artist from
Raiolbern.

Lord Aroo

A Wolf Who
Occasionally
Visits Iqetitia

Chapter 1: Strawberry Picking and Shortcake

I, Laetitia Gramwell, am a woman who possesses memories of a past life I lived in Japan.

I regained those memories in the same moment my fiancé, the crown prince, ended our engagement. As overwhelming as it all was back then, I now live a relatively calm and leisurely life.

After King Glenreed, the Silver Wolf King, granted me a royal villa to live in, I became friends with Gilbert, my new head chef. I bonded with the wolves who visited my home, and I met Berry, a Gardener Cat.

One day, as the chiffon cake scandal came to a close...

I became the owner of Fon—a griffin and the next fluffy friend to come live with me at the villa.

“Krah?!”

I stroked the soft white feathers of Fon’s neck. He puffed up his plume and squinted his eyes happily. The creature was easily over six and a half feet tall, judging by how far above me his own head rested. Fon’s upper body was like that of a bird of prey, while his lower half resembled a lion. Altogether, he was a bit too large to keep inside the villa.

“We’ll get you a house of your own, Fon. Do you mind waiting a little longer for it?”

“Kwah!!”

Fon responded by shaking his head from side to side. He was a creature clever enough to understand human speech.

For now, I had him living near the wooden crate he originally arrived in.

He didn’t hesitate to listen to my order. I watched him fold up his large wings and sit down inside the crate.

Though his size was incomparable, he reminded me of a dog curled up inside its doghouse, and I couldn't help thinking back to the Shiba Inu, Jiro, that I owned in my past life. My precious dog...or rather, my precious griffin needed a real home, and I hoped to give him one as soon as possible. I could probably use magic to build a suitable griffin house, however...

"I should get permission from His Majesty first..."

Fon's griffinhouse would need to be as big as an ordinary house for humans if he was going to fit inside.

Even though the king was the one who gave me this villa to live in, I still needed to inform him before I began building.

We also had other topics to discuss, such as Lady Natalie's punishment, his impression of the chiffon cake—if he had one—and many other details I was desperate to know about.

In my bedroom, I was busy pondering how best to contact the king, when...

"It looks like you've received a letter from King Glenreed."

The envelope was sealed with wax in the shape of the royal crest—the image of a sword and a wolf.

It was an invitation to meet at the castle tomorrow evening.

"How will you answer, my lady?"

The only person who addressed me as "my lady" was Lucian, the servant who had joined me in the move from our homeland. His black hair was neatly styled and his butler's uniform was wrapped elegantly around his tall, slender body.

"I'll take him up on his offer, of course. What perfect timing."

Fortunately, I was free tomorrow evening too.

Well, I was available most evenings, in fact.

"Aren't you free in the afternoons too?" you might say, but I did have certain noble duties of my own to carry out. Like playing with all the wolves.

"...I'll be a bit busy tomorrow, even outside of brushing the wolves."

"Indeed. I'll make sure the preparations are in order."

Lucian nodded.

I had something of an event in the works for tomorrow afternoon.

What exactly was I so looking forward to...?



“MEOW! Meow!!”

The next morning, in my bedroom: *“Time for battle!!”*

I could practically hear those words coming from Berry, the Gardener Cat.

She stood on her hind legs and gazed in my direction with glimmering light-green eyes. It was a stark contrast to her usual self—always lazily curling up into a ball wherever she could bask in the sunlight.

“Mraw mraw mraaaw!”

“Yes, I know, Berry. Wait just a minute, won’t you?”

I smiled at her insistent meowing, picked up a small basket, and stood up.

My first stop would be the potted plants around the window.

“They’ve grown nice and red thanks to you, Berry.”

“Meow meow!!”

“Exactly!” she seemed to cry.

The red, ripe, delicious-looking strawberries glimmered like gemstones under the light of the morning sun.

“It’s time to pick our strawberries!”

Finally, after so much waiting, they were ready for the two of us to harvest.

A familiar sweet-and-sour scent enveloped me when I stepped close to the pots. The plant’s green stems twisted on the runners, and the seeds embedded in the surface of each berry looked ready to burst out. They were the perfect ripeness for eating.

I delicately snipped the green stems with scissors, being careful not to damage any of the fruit. Each strawberry sat on the palm of my hand, perfectly diamond-shaped, and the sight sent my appetite into full gear.

Grooowl.

I heard a loud stomach gurgle.

But the sound didn't come from me—the culprit was Berry, who had her eyes locked on the strawberries as she watched from the side.

Despite the early morning light in the room, Berry's black pupils were enlarged. She must have been excited, I thought.

Berry seemed incredibly eager to experience the fruits of her own labor.

With her ever-present gaze on me, I placed the picked strawberries inside my basket. Each fruit was perfect and untouched by any hungry insects, either due to growing inside the house or perhaps thanks to Berry's powers.

Once I'd plucked all the berries that were ready to eat, Berry and I set out for her private strawberry patch outdoors.

"These ones are perfect too. Well done, Berry! Gardener Cats are incredible!"

"Mraw!!"

Her response sounded just like a boastful chuckle.

I gave my thanks to the tiny strawberry patch owner and crouched down toward the sweet, fragrant plants.

Berry had used her Gardener Cat powers to grow about thirty of them. The berries were in different stages of growth, with some plants sporting bright-red fruit already, while others were still speckled by tiny white flowers.

Just as I finished picking the ripe strawberries, one strange berry in particular caught my eye.

"It looks like..."

Unlike the other diamond-shaped strawberries, this one was wider than the rest. The tip was split into two equal points, forming something unlike the usual triangle. When I turned it upside down, so that the two lumps were facing the sky...

"A cat head..."

The strawberry looked just like the shape of a cat head, with two ears sticking

up at the top.

I held it up to Berry, the Gardener Cat, and took in the striking resemblance.

The unexpected twist of fate left me feeling warm inside. Berry, on the other hand, wasted no time tilting her neck and sinking her teeth into the strawberry.

“Hey! Bad Berry! You won’t have room for your meal if you eat them raw!”

Berry didn’t seem particularly bothered by this warning.

I smiled bitterly at her and decided it was time for the plan I’d made in case Berry’s appetite became a problem.

“Here you are, my lady.”

He really must be telepathic.

Lucian quickly passed me a ceramic bowl filled with a thick light-yellow liquid.

“When it comes to strawberries, nothing beats condensed milk.”

I scooped up the mixture of milk and sugar and drizzled it onto a freshly picked strawberry. The creamy sweetness of the thick condensed milk combined with the fruit to produce a heavenly flavor.

“Here, Berry. Would you like some too?”

I held out a drizzled strawberry to Berry, who had been eyeing me intensely. After giving it a good sniff, Berry sank her little fangs into the first bite. The cat looked flustered as she rushed to eat the strawberry before any condensed milk dribbled off it.

“Meow!! Mraw mraw mraw!!”

“Delicious! Gimme more!!”

...That sounded right to me, anyway.

Berry finished her snack quickly and stretched her paw pads out toward me.

“Hehe! Just one more for now, okay?”

I couldn’t resist letting her have one more when I saw that gesture.

Cats and strawberries. It was practically unfair—what an adorable combination they made.

I was squirming at the sight of the strawberry on her little paw pads when, just then, Gilbert emerged from the tree line.

“Good morning, Your Majesty. How is the strawberry harvest going?”

“Quite well. Every single berry is sweet, sour, and delicious. Would you like to try one?”

“Yes, by all means!!”

I handed him one of the strawberries I’d washed clean with a spell. After sniffing it lightly to get the scent, Gilbert took his first bite into the tip.

“...Today’s strawberries are quite tasty. I tried them back when we still called them Poor Man’s Gems, but both the smell and sweetness come through stronger in this batch. I can tell that a Gardener Cat grew these.”

Berry rustled her fur. She looked simultaneously proud and pleased to be complimented by Gilbert.

“Berry helped make them sweeter this time. ...Were the other strawberries not very sweet?”

“It’s not that. I merely meant they were less so than these ones. But even the sourer strawberries were refreshing and delicious in their own way. I certainly remember that they tasted better than those acidic Demon Gems, at the very least.”

“Oh my, is that r— Wait a minute!! What did you just say?!”

I can’t just ignore that statement, right?!

“You’ve eaten Demon Gems before?!”

“Yes, I have. They’re bitter and acidic, and under no circumstances would I ever describe their taste as appealing. The juicy quality was fine enough, but I don’t know whose palate such a berry could ever suit.”

His response sounded like some kind of culinary critique.



“Thank you for that review!! But aren’t they supposed to be poisonous?!”

“I’m still alive and well today, as you can see. Demon Gems are only dangerous when they’ve been prepared in a certain way.”

Gilbert let out a nonchalant chuckle.

“I-I see... So there’s no real effect when you eat them raw?”

“Only a grueling stomachache that lasts a day or so.”

“How is that not poison?!”

How disturbing.

Berry was silent, but I swore she seemed just as disturbed as I felt.

Gilbert had once tried eating some when he learned that one or two berries wouldn’t cause any damage.

He claimed he only wanted to memorize the taste so that he could recognize it on the off chance it was ever added to any food... But still, actually eating *any* Demon Gem seemed like much too extreme of a challenge.

“Well, I was still young back then, and I was extremely curious about what they might taste like. I thought maybe I could find a way to remove the poison for future meals if they turned out to be delicious; however...that wasn’t the case at all. It’s unfortunate.”

“...Yes, unfortunate indeed...”

I decided to simply nod along to Gilbert’s straight-faced criticism.

If Gilbert had been born in an earlier era in Japan, I wonder if he would have been the kind of person who challenged himself to make one of those dangerous puffer fish meals.

I knew his skills as a chef made him exceptionally attentive when it came to cooking ingredients. The whole reason he came to my villa in the first place was because he had voiced his concern over Lady Natalie’s diet.

He was generally the gentle, weak-spirited type, but I held a lot of respect for his earnest approach when it came to food.

Although...

That didn't make it any less shocking to hear him say he'd eaten an ingredient he knew was poisonous...

Please don't try such a thing at home, kids.

Berry and I both seemed equally taken aback by this unexpected side of Gilbert.



WITH admiration and concern for Gilbert tucked away in my heart, we teamed up together to harvest the rest of the strawberries.

Once we finished, we ended up with nearly a hundred, all at the perfect ripeness. Some of the remaining ones on the runners were still green, so we decided to come back every day to pick more.

With the sweet-and-sour scent drifting in the air, I returned to the villa, where I changed into an apron and dress.

I entered the kitchen and began to prepare the fruit right away.

Some of the fruit from outside had dirty streaks and damaged spots. I cut away these imperfections to use for my jam.

I had three strawberry dishes planned for that day.

First, a strawberry jam with sugar—versatile and easy to preserve.

Next was a chiffon cake made from crushed-strawberry batter.

Finally, the most famous strawberry treat of them all...

“‘Shortcake,’ is that right? It will be my first time both cooking and eating such a dish, so I sure hope we can make it a success.”

Clutching my handwritten recipe in one hand, the meek-faced Gilbert offered some words of encouragement.

A shortcake topped with bright-red berries.

Once I had the strawberries in my possession, this was a dish I couldn't resist making.

Fortunately for me, Gilbert and the other chefs had mastered the use of whisks—the kind I used in my past life—when we worked on perfecting the chiffon cake together.

With their help, I decided to take on the challenge of creating this world's very first shortcake.

“All right. Let's start with the batter.”

I set out the eggs, sugar, butter, and whipping cream for decorating the cake, then got straight to work. I cracked the eggs into a bowl, added the sugar next, and stirred them together with my spoon.

Next, I whisked them over a pot of hot water, to be sure the batter would eventually expand into a nice spongy texture.

Eggs don't whisk well unless they're warm, and the batter will stay stagnant without this step.

But I knew the batch would be ruined if it got *too* warm, which is why I removed it from the double boiler and continued to mix it away from the heat. From what I could recall, the ideal amount of heat was somewhere around body temperature.

Please turn out okay, I prayed as I whisked the mixture at full speed, then slowed down a bit to let the batter smooth out.

I continued to stir until the egg mixture was more solidified and kept its shape slightly when I lifted up the whisk. I then moved on to the next steps and added the cake flour and butter to the bowl, and once I'd given it a thorough mixing with a wooden spatula, I poured it into the cake mold.

Next, I dropped the cake mold onto the counter twice to disperse any remaining air bubbles in the batter, placed it in the warm oven, waited a while for it to finish cooking, then took the mold back out.

“That's a nice color and aroma...”

The freshly baked sponge cake was light brown on the surface and gave off a sweet smell.

Once I'd finished letting the steam out of the cake by dropping it onto the

counter again, I removed the cake from the mold and placed it on a rack to cool.

I checked on the strawberry jam the other chefs had been working on in the meantime, and then it was time to start on the strawberry chiffon cake.

The recipe was no different than a plain chiffon cake. It only included the extra step of adding puréed strawberries to the batter.

Without an electric mixer, the best I could do was place the strawberries inside a colander and crush them with a fork. I went about this as steadily and quickly as I could to ensure the aroma remained in the berries when they were properly puréed.

Once I'd mixed the strawberry purée into the batter...

"What a nice light-pink color that makes..."

A large-bodied chef was watching my hands at work.

With the most impressive physique of any of the kitchen staff, this man, nicknamed "Mr. Bear," was a sucker for anything cute. Mr. Bear, with his delicate taste, seemed to have had his heart stolen by the sight of the pink chiffon batter.

"There. Nice and mixed now. All that's left is to put it in the oven."

I decided to start assembling the shortcake while the chiffon batter cooked in the oven. I sliced the sponge cake into three circles and whipped up the cream with my whisk.

Next, I spread a layer of syrup over the slices of sponge cake and covered them with whipped cream.

Then I packed the top with strawberries, the stems of which I'd already removed, and covered them with even more whipped cream.

The bottom layer was sponge cake, the second layer was whipped cream and strawberries, and the third layer was even more sponge cake.

I slathered on a helping of the just-finished, rich strawberry jam for the fourth layer, then set another slice of sponge cake on top.

Finally, I frosted the entire five-layer cake with whipped cream.

“Once I smooth the cream out, I’ll finish it off with this star-shaped frosting tip.”

I’d used my magic to “transmute” a star-shaped tip for the piping bag I made out of soft cloth. With these tools, I used the remaining whipped cream to give the finished product some accents.

But there was no avoiding the nerves that came along with decorating the cake.

Mr. Bear bent his large body over to get a closer look.

“Ooh...!! It’s like little flowers are blooming on the cake!!”

With the star-shaped tip, the cream came out of the tube forming dainty white flowers.

Finally, I topped the surface with a careful selection of the largest strawberries in my collection, and with that, the red-and-white cake was complete.

“This is...a very beautiful cake indeed. The strawberries on top glisten just like jewels.”

Gilbert seemed quite impressed too.

His words made me feel a bit embarrassed, but now I knew that the appearance of shortcakes was deemed “beautiful” in this world too. It was a relief to hear he was pleased with the outcome.

The “strawberries” of this land were known as Poor Man’s Gems and hated by the natives here.

Despite this derogatory nickname, the inclusion of the word *gems* seemed to mean they had a favorable appearance, at the very least.

As for the flavor, since this world’s love of sweets was much stronger than back in Japan, I was confident the strawberry could still amass an army of fans here.

But this fruit was hardly ever eaten due to its resemblance to Demon Gems. It

was my hope that little by little, strawberry dishes would become more mainstream to the point that it wasn't uncommon to eat them during the springtime.

All of a sudden, I felt an intense gaze on my back.

I turned around, and sure enough, there was Berry. She was clutching her personal fork, a miniature utensil, and peering in from the kitchen doorway.

"Wait a moment. I'll slice the cake up right now."

Berry was the most important component in growing these strawberries.

I immediately began to cut into the round cake with my knife to present it to her.

The neat layers of yellow sponge cake and crimson berries peaked through from underneath the whipped cream with each slice.

Gently, I set a plate of cake topped with strawberries in front of Berry. She gave it a good look from each and every angle, then plunged her fork into the dessert.

"....."

Berry took bite after silent bite, whipped cream accumulating around her mouth.

I learned that Berry was the type to save the top layer of strawberries for very last.

Once she'd gulped them down, she began to cry "Mraw mraw mraw mraw mraaaw!!" with a satisfied look. I took it as an expression of gratitude in her little cat language. Her belly was full and round now.

"Mew, mew..."

Mumbling something else, the blissful-looking Berry started to fall asleep.

I gently lifted her up and brought her to her special bed in my room. Then it was time for the kitchen staff and me to taste test our strawberry creations.

I took a bite from my slice of shortcake.

My mouth was filled with smooth cream, soft sponge, and a juicy, sweet, and

sour burst of strawberries. The sponge cake melted on my tongue, sending waves of sweetness washing over my taste buds.

“Delicious...”

The faint hint of sourness from the strawberries made for a refreshing accent.

One of the cake’s strong points was being able to taste the sliced strawberries and strawberry jam together in one bite.

“It’s a fine-looking cake, and the strawberries taste even better when they’re added to things like this. I can really feel their potential as an ingredient...”

Good, good.

I seemed to have earned Gilbert’s stamp of approval on the taste.

The other chefs seemed surprised by the new concept of shortcake, but with each bite from their forks, their smiles told me they enjoyed it.

About three-fourths of the staff were eating the shortcake. The others still seemed put off by the shape of the strawberries, so they helped themselves to the chiffon cake instead. They seemed to tolerate the light-pink cake better, as no strawberries remained in their original shape.

“This is really good.”

“Yeah. The last chiffon cake was great too, but I prefer the sweet-and-sour combination in this one.”

“I wanna see if I can bring myself to try that shortcake next.”

Excellent reactions.

My strategy of gradually whittling away at their resistance to strawberries as a useful ingredient was working.

The movement would start with my chefs, then spread to their acquaintances and friends, making strawberries more widely accepted along the way.

“I’m glad to see them take to the strawberries. Now I just hope my talk with His Majesty goes as well...,” I murmured to myself.

Once night began to fall, I changed clothes for my next outing.

My dress was made of bright-green fabric, reminiscent of strawberry runners and stems, while the white lace trim resembled tiny strawberry flowers.

I finished changing, and one of my maids helped style and decorate my hair. Then Lucian and I boarded the carriage.

Lord Melvin was waiting for us when we pulled up to the castle.

This man, with bright-gold hair and a gentle smile, was King Glenreed's trusted aide. He led me into the castle until we reached our destination.

"It's been a while, my queen. Have you been well?"

His Majesty welcomed me when I arrived in the throne room.

Once again, the king was as beautiful a man as ever. His blue-green eyes, the color of a winter lake, were silently fixed on me. The candlelight cast a shimmer over his silver locks, emphasizing the perfection of his silhouette.

"Good evening, Your Majesty. Thanks to your generosity, I've been living a satisfying life in my villa."

"I see. I'm glad to hear it. ...Have you brought a gift with you?"

He was looking at the large wooden crate held by Lucian.

"Not exactly... I brought something I'd like you to see in person, Your Majesty."

I exchanged glances with Lucian, and he opened the box to retrieve the contents.

"Those plants...are Demon Gems... No, a similar fruit?"

"Indeed, they are not Demon Gems. I'm surprised you could tell at first glance, Your Majesty."

"...I have a good nose."

...Is that a metaphor?

Either way, His Majesty was most impressive.

Perhaps he was extra knowledgeable on the topic of poisons, seeing as how he sat atop the throne of this kingdom.

As I felt a surge of respect for His Majesty, our meeting officially began.

“I see these are not Demon Gems. So why bring a plant that so closely resembles them here?”

“That resemblance is the reason, as a matter of fact. I’m currently growing these back at my villa.”

“...And so you fear people will get the wrong impression.”

His Majesty nodded slightly while he stared at the strawberries. It seemed he’d understood. I was glad to see this wouldn’t be a long discussion.

The servants who worked at my villa knew I was growing strawberries, and they accepted this fact...but what if someone else, such as a person who was already hostile toward me for my title, caught wind of what I was up to?

The possibility remained that someone would mistakenly believe that I, the queen, was growing Demon Gems in my villa. It could easily spawn nasty rumors about me.

In my past life on Earth, I’d heard stories of police being called to investigate home gardens over plants that seemed to resemble cannabis.

Though I was a queen in name only, there was no such thing as being too careful.

Thinking back on it, one reason the chiffon cake plagiarism incident arose was because I spent too much time inside my villa, letting my guard down.

I had to explain the strawberries to His Majesty, the highest authority in the land, before they caused even more misunderstandings.

“I call these plants ‘strawberries.’ Their natural shape does indeed resemble Demon Gems, but these are not poisonous whatsoever. I’m growing them at the villa for their sweet flavor, which I believe is a great addition to certain recipes.”

“...So that’s why you’ve been so strangely happy lately...”

“Your Majesty? I didn’t quite catch that.”

The king crossed his long legs while he murmured something, as if to distract

from his words.

“No, it’s nothing. You have my permission to grow these at your villa. Do you have any other messages or requests for me?”

“Very well. Your Majesty, might I join you for a cup of tea?”

“Tea?”

“Yes. There are some treats I’d like to gift you that pair well with tea.”

With this explanation, he agreed to prepare a space for us.

One of the many small rooms adjacent to the throne room already had a table set up. The parlor wall was home to a giant tapestry that nearly stretched from floor to ceiling. It bore an embroidered silver wolf—the royal crest of the Wolfvartian royal family.

King Glenreed’s distant predecessor, the progenitor of the Wolfvartian royal family, was described in legends as a silver wolf, resulting in the current family crest. As I sat before the king, I silently noted how the crest wolf’s silver fur and green eyes reminded me of Lord Aroo.

Once a pot of black tea was brought out for us, Lucian, who had been standing at my back, lifted the cover from the tray.

“These are newly created sweets made from Queen Laetitia’s homegrown strawberries.”

Underneath the lid was a row of whole strawberries, their stems removed for easier consumption; strawberry jam in a glass jar; the light-pink strawberry chiffon cake, and the shortcake covered and decorated in whipped cream.

His Majesty seemed to be squinting at the bright-red, sparkling, whole strawberries that sat atop the cake.

“They really do look like Demon Gems when you see them up close.”

“They certainly do. But by no means are they poisonous.”

I smiled to quell his worries.

All foods presented to His Majesty were tasted for poison by his servants before they ever reached his own plate.

But that didn't mean the king was necessarily eager to eat the unfamiliar fruit in front of him.

I reached out and picked up a large strawberry to reassure him. Careful not to let any juice drip out, I bit into it and swallowed.

"As you can see, they're perfectly fine to eat."

I enjoyed the sour-sweet flavor of the strawberry while simultaneously offering physical proof of its safety.

"This jam is made from boiled strawberries, while the chiffon cake contains crushed strawberries in the batter. The jam will keep for a while, so please enjoy it at your leisure."

"Very well, I will. The cakes are ready to eat as they are, right?"

"...Yes. It would be an honor to have you try them, Your Majesty."

I nodded to him. On the inside, I was surprised by this unexpected development.

I really thought it would be enough to have him take a bite or two of strawberries and probably never try the cakes at all.

My previous gift to the king was my chiffon cake, which I only ever received a very formal reply about.

That's why I had assumed he hadn't been impressed by it at all. I even wondered if he disliked sweets altogether.

Today's strawberry chiffon cake was just intended as an expression of my gratitude, and I assumed his servants would be the ones to eat it after I'd left, so I couldn't help but be surprised by his remarks.

His Majesty dipped his silver fork into the chiffon cake and lifted a large bite to his mouth.

Is he going to like it? Will the flavor win him over?

I kept my nervous thoughts to myself as I watched him eat.

Though we'd been married for over a month now, it was our first time sitting down for tea together, I realized.

I felt strangely relieved to see the king dining on cake right in front of me.

His Majesty was a very disciplined man. It was hard to discern any emotions from him at all.

He almost resembled an ice sculpture in that sense, but seeing him eat and drink just like me was a reminder that this man was as human as I was. It was a somewhat amusing realization, so I decided to make a joke.

“How relieved I feel to know that you’re human too, Your Majesty.”

“...?!”

The king suddenly began to choke.

Did he get part of the cake stuck in his throat?

“Are you all right, Your Majesty? Can you drink some of your tea?”

“...! Where did that come from? Why would I be anything other than human? Don’t tell me you thought me to be a wolf or something so outrageous?”

“No, of course not. I only meant that in contrast to your usual noble aura, it’s just a bit unusual to see you dining like an ordinary person...”

“...Ah, I see what you mean. You nearly had me worried...,” muttered His Majesty, seeming unusually flustered.

“My apologies, Your Majesty. It was a poor attempt at a joke.”

“...Pay it no mind. Since you brought me this strawberry chiffon cake, I’ll let it slide.”

“Does that mean you like it?” I eagerly asked.

“Yes. It’s delicious.”

I could’ve sworn I saw a faint smile on his face as he shared his thoughts.

The sudden change in expression made my heart speed up.

His usual cold blue-green eyes were alight, like a warm beam of sun on a winter day.

Though, it was only the faintest difference on his face. I would’ve missed it myself if I hadn’t been paying attention.

It was the first time I ever saw him smile, making it all the more striking.

...I'm really happy.

First, he said the strawberry chiffon was delicious.

But then I even got to see the rarest of smiles from the usually expressionless king.

"...Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I'm glad to hear you enjoyed it."

"I've never tasted something like it before. These strawberries have a pleasant aroma too, don't they?"

"Yes. I love their sweet-and-sour scent as well."

A smile naturally spread across my face.

Strawberries were my favorite food in both of my lives. My heart sang out with joy to learn that I'd been able to share the wonders of them with King Glenreed.

From the opposite side of the table, the king silently kept his eyes on me as I rejoiced.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?"

"...No, it's nothing. I was simply curious about the unprocessed strawberries."

His eyes fell to one of the large strawberries in front of me. It appeared he'd taken a true interest in the fruit itself.

"Please give it a try, if you'd like. I think you might prefer raw strawberries to the strawberry chiffon."

"Prefer it over the chiffon? Why is that?"

"...No particular reason..."

I tried to wiggle out of the question, but His Majesty's silence demanded an answer.

"I thought you didn't care for chiffon cakes in general. You didn't seem to particularly like the one I gave you for your birthday..."

"...But I *did* enjoy the one you gave me at the party. It was delicious,

although...”

King Glenreed’s eyes fell to the treats on the table. He seemed a bit hesitant.

“I’m not the kind of person who’s ever been interested in cooking,” he stated simply. “I’ve memorized dining etiquette for formal dinners and the distinctions between local cuisines, but never anything more. Eating has always been a chore and a social function for me.”

Being royalty means having to dine with all kinds of guests.

If you have strong opinions on food and request that others cater to your preferences, you’ll just be burdening yourself in the end.

Maybe avoiding that trouble was why His Majesty chose to see eating as nothing more than an obligation in life.

“...That’s why I was confused. I really did enjoy the cake you and your staff prepared for me. But when compared with Natalie’s so-called chiffon cake, I couldn’t form an honest opinion about which was the superior creation, as I’m far from a food expert.”

“...Could that be why you only sent a formal response to mine?”

“That’s right, and I apologize for that. I knew I had to make a judgment about which cake had the better taste, considering the plagiarism scandal, but I didn’t trust my own palate when it came to making that call. ...I can see why that bland letter gave you the wrong impression.”

...I see. So that’s why the response had seemed so distant.

But I was glad to hear that my gifted chiffon cake was pleasing to him.

“I see where you were coming from. ...Since I was able to hear you call the birthday chiffon cake ‘delicious’ today, that’s all I need to know.”

“Is that really all it takes to satisfy you?”

I nodded back at him.

It was true that the chiffon cake had caused a scandal to break out. But one reason I wanted to gift it to His Majesty in the first place was to share something delicious with him.

“You told me to my face that you enjoyed it, so I’m perfectly satisfied.”

“...Just from that?”

“Yes. You enjoyed the flavor when you took a bite of the cake, so now I know it was worth spending so much time in the kitchen.”

Everyone has different food preferences.

Some like sweets, while others, like my second-oldest brother, love anything spicy.

The chiffon cake was an entirely new concept to the people of this world. No one was accustomed to such a dish.

That’s why I felt so blessed to hear His Majesty praise its taste despite those obstacles.

“I don’t believe cooking to be the kind of thing that requires such deep thought. While I’m sure much of the food you receive is given to you with ulterior motives...simply calling a meal ‘delicious’ when you enjoy the taste is the ultimate reward you can give a chef.”

“Calling delicious food ‘delicious,’ huh...?”

He nodded slightly, seeming to digest my words.

Then he turned his eyes back to me.

I couldn’t decipher the emotions in his eyes, but their color was intensely alluring.

The light pooled in his beautiful blue-green eyes...and reminded me of Lord Aroo for some strange reason.

He blinked slowly and let out a brief sigh.

“I guess that’s only natural, but it’s a strange thing to hear from someone else.”

“...Have I offended you, Your Majesty?”

“Not at all. I should have expected to hear something like that from you.”

Should have expected it?

Was he trying to indirectly say I was greedy when it came to food?

...Well, he wouldn't be wrong about that.

But I didn't expect the king, whom I'd hardly developed a relationship with at all, to see through me so easily.

"How did you know I was so interested in food, Your Majesty?"

"...I can tell by looking at you."

Am I really that easy to read? I always try to be more guarded than usual when I interact with him, though...

"If you weren't so keen on the subject of food, you wouldn't have gone to all the trouble in bringing strawberries here to the castle just for my approval to use them in cooking. I'm sure you were aware that presenting a fruit resembling Demon Gems to the king could earn my disfavor, or even a punishment."

"No, I wasn't concerned about that at all. I don't think of you as someone who would bestow punishment without knowing all the details first."

His Majesty had a cold, distant aura to him.

But after I saw his actions during the birthday party, as well as the brief words we'd previously exchanged in the throne room, I was sure King Glenreed wasn't the kind of man who abused his powers.

"I believed you would give me permission to grow the strawberries at my villa so long as I explained them properly. Not only did you do so, but you even praised their flavor. I'd like to thank you once again for that."

I smiled to show my gratitude for and trust in the king.

His eyes narrowed just slightly, and his long silver lashes cast shadows from above.

"...You really are a strange queen, rejoicing over such simple praise. ...It's a political necessity, but still, you've been forced to live in an isolated villa, and I was prepared to grant you fine jewelry or whatever you needed to relieve your boredom..."

"I appreciate your generosity, but no, I require no such luxuries. ...Instead,

might I ask for some alternatives?”

“And what would those be? Go ahead.”

The king pressed me to continue.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. There are a few requests I’d like to make. First of all, I’m planning to clear some of the land in the forest near my villa for a strawberry patch, as well as to build a home for my griffin. I may also need to prepare a few plots of land around the villa. Do I have your permission for this?”

“Very well, as long as you don’t make any big changes to the villa itself. If you speak to me first, I can send along carpenters and craftsmen as needed.”

“Thank you very much. As for compensation for the workers...”

“I’ll take care of that. Don’t trouble yourself with it.”

“No, please allow me to pay. I have something I believe will serve well as payment.”

I slipped my hand into my dress pocket. The object I took out hardly looked appropriate for the setting of a regal castle room.

“...A slicker brush.”

“Oh! Your Majesty, you know what this is?”

The king was quick to learn about things.

I’d already given many of my transmuted slicker brushes to Edgar and the other wolfkeepers.

The wolfkeepers served directly under the royal family. In other words, His Majesty was their boss, at the highest level of the chain of command.

It actually made sense for him to know about these brushes.

“I created this with a transmutation spell. Unfortunately, it breaks down after only a few days...”

While I could make a brush that survived for longer than a month, I wanted to keep that a secret for now. Being able to transmute something that didn’t break after even a few days was extremely unusual by itself in this world.

Just to be safe, I transmuted this brush with enough weaknesses that it would fall apart after ten days or so. That way, my strange form of “overpowered cheats” in this world still remained unknown to others.

“This is a useful tool that makes grooming easier for wolves and other animals with fur coats.”

“Yes, I know all about it. It also feels very good—for the wolves, or so their keepers tell me.”

King Glenreed was nodding.

He’d trailed off for a moment there, but maybe he simply had a piece of cake stuck in his throat or something.

“I’m glad to hear it’s been well received. Would you agree that a craftsman could make quite a profit if he was able to recreate these brushes?”

“...You intend to hand over the rights to the slicker brush to me?”

“Indeed. It felt like a waste, knowing that only the wolfkeepers and myself were using them.”

“A waste, you say... This kingdom is home to many beastfolk, who often take care of the animal whose traits they share. If we were able to mass-produce this brush, you’d be right about the profits. I’m confident it would rake in much more fortune than needed to reimburse the development costs on the land around your villa. ...It’s not a fair exchange at all. Should I take this offer to mean you have something else you’re after?”

“...I appreciate your quick understanding.”

His Majesty was quick-witted, that much was for sure—he knew of the slicker brush’s existence and value without any prompting from me.

“I can create many kinds of tools with my transmutation. However, I wish to avoid the attention that would come with that fact being made public, so I’d like to request your help in keeping that information private.”

Transmutation was my secret behind the slicker brush, the whisk, and all kinds of convenient crafts. But it was a difficult form of magic that could take years just to master a single product.

My ability to craft one tool after another with transmutation was highly abnormal.

Few people of this kingdom were magic-savvy, so my skills hadn't caused much of a fuss yet...

But Bodorey, the palace's head sorcerer, had already taken an interest in me during the chiffon cake incident.

All I was after was a life of leisure that I could spend holed up in my villa. I wanted to avoid any labels like "master magician."

"...Very well. I'll tell my imperial sorcerers and subordinates to keep your transmutation skills to themselves."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. It means a lot to me."

"I see. Although...I imagine you won't be able to avoid every headache relating to your magic. Ever since you displayed your transmutation at my birthday party, the head sorcerer has been completely fixated on you. I'd expect to hear from him at some point."

"...I've been planning to deal with him on my own."

Bodorey had already sent a request for a meeting once before.

It appeared he was currently out of town on a business trip, but I had a bad feeling that the exact moment he returned, I was in for a barrage of questions.

I didn't want to stand out too much while I figured out how to get him off my back.

"You should deal with him quickly. ...Didn't you say you had more than one request? Let me hear what else you need."

"...Your Majesty, how are you planning on punishing Lady Natalie?"

"Natalie? I'll be punishing her father, the duke, since he was the brains behind it all, but the girl will receive no punishment. My plan is to siphon a portion of profits from his territory, a harbor city, by forcing him to pay fines back to the kingdom for a few years. What do you think?"

"That sounds fair to me...but will the duke agree to it?"

“He’ll have to, of course. The plagiarism itself was carried out by Diaz and her gang, and I’m sure the duke was behind it too, but Natalie carries some clear responsibility herself as well. She couldn’t claim unfair treatment even if I disqualified her as a candidate for queen and sent her back home. The duke wants to avoid that outcome at any cost, I’m certain.”

That definitely seemed to make sense.

The daughter of a duke, who was brought to the castle to potentially become the queen, would be sent home as a criminal. There could be no greater dishonor. On top of that, he would lose the chance to have his daughter become the next queen.

Unfortunately for him, Lady Natalie was currently the only woman in his family who was a suitable candidate. Without her in the fight, the duke would be forced out of the running altogether.

Of course, Lady Natalie’s own reputation took quite a hit after the cake plagiarism scandal, but that didn’t mean her chances of being selected as the next queen were zero.

I couldn’t imagine His Majesty wanted to send Lady Natalie away either.

Without her around, the power struggle between the remaining candidates would only intensify, if not become a full-on war. Keeping Lady Natalie in the mix would likely avoid such an outcome, and her family would now owe His Majesty for his mercy, making it the most beneficial option for him.

I asked for more details about the fines on the duke’s profits, then quenched my dry throat with a cup of black tea.

The drink had cooled off completely.

Perhaps I’d stayed a bit too long.

“Your Majesty, thank you very much for making time for me in your busy schedule. I’m sure you have more plans tonight, so I’ll be taking my leave now.”

“...Very well.”

The king nodded, though he seemed a bit hesitant to let me go.

He cast his eyes to the side.

I followed his gaze to see the now-empty chiffon cake plate.

“Perhaps you haven’t had your fill of strawberry sweets, Your Majesty?”

“...It’s possible.”

“I’m very glad to hear that. Shall I send some dishes to the castle when I next cook with strawberries?”

“No, that would be too much...but next time you come to visit, could you bring a dish with you as a gift? There’s still more I want to ask you about the slicker brushes and your transmutation.”

“...Of course!”

I practically sang my response.

He must have liked my cooking if he was requesting more for future gifts.

I left the castle that day excited, filling my head with ideas for what to have him eat next.



AFTER Laetitia went home...

Glenreed heard a small chuckle from behind him.

“What a surprise. I didn’t know you were such a glutton, Your Majesty.”

Melvin, who looked to be enjoying himself, had been standing at the king’s back during the tea party.

He was a tall, slender man with broad shoulders and a sweet, handsome face that made him popular with women of all ages. Melvin’s blond hair was tied up loosely and his sky-blue eyes narrowed with mirth in teasing the king.

“But I like that you’re a little gluttonous, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m sure you know it’s not the food I’m after.”

Glenreed recalled the cake’s complex flavor while his aide made jokes at his expense.

The fluffy chiffon cake had given off the faint aroma of strawberries.

The more he thought about it, the more he could still taste the delicate

sweetness on his taste buds.

“But that’s not entirely true, is it? I’ve hardly ever seen you look so taken by a plate of food in front of you.”

“...I’ll admit that I enjoyed how it tasted,” Glenreed grumbled a bit angrily.

Melvin was right that the king hadn’t enjoyed a meal in many years.

When he ate with company, he was too focused on his conversations and the situation around him to pay much attention to the food.

Even alone, he couldn’t eat without considering the possibility that his food contained poison.

With no interest in food, he saw the act of eating as a mere necessity in ingesting nutrients. Eating three whole meals each and every day felt like such a waste. Glenreed always wished he could spend the time on other, more important matters.

Thus, his daily meals reflected his attitude on food. Despite being meals for a king, they were all incredibly simple, with flavor being secondary to qualities like safety and convenience to consume. They were dull plates served at the king’s table, but he never felt dissatisfied.

...Which was why tonight in particular was such a shock.

Not even Glenreed had expected to enjoy Laetitia’s food as much as he did. His first taste of strawberries seemed to suit his palate perfectly.

“I just so happened to like the flavor of the strawberries, that’s all.”

“...And the strawberries are really the only thing you liked?”

“Did you say something?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Melvin smiled softly, sweetly, and to Glenreed’s eyes, suspiciously.

“But Queen Laetitia is certainly a most interesting woman. I understand what drives you to visit the villa so often to see her.”

Melvin seemed to be enjoying himself.

This man, Glenreed's trusted confidant of many years, often found the opportunity to tease his king.

"Don't make it sound strange. Visiting her often would cause trouble if I'm in my human form. I only go as the silver wolf so that I can observe her safely."

"But from what I've seen, you seem quite taken with the slicker brush, wouldn't you say?"

"...That's because of my animal instincts."

Glenreed retained his free will and memories when he transformed into the silver wolf. However, be it because of his animal instincts or another reason, his logical thinking tended to take a back seat when he appeared as the wolf. He became much more sensitive to both pleasure and discomfort.

Glenreed was all too used to pushing his own feelings aside in order to govern. Perhaps that was why he struggled to control his emotions in wolf form.

A friend of his, the blond crown prince who could take the forms of both lion and human, apparently struggled with the same issue. Animal forms and human forms had different influences on a person.

"Between her mastery of transmutation and her clever handling of Diaz's crew, it's obvious Laetitia is nothing like any other noblewoman. Now that I've taken her as my queen, even if that title is in name only, I have a duty to understand both her powers and actions."

"You have my agreement there. You've always avoided drawing attention from the candidates by refusing to meddle in outside affairs, but from now on, I might advise you take more direct actions while in human form."

Glenreed nodded silently. The image of Laetitia appeared in his mind.

It wasn't the carefree version of her, with a brush in one hand, chatting to his silver wolf form, but instead...

"Yes. I love their sweet-and-sour scent as well."

Her pleased, somewhat shy smile was strangely vivid in the king's mind.

When Glenreed took the form of the silver wolf, he always got to see Laetitia smiling as she played with the wolves. ...He'd seen that expression over and

over again. It was a familiar sight to him. And yet...

Glenreed didn't understand why he was so charmed by that brief smile that bloomed on her lips while he was in human form. It didn't make any sense, which was why he felt a bit hesitant to say goodbye when she said she was leaving.

Although, as a result, Laetitia misinterpreted his emotions as a request for more strawberry sweets.

But it seemed he would now have more opportunities to observe and interact with her in his human form, so that shouldn't be a problem.

...As Glenreed quietly convinced himself of this conclusion, he checked his upcoming plans with Melvin so he could schedule his next meeting with Laetitia.

Chapter 2: Our Secret Sides, Known Only to Animals

TWO days after my strawberry treats received the prized label of “delicious” from His Majesty, I was invited to go and visit Lady Natalie.

Lady Natalie had finally received her formal punishment as of yesterday.

It was light, just as His Majesty had informed me it would be.

She would be fined a lump sum of money and stripped of the right to her usual lavish lifestyle for two months. Naturally, that prevented her from inviting people to her villa for extravagant parties, but the invitation I received from her was an exception.

Lady Natalie had informed me that she wanted to meet me in person and offer me a formal apology for the chiffon cake plagiarism.

That was why I decided to leave my villa for a bit, putting my strawberry research on pause.

“I’ll be back soon, Fon. Take care of the place for me while I’m away, all right?”

“Kwah!!”

“As you wish!” the griffin’s cry seemed to say.

Fon’s way of acknowledging me as his owner consisted of acting like some kind of knight.

He stood at attention near the wooden crate that was set up in a corner of the villa’s front yard. It was his temporary home until the construction approved by His Majesty could be carried out to build him a special shelter.

I felt bad that I had to keep him so locked up. I petted the scruff of the beast’s neck all the way down to his shoulder.

Next, I put more strength into the tips of my fingers, like I was scratching him. Fon shook his wings in what appeared to be pleasure. He closed his sharp,

eagle-like eyes in a cute display of perfect calmness.

“Lucky bir— I mean, how disrespectful to let his guard down in front of Lady Laetitia, his master.”

“Ahaha. Goodness, Lucian. Fon isn’t human. There’s no need to let it bother you.”

“But it *does* bother me. Fon has sworn his allegiance to you, my lady. He needs to get it into that bird brain of his that such behavior is inappropriate.

“Bird brain...”

Well, Fon *did* have the head of a bird of prey...

On occasion, Lucian’s commoner upbringing would come out in the form of a sharp tongue. But that only happened around people he was very close with, like my older brothers or me. Lucian’s words and conduct were absolutely perfect around everyone else, never betraying his status as a man of class.

I wondered if that was why Lucian was on edge around Fon.

He tended to let an unseen side of himself show around animals, with their furry coats and lack of language, so unlike humans.

I was no different in that regard. The wolves and Lord Aroo saw a side of me I could never show anyone else.

It was perfectly natural to act like a different person around fluffy creatures.

Assuring myself that that fact remained unchanged, even in a different world altogether, I bid Fon farewell and boarded my carriage.

We reached a certain spot near Lady Natalie’s villa after a brief ride.

There were still ten minutes before our scheduled arrival.

Since I rarely left my own villa like this, I decided to use the opportunity to scope out the area around Lady Natalie’s residence.

“Look at all the flowers in bloom. What a beautiful garden.”

The well-kept shrubs were arranged in geometric patterns.

I strolled through the garden, enjoying the brilliant flower beds, when I

suddenly heard a faint, soft cry.

Was that a cat?

Not wanting to scare the creature, I quietly advanced toward the source of the voice. The sound drew me to a hidden corner of the garden surrounded by a mass of shrubbery.

“...A person?”

In between the sound of a cat’s meows came the quiet words of a human.

I peeked through the shrubs, curious to see who it was, but then...

“Little kitty, won’t you help ‘me-ow’ figure out how to get through today?”

Someone was speaking in baby talk to an orange tabby cat. She didn’t seem to have noticed our approach.

“Ugh! I’m just so anxious, and I don’t know what I should ‘mew’ next... Huh?”

Our eyes met.

She fell silent.

Time seemed to stand still.

The girl in front of me, speaking so sweetly to the cat...

Was the usually doll-like Lady Natalie.

“.....”

“.....”

Neither of us spoke.

Lady Natalie was frozen. She looked like she’d seen a ghost.

...Sure, I did say that people act differently when they’re around animals...

But isn’t this a bit too different?!

“Mraaaaaaaw!”

The cat let out a loud cry, breaking the silence between us.

Orange tabbies pay no mind to the plight of humans.

It stretched its front legs, then the back ones, and strolled off into the shadow of a grove of trees.

“Ah...”

Lady Natalie let out a sad sound as she watched its light-brown tail disappear into the greenery. But right away, she seemed to remember Lucian and me standing there.

She turned to face us, so stiffly, I expected to hear gears grinding together.



“Did you overhear me talking to myself...?”

“...Not a peep. Or a *mew*.”

“You *did* hear me!!”

Lady Natalie blushed furiously.

She began to tremble lightly. Even her ears turned red.

...I know how you feel. I know it so well.

I liked to meow back to cats when I spoke too.

But what if a passerby ever witnessed me doing something so disgustingly cute?

Well, Lady Natalie was playing out that scenario right in front of me. I would be just as intensely humiliated as she was. Sympathy overcame me to imagine being in her place.

“Lady Natalie, please don’t worry. Just calm down and listen to—”

“Lady Nataliie?”

The girl flinched when she heard a voice calling for her.

The owner of the approaching voice turned out to be a woman in a maid’s uniform.

“Lady Natalie!! There you are!!”

“...I’m sorry to have scared you.”

Whoa. Look at that.

Lady Natalie had already snapped right back to her usual doll-like expression. Her cheeks were still a bit pink, but other than that, it was a perfect transformation. I mentally applauded her display of talent.

“Lady Natalie, you must hurry up and prepa— Your Majesty?!”

“Good day.”

I greeted the maid, who’d frozen at the first glimpse of my face, and then I decided to help Lady Natalie out.

“I ran into Lady Natalie just now, and the two of us have been chatting as we tour the gardens. ...Isn’t that right, Lady Natalie?”

“...Yes, that’s right. Queen Laetitia is very kind and a skilled conversationalist, and I’ve enjoyed my time with her.”

She was quick to follow along.

Despite her blank expression, I felt like I could see the relief on her face as Lucian and I headed toward her villa together.



WE entered one of the rooms and exchanged formal greetings, and Lady Natalie sent the servants away.

The maids seemed hesitant, but they couldn’t ignore orders from their master.

I asked for Lucian to leave as well, and he reluctantly agreed.

Once Lucian and the maids were sent to wait in the next room, Lady Natalie and I could talk on our own.

“Your Majesty, thank you so much!! You were a great help back there!!”

Lady Natalie bowed deeply toward me.

Her gesture was an expression of gratitude and respect of the highest level.

“Please lift your head. I can tell how strongly you feel, Lady Natalie.”

“Thank you, truly!! But I also have a request!! Please, please, please don’t tell anyone about how you saw me acting...!!”

“Don’t worry, that’s the last thing I feel like doing.”

The red-faced Lady Natalie had looked as if she was about to burst into tears back in the garden. I wasn’t so cruel as to rub salt in her wounds. Not at all. I shared the same inclination to chat with animals, so seeing her like that didn’t put me off at all.

Lady Natalie seemed a bit relieved to hear me repeat my vow of secrecy.

“Thank you! ...When I’m feeling anxious or disheartened, I have a bad habit of

talking to cats and other animals. I know it's pathetic, but I'd appreciate it if you could just forget what you saw."

"I don't think it's pathetic. I understand feeling embarrassed to have been seen by someone else, but there's no need to berate yourself for it."

I let her know she was mistaken. I spoke both to cheer her up but also to reflect on my own past.

All kinds of animal lovers out there talk to their fluffy friends like that...I strongly hoped.

I'd certainly struck up conversation with Lord Aroo about all kinds of things. I interacted with the wolf in relaxed ways I would never use with another person, outside of Lucian and my family. There was no doubt in my mind I would be stricken with agony if someone like His Majesty or a stranger ever saw me act like that.

"Y-You don't say...? Everyone I know seems to agree that complaining about one's life to animals is something pathetic...", she murmured weakly.

Her Doll Princess mask was gone, and in its place was the face of a normal sixteen-year-old girl.

When I considered her hometown and upbringing, I understood why she seemed so anxious.

Lady Natalie's home region had a deep history of prejudice toward beastfolk.

From what I'd heard, this meant that the culture of doting on dogs, cats, and other small animals didn't exist. They believed humans were superior and everyone else was below them.

Such people in her life would never allow Lady Natalie, a duke's daughter, to confide in animals.

"I understand that you wouldn't be allowed to bond with animals in your homeland. But there are many people in this world who cherish animals and trust them with their deepest feelings. Why, even I remember snuggling up to furry friends when I was feeling down."

"You, Your Majesty...? Is that true?"

“You don’t believe me? Don’t you think everyone behaves in ways they wouldn’t show other people at times?”

“F-Forgive me!! I didn’t mean to cast doubt upon you. But you’re always so elegant, Your Majesty. You’re only one year older than me, and despite coming to this kingdom as a bride from foreign lands, you behave with such grace and grandeur...”

Her intense gaze of admiration and respect made me feel a bit awkward.

There was one reason in particular why I felt so at home in this foreign land.

It wasn’t just my past-life memories—it was the education I had received from my oldest brother in this world.

If I didn’t have to endure the crack of my oldest brother’s loving whip...or rather, his rigorous education course, marrying into a foreign country definitely wouldn’t have been possible for me. After all, I lived a completely average lower-middle-class life before I reincarnated. But my brother’s training was just that intense. I still had nightmares about it sometimes, even now.

Well, thanks to my brother’s steady stream of merciless critiques, always given with that beautiful smile on his face, I generally had no trouble socializing with fellow nobles at all. Though that brother and I now lived far apart from each other, I still had Lucian, my trusted companion, with me all the while.

I was certainly blessed in comparison to Lady Natalie, who’d lived with Diaz at her side.

“I thought you showed great courage in coming here to live at the castle so far away from your home. At the birthday celebration, when you agreed to accept punishment for the chiffon cake plagiarism led by Diaz, I thought that to be a very dignified act.”

“...Thank you, Your Majesty. But that only happened in the first place because I wasn’t able to stop her...,” Lady Natalie said, then bowed her head deeply once more. “Queen Laetitia, I’d like to formally apologize again. I made trouble for so many people by failing to realize what Diaz and her followers were up to. There’s no excuse for my actions. Everything that occurred was a result of my own inadequacy.”

“Lady Natalie...”

“Are you going to reprimand me? I know better than anyone that I’m not fit to be in the running for queen.”

“...What do you mean by that?”

“I mean just what I said. You saw me earlier, didn’t you, Your Majesty? I’m a pathetic person who can only share my honest feelings with cats and other creatures. My parents scolded me every single day for my shyness and clumsiness. It was supposed to be my vivacious sister, three years older than me, who came to the palace as a candidate for queen...”

Lady Natalie bit her bottom lip.

I’d heard that her older sister had suffered from a grave illness, for which there was no treatment.

“I became the only one from my father’s bloodline who could compete for the title. But I’m not suitable for something so important... I’ve tried to keep my facial expressions hidden so that no one sees how truly cowardly I am, and I left any true power to Aunt Diaz to secure my position. I didn’t want to betray my parents’ expectations for me either.”

Lady Natalie spilled one detail after another about her life and how she had become a candidate for queen.

For a moment, I wondered if she should be revealing so much to someone outside her family. But I could tell she had been holding so much conflict inside her.

As the head of the house in which Diaz, the perpetrator of the stolen recipe, was a member of, Lady Natalie took a big hit to her reputation when the scandal had been revealed. She managed to hold on to her position as King Glenreed’s potential future bride, but the chances of such an outcome for her had slipped dramatically.

She had no choice but to remain at the castle unless she wanted those chances to drop to zero.

Her unwavering declaration of guilt during the king’s birthday party earned

her some sympathizers, while simultaneously, many people used it as an opportunity to tear her down.

The castle became a bed of thorns to Lady Natalie.

It was a bitter situation. Leaving the castle altogether may have been the healthier option for her.

...And then, on top of all that, she had caught me watching her as she complained about her life to a cat.

Her desperation seemed to originate from then too. I'd seen her in her most fragile state, one she'd described as "pathetic."

The dam holding back her fears crumbled away, leaving a despairing Lady Natalie who *had* to pour her heart out to me.

She was only sixteen in a world where most women married around the age of twenty. In Japan, she would have been a high school student, but here, she was given the heavy burden of being candidate for queen. It would be difficult to carry such a hefty responsibility on her slender shoulders alone.

Even her parents were worried about their daughter, from what I'd heard.

But after Lady Natalie's older sister fell ill, their mother grew weak of heart and poor of health as well. She was unable to accompany Lady Natalie to the castle, and her father was too busy as a duke to join her either. His younger sister, Diaz, had to be chosen as her attendant in the end.

"Diaz was given a lot of power as my overseer. Father felt that his own sister would be much more reliable than someone timid and meek like me."

"So that's why Diaz acted as though she was in charge of you."

"...It made things easier for me too. All I had to do was exist in the palace as one of the candidates. I thought Diaz and the others would make everything run smoothly if I kept my mouth shut and lived like a doll... Well, I wanted to believe that would be the case."

When she spoke of the now-convicted Diaz, Lady Natalie's face showed sadness, rather than anger or resentment.

Even if Diaz was the woman who had sabotaged Lady Natalie's chances of

success, she was still the young lady's aunt.

I didn't know if they ever shared a familial closeness, but whatever they had between them had gone to waste.

"...You trusted her with that power, and that's probably why Diaz grew so arrogant. I imagine she was thinking about all the power she could obtain if you really did marry His Majesty. That may be why she resorted to stealing the chiffon cake recipe. It was a way to leave an impression on the king while raising your status with other nobility as well."

"...Yes. I think you're right. Diaz was probably impatient with me, since I was such a poor candidate. Her crimes are unforgivable, but I'm the one who drove her to them..."

"Is that why you tried to take responsibility at the birthday party?"

"...That was the only thing I could do... Pathetic, isn't it?"

Lady Natalie smiled, but her eyes were on the verge of tears.

"It's not pathetic at all. You're living up to your role, Lady Natalie."

"What...?"

"It's the one with power who must atone for crimes committed by their subordinates. However, very few people actually take such responsibility when the time comes."

"...It wasn't anything so honorable. I was full of shame and frightened, and I had no other choice left."

"Being frightened is the normal response in such a situation. But no matter how much fear you felt in your heart that day, you were able to speak up. That's all the proof I need."

Lady Natalie had many insults for herself, like "cowardly" and "pathetic." But still, she acted in the moment during that birthday party of her own free will. She wasn't just some weakling who couldn't stand up for herself.

"You're still staying here at the palace, refusing to flee from the pressure of your position. Even if it may be true that you lack in certain areas as a candidate for queen, you're still able to grow, little by little."

“Your Majesty...”

Lady Natalie’s eyes glistened as she gazed at me.

“Would you be so kind as to pay me a visit at my villa sometime? I still have the griffin you sent me, and perhaps the two of us could have tea while we watch the wolves and cats in the yard.”

“...Are you sure? I caused you all kinds of trouble, Your Majesty, and I’m not allowed to indulge in any luxuries right now...”

“Then you’ll be all right if there’s no luxuries, yes? I can simply say that I needed advice from you about caring for the griffin.”

Inviting Lady Natalie over for that was a perfect pretense.

The two of us came from different homelands and different families, and thus, it would be difficult for us to open up to each other. But I did believe that our shared love of furry creatures could result in pleasant conversations.

It might even help Lady Natalie find some relief from her burdens. That would be the best outcome.

“Thank you, Queen Laetitia. I’d be honored to visit your home.”

Lady Natalie smiled at me.

Her expression wavered, but I could tell she was looking toward the future.

The two of us would discuss our love for animals over an array of tea and snacks.

We said our goodbyes, having agreed on plans for a laid-back, pleasant afternoon together.



“**THINGS** have been hard for Lady Natalie...”

That night, I was lying in bed, murmuring to myself.

Berry and I were the only inhabitants of the dark bedroom.

My words were partially directed to the Gardener Cat. She was curled up on top of my cozy pink blanket.

“It’s an honor to be chosen as a potential queen, but she’s still only sixteen.”

I’d never even worked a part-time job at that age back in my past life. Whenever I had complaints, I would vent to Jiro, my pet Shiba Inu.

“Hm...?”

Something suddenly didn’t feel right.

What is it?

I was certain that back then, “I” was just a normal student living a normal life...

“No, wait...”

Something hit me.

My name.

I remembered my parents’ names. I never forgot Jiro’s name, the dog I loved so much. I still knew my friends’ names and even my elementary school teachers’ names.

“But what is *my* name...?”

A chill ran through me.

It was like someone was pressing ice against my spine.

I couldn’t remember the name I had in my past life.

All the hair on my body stood on end. How could I go all this time without noticing?

It was as if an insect had chewed that one, single fact straight out of my brain. Both my first and last names were completely gone from my memory.

“What’s going on...?”

“I” was reborn into this world after I was struck by a car during a walk with Jiro.

As far as I could remember, I never met “God” or anything divine along the way, nor was I given any special orders for my next life.

“So if I can’t remember my name, it must be...”

It must be because of my reincarnation.

How terrifying.

I didn't understand how I could go so long without realizing I was missing my name, even after thinking back to my past-life memories so many times. Something definitely wasn't right about that.

I began to rack my brain for any clues about my previous name.

I'll figure it out. I'll figure it out. I've got to figure it out.

How many letters was it? Did I have a nickname?

I did have memories of something people called me throughout my school years.

Come on. Think, think, think, think, th—

"Capybara."

"Excuse me?"

The word that finally crystallized in my head was so unexpected, I felt my whole body go stiff.

...But then I recalled a memory from my early years of elementary school.

"XX, you're so calm and relaxed, you're totally like a capybara."

"You know, capybaras? Like the ones who act all spaced out all the time but then get real fast when they've got something to do."

One of my classmates called me "Cappy" in my memory. It came from my capybara-like personality.

The capybara, who gets so fast when it has something to do...

"Pfft! That's so weird..."

An awkward smile formed on my face at the unexpectedly silly revelation.

So I was "Cappy" in my past life.

The memory caused my stiffened body to relax.

"Meow? Meow?"

Pat.

The bottom of Berry's paw landed on my cheek. She seemed worried, as if she could tell I was acting strange.



“Thank you, Berry. I’m okay now.”

I stroked her soft fur, growing calmer as time passed.

“...Right now, I’m Laetitia Gramwell.”

Why did I reincarnate into an alternate universe instead of on Earth?

I couldn’t comprehend the reason, but still, I had seventeen years of memories from my life in this world.

Although, it was hard not to feel vexed by the mystery of my past-life name and how on earth it connected to that nickname.

“I mean, really? A capybara...?”

I was such a laid-back, average, lower-middle-class kid that I ended up with the nickname Cappy. It was like my roots hadn’t changed at all, even when I was reborn as a duchess, and even when I became a queen.

What I needed to focus on was getting good rest, eating good meals, and enjoying each day—not endlessly obsessing over things.

“...Good night, Berry.”

“Mew!”

I picked up the cat and set her on top of my blanket.

She curled up into a snug ball. I lay back down in bed too.

I pulled the covers over my body and closed my eyes.

It took a bit longer than usual, but in the end, I drifted off into slumber.



“**THE** Great Capybara Circus...”

“What was that, my lady?”

Lucian’s voice snapped me out of my daze.

A slice of bread topped with strawberry jam was still sitting in my hand. I’d been in the middle of breakfast.

“...I was just remembering the dream I had last night.”

My dreams had been full of capybaras. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I counted capybara instead of sheep in an effort to fall asleep.

Either way, the memory slipped out of my mouth while I was spacing out.

“‘Capybara.’ It doesn’t quite ring a bell. Is it the name of some kind of recipe?”

“...No. It’s a fictional animal with light-brown fur. They’re from a book I read many years ago.”

This world had dogs, cats, horses, and even cows and pigs, but apparently no capybaras to speak of.

It was too bad I’d never get to see those lumbering creatures again. But maybe that was exactly why the Great Capybara Circus had come to me in my dreams.

With those nearly incomprehensible thoughts in my head, I finished breakfast and went outside to the front yard.

“I wonder if I should put Fon’s house over there...”

I was strolling through the garden while I waited for Edgar to arrive with the wolves.

The front of my villa housed a sprawling garden centered around a water fountain. It was smaller than the garden at Lady Natalie’s villa, but mine was well kept, with plenty of beautiful flowers in bloom.

My plan was to clear some of the trees on the edge of the yard to make a place for Fon’s shelter.

It was directly diagonal from the front of the villa.

“Then I’ll have them fence off the strawberry grove in the woods...”

I made my plans for Berry’s strawberry patch, which was located in the forest behind my house.

His Majesty had already given me permission to make adjustments to the surrounding area.

As long as construction costs remained low and I didn’t change the actual building, I was allowed to do pretty much whatever I pleased.

After Fon's house and the strawberry patch renovations, there were still a few other things I wanted to build too.

I was busying myself with my construction plans when I heard something rustling in the trees.

Finally. It was fluffy time. The wolves were here to play.

"Woof?"

"...You're not a wolf."

A pair of round black eyes stared up at me.

A white ball of fur leaped out from the tree line...

No, looking closer, it appeared to be a fluffy white dog with a pair of pointy ears.

Its face was friendly, almost like it was smiling at me. It reminded me of the Samoyed breed I knew from my past life.

"We haven't met before, have we...?"

"Arf!"

The animal swished its round tail back and forth as if to respond.

But why was such a friendly dog here in my yard?

I didn't have any clues, at least not until Edgar appeared behind the dog.

"Good afternoon, Your Majesty. You've never met Sana before, have you?"

"So her name is Sana? Is she your companion animal?"

"Yes, exactly. Cute, isn't she?"

Edgar stroked Sana's head proudly.

A companion animal is a creature that beastfolk love and cherish as another part of themselves.

I'd heard that Dog-Fang clan beastfolk in particular, such as Edgar, put a lot of love into training their companion animals.

And while I'm on the subject...

There are a few races of beastfolk that exist in this world.

Edgar and my head butler, Borgan, are both from the Dog-Fang clan. Krona was from the Wildcat clan.

There's also the Snow-Fox clan, the rarer Bird-Wing clan, and even more subcategories of beastfolk that live in this kingdom.

Humans often lump beastfolk into one big group, but the many clans have vastly different cultures and histories, which is expressed even in the way they choose and raise their companion animals.

Dog-Fang clan members customarily pick dogs as their companion animals, giving them strict training to establish a relationship between master and animal. Opposite them, the Wildcat clan tends to let their companion cats roam about freely.

Many people refer to the Dog-Fang clan as diligent and the Wildcat clan as self-centered for those reasons. But those are only generalizations. Some Dog-Fang beastfolk prefer to live on their own, while some Wildcats appreciate a bond of loyalty.

In Earth terms, it would be somewhat like describing Japanese people as high-strung and Americans as overexaggerators. As a Japanese person in my past life, I certainly wasn't very meticulous myself. It seemed to me that a person's individual qualities play more of a role in their behavior than their race or nationality.

"May I pet Sana?"

"Of course! I think she'd like that."

I began to stroke Sana's head once I had her owner's permission.

Most of my palm sank into her white cotton-candy-like fur. I started to relax and close my eyes at the soft sensation. Sana followed suit until her eyes formed little slits.

A sudden wind from above interrupted my peaceful moment. Shadows blotted out the light from the sun.

"Fon!"

“Gyaaah!!”

Fon immediately landed at my side.

His birdlike eyes were completely fixed on Sana. He appeared to be both curious and alert at the appearance of the brand-new creature.

Fon stepped out in front of me protectively.

Sana seemed surprised to see such a large creature in front of her. She looked up at Edgar and me to gauge our reactions.

“Don’t worry, Fon. Edgar and his animals are very special guests here at the villa.”

I stroked Fon’s neck to calm him down. Fon allowed this for a while before appearing to understand that our guests weren’t foes. He nuzzled his beak against me, then stepped back, flapped his wings, and flew back toward his wooden crate.

“Griffins are so amazing up close...!” Edgar murmured, sounding very excited.

He didn’t even seem frightened after receiving such a glare from Fon’s sharp eyes.

Edgar, the boy who was so scared of me when we first met, didn’t appear to have any problem with Fon.

“Thank you very much for providing such a valuable opportunity!”

“And thank you for letting me pet Sana. ...Are the wolves not with you today?”

“No, another wolfkeeper is taking them on their walk today, so they’ll be here a bit later.”

“So you decided to come here with Sana instead?”

“I wanted to teach her the road to the villa. Sana’s always stayed at the wolfkeepers’ station, but I decided it was time to let her go to new places as well. I hope to have her help with my wolfkeeping duties once she’s ready.”

“Oh, I see. So she’s a wolf dog instead of a sheepdog. How impressive!”

I looked at Sana in awe. With her Samoyed-like build, she was quite the large

canine. She seemed well trained and was apparently even up for the job of working with the wolves.

“Yes! That’s exactly right! She’s an incredible companion animal. I almost feel like she’s too good for me.”

Edgar lit up as he gushed about his dog.

I could see the happiness in the swishing of his tail. Sana’s tail began to wag identically to Edgar’s. Their matching gestures were very cute.

“She’s the whole reason I was able to become a wolfkeeper.”

“Are companion animals’ personalities and abilities considered criteria in becoming a wolfkeeper?”

I looked at Sana. She was sitting on the ground, perfectly calm.

Wolfkeepers are given their positions by the royal family. It’s a revered and, from what I’d heard, fiercely competitive job.

“That’s right. About half of the wolfkeepers inherit the job from family over many generations, like Mr. Moore, and the other half are hired from the outside, like me. Sana and I passed the employment exam together.”

“That’s amazing, Edgar. I’m sure it’s not every day that someone so young, much less a commoner, passes such an exam.”

“Th-Thank you very much!! You’re far too kind...!”

Edgar blushed. Perhaps he wasn’t used to receiving praise.

Though his response was quiet, I could see his tail wagging behind him.

“It’s all thanks to Sana that I became a wolfkeeper, and that I got to meet you too, Your Majesty. Sometimes humans and beastfolk can’t keep up with four-legged animals when they run, so leading the wolves becomes the job of companion animals like Sana.”

“I see. So having a companion animal is a very important requirement in hiring beastfolk.”

“Absolutely. I owe it all to Sana.”

Edgar ruffled the fur of Sana’s head.

His humility never failed for even a moment.

“But it’s plenty impressive in itself that you brought out that personality in her, Edgar. Even the smartest dog won’t be able to make use of its talents without patient leadership.”

I thought back on Jiro, my pet Shiba Inu in my past life.

He had a mix of brown and white fur and a glossy, wet nose.

Jiro knew a few tricks like “stay,” but I remembered how much of a nightmare it was to train him. I would probably lose my wits altogether if I tried to teach him how to lead wolves like Sana.

As a dog lover, I couldn’t help but respect Edgar.

“You two must have put in years of work to become wolfkeepers.”

“Well, it was my dream ever since I was a boy.”

“That’s wonderful. Might I ask what inspired you?”

“...The wolf with the blue-green eyes.”

“Wait, you mean Lord Aroo?”

Wolves generally had brownish eyes. Lord Aroo was the only one of the pack whose eyes were blue-green.

I didn’t expect his name to come up so suddenly.

Edgar quickly opened his mouth while I tried to make sense of it.

“M-My apologies! I didn’t explain that very well! What I meant was that many years ago, I was saved by a wolf who looked just like Lord Aroo.”

“A wolf who looked just like Lord Aroo?”

“He had the same beautiful silver fur and those unusual blue-green eyes. I don’t remember his face very well...but I believe he resembled Lord Aroo. Sana was still just a pup at the time. The two of us got lost in the forest next to the capital, and that’s where we met him.”

I’d heard that the capital woods were a relatively safe place, not being home to any dangerous animals. But that forest, which seemed to stretch on forever,

had been deeply frightening to the young Edgar. He told me about how he was wandering through the woods with Sana, his tail hung limp and meek, and just before he burst into tears, the Lord Aroo lookalike appeared.

“I was so frightened. I thought that wolf might make me his dinner right then and there. But he made no attempt to attack me at all. In fact, he led me through the forest until we reached an exit.”

“It sounds like you had one shock after another.”

The wolves who visited the villa were like big, friendly dogs, which made me tend to forget their nature. In this world, much like Earth, wolves were generally wild animals who didn’t approach humans. It was very unusual to hear about a wolf coming to the rescue of a helpless child.

“I still remember how startled I was, despite my young age. I was even more surprised when I saw that the wolf’s eyes were blueish-green. It was like the silver wolf from the legend, the one who fathered the Wolfvartian royal bloodline, had come to save me himself. I was so grateful for his help, and ever since then, I’ve found myself drawn to wolves.”

“And that made you want to become a wolfkeeper.”

“...Are you going to laugh at me?”

“Of course not. Pursuing your childhood dream for so long is no easy task.”

Edgar looked relieved to hear this.

“A lot of people made fun of me. They said there was no way the wolf saved me and I must have seen his eye color wrong. Some people even said I fell asleep in the woods and dreamed the whole thing up. If I heard anyone else tell the same story, I would think it was all a lie too...”

“But you don’t believe them, do you? That’s all that really matters. Whatever others may say about you, you still put in so much effort to follow your dream and never once gave up.”

“I appreciate it, Your Majesty...”

He kept his face hidden from me, but I could see his tail bouncing from side to side.

“I really am blessed. I never did meet that same wolf again, but my fellow wolfkeepers are both strict and kind with me, the wolves themselves really like me, I get to converse with Your Majesty, and I even met Lord Aroo, who’s a perfect lookalike to the wolf who saved me.”

“Lord Aroo...”

Melvin had told me that Lord Aroo was a young wolf, still only three years old.

He was too young to be the one who’d saved Edgar as a child, which should be enough of a distinction, but since they shared the same unusual blue-green eyes, there could be some kind of blood relation between the two.

“I hope you get to meet that wolf again someday.”

The boy, now an adult, reuniting with the wolf who rescued him all those years ago. It was like something out of a storybook.

I looked up at the sky and thought about that wolf—if he could still be alive and where he might be now.



MEANWHILE, as Laetitia basked in her dreamy, fairytale mood...

“Achoo!!”

Unbeknownst to the queen, King Glenreed sneezed quietly to himself.



AFTER Edgar finished his story, I decided to consult him on my plans for a tea party with Lady Natalie—petting Sana all the while.

“I’m thinking of inviting Lady Natalie to my villa sometime soon. We could set up a table in the front yard and have tea while we watch the wolves. Does that sound all right to you?”

“L-Lady Natalie?”

Edgar’s tail slumped and his dog ears sank down.

Lady Natalie’s family was famous for their harsh treatment of beastfolk. Edgar didn’t seem to welcome the idea.

“Lady Natalie herself has no ill will toward beastfolk. She even told me she loves dogs and wolves. But if you’re not comfortable...”

“N-No, that’s fine!! I just...might not fit in very well if I’m there...”

Edgar hung his head.

By now, he’d become accustomed to speaking with me casually, but at first meeting, he displayed a high level of uneasiness.

Edgar appeared to struggle around strangers, humans in particular. That wasn’t strange considering the bad blood between humans and beastfolk. In fact, maybe it was actually unusual for someone like him to open up to a human like myself so quickly.

The slicker brush worked in all sorts of wonderful ways.

“If you’re able, could you possibly schedule your tea party on a day one of the other keepers is in charge of the wolves?”

“Very well. If the wolves aren’t feeling well that day, you don’t have to force them out on a walk. Could you ask for the wolfkeepers’ cooperation, so long as it doesn’t harm them or the wolves?”

“Of course! Our job is an extra rewarding one if more people come to love the wolves.”

“Thank you, Edgar. Lady Natalie doesn’t have much experience with animals, so I’m going to have her watch them from afar at first.”

The girl had told me she loved fluffy animals but, apparently, had hardly ever actually touched them. She’d never owned a pet before. In fact, the only animals she’d directly touched were horses.

She’d said she didn’t usually talk to animals either, like what I saw the other day. She’d only happened to see that tabby cat crossing through the garden while she was out there fretting over the coming meeting with me.

Once she was away from the eyes of her maids, Lady Natalie got her fill of fluff in an attempt to calm her nerves.

She’d sidled up to the tabby cat but couldn’t bring herself to touch it, scared that it might run away if she got too close. Since she couldn’t pet it, she decided

to confide her troubles in the animal—the problems she could never share with another human.

I wasn't sure it was a good idea to let her jump straight to petting wolves.

They were well trained, sure, but they still had sharp claws and fangs, and they were very large as well.

Lady Natalie, despite her love of animals, might be frightened to see them for the first time. Wolves can sense those kinds of emotions in people.

Just to be safe, I decided to watch Lady Natalie's reactions before I let her pet them.

There were other small, well-behaved, and perfectly pettable animals she could start with first.

I drew up a list of candidates in my head, got my fill of stroking the wolves when they arrived, bid farewell to Edgar, then went back inside the house.

Borgan, my butler, was waiting for my arrival. There was something I felt like asking him.

"You'd like us...to bring our companion animals to the villa?"

"That's right. I've heard that some beastfolk are accompanied by their companion animals when they take up live-in work."

There were thirteen beastfolk who lived and worked in my villa. I allowed them routine days off so they could all go home and visit their companion animals. It was like a furry friend vacation for them.

While it depended on their individual personalities, many companion animals wished to stay with their beastfolk masters. Live-in jobs with high numbers of beastfolk employees generally allowed their companion animals to join them.

Here at the villa, I was a human from a foreign land, so it seemed that the beastfolk were exercising caution in not bringing their companions.

"I've heard that some companion animals don't take very well to strange places, so I won't force anyone into it, but if the animals and their masters would like, they'll be allowed to live here together."

In all honesty, I really wanted them to bring their animals here.

I'd heard that companion animals tended to feel less stressed around their masters, and I'd get the benefit of getting to look at cute critters whenever I wanted.

Dog-Fang clan companion animals in particular were composed of all kinds of dogs—brown or white fur, big or small, sweet or brave. I was so looking forward to seeing them.

"I appreciate your kind words, Your Majesty. I'm sure the beastfolk will all be thrilled to hear this."

"Wonderful. Might I also ask a favor of you?"

"Of course, Your Majesty."

"When Lady Natalie is here for her tea party, I'd like to have her pet one of the companion animals, so long as they're not shy. What do you say?"

"That would be perfectly fine. It would be an honor to have Your Majesty and Lady Natalie pet my very own companion animal, if that's to your liking."

"Thank you, Borgan. Could you bring them to the villa during your next vacation to familiarize them with this area?"

"Of course. Where shall I keep my companion during work hours?"

"I'm going to build a doghouse out back and, hopefully, a place for them to exercise as well."

I was planning to build something like the dog parks we had back in Japan.

My goal was to grant the companion animals a place where they could relax. That was part of why I needed construction permission from His Majesty.

"A place to exercise? Your Majesty, we couldn't possibly ask you to do so much for our animals' sake..."

"It's no trouble at all. I'd like to do it, in fact. I'll just need your help in describing what kind of area would most appeal to them."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness...however, some of the companion animals are dogs of larger breeds. They'll need quite a lot of room, and I'm afraid some

space in the forest would need to be cleared for such a purpose. Wouldn't you agree that the time and cost of such work will be considerable?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll be the one to clear the forest."

"You, Your Majesty?"

"My magic should do the trick. I'd like to make use of some spells in the renovations to be sure I keep my skills polished."

Tools grow rusty when they go unused for too long.

I hadn't used any spell besides transmutation recently, though I'd been thinking up ways to make use of magic in my life.

As long as I had such an incredible power, I had no intention of being stingy with it when it came to adorable animals.



"**SO** you're planning to clear out part of the forest behind the villa?"

"That's correct. Would you be able to watch over me while I try cutting down a tree with my spell?"

Five days had passed since I inquired about the dog park with Borgan.

A carpenter named Carter had arrived at the villa. His short-cropped brown hair was slightly graying. With a large, robust body, Carter gave off the appearance of a kindhearted old man.

I was there with Carter, the top carpenter in his field, to inspect the construction site before beginning the job.

"For today, I'd like to remove around twenty trees from this area."

This was just the initial test.

First, I would use a spell to burn down the trees where I wanted to build the dog park, since controlling fire was my magical specialty. I thought it would make for easy cleanup if I burned it all down to ashes.

...A pillar of smoke billowing away from a fire near the castle.

"...Has there been a coup d'état?"

It would be a bad look, that much was for sure. I abandoned the idea. Even though I had permission from the king to restructure the area, Fire Magic would make it stand out far too much.

I decided to scrap the fire spell and turn to a form of magic that wouldn't invite any misunderstandings.

I faced the front yard, ready to begin.

"Fon! Come!"

"Kraaah!!"

A shrill cry came in response.

The flapping of wings grew louder in a flash. Fon descended in front of me.

"Good boy, good boy. Thanks for coming. Would you like to go for a walk in the forest with me?"

"Kyuwah!"

"With pleasure!!"

Fon nodded his head up and down. The plumes of feathers on his head bounced with each nod.

I exchanged looks with Carter, who was clearly shocked to see Fon, and then the three of us headed into the forest.

Once I found a more open area, I began to walk with my hand on Fon's back.

I felt his silky coat and the shifting of his powerful muscles underneath. Suddenly, the bushes in front of us began to rustle, and a small shadow darted out.

"Oh, a squirrel."

So cute.

It ran in the opposite direction of us, with its brown tail bobbing behind it. It didn't want to be anywhere near Fon.

With the upper body of a bird of prey and the lower body of a lion, the griffin was a Mythical Beast that dominated both land and sky. No ordinary animal,

even with an advantage in numbers, could hope to defeat such a creature.

The squirrels seemed sensitive to the appearance of the foe. They fled in a panic.

Squirrels who lived close to the villa weren't particularly frightened of people and would only keep a short distance away if I tried to approach them.

Their big black eyes were calming to look at, but if I used my spell without taking any precautions, the squirrels would get wrapped up in it too.

Fon was my assurance that the squirrels would run far away to safety.

I had heard that the squirrels didn't build their nests near the villa, which meant they only had to leave for a brief period.

I checked the rest of the bushes to be safe, making sure to clear out any remaining animals. Then I thanked Fon for his help with a stroke of his fur. The two of us relocated to just outside the tree line.

Taking in the sound of the forest—somewhat quieter than before—it was time to let my voice and spell fly.

“...Wind Cutter!”

An invisible, formless blade shot forward.

It stirred up a sharp whirlwind that blew into the trees.

“What was that...?”

Carter cocked his head.

“What exactly did you just do? Sadly, I'm no expert when it comes to magic, but—Huh?!”

Shink!!

The earth let out a hearty rumble as trees went toppling down.

Each remaining stump was perfectly smooth where the tree had been split.

“One, two, three...eighteen, nineteen, twenty! Perfect!!”

“Well done, my lady.”

Yes!! I did it!

Lucian's praise comforted me.

The spell was neither too powerful nor too weak.

I adjusted the whirlwind perfectly to cut down exactly twenty trees.

What a great feeling!

I enjoyed making convenient tools with transmutation, but it was a nice change of pace to use my magic for something on a much larger scale.

I proudly took in the sight of what I'd done.

"Fast and precise work. I'll admit I underestimated you."

Captivated, Carter examined the stumps of the fallen trees.

"Even the best carpenters and lumberjacks would have trouble cutting them this smooth."

"Will you be able to take this wood for yourselves?"

"Of course. I'll gather the younger guys and have 'em carry these trees out of here."

"I appreciate the help. You'll only need the tops of the trees for lumber, yes? I don't think these stumps will do you any good."

"Right you are. They can't be used as lumber, but we'll take care of them for you too."

"All right, then. I'll go ahead and make them easier to dispose of."

"Easier to dispose of?"

"Take a look."

Just diagonal from where I stood was the perfect spot.

The cut trees had all fallen in the distance, blown back from the impact. Smaller foliage still remained near the stumps.

"Wind Cutter!"

The blade whipped up in a breeze and shot forward at my command.

This time, the whirlwind moved vertically as it was sucked toward the ground.

I cast one spell after another until the stumps stuck in the earth were chopped down in size.

“Like this, see? The remaining stumps and trunks are whittled down, making them easier to transport.”

“...It’s like mincing food in the kitchen...”

Carter was correct, although he sounded a bit horrified about it.

Digging each stump out of the ground would be no easy task. I tried slicing away at them, just like how Gilbert diced his ingredients for a dish, to make that process easier.

“I’m real impressed with your strength, Your Majesty. With spells like yours, I bet you could give all the knights in Wolfvarte a good beat— Ahem!! You never have to worry about being attacked by evildoers!!”

...What was that just now, Carter?

He certainly had my attention, but I decided to drop the subject.

“That will be all for today. My magic is drained, so I’d like to get some rest.”

“No problem!! You put on a real show with that spell, so please, rest up.”

I made a show of rubbing my shoulders as I retreated to the villa.

...I still felt perfectly energized, but that would remain a secret.

I was perfectly able to clear the whole area of trees and stumps within a single day if I felt like it, but judging by Carter’s reaction, I’d chosen a good stopping point.

Revealing the true strength of my spells would only invite more trouble.

I had no intention of causing a coup d’état or beating up the kingdom’s knights.

Instead, my plan was to save the full strength of my magic for when I needed it in a situation like self-protection. Until then, it would remain hidden.

Chapter 3: The Fox and the Wildcat

“GOODNESS! What a fresh new look!!”

Lady Natalie’s eyes went wide when she took in the changed appearance of the villa’s backyard.

Her shock was understandable.

I had been using my magic to clear out trees for five days now.

The space where more than one hundred trees had once stood was now a spacious opening flooded with sunlight from above. I believed it would serve well to make up most of the dog park I had planned. I only needed to cut down a few more, then leave the fence building to the carpenters.

They had just arrived at the villa today, as a matter of fact. I could see them in the distance, busy with their work while simultaneously taken aback by the cleared-out forest.

“I’m going to make this a space for the dogs to run around in and get some exercise. You should come see it when it’s all finished, Lady Natalie.”

“I would love to!!”

Her face lit up right away.

The way she couldn’t hide her excitement was quite cute. She was truly acting like the sixteen-year-old girl that she was.

Fluffy friends were one reason she came to my home today.

One of my servants had brought his companion animal here two days earlier. He assured me that his dog was well trained and wouldn’t bite or snap at anyone.

Once I had the owner’s permission, we agreed that Lady Natalie would try her hand at petting the animal.

“This way, Lady Natalie. Please try not to make any loud noises on the way.”

She nodded instantly and wordlessly.

I led her around to the back where the companion animal was waiting.

“Good afternoon, Dynus. How is Snarl, your companion animal, doing today?”

“He seems quite well. It’s only his second day here, but it’s almost as if he’s grown used to the place already.”

Snarl, the dog tied up to the back of the house, was small, with droopy ears so large that they hung all the way down to his jaw. The size of the dog’s whole head almost rivaled those impressive ears.

The fur on Snarl’s belly was white, while his back was brown and black. He appeared about one size smaller than a beagle would have been on Earth.

His dark-brown eyes looked back and forth between us. The dog’s short fur was smooth and glossy. I could tell he’d been well-groomed.

Snarl showed no fear as Lady Natalie, a stranger, approached. He wagged his tail and stepped closer.

Just as Dynus had described, Snarl appeared to be a friendly dog who loved humans.

“...!!”

Lady Natalie was silently squirming.

Her face was still in doll mode, perhaps because Dynus was with us, but I could tell just how ecstatic she was. A quiet celebration took place as the girl realized she was finally on the verge of petting an adorable animal.

“Dynus, do we have your permission to pet Snarl?”

“By all means. He really loves attention, so you’ll be making him very happy.”

“Thank you. Now please watch what I do and follow along, Lady Natalie.”

I leaned down silently, being careful not to aggravate the dog, and placed the back of my hand in front of Snarl. He sniffed at it, taking in my scent, then nuzzled his head against my hand as if to get a feel for the sensation. His short fur glided across my skin until I reached one of his droopy ears.

I let Snarl take control for a while before moving my hand to stroke his head. I

pet from the top of his head down to the scruff of his neck, keeping my palm nice and limp. Snarl seemed to want more. He was grinding his head into my hand.

“Oh! Snarl sure took a quick liking to you, Your Majesty.”

“He’s a very sweet, friendly boy. Here, Lady Natalie. Join me and try petting him too.”

“Okay! I’ll give it my best shot!”

She looked nervous as she crouched down to the ground.

When she stretched out her hand toward Snarl, he quickly ducked away from her.

“What...? Does he hate me...?”

“Hold on for just a minute. You saw how you brought your hand down toward him from above? Many dogs are wary of such a motion.”

You could move your hand down from above, or up from below. It may seem like a small difference, but it’s not uncommon for dogs to feel alarmed by one of these methods.

Humans are no different from giants in the eyes of a small dog. Who wouldn’t run away if a giant swung its hand down at you from above?

I only wanted her to keep that in mind, but instead, she pulled her hand away in a panic.

Snarl was just as startled by the quick motion. He took a few steps away from her.

“Ah...”

“...There’s no need to be so upset, Lady Natalie.”

Her expression remained blank, but her aura was proving easier to read than I would have imagined. Perhaps the presence of the cute little dog was causing her to let her guard down.

“Moving your hand so quickly only scared him. He wouldn’t hate you because of something like that. Look, Snarl’s back already! Try petting him from below

this time, and go slowly, so you don't startle him."

"O-Okay!"

Lady Natalie nervously stretched her hand out toward the dog. Little by little, she closed the distance between them, until her pale palm landed on Snarl's fur.

"So warm..."

I could tell the words slipped right from her lips when she felt Snarl's coat.

With just one petting, she had already fallen captive to the alluring phenomenon of fur.



LADY Natalie and I sat down to have tea together after she spent some time petting Snarl.

My servants set up a table in the front yard, under the bright-blue sky of the sunny day, and lined it with sweets. In addition to normal snacks like cookies, one plate also held my new-and-improved version of the chiffon cake.

Serving the cake would surely be of significance to Lady Natalie. In truth, I wasn't planning on having it at all at first.

But after she told me directly that she wanted to try it, I decided I wanted to make that a reality for her.

"It's delicious. The texture is somehow both soft and moist. It's very intriguing..."

Lady Natalie neatly cut into the cake with her fork, then brought a bite up to her petite lips.

She finished off her slice, took a drink of black tea, and opened her mouth to speak.

"I may know nothing when it comes to cooking, but even I can tell that the flavor and texture of this cake are far different from the one made by Chef Giran. ...If you'd given up the fight, that terrible attempt may have been what everyone knew as a 'chiffon cake.' ...I really can't apologize enough."

Lady Natalie expressed her regrets as if she, not her subordinates, was the one behind the theft.

She was nothing like the fearful girl I had just seen in front of Snarl.

While I knew she may very well be putting on a brave face while still feeling timid on the inside, it was certainly impressive and promising behavior.

“...I know this doesn’t make up for my actions, but I have some information for you, Your Majesty. I’ve heard that the candidate for queen who lives in the eastern villa is planning on inviting you to her home.”

She watched eagerly for my reaction with her regal eyes.

“...The eastern villa candidate. That’s Lady Kate of the Wildcat clan, correct?”

I recalled the map of the territory that made up the royal castle grounds.

The main palace where King Glenreed resided was located in the middle of the vast area, slightly toward the north.

The four candidates to become the next queen lived in royal villas surrounding his castle on all four sides. The direction each woman lived in represented the area of the kingdom her family came from. Lady Natalie was granted the western villa, as she had moved here from the western region of Wolfvarte.

“Lady Kate is the eldest daughter of the duke who governs the eastern territory. I’ve heard rumors of both her pride and beauty. How would you describe her, Lady Natalie?”

“I suppose I’d call her my exact opposite,” Lady Natalie responded after a moment of thought. “She’s very cheerful and expressive. I would even call her strong-willed. Her hair and facial features are beautiful, her cat ears are well-groomed, and her tail is bent at the end. I remember how much that tail of hers always moved.”

So she has a kinked tail?

Lady Natalie’s love of animals seemed to result in her taking in all sorts of details.

I had never met Lady Kate before, but I could easily picture the beautiful cat

girl with a kink in her tail from that description.

“She sounds like a very lively person.”

“Yes, and that’s why she’s my exact opposite. ...Both in personality, and in how she managed to become one of the candidates.”

“...So the rumors are true? Lady Kate and her sister were engaged in a power struggle for the candidacy?”

The eighteen-year-old Lady Kate supposedly had a half sister who was one year younger than her.

The mother of this half sister was a woman of high status; however, she was somewhat cruel to Lady Kate’s own mother. It was rumored that the family had quietly been at war over which daughter would be up for consideration as the next queen candidate.

The battle of the women of the Wildcat clan.

The word *catfight* flashed in my mind for a moment, but I kept the thought to myself.

“I don’t know for certain, but from what I could tell, Lady Kate did seem hostile toward her sister. It would probably be best not to mention her.”

“Thank you for the information. You’ve been a big help.”

“...I deserve no thanks.”

She brought her cup of tea to her lips. Perhaps it was to hide the slight blush on her cheeks.

I imagined that between her parents’ strict discipline and Diaz’s constant monitoring, Lady Natalie wasn’t used to being praised. She was the one sent to be a candidate for queen after her older sister fell ill. But at heart, she was a kind girl who loved animals, with no desire for power or prestige.

It was almost the exact opposite for Lady Kate, who had fought her own half sister for the very same position.

Lady Natalie never wanted to be queen, whereas Lady Kate struggled against a sister she shared blood with for the title.

If only they'd been in each other's positions. It was unfortunate indeed.

I pondered the bent-tailed Wildcat candidate and her difficult circumstances until I felt the presence of something approaching us.

This was no Wildcat, but a feline of my very own villa.

Berry, the Gardener Cat, was silently wandering up to us.

"How cute! Is this your pet cat, Your Majesty?"

"Something like that, I suppose?"

Berry was transfixed by the plates of cookies set atop our table.

Each bite-size cookie was made with crushed strawberries mixed into the dough. They came out of the oven with a faint pink color. I prepared them to familiarize Lady Natalie with strawberries, as the cookies didn't contain the fruit's original shape. They were a cute color as well.

"Your eyes are as sharp as ever, Berry..."

As a lover of strawberries, Berry had already tried these cookies, of course.

But now it appeared that she wasn't satisfied and had come to beg for more.

She sure was perceptive, considering these cookies barely resembled or smelled like strawberries at all.

The cat walked right up to the legs of our table and stared up at us.

"...Lady Natalie, would you mind giving her one of those cookies?"

"Are you sure?"

"Berry is a Mythical Beast known as a Gardener Cat. It's safe for her to eat cookies."

"A Gardener Cat!! I've never seen one before!"

"I hear they're quite rare. I'd appreciate it if you could keep her presence here a secret."

It felt like a good idea to keep her existence a secret.

Lady Natalie seemed to understand. She quickly nodded in response.

Her eyes stayed glued to Berry the entire time.

“Here you go.”

Lady Natalie held out a cookie.

The cat stood up on her hind legs and clutched the cookie between her paw pads.

“She stood up!! Your Majesty, she stood up!!” cried Lady Natalie, her cheeks turning slightly red.

The excited girl and I struck up a more lively conversation as we watched Berry eat her cookie.

Our time together was both enjoyable and nostalgic to me.

When Krona, the maid, was still here, the two of us sometimes chatted casually together like this.

The fond memories of the time she spent in the villa stung my heart.

“...Oh, Berry, you finished your cookie? Lady Natalie, you can pet her now, if you wish.”

Berry didn't run away when the girl stretched her hand out. I wondered if she was just that happy to have had a taste of her beloved strawberries.

Lady Natalie couldn't hide the smile on her face as she took in the feeling of the cat's soft fur.

The two of us spent our afternoon enjoying Berry's company as we chatted. Eventually, it was time for Lady Natalie to leave.

She seemed like she wasn't ready to go yet. I had one last thing I wanted to ask her anyway.

“You said that Lady Kate and you are exact opposites, right?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“In both your personality and in your past reasons for becoming candidates... but that's not all, is it?”

It wasn't just their histories.

Lady Natalie might be seeking a different future as well.

I decided to ask her about her feelings on the turmoil surrounding the queen candidacy.

“I’ve heard that Lady Kate is very strong-willed and that she desires to be King Glenreed’s next wife more than anyone else. Is that correct?”

“...Yes. All four of us were battling behind the scenes, but no one wanted it more than Lady Kate.”

“And that intense desire hasn’t changed since I arrived in this kingdom, has it?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“...So that makes you the ‘complete opposite’ of Lady Kate, yes?”

“...Yes, that’s probably a good way to think of it.”

She spoke as if talking about someone else entirely. Her reply was hard to read, but she made no attempt to deny my implication, which helped me understand her true feelings.

Lady Natalie most likely had no intentions of becoming the next queen whatsoever.

She was only in her position as a replacement for her ill sister in the first place, and she didn’t seem at all interested in power or prestige. I believed that becoming the queen was never even a priority for her at all. However, she desperately stayed in the running so as not to let down her parents and everyone else in her life.

I respected her efforts, but there was no doubt that the plagiarism led by Diaz had been a big blow to the work she’d put in. I didn’t regret exposing Diaz’s crimes, but I couldn’t deny that I was responsible for hurting Lady Natalie’s chances of becoming the next queen. I was sure she knew just how bad her prospects looked too.

But she wasn’t going to ramp her efforts up just because the going was tough. Lady Natalie already seemed to have given up on winning this battle. She had other plans in mind. In her current position, that was the best option, but with

the expectations of her family on her...

There was no way she could ever say the words “I withdraw from consideration as the next queen.”

If she ever stated something like that publicly, she may very well have been forced out of the castle altogether. For that reason, she phrased it abstractly by saying she was the exact opposite of Lady Kate, who was desperate to be selected as queen.

It was certainly a slow way of doing things, but perhaps, when considering Lady Natalie’s circumstances and responsibilities, it was the best option.

She had lots of demeaning words for herself, but when it came to difficult truths, she struck me as a very clever person in how she came up with indirect ways to express herself.

“...I understand your thinking, Lady Natalie. By the way, does your father, the duke, share your feelings on that?”

“I think he’s a bit more motivated than I am... However, after what happened with Diaz, he doesn’t seem as strict about wanting me to become the next queen.”

Her eyebrows arched a bit sadly.

It looked like she felt guilty that she couldn’t live up to her father’s expectations.

I remembered feeling the exact same way when my engagement fell apart.

“...I’m not confident I would be the best queen for this country. I’m a timid person, and the people who raised me are terribly prejudiced against beastfolk. The beastfolk of this kingdom wouldn’t welcome a family like mine joining His Majesty at the highest seat in Wolfvarte.”

“No matter how fantastic a queen may be, it’s unlikely that every single citizen of this kingdom will take a liking to her. In fact...”

I looked at Lady Natalie.

She was the girl who came here in place of her older sister.

But regardless of how it came to be, she was still a candidate to become the next queen.

“Beastfolk and humans have a complicated relationship, of course, but that can still be changed. You’re here right now to represent your family. Regardless of whether you wished for it or not, your position comes with obligations, influence, and power.”

“Power? But I—”

“You could, for example, make it public that you see beastfolk as friends. Your family won’t support such an action, I’m sure, but if you stick to your opinions, it could easily change your family’s current stance, for better or worse.”

Perhaps, to Lady Natalie, everything I was saying was unfair. I was urging her not to stay silent in the face of her family’s prejudice. She needed to make use of the power that came with her position.

“Even if you act, I can’t be certain that the results will be favorable. It could just as easily backfire. If your family decides you’re no longer useful to them once you’re not merely a puppet, they may even decide to deal with you by imprisonment or assassination.”

I warned her of the dangers.

Much like her nickname of “Doll Princess” would imply, Lady Natalie had lived her entire life at the orders of her parents. I didn’t know how things would turn out if that doll suddenly learned how to act on her own.

“I...”

The girl was trembling.

“I don’t know if I can do such a thing properly, and I highly doubt that my father, my family, and the people of my homeland will approve of those actions. However...”

She continued on.

“Nevertheless, I agree that it’s not okay to ignore the way my family is worsening relations between humans and beastfolk. If I can make a difference, even if it takes a long time to do so, then it would give purpose to my position

as a candidate.”

“Lady Natalie...”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. May I continue to receive your help from now on? I’m lacking in so many ways, and I know almost nothing about beastfolk and their companion animals. I would love to hear more about them, perhaps over tea like today.”

“Of course. Berry and I will be waiting for you here at the villa with tea and snacks.”

Lady Natalie and I came from different lands. We belonged to different factions. I couldn’t give her my direct support, but I could hear her out when she wanted to talk or complain, and I could certainly revel in the joy of adorable animals with her.

“Thank you so much!”

Her face lit up in response.

I was sure she was still uneasy, but she appeared to have made her choice.

“...If only...”

“Did you say something, Lady Natalie?”

“...No, it’s nothing. I have a date in mind for my next visit!”

With a happy, if not somewhat rushed, look, Lady Natalie began to describe her schedule.

“If only you could be the queen forever.”

I wouldn’t learn of Lady Natalie’s words for some time to come.



I saw Lady Natalie off, asked the servants to clean up the tea party, then received an envelope from one of my maids.

It was an invitation from one of the candidates.

This was exactly as Lady Natalie had predicted; however, one important detail was different.

“This invitation is signed by Lady Kate of the eastern villa and Lady I-Liena of the northern villa?”

Lady Kate was of the Wildcat clan.

Lady I-Liena belonged to the Snow-Fox clan.

The two candidates possessed cat ears and fox ears respectively, and now, I would soon be meeting both.



WHY would Lady Kate of the Wildcat clan and Lady I-Liena of the Snow-Fox clan both sign my invitation?

I believed the reason for this likely originated with Lady Kate.

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate were the two of the four candidates who were regarded as the most likely selections to take my place as queen. Now that Lady Natalie had lost her power during the plagiarism scandal, Lady Kate was the obvious frontrunner.

I was sure she was planning to invite me to her home, display her superiority as a candidate, then try to get me on her side in the battle. However, there were also circumstances that would make it difficult for her to form a relationship with me.

This time, opposition came from within.

The majority of the residents in Lady Kate’s eastern homeland were beastfolk, including Wildcat clan members. Unfortunately, many beastfolk did not look kindly upon humans. Just as humans mocked beastfolk for being “mutts,” some beastfolk also used the term “hairless apes” to demean humans.

“Hairless... That’s a harsh insult to some humans...”

I smiled bitterly from inside my carriage.

Fortunately, my older brothers and my father still had plenty of hair left on their heads. But there was no shortage of middle-aged and elderly people who struggled with hair loss, regardless of their class. Who knew what kind of carnage could result from poking fun at their baldness?

Well, actually, such a result had already happened.

I'd heard that fights breaking out between enraged humans and beastfolk over the term "hairless ape" wasn't uncommon in this kingdom.

"It's not very funny at all..."

I loved the fluffy tails and fuzzy ears of beastfolk, but that didn't mean each and every single one of them was a good person.

The small numbers of beastfolk in other kingdoms tended to result in them being mistreated, but here, they made up just under half of the entire population. In Lady Kate's home territory, where the vast majority of people were beastfolk, many of the local population looked down on humans.

I'd learned that many of Lady Kate's close associates weren't comfortable with humans either. From their perspective, my title as queen was only a formality, and my status as a human wouldn't earn me a warm welcome.

I was sure that was a problem for Lady Kate. She wanted to invite me over and make an ally out of me, but it would be difficult to convince her subordinates. Instead, she and Lady I-Liena had banded together to avoid such troubles.

Lunch was being held at Lady Kate's villa today. Lady I-Liena, who was also going to be in attendance, expressed the desire to have me join them.

That seemed to be the gist of it. I was certain Lady Kate had arranged with her beforehand to invite me herself.

Though it was Lady Kate's lunch, Lady I-Liena was the one who had insisted upon my presence. Both of their names were signed to the invitation as well. That appeared to be the key to convincing Lady Kate's human-hating servants to go along with their plan.

"Such a hassle... Aristocrats always make things much too complicated..."

The lower-middle-class self inside me let out a loud sigh.

I already wanted to go back home to my villa.

The beastfolk I interacted with on a daily basis like Edgar and Borgan were all kind people. It was almost easy to forget...that beastfolk and humans had a

difficult relationship. My personal relations were just fine, but as a public figure, there were many walls and obstacles I had to navigate around.

Once I arrived and exited my carriage, I switched off the melodramatic background music playing in my head. I put on my best smile so as to not give my gloomy heart away. It wasn't long before I was thrown right into the swing of things.

"Welcome, Queen Laetitia. We're so honored to have you here with us today."

A beautiful girl with silver hair, fox ears, and a tail was outside to greet me. Her slender golden eyes were just slightly red at each corner, giving them an entrancing look.

As beautiful as she was, I was more interested in the ball of fur at her side.

An incredibly fluffy fox with a silky golden-brown coat and five plush tails stood there with an elegant posture.

"Oh my. Are you fond of foxes, Your Majesty?"

She smiled sweetly at me.

Sure, I did get distracted by her fox's fuzziness, but I was purposefully trying not to let it show on my face.

The girl was perceptive.

"My name is I-Liena. I'd be so happy if the two of us could be friends."

"I'm Laetitia. Thank you for your generous invitation today."

The two of us exchanged spirited greetings.

Lady I-Liena of the Snow-Fox clan was the candidate for queen who resided in the northern villa. I'd known her name for some time now, and it was actually our second time meeting directly. The first was during His Majesty's birthday celebration. I was more focused on Diaz and her followers' actions on that day. Therefore, this was our first real one-on-one conversation.

Lady I-Liena was a beautiful woman and the same age as King Glenreed at twenty-four years old.

The Snow-Fox clan had a rich culture of their own, so she was clad in unusual garments. Layers of dyed and patterned fabric made up her tunic. It reminded me somewhat of kimonos or the native garments of the Ainu people that I knew from my past life.

“I’ve heard rumors of your companion animal’s beauty.”

I was referring to the gorgeous fox waiting at Lady I-Liena’s side.

This creature was known as the two-tailed fox. On the outside, they appeared to be normal foxes with long tails, but the number of tails varied, despite the name. Usually they only had two, but some had more; the more tails, the rarer they were considered to be.

Lady I-Liena’s five-tailed fox was a physical representation of her own notable status.

The rare creature boasted an overwhelming amount of fur. Each of its five long tails swished back and forth.

The elegant yet charming animal was incredibly stunning.

“Why, thank you. He seems happy to receive your praise.”

“So he’s both beautiful and clever.”

“How kind of you to say. Would you like to pet him?”

It was an invitation.

The underlying message behind an invitation to pet her companion animal upon our first real meeting was “I hope we can be friends.” Rejecting such an offer would be rude, and I had no reason to either. I didn’t fully understand why Lady I-Liena had cooperated with Lady Kate in inviting me here, but I decided not to play games for the time being.

This was a fantastic opportunity to pet a very rare animal.

“All right, then. Don’t mind if I do.”

I crouched down and stroked the fox’s head.

Unlike Lord Aroo and the wolves, this fox had a coat that was silky smooth.

As I let my hand glide across that wonderful fur, taking in the sensation, I felt

a soft breeze hit my cheek.

Swish. Fluff. Fwish.

One of the fox's long tails was gently grazing my cheek.

Each of the five tails were swishing against my body at his whim.

Animals are so amazing!!

I almost broke out into a smile when I realized just what exactly was happening. The impending doom I'd felt in the carriage disappeared in an instant.

I pet the incredibly fluffy fox, let him pet me back with his tails, until it was time to leave again. I didn't want to say goodbye, but I had to continue my conversation with Lady I-Liena as she led me into Lady Kate's villa.

Lady I-Liena's silver-white hair and fox ears were like physical embodiments of the name "Snow-Fox clan." Her body was curvy and feminine underneath the brightly bejeweled native clothes she wore. The pleasant smile on her face emphasized her eye-catching red lips.

The northern region of Wolfvarte from which she hailed was a snowy area that was generally said to be distrustful of outsiders. However, Lady I-Liena didn't seem hostile to me at all. She was skilled at conversation too.

Though she was friendly on the outside, I needed to stay alert. I almost felt like she was about to lead the conversation in a direction I had no control over whatsoever.

"I'm Laetitia. Thank you very much for inviting me here today."

Lady Kate was waiting for us in the dining room. I introduced myself to her there.

It was my first time meeting Lady Kate face-to-face.

She was a beautiful girl with oval eyes, golden-brown hair, and well-groomed cat ears.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. Thank you for traveling such a distance to join us."

It was almost a normal greeting at first glance, though I sensed a certain bite

in her words, as if the “long trip” she was referring to was the one I made from a foreign country to become King Glenreed’s wife.

“Oh my, Lady Kate, what’s the matter? Your fur is standing up on end.”

“Could you please keep such comments to yourself? I see that smirk on your face again.”

Lady Kate immediately lashed back at Lady I-Liena’s quip.

She really did look like a cat whose fur was standing on end.



These two women invited me here together, but they didn't seem to get along particularly well. I'd heard that Lady Kate was a strong-willed person, so maybe that was why. So long as only one candidate could be made the next queen of this land, there was no doubt in my mind that she would be on guard around her every rival.

It was then that I realized something strange. I could see Lady Kate's cat ears twitching on top of her head, but her tail was nowhere in sight.

Beastfolk treated their tails the same way humans treated their limbs. Their clothes always had special holes just for their tails to hang free.

I knew that Lady Kate had a short, kinked tail, so perhaps she was hiding it along her back?

It was a stark contrast to Lady I-Liena's plush tail.

I feared the two of them would devolve into a full-blown argument if I left them alone, so I decided to change the subject.

"Lady Kate, is that the famous rock salt from the eastern region that I see?"

There was a large crystal on display in the center of the dining table. It was as large as my head, with a beautiful, glittery surface.

"Yes, that's right. What a surprise to hear that a foreigner such as yourself is familiar with it."

"I've heard the rock salt from the eastern region is abundant and of the highest quality. It even shines like crystal when it's polished."

This famous product from the east was sometimes referred to as "white gold."

Lady Kate puffed her chest out with pride to hear my praise for her local specialty. She was easy to read, or rather, she was very expressive, just as Lady Natalie had told me. Despite the pointedness I'd sensed in her words at first, perhaps she wasn't a bad person after all.

"Hehe! You're pretty clever for a human. Most of the ones I know have forgotten the wonders of salt. Don't you think humans are so silly for using all those lavish spices?"

“Well, I enjoy both salt and spices.”

“I’m more fond of a salty taste, myself.”

“...Lady I-Liena, this has nothing to do with your opinion.”

Lady Kate seemed displeased with both Lady I-Liena’s interruption and my own response.

Salt and spices.

Both were vital elements when it came to cooking, but that wasn’t their only role in this kingdom.

Lady Kate’s home region, in eastern Wolfvarte, had been the main producer of rock salt since long ago. On the other hand, the kingdom’s main harbors were generally located in the west, where Lady Natalie’s family came from. Their main import was spices from overseas.

The nobles of Lady Natalie’s hometown used an overabundance of spices in their cooking both as a form of antagonization toward beastfolk and also as a display of the value of the ports where said spices were brought to the kingdom.

It made sense that one would have an attachment to the products originating from their own lands. Lady Kate’s question of my preference for salt or spices definitely held a deeper meaning. Lady Kate’s hometown was famous for its rock salt, while Lady Natalie’s highly valued spices. She wanted to know which party my alliance was with.

Both salt and spices were delicious.

I thought that might be the best answer to give.

With that, lunch was served right away.

As I’d imagined, most of the dishes were seasoned with salt.

The pickled cabbage was supposedly made much like sauerkraut was back on Earth. As sour as it was, I was pretty certain no vinegar had been used. The chopped cabbage was mixed with salt, then left to ferment. The sour taste was refreshing and paired well with the main dish of herb sausages. I could have easily helped myself to many more servings.

The sausage had a pleasant snap with each bite. It was the perfect texture to go along with the crisp fermented cabbage. I imagined it was a meal that kept well too. I decided to make it myself at the villa some other time.

I'd heard that beastfolk, even among the upper classes, only ever used spices in moderation. It appeared that was true. Though the meal was a bit salty, I felt as if I preferred it to the foods served to human aristocrats.

"Lady Kate, thank you for the wonderful meal."

"I'm honored to hear you're enjoying it, Your Majesty. It included a bounty of rock salt harvested directly from my hometown. I'm quite confident in its quality."

Lady Kate seemed pleased, though her eyes contained a distinct, pointed glimmer.

"Can I be confident in the honesty of your praise for my lunch, and for your acceptance of my invitation today?"

"Of course. Is something weighing on your mind?"

"...This is taking too long."

Her eyes were focused on me.

"Your Majesty, I'd like to ask you a question. Do you have any intentions of aiding me in becoming the next queen? You accepted my invitation and came to visit me today. Shall I interpret that as a showing of your alliance to me and my candidacy?"

It's déjà vu, all right.

Diaz had asked me the same question upon my first visit to Lady Natalie's villa. She had believed I was going to support Lady Natalie because we were both humans. However, once Lady Natalie lost her influence and that power went to Lady Kate's side, Lady Kate seemed to believe that would earn her my support.

It was true that her chances of becoming the next queen would be high, so long as nothing rocked the boat too much along the way. As the current queen, even if I was only a placeholder, my support of Lady Kate would nearly assure

her victory.

Perhaps the best option for me would be to ally myself with her, the clear winner in this race, and use it to benefit the relationship with my homeland once she was queen.

I was aware of that possible outcome, but there were still concerns that weighed on my mind. I couldn't bring myself to agree to her request.

"...I'd like the two of us to be friends, and—"

"...! What a great answer!!"

Her ears perked and her expression lit up.

But unfortunately for her, she hadn't let me finish.

"...And I'd like to be friends with Lady I-Liena as well."

"...What do you mean by that?"

Lady Kate's joyful face did a complete reversal.

Her reaction was more proof of why I couldn't support her in becoming the next queen. Even during this short conversation, I could see she had trouble keeping her emotions in check. I certainly didn't hate emotional people, but was that really the best trait for a potential queen? Someone who couldn't control their own conduct would cause a mountain of trouble as a member of the royal family.

"Why would you mention Lady I-Liena right now, Your Majesty?"

"The two of you signed your names to today's invitation. Isn't it natural to want to befriend both of you?"

"Oh, I'm honored. I'd like to be friends with you forever, Your Majesty!"

Lady Kate seemed to ignore Lady I-Liena's entry into the conversation. I could see the wariness and disappointment clearly in Lady Kate's eyes.

"Your Majesty, if I might be so honest, it would be most beneficial for you to ally yourself with me. That she-fo— I mean, Lady I-Liena may be a smooth talker, but if you take into account the areas of her home region that are lacking, it's impossible to think she'd be chosen as a queen over me."

“...That may be true.”

“Then why won’t you simply agree to my request? Do you look down on me because I’m beastfolk?”

I could only chuckle awkwardly on the inside when I heard Lady Kate’s incorrect assessment of my behavior. I had no interest in belittling beastfolk whatsoever. Even if I did hate them, I would never let such a personal emotion show in front of Lady Kate. If anything, it was she who was failing to hide her contempt for me, a human.

I knew she probably couldn’t help it, considering the state of relations between humans and beastfolk, but in all honesty, it made me hesitate to support her as the next queen.

Elltoria, my homeland, was inhabited mainly by humans.

I feared the possibility that the relationship between our two kingdoms could become strained if someone like Lady Kate, who was prejudiced toward humans, became the Wolfvartian queen.

But I couldn’t voice any of those opinions out loud, so I decided to avoid the question.

“I have friendly relationships with all the beastfolk employed at my villa. I have never given humans favorable treatment over beastfolk, and if you saw how I acted with Diaz and her henchmen at His Majesty’s birthday party, then you witnessed that proof with your very own eyes.”

“...I suppose so. But in that case, can you explain your treatment of Lady Natalie? You invited her to your villa just the other day, right? How can you be so kind to the girl responsible for Diaz?”

“Lady Natalie is at fault for failing to control her subordinates, certainly, but she never acted maliciously herself.”

“So that just makes it all okay? That’s exactly what I meant by favoring your fellow humans to—”

“Hehe! Lady Kate, you really don’t get it, hmm?”

“...What do you want now?”

Lady Kate gave Lady I-Liena a side-eyed glare for her interruption.

But Lady I-Liena seemed unmoved. She looked at Lady Kate as if she were observing a young child.

“Do you understand that when Her Majesty accused Diaz of those crimes, she earned the scorn of all the humans in Lady Natalie’s camp?”

“Of course she did. That’s just out of retribution.”

“But scorn in retribution is still scorn all the same. Do you know what would happen if Her Majesty treated Lady Natalie coldly after that incident?”

“I...”

Lady Kate trailed off quietly. She seemed to have reached the right conclusion.

There was a reason why I had invited Lady Natalie to my villa.

While I did want to speak with her and offer her my personal support, that was far from my only motivation.

Indeed, I was the one who exposed Diaz’s crimes.

But the only people I opposed were Diaz and her direct followers. I invited Lady Natalie to tea as a means of showing I felt no ill will toward her. As a result, her subordinates would not be able to be openly hostile toward me either.

“Lady Kate, I don’t wish to make enemies out of you, Lady Natalie, or Lady I-Liena... Can you accept that?”

“...If you don’t want to be enemies, then why not offer me your support?”

“That might be the case in the future, but it’s a bit soon for that, is it not? We’ve only really met for the first time today.”

“True, but—”

“The two of us are different races and come from different homelands. I think it’s only natural for us to need time before we can understand each other well.”

“...Fine, then. We’ll save the complicated discussions for later. Let’s enjoy the rest of our meal for now.”

Lady Kate was retreating. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Unlike Diaz, she didn't seem to see me as a full-on enemy just because I rejected her initial offer of partnership. Lady Kate was unable to control her emotions, and she didn't seem fond of bargaining either, but perhaps she wasn't a bad person after all.

Even her standoffish behavior seemed somewhat normal, considering our differences. If I took my time to develop a friendship with her, maybe Lady Kate would soften up a bit, or even rid herself of some prejudice toward humans.

I concluded that our first meeting wasn't too bad in the end.

Feeling a bit lighter, I began to resume my meal, when I felt someone's eyes on me.

I glanced around and realized Lady I-Liena had been looking my way. Well, it felt that way, at least. She was much harder to read than Lady Kate, so it was possible I'd just imagined it.

I picked up my fork and brought a bite of sauce-covered beef up to my mouth, when...

"?!"

My whole body went stiff in an instant.

Immediately, I swallowed the sliced meat in an effort to appear calm.

Salty. It's so salty!

An intense, almost painful saltiness assaulted my tongue.

All the moisture disappeared from my mouth, as if I'd been served a glass of seawater.

I knew their food revolved around salt, but this was clearly too extreme.

Something was off about this one dish in particular.

But as the guest, I couldn't simply express it outright, so I tried to act normal as I brought my fork back down to the plate.

I could see Lady I-Liena eating the same meat dish with her usual smile on her face.

Is something wrong with the seasoning on my plate? Or is Lady I-Liena just trying to avoid making a scene like I am?

As I tried to figure out what to do, Lady Kate was the next person at the table to try the beef dish.

“What *is* this flavor?! What mockery is this?!”

Lady Kate slammed her fork into the plate and rose to her feet.

Although I’d done my best to avoid causing a fuss, the emotional girl appeared unable to resist.

Her fork let out a loud squeak as it collided with the plate.

Before the room could even fall silent again, Lady Kate had dashed away from her seat.

“That fiend!! I won’t allow this!!”

“Lady Kate.”

“Don’t move!! I’ll get the real dish right n—”

“Lady Kate!! Please just wait!!”

I grabbed hold of her arm before she could leave the dining room.

“What’re you doing?! Let go!!”

“Please calm down. For now, have a seat and—”

“There’s more important things for me to deal with right now!! Get out of my way!!”

“Kyah!!”

She swung her arm, sending me stumbling back.

Lady Kate and I were roughly the same size, but beastfolk were physically stronger than humans. The two races had vastly different muscular strength. I staggered backward from the blow...as part of an act.

She really did manage to shake me away, but my stumble and shriek were both for show.

It almost seemed unnatural, but Lady Kate gasped and rushed to pull me back

on my feet.

Her tight grip sent pain through my arm. But now, I knew how she felt.

I was a human she'd only just met. When I was on the verge of getting hurt, her first instinct was to help me.

Her instantaneous act of kindness didn't feel calculated, and I'd successfully prevented her from leaving.

"Thank you, Lady Kate."

"...I shouldn't have shaken you away so hard."

Lady Kate's embarrassed but sincere apology conveyed her good character. Her true self seemed to be shining through her words for some time now.

"I apologize for trying to pull you back too. But I need you to wait just a moment."

"...Why? You also tasted that oversalted meat, right, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. It was quite delicious."

"Huh?"

Lady Kate looked downright dumbstruck.

"Are you mad or something? I eat salty foods all the time, and even I couldn't take it!"

"But it was delicious. You thought so as well, right, Lady I-Liena?"

"Hehe! I loved how salty it was."

She followed my lead without hesitation. We seemed to be on the same page.

"Are your taste buds broken? Maybe you've both come down with something and can't taste things anymore...?"

As Lady Kate began to worry about our conditions, I decided to explain our thinking.

"Why can't...we just say it was delicious? It wasn't salty enough to make anyone sick or something so terrible. No such meal could ever be served at an event led by the two of you."

“That’s...true.”

Lady Kate seemed to accept this.

Serving an inedible dish while entertaining a guest was a grave embarrassment for a host. Regardless of what caused it, Lady Kate and Lady I-Liena would take the blame as today’s hosts. That’s why I proposed we pretend the overly salted meal hadn’t happened in the first place.

I prevented Lady Kate from leaving the dining room in an effort to contain the situation as much as possible. While I was angry with whoever the offender was too, when I saw Lady Kate’s frenzy over the situation, I could tell she was a victim as well.

And if it was all an act, well, then Lady Kate was a stunning actress.

I didn’t see any motive for her to serve such oversalted food. I decided to exclude her as the culprit for now.

“...Thank you, Your Majesty. I lost my temper and almost made things much worse.”

Lady Kate’s cat ears slumped forward sadly. I realized that in her own way, she was embarrassed by her overreaction too.

“I appreciate your help,” she said. “The criminal...or at least, the offender, will be punished as soon as I find them.”

“On that topic, might I ask you a favor, Lady Kate?”

“...What do you need?”

“It’s regarding Lady Sienna... I’d like to meet your younger sister, if you’d be so kind.”



“**PLEASE** excuse my intrusion. I’m Sienna.”

A young noblewoman with a light-brown tail and cat ears entered the room.

She took step by graceful step toward us with a pleasant smile on her face.

This was Lady Kate’s younger half sister, and the two bore little resemblance.

“I’m honored to have an audience with you today, Your Majesty.”

Lady Sienna kept her eyes fixed on me instead of on today’s host—her older sister born to a different mother. Her posture was almost like a declaration that she was the true head of this villa.

“I’m pleased as well. Thank you for seeing me despite the sudden request.”

“I heard that the queen wanted to meet with me. I was already staying here so that I might be of help to my sister. Such good fortune indeed.”

“Be of help to me? Can you knock it off already?”

Lady Kate was clearly upset.

On the other hand, Lady Sienna kept that calm smile on her face without dissenting.

“Lady Sienna, I’d like to give you something in honor of our first meeting. Would that be all right?”

“Why, certainly!! I’m honored to—”

Her face stiffened.

The tail behind her body began to puff up.

She was staring at my plate of oversalted beef. I’d removed the small portion I already ate from.

“Your Majesty? Is this a joke of some kind? That’s part of today’s lunch, is it not?”

“Yes, exactly. It was delicious, so I thought you might like to try a bite as well?”

“...No thank you. My stomach isn’t feeling too well today.”

She shook her head lightly.

Lady Sienna was called here only to be presented with a guest’s plate of food. It wasn’t strange for her to reject it...but it seemed like there was more to the story.

As soon as I showed her the plate, what flashed in Lady Sienna’s mind almost

certainly wasn't simply bewilderment, but rather, "I can't eat something so disgusting."

Her expression was one of revulsion.

It was far too strange a reaction in response to being offered a single bite. I was quite sure Lady Sienna already knew exactly how salty the dish was.

Therefore, she had to be the person who ordered the change in seasoning.

Lady Kate seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion. Her fur stood on end as she lashed out at her half sister.

"Sienna!! I knew it was you!!"

"Please don't yell, Big Sister. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're the one who made the food come out salty! I just know you're trying to drag me down, right?!"

"What in heaven's name are you talking about? If you're going to treat me like a common criminal, you'd better have proof."

"You wouldn't take a single bite just now!!"

"That's all? You think that gives weight to your false accusations?"

"...!!"

Lady Kate fell silent.

This helped me gain a good understanding of the state of Lady Kate's camp.

Though Lady Kate was the one chosen as a candidate to become the next queen, her inner circle wasn't entirely on the same page. Her command of her subordinates was clearly lacking if some chef could be ordered to oversalt a meal like that. Lady Kate seemed to be thinking the same thing.

"Big Sister, please don't accuse me of wrongdoing without any proof. You and Lady I-Liena are today's hosts. Whatever occurred today, the responsibility lies with the two of you. Don't you agree, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Eek!!"

Lady Sienna let out a quiet squeak.

She was a scheming woman but, deep down, an utterly simple one too.

I was smiling at her with my coldest, most intimidating villainous smile.

“The meal today was quite delicious. Lady Kate, Lady I-Liena, I thank you for hosting a wonderful lunch this afternoon.”

“...What did you just say?”

“Is something the matter? Lady Kate felt the dish was a bit too salty, but Lady I-Liena and I both enjoyed it.”

It was an indirect assertion that I had no plans to pin the blame on Lady Kate. Lady Sienna’s face instantly distorted when she heard that. It seemed she understood my intentions.

Yeah, she’s definitely a simple person.

The girl tried to put on an air of elegance, but there were still instances where she failed to hide her thoughts whatsoever.

She really shouldn’t have refused my offer to try a bite of the beef. If she’d gone through with it, she would’ve rid herself of all suspicions of being the one who ordered the salting in the first place. She could have even used it as an opportunity to criticize Lady Kate for serving such a salty dish. But she simply didn’t want to taste it for herself, which had resulted in an awkward refusal.

I imagined she was confident that no one could come up with definitive proof of her misdeed. It seemed to be making her act carelessly. But as long as Lady I-Liena and I had our stories straight, Lady Sienna would have no public knowledge of the problem with the dish at all.

She was clearly eager to embarrass her half sister and ruin her efforts. But the execution itself was sloppy.

Well, as emotional as Lady Kate was, maybe a sloppy execution was just fine. I had no obligation to play along with their sibling rivalry.

I couldn’t exactly treat Lady Sienna like a criminal without any proof, so instead, I decided to make a mental note of the dangers she might pose. Much like with Diaz, I hated anyone who used food as a means of harassment. I knew

I wouldn't get along with someone who played such cowardly tricks on her own half sister.

"Lady Sienna. Yes, I'll definitely remember that name."

Her face fell. She was quick to recover her expression, but I could still decipher her emotions in time.

Messing with food seasonings was no laughing matter.

Lady Sienna had presented me with something not even she could stomach. It was an undeniable act of harassment against me.

I was retreating for the time being, with no proof of what she'd done and a desire to contain the situation, but I was parting with a warning—she wouldn't get off so easy next time.

"...Thank you very much. I'm feeling a bit unwell due to my stomach, so I'll be taking my leave now."

She practically fled the room, seeming to understand that I was displeased with her.

I spent some time pacifying the still-angry Lady Kate, but with no further incidents, the lunch came to its end.



"VERY well done, Your Majesty."

Lady I-Liena called out to me as I was about to board my carriage. Lady Kate had already left to search for the offender in the beef salting incident.

"You kept calm when you tasted that toxic disaster and took the wind right out of Lady Sienna's sails. I underestimated your skills, I must say."

"...Thank you, but the same goes for you, Lady I-Liena. You kept a cool head in that situation as well."

Her smile widened when I praised her. The look was both fascinating and indecipherable. I decided I needed to ask her something that had been on my mind.

"Lady I-Liena, did you know the dish was going to be served oversalted?"

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I felt you looking at me before I even took a bite.”

“That was just your imagination... Well, I’d like to say that, but you’re perceptive, aren’t you?”

Lady I-Liena didn’t try to deny my theory. She confessed right away.

I knew she must have learned of Lady Sienna’s suspicious actions beforehand. I couldn’t imagine they were coconspirators, but it was true that she didn’t think to directly interfere either.

Lady Kate and Lady I-Liena were both hosts of today’s lunch.

Seeing as how the two of them didn’t get along so well, I could imagine there must have been many conflicts and disagreements arising from the preparations for this gathering. Lady Kate was probably too preoccupied with all that to notice what Lady Sienna was up to.

However, only the slightly careless Lady Kate had been tricked by her act. Lady I-Liena was in the know.

“What are you going to do, Your Majesty? Are you upset that I let Lady Sienna, that scheming little kitten, get away with it?”

“...No, I won’t chastise you. I understand why you reacted the way you did, considering your position.”

Lady I-Liena had multiple reasons for letting Lady Sienna off the hook.

First, despite the joint invitation signed by both Lady Kate and Lady I-Liena, Lady Kate was the one in charge of both the location and the meal. If something was wrong with the food we were served, it wouldn’t particularly hurt Lady I-Liena’s reputation or reflect poorly on her.

The two were also political opponents in the war to become the next queen. Lady I-Liena had no reason to stop a member of Lady Kate’s family from trying to drag her down, nor would it make sense for her to expose Lady Sienna’s plot and earn her contempt.

There was also a second reason I suspected she allowed it to happen. Lady I-Liena wanted to see how I would respond to Lady Sienna’s harassment. She

avoided painting a target on her back while also measuring my reaction at the same time.

That thought process would explain her behavior today.

“...I think you sympathized with me in your own way, no? You could have avoided the salty meal for yourself, but you purposefully joined me in tasting it.”

The same soft smile stayed on her face all the while, but I saw what I saw. Lady I-Liena ate the same disgusting meal that I did.

My theory was that she would have felt too guilty to let me eat such an obviously unhealthy meal all on my own.

“Oh my. I didn’t exactly expect you to be so observant. I see that Your Majesty is quick-witted indeed.”

Her praise didn’t exactly lift my spirits.

Lady I-Liena was a fox, and not just in appearance. The image of the clever, deceptive vulpine fit her to a tee. Unlike the blatantly transparent Wildcat sisters, she appeared to be much more of a fox in sheep’s clothing.



I left Lady Kate’s villa and returned home.

With my mouth still stinging from the salty food, I decided to make a light meal to cleanse my palate. The best option would be whatever ingredients I could put together the quickest.

I swiftly changed clothes and headed to the kitchen.

“Gilbert, is my bread from earlier out of the oven yet?”

“Yes! It came out looking splendid.”

Gilbert looked at the loaf of bread, the outer crust cooked to a nice dark-brown color. It looked just like the normal white bread we ate for breakfast in my past life. I’d baked it as a treat for tomorrow’s morning meal, but now that it was available, I decided to eat some in advance. It was nicely cooled already, at the perfect temperature to eat.

“This ‘loaf’ is certainly baked in an interesting way.”

Gilbert was eyeing the rectangular metal pan sitting next to the bread.

Loaves of bread are made by placing fermented dough in a pan, then baking it in an oven. However, the bread in this world is generally made by kneading dough into a ball and baking it as it is. Gilbert seemed to find the shape of the loaf to be unusual.

“It’s sort of like a cake in how you use a pan to bake it. Would it be possible to make cylindrical loaves if you used a cake pan for the bread...?”

He gazed at the pan I’d made with my transmutation, murmuring about his other ideas for shapes. They all seemed to originate from the bread loaf I brought into this world.

While anticipating all the variations that would surely arise from his passion for food, I began to prepare the fresh bread. I briefly warmed up my sharp kitchen knife over a flame. Then I sliced into the loaf, little by little each time. The white surface of the bread that came into view was soft and fluffy. I was quite sure it would be delicious in this form too.

However, I was after something that would take a bit more time to prepare.

When you’ve got a fresh loaf of bread, what’s better than toast?

I decided I was going to make grilled toast for a snack.

I warmed up a metal grill and used it to cook the slices one side at a time. Careful not to let it burn, I took in the savory smell of the roasting bread.

My excitement for my snack was at its peak.

“There we are. Butter and strawberry jam.”

I removed the bread from the grill and brought it to the table. Once I spread the surface with butter and jam, it would be perfect.

The butter melted down over the steaming bread, its aroma sinking in. I spread it out evenly and opened my mouth to take my first bite.

“This is it! The ultimate taste of breakfast...!”

Despite the afternoon hour, I decided that for right then, it was breakfast

time at my table.

The bread crunched nicely under my teeth as I inhaled the buttery aroma. I bit down a little harder and grazed the soft center of the toast with my tongue. Savoring the smell, I next reached for the strawberry jam. I slathered it over the toast, then topped it with sliced strawberries, which clung nicely to the sticky jam.

“...Don’t worry, Berry. I have some for you too.”

Berry never failed to show her face when there were strawberries on the table. As expected, she had come rushing to the kitchen as soon as she sensed their presence. I offered her a piece of my strawberry toast.

She took in her very first sight of sliced bread, seeming a bit guarded.

Little by little, Berry poked at the toast with her paws, keeping her claws tucked away all the while, until her appetite won out in the end. She skillfully clutched the snack between her paw pads and took a bite, careful not to knock the strawberry slices from the top, then began to dig in. She brought the toast, glimmering with a layer of strawberry jam, to her mouth the same way I did.

The crunchy white bread paired well together with the velvety sweet jam and juicy chunks of strawberry. By the time I even got to the pot of black tea Lucian had prepared for me, I’d already finished two whole slices.

Berry seemed to be satisfied. She was fast asleep now, curled up in my lap. When I cleaned a bit of strawberry jam off her whiskers, her nose twitched up and down.

I stroked her fur. She seemed like she would be out for a while. The sting of salt was completely gone from my mouth by this time.

“Lady Kate and Lady Sienna...”

The sight of Berry’s ears reminded me of the two Wildcat sisters.

Lady Natalie had been correct in telling me that the two women seemed to be at odds with each other. Maybe that was inevitable, considering they had different mothers, but as someone who had ended up in the middle of their sibling rivalry, I couldn’t just let it slide.

“Oh no... Now I’m irritated again...”

My anger returned when I thought of Lady Sienna’s face. I expected to feel better by now, but that didn’t seem to be the case...

“I guess I’ll have to make the best of it.”

I returned to the kitchen and found it was empty. The chefs weren’t starting on dinner preparations yet. Since I had been successful in my creation of a loaf of bread, I decided to whip up enough dough to share more bread with the rest of the villa servants.

Mix, knead, knead, knead, smack, smack, and smack some more.

As I smacked the bread hard against the counter, I let out all my anger and irritation with each blow. This was usually an annoying part of the cooking process, but right now, it was the perfect stress relief.

I put my heart into beating the bread dough, and along the way, the chefs came to join me in what turned into a lively bread-making session.



...**AND** that was the story of how I ended up with far too much bread.

It was too much for even the servants to finish, so I chose to share my massive amount of bread with the construction workers who came to renovate the outside of the villa.

Chapter 4: Sandwiches and Lord Aroo

“GENTLEMEN! Lunch is reeeaaady!!”

The group of men, all gripping their construction tools, turned toward us when the maid at my side called out to them.

“Oh, is it that late already?”

“I wonder what they’re bringin’ us today?”

“I can’t wait!”

“That herb chicken last time was so good!”

“My favorite was the baked seafood.”

The workers gathered around us, chatting among themselves.

As laborers, many among their numbers were beastfolk. I could see the dog ears and cat ears on some of the construction workers’ heads. Their clothes were covered in sawdust and sand from working on the dog park. Since it would only add to their burden to have to clean up before entering the dining room, we instead brought a table and chairs outside for their lunch.

The men always worked up a tremendous appetite after spending the day hard on the job. While my villa employed almost more staff than we needed, the chefs had been particularly busy at lunchtime over the past few days. Gilbert did seem quite occupied, but he also seemed happy to have a chance to show off his skills in the kitchen.

They say hunger is the best sauce, and indeed, the hardworking laborers always eagerly devoured their lunches. The chefs were pleased to see this.

“All right, and today’s wonderful lunch is...”

The head carpenter, Carter, cocked his head when he saw the table.

“Is this bread...?”

“Yes. It’s called a sandwich.”

“Huh. Can we eat these with our hands?”

“Please pick them up and bite into them.”

“Sounds great! That makes ’em easy to eat.”

Carter grabbed a sandwich.

The term *sandwich* came from an earl who once lived in England back on Earth. It was said that the ever-busy Earl of Sandwich preferred them for how quick they were to eat while also keeping his hands clean, and that was how the name became popularized.

The workers only had so much time for their lunch break, so they seemed to appreciate the simple meal, which took no extra steps for them to eat.

“Guess I’ll start with this, then.”

Carter’s sandwich was cut into rectangles, without any crust, and with a light layer of butter. The other workers seemed to find the sandwiches a bit strange, but once I explained how to eat them and what ingredients they contained, each man picked up one of his own. They appeared to have their own preferences as I watched them choose among the four different flavors.

“It’s really good! It’s got leafy vegetables, bacon, and tomato in it! I like how you can taste the whole thing in one bite!”

Crunchy bacon, crisp lettuce, and ripe tomatoes were always a sure winner. The workers also seemed to find the red and green colors peeking out of the bread to have an appetizing look to them.

“This one’s got herbs and cheese in it. It’s definitely my favorite.”

“I like the sausage one!”

They stuffed their cheeks and gave me their rave reviews.

When the men had first come to the villa, they were shy around me, but after I told them I wanted to plan lunch menus around their preferences, they agreed to share their opinions.

Gilbert and the chefs made each lunch based on my suggested recipes. The

construction workers were often served dishes entirely new to this world, and many of them seemed to look forward to the unusual food. They were always eager to see what lunch their break from the day's demanding labor would bring.

This time, they were served four different kinds of sandwiches.

There was the leafy green, bacon, and tomato combination. Another had herb-seasoned scrambled eggs and cheese. One kind was made from thin-sliced sausage and sauerkraut, the inspiration for which I took from my lunch at Lady Kate's villa. Finally, there was a dessert sandwich made from strawberry jam and cream.

The construction workers seemed to prefer the bacon and sausage sandwiches the most. I imagined the meat and salt were healthy for the men who spent so much time sweating under the early summer sun.

As I made a mental note to include more meat in their next sandwiches, one of the younger workers called out to my maid at the table.

"Hey, Miss Anna, how about having a chat with me when I'm off the clock?"

"I'm sorry, but I'll be working late..."

"Damn, that's a shame. I thought today was finally gonna be the day!"

Hanz was a young but skilled craftsman. He wasn't particularly lacking in looks either. Whether those facts bolstered his confidence or perhaps because he was just a natural flirt, he never missed an opportunity to hit on a maid during lunch. I chose not to give him a particularly harsh scolding, as he always backed off after being rejected, but I was still surprised to see such determination every single day.

"Hanz, you've worked well today, but could you please keep the flirting with my maids to a minimum?"

"Your Majesty! You look as lovely as ever. How's your day going?"

My casual warning didn't deter Hanz whatsoever. It appeared he was something of a lady's man by nature. Of course, he wasn't exactly hitting on me, the queen, but he didn't seem to fear the idea of using flattery on me.

However—

“E-Eeek!!”

Hanz’s face went stiff.

What’s the matter?

I followed his eyes past my own position to the space behind me.

“A-A wolf?!”

“Lord Aroo?!”

Lord Aroo approached my side, his silver fur gleaming under the sunlight.

I wasn’t sure why exactly, but he seemed a bit on edge. He was practically glaring at Hanz.

“Your Majesty, what’s with the wolf?!”

“Don’t worry. The wolfkeepers care for this particular one.”

“The wolfkeepers, really...?! I’ve never seen one of theirs before...!”

Hanz was completely fixated on Lord Aroo.

I was a bit amused to see his childlike fascination with the animal.

Many people of this kingdom held great respect for the pack raised by the wolfkeepers. Even Hanz, the flirt, was much more interested in Lord Aroo than he was in Anna or me.

“Your Majesty, that’s incredible! Even the wolfkeepers’ wolves love y—Wah!!”

Lord Aroo was sniffing Hanz’s hand. He seemed to be interested in the scent of his sandwich.

Does he want to try one?

It was unusual to see Lord Aroo showing any interest in food.

...I’d seen Edgar give the wolves dried meat as a snack before. The animals seemed to love those treats, with the one exception of Lord Aroo, who didn’t care for them.

“I’m not some simple wolf. I can’t be bought with meat.”

I could read that attitude from his calm demeanor. But this was the first time I ever saw him directly approach any food for himself.

“Oh, he’s going to eat it.”

Lord Aroo stretched his head up to the table and very precisely picked up one of the sandwiches set aside as seconds for the workers. I wasn’t sure if he knew those were the unclaimed ones, but if he did, it was a clever deduction for an animal.

Lord Aroo had chosen an herb scrambled-egg-and-cheese sandwich.

I was pretty sure there weren’t any ingredients like onions that could be toxic to wolves and dogs. I had made these sandwiches personally, as the chefs were busy enough already.

Bite by bite, Lord Aroo swiftly devoured the sandwich held between his teeth. His green eyes slimmed as he chewed on it, just like a human taking in the flavor of their meal.

Gradually, the sandwich disappeared from his mouth until he’d swallowed it entirely.

“Aroooo!”

“...You want more?”

Lord Aroo looked at me, then back to the table again. He was demanding seconds.

What should I do?

Lord Aroo had already finished half a sandwich in no time at all. It felt like a bad idea to give him another one on top of that. I was hesitant to give him more without the permission of the wolfkeepers.

As I tried to come up with a plan, still with Lord Aroo’s pressure on me, I heard footsteps coming from behind.

“Pfft! Ahaha... Good grief. What are you doing...?”

It was Lord Melvin, King Glenreed’s trusted aide.

His light-blue eyes narrowed as he chuckled to himself.

Maybe something about the way Lord Aroo had me flustered was funny.



“No, Your Majesty, I’m not laughing at you.”

I was taken aback for a moment when I heard him express the words in my mind. The young man’s clever deduction skills were perfectly suited for his position with the king.

“The only thing I’m laughing at is that wolf, Lord Aroo. He always acts so proud around humans. I just found it amusing to see him in that state just now.”

Lord Melvin took a swift step backward.

He seemed to be putting distance between himself and the grumbling wolf.

“You always know a lot when it comes to Lord Aroo.”

“Well, we’ve been together for quite some time.”

“Is that so...?”

In that case...

I decided to question him about something on my mind.

“Lord Melvin, do you know where Lord Aroo’s parents or siblings are now?”

Edgar had told me the story of the time a silver wolf with blue-green eyes, just like Lord Aroo, saved him as a child. I wanted to know if Lord Aroo himself held any clues that could lead to that same wolf.

“I’m unable to answer that question, unfortunately.”

“...I see.”

I wonder what happened in Lord Aroo’s life?

I wanted to know about his past and his family, but it didn’t seem like that would be an easy task.

Lord Melvin kept a pleasant smile on his face, but something about it reminded me of the smiles from Lady I-Liena or my oldest brother. It was simultaneously a sword and a shield, painting him as a complicated person on the inside.

“What brings you to my villa today, Lord Melvin?” I asked.

“I’ve come to deliver a letter of invitation to join His Majesty tomorrow evening.”

“Oh, why, thank you. I’m sorry you had to personally travel all this way.”

“It’s no trouble. His Majesty is the one who sent you to live here, but that’s not my only reason for coming. I just happened to hear from the wolfkeepers that Lord Aroo was visiting you today. I thought I might come see him, as it’s been some time since we were last together.”

“I see...”

I followed his line of sight to Lord Aroo.

The wolf was sitting with his back to us now, looking strangely embarrassed or shy. His ears were perked up and twitching. I imagined him listening to our conversation from behind.

“Lord Aroo can be a bit unfriendly at times,” I said, “but he’s still a cute, kindhearted creature.”

“...Cute...”

I wasn’t sure if I was imagining it, but it looked like Lord Melvin was desperately trying to stifle a laugh as he repeated my description.

“Yes, he’s cute. He gets very close to me so I can pet that wonderful fur of h—
Kyah!!”

“Don’t you dare say another word!!”

Lord Aroo charged headfirst into my body. It didn’t hurt, perhaps because he was holding back. If anything, his soft fur made for a nice sensation.

“Hehe. He sure seems to like you.”

“You think so?”

“Lord Aroo would never let anyone he didn’t like get close to him.”

I almost broke out into a smile when I heard that. Lord Aroo was temperamental, but it made me very happy to think he may have opened his heart up to me a little.

Lord Aroo seemed to notice what I was thinking. He lifted his head to look up

at me.

“Lord Melvin, would you mind asking Moore or one of the other wolfkeepers if it’s all right to feed sandwiches to the wolves?”

“Of course. On that note, would you mind bringing some of them with you when you visit His Majesty tomorrow evening?”

“His Majesty?”

I didn’t exactly expect that request.

I knew the sandwiches were of excellent quality in terms of flavor, but was it really okay to serve the same food to both the construction workers and the highest authority in the whole kingdom?

Lord Melvin, as wise as always, seemed to understand my concern right away.

“Fear not. His Majesty isn’t concerned with such details. Should he be displeased, feel free to inform him that I was the one who suggested it.”

“...I’ll do my best to bring him sandwiches he’ll enjoy.”

I needed to make the greatest sandwiches I was capable of.

I had no intention of slacking in the first place, but Lord Melvin’s request only made it all the more important. His words were kind and sincere. That didn’t change the pressure they put on me, however.

While I didn’t fully understand his intentions, I could tell he was a crafty man indeed.



“...I could crawl into a hole right now...”

Glenreed muttered to himself in his palace bedroom, his brow pressed into his hands.

He couldn’t hold his head up high when he thought about his shameful display back at Laetitia’s villa.

Glenreed had managed to finish up his morning work earlier than expected. With nothing else to do until lunch, he decided to observe Laetitia at her home. However...

“I was just as surprised to see you take such an interest in the food, Your Majesty.”

“.....”

He couldn't even deny Melvin's amused comment.

It was true that Glenreed was hungry, having not yet eaten lunch. But nothing ever truly stirred the king's appetite. Despite the increase in instinctual urges while he was in his wolf form, Glenreed had never once been beaten by hunger.

It all started when he saw Laetitia speaking with a young man earlier.

He hadn't planned it, but Glenreed ended up physically putting himself between the two. The wolf took in their conversation as he felt himself being drawn to those sandwiches. His special nose had picked up that they were made by Laetitia.

For the time being, he decided to accept the fact that he was fascinated by her cooking. But his human sense of pride couldn't let go of the shameful way he gobbled down that sandwich earlier.

“...I should dig a hole to crawl into.”

“That should be simple enough in your wolf form. Would you like my help?”

“...Commendable. You want to help dig your own grave, huh?”

“Wait, Your Majesty, you intend to bury me too?”

“You witnessed how I acted back there, right? You're coming with me.”

Glenreed's face was completely serious.

“How violent, dragging me down with you to hide the evidence. Have you become a tyrant while I wasn't looking?”

Melvin simply smiled and shrugged his shoulders.



IT was the next day after I fed Lord Aroo that sandwich.

I spent most of the day in the kitchen in preparation for His Majesty's dinner. Gilbert and the other chefs came to my aide as well. In the end, we managed to

put it all together just in time. I thanked the chefs, and with my heart racing in my chest, it was time to head to the main castle to present my creations to the king.

Fon gave me a little squawk to cheer me on as I boarded the carriage. It was much appreciated.

“Good evening, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to be chosen to serve you dinner this evening.”

“It’s nothing so formal. I know you didn’t exactly have a choice either.”

The two of us exchanged greetings from across the dining table.

Gilbert and Lucian stood at my back. The king was already acquainted with both of them.

Once we were seated, Gilbert removed the lid from the serving tray.

“Is this what you call a ‘sandwich’? The shape is a bit different from what I’d heard.”

“I modified them slightly so that they wouldn’t fall apart on my way here.”

These sandwiches were square and bite-size. They formed a layer on top of the tray. Each sandwich had a small, decorated skewer in the middle to prevent the bread and fillings from separating.

I traveled by carriage from my villa to the castle. Changing the construction method was necessary to ensure they stayed together with all the motion, and I recalled the colorful toothpicks used in lunchboxes in my past life. I knew if I secured the sandwiches with skewers, they wouldn’t fall apart so easily.

“I see. They do seem to hold their shape nicely, even when brought from a distance.”

“Indeed. It appeared to work out well. Please remove the skewers before you eat them.”

“All right, I’ll try one now. Is this a...wolf?”

His Majesty was staring at the very top of the skewer.

The metal skewers were made with my transmutation spell. The top of each

was decorated with more thin metal in the shape of a wolf.

“The wolfkeepers have been allowing me to play with their wolves at my villa, and as this land’s king, Your Majesty is in charge of the wolfkeepers. I wanted to thank you for allowing me to interact with those adorable animals, so I came up with these decorations.”

“Wolves, huh... You really enjoy them, don’t you?”

“I do. They’re smart, cute, and very calming to pet, like all the worries get washed away from my heart.”

They’re fluffy and adorable! I love them so much!

I couldn’t voice the excited thoughts in my head, so I gave a more proper description instead.

It’s important to sugarcoat such intense emotions at times.

“...Calming? Even though you always sing those weird songs...?”

His Majesty’s lips were moving, but his voice was too quiet to make out.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. I just thought it was nice craftsmanship. Did you make them yourself?”

“I used transmutation to create them, so they won’t last very long, but they should make it through the day, at least.”

The king nodded, removed the skewer, then bit into the sandwich.

His first selection was filled with thinly sliced herb-roasted chicken thigh.

I felt like I could see his face unstiffen a bit as he chewed.

He seemed to be enjoying it. His Majesty reached for the next sandwich and then the next, trying all nine sandwich bites in all.

“How are they, Your Majesty? Each one has different ingredients. Do you have a personal favorite so far?”

“Hmm... Probably the herb chicken one I tried first, and the sausage kind too. Those were particularly delicious.”

That's a relief.

Not only did he call them “delicious,” but his selection made me happy as well.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. Would you say you enjoy chicken and pork in particular?”

“Enjoy them...?” He hung his head a bit, trailing off his words. “I’ve never really thought about it before, but I guess maybe I do prefer chicken and pork to things like fish and beef.”

Hmm. Is he trying to figure out what it means to “enjoy” something?

King Glenreed had already told me he didn’t have much interest in food, but that indifference appeared to run much deeper than I first thought.

“Very well. Your Majesty, shall I bring you chicken and pork meals during my visits to the castle from now on?”

“...Why are you asking?”

“I’d like to thank you for gifting me my villa.”

Simply saying I wanted him to take an interest in food would have no point in our current relationship. Though His Majesty might see it as an unnecessary burden, I truly wanted him to discover meals he enjoyed.

Some people believed that half the joy in life was the act of eating in itself.

His Majesty, who took to the throne at such a young age and probably had many concerns in life, could only benefit from enjoying his three meals a day instead of seeing them as obligation.

The image of Lord Aroo devouring that sandwich yesterday flashed in my mind.

The usually grumpy wolf had genuinely seemed to be excited about his snack.

Perhaps it was a disrespectful comparison, but I wished His Majesty could enjoy meals just like Lord Aroo did. If I could have a hand in it, then all the better.

“What do you say? If it displeases you, you mustn’t hesitate to tell me.”

Am I really just getting in the way?

Nervous, I asked him directly, but...

"It doesn't displease me."

His response was immediate and absolute.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like you to bring more of your cooking next time too. I know almost nothing about food, so I probably can't give you the reactions you'll be looking for. Does that still sound suitable?"

"Yes, that's perfectly fine."

His Majesty held no interest in food. It may be difficult to change his long practice of viewing the act of eating as anything more than an obligation. But if I could share the joys of food with him, even just to a small extent, that would be rewarding in itself.

Fortunately, I had a lot of free time and a kitchen full of chefs on my side.

Though I couldn't aid the kingdom as its queen or show His Majesty a spouse's love, I still wanted to be of help to him.

What meal should I present to him next?

He enjoyed today's sandwiches, particularly the herb chicken and sausage varieties. If I went with chicken or sausage next time, what should I serve it with? What could I make that he would find to be delicious?

I was half nervous, half excited. With my mind working in full swing, I suddenly came back to my senses. It was plenty fun to think about cooking, but that was a problem for the future.

I wasn't visiting His Majesty just for dinner tonight. His praise for my sandwiches had been such a happy distraction, I nearly forgot all the things I wanted to ask him about. I needed to be quick with my questions too. I didn't want to keep the busy king occupied for so long.

"Your Majesty, now that you've finished your meal, might I speak with you regarding a few matters?"

"Is this about Kate and I-Liena? I heard they invited you for lunch and served

you something outright parching.”

“...You already knew about that?”

Parching.

He was referring to the salty meal that made its way onto Lady Kate’s table.

Lady I-Liena and I had agreed to keep the matter to ourselves so as not to worsen the situation.

I couldn’t imagine Lady Kate would expose the details of her family drama to anyone on the outside, but somehow, the information had made its way to His Majesty.

Was the king’s information network truly that capable? Or was Lady Kate sloppy in her cover-up attempt...?

I could only guess, but I had my suspicions that both factors were at play.

“Do you have any theories as to the culprit, Your Majesty?”

“Oh, I’m sure it was Kate’s half sister, Sienna. I’ve met her before and sensed a certain threatening aura in her words.”

“...You’ve spoken to Lady Sienna directly?”

I racked my brain for a moment.

I’d already heard that Lady Kate hated Lady Sienna and was always on guard around her. She was particularly worried about King Glenreed taking a liking to her half sister and the threat that would pose to Lady Kate’s own position as a candidate. For that reason, she did her best to prevent interactions between her sister and the king.

“I was invited to a ball where the two of us exchanged words in passing.”

“I see. May I ask, how did Lady Kate react to that?”

“As soon as she saw me speaking to Sienna, she made her way between the two of us with her tail all puffed up.”

Lady Kate, the fur of her tail standing on end, making a beeline toward her half sister.

It was easy to imagine.

“So you only had a brief time to speak with Lady Sienna?”

“That’s right. It was a short interaction, but it was more than enough to understand what kind of person she is.”

I knew that Lady Sienna liked to put on an innocent act, but it turned out that His Majesty had a nose for this kind of thing too. It made sense that the man on the Wolfvartian throne would have keen senses.

Since I was a woman and a fellow noble, Lady Sienna’s act was obvious to me, but perhaps she was able to fool her fair share of others. Some also seemed to be drawn to her outwardly composed personality in contrast to that of her emotional half sister.

“Laetitia, what was your read on Sienna’s character?”

“An elegant, gentle young lady...is what she appears to be trying to present to the world. However, she seemed shortsighted in my eyes. I found her to be temperamental and something of a schemer.”

“That’s how I saw her too. Sienna tries to act mature, but she’s no more than a kitten in reality.”

“A kitten...? Even kittens have claws, don’t they? I intend to be careful around her in the future.”

“See to it that you do. ...I wish Kate was as vigilant as you are.”

His Majesty glanced away from me, looking off toward the east. I wondered if he was thinking about Kate and her sister.

“There’s something else I’d like to ask, Your Majesty.” My next question was a bit intrusive, but I decided to ask it anyway. “Have you already made your decision about who will replace me as queen when I return home?”

My title came with a time limit. I would only be the figurehead queen for two years. I needed to find out who he was going to select next.

“Now that Natalie is essentially out of the running, Kate’s family probably offers the most political power,” he replied matter-of-factly.

“...However, it sounds like you’re not thinking about it from that perspective?”

“Who knows? But I’m sure you see what I do. Does Kate really have the right character to become queen?”

“...Yes, I believe we’re on the same page in that regard.”

We didn’t speak it directly, but His Majesty definitely understood.

Lady Kate’s temperament was hardly suitable for a noblewoman, much less a queen.

“It would be difficult to select either Lady Kate or Lady Natalie. That leaves Lady I-Liena, right?”

But in truth, there was a fourth candidate.

The woman who lived in the southern villa; however, there was little chance she would be selected as the next queen. Her family held little authority, and there were other reasons that made Lady I-Liena the more likely choice of the two.

In the northern region of the country, her homeland had such heavy snow that it often made interaction with other regions impossible. I’d heard that the unity within her region, however, was strong. The relationship between beastfolk and humans was said to be relatively stable too.

Her family didn’t have as much influence as Lady Kate’s, but from what I could tell, Lady I-Liena’s personality was much more fit for the title of queen.

“I-Liena... By process of elimination, she would be the one, if it weren’t for her lies.”

“Her lies?”

What on earth was she being untruthful about?

Despite my curiosity, His Majesty didn’t seem interested in sharing the details with me.

“I won’t condemn her for it, but you should be careful. Lies are spoken out of a desire to deceive, after all.”

“...Thank you for the warning.”

Lady I-Liena was a liar, but His Majesty didn't seem to think badly of her for it.

I couldn't think of what he was specifically referring to, though I decided to stay on guard anyway.

But if I did learn one thing, it was the perceptiveness of the clever king for his ability to see through Lady I-Liena.



AFTER receiving His Majesty's warning, Lord Melvin escorted me to the carriage.

“Lord Melvin, thank you very much for today.”

“...I'm not sure I've done anything deserving of thanks?”

Lord Melvin cocked his head.

Is he just acting?

I decided to simply offer my explanation and gratitude.

“You're the one who suggested I present the sandwiches to His Majesty. Thanks to you, I was able to learn some of his food preferences.”

I believed that Lord Melvin had suspected His Majesty would enjoy the sandwiches and recommended them intentionally. He'd seen them for the first time in his life yesterday, which is why I found the recommendation strange at first, but it made sense if he was nudging me toward finding out what the king liked.

Lord Melvin had noticed how the sandwiches contained all sorts of different ingredients and quickly figured out how to make use of them.

The man smiled when I expressed my respect and gratitude.

“I understand how you could see it that way. However, it was your own character and wit that allowed you to take advantage of the situation, Your Majesty. I don't believe I deserve your thanks.”

Lord Melvin's response was both fluent and evasive.

On his face was a beautiful, unreadable smile.



GLENREED was seated in a chair in his office, staring off into space.

“You’re very observant, Your Highness. You have sharp instincts.”

He was picturing how Laetitia looked when she gave him that respectful gaze. She was a wise woman, and her praise certainly wasn’t troubling to receive, but the lack of annoyance he felt actually made him a bit uncomfortable.

“I’m not nearly so impressive...,” Glenreed murmured to himself.

It wasn’t self-depreciation or humility. He believed these words to be the truth.

He saw through Sienna’s act after only a brief encounter.

He caught on to the “lies” told by the refined I-Liena.

Those may be praiseworthy observations, but the king had different reasons for making them: he only noticed any of those things because of his unique sense of smell.

I’m not observant or perceptive. I just have a good nose...

Glenreed possessed the ability to transform into a wolf spirit—the creature that founded the royal family generations ago. Including his transformation powers, he possessed other unique abilities as well, including a special sense of smell.

Glenreed took in the air of the room as a reminder of that nose of his. The room had its own natural smell, but something different was mixed in the air. It came from the basket of sandwiches Laetitia had left him as a gift.

“That scent is as strange as ever...”

It was something he’d never smelled before meeting her. It wasn’t her perfume or the natural smell of her body. Glenreed didn’t understand it himself, but it didn’t seem to have a physical source of its own.

It was formless.

Glenreed’s nose could detect a note of something deeper. A person’s heart,

or will—or perhaps even their soul. It was a strange sensation, but it was similar to the normal things he could pick up with his nose, which is why he referred to it as a “scent.”

The royal family Glenreed was born into occasionally produced those capable of transforming into wolf form. It was mainly kings who received this gift, particularly those whose reigns were prosperous for Wolfvarte.

Maybe that's the most obvious outcome of such a power...

It didn't matter how much effort a person put into disguising their words and expressions. He had the absurd power to discover lies and true personalities all through their “scent.”

His nose wasn't all-powerful, however, and some untruths made their way past him unnoticed. On the other hand, the power of “scents” in revealing a lie or betrayal never proved to be misleading.

It was an incredibly useful power for the royal family.

Glenreed in particular, having taken to the throne so young, was particularly lucky to have that nose. As the man in charge of his kingdom's fate, he didn't hesitate to make use of those scents. However...

“It's almost like cheating, in a way...”

Glenreed was born with his unique sense of smell. While he believed it was only natural to make use of his God-given talents, he still had some resignation in the back of his mind.

He felt guilty. He also still carried certain scars from his past.

My transformations help me, and they're definitely a blessing, but they feel like a curse at the same time...

What would his life have been like if he wasn't able to take the form of a wolf?

His relationship with his parents, the way he ruled after his father's death—they all may have turned out different.

The fate of his older half brother, the wonderful person who had always looked after Glenreed, definitely would have been different.

That kind brother with red hair. He was gone from this world now.

Regrets, sadness, sentiments.

Glenreed believed he had sealed all those emotions away inside himself. But they were now bubbling up in the pit of his stomach.

Just as he was on the verge of being pulled into the abyss of depression by his past, a smell in the air tickled his nose.

This “scent” is...

His mind landed on that blonde hair and those amethyst eyes. They pulled Glenreed back into the present. Laetitia was already gone, but the traces of her scent, or whatever it was, still emanated from the sandwiches.

It seemed she made them personally instead of leaving them in the hands of her chefs. For that reason, they still held her essence even after she was gone.

“She made them herself, for me...”

His heart felt strangely relaxed after he said it out loud.

As he pondered this phenomenon, his nose caught a familiar smell approaching. Melvin was back from seeing off Laetitia. As soon as the man entered the office, his eyes were drawn toward the sandwiches.

“Are those a souvenir from Her Majesty? Don’t mind if I do—”

“Absolutely not.” Glenreed grabbed the basket before his aide’s hand could touch it. “I’m saving it for a midnight snack.”

“...Have you finally found yourself an appetite? It would certainly be a welcome change.”

“Don’t be disgraceful. And didn’t you already have enough during your so-called poison testing?”

It was hard to picture Laetitia ever poisoning his food, considering both her position and her personality. But a simple tasting was required for any food presented to Glenreed, just to guarantee absolute safety.

Melvin wasn’t usually in charge of that role, but just for today, he had nominated himself. He had already told Laetitia to prepare one extra serving of

each food she brought to the castle. Before she met with the king, Melvin conducted a simple poison test by eating one of each sandwich.

“Are you sure you didn’t ask Laetitia to bring these just because *you* wanted to eat them?”

“Oh, most certainly not.”

Melvin smiled in a vague expression, but Glenreed’s nose didn’t lie.

Melvin was not being honest.

“I mean it. Perhaps it would be better to say that’s not the only reason.”

Glenreed sniffed the air.

...That didn’t appear to be a lie, but it didn’t smell like the full truth either.

The king’s nose couldn’t go any further than that.

“...Oh well. It doesn’t matter. These sandwiches are mine.”

Despite their many years together, Glenreed could not fully interpret the heart of his trusted aide. But either way, the king *did* have a basket of sandwiches all to himself now.



“MM...”

I began to squirm in bed as morning sunlight filtered through my eyelids. I rubbed my eyes and attempted to sit up.

“...You’re sure heavy today...”

I looked around with drowsy eyes.

Lately, without fail, I would awake each morning to find Berry’s weight on top of my chest. The cat loved to eat. She would often sit on me to beg for breakfast, though strangely, she didn’t seem to be doing that today. I could see she was facing away from me.

I sensed a sorrow from Berry’s back as she stared at the strawberry plants...or at least, I thought so.

“Berry...”

“...Mew, mew...”

Her cry seemed somewhat sad and weak too.

The plants she was facing were picked clean of strawberries.

Spring had come and gone. The early days of summer were already upon us. Just like the strawberry patch outside the villa, these plants were bare, signaling the end of the season.

Berry’s Gardener Cat magic allowed her to grow and eat strawberries outside of spring, but there was a limit to the magic she could use in a day, meaning the harvest would see a steep drop off.

To Berry, who only had eyes for strawberries, it was a season of suffering.

“Don’t be sad, Berry. The jam I made should last for a while still.”

I leaned over to stroke her fur. Her round head was tiny enough to fit in the palm of my hand.

“Plus, yesterday’s final harvest is still in the kitchen. I’m going to make a lot of strawberry treats today to celebrate the end of the season.”

But Berry’s expression remained gloomy...or at least, it looked that way to me.

Worry for Berry lingered in my mind as I dressed myself and headed for the kitchen.



A long day spent in the kitchen resulted in a line of food to present to Berry, her eyes absolutely sparkling.

“Mraw mraw mraw mraw mraw mraw!!”

Translation: “*Am I in heaven?!*”

...That seemed to just about sum it up.

Berry was brimming with excitement at the sight of all the strawberry treats.

Shortcake, strawberry chiffon, condensed milk drizzled over strawberries, strawberry cookies, strawberry jam sandwiches, and fragrant strawberry tarts

with a cookie crust.

They were all sweets Gilbert, the chefs, and I succeeded in making over the course of this strawberry season.

I placed portions of each treat on Berry's dish. Her eyes lit up and she leaped into action with her special fork. The cat's tiny mouth sank into a bite of shortcake, with no concern for the whipped cream sticking to her whiskers.

"So cute...!!"

Lady Natalie squirmed with joy.

Both of us had identical grins.

Berry was always adorable, but the sight of her stuffing her cheeks with strawberry sweets was even more destructive to us. Watching her eat so gleefully made me happy as the maker of those treats.

With a smirk on my face, I dipped my fork into my own strawberry tart. The refreshing flavor of the sweet-and-sour fruit, the thick custard and cream—it all came together on a bed of cookie crust.

Lady Natalie ate her tart as well, her eyes happy and relaxed as she watched Berry.

I had invited her today because she seemed to love my strawberry cookies last time. I could tell she liked the tart too. She had a smile on her face as she took bite after bite.

"It's both sweet and sour. How delicious! I see why Berry's so taken with it...!"

"Hehe. Thank you for your kind words. I'm very glad you like it."

"It's all thanks to you, Your Majesty. It would have been such a waste to never try a strawberry because I was too scared to eat something that looked like a Demon Gem. Where did you learn about the concept of strawberry foods?"

"I once read a book that described the delicious taste. It piqued my curiosity, and when I happened to try one, they had a wonderful sour-sweet flavor. That made me want to use them in cooking."

"Indeed. This flavor is the kind that takes hold of you the second you taste it."

Something about Lady Natalie's comment raised a sudden question in my mind.

Why exactly *did* I love strawberries?

The reason came from my past life, where I was a different person. Strawberries were "my" absolute favorite fruit back then. But where exactly did that come from? I tried to think back but couldn't find the right memory at all. Being born and raised in Japan, maybe I just came to love strawberries somewhere along the way?

That sort of thing wasn't uncommon, but it didn't feel right, for some reason.

Later that day, when I was tucked into bed, I tried to recall those past-life memories, with no results. There was nothing left in my brain about the reason I fell in love with strawberries, nor about my past-life name. I felt like my name was spelled with two kanji characters and pronounced in three syllables, but I didn't have any proof at all.

"Cappy... No, wait... No... Jiro..."

What appeared in my mind just before I drifted off was the image of my beloved dog Jiro, who I was never to meet again.



"JIRO..."

The next day, I stroked the fur of a fluffy creature and murmured to myself.

Is Jiro still doing okay in that world?

He was a very old dog. I hoped he made it through the intense Japanese summer, but—

"Aroooo...?"

Lord Aroo gave an annoyed cry at my side. With a gasp, I looked over at the wolf.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just spaced out for a moment."

I scratched his neck softly as an apology. Apparently, Lord Aroo's warmth had reminded me of Jiro, and I had called out the dog's name without thinking.

Lord Aroo had recently begun letting me pet him more, but only when he was in the mood for it. I was focusing on this precious opportunity to stroke the creature when I suddenly recalled something.

Didn't people sometimes say that Shiba Inu were the breed of dog most similar to wolves?

Thinking about it, they shared the same upright ear shape and cute yet noble kind of facial features. They did seem to resemble each other a bit.

I thought over the comparison, enjoying my fluffy petting time with Lord Aroo, when suddenly...

"Your Majesty!"

Lord Aroo's ears perked up when he heard the flustered voice calling for me.

One of the maids who worked at my villa was hurrying my way.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

"Lady Kate has just arrived!"

"Lady Kate? I wasn't expecting her."

"She seemed to be in a terrible rush."

"...Understood. I'll be right there."

Why is Lady Kate here?

I didn't exactly get it, but I decided to listen to her situation.

That was when I realized Lord Aroo was no longer at my side.

He was standing a bit further away from me, his ears perked up to listen to what the humans were discussing. Lord Aroo never let me continue petting him whenever other people showed up. Perhaps he was actually shy on the inside. Or at least, wary of others.

"Until next time, Lord Aroo. I have to go home for today."

"Aroooo..."

"...Lord Aroo?"

I tried to leave for the villa, but the wolf stayed by my side.

“What’s wrong? You want to go inside?”

“Graaawh!”

It appeared to be an affirmation.

“...Don’t tell me you’re thinking of sneaking into the kitchen to steal a sandwich — Ow, ow, ow!!”

He rammed me with his head.

“You think I’m some kind of petty thief?!”

I could practically hear the angry denial.

“Okay, okay, sorry. I get it. Will you stay with me when we’re inside and behave yourself?”

“Grah!!”

I wasn’t exactly sure how much he understood of my order, but after I listed my demands, he seemed to be agreeing with me.

Lord Aroo was a wolf, sure, but was it possible he actually understood human speech?

I found it strange, but I had to head quickly to the villa.

Lady Kate and a man in a chef’s uniform were standing at the front door.

“Good afternoon, Lady Kate.”

“Your Majes— Eek!!”

Her tail stiffened and puffed up. I could see that it was indeed bent.

...What had her so on guard all of a sudden?

“Is something the matter?”

“What’s with that wolf?!”

“He’s one that the wolfkeepers take care of.”

“I-I know that!! But that’s not a normal wolf!! He’s so intimidating! It’s like speaking to Father or His Majesty...!!”

“There’s no need to be so afraid. Lord Aroo does look very intense, but he

would never attack anyone. Isn't that right?"

I called out to him for approval.

Apparently Lord Aroo actually *was* a strange wolf in the eyes of other people.

"This Wildcat's pretty sharp," his eyes seemed to say as he looked at Lady Kate.

"...Whatever. There's something more important than that weird wolf right now."

"Grrr..."

"Who're you calling weird?!"

I soothed the grumpy Lord Aroo and led Lady Kate into the parlor.

She opened her mouth as soon as she sat down on the guest couch.

"Your Majesty, I came today to ask for a favor. Would you be so kind as to lend me the chefs from your villa for a few days? I'll be sure to compensate them fairly, of course."

"...May I ask why?"

"...! Of course...you'd be curious..."

She bit her lip, struggling to continue.

The silence continued.

I racked my brain for a while until I landed on something.

"...Is it for Manilla Day?"

"Wow, you know about that?! You weren't even raised here!"

"But I'm the queen of this country. I've studied up accordingly."

I was correct, apparently.

Manilla Day was an anniversary celebrated only in the eastern region of Wolfvarte, where Lady Kate came from. The east was a mountainous land with soil unfit to grow grain crops. But what made up for the poor soil was the rock salt known as "white gold" that could be harvested from the region.

The Manilla salt mine was known for its vast size and long history. The day of its discovery was said to be celebrated in the eastern region by serving loved ones well-salted meals.

Lady Kate wanted to observe those native customs at her villa. The holiday was ten days from now, so it was coming up fast.

“I’m sure your chefs are all very capable. What about them?”

“...They ran away.”

“Ran away?”

“...It’s all Sienna’s fault...!!” Enraged, she loudly gritted her teeth together. “I was planning to invite my father for Manilla Day this year. I wanted to prepare a lavish meal for him, as a display of my power as a candidate and to do my father proud as his daughter.”

“And Lady Sienna got in the way of that?”

“...I just know it was her. Why else would all my chefs resign right before the holiday? On top of that, they’re all leaving to work for people Sienna has connections with.”

“...I see. So why did you come to me for help?”

“Since you presented a wonderful dish at His Majesty’s birthday party, you must be employing the absolute best chefs, right? The man with me today is one of the few who agreed to stay behind. He knows your head chef, Gilbert, and had a lot of praise for his skills.”

The man behind Lady Kate bowed his head.

I was happy to hear the nice words for Gilbert, but there were certain risks that came with Lady Kate’s request.

So far, I hadn’t shown support for any one of the four candidates for queen.

I liked Lady Natalie and wanted to be friends with her. But our tea parties were also my way of settling the chiffon cake plagiarism matter. And she was essentially out of the running anyway, which made it easier for the two of us to grow close.

None of that applied to my relationship with Lady Kate.

The two of us shared nothing in common, and she was also the most likely woman to become the next queen. It was hard to lend her my chefs so easily. That would be the same as giving her my support.

“...Lady Kate, I’m sorry to hear about your chefs leaving, but I have to think about my own situation.”

“...I know. It’s not fair of me to ask you for this, is it...?”

Lady Kate still looked flustered as she spoke, apparently understanding that it would be difficult for me to come to her aid. On top of that, considering her personality and feelings toward humans, I imagined it was no easy task for her to request my help in the first place.

Yet she was drawn straight to my doorstep anyway.

I had a theory about why she was so desperate to obtain chefs.

“If your father isn’t satisfied with your Manilla Day preparations, is he going to remove you as a candidate?”

“...Yes, he will. He’ll be able to replace me with Sienna, I figure.”

Lady Kate squeezed her fists on top of her lap.

“I know I’m very emotional, and that’s not befitting of a noblewoman or a member of the royal family. I’ve tried to change, but it’s just so hard, and Sienna never lets me off the hook. She always says I’m not qualified to be a candidate. I think that’s why Father’s started to change his mind... If my meals are lacking on Manilla Day, he’ll think I can’t control my villa, and there’s no doubt he’ll remove me from my position.”

“...I see.”

I quickly thought through this conundrum when I heard Lady Kate’s confession.

It wasn’t uncommon in this kingdom for a queen candidate to later be substituted. Of course, it wasn’t a welcome practice, but there was still precedent.

Lady Sienna's age and family should make her perfectly suitable as a replacement. That made the stakes of their power struggle all the higher. If Lady Kate's father backed Lady Sienna, he would make up a reason for Lady Kate's departure, such as illness, then take her back to her home region.

Even if Lady Sienna's substitution resulted in a bit of confusion or weakening of her status, with her family's power and connections, it wasn't unreasonable to think she could become the next queen.

"...I wouldn't welcome Lady Sienna as a candidate, but do you have any other means besides receiving my help? It may cost quite a sum of money, but could you hire a temporary group of chefs from somewhere else?"

"I tried that, but it wasn't possible. I don't have many friends in the capital city, and Sienna's already made sure I can't use any of my other connections. I could ask someone else, but then I'd be dragging them into my fight with Sienna, and I don't want to do that..."

Yeah, it's not going to be that easy, is it?

Without the proper time to gather a new team from scratch, she had no choice but to ask for my help.

I thought back to the oversalted dish served to us at Lady Kate's villa. There was no doubt in my mind that Lady Sienna had controlled the kitchen workers in order to do that.

"Including the man behind you there, how many chefs stayed behind at your villa?"

"There's seven in total. But I lost the ones who worked on my new meat dishes, and there's no way the rest can learn to make the same ones in time. Plus, there will be ten guests coming for Manilla Day, including my father, so they may be too busy to work on extras..."

I see.

With her main chefs gone, she couldn't supplement quality for quantity either. Most eastern families made more lavish salted meals than usual for Manilla Day, but among families like the duke's, what was truly sought after was newly invented meals or a large number of dishes overall.

“.....”

Lady Kate stared at me, her expression urgent.

I could easily turn her down, but...what was the best option here?

The main reason I revealed the chiffon cake plagiarism at His Majesty's birthday party was because I had no other choice, due to how I was roped into it. Unlike then, I was now an outsider with multiple solutions, which made it all the more complicated.

I could reject Lady Kate's request and stay neutral.

That was the easiest option for me. But I didn't want Lady Sienna to become a candidate—for my own reasons, certainly, but there was an even bigger problem with her supporters.

Lurking behind the war between sisters was Lady Kate's faction's favorable treatment of humans and Lady Sienna's faction's distaste for us.

Lady Kate wasn't the friendliest person toward me, a human, but it was comparatively better than a lot of beastfolk. Lady Sienna's gentle approach, on the other hand, was countered by the occasional slip of her mask. On top of that, many of her supporters openly looked down on humans. I needed to prevent her from becoming a candidate, much less the next queen, if I wanted Wolfvarte's relationship with my homeland to remain strong.

Of course, there was also the chance His Majesty wouldn't allow for Lady Kate to be swapped out for her sister. But the more likely outcome, instead of earning the scorn of their duke father with a rejection, was to allow the sisters' exchange as a favor to their family.

That would give the king the upper hand in his relationship with Lady Sienna. He may even be able to exercise full control over her and her family, though relying on such a tactic in the first place could backfire for him.

But...I can't use that as an excuse to give too much support to Lady Kate.

As I looked up in thought and made eye contact with her, something came to mind.

“Lady Kate, can I ask you something?”

“...What is it?”

“Why do you so strongly desire your candidacy in the first place?”

It was natural for her, the daughter of a duke, to seek the title of queen. But I wanted to hear her true reason from her own mouth. Now that I was struggling with what to do, I needed to know what it was she wanted out of this.

“I...”

She hesitated.

Was it something she didn’t like sharing?

Maybe it was a way of besting her half sister, or perhaps she was interested in the fame that would come with the position. If it was something like that, then I probably needed to give her a firm rejection.

I waited for her answer, and she finally opened her mouth.

“...For the kingdom.”

Her face was red as she blurted out her answer.

“I’m sure you think that’s ridiculous, right?” she continued. “I know, I know!! I’m just some girl who can’t control her emotions, so how can someone like me speak of helping the kingdom?!”

“No, I wasn’t—”

“But what else can I do?! Sienna’s a schemer, Lady I-Liena’s true character is a mystery, and Lady Natalie was just a puppet!! None of them are fit to be the queen!! Nobles are supposed to work for their countries, right?! So what other choice is there but for me to work hard, grow, and become the queen?!”

Embarrassed, she turned away after her long-winded response. She seemed to think it was immature, an unsuitable opinion for someone like her.

“...Lady Kate, I think that’s wonderful.”

“What’s that?! Are you mocking me?!”

“No, I mean it. You could have lied and made up whatever would sound best, but you shared your true feelings, right?”

Even though she was bad at concealing her emotions, I was moved by her earnest passion for the kingdom. I also came to realize a few other important things.

“You want to be queen for the good of your kingdom. In other words, if a more suitable candidate appeared, you would give up your seat and support her endeavors?”

“...That’s right. Father has other motives, though...”

“You also said Lady Natalie *was* a puppet, in past tense. Does that mean you acknowledge how she’s changed?”

“Between the birthday party and the time you’ve spent with her, I do think she’s changed. She speaks her own words now.”

She’d noticed Lady Natalie’s transformation despite the fact that the two weren’t close.

Lady Kate’s emotions often made her careless, but perhaps she was more observant when it came to people than I had given her credit for.

“Would you step down from the contest if you felt that Lady Natalie or Lady Liena were suitable to be the next queen?”

“...That’s my plan. It’s just hypothetical for now, though...”

Lady Kate was hesitant, but she gave a firm nod.

I didn’t sense any lies in her words.

“...I understand. Thank you for letting me hear your feelings on the issue. Though it isn’t much, I think I may be able to help you a bit.”

“May I borrow Gilbert and the others?”

“No, that’s not possible. People would believe I was supporting you as a candidate. Also, there would be no point in serving my chefs’ meals to your father, would there?”

“That’s true, but...”

Lady Kate was becoming more and more disheartened. Her cat ears slumped downward.

“Please don’t be so upset. In exchange, I’d like to help make suggestions for new dishes to serve.”

“New dishes...?”

“Your chefs will be the one preparing the ingredients and cooking the food. I can’t guarantee it will be a success, and I need to consult with His Majesty first before implementing anything, but if you’ll still agree to it, I can provide a bit of assistance.”

“...Yes! Please...!!”

Lady Kate bowed her head deeply.

As I explained my thinking to the girl, Lord Aroo remained at my side, his ears perked straight up to listen to us.



“I see. So that’s what all the fuss at Kate’s villa was about.”

King Glenreed nodded.

After Lady Kate came to visit my villa, I sent a request to speak with His Majesty that very day. Now, one day later, I was at the palace for an audience with the king.

His Majesty was a busy man, so I didn’t imagine I’d be able to see him so soon, but I was glad to meet with him today, considering the impending deadline of Manilla Day.

After explaining the situation to him, choosing how much to share with him directly, I asked for his opinion.

“If you were approached with the request to trade out Lady Kate for Lady Sienna as a candidate, would you agree to it?”

“Sure. I would. But I’ll bet you predicted that, right?”

“Yes. I believed that would be the most beneficial choice for you, Your Majesty.”

By allowing Lady Sienna to take Lady Kate’s place, the most powerful candidate would now be in debt to the king.

Even if Lady I-Liena ended up taking the crown instead, Lady Sienna's powerful family wouldn't be able to attack Lady I-Liena either, having received such a favor from His Majesty in the first place.

From King Glenreed's perspective, having equally matched candidates in terms of power was the best way for him to control them, even though he wanted to avoid any serious conflict between them.

"Laetitia, I think the plan you came up with—developing a new menu instead of lending out your chefs—is the best one for you right now. That way, Kate will owe you without your having to get too close to her."

"I appreciate your words. By the way, I already have one of my new creations here with me..."

Lucian, who was standing behind me, presented a dish to the king that had already been tested for poison. It was a gift for His Majesty as well as an opportunity to ask if it was appropriate for Manilla Day.

"...What an unusual presentation."

I explained the details of the food to him, as well as how to make and eat it.

"I see. This might just fit well on a Manilla Day table. I'm no expert when it comes to taste, but as for the appearance and the way it's eaten, I think the people of this kingdom might enjoy those unique traits."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Do you believe I've overlooked anything or should be aware of anything in particular?"

"Not when it comes to the food, but...can I ask you to tell Kate a few things for me?"

"...Should I encourage her to request additional servants from you?"

"Exactly. As quick as ever, I see. I can't step in to help Kate directly, as that would be favoritism, but that's not the case if she submits a request first. Kate runs her villa, but the villa is part of the castle, of which I am the head. If she submits a complaint about a lack of staff, I'll be able to temporarily dispatch more servants, at the very least."

"I'm sure that would be a great help to her."

An increase of servants.

I imagined that not even His Majesty could quickly assemble a group of top-grade chefs, but that didn't mean it was completely hopeless.

It was possible that some of the remaining chefs at Lady Kate's villa were controlled by Lady Sienna. I feared they could secretly alter the Manilla Day dishes just as had happened when I visited.

Without the proper number of chefs, it would be difficult for them to watch over each other to prevent any meddling. But if His Majesty ordered the newly dispatched servants to keep an eye out for anything suspicious, it would be an effective deterrent.

It seemed like a good thing to plan for, even if it never amounted to a real threat.

It was also a favorable exchange from His Majesty's perspective too, I imagined.

Lady Kate would be in his debt once he supplied her with servants.

All that was left for her was to do a good job and protect her seat as a candidate. If she failed, the king could easily switch her out for Lady Sienna, who would instantly be indebted to him as well. Neither outcome seemed too problematic for him.

"That's all I can do in this situation. The success of the plan is completely up to you and Kate now."

In His Majesty's words, I could swear I sensed something of a challenge.

Chapter 5: The Potential for Salt

MANILLA Day arrived in the blink of an eye.

I was plenty busy in my own right, but Lady Kate and her servants were practically on death's door.

"But all our hard work paid off in time, fortunately."

I took Lucian's hand to board my carriage, then headed straight for Lady Kate's villa. She had invited me over today as the two of us had agreed upon. I wanted to observe her Manilla Day celebrations to see if they were successful, as well as...

"Oh my. If it isn't Queen Laetitia?"

The voice from behind me sounded a bit displeased.

There stood Lady Sienna, dressed in beautiful attire but still unable to hide her inner feelings.

Lady Kate's half sister seemed to be another guest for the holiday.

"I didn't expect to see you here. To think I saw you as a wise person, Your Majesty."

"I appreciate the praise, thank you."

"...What exactly are you thinking?"

Lady Sienna came up to me to whisper in my ear.

"I understand that you've been speaking with my half sister recently. I imagine you two are up to something, but I wouldn't get your hopes up. Manilla Day is part of our culture, and it's customary to eat salted foods. As a foreigner, suggesting your new recipes won't be possible for chefs of our region."

"You don't think outsiders can bring new insights at times?"

"I'm not sure it'll result in anything but the shallowest of changes."

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough.”

We reached the dining room. When the doors opened up for us...

“Good day, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to have you in attendance today.”

“Good day. It’s been a while since we met outside of our villas, hasn’t it?”

“Oh my, you’re as pretty as ever, Your Majesty. I see you’re here with the little kitten. Have you two grown close?”

Lady Kate, Lady Natalie, and Lady I-Liena were already in the dining room when we arrived. The three turned to greet me.

“What...? Why are the other candidates here...?”

Lady Sienna froze.

“Oh, welcome, Sienna. I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Big Sister!! What’s going on?! I didn’t know you were inviting the others for Manilla Day!!”

“Is there a problem? Today is meant to be spent treating the people you care about. Lady Natalie and Lady I-Liena are both daughters of dukes, like me, and we all carry the burden of the kingdom’s future on our shoulders.”

Lady Kate explained the situation nonchalantly.

Everything was going as planned.

As was traditional for Manilla Day, all of today’s guests were connected in some way to our host’s status. The fact that Lady Kate even invited people like Lady Natalie and me to the celebration should naturally benefit her own reputation.

I simply accepted what had been given to me. I couldn’t imagine that it would look like I was favoring Lady Kate’s candidacy to an outsider.

Lady Natalie also had something to gain by accepting the invitation. It was a big deal for her, considering she had lost almost all chance at becoming the next queen, to improve her relationship with the powerful Lady Kate.

The different races of the two girls left them estranged, but for tonight’s event, they were on the same page and would be meeting each other halfway.

Lady Natalie first agreed to my proposal after a bit of thought.

Lady Sienna and her beastfolk faction acted even more distant toward humans than her half sister did. Therefore, Lady Natalie definitely felt it important to prevent Lady Sienna from becoming the next queen.

Once I had Lady Natalie's permission, Lady Kate and I next sent an invitation to Lady I-Liena. While I couldn't read her true intentions, I didn't imagine she wanted to publicly cause any discord. We told her that Lady Natalie and I would be attending, and perhaps just to keep an eye on what we were up to, Lady I-Liena agreed to attend.

...And although she didn't stand out, there was one last guest.

Lady Fillia, the black-haired candidate from the southern villa, was seated at the dining table as well. She was apparently open to attending events when directly asked, so she had accepted our invitation to today's celebration.

Lady Kate had managed to invite all three of the other candidates.

It was a perfectly suitable crowd for Manilla Day.

I was hopeful that our hard work leading up to this day would help keep Lady Sienna's ulterior motives at bay.

I was exchanging introductions with Lady Fillia, whom I was meeting face-to-face for the first time, when the dining room door opened.

Lady Kate and Lady Sienna instantly turned anxious.

It was none other than Duke Garon—their father and the man who held their fates in the palm of his hand.

He was a middle-aged man who resembled a wildcat...or rather, he was styled like a lynx, specifically. His light-brown hair resembled Lady Sienna's, while his more pointed eyes reminded me of Lady Kate.

We welcomed Duke Garon, and after a few more guests arrived, it was finally time for lunch.

All the dishes were brought out and placed before us at our seats.

While the kitchen had grown even busier with the addition of the three

candidates to the guest list, Lady Kate informed me that they had just enough manpower to handle it, so I didn't expect any trouble.

The first dish set on the table was a salad made from leafy greens and sprinkled with large salt crystals. It was a simple dish, but perfect as a palate cleanser during the course of the meal.

Next to the salad was a plump mound of bread covered with salt.

Salt had been kneaded into the dough too. The sweetness of the butter would draw out even more of a salty taste, but just like the salad, this was a food commonly eaten in Lady Kate's native region.

Today's main dish was the last suggestion I gave her for a brand-new kind of Manilla Day food.

Everyone murmured to themselves when they saw it brought out of the kitchen.

"A big...lump of salt...?"

Whispers ran through the confused guests as the dish was set in front of them.

"Is this a salt cluster?"

"That's exactly what it looks like to me..."

When Lady Sienna watched the whispered exchanges occurring between guests, she spoke up.

"Big Sister!! Enough with this nonsense!"

Once she made sure she had everyone's eyes on her, she glared at Lady Kate.

"I've heard of your recent troubles with the chefs at your villa. You lost the majority of them right before Manilla Day, isn't that right?"

Her eyes turned from pity to judgment as she looked at her older sister.

"However, that doesn't make it acceptable to serve something as ridiculous as a lump of salt and call it 'food'! Are you mocking Father, today's guest of honor?!"

Lady Sienna was shouting as if she'd already won.

I was sure she thought she was about to topple her sister, but that was way too hasty, even for her.

Maybe it was just proof of how much she underestimated Lady Kate.

“Be quiet, Sienna. If you have complaints, can you not wait until after you’ve sampled the dish?”

“You expect Father and me to eat this lump of salt?!”

“If you don’t want to eat it, then close your mouth and watch.”

Lady Kate didn’t let the indignant Lady Sienna throw her off her pace.

In fact, when I looked closely, Lady Kate’s ears seemed to be twitching. If she was angry on the inside, she wasn’t showing it on her face.

Lady Sienna was taken aback to see her emotional sister staying so calm. With the wind taken out of her sails, she fell quiet.

...I’d told Lady Kate in advance that her sister might act up as soon as the dish was served. That was clearly the right approach.

Plate after plate had been carried out to the table while the two sisters argued.

Once each of the fifteen guests had their lump of salt placed in front of them, Lady Kate spoke up.

“Thank you for your patience. Today’s main course was very specially prepared by the chefs at my villa, but you’ll find the method of eating it a bit unusual. I’ll give you a demonstration first.”

A maid handed Lady Kate a wooden mallet.

“Oh my! Don’t tell me! Could it be?” whispered Lady I-Liena.

It was the first time I ever saw the fox woman express shock. Just then...

Smack!!

Lady Kate dropped the mallet onto the salt lump with a nice crunch.

After a few more hits, the shell cracked and fell open.

“What a nice aroma...”

The smell of herbs and roasted meat filled the air.

I could see both the hunger and excitement on everyone's faces when they caught the scent.

With a bit of a triumphant look, Lady Kate moved the salt fragments to the side of her plate. The smell grew stronger until the roasted pork inside became visible.

"As you can see, once you crack open the lump of salt, you can remove the ingredients to eat. The salt is mixed with egg whites, kneaded into an outer shell, then baked with pork on the inside. It's called salt-crusted pork."

"Salt-crusted pork..."

The guests stirred in surprise over the foreign name.



I was the one who taught her this recipe, of course.

Salt-crusted dishes were well-known in my past life in Japan for their impressive appearance and memorable method of eating, but here in this world, fortunately, it was a very unusual form of food.

Some recipes might resemble it if one searched the entire continent...but at the very least, it wasn't known at all in this kingdom.

I had previously received a piece of rock salt as an apology for the lunch incident that happened when I last visited the villa. It was a most abundant amount of salt. I was planning on using it to make salt-crusted pork for His Majesty, but I ended up scrapping the idea and decided to present him something else instead.

When I had the dish taste tested recently, the results shocked me.

...Leaving aside why I decided to scrap the dish, as luck would have it, the recipe turned out to be a great help to Lady Kate.

"Salt-crusted pork, huh? What an extravagant use of our region's pride and joy."

The sisters' father, Duke Garon, looked at the dish with great interest.

"So we're not supposed to eat this salt shell on the outside, is that right?"

"Indeed. Please feel free to leave it on the side of your plate. I'll be saving it to use for other noncooking applications in the future."

I knew that in Lady Kate's homeland, some salt was processed in a way that wasn't edible. The people shared their various ways of reusing this salt for things like abrasive products.

The shell on their plates was made from a simple mix of egg whites and salt, and while it would take some time, it could be processed for reuse.

"I see. Then I'll gladly accept what my daughter presented us here."

The guest of honor, Duke Garon, was next to take a wooden mallet from the maid. After a few swings, he could begin to see the contents within the crust.

"Oh, is that simmered beef I see inside mine?"

“Yes, that’s right. I wanted to add your favorite food as well, Father. All other guests, please crack open the shell and see what’s inside.”

The maid passed a mallet to each guest.

The dining room was filled with the sounds of soft crunching.

It was exciting, like something of a treasure hunt. Everyone was eager to see what they had received.

I looked down at my plate.

There were three varieties of salt crust that would be served today. Each dish was seasoned with rosemary and other herbs, and contained either pork, beef, or lemon-stuffed fish. Lady Kate served each guest whatever their preferred ingredient would be, if she knew that much. I left my personal selection up to her, knowing I’d enjoy whatever I got.

The presentation of the salt crust was certainly eye-catching, but the shell was quite simple to make.

Thick slices of meat already make for a tasty meal as it is. The rest of the preparation was to simply cover them in salt and roast them in the oven. Thanks to this dish, even Lady Kate’s understaffed kitchen managed to pull it off.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I quickly took to the task of cracking the shell so I could taste the main dish.

“I got pork and it’s delicious...”

Juices dripped from the meat as I bit into the slice.

The perfect amount of salt brought out the natural flavor of the pork. Combined with the rosemary seasoning, the meat was a succulent and refreshing treat.

I snuck a glance at the other guests. I could hear all their satisfied remarks.

Duke Garon seemed to be enjoying his beef as well.

“...Very nice. Cooking the meat with salt made it very juicy. It’s roasted well too, and I like the way the salt on the outside tickles the tongue with each bite.”

Not only did the dish have a memorable presentation, but the taste was favorable too.

The guests let out sighs of satisfaction. I wondered if that was thanks to the changes in meat to specially suit each person at the table. They seemed to have taken to the shocking presentation and delicious taste of the meal.

While the guests quietly dug into their meals, there was one single person at the table who wasn't enjoying herself.

Lady Sienna couldn't hide her disappointment.

"...May I ask you something, Big Sister?"

"What is it? Did you see how yours is fish, just how you like it? Wasn't it scrumptious?"

"I-It was, but..."

Oh, that's surprising.

I was certain she would say something like "Sure, it was prepared in a new way, but the taste is completely average."

Lady Sienna was more honest than I expected...or perhaps she wasn't the quickest of thinkers. She was skilled when it came to schemes but lacking in the ad-lib department. Lady Kate's explosive emotions were a stark contrast to her sister.

"...However, that's irrelevant. The problem lies in who created this dish. It's not customary in our region to bake foods inside a salt crust like this. I can't imagine this was your idea, Big Sister."

"That's right. Her Majesty helped me to come up with this dish."

A murmur traveled across the table when she mentioned me.

Lady Sienna began to speak triumphantly. "Aren't you embarrassed to need rescuing just to create your glorious Manilla Day meal?"

"She didn't rescue me. We worked together. This dish is made with our region's bountiful salt. There's only so much one can do on their own. You understand, right? You're the one who said neither of us could ever come up

with such a thing on our own.”

Lady Kate’s father nodded when she said this.

She’d once told me that Duke Garon was a strict man, but forgiving whenever sound logic was involved. It appeared she was correct.

Lady Sienna only grew more irritated to see her father’s approval of her half sister.

“‘Working together’ is certainly a nice way of putting it. You’re the host for Manilla Day, but you make Queen Laetitia do everything for you?”

“What proof do you have of an accusation like that?”

“The chandelier.”

Lady Sienna smirked triumphantly.

Quietly, I confirmed that the girl had fallen into our trap.

The guests at the table raised their heads to look at the ceiling.

The entire fixture was a light-white color but nearly transparent. Its candles cast a brilliant glow throughout the room, perfect for an elegant space with its complex and aesthetically pleasing metal curves.

“What’s your problem with my chandelier?”

“Don’t you think it’s best for the host of an event to be the one to decorate their dining room?”

“I think my beautiful chandelier is doing that job just fine.”

“Absolutely. It’s the centerpiece of this room...and it was Her Majesty who prepared it, not you, Big Sister, right?”

Lady Sienna turned to look at me.

“Five days ago, I heard there was a commotion going on here at the villa. The next day, Her Majesty showed up with a glazier. I thought that was strange, but I get it now. You had Her Majesty gift you a chandelier, didn’t you?”

“That’s true, I did visit this villa...but may I ask how you reached such a conclusion?”

I imagined she would say something like this. I wanted the meal to end peacefully with everyone enjoying their food, but I knew there was a chance Lady Sienna would get in the way. To avoid a situation where she got the better of us, I laid what could be called a trap for her to fall into.

“Please don’t play dumb,” she said. “I’ve been to this villa more often than you, Your Majesty, so I can tell. This isn’t the same chandelier that’s always been in this room. It looks very similar, but you can’t fool my eyes. All the fuss at the villa five days ago was because someone accidentally broke the chandelier!”

Lady Sienna was brimming with confidence.

“It’s easy enough to figure out. The chandelier that was in this room was a made-to-order glass piece. There can be no identical fixture. If you were going to create a lookalike on short notice, you’d need a large amount of money for such an order. Big Sister, surely you can’t afford a sum like that? Then there can be only one answer. You begged Her Majesty to hire a glazier, making him work day and night, hidden away in a studio, until he created a replica.”

The guests quietly took in Lady Sienna’s conjecture.

Lady I-Liena looked to be having a good time. Lady Natalie was just nervous.

When Lady Sienna saw that the rest of the guests were looking at Lady Kate and me judgingly, she began to smirk.

“I’m impressed Her Majesty was able to produce an identical chandelier in a mere four days. But to force the queen to use her wealth is going much too far, don’t you think? It’s unfortunate the chandelier was broken, but even so...”

She made her words sound sympathetic. I caught sight of Lady Kate beginning to glare back at her.

I understood how she felt, but I signaled her to keep calm with my eyes.

The chandelier breaking five days ago was neither coincidence nor bad luck, of course.

It was a crime committed at the hands of the servants Lady Sienna controlled.

The true culprit continued to speak on with an innocent face.

“If your chandelier was broken, you could have prepared a less extravagant room for our use, or anything else. But you wanted to present a lavish celebration to the point that you relied on the wealth of others. Your selfishness and your shamelessly displayed chandelier just aren’t fit for a holiday like Manilla Day.”

Lady Sienna’s face, expressing pity for her sister, was also failing to hide her delight.

I decided to be the next to respond. I needed to be sure of the plan.

“...Lady Sienna, you can tell this is a different chandelier than the one in the room from five days ago?”

“Yes, of course. One can take a close look and see that the shape is different.”

“...Very well. I’d like to ask one more thing. You said this chandelier isn’t fit for Manilla Day. Are you absolutely sure about that?”

“I’m not taking back anything I said... What exactly are you getting at?”

She seemed nervous from my pressing questions, but unfortunately, it was already too late.

She had firmly fallen into my trap. I could now move in for the kill.

“Lady Sienna, you are lying.”

“...What did you just say?”

“Look closely at the chandelier and I believe you’ll understand.”

Aristocrats have always lived in mansions with tall ceilings, making use of all the extra space in the room. The room we currently sat in was no different. The height between the floor and the ceiling was easily more than that of two adults. Naturally, the chandelier hanging from the ceiling wasn’t reachable from the ground.

At Lady Kate’s signal, one of the servants stuck their hand into a small hole in the wall. We heard the sound of scraping metal as the chandelier slowly lowered down to us. The mechanism existed to light the candles before hauling the fixture back up the ceiling.

The chain holding the chandelier grew longer and longer until it was just above our heads.

“Oh my, what is this...?”

“Seeing it up close, this glass isn’t as transparent as usual.”

I decided to answer the guests’ questions.

“This chandelier was mostly created with salt.”

“The chandelier is salt...?”

Lady Sienna repeated my statement in confusion.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before...”

“Well, here it is, right now. If you don’t believe me, please touch the chandelier, then give your finger a lick.”

“I’m not going to do something so silly and—”

“Whoa!! So salty!!”

It was a child who next cried out.

Duke Garon had brought his son along for dinner as well. He was Lady Kate’s younger brother. The boy was only about ten years old and well-behaved around all the adults, but it appeared he may have been secretly bored until now.

My words had sparked his curiosity enough to take action. He reminded me of the expressive Lady Kate. The boy’s tail slinked down in embarrassment when he realized he’d attracted the attention of the room.

“...He’s correct. This chandelier is made from blocks of salt, which you can tell if you lick it. The center foundation that connects to the chains is made of metal, but aside from that, the outer decorations and dangling crystals are all made out of salt. Lady Kate knew that, of course.”

I exchanged glances with her to have her take over the conversation for me.

“It’s just as Her Majesty says. Our region already makes sculptures out of rock salt, so I took that idea, borrowed the queen’s magic skills, and created this beautiful salt chandelier.”

“Salt...with magic...?”

Lady Sienna cast me a doubting look. I decided to give an easy demonstration for her. I reached into my dress pocket, removed a fist-sized lump of rock salt wrapped in cloth, and held it up for all to see.

I closed my eyes for a moment and focused.

I let the energy flow as I chanted a spell, and soon, I held a small key made of what resembled cloudy glass.

This was the work of the spell I relied on most ever since I regained my past-life memories—transmutation. It was a skill generally used to change the shape of raw materials such as dirt and minerals.

“Since salt is a mineral, won’t I be able to transmute rock salt too?”

It was the large piece of rock salt sent by Lady Kate that had given me that thought.

But since it was “rock” salt, after all, it also strongly resembled a piece of boulder or crystal. It meant I could probably use transmutation on it.

I gave it a try, figuring it could do no harm, and was shocked at my own success.

There is truly no end to the uses for magic.

Next, I tried to use transmutation on things like chunks of meat or vegetables, but as I imagined, I saw no results. Since meat and plants were both living things, maybe that was why the spell didn’t work? Or maybe it worked on salt because I perceived it as a type of rock? I didn’t understand how the fundamentals worked exactly, but now, at least, I knew that salt could be transmuted.

A transmuted key of rock salt sat atop my palm.

The guests had the same looks of shock on their faces that I did when I first successfully transmuted salt. It was a bit funny to see.

“It’s said that Manilla Mine was first discovered when a young girl dropped a key inside the caverns. Since today is a day to celebrate that discovery, I chose to make a key out of this salt.”

I handed it to a maid, who brought it around to Duke Garon.

He picked up the key, looked it over, and gave a quiet nod of approval.

“It’s just as Her Majesty says. This is a real piece of salt. I’ve heard of the queen’s incredible ‘transmutation’ spells ever since her display at His Majesty’s birthday party, so I’d buy that she made the entire chandelier here.”

The other guests seemed to agree with the duke’s conclusion.

Most beastfolk knew little about magic, but Duke Garon seemed to have a good understanding.

“I’m honored to receive your praise. I made this chandelier out of rock salt given to me by Lady Kate, making it a joint creation between the two of us. Unfortunately, my transmutations are not perfect, so this will only keep its shape for about a month... Until then, I hope it will serve as a treat for your eyes, and once it’s gone, we hope you’ll use the salt for other purposes.”

Lady Kate took over from there.

“The chandelier is made from salt mined in our native region. We only have this one made with Her Majesty’s magic right now, but back at home, there are many ways to process salt.”

“I see. So that means...”

The eyes of our eastern beastfolk guests lit up.

Lady Kate looked at them with a determined smile.

“Someday, we’ll be able to sell salt chandeliers as a local specialty, once we train the workers properly in our region. Manilla Day is a time to give thanks for the blessings of salt, but it also exists to search for even better uses than what we already have. What could be any more fitting for the occasion than this chandelier?”

Lady Kate’s eyes fell upon Lady Sienna.

It was like she was after revenge for her sister’s earlier remarks.

The guests began to praise the creation too once they’d heard Lady Kate’s explanation. Everyone at the table today, besides the candidates and me, were

members of her family.

Salt-crusted meat on our table, and a salt chandelier above our heads.

For her new applications of the region's famous salt, Lady Kate's reputation among everyone seemed to have been bolstered.



THE evening's dinner eventually came to a successful end without further incident.

As I was just about to leave with Lady Natalie and the others, a voice from behind stopped me in my tracks.

"Your Majesty, might I have a moment of your time this evening?"

"Why, hello, Duke Garon. What is it you'd like to discuss?"

"...The chandelier, among other things."

The duke whispered his response to me. I gave a small nod.

Leaving Lady Natalie, I followed Duke Garon back into the villa.

We arrived in the dining room where we'd just finished our meal. As I expected, Lady Kate and Lady Sienna were waiting for us there.

"...Sienna, you know what I want to say, don't you?"

"Father..."

Her face grew pale. She fell as silent as a frightened cat.

"I knew you and Kate weren't getting along...but what I saw in here was a disgrace. You disrupted an event full of outsiders and exposed your private disagreements. What were you thinking?"

"...I apologize. But, Father, you didn't put a stop to it either—"

"Sienna!!"

The girl flinched when her father barked at her.

"How old are you?"

"...Seventeen."

“What’s the age of adulthood in this kingdom?”

“...Fifteen.”

“That’s right. You’re an adult. You should know right from wrong.”

“...! But! It was Big Sister’s fault!! That confusing chandelier was her way of tricking me!!”

“How can you say that?!”

Lady Kate shot her a glare.

Her family and I—apparently now thought of just like a relative—were the only people in the room, meaning she didn’t have to put up an act around us.

“You’re the one who broke my chandelier in the first place, right?!”

“Where’s your proof?! Don’t just make things up!!”

“What?! You shameless little—”

“Lady Kate, please calm down.” I decided to step into the escalating sibling fight. “Lady Sienna, you insist you have nothing to do with breaking the chandelier, yes?”

“Right! Of course I’m insisting, since I didn’t do it!!”

“Then how did you know that the shape of the chandelier had changed?”

“I-I just... I could just tell at first glance!!”

“I see. In that case, would you like to compare them?”

“...What?”

At Lady Kate’s order, her servants brought in a large wooden crate.

“Inside this crate is the chandelier that was damaged five days earlier. The brace is broken and a few decorations are cracked, but the overall shape is still intact.”

Duke Garon peered into the crate.

“...It’s a bit dented, but the curve of the braces looks the same as the salt chandelier to me. Your ‘transmutation’ is truly remarkable, Your Majesty.”

I smiled back at his praise.

I did work hard to transmute that chandelier. Never once in my life had I worked on anything so large or something that required such attention to detail. It wasn't possible to do the entire thing in one go, so I separated it into parts and built the pieces one at a time, assembling it together with advice from a glazier. I had to start over if any bit came out even slightly warped, or if there was any cracks.

...Yeah. It was a total hassle.

But I never imagined my magical energy could be so drained from the experience.

Ever since I regained my past-life memories, the amount of magical energy at my disposal was plentiful. Usually, that energy would remain no matter how much magic I used consecutively...

But memorizing the detailed chandelier enough to recreate it again was an overwhelming process of trial and error. Without my overpowered magical energy and transmutation spells, it probably would have taken me a few years to complete. I was terrified I might not finish in time, but the end result was that my transmutation accuracy had improved, so I wasn't unhappy with the process.

"I'm proud of the work I put into the salt chandelier. Up close, you can tell it's not made of glass because it's not as transparent... But I'm confident the shape is an exact match. Lady Sienna claimed it was different when she looked up at it on the ceiling. ...Don't you find that strange?"

"...!"

Lady Sienna fell silent.

"Lady Sienna, you knew my identical chandelier was a new one because you had the original broken, didn't you?"

"Ah... I..."

She opened and closed her mouth uncomfortably. Her eyes scanned the room as if to find a way out, but she'd already fallen perfectly for my trap. There was

nowhere left to run.

When the chandelier was broken five days ago, I already predicted it was the work of Lady Sienna.

It all began when Lady Kate's chefs left the villa at Lady Sienna's command. It only took a little thought to imagine that some of the remaining chefs were also under Lady Sienna's thumb just the same.

While Lady Kate managed to receive servants from His Majesty to keep an eye on things, it was difficult for temporary workers to keep a complete hold on all sabotage within the home. If she assigned them to watch the kitchen, other areas of the villa would be lacking in help.

When I tried to come up with a solution, I remembered the words of my brother Claude, who was closest to me in age.

"The absolute best defense is one with a weakness. You feign ignorance, put that weakness on full display, and wait to reel them in."

I explained his philosophy simply to Lady Kate. I suggested she keep the dining room less guarded than the rest of the rooms in the villa. The most obvious target for sabotage there was the chandelier.

And just as I expected, it ended up broken.

Lady Sienna was apparently satisfied with that single move. There was no tampering with the food whatsoever. Thanks to the help of the kitchen staff and lookouts, no information about the secretive salt-crusted meat escaped their numbers either. It all went exactly as I thought it would, and the only thing left to do was to complete the salt chandelier in time.

After the day finally arrived, I began to doubt if Lady Sienna would really bring up the topic of the chandelier at all...but in the end, she wound up squarely in our trap.

"Sienna, as the daughter of a duke, I won't order you never to resort to trickery. But your attempted schemes are much too sloppy."

"Father...!"

"I can only conclude you would be the wrong choice to name as a candidate."

“That can’t be...!”

Lady Sienna didn’t seem convinced, but from an outside perspective, she was clearly inadequate for the title.

First, she was solely focused on her older sister and seemed disinterested in any other candidate activities. Second, she thoughtlessly disrupted a holiday celebration when she caught a single mistake from her sister. Third, she dove headfirst into a trap.

...No matter how you sliced it, she wasn’t fit to be the future queen.

The duke and I seemed to be on the same page in that regard.

“...Duke Garon, may I ask you something? You didn’t stop Lady Sienna from making any of her remarks at the dinner table. Were you intentionally using their sibling rivalry as a way of measuring the two?”

“So you saw right through me, huh? ...I wish my daughter was half as thoughtful as you are, Your Majesty.”

The duke looked at Lady Sienna.

“I decided not to interfere, figuring that if they can’t resolve an argument between sisters, their failure as the future queen would be inevitable... But you have my sincerest apologies for allowing you to end up in the middle of their dispute.”

“Father...” Lady Kate spoke to Duke Garon, his head now slightly bowed. “You always doted on me when I was a child. ...But when I became a candidate, you grew much more distant. Was that because you were testing my aptitude as a future queen?”

“...That’s right. It would be easy to keep you close and control how you operate, but relying on your father forever wouldn’t be acceptable as the queen.”

“...So you were actually trying to help me all this time. I really thought you’d given up on me...”

Lady Kate paused for a moment. She smiled almost as if she was on the verge of tears, like a weight had been lifted from her.

She must have been so worried that her father had abandoned her. Now she seemed deeply relieved to learn that the change in his attitude and their interactions came from love, not apathy.

“Kate. I feel sorry for the way I treated you. I kept my distance to help you grow...but if I didn’t see results, I wasn’t going to hesitate to make you step down as a candidate.”

Duke Garon made no attempt to hide his harsh intentions. Though he cared about his daughter, he had a duty to the kingdom as a nobleman at the same time. It seemed like a sincere, if not awkward, manner of operating.

Though I had some concerns...like whether or not there was any better way for the duke to handle his relationships with his daughters. I knew what it was like to be at odds with my father for a long time, so I wasn’t one to judge.

“Thank you for explaining your thought process, Father. ...What about now? Do you see me as a fitting candidate?”

“...I can’t make that judgment, but...” Duke Garon turned his eyes toward me before continuing to speak to his daughter. “Until now, you’ve never been able to swallow your pride and ask anyone else for help. But at that Manilla Day table tonight, I saw much more restraint from you than ever before.”

He let out a quiet sigh as he looked at Lady Kate, his eyes showing a newfound display of kindness in them. “You did well, Kate. I can tell you still have a lot to learn, but for now, you’ve passed my tests.”

“Thank you, Father!!”

The girl’s face lit up. Her bent tail swayed from uncontrollable happiness... then gradually settled back down as her face regained its composure.

“I appreciate your praise, Father, but that’s exactly why...I’d like to withdraw my candidacy.”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?” Duke Garon furrowed his brow. Lady Kate seemed to tremble at the sudden change in tone, but she continued to speak.

“Until now, I’ve been completely focused on Sienna whenever she was near. But the more time I spent with Her Majesty, the more I realized my desire to

become the queen and improve the kingdom was outweighed by my own shortsightedness.”

Lady Kate was looking at me, but her eyes almost seemed to be focused on something in the distance.

“It’s not just you, Your Majesty. Lady Natalie, that doll-like girl, managed to control herself despite the pressure from her family. Even Lady I-Liena’s mysterious persona is an advantage to her in a way... I’ve finally come to understand now. I see just how foolish and immature I’ve been.”

“I didn’t know you saw things that way...”

When I spoke, Lady Kate’s lips curved upward. She looked to be bearing an intense pain, but now something inside her had burst.

“Of course, I know I still have more maturing left to do!! I have nothing but potential!! Once I’m confident I can be the very best queen for Wolfvarte, then I promise I’ll claim that title for myself. But for right now, since I don’t think I’m the right choice, I want someone to take over temporarily.”

She turned back toward her father.

“So, Father, I know I’ll be letting you down by asking this...but can’t you please acknowledge that right now...the title of queen would be far too heavy a burden for both Sienna and me?”

“...”

Duke Garon was silent.

Lady Kate was nervous, but she waited for his answer without backing down.

“Kate...I can hardly believe how far you’ve come.”

“Father! Does that mean—”

“Yes, you have my approval. Forcing my daughter to be queen isn’t the only way of protecting my family. Our own prosperity depends on the kingdom being healthy, first and foremost. From now on, I want all your focus to be on finding a proper queen for this land.”

“Of course!! I’ll give it everything I have!!” she cried with a smile.

Just as Duke Garon had said, in that moment, Lady Kate was a shining display of personal growth.



THE duke left with Lady Sienna in tow, offering me one last apology for allowing me to be wrapped up in their sibling rivalry.

As Lady Sienna was being dragged away in a daze...

“How could I lose to that kink-tailed, hotheaded woman...”

I heard her muttering those words to herself. Now that her schemes had been exposed in front of her father, she seemed to have lost all will to resist.

Duke Garon told me they would be returning home so the family could plan where to go from here, and also to encourage Lady Sienna’s reeducation.

According to Duke Garon...

“Sienna changed as her bitterness toward her sister grew, but just like Kate, she used to be an honest girl. We’re going to start over with her, until she’s learned to behave with the dignity a duke’s daughter needs to carry.”

...That was news to me.

For now, the war of the sisters had come to a close. Lady Kate was keeping her title as a candidate for the time being. According to her, she would be using her position to judge the other candidates for their qualifications to be the next queen. Once she found the person most fit, she would be giving them her support.

I was thinking about how relieved I was to hear about her plans when Lady Kate called out to me.

“Your Majesty, thank you for all your help in this matter. You’ve put me...and even Sienna back on the right path. I’m going to start keeping my emotions in check. Even if people insult me or try to mock my tail, I want to remain levelheaded.”

That last bit still felt like a shot at Lady Sienna. Their relationship seemed to be made all the more complicated by their shared blood.

Something about that weighed on my mind.

“Lady Kate... Do members of the Wildcat clan dislike having their bent tails commented on?”

I’d always been curious about this subject. Lady Kate hid her tail when we first met, and after that, I only caught glimpses of it depending on the state of her emotions. Whenever she was remaining calm, her tail was always out of sight.

“...That’s right. I mean, it’s so shameful, right?”

She pursed her lips.

“It’s not elegant, like those long and slender tails you see. My tail looks like it suffers from a broken bone or something,” she muttered angrily and sadly.

Both beastfolk and humans generally held the same standards of beauty when it came to one’s face, but beastfolk seemed to interpret aesthetics differently when it came to the unique traits of their tails.

“Sienna wasn’t the only one who made fun of me for it. Many people laughed at me behind my back and said my tail was scrawny for a duke’s daughter. That’s why I want to remain strong and confident, so that people like them don’t get the best of me...”

She kept her lips tight, her words quiet.

Lady Kate would lash out at others as a way of keeping her weaknesses hidden. She seemed to be embarrassed of that side of her personality.

“I wish I was born with the same straight tail that Sienna and Father have...”

“A straight tail?”

“Yes. Don’t you find my tail ugly, Your Majesty?”

“Not at all. I’m a human, after all.”

“Huh?!” Lady Kate’s mouth fell open. “...What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly what I said. I believe you haven’t had many interactions with humans until now, so maybe you haven’t realized...but most humans would see a kinked tail just like any other tail.”

“Like any other...?” she repeated. “Are you telling me this lifelong worry of

mine isn't a big deal to you at all?"

"Right. Most humans wouldn't find your tail worthy of bad-mouthing whatsoever."

"....."

Lady Kate's shoulders dropped as if she'd been freed of a large burden.

I may not be able to fully share in her distress...but at the very least, I could provide a point of view from someone who wasn't beastfolk.

"...It all depends on who's doing the looking. Some people see things differently, and that causes disputes, but that's not all that matters. I can't speak to the beauty standards of the Wildcat clan, but I think you'll come to see that the world doesn't take those same standards as absolute."

The problem was simple in some ways and complicated in others. It was hard to break from the norms you'd lived with your entire life. Just as Lady Kate said, she in particular had a tendency to ignore the bigger picture.

I couldn't be sure how much of an effect my words might have on her. I just hoped I could provide a bit of relief for the earnest and awkward young woman.

"I find your tail quite lovely, Lady Kate."

Tails came in many shapes and sizes, each with their own good and unique qualities.

"...You mean it?"

"I do. It's not just me either. There once existed a land that believed a kinked tail like yours would bring about good fortune."

...That was Japan, the place I lived in my past life. Appreciation for kinked tails was said to be the reason many modern house cats in certain regions of Japan had bent tails.

"I know exactly how they feel. The appeal of the kinked tail is what brought about such a belief. The way you wag your tail, Lady Kate, the bent end always changes directions with each swish, and I just love to watch it move. In fact, I wish you wouldn't hide it. Why not show it off more so that I can see it up close and get my hands on that fl— and perhaps allow me a chance to touch it?"

Whoops.

My passionate tail talk had gotten swiftly out of hand.

I watched her reaction and saw her quickly turn her head away from me.

“...You really want to look at my tail? You’re such a strange person.”

As Lady Kate spoke, I could see her kinked tail swishing happily behind her.

Chapter 6: Ordinary but Delicious

“...**SO**, as a result, it seems as if the sibling rivalry between Lady Kate and Lady Sienna will be on hold for the time being.”

Three days had passed since Manilla Day.

I'd been invited to an audience with His Majesty, who had lent out his servants to observe Lady Kate's villa, so that I could summarize recent events for him. I wanted to directly report the guests' reactions to the salt-crusted meat dishes and the incident with the chandelier, and also to convey my gratitude to him as well.

“There was a lot of trouble surrounding Manilla Day, but it appears Lady Kate got the best of her sister and has shown a newfound level of maturity.”

“It sure sounds like it. I wasn't sure how this was all going to turn out, but with your help, the battle of the sisters seems to have been kept from getting out of hand. On top of that, you were the one who planned the salt-crusted meats and the chandelier trap, right? You did very well, Laetitia.”

“...Thank you for your words of praise.”

I was happy to hear him compliment me...but there was still a detail from Manilla Day that I hadn't yet shared with him.

“Your Majesty, forgive me if I'm mistaken, but...”

“Yes? Tell me what's on your mind.”

“When the chandelier was broken, one of your observers informed me that they didn't know who the culprit was...but they probably already knew the offender's identity and how they were connected to Lady Sienna, correct?”

It didn't quite make sense to me. I *had* ordered the chandelier's room to be less guarded than the others; that weakness was one created intentionally. Still, despite the request for observers, none of them came up with a single piece of

information.

It was true that Lady Kate lacked staff, so perhaps the outcome was inevitable... But I didn't understand how there could be absolutely *no* evidence pointing to a culprit.

"Did you figure out who it was and let them go free intentionally, Your Majesty? It would be an effective strategy to force Lady Kate and me to focus on making Manilla Day a success if we were able to recover from that wrench in our plans."

That was what happened in the end, after all...

"If the two of us had failed and Lady Sienna became one of the candidates, you could have then presented her with proof of her involvement with the chandelier destruction, therefore giving you the upper hand over her. Correct?"

As I laid down speculation after speculation, His Majesty watched me quietly.

"...I remained a spectator in order to keep a card up my sleeve, one that could pressure Sienna," he said. "Do you criticize me for that choice?"

"...No. I believe that's natural for someone in your position."

His Majesty wouldn't thoughtlessly make trouble for Lady Sienna and Duke Garon, who backed her. That made perfect sense and was a very sound judgment for the king to make.

"If anything, I appreciate that you didn't take any direct actions. If you'd accused Lady Sienna of misdeeds before Manilla Day, our dinner may not have taken place that night, and I wouldn't have been able to treat Duke Garon and the other guests to the meal of salt-crusted meat I worked so hard to perfect."

"...But that's a matter of hindsight."

"Perhaps. But you also made that decision because you had faith in me and my new dish, no?"

I thought back to the time I had His Majesty taste test the salt-crusted meat dish.

The outer shell had to be broken so the inside could be tested for poison, but even so, the scattered pieces of salt on the plate had great impact. The king

praised the method of cracking the shell with a wooden mallet to eat, and he even tried the dish for himself too. I used His Majesty's preferred choice of pork, so he seemed to enjoy the meal.

I wanted to believe that his acknowledgement of the dish's merits was part of why he let us be the ones to take care of Lady Sienna.

"If you had accused Lady Sienna, then yes, perhaps the fight between her and Lady Kate would have come to a conclusion sooner. But Lady Kate would never have received her father's approval like she did, nor would she have become closer to Lady Natalie. Was that the reason why you kept your information to yourself?"

"...Maybe it was."

He neither confirmed nor denied my line of thought.

He's tricky... Maybe His Majesty is more of a schemer than I first thought.

Even though His Majesty invited me to his castle from time to time, we were still a husband and wife in name only. The fact that neither of us could be completely frank with each other was natural, but still, I felt...

No, forget it. I'll leave that aside for now.

I decided to move on to the main reason I was visiting His Majesty today. I had begun with Lady Kate's situation to get the messy stuff out of the way first. Once we wrapped up the hard-to-digest discussions, it was time to eat.

"Thank you for answering my questions, Your Majesty. I think it would be a good time for dinner now. May I present you with today's meal?"

"Yes, go ahead. What have you brought me this time? That's a pretty big serving tray..."

His Majesty was looking past me to Lucian, who stood at my back and was holding a tray with a particularly large lid.

"Today, I'm pleased to present you chicken cream soup and roasted bread known as 'toast.'"

"'Toast'... I've never heard that term before. Is it a large chunk of bread?"

“The bread is cut into thin slices. I brought enough for one serving.”

“So what’s the big tray for?”

“It’s for cooking the meal.”

His Majesty seemed suspicious of this answer.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to make it from scratch here?”

“No, of course not.”

I signaled Lucian. He removed the lid and placed the contents of the tray on our table. Then he spread out a thin cloth and set down a plate with two slices of bread on top, followed by a small pot of soup.

Next to the food was a metal grill with handles to grip.

“...Is that grill for warming the food?”

“Exactly. You can eat this soup and bread as it is, but it becomes much better once it’s warmed.”

I started with the soup.

Instead of using charcoal or firewood, I would be performing a spell to start the fire. As long as I kept my magical energy under control, the flame from my spell should remain both stable and strong without having to use any other tool.

Compared with using a more normal form of fuel, it would produce less smoke and fewer cinders, making it the best option. My energy would be drained the longer I kept the fire going, but I had no lack of magical energy in my body. It wouldn’t be a problem.

I made sure the flame was a small one as I stirred the contents in the pot. I didn’t want it to burn. The soup was made with minced chicken, onions, and fried potatoes, all simmered together in water and cream. It had cooled off since I first made it, but because the ingredients were sliced finely, it was easy to reheat.

“That smells good,” His Majesty murmured.

The warm aroma drifted through the air. A mild, pleasant, appetizing smell of

cream tickled my nose.

“This seems about right...”

Once the surface continued to bubble even as I stirred it, I decided the soup was heated enough.

Lucian placed the pot on a stand and removed the metal grill from the table with potholders.

The white bread would already be delicious on its own, but I decided the extra work was worth it. I roasted both sides of the bread over the hot mesh and placed the slices on a plate.

Finally, I ladled warm soup from the pot into a bowl. The dish was complete.

“It’s ready, Your Majesty. Please enjoy it before it cools, if you will.”

“Can I eat this toast with my hands?”

“Yes, but first, put as much butter as you like on the surface, then go ahead and take a good bite.”

My suggestion was slightly informal, but it prompted the king to butter his toast, if a bit clumsily. He checked the bread to be sure it was properly covered, then sank his white teeth into the surface.

“...! This is...quite delicious...” King Glenreed sounded a bit surprised as he murmured to himself.

But his remark didn’t sound like empty flattery to me. He ate the whole slice of toast without stopping.

Thank goodness.

He seemed to like it.

Seeing the king hungrily devour the toast made me happy. Though I’d presented him a loaf of white bread, an unusual product in this world, the actual preparation of it was incredibly simple. I imagined such an easy-to-make snack would be a valuable treat for His Majesty.

“I didn’t know warm bread tasted so good...”

“It does! Freshly baked toast is very delicious on its own as well.”

Cooking is almost always most delicious when it's freshly made—a fact most people already know, but something difficult for His Majesty to experience. He almost exclusively dined on food that had to be set aside for poison testing first.

Today's toast was no different. The designated tester had to taste it before it could be brought here. His Majesty's safety was a priority, so this was unavoidable, but it did result in the meals losing their warmth and aroma.

I imagined the king could request a way to reheat his food if he so wished... but judging by his disinterest in food, I couldn't see him going to that much trouble.

But maybe I was wrong. Perhaps His Majesty lost all interest in food by eating cold meals his entire life.

It was a chicken-or-egg kind of problem.

I couldn't know the answer for sure...but I could certainly tell the king hadn't dined on warm food in some time.

He brought a spoonful of hot cream soup up to his lips.

The savory taste of chicken and vegetables permeated the dish. He went back for spoonful after spoonful of the soup that contained one of his favorite kinds of meat. His lips parted for each sip and his throat moved as he gulped. Unexpectedly, my heart began to speed up.

My eyes were drawn to the king as he was eating.

His Majesty's cheeks were slightly red due to the heat of the food. I understood why, but seeing the man's beautiful face go flushed wasn't entirely healthy for my heart.

"Your Majesty, try dunking your toast into the soup. The bread has a nice texture when it's soaked."

I spoke up to try to distract myself from my racing heart.

"Hmm. ...Yes, this is nice too. It absorbs the soup to fill your mouth when you eat it."

"Exactly! I'm so glad you like it."

I smiled at the satisfied king. I'd been so uncertain of what food to present him. I wanted him to take an interest in my cooking, so I knew I had to choose something with both a visual impact and a delicious taste. That was the whole reason I first thought to challenge myself with salt-crusted meats...

But during that whole process of trial and error, I realized something.

No matter how I perfected the recipe, it would always need to go through poison testing first. The meal would be cold by the time it reached His Majesty, so he couldn't experience the wonderful taste of freshly cooked food.

That was why I had to change my way of thinking.

Toast was easy and fast to cook. I could reheat the soup, with its finely chopped ingredients, right at the castle and have His Majesty eat it immediately after. Lord Melvin had informed me that I could bring a metal grill along to reheat the food once it'd been tasted for poison.

In the end, I chose to serve cream soup together with toast.

Neither dish was particularly elaborate. Anyone could cook them, and in fact, they were pretty common. But the point was to have His Majesty eat them while hot.

That alone made them worth making.

"How warm..."

His Majesty's reaction warmed my own heart too.

It felt like the exact words I wanted to hear today, more than anything else from the king.



A bit before the moment Laetitia's heart was warmed...

"...! This is..."

Glenreed went wide-eyed as soon as he took his first bite of toast.

"Quite delicious..."

The words spilled from his lips reflexively.

It had been so long since Glenreed's compliments for a dish were both genuine and a surprise even to himself.

Again and again, he bit into the crunchy bread.

The surface was roasted to give off a nice aroma, but the inside was sweet and fluffy. As the melted butter spread, it brought out the taste of the bread itself.

Even though it gave off an appetizing scent, Glenreed could tell it was still the same bread he ate with the sandwiches. He thought the taste would be the same as well, but...

"I didn't know warm bread tasted so good..."

"It does! Freshly baked toast is very delicious on its own as well."

Laetitia's expression lit up.

Glenreed was a bit taken aback when he saw the gleeful smile on her face.

So she can smile like that even when she's not with the wolves.

The surprise he felt seemed to be making his heart beat a little faster.

That smile, so unlike the faces she made as the two discussed the serious Manilla Day business, seemed to be very genuine. She was simply thrilled to hear Glenreed praise the toast. Her expression was so carefree.

Glenreed didn't comprehend how his simple words could please her to that extent. He didn't understand, but the king *did* realize that it wasn't such a bad feeling after all.

Something must be wrong with me...

Glenreed wanted to distract from his reddening cheeks.

He chewed his toast and focused on its flavor. Soon, he was completely transfixed by the aroma of the warm bread. The crunch of each bite of toast was very satisfying. He felt like there was no limit to the slices he could eat.

"Hmm. ...Yes, this is nice too. It absorbs the soup to fill your mouth when you eat it."

"Exactly! I'm so glad you like it."

As suggested by Laetitia, he tried dipping the bread into the cream soup. The soaked bread seemed to fall apart once it was in his mouth. Even the chicken was cut into nice bite-size pieces. It was simmered long enough for all the flavors to permeate the soup.

“How warm...”

Glenreed took a satisfied breath. Laetitia watched over him happily.

The heat had seemed to have reached not just his stomach, but a deeper place somewhere inside his body.

It all felt so warm.

When that realization hit him, Glenreed began to consider that maybe he'd never noticed a certain coldness that had been with him all along.

/...

The king was saddened at the idea of the meal being over. He was just as saddened to think of parting with Laetitia for the evening.

Bite by bite, he ate the bread, savoring the taste and warmth. But regardless of his strong desire to remain, the meal eventually disappeared into Glenreed's stomach.

Dinner was over. Laetitia returned to her villa.

After seeing her off, Glenreed collapsed into his bedroom chair.

“She always surpasses my expectations like it's the easiest thing in the world for her...”

His face relaxed a bit.

The king had been quite surprised when she presented him with salt-crusted pork and its strange method of eating. But after seeing something so odd, he was sure he'd never be as surprised by whatever she served next. As usual, Laetitia went above and beyond anything Glenreed imagined.

That wasn't just limited to cooking either.

All the turmoil surrounding Manilla Day at Kate's villa was another example.

Glenreed had many reasons for not revealing the culprit behind the

chandelier's destruction. He did indeed believe that Manilla Day might be salvageable with Laetitia's imaginative salt-crusted meats, even if the chandelier couldn't be replaced and the room became less decorative.

While he had expected great things from Laetitia's special dishes, those expectations began and ended with her cooking skills.

I never imagined she'd gather all the queen candidates for Manilla Day. She even got Natalie, the former puppet, and I-Liena, the trickster.

He knew she'd been growing friendlier with Natalie as of late. But he believed that was only to quell suspicions of discord between herself and Natalie's family. What Glenreed definitely didn't imagine was that she'd won Natalie over and persuaded her to break free of her father's control in such a short period of time.

I-Liena probably attended Manilla Day to keep an eye on Kate but also, more likely, to watch Laetitia's actions too.

He hadn't heard of Laetitia and I-Liena meeting more than once before the holiday had arrived. It implied that I-Liena, after only one meeting, determined that Laetitia wasn't someone she could ignore.

I-Liena and Natalie.

In addition to getting their participation, Laetitia had created a brand-new salt chandelier and presented it as a new way of using the substance. She assured Manilla Day was a great success in a manner no one could have expected.

"If only she could stay..."

Glenreed's words fell quietly in the room.

Laetitia was never more than a figurehead queen to him, but what if he took her as his true queen, allowing her to govern the kingdom with those talents of hers?

When he imagined the girl at his side, nestled up close to him, his heart began to race.

If only he could see her brilliant smile so close forever. The warmth he felt today would surely never leave him again.

“...What nonsense am I fantasizing about?”

Glenreed slowly shook his head.

That future isn't a possibility...

He understood well that Laetitia could easily surpass his expectations. She was somehow in the process of winning over Kate in addition to Natalie, and that could happen only because Laetitia was a placeholder queen.

If Glenreed gave Laetitia the official title of queen, even if Natalie and the others agreed to it, it was very unlikely Laetitia's own family would give their approval.

The kingdom Glenreed ruled was made up of five smaller lands. It was a detailed, complicated establishment. No matter how useful Laetitia may be, opposition to a foreign queen would be much too strong.

“Obviously. That's plenty easy to see...”

Glenreed smiled bitterly to himself.

His fantasy over an impossible future may have been set off because of how much he loved her cooking.

Laetitia cooked for Glenreed, and when he praised her meals, she smiled.

It was the most normal thing in the world for a married couple, but to Glenreed, it was a strangely embarrassing situation.

The way to a man's heart is his stomach.

He'd heard the saying before, but never in his life did Glenreed, the man with little interest in food, imagine it could ever apply to him.



“**YOUR** Majesty! Is that pot boiling yet?”

“Not quite. Once it's finished, I'll start arranging the sandwiches.”

I looked over from the pot and responded to Gilbert. My voice was a bit louder than usual. It had to carry over the rest of the clamor around us.

It was just before noon and the kitchen was in a heightened state of activity.

Today, the construction around the villa was finally wrapping up. We would be holding a banquet to thank the workers for everything they'd done. Right now, we were busy with those preparations.

"Perfect. The vegetable soup is done."

I confirmed the completion of the soup and quickly moved to the next dish.

As hectic as it was, the work left me feeling fulfilled. With a lack of chefs to help out, I was participating in the preparations as well. This would be unthinkable in my home country, but the servants at my villa were well aware of how much I loved to cook. They were fully accepting of my hobby.

"Your Majesty, I'm sorry to trouble you, but could you check how things are going outside if you have a minute?"

"Of course. I'll be back shortly."

I finished arranging the sandwiches, then left the kitchen and headed outside.

We would be holding the banquet outdoors today. An inside banquet would be too cramped for the large number of construction workers, but also...

"...Yes! What a nice transformation, if I do say so myself!!"

I glanced around the yard.

The before and after of the villa's surroundings were shocking.

The silent villa alone in the forest is no more!!

"Gyuwah!!"

I heard a pleased cry.

Fon, in all his impressive glory, was soaring through the sky above. He gave his wings a light flap when he saw me. The sunlight glinted off his fine coat. He reminded me of a show horse or something of the sort.

Behind him, I saw his new wooden shed, complete with bedding for Fon to sleep on. Its construction was simple, but that made it blend in even better with the surroundings. It made Fon stand out more too.

The doghouse, or rather, the griffinhouse was built directly next to my villa.

As I turned the corner, the surrounding trees opened up for me to see the dogs running around.

“Arf!! Arf arf arf!!”

It was Snarl, a companion animal. He was racing around the completed dog park. His droopy ears flopped as he played with the other small dogs. The ground had been flattened and covered with a nice bed of grass.

“I’ll have to thank Berry too.”

She had helped by using her Gardener Cat powers to grow the lawn itself.

I wasn’t sure if she just had too much power left now that strawberry season was over, but for whatever reason, she had agreed to help me as long as I cooked for her.

Berry had a weakness for strawberries, but she still took a keen interest in other foods too. She seemed particularly fascinated with sandwiches and my other new endeavors recently. She always used to come to me strictly for strawberry treats, but it seemed she was insatiable in her quest for gourmet food.

A new path just for her now existed between the villa and the strawberry patch in the forest. I also had the workers open up more soil for that strawberry patch. If my plan worked out, next spring should bring a larger bounty of strawberries than this year.

“Your Majesty! You’re just in time. They’re nearly finished!”

“Thank you! I’ll be right there!”

I caught a whiff of freshly baked pizza from the direction I heard the voice.

In the backyard of the villa sat a massive brick oven. The snug stack of stone was both simple and reliable. With an oven in the yard, we would be able to feast on fresh pizza.

“Now this is the ultimate slow life!”

I’d seen sights like these in magazines and on TV in my past life, and now, it was finally a reality. Though it would probably be faster to just make everything in the kitchen, the brick oven was vital to the atmosphere I wanted to create. I

even helped build it with my magic. It was a luxury I was eager to bring to life.

“Did the pizza turn out nice?” I asked the chef.

I took in the fragrant scent and peered into the brick oven.

“It’s perfect! Good thing we tested it so many times first!”

He was just removing the pizza.

I helped placed it on the table and began to cut it into simple slices to take some of the burden off the busy chef.

The surface of the pizza sparkled in the early summer light.

My eyes were dazzled by the slick, seasonal tomatoes we used. The crust puffed up nice and squishy like a Neapolitan pizza. A light-brown crust had formed over the cheese. Basil leaves stood out in contrast to the red tomatoes.

Each pizza had slightly different additional toppings. There was sliced sausage, chicken, spicy herbs, and even more varieties. They came out of the oven one by one.

I cut away each slice, then Lucian and I brought them over to the dining table.

“Hand me one of those dishes, Your Majesty. I’ll help you carry ’em.”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.”

I handed a pizza tray to one of the construction workers when he asked to help.

The workers and I had become quite close over the course of their visits. I would go to ask them about their thoughts on the sandwiches, use my magic to help with the building, and things like that. There were lots of opportunities to chat with them.

But today I had to say goodbye to the men. It saddened me a bit, but they needed to move on to their next jobs. That’s why I decided to send them off once and for all with a banquet to show my gratitude.

“How am I supposed to get through the days without being graced by your beauty, Your Majesty?” Hanz asked dramatically.

He was walking alongside me, when suddenly...

“Oh?! Is that Lord Aroo? He must be just as excited to smell all that food as I am!”

His eyes lit up when he saw the wolf.

Hanz was a bit of a playboy, but whenever he was around Lord Aroo, he became an innocent little boy again.

“Arooooooooo!”

“I appreciate how you look at me with respect, but get out of my way.”

I imagined that was what Lord Aroo was trying to say as he wedged his way between Hanz and me.

“What’s wrong, Lord Aroo? Are you really that eager for pizza?”

I realized something a bit sad as I spoke to the wolf at my side.

I was carrying the pizza tray with both hands. Lord Aroo was right next to me, but I had no way of petting him.

“If only I had four legs like an animal...? No, I guess that doesn’t make sense here.”

I indulged myself with the imagined convenience of being an animal.

Finally, I finished setting out the pizzas. It was time for the banquet to begin.

“It’s so good! The cheese is all melty!”

The construction workers were big fans of the brick-oven pizza. They seemed particularly impressed knowing those pizzas came from a stove of their own handiwork.

“We get to eat delicious foods and take in our work at the same time! What else could you wish for as a carpenter?!”

Carter, the head carpenter, chowed down as he looked around the dog park.

We decided to hold the banquet outside today so the workers could see the fruits of their labor as they ate. We were fortunate enough to have wonderful weather too. A gentle breeze caressed my cheeks.

The wind carried cheerful voices and the scent of roasted cheese.

As we feasted on one pizza after the next, the mood in the air merry, Lord Aroo never once took his eyes off me.

“Arooooo?”

“Hey, where’s my pizza?”

He let out a low, demanding growl.

“Wait just a bit more, Lord Aroo. I asked the chefs to bake a special wolf pizza, and they’re working on it now.”

I pacified the wolf and took a look at the brick oven.

Today’s pizzas for the humans included many ingredients that were toxic to dogs, such as onions, so the oven was currently cooking up ones that had less salt, no onions at all, and more meat.

“There’s going to be two pizzas, but you only get two slices, all right? The rest goes to the other wolves.”

“Grrrrrah...”

“Hmph. Fine, I’ll allow it, if they’re going to the wolves.”

I seemed to receive his reluctant approval. Lord Aroo sat down at my side.

The way he sat perfectly upright, nice and well behaved, was very cute.

The nose of his handsome face was glued to the direction of the oven.

His tail swished up and down, like he was desperate to taste the pizza and couldn’t wait any longer.

I’d heard that Lord Aroo’s grumpy personality was probably why he didn’t eat much... But lately, he seemed so much more eager for food. Moore, the wolfkeeper, had given me permission to feed Lord Aroo with my cooking. I was allowed to give him something if he was begging.

“Hehe. Lord Aroo, you’re a bit like His Majesty when it comes to food, aren’t you?”

I realized that maybe comparing His Majesty to a wolf was disrespectful. But the two shared the same eye color and everything. They reminded me of each other sometimes.

Whether he understood what I meant or not, Lord Aroo turned away from me. The finished pizza seemed to be much more important to him than my words.

“Just wait. It’ll be ready soon.”

Once the pizza was out of the brick oven, I cut it up for the hungry wolf. I placed a slice on his plate, set it on the ground, and saw Lord Aroo dig right in, sinking his fangs into the pizza. I watched it quickly disappear into his stomach.

“Do you like it? You’re sure devouring that pizza.”

I felt a natural smile form on my face as I watched him eat.

He seemed a bit flustered, maybe because cheese had flown from the food and onto his cheek. I reached out and wiped it off his face.

“You won’t get my thanks for something so simple.”

He ignored me and ate more pizza, as if it made him feel a bit shy.

Lord Aroo was totally absorbed in his meal, until he came to a sudden halt. He sniffed at the air and turned toward the gate where guests would enter. With his ears perked straight up, the wolf braced all four legs against the ground.

It was unusual to see him so alert.

“Kraaah!!”

“Whoa, what was that?!”

“Why’s the griffin screeching?”

The construction workers began to stir.

Fon was a clever creature. He knew not to cry unless there was a good reason, just like a proper watchdog.

Is someone trespassing? Or trying to sneak in?

Now a bit worried, I followed Fon’s and Lord Aroo’s eyes toward the entrance to the yard.

“Pardon me. I’m sorry to disturb you out here.”

With a casual greeting, a person and a creature both came into view.

The young man had black hair with a slight blue tint to it. At his side was a most unusual animal.



“Is that creature...a scaled horse...?”

It was as big as a normal horse, but it stood on its two back legs and resembled a lizard.

Light-brown scales covered its entire body. Both sides of the creature’s head held a single beady, black eyeball.

It was my first time seeing one in real life. If I remembered correctly, they were treated just like horses in the southern area of the continent. I’d heard they looked like giant lizards, so I was expecting something more like a dinosaur...

But its face was a bit more charming than I’d imagined.

And who’s the man with this creature?

Judging by his facial features and skin color, I could see he most likely came from the western region of the continent in which we lived. I decided to introduce myself to gather more information about this man.

“Good day. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Laetitia, and I’m the owner of this villa. What brings you here today?”

“Oh! Sorry, I should’ve introduced myself first. My name is Hayruth, and I’m an artist. I’m just a regular commoner, but I promise I’m no one scary.”

The young man, Hayruth, held up a small wooden tag. It was a visitor pass for all workers and tradesmen to be on castle grounds temporarily. As long as he had that, he was allowed to come to my villa property too.

“I’ve been away from the royal capital for a while, and now that I’m back, I wanted to come visit this place...”

Hayruth’s eyes seemed to be drawn not to me, but to Lord Aroo at my side.

“...That wolf has cheese on its mouth, huh? He sure seems to like you, Your Majesty.”

His dark-blue eyes, which matched his hair, squinted a bit mockingly. His smile was relaxed and friendly.

“Grrr...”

“Why’d an annoying guy like him have to catch me...?”

Lord Aroo gave an obviously grumpy growl.

Fon also glared sharply at Hayruth from up in the sky above.

But the man didn’t seem upset. He remained as unbothered as ever.

“So you’re an artist, Hayruth?”

“That’s right. People say it doesn’t suit me, but art’s my main passion in life.”

“Grah!”

“Liar.”

Lord Aroo gave a low groan.

All the animals seemed to be particularly unrelenting with Hayruth.

“If you’re an artist, does that mean you carry paints or something else that gives off a strong odor?”

“Do I smell?”

“No, you don’t, but Lord Aroo...this wolf seems to be reacting strangely to you. I wondered if he was picking up something that humans can’t really smell.”

“Oh, I see what you mean.”

His shoulders slumped. The man scratched his head with his left hand.

“I’ve always been like that. Dogs, cats, birds—all animals seem to hate me.”

“How sad...”

But these things happen. Animals just avoid some people, even when there’s no obvious reason for it. Perhaps it’s a problem of pheromones, or maybe the frequency of their voice. People used to suggest those kinds of things in Japan, but I don’t believe anyone ever figured out a clear answer.

Hayruth seemed unmoved by Lord Aroo’s attitude because he was used to being hated by animals.

“Well, it’s usually not much of a problem, since all they really do is run away when I get close. I guess that wolf’s just extra sensitive for some reason.”

“I see. ...Maybe you’re like reverse catnip to Lord Aroo...to this wolf.”

“Reverse catnip...”

Hayruth’s expression changed. It was vague enough that I couldn’t tell if he was smiling anymore.

Is there a problem with catnip?

This world has many differences in plants compared with those of Earth. For example, one wouldn’t be able to find eggplant here. But catnip still exists just like anything else. It shares the same enticing element toward felines as well.

...In fact, its effect on cats is something of a problem in this kingdom.

Beastfolk of the Wildcat clan experienced strong reactions to catnip. I didn’t know for sure, but I wondered if it came from their shared ears and tails with cats. It depended on the user, but some Wildcats even experienced a state of drunkenness where they completely lost control of themselves.

For that reason, raw catnip and its processed variants are illegal to sell or possess in this kingdom. It’s referred to as an illegal drug, but still sold for large sums in secret. Can you blame me for laughing when I first heard about a black market for catnip? It was such a funny contrast to Japan.

“Hehe. Do you have some thoughts on catnip, Hayruth?”

“Well, I happen to know a person who loves catnip, actually. They got really hooked on it,” Hayruth murmured as he stroked the scaled horse.

Its eyes remained round and beady, but the creature was still as the man petted it.

“That scaled horse sure seems to like you. Do you use one of those instead of a regular horse because of how animals react to you?”

“Yep, that’s right. The horse I brought from my country couldn’t carry me anymore, so when I went looking for a new one, I found this guy by coincidence. Scaled creatures don’t seem to hate me so much, so it worked out just perfect. This one carries me around now.”

“I see. So you’re not from Wolfvarte yourself?”

“I’m from Raiolbern, but I came here about two years ago.”

“Oh, from Raiolbern?!”

Raiolbern was a land of delicious foods.

That was the first thing I thought of, with my own strong preferences for food. It was also a destination I kept in mind when I learned I was to be expelled from my homeland.

“You’ve come from very far away. Why did you choose to leave Raiolbern for Wolfvarte?”

“I came to improve my skills as a painter. This country has a lot of beastfolk who bring unique cultures with them, you know? I wanted to see all of it for myself.”

“You sound very passionate. What kind of things do you paint?”

“For work, I mainly do portraits, like this one.”

Hayruth took a small locket out from under his shirt and opened it. Inside was a tiny portrait made from delicate strokes of a paintbrush.

“You’re very skilled! Have you come here to have paintings commissioned?”

“That’s one of the reasons, but I’m here on some personal business too.”

“Personal business?”

“Gurawh?!”

“What is it? Spit it out already.”

My response came at the same time as Lord Aroo’s impatient growl.

“I wanted to meet you, Your Majesty. I used to have a drinking buddy by the name of Lord Claude, you see.”

“Claude...”

Claude was the youngest of my three older brothers.

I remembered that he came to this kingdom for work about a year and a half ago. It appeared he’d formed a friendship with Hayruth during his time here.

Now that I thought about it, the two of them shared the same easygoing,

carefree personality. No wonder they hit it off.

“I heard a lot about you when I drank with Lord Claude. It’s an honor to meet you in person.”

“Why, thank you. ...And thank you for taking care of my big brother as well.”

Claude loved books and the act of relaxing. He was a calm person... But as his younger sister, I couldn’t help but fear that his personal life was nearing the point of crisis. He never slacked on work, but he was much, much more dedicated than even I was to living a relaxed life.

“Ahaha. He took care of me just the same.”

Hayruth chuckled a bit.

The two of us stood and chatted a bit longer before agreeing that he would visit the villa again a few days later.



“**ALL** right, then. Time for me to take my leave.”

“Gyauu!!”

The scaled horse let out a cry and began to walk once Hayruth had mounted him. Hayruth headed down the forest path away from Laetitia’s villa for a bit, then squinted his eyes in one direction.

“That’s...”

He stared off to the side of the path at a thick grove of trees. They formed a shady spot dark enough to hide the greenery beneath from human eyes.

Hayruth watched it for a bit before quietly dismounting his scaled horse.

“Wait here a moment, got it?”

“Gyagyah!!”

“*Understood!!*” the scaled horse seemed to cry.

His beady eyes stared at his master fondly.

Hayruth stroked the animal’s cold, smooth neck and watched him respond by closing his eyes out of comfort.

“Beasts that like me, at least, sure are adorable.”

Hayruth muttered his feelings as he advanced through the dim forest light.

There were certain reasons why dogs, cats, and other animals tended to hate Hayruth. Regular horses fell into that category too. While he had never been thrown off one before, they’d never bonded with him either. So the existence of scaled horses was a refreshing change.

Horses were generally the only animals used for riding in Hayruth’s home kingdom of Raiolbern. Meeting his first scaled one was an unexpected benefit of coming to Wolfvarte.

“...It’s going well with the scaled horse. I just hope everything else goes equally smooth...,” Hayruth murmured.

He wasn’t just speaking to himself.

In the direction he was heading, a figure appeared from the darkness under the trees.

“It’s been a while, Hayruth.”

Despite the dimly lit space in the woods, the man’s silver hair shone brilliantly.

Glenreed stood completely alone, casting a composed gaze over Hayruth. It appeared he’d entered the forest as a wolf, returned to his human form, then waited for Hayruth’s approach.

“Long time no see, Your Majesty. Well, I guess I just saw you, now that I think of it. How was the pizza?”

“...Forget what you saw earlier.”

Glenreed’s order sounded a bit annoyed.

Hayruth was one of the few people who knew Glenreed could transform into a wolf. The problem wasn’t that he’d caught the king in his wolf form; it was more that Glenreed didn’t seem to appreciate the reminder that he’d just been transfixed by that pizza at Laetitia’s villa.

“Sure thing, got it. I can’t disobey an order from His Majesty.”

“That’s right. I don’t want trouble with your master, either.”

Glenreed responded simply as Hayruth shrugged.

“Anyway, why did you think to visit Laetitia before you came to see me?”

Glenreed’s voice was calm, but Hayruth detected something that sounded more like a whine.

He found this to be interesting. A smirk formed on his face.

“What’s the matter, Your Majesty? You don’t like me talking to the queen directly?”

“...It’s nothing like that. I just didn’t understand.”

“No reason, really. I’d heard rumors about Her Majesty, plus she’s Lord Claude’s little sister, you know? I just felt like I had to go get a look at her.”

As he joked back to the king, Hayruth recalled the words Laetitia’s older brother Claude had said to him.

“My little sister’s so cute. She’s strong, and she’s got this super-scary, intimidating smile, but once you actually talk to her, you’ll see she’s really an adorable girl.”

It was a bit hard to tell if that was meant as praise or an insult, but still, Claude’s love for his sister was obvious from his introduction of her.

Claude was exactly right in one way. She was a beautiful, lovely young woman.

But her smile wasn’t scary like Hayruth had been told. He instead saw her as a cheerful, friendly sort of person.

“Anyway, as the daughter of a duke and a queen, I was a bit surprised to see Her Majesty out there doing the actual cooking. I went to the villa hoping I could request a later visit with her from one of the servants. It was just a coincidence that Her Majesty was out in the yard today and I had a chance to talk to her.”

“So don’t freak out about it”—Hayruth didn’t say that out loud, but he conveyed it in the way he looked at Glenreed.

“You’re sure protective of Her Majesty, aren’t you? I didn’t really expect you to chase me out of there so we could talk.”

“I’d just been wanting to talk to you ever since you got back to the capital city. It would look suspicious for me to publicly meet face-to-face with a painter, wouldn’t it? The opportunity came, so I took it and routed you out so we could talk.”

“I see. Well, I appreciate it,” Hayruth replied.

He went on to explain the knowledge he’d gained on a few subjects while he’d been away. Hayruth had received Glenreed’s help in his endeavors, including receiving a visitor pass to the castle. The two didn’t completely trust each other, but considering the accommodations he received, it was necessary to provide compensation.

“...I see. You brought me many interesting things. Write up what we discussed and send it to me later.”

“Of course. Do you need anything else from me?”

“Let’s see... I have just one thing to warn you about.”

Glenreed’s blue-green eyes briefly glanced at Hayruth.

How scary.

They only met eyes for a moment. But it was more than enough to feel the king’s intensity.

“I understand that you want to get closer to Laetitia to figure her out, but I wouldn’t treat it so lightly. She’s good at surpassing expectations. I can’t guarantee it will go well for you, and I’m sure you understand that she is my queen, even if in name only. Be sure not to act in a way that will cause misunderstandings.”

“...Don’t worry about that. I’m not so popular with the ladies.”

Hayruth felt an urgent itch begin to form inside him.

Glenreed narrowed his eyes a bit, transformed back into the silver wolf, then returned to the forest.

Hayruth watched the wolf leave. Once he was gone, he turned to look in the direction of the villa.

“...She’s Lord Claude’s little sister, and now His Majesty’s grown attached to her too.”

Hayruth silently reached a conclusion in his mind.

I definitely need to gather information about Queen Laetitia.

Chapter 7: This Land of Fuzzy Friends

IT was a few days after I first met Hayruth.

I'd invited Lady Kate over to entertain her at my villa.

"Mmm, how delicious! It's so crispy. I could eat this forever!!"

Lady Kate wagged her bent tail to express her satisfaction with the taste. She was holding a slice of apricot pie in her hand. The fruit was soaked in syrup and baked into a crispy crust.

Watching Lady Kate, who seemed to be in a state of bliss, I brought a slice of the beautiful apricot pie up to my mouth as well. The crust gave off the rich smell of butter. Underneath was the soft flesh of the fruit.

My mouth was filled with a delicious apricot taste. The crust crumbled and absorbed the juices beneath. It was a nice, squishy texture on my tongue.

"I never imagined such a delicious pie could come from a garden stove. I should have one built in my yard too," remarked Lady Kate, somewhat seriously.

I chose to make the pie because I knew apricots were one of her favorite foods. She seemed to be enjoying it, thankfully.

"Actually, I baked another pie in addition to this one. Would you like to take it home with you?"

"Are you sure I can?!"

"The chefs will be pleased so long as someone enjoys it."

"Thank you so much!!"

Her face completely lit up. Her joy on full display warmed my heart as well.

Lady Kate's intense emotions were a weakness for a noblewoman. Her family connections helped her remain a candidate, certainly, but I wondered if her honest and genuine personality had something to do with it too.

“Do you mind if I share the pie with the construction workers at my villa?”

“Of course not. They did so much for me as well.”

Lady Kate wanted to share the delicious pie with her subordinates instead of hogging it all for herself. As I considered how His Majesty might find that side of her desirable, I looked in the direction of her villa.

She was currently housing a group of craftsmen who worked with salt. The chandelier I’d transmuted was already turning brittle and falling apart just from slight bumps. Thus, the workers were hurriedly brought in to build a new one that didn’t rely on magic.

Lady Kate told me that as they worked, they were also improving their skills when it came to new methods for using salt.

I’d previously asked for their expert opinions when I made the first chandelier. They’d spent years working with salt, so their experience was both reliable and valuable. Someday in the near future, I might even be able to create something like a salt chandelier without magic.

But all I did was create that opportunity.

It was no different from my cooking. I remembered Gilbert’s incredible speed and improvements in the face of Earth recipes I’d merely presented to him.

Working together with the experts throughout this world: that was the key to success.

“Your Majesty, thank you very much for entertaining me today. May I visit again, ten days from now or so?” Lady Kate asked. She’d finished off the last of the apricot pie.

Lady Kate had come to the villa today to feast on delicious sweets...but I had another reason for inviting her over as well. I wanted to discuss the salt chandelier and the aftermath of Manilla Day.

I’d already heard about most of what I had in mind, but I was still curious about the progress of the new salt chandelier, along with a few other things.

“I’d like to see you then too. Is there a specific time and date you have in mind?”

“What about eleven days from now, in the afternoon?”

“...Sorry, could we skip that day for now?”

“Huh? You already have plans?”

Lady Kate’s wide eyes blinked rapidly.

...It seemed as if she thought of me as someone with no plans and nothing but time on my hands.

I couldn’t deny that I lived a life of leisure, but the blunt honesty in her reaction made me feel a bit awkward.

“I’ve already arranged to have a tea party with Lady Natalie that afternoon.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry.”

She apologized, then seemed to think of something.

“Your Majesty, would you mind if I joined you for that tea party instead?”

“With Lady Natalie?”

“...Yes.”

She nodded, though she was clearly hesitant.

“After I invited Lady Natalie to Manilla Day, she sent me a thank-you letter, and the two of us began to exchange messages. I just...struggle when it comes to letters. Some things are so hard to interpret.”

Letters from Lady Natalie, huh?

I’d corresponded with her as well... But her words always came out calculated, like something out of a textbook. It didn’t convey her personal thoughts at all. I understood why Lady Kate, who wanted to get to know the other candidates, found that frustrating.

“Things would move much faster if I visited Lady Natalie directly, or if I could have her come to me...”

“Considering both of your circumstances, that may be difficult...”

Both girls were being held back by the mixed feelings from their subordinates.

Of all four candidates, the supporters of these two were the most at odds.

Manilla Day was an exception. Normally, inviting one of them to the other's home would result in a lot of pushback.

"Very well. I'll write a letter to Lady Natalie and ask permission to invite you as well."

"...Thanks, Your Majesty. But are you sure you don't mind?"

It seemed like Lady Kate didn't expect me to agree so easily.

Actually, that made sense: I was always such a shut-in here at the villa. I was physically shut-in, and politically shut away too. Lady Kate didn't expect someone like me to be a middleman for her and Lady Natalie.

"Of course. I sort of have something on my mind too, to be honest."

I smiled to reassure her.

"...And what exactly is that, Your Majesty?"

Lady Kate had asked me to be a go-between for her and Lady Natalie, and I'd agreed to it. But judging by her face, she seemed to find that strange. Unable to hide her doubt, she came out and asked me directly.

"You've kept so quiet here at your villa all along, trying to keep your distance from us candidates, right?"

"True. However, I think it's time to take some actions of my own."

"...Why now? If you spend the rest of your two years here being a placeholder queen, that'll be the end of your problems, right?"

She was very blunt. Lady Kate jumped straight to asking for my thoughts instead of trying to navigate the conversation there indirectly. Her concern for the kingdom had probably induced her to speak so frankly, but at the same time, I wondered if it was also because she was treating me more like a friend than a political higher-up.

...I wasn't concerned about sharing my thoughts with the girl.

"Lady Kate, this whole time, I've felt like a guest."

"A guest?"

"I wasn't born in this kingdom. I married into it to become the queen, but that

title has a time limit attached, which is why you candidates have been so proactive in arranging to replace me when that time comes, right?"

"Yes, correct."

She agreed, but her face didn't quite tell the same story. She didn't seek the title of queen any longer; she believed she didn't have the right disposition for such a role.

The same fears for the kingdom that she harbored had begun to take hold of me too.

"I'm much more like a visitor to this kingdom, which is why I planned to stay in my villa and pass the time by relaxing... But I think it's time I change my thinking a bit."

Truly, just a little bit.

My overall policy on living a relaxed life wouldn't change.

But now, I wanted to take actions that would affect this kingdom's future.

"Edgar, Gilbert, Berry, Fon, Lord Aroo, and all the wolves. Lady Natalie, and you too of course, Lady Kate. ...Since I first came here, I've gained so many people I care about."

Humans, beastfolk, and fluffy friends.

Our races and statuses were different, but I loved them all.

"I don't yet know if I'll be able to remain in this kingdom once I'm no longer queen...but now I know, at least, it won't be the end of everything for me."

Whether I returned home or not...the others would continue their lives here in this kingdom.

"I want the future of this land to be filled with peace and success. That's how I've come to feel after my time here."

Once I spoke, for some strange reason...the image of King Glenreed flashed in my mind.

...What was that just now?

His Majesty ate my cooking and called it delicious.

The memory of that unguarded look on his face as he tasted the warm soup was so clear in my mind.

My chest stirred. My heart began to speed up.

“Your Majesty?”

Snap out of it!

I was with Lady Kate right now.

“Oh, it’s nothing. ...After becoming queen, His Majesty has offered me his help with a few different things. I also wish to be of use to the kingdom for his sake.”

Putting it into words, I realized something about the way I was feeling inside.

My relationship with King Glenreed began as a king and a figurehead queen.

Nothing about that had changed, but once I started bringing him meals, I got the sense that we’d become somewhat closer. I’d even started feeling something like affection for the king.

...Though I had no idea how he felt about me whatsoever.

But I wanted His Majesty to remain healthy for the future of the kingdom as well.

“I may be an outsider, but that actually gives me the upper hand at times. The history of this kingdom can get in the way when it comes to its citizens. It’s hard for them to interact at times, no? What I’d like to do is help them get on friendlier terms with each other.”

“...So that’s why you want to mediate for Lady Natalie and me now?”

“Yes, that’s right. There aren’t many other things I can do at the moment.”

I wasn’t going to wave my title around to stick my nose in political affairs. But from here at the villa, I would do whatever I could. I would cook, be a conversation partner for Lady Kate and the others when they needed one, and serve as an in-between for social exchanges. That was my role.

“I’d like to help you and the others become better friends. Will you join me in that effort?”

“Of course! ...But don’t you think it’s strange? I just asked you for a favor, yet now you’re the one asking me for help.”

“That’s all part of what I want.”

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate.

I didn’t yet know how they would get along, but the two were kind, responsible girls.

As long as they respected each other, I felt there was a good chance they could be friends.

“...Very well. Since you asked, I’ll do my very best to hit it off with Lady Natalie! I’ll show you the good luck this tail can bring!!”

Lady Kate’s bent tail stood straight up toward the sky with that declaration.

She’d been so embarrassed of that tail only a few days ago. The change I saw in her was a dazzling, brilliant one.



LADY Kate, Lady Natalie, Berry, Fon, the wolves, His Majesty, and Lord Aroo.

With my newfound friends in this kingdom, both people and animals, my life as the figurehead queen would continue on.

Side Story 1: With Vegetables in Hand, the Head Chef Speaks

“URK. I bet it’s happening right now...”

The head chef, Gilbert, was muttering to himself in a corner of the kitchen. His brow slumped sadly and his face had grown pale “I wonder if His Majesty will like the strawberries...”

Laetitia was with Glenreed right now, presenting him the strawberries and strawberry treats.

Has he laid eyes on them already, I wonder? Did he try them? Does he approve of strawberries as an ingredient?

Gilbert couldn’t keep calm once his mind began to race.

Strawberry jam, strawberry chiffon cake, and strawberry shortcake.

Laetitia was fully confident in each of them, but the problem lay in who they were presenting the dishes to.

Glenreed, the Silver Wolf King.

The young man who had ascended to the throne early in his life, earning said nickname.

The man rarely smiled. He was said to be incredibly tough on anyone deemed an enemy.

Not to mention the rumor that His Majesty doesn’t actually like to eat...

Those whispers came from the chefs working at the main palace. Gilbert knew there were very few working for Glenreed in the first place.

What if the king felt insulted by the food they presented him today?

“Queen Laetitia, please be safe wi—”

“Head Chef, I think you’re worrying too much.”

One of the chefs spoke up to the pale-faced Gilbert.

“Her Majesty is smart enough to avoid offending the king.”

“...I know that.”

“But I’m curious to know how it’s going too. I guess I understand where you’re coming from...”

The chef’s eyes fell on Gilbert’s hands.

Scrape scrape. Scrape scrape. Scrape scrape.

He was peeling a potato at intense speeds with his knife.

“As fast as ever, huh, Head Chef? It’s like your hands and your face belong to different people right now.”

The bowl at Gilbert’s side was overflowing with peeled potatoes.

Using a knife on so many vegetables like that was actually quite a draining task, which was why he usually assigned the work to a kitchen maid or one of the novice chefs.

Gilbert himself peeled vegetables every single day when he was still an apprentice. In fact, the act itself seemed to be ingrained in his body now. Whenever he was nervous or hung up on something, Gilbert tended to take over the peeling.

“We appreciate the help with the vegetables...but have you always been so anxious, Head Chef? You seemed so happy and upbeat to me lately, anyway.”

Gilbert once lost all confidence in his cooking when he was forced out of a job at Natalie’s villa. But he’d found a second wind thanks to Laetitia’s arrival.

“You should be more confident, Head Chef. What happened to that fearless man who tasted a real ‘Demon Gem’ for himself?”

“What are you talking about? What chef wouldn’t do the same?”

“Are you crazy? What chef *would* do that?”

The man shook his head from side to side. The rest of the chefs followed his gesture to a tee.

“Did you see Her Majesty’s reaction when you told her you ate a Demon Gem? She was horrified.”

“The queen was raised as a young lady of status. It’s not surprising that it was too much of a shock for her.”

“It’s not a class problem. Any commoner would be just as horrified...”

As the chefs chatted among themselves, more and more potatoes ended up peeled along the way. Gilbert eventually finished all the vegetables to be used that day.

Finally, *finally*, it was time for Laetitia to come home.

Gilbert rushed out of the kitchen and headed straight to greet her.

“He liked it. His Majesty said they were delicious.”

“Thank goodness...!!”

Gilbert breathed a sigh of relief. He felt a weight lift off his shoulders. Now able to relax, he suddenly found himself taken by Laetitia’s appearance.

She’s very beautiful...

The queen was much more dressed up than usual for her visit to Glenreed. Her cuffs were lined with lace and her skirt was embroidered with gold thread. She wore her hair with beautiful braided strands. Large gems dangled from her earlobes. Laetitia wore the bright, dazzling outfit and accessories with nothing but elegance.

Well, of course. She’s the new queen...

Gilbert spent a moment appreciating her beauty.

Laetitia always wore an apron and her hair in a ponytail when she was in the kitchen. The contrast between that version of her and the one who stood before him now completely captivated him.

“Is something the matter, Gilbert?”

“N-No!! Nothing at all!! What kinds of things did you speak to His Majesty about?”

Gilbert snapped out of his reverie and quickly tried to change the subject by

asking Laetitia about her discussions with the king. They spoke of strawberries, construction around the villa, and Glenreed's disinterest toward food in general.

"So from here on out, whenever I go to visit His Majesty, I'm going to bring a meal along with me."

"That's incredible!"

"It's all thanks to you and the chefs' help, Gilbert. He seemed to enjoy the strawberry chiffon."

Laetitia thanked him, and Gilbert's heart warmed to hear it.

A dish he personally worked on caught the interest of Glenreed, the man indifferent toward food. It was an honor—an absolute blessing for a chef.

"I'd love for His Majesty to enjoy the next meal as well. Have you decided what to present to him next?"

"No, not yet. What do you think we should serve?"

"That's a difficult question..."

"Indeed. ...Could I possibly ask for a favor?"

"What do you need?"

"I'd like to try a meal you consider to be your specialty, Gilbert. I think it will help me decide what to make for His Majesty."



"...**THERE.** Perfect."

Gilbert gave a nod as he looked over the row of ingredients on the counter.

What kind of meal should he make?

What would please King Glenreed's palate?

Gilbert had struggled with these questions, but then he received word that his butcher had just received some high-quality beef.

"Roast beef. That's the answer."

It was one of Gilbert's specialties, and it presented nicely too.

He placed his well-sharpened knife against the massive round steak and used his years of experience to measure and cut exactly as much as he needed. Not too much, but not too little. He sprinkled the beef with salt and pepper, then set it aside to soak in the seasoning.

That left him some time to quickly whip up a few sauces. He used red wine as the base for his first sauce, a flavorful garlic sauce as the second, and finally, a third sauce made from mushrooms and butter. Each of the three sauces would pair perfectly with the flavor of the meat. They were recipes Gilbert had perfected after trial and error.

With three sauces to choose from, His Majesty might actually find one he loves.

Gilbert thought forward to the future as he picked up the seasoned beef. He poured oil into a frying pan and went about cooking each piece of meat at a time. Along with the juicy sizzle came an enticing aroma from the pan.

Yes, this is good meat. I can tell from the smell.

He felt his face tense a bit as he removed the roast beef. Wrapping it in waxed paper first, he then enclosed it in even more layers of cloth.

He set it aside for a while, and once it was cooled, it was ready to eat.

Next, Gilbert cut the meat into thin slices and garnished the beef with sliced onions, leafy vegetables, and glazed spring carrots.

When he brought it out to the dining room table, Laetitia's face lit up.

"Oh my! What a pretty color. It looks so appetizing."

The surface of the beef was bright pink—a visual display of how freshly cooked it was.

Laetitia started off by trying it with the red wine sauce.

"The meat is tender and juicy. It's truly the perfect roast beef. This sauce is very robust as well... Did you include butter in this one for added flavor?"

"Yes, I did. How do you like it?"

"It's incredibly delicious."

A smile crept onto Gilbert's face when he heard her praise.

I'm glad I got to see her reaction.

Laetitia was smiling because of the food he made for her. It filled Gilbert's heart with joy.

"I'll try the other sauces too."

Laetitia next had bites of beef with the mushroom and garlic sauces. She seemed to enjoy both of them...but once she was finished, Gilbert noticed a look of deep thought on her face.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty? Are you uncertain if roast beef is the correct meal to serve King Glenreed?"

"The taste is impeccable, and the presentation is lovely too..."

Gilbert understood exactly where she was going with this.

They were presenting a meal to the highest authority in the land. On top of that, he was a king who had never shown any interest in food. This was an important decision that required the utmost consideration.

As the two of them discussed this, their shared love of cooking began to take over, and the topic switched to sauces for the roast beef.

"There are a few other varieties I'd like to test out," Laetitia said. "I'll try making them tomorrow. Would you mind if I use some of today's leftover roast beef for that?"

"By all means. ...Oh, the color will have deepened by tomorrow, though. I'm sure you already know that doesn't mean it's gone bad, so please don't worry, Your Majesty."

"Right, of course. If memory serves, the meat turns red due to hemoglobin?"

"Hemoglobin?"

"It's a certain substance found in blood. It oxidizes as time passes, changing the original color..."

Laetitia fell silent.

"What is it?"

“Something’s bothering me...”

The queen had something on her mind, but it was time for her to head to Natalie’s villa, so Gilbert never received a response.



“**THIS** is something you...eat...?”

Gilbert was taken aback.

Before his eyes was what appeared to be a lump of salt. It was made with the rock salt Laetitia had received as an apology for being roped into Lady Kate’s sibling rivalry.

“It’s salt-crusted pork. You use this wooden mallet to crack the shell, then you eat what’s on the inside.”

He followed Laetitia’s instructions and split the heap apart. The inside turned out to be a delicious pork roast salted to perfection.

“It’s wonderful!! What a fun new way to eat, and the taste is great too. This might be a good dish to present to His Majesty.”

“Thank you very much. ...However, I need to improve this a bit more before I do that.”

“Improve it? How so?”

“Any food presented to His Majesty must first be tested for poison. I’d like to find a way to extract the meat for tasting before breaking the salt shell apart. The ideal method would be to create a lid within the crust that can be opened. That way, you can take the meat out and close the lid again. Do you think that would be doable?”

“I see... Perhaps adding cuts in the meat after it’s cooked might make it easier.”

Gilbert racked his brain. It might not be successful, but it was still worth taking on the challenge. The salt-crusted pork was just that unique and versatile.

“This dish has a visual impact and a good flavor. You can even present it to His Majesty while warm.”

“...Warm?”

“The salt shell traps the heat inside, so it should stay that way for quite some time.”

“That’s true... That’s it!!”

Laetitia lit up in realization.

“That’s perfect, Gilbert!! Thanks to you, I finally figured it out!!”

“Y-Your Majesty?!”

“It’s warmth!! I just figured out what bothered me about the way that roast beef changed color. His Majesty can’t eat things that are freshly prepared. That means he never eats anything warm.”

Laetitia was mumbling something to herself, apparently now deep in thought.

“Of course they have to test for poison... How did I never think of that? So I could improve the salt-crusted pork, or I could find a way to warm the meal once I get to the palace. Maybe His Majesty would like that.”

Laetitia’s chain of thought eventually led them to the dish they would serve to Glenreed.



A dish that was more delicious while warm and easy to heat up.

Laetitia ended up going to the palace to present the king with chicken cream soup and toast. While she was gone, Gilbert stood in the kitchen peeling spring carrots.

I always pick up vegetables at times like these...

With a pained smile on his face, he quickly peeled one carrot after the next, but he wasn’t using a knife this time. Laetitia had transmuted him a utensil called a “peeler,” which had a handle with a thin blade on the end. It made the job extremely easy.

What a convenient tool. It really improves our efficiency in the kitchen.

With vegetable preparation going much faster, everyone could now spend that time focusing on seasoning the food or whatever else was needed. The

other chefs seemed to like the peeler too. Dishes that made use of it were growing popular in the kitchen.

Her Majesty is so amazing.

First the whisk, and now the peeler. Chiffon cakes and salt-crusted meat. She brought them so many new meals and utensils, but instead of expecting to be the one treated with them, the queen participated in the cooking herself—enthusiastically, at that.

Gilbert's respect and gratitude for Laetitia had only grown.

The two had worked together through a process of trial and error to make the dish she was presenting to Glenreed today. They'd adjusted the recipe to emphasize the soup's flavor once it was reheated, and believed that Glenreed would be pleased with their efforts.



EVENTUALLY, when the peeled carrots formed a small mountain on the counter...

"Gilbert, it went perfectly!! His Majesty loved the warm soup!"

Laetitia's announcement filled him with a wave of joy and relief. But at the same time, he felt a strange twinge of sadness when he watched Laetitia talk about Glenreed with so much cheer in her voice.

"That's wonderful. I'm filled with pride as a chef."

A smile came over Gilbert's face.

Side Story 2: Flying Freely through the Sky

“**SHE** wants to...fly?”

Laetitia was always surpassing Glenreed’s wildest expectations.

He’d come to that realization the day she served him the hot meal.

Even so...this was still a surprise.

“...What is she talking about?”

Knitting his brow, Glenreed sat down to read the entirety of Laetitia’s letter.



“**COME**, Fon. This is your brand-new bedroom.”

“Kyuwah!!”

A wooden shed stood in front of the two of us. I opened the double door to reveal a bed of straw spread across the ground.

“Kwee!”

Tap tap. Rustle rustle.

Fon poked at the straw with his front legs and beak, then lay down on top of it. His belly was glued to the ground just like a bird settled into its nest. He seemed to be very relaxed.

“I’m glad you like it. Wait here for a while, okay? I’ll come get you later.”

I left the shed with Fon still half-buried in the straw.

It was nearly time for the wolves to arrive. I’d never let them come near Fon before. Fon was an incredibly large Mythical Beast, and even from far away, the wolves seemed alert in his presence. They might be frightened if I let him get too close. It would take time and effort for them to grow comfortable with each other. For now, I was instructing Fon to stay away.

After leaving the shed, I headed to the trees in the front yard, underneath

which the wolves were waiting.

“Kyauh!!”

Tera, the puppy, rushed up to me first. She’d grown attached to me ever since I used a wolf plushie to help her start drinking milk. In the past few days, she had grown quite a bit larger, and her droopy ears were now upright.

Tera was wagging her tail at me. I lifted her up with both hands.

“You’ve gained some weight, huh?”

“Woof?”

The pup was soft and warm, fluffy and gentle. Her fur was the softest of any of the wolves.

I was completely entranced by those dark-brown eyes gazing up at me.

“So cute...!!”

I squeezed her tight and heard a playful bark from her.

How cute is this pup?

Once I’d finished my wonderful little hug, I set Tera back on the ground and the other wolves came over.

“Welcome back.”

“Thanks for having us today, Your Majesty.”

Edgar led the wolves into the front yard.

Jenna, the friendliest of the pack, came right up to me. She pushed her head against my body as I stroked her fur. I could tell she wanted her head pet too. As requested, I moved my hands to the top of her head, and she laid her ears flat, which made it easier for me to pet her.

“There, there. You’re such a good girl.”

“Roooo...”

She squinted her eyes as I stroked her fuzzy head, snuggling up against me for some pampering, until...

“Grah!!”

She looked up at the sky and let out a sharp howl. All the other wolves were staring in the same direction.

“Kyuwah!!”

It was Fon.

He flapped his broad wings and landed next to me.

“Grrr...”

The wolves let out low growls of warning.

“Fon, didn’t I tell you to wait in your shed?”

“Kweeee...”

The griffin sounded guilty in his response, but he made no attempt to leave. His eyes were pointed at the wolves.

“What’s the matter, Fon? You never come near the wolves. Did something happen?”

He shook his head from side to side at my question.

...I didn’t understand, but it looked like he wasn’t planning on going back to his bed.

“...Your Majesty, the wolves are frightened, so I think it’s best if we leave.”

Fon didn’t budge until Edgar and the wolves had totally gone.



AFTER that day, Fon started showing up every time the wolves arrived.

He never used to disobey me, but my orders to stay away no longer had any effect on him. While he made no attempt to threaten or attack the wolves, the giant winged beast never failed to unnerve them. If things continued, the stress for the wolves might become too much. They wouldn’t be able to come to the villa anymore.

Still, I didn’t want to just lock Fon away against his will.

As I looked at Fon and the wolves, trying to figure out what to do, Edgar spoke up.

“I asked the older wolfkeepers and gave it some thought myself... We think Fon might be territorial, and that’s why he wants to keep an eye on the wolves.”

“Territorial... But he’s always obeyed me before. What could have changed so suddenly?”

“It’s probably because he has an official place to stay now.”

“...Ah, I see what you mean.”

That sounded right.

Fon was smart, but he was still a griffin. He understood human speech and behaved like my own personal knight. But he wasn’t a human himself. His griffin instincts seemed to urge him to observe the wolves when they were in his territory.

“Hmm. Is there any way to solve that problem? Fon just seems to be concerned about the wolves, and that’s why he watches them. I wish the wolves would warm up to him instead...”

“...I think they’d need a lot more time to reach that point.”

“Right...”

It might be best to keep the wolves away for a while, until I could train Fon to better listen to my orders.

I was going to miss petting those wolves, but I felt too guilty forcing them to come here...

“Please don’t feel sad, Your Majesty. There’s another way we can solve the problem.”

Edgar’s suggestion for me was...

“You can ride Fon as he flies across the sky.”

“...Excuse me?”

My mouth fell open.



ACCORDING to Edgar...

There had been cases of Mythical Beasts larger than wolves, like dragons and flying horses, that soared through the skies above the castle. To soothe the stress of the concerned wolves during those times...they showed the wolves the sight of a human flying on the beast's back. That way...

"The creatures must be safe, because they obey humans."

Once the wolves saw it that way, they were less cautious over the presence of Mythical Beasts. This was something the wolves could understand. The human controlled the winged beings even in their home domain—the sky.

"...I see the logic there. But I oppose the idea of you flying in the sky with Fon, my lady."

Lucian had a grim expression on his face. He glared at the griffin, his brow unusually furrowed.

"We can have another person ride Fon."

"That won't work. A griffin would never let anyone other than their master ride them."

"But what if he knocks you off while in the air...?"

"That's why I have to be the one to ride him."

One of the spells at my disposal was a way of making my body float in a strong wind. A floating spell required constant use of energy, so I could suspend myself once and stay that way, with some control. With my amount of energy, I could easily cast such a spell the entire time I rode Fon.

"You know I can use floating spells, right, Lucian? And you know how intensive Big Brother's training was when it came to floating ones in particular..."

A shudder overcame me.

My second-oldest brother was an outstanding soldier. He was also a truly brutal teacher. They say lions throw their cubs off cliffs to toughen them up—well, he was the embodiment of that philosophy. He even pushed me out of a big tree at our house so that I could practice my floating spell.

...Though it was true that his rigorous education was the reason I could quickly control people like Sumia and Fon with my magic.

I never wanted to be instructed by my big brother again.

“Those days you trained with him...I still dream about them sometimes...”

“So do I...”

Lucian had gotten wrapped up in my brother’s training too. I really appreciated the fact that he never left me behind in the middle of a lesson, but I could see the trauma still lingered even now.

“...Well, let’s forget about Big Brother for now. I’m going to try riding Fon.”

I mounted the leather stirrups on Fon’s back. Jumping straight to a full flight was too frightening, so I decided to practice controlling him on the ground first. Thanks to my brother’s lessons, I was skilled at horseback riding, but it was my first time on a griffin.

Fon’s torso felt somewhat thicker than that of a horse. I could feel the strong, flexible muscles of his sides with each of my legs.

“Ready, Fon?”

With a stroke of his back, I made the griffin begin to take his first steps forward.



I continued my training with Fon, and one day, I decided to write a letter to His Majesty.

I told him I wanted to fly with Fon above the woods surrounding my villa. Even though I planned to avoid the area around the king’s castle, Lady Natalie’s villa, and the rest of the palace territory, I wanted his permission for what I was doing.

It was such a ridiculous request. I was a bit nervous for his response, but I ended up receiving His Majesty’s permission.

“All right. I’m ready.”

The wolves were on alert. Fon leaned down in front of them.

The whole pack was focused on my movements, with my hands on the griffin's back.

My heart began to beat faster. I'd floated in the air with magic before, but it would be my first time flying through the sky with full control.

I let my pulse slow, activated my floating spell as a safety harness, and gave Fon the signal.

"Okay, Fon. Take me to the sky!!"

"Kyuwah!!"

He flapped his wings.

The wind picked up around me, lifting my body toward the sky.

"Whoa...!"

We climbed higher and higher. Soon, we were above the roof of the villa. The sight of the bright blue sky filled my vision.

"How incredible...!"

I heard more flapping of wings. Fon twisted his powerful muscles and took off soaring.

The wind felt so pleasant against my cheeks.

Flying through the sky was so very fun.

"Kraaah!"

Fon let out a happy cry too.

I looked down and saw that the wolves were following us on the ground. Even little Tera was racing at full speed to keep up.

"Can you turn so that we're flying in a big circle?"

With that request, Fon tilted his body slightly and began to rotate. As we went sailing around and around, as if set on an invisible track, I saw the wolves sitting in the center of our circle, looking up at us. Tera had stopped too. I felt like she was looking at me. I waved my hand at her and heard the wolf's little barks in response.

Once they seemed to have processed the sight, they headed back to the villa.

“It doesn’t look like they’ll be scared of you for much longer, Fon.”

My mission was complete. I still had plenty of magical energy left too.

As I enjoyed our little stroll in the sky...

“Hm? Is that Lord Aroo?”

I felt like I spotted a familiar figure beneath the trees. Curious, I made Fon get closer to the ground. As we flew low, I peered through the gaps between trees...

“Huh?! His Majesty?”

It wasn’t Lord Aroo, but King Glenreed instead.

I was confused, so I had Fon bring us in nearby for a landing.



“What brings you out here, Your Majesty? Did you see a silver wolf nearby at all?”

I dismounted Fon, greeted the king, and quickly straightened out my dress. My outfit allowed for more mobility during horseback riding, but then there was the king, wearing only the finest of clothes.

“What are you talking about? I haven’t seen any wolves.”

“I see. Perhaps I imagined it. ...Why are you here, Your Majesty?”

“I heard you’d be flying, so I came here for a walk to see it while I’m on a break from work.”

“Alone? Out here in the forest?”

“There are hidden guards posted around us right now.”

Really?

I couldn’t sense any of them at all. But it made sense for the king to have secret guards with him, I supposed.

As I came to that conclusion, his fingers reached for the side of my head.

“Your Majesty?”

The sight of his fingers approaching made my heart skip a beat.

It was the first time he’d ever gotten so close to me.

His expression remained unchanged as he gently touched my head.

“Your hair was a bit tangled. The wind must have done that.”

“...Thank you.”

The king had fixed my hair.

I thanked His Majesty, but he stepped back and turned away from me.

“I’ve got to get back to work, so I’ll be on my way now.”

With that, he retreated out of my line of sight...

My heart still took quite some time to settle back down.



“I never really thought she’d actually fly herself...”

Glenreed was muttering to himself in his bedroom at the castle.

When he first received her letter, asking for permission, he had to do a double take.

So she’ll even fly through the sky if it’s something the wolves need...?

It was a very strange task for the daughter of a duke, much less a queen, to take on.

But Glenreed was concerned. What if Fon dropped her? He felt he needed to go watch over her in his silver wolf form.

However, not only was she unafraid, she really seemed to enjoy it up there. She’d been smiling, her golden hair fluttering in the wind as she rode Fon through the sky.

Glenreed found the sight of her, bathed in pure, unobscured sunlight, to be truly radiant.

She never fails to surpass my expectations. I can’t take my eyes off her for a minute...

Glenreed sighed.

Laetitia’s actions weren’t the only thing that had shocked him. He’d truly meant to observe her only in wolf form, but when he wanted to exchange words with her, he turned back into his human self.

It was difficult for Glenreed to meet with her casually as a human, given that he was the king and she was merely a figurehead queen. Yet he’d felt that transforming then wouldn’t be a problem, since no one else was around.

That realization hit the king, and before he knew it, he’d left his silver wolf form.

The change had surpassed his expectations.

...But thanks to that, I got to fix her hair.

Laetitia had looked so surprised.

Maybe she was confused by Glenreed’s sudden touch.

It wasn't fair that she was always the one surprising the king.

"But now we're even."

The sight of Laetitia, her cheeks tinged pink with shock, was unexpectedly charming.

Glenreed gave a fulfilled sigh and broke into a smile.

Afterword

IT'S nice to see you again in another afterword.

My name is Yu Sakurai. I'm the author of this series.

With the help of my readers, I was able to release a second volume of *Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook with My Fluffy Friends*.

Thank you to everyone who purchased Volume 1!

I hope you'll keep this second volume, with all the beautiful illustrations by Kasumi Nagi-sama, at hand. I've just received the black-and-white illustrations myself, and much like in Volume 1, they turned out so beautifully.

Berry is way too cute in those drawings. I love how she looks when she's freaked out by Gilbert. I also like the way she puts her paw up against Laetitia's cheek in another picture.

Kasumi Nagi-sensei drew even more new characters and foods that appeared here in Volume 2 as well. There's a color image in the front of the book that shows Kate, I-Liena, and the two-tailed fox. There's also a black-and-white drawing of the scaled horse and its cute, beady eyes. On the cover, you can see all the foods spread out on the table, as well as Fon and a few other fluffy friends playing together in the background. Be sure to take a good look at it.

Oh, and one more thing...

With the release of this second book, I have another wonderful announcement to share: Volume 1 of the manga version is now on sale through Futabasha Comics F in Japan! Laetitia and the cast can now come alive in manga form. The wolves are at a fantastic level of fluff in this one.

I think my favorite depiction is how Lord Aroo looks. He gets totally shocked around Laetitia and headbutts her fiercely—that kind of thing. He's drawn extremely expressive for a wolf, which is just so cute.

Along with Monitsunanoni-sama's manga comes a little short story I wrote about Laetitia and Lord Aroo, so I hope you'll give that a read as well.

I would like to thank the following people for all their support in making the release of Volume 2 a success: Kasumi Nagi-sama, Monitsunanoni-sama, my editors, the people from the printing office, and all my readers.

I can't thank you enough.

I hope to see you again in the Volume 3 afterword.

I'll continue to write for Shōsetsuka ni Narō and other places, so please support my works so that more can come out in English!

Author Bio:

Born in Aichi Prefecture. Lover of furry critters. I love all animals but adore dogs, cats, and penguins in particular. My current dream is to win the lottery and build a penguin aquarium in my house with an Olympic-sized swimming pool.



AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
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SERIES | VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!



RESET! THE IMPRISONED PRINCESS DREAMS OF ANOTHER CHANCE!

STORY BY: KEI MISAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: POPORUCHA
SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

Can Magic Change Her Future?

This is the story of Princess Annabel's second chance at life, and her drive to stop the destruction of her kingdom.



cross infinite world



APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

STORY BY: FEHU KAZUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY: JUN
SERIES / VOL 1 OUT NOW

Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES / VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA
VILLAINESS WANTS
HER FREEDOM!
STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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