

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating

# I Will **Cook** With My **Fluffy** Friends

The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace

5

YU

SAKURAI

illust. KASUMI NAGI





# Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Winter is the Season for Fluffy Friends](#)

[Interlude: The Things Seen by His Eyes](#)

[Chapter 2: Nostalgic Food, Nostalgic People](#)

[Chapter 3: Part Time Student, Full Time Queen](#)

[Chapter 4: Leopard in the Cage](#)

[Chapter 5: A Qualified King and the Wings of the Butterflies](#)

[Chapter 6: Return to the Villa](#)

[Bonus Chapter 1: A Big Brother's Hopes and Schemes](#)

[Bonus Chapter 2: A Farewell and the Oldest Son's Thoughts](#)

[Bonus Chapter 3: New Year's Festival with His Majesty](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy  
Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 5





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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 5

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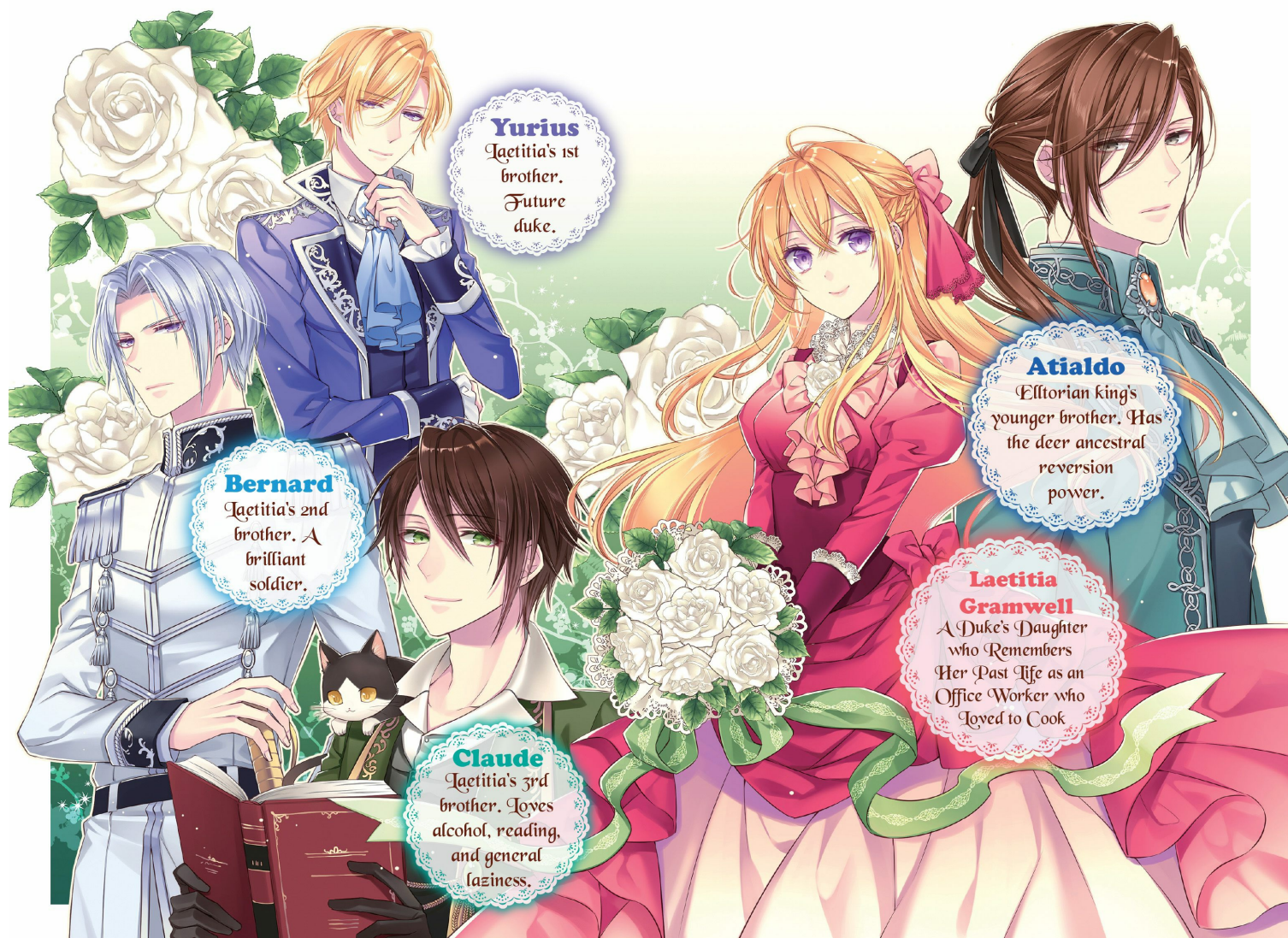
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**Yurius**  
Laetitia's 1st  
brother.  
Future  
duke.

**Bernard**  
Laetitia's 2nd  
brother. A  
brilliant  
soldier.

**Claude**  
Laetitia's 3rd  
brother. Loves  
alcohol, reading,  
and general  
laziness.

**Atialdo**  
Elstorian king's  
younger brother. Has  
the deer ancestral  
reversion  
power.

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









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

**Ishnad**  
Emperor of  
Ringrard.



# Chapter 1: Winter is the Season for Fluffy Friends

**“HOW** cold! The mornings are still so chilly.”

My words dissolved into the air along with my white breath. With each exhale, I watched the cloud of mist form and gradually melt apart. My villa’s front yard was equally white from a blanket of snow.

I wore a thick dress, a scarf, and a pair of fluffy mittens. I was sufficiently insulated, but the cold still nipped at my cheeks and the tip of my nose.

“Shall I bring you some more garments for warmth, my lady?”

The question came from Lucian, my servant, who was also dressed in a warm overcoat. He stood prim and proper, and aside from the puffs of white breath coming from his lips, I would never imagine that he was cold.

“I’m perfectly fine like this,” I said. “It’s already starting to get a little warmer.”

We’d passed the peak of winter, and the fallen snow was gradually receding.

This was my very first winter since I came to the kingdom of Wolfvarte.

Compared to my hometown, the kingdom of Elltoria, winters in this country were harsh and filled with heavy snowfall. This felt like the first time I’d ever seen so much snow with my own two eyes, even in my past life.

“I wonder if this region has a more northern climate than even Hokkaido...” I murmured.

“Ho-kai-do...?” Lucian repeated the word to himself quietly.

It was natural for him to be confused by the foreign location.

I, Laetitia Gramwell, possessed memories of a past life. I was once a perfectly average office worker who lived in a country not to be found in this world—Japan.

One year ago, Prince Fritz, my fiancé in this life, suddenly broke off our



engagement. That was the exact moment my more than twenty years of past life experience came surging back. That may have been what kept me from being weighed down by the termination of my engagement, so that I could now live a healthy life.

My current role was to serve as a figurehead queen to the Silver Wolf King, King Glenreed. Despite my superficial role, His Majesty treated me well, and we maintained a generally strong relationship. I was able to spend my days pursuing my favorite hobby, cooking, here at the royal villa he granted me to live in.

From last summer to fall, Wolfvarte received Prince Ernest and his Pegasi, and despite the temporary disruptions from his subordinate, winter had passed peacefully so far.

The heavy snowfall in this country made visitors uncommon during winter. I had also spent most of the season shut inside my villa.

“Where is this Hokkaido located?” Lucian asked.

“It’s not on this continent. I’ve never been there either.” *Not in this reincarnated body*, to be more accurate. But I still remembered the delicious salmon roe and crab I ate on trips there in my past life.

“Is that so? Did you learn of this region from books as well?”

“Yes, something like that,” I said vaguely.

I decided it was best not to correct him.

Even before I regained my past life memories, I would occasionally reveal pieces of information from my life in Japan, thinking that I must have read about it in books at some point myself.

Big Brother Claude, the brother closest to me in age, influenced me to start reading at a young age. I’d spent the past few years occupied by educational books in preparation for becoming a queen, so I didn’t have time to reexamine each piece of information in my head and pin down where it originated from.

Compared to back then, my current life was much more relaxed, so I could do as I pleased. As I reflected on the joys of a life of leisure, I heard some quiet

footsteps crunching toward me.

“Meow!”

This was Berry, the Gardener Cat. She wore a scarf wrapped around her neck. Berry stood up on her hind legs and began to teeter toward me. She usually traveled on four legs like a normal cat, but I could tell she wanted to keep as few paws on the freezing snow as possible.

Berry came up to my legs and snuggled up to me.

“Mraw mraw mraw mraw...”

*“I hate how cold my paw pads get during winter.”* That was what Berry seemed to be telling me as she rubbed her paws together aggressively. Despite her scarf and coat of fur, her paw pads remained unprotected.

“Wouldn’t you like to have some gloves, Berry?”

“Meow meow!”

She shook her head, refusing to give in. I knew Berry didn’t like wearing mittens because they hindered her ability to use her claws. Instead, she pawed at the bottom of my dress, although her claws didn’t penetrate or tear the fabric.

“You want up? Here we go.” I stooped down, lifted the cat up, and adjusted her in my arms so that she’d be comfortable.

She managed to find the best position after squirming around from side to side. Then she leaned against my chest and began to nuzzle her soft head against my cheek.

“Heehee. That tickles.”

I felt the weight of her in my arms and the gentle sensation of her fur against my cheek.

Winter was truly a lovely season.

Berry spent about thirty percent more time snuggling me in the winter compared to other seasons. She was an excellent replacement for a hot water bottle to snuggle with, and feeling the limp weight of her against me warmed

my heart just as much.

As I brushed away the pieces of snow stuck to her striped, gray fur, Berry's ears suddenly started to twitch. She craned her neck to look toward the outer gates of my villa.

"Oh my. Do we have a visitor?" I asked. "Or are the wolves coming from that side today?"

I'd come out to the garden to wait for the wolves in the first place. They usually came to my villa as a stop on their daily walk, but I was used to them coming from the forest next to my villa, not the front gates.

"Woof woof!"

"Bark!"

The visitors did indeed turn out to be the wolf pack.

I heard the sound of the wolves coming from the gate, along with an unfamiliar scraping noise.

"Hi there, Your Majesty!"

"Edgar! What are you riding on?!" I managed to wave back at him despite my shock.

He arrived with not a dog sled, but a wolf sled. Edgar was standing on the sled and gripping the ropes, with a few of the wolves pulling him around. He easily ordered the wolves to slow down until they reached me.

"I didn't know wolves could do that!"

My eyes were drawn to the wolves. This was rather exciting. They were all standing perfectly in lines while connected to the harness. To me, they appeared like a proud pack, forming white fog in the air as they panted.

Berry seemed just as fascinated as I felt. She jumped out of my arms to get a closer look at the wolves.

"I've seen dog sleds before, but this is my first time seeing one led by wolves," I commented.

"Even in this country, I think us wolfkeepers are the only ones who do this. I



practiced all winter to finally get to the point where I could ride one,” Edgar said proudly.

“Wow. You look so cool on your sled!”

These wolves were used to being around people but were still less friendly than dogs. I’d heard that wolves are prideful beings.

Edgar had to be a talented and capable wolfkeeper to be able to control them on his sled like that.

“C-C-C-C-Cool?! I-I’m not cool at all...!” He blushed and his triangular beastfolk ears began to twitch. Despite being a skilled keeper of the wolves, he was a shy, easily embarrassed young man.

“I think you should be more confident, Edgar,” I told him. “You take such good care of the wolves, and that’s why they obey you.”

“Awooooo!”

One of the wolves let out a howl as if to agree with me.

Wolves are clever beings.

It was possible they understood the meaning behind my words.

“There, there. Good boy, good boy. Such a clever, adorable little wolf you are!” I cooed.

“Woof woof!”

Fluffa fulla fluff.

I praised the wolf as I pet him from the head down to the neck. I could feel the overwhelming density of fur even through my gloves.

Yet again, I felt grateful for winter.

The wolves’ coats became thicker in winter to protect them from the cold. It took the form of a fuzzy white layer that peeked through from underneath their gray and black fur. This layer, known as the undercoat, was extremely protective against the chill of winter. It was also extremely fluffy.

*Ah, this is bliss. I’m so grateful for the blessings of winter.*

Spellbound, I continued to pet the wolves and watched as others approached me, snorting from their noses. I loved the contrast between the gallant wolves who pulled the sled and how they acted now, like friendly dogs.

One wolf, two wolves, three wolves...

Including those not hitched to the sled, there were about twenty wolves in total.

After finishing my rounds of petting each one, I stared at the sled.

*Is the frame made of wood?*

It was well-constructed with something resembling leather covering the handle and base. I wondered if it was built that way to preserve the structure and prevent friction.

“...May I try the sled too, if I go slowly?” I requested.

“You want to, Your Majesty?” Edgar asked.

“Is it very difficult? The snow here is quite soft and deep, so I don’t think I’d be injured if I fell off.”

I’d always wanted to ride in a sled. It looked like so much fun in the movies and manga from my past life. I hoped Edgar would allow me to ride it, even if we could only stick to walking speeds.

“Snow, and the wolves... In that case...” Edgar looked from me to the sled and then to the wolves. He was muttering to himself, appearing to be deep in thought. “...But wait, that would mean...”

“Is it too much to ask?” I asked sadly.

Perhaps I had asked the impossible.

*Of course he wouldn’t be enthusiastic to let an amateur run wild...*

I apologized to Edgar, but he shook his head from side to side, causing his white ears to sway.

“N-Not at all! You can ride it!! I’m sure if anyone can do it, it’s you, Your Majesty!”

“You don’t mind?”

“Of course not! The wolves really trust you, so they shouldn’t take off running or anything, and you probably won’t be hurt badly if you fall off... It’s just...um, well...” Edgar really struggled to get the words out. He glanced at me, his face getting redder and redder.

“Do you need me to do something?” I asked.

“You see... It’s very hard to ride a sled alone the first time. I’ll have to ride with you...”

“That would be great. I know I can count on you,” I said with a smile.

Beginners *do* need a coach.

I used to ride together with my teacher when I practiced horseback riding.

Edgar was a skilled wolf handler, and despite his shyness, I’d come to trust him as a person. We may have been of the opposite sex, but we were both wearing very thick clothing, so I didn’t feel like I had to worry about anything in that area...

But Edgar was clearly blushing and he remained perfectly still. Perhaps he was nervous about teaching someone how to ride for the first time.

“I’m sorry. Please forget I even asked—”

“No, don’t say that!” Edgar cut me off with a shout. “I’m not worthy, but I can’t waste this opportunity!”

“...This opportunity?”

When I cocked my head...

“He can’t hide his true feelings. Of course he doesn’t want to miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime chance.” Lucian was mumbling something to himself. Whatever it was, I could tell his words had some bite to them.



“**SO** fast!! Woo-hooooo!!”

My shout was drowned out by the wind and buried in the field of snow.

“Huff, huff, huff!”

The wolves dashed forward in their pack ahead of the sled. They kicked up snow with their paws and panted heavily, sending clouds of white smoke into the air.

“It’s so cold! But this feels incredible!”

The frozen wind hounded my cheeks. It felt like they were going to freeze solid, but in a way, the sensation was refreshing.

The wolves ran at the speed of a light jog, leaving paw prints and sled tracks in the white snow. I could feel the bumps of the sled as we rode, but it was much smoother than I’d expected. I could enjoy myself without having to worry about falling, even as a total beginner.

It was all thanks to Edgar, who rode along with me and kept me safe from harm. He stood behind me on the sled while keeping an eye on the wolves and myself. I couldn’t see his face from my position, but his directions were vital in keeping the sled ride stable.

“...The person in front of me is just a beginner. Just a beginner. Not Queen Laetitia, just a beginner...”

Edgar repeated the word “beginner” as if to convince himself of something. Perhaps he wanted me to remain humble so that I didn’t make any mistakes.

I allowed Edgar to teach me, careful not to stray from orders, as we sled over the snow. Some of the instructions for the wolves were similar to horseback riding. After some practice...I started to feel like I was getting the hang of it.

“Thank you! That was so much fun!” I exclaimed.

I brought the wolves to a stop and stepped off the sled, feeling quite pleased. I patted the wolves who’d transported us, along with Sana, Edgar’s companion animal.

“Woof woof!”

Sana wagged her tail and let out a happy bark. She ran parallel to the sled the whole time, making sure I didn’t fall or get hurt. Her plan was to let me fall into her soft, white fur if anything went wrong.

“What a clever, fluffy, adorable girl you are. I think you might be perfect, in

fact..." I scratched her head over and over again to express my gratitude. Scratch, scratch, scratch, scratch.

Unlike the wolves, with their soft coat under the slick exterior, Sana resembled a Samoyed dog whose fur felt like the texture of cotton candy no matter where I placed my hands.

I pressed my palm against her a bit harder and watched my entire hand sink into her coat. It felt fantastic. Sana squinted her eyes like she was smiling, seeming to enjoy being pet.

The other wolves were relaxing after all the exercise. Only Edgar seemed strangely nervous.

"You were great, Edgar," I told him. "Thank you for making it so easy to ride. Can we do that again sometime, if you're not too busy?"

"O-Of course, I would love to— Eek!"

"Huh?"

Edgar suddenly went completely stiff.

Wondering what had happened, I looked at the wolves and saw a slight bit of tension in them as they lifted their heads.

"This reaction... Could it be..." I wondered.

"Aroo!"

The cry was short but unmistakably proud.

There stood Lord Aroo—exactly who I knew I would find.

He strode toward me through the other wolves, sitting with perfect posture so he could pass.

"Arooo? Guruff?" He looked up at me and barked.

I couldn't explain why, but he sounded somehow angered or irritated.

"...Did something happen to upset you?" I asked Lord Aroo in a hushed voice.

Though Lord Aroo resembled nothing more than a silver wolf, his true identity was that of King Glenreed, this country's ruler.



Nothing good could come of upsetting the king. Despite my question to him, Lord Aroo had nothing else to say to me. He sat down and kept his eyes fixed on Edgar instead.

“...Is he curious about the sled?” I wondered.

“He might be. He was really staring at me earlier,” Edgar said.

“So that’s why you yelped.”

Lord Aroo had been the one to frighten Edgar just a moment ago.

He now had his face turned away awkwardly. Maybe he felt bad about startling him. Though, he continued to glance at Edgar and the sled, unable to hide his interest.

“I wonder what’s got his attention?” I asked.

“...Maybe Lord Aroo wanted to pull the sled too?” Edgar guessed.

“The sled...?”

As a human, His Majesty had people to wait on him and take him around by horse or carriage.

...But maybe he wanted to be the one to do the pulling for once?

Lord Aroo let out a sigh when I looked at him.

*I get it. Even I can understand that one.*

*“You really think that’s what I want?”* He was squinting his eyes at me, exasperated.

“I don’t think that’s it. But why does he keep looking at me and the sled...?” Edgar was blatantly confused.

Lord Aroo was a proud soul, even in wolf form. He exuded an extremely overwhelming aura. It appeared that the timid Edgar couldn’t stand to be on the receiving end of that glare.

“Ah, I’ve got it!” I was suddenly hit with the reason for Lord Aroo’s grumpiness. He was surely experiencing the same feelings that I did. “Couldn’t it be that Lord Aroo wants to ride the wolf sled as well?”

“Huh?!” Edgar was shocked for some reason.

Was it really that strange of a suggestion?

But then it hit me.

Edgar didn't know that Lord Aroo was King Glenreed...

“Do you really think a wolf would want to ride on a sled pulled by fellow wolves...?” Edgar asked.

I'd spoken without thinking.

I couldn't help but picture His Majesty having the time of his life on a sled in human form... Actually, maybe he wouldn't get so excited in reality.





Well, setting that aside, I'd already considered that he wanted to ride the sled like me.

"...Don't you think it's possible? Even humans like to ride in the kinds of parade floats pulled by other people," I said.

"Parade floats...? What are those?"

"Um, they're a kind of vehicle used during festivals and the like."

"Wow, I didn't know you had such things in your homeland, Your Majesty."

I certainly did. In the homeland from my past life.

But all that mattered was that I'd managed to fool him.

I glanced at Lord Aroo and saw that his brow was furrowed. It was only natural, seeing as how he was the king in disguise, but his facial expressions were incredibly human.

*"I don't want to ride the wolf sled. Why would you think that? There are certain things you're just so foolish about..."* That was what Lord Aroo's face seemed to say as he stared up at me.



**AS** of late, Glenreed had times in his life that he looked forward to more than anything.

These were the moments when he happened to finish work early or have plans canceled unexpectedly. He would then transform into a wolf to go observe Laetitia's villa.

The king and queen kept their separate residences. But they would exchange greetings and allot formal time to see each other.

Laetitia had her own schedule, so Glenreed knew he would probably just disrupt her by showing up suddenly in human form. He had no interest in taking up her time.

*That's the only reason why I go to check on her in wolf form.*

It was a means of convincing himself. It was also an excuse.

Those were the thoughts running through Glenreed's head as he went to pay Laetitia another visit. His four legs pitter-pattered rhythmically over the ground. The king was in a good mood, for whatever reason.

*...This sound. Could it be?*

He suddenly heard an unusual scraping sound coming from the ground at the villa, along with the cries of wolves.

Glenreed's ears were likely even sharper than the other wolves. He approached the villa curiously when a shrill voice reached those triangular ears of his.

"So fast!! Woo-hooooo!!"

Laetitia was cheering. She sounded as if she was enjoying herself.

Excitedly, Glenreed wagged his tail and raced toward Laetitia. But as soon as he spotted her, he wrinkled his nose.

*What the hell is he doing...?*

Glenreed recognized Edgar, the wolfkeeper. He was there to guide Laetitia on the sled, but his face was clearly flushed. When Glenreed listened closer...

"...The person in front of me is just a beginner. Just a beginner. Not Queen Laetitia, just a beginner..."

That was what Edgar was muttering to himself. He was clearly thinking only of Laetitia.

"Grrrrrr..."

Glenreed hardly even realized he'd begun to let out a deep growl. His blue-green eyes glared, filling with a piercing light as if watching his prey.

Glenreed struggled to properly express his emotions while in wolf form. His last remaining senses were clearly being crushed by the sight of Edgar clinging to Laetitia's back.

He couldn't allow a man with feelings for her to get so close.

"...Eek!"

Edgar's choked scream caused Glenreed to snap back to reality. He felt bad



for scaring the young man, but remained alert, causing a grimace to form on his face.

*Edgar is a hardworking, good person. I know he wouldn't let his feelings for her show or do anything to trouble her. Still...*

Glenreed's brain understood. But his wolf body couldn't hide his emotions.

"...Maybe Lord Aroo wanted to pull the sled too?"

Glenreed ended up sighing when he heard Laetitia's question.

She was a smart and perceptive woman, but there were also times when she was incredibly stupid. It was clear that she knew Edgar liked her, but not how deep that "like" went.

*I don't know if I should call her "carefree" or just an idiot...*

Even now, as she explained parade floats to Edgar, she showed no signs of understanding what had upset Glenreed.

"All right then, Your Majesty. I'm going to do some more wolf sledding nearby to get better at it," Edgar said.

Laetitia grinned at Edgar as he left to get more practice in. The innocence in her smile was exactly why Glenreed found himself detesting it a little.

"Wow, that's incredible," she exclaimed. "He glides so much faster than he did while I was on board. Edgar's amazing. He's usually timid, but he's such a skilled wolfkeeper. You're the one who gave him that job after all, Your Majesty."

"...Aroo."

Glenreed didn't dislike hearing his staff praised, but seeing Laetitia's eyes light up for Edgar stopped him from feeling any happiness about it.

As Glenreed struggled with these complex emotions...

"I think I understand how you feel." Lucian, with a faintly strained smile, murmured quietly to the king.



I spent some time watching Edgar practice with the wolf sled until he left for

the day with the pack.

Lord Aroo tapped the ground five times with his front right paw.

“Understood. Let’s head that way.”

The two of us treaded over the snow to the wooden shed next to my villa.

“Pardon us for a moment, Fon.”

“Krah!” Fon let out a quiet cry from the back of the shed.

Griffin behavior resembled hibernation during the winter. Wild griffins typically spent their winters eating little food and excreting little waste, simply nesting in high mountains or cold regions away from humans instead.

Fon had spent the past two months curled up quietly in his shed instead of doing any flying. He sat with his legs tucked under his body, casting a circular silhouette. With each breath, the feathers of his head plumage twitched while his folded wings lifted up and fell again.

He had also built a nest of twigs, fallen leaves, and shed fur from the wolves underneath his body. Edgar’s frequent visits to the villas with his wolf pack meant there was no shortage of nest materials.

The inside of the shed was silent save for the breaths of the slumbering Fon, Lucian, Lord Aroo, and me.

“Mph!”

Lord Aroo’s body became enveloped in light until it was replaced with the king’s tall stature. I watched the appearance of his glittering silver hair and blue-green eyes, reminiscent of a winter lake. Standing before me, those eyes of King Glenreed’s were the same color as Lord Aroo’s.

“Good day, Your Majesty. Thank you for stopping by today.” I bowed my head to him.

Lord Aroo and King Glenreed. I knew they were the same person, but in the end, it was hard to discount appearances. I still felt a bit nervous around the king in his human form. I could feel my heart speed up faintly when his foxlike eyes were looking at me.

No matter how many times I saw it, I was always amazed by His Majesty's beautiful face. My older brothers were very beautiful too, so I should have been desensitized to good looks by now, but for some reason, I'd started to become flustered recently whenever I met with King Glenreed.

"What is it that you need today?" I asked.

Tapping his front right paw on the ground five times was his signal that he wanted to talk to me in human form. I couldn't remember any pressing matters or national affairs that required a conversation with me...

"I'm thinking of joining you for the celebration of the Elltorian king's ten-year reign," he said.

"You are?"

It wasn't the most shocking admission, but I didn't quite expect it either.

The two events occurring this spring were the Elltorian king's ten-year reign ceremony, as well as the wedding of Prince Fritz, my former fiancé.

Both were rare festivities that only occurred many years apart historically, but it was a long journey between our countries. A round trip would take over a month, even with the royal family's finest carriage, and that didn't account for the stay and visits we would have to make around the ceremonies. His Majesty would have to leave Wolfvarte for just under two months at the very shortest.

*Can His Majesty really be away from the capital for so long right now?*

King Glenreed was seen as a brilliant ruler and revered as the Silver Wolf King, but unfortunately, his short reign thus far meant he lacked a stable foundation as king.

The reason I married him in the first place was because the aristocracy of Wolfvarte was pressuring him to find a queen, and he needed to buy time. Fortunately, the country had yet to see a crisis or governmental discord under King Glenreed, but leaving this land for two months seemed like it could be unwise, should something unexpected come up.

"It's my role as queen to represent you in ceremonies or diplomatic events. Will I be incapable on my own?"

Even if it was just a formality, I was still essentially banished from Elltoria before coming to Wolfvarte. I understood why His Majesty might hesitate to leave diplomatic relations with the country in my hands.

“No, you won’t. Don’t think that I don’t trust you.”

King Glenreed’s blunt statement was a relief. Despite his strong personality, the king was an honest man at his core. I never knew him to come up with lies or placations as needed out of convenience.

“You were born and raised in Elltoria, right? I’ve heard they’re the most prominent country on the continent when it comes to the magic arts, and that the land is home to famous ruins from history. I’d been wanting to visit at least once in my life,” he said.

“Hehe! Thank you for the kind words. When you come to our country, my father and family will be honored to receive you at our home.”

It made me happy to hear my homeland being praised.

Elltoria tended to be despised by other lands, but we had plenty of good qualities as well. I used to visit tourist destinations while entertaining important state guests, back when I was undergoing my education to become the next Elltorian queen.

His Majesty had handled everything for me since I came to Wolfvarte—providing me with both a home and staff. I wanted to show him the wonderful sights of Elltoria in return.

“...But are you sure it will be all right to leave the country for so long, Your Majesty? I’m sure nothing important will come up, but do you not feel anxious?”

“I won’t say I’m not uneasy at all, but so long as I’m the king of this country, it should always continue to function. Fortunately, I recently gained a powerful ally too.”

“...An ally?”

*Who could he be referring to?*

Since he said “recently,” perhaps he meant Lady I-Liena, a candidate to



become the next queen.

Last autumn, Lady I-Liena had nearly fallen victim to a plot launched by Lord Kernell. But His Majesty and I took action to save Lady Mi-Milsha, part of Lady I-Liena's family.

*So Lady I-Liena must have sworn her loyalty to King Glenreed because she was so grateful?*

True, she was indeed a powerful ally, but that alone didn't seem like it would be enough to reassure him. It was possible that something else had happened behind the scenes.

"Sorry, but I can't tell you everything. You'll just have to trust me for now," he said.

"Very well. You haven't given me any reason to doubt you."

Instinct told me he wouldn't do anything that would hurt my position...or so I wanted to hope. But since he said "for now," I knew there was a chance I would get to learn all about it later.

I decided not to press him despite my curiosity. I trusted His Majesty to talk to me about it sooner or later.

"I want to sit down and talk to you about everything, including this trip to Elltoria," he said. "Do you have time to come to dinner next week?"

"Of course. Let's see, next week..."

We quickly arranged a schedule to have dinner together.

King Glenreed was currently visiting me during a break in his work. We didn't have time to speak for very long.

"All right then, Your Majesty. I look forward to next week," I said.

"Right. I'll be waiting." He nodded his head, though he didn't show any sign of leaving yet.

"Is something the matter? Do you have something else you'd like to discuss?"

"....."

The king glanced slightly toward the entrance of the shed. Lucian was

standing there, looking out to be sure no one approached us, and further past him was a corner of the garden where the wolves' tracks still remained in the snow.

"...Did you like the sled?" he suddenly asked me.

"I did. I've always wanted to ride on a sled pulled by dogs or wolves." Between my past life and this one, it had been my dream for over twenty years. "I couldn't help but get excited to have my dream finally come true. Were you watching me, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. You looked like you were enjoying yourself. It was nice to see."

His lips formed a faint smile. It was like watching the daintiest of flowers blooming in a field of snow. The subtle transformation was enough to send warmth to my cheeks.

I was embarrassed that he saw me playing like a gleeful child...or maybe that wasn't the truth? I'd embarrassed myself terribly in front of Lord Aroo before I knew he was actually King Glenreed. I petted his fur like a maniac, talked to him about my life, vented my complaints, hummed made-up songs to him...

...Just thinking about it made me want to roll around on the ground, so I stopped myself from thinking. It was far too late for me to be feeling embarrassed that His Majesty witnessed me having the time of my life on a sled...

But then why was my face so hot all of a sudden?

I wanted an answer, but also got the sense that it would be better not to find out.

Instead, I spoke up to the king again to distract the both of us. "You were staring at Edgar and the sled when you were in wolf form. What had your attention, exactly?"

"...I felt nostalgic."

"...Nostalgic? Have you ridden on a wolf sled before too?"

"Years ago. The forefather of our royal family was said to have ridden a wolf sled onto a frigid battlefield and led his troops to victory. All children of the

royal family take wolf sled-riding lessons because of that legend.”

“I see. I’m sure you’re wonderful at driving a wolf sled, Your Majesty.”

King Glenreed was an athletic person. Since the other wolves revered him in his Lord Aroo form, perhaps he really would be the ultimate wolf sled driver.

“I’ll show you sometime. ...Maybe you could join— ...?!”

He suddenly fell completely silent.

Then he darted toward the entrance, passed Lucian, and barked orders for him.

“Someone’s listening. Check the right side!”

Lucian took off running like a bullet.

*Who was listening to us?*

Lucian was a skilled guard, and as the man who inherited his forefather’s powers, King Glenreed also had very sharp senses.

Someone would have to be incredibly tricky to get past the two of them like this.

I kept my guard up, just about on the verge of chanting a self-protection spell, but as I stared at the surroundings...

“Haha! Goodness gracious. I didn’t think you’d find me so soon.”

I heard a third person laughing.

That deep, velvety voice, spoken almost as if he was singing, belonged to...

“Leonard...”

I instantly felt relief.

The grimacing king returned to the shed with Leonard, the traveling bard.

I didn’t know what he was thinking in eavesdropping on us, but at least I instantly knew he wasn’t dangerous.

Leonard’s true name was Prince Leonardo—the prince who was publicly believed to be dead. Leonard was the result of his mother’s infidelity, but despite having no blood ties to King Glenreed, it sounded as if he took great

care of the young king, just like a true older brother.

“Why were you listening to us?” I asked him.

“I just happened to be nearby. When I caught a glimpse of your face, I decided to pay a visit here at the villa, only to see you two sneak off into this shed. There’s nothing more enticing than someone else’s secrets. Don’t you think?”

“Still, you shouldn’t eavesdrop on others. Besides, Leonard, didn’t you say you would become a normal traveling bard after you were freed from Lord Kernell? Why come here, to the inner palace area?” I questioned.

“Normal bards visit the palace too. See, that’s the thing about playing the strings. You can take them with you anywhere.” Leonard pulled his lute out and gave it a strum. Not that I had any idea where he’d been carrying it this whole time.

*...He’s being a little too carefree.*

My own older brothers were quite carefree too. Perhaps that was just a common trait shared amongst the species known as “big brothers.”

Shocked, and a bit impressed with his attitude, all things considered, I watched Lucian nod his head at me. Perhaps we’d telepathically been sharing the same conclusion.

“...I’m going back to work. Don’t bother Laetitia too much. You may be my brother, but I’m not letting you off the hook. Got it?” King Glenreed transformed into Lord Aroo and went on his way, although he looked quite reluctant. Staying here longer must have been likely to delay his work.

“Krah?”

Fon tried to stand up. He seemed to sense the turbulent atmosphere amongst us humans. I placed my hand on his neck, telling him not to worry, then turned toward Leonard.

“...Are you still running around like a spy, Leonard?”

That was the only explanation I could think of for why he was here right now.

There were plenty of people amongst the aristocracy in this country who knew what Prince Leonardo looked like. Though there was still little chance of

him being recognized, due to his major change in demeanor compared to when he was a child, there were plenty of opportunities for his true identity to be revealed while within the palace.

Logically, he shouldn't be taking these risks if he wanted to live as a normal traveling bard.

"Haha, clever girl. Everyone in this world is a spy for someone, you know." He was speaking off the cuff, but didn't deny it either.

"I thought as much."

"Did you? You predicted this?"

"I had a vague notion, yes. You're spying to help His Majesty now, right?"

Leonard only ever spoke in riddles.

Still, I got the sense that he was an affectionate person. Perhaps it was more accurate to call him honest at his core.

The prince with no royal blood, who was formally labeled as dead.

Unfortunately, Leonard posed a threat to the royal family of this kingdom. His past was too heavy a chain to bear for a normal traveling bard. If the unthinkable happened and his survival was exposed, he would become a weak point of King Glenreed's.

"...It's safer to keep lit coals close to you. Throwing them out into the street means you can't control when they explode," I said.

Even if a fire *did* break out, you could extinguish it faster that way.

As long as Leonard was working for His Majesty, it wouldn't be easy for anyone else to start a rebellion in an attempt to elevate Leonard to the throne.

I didn't know how much Leonard and His Majesty had worked out together, but it appeared that Leonard currently worked for the king as some sort of spy. That could be the only reason why he felt so emboldened to show his face within the palace grounds, where strict permission was required to enter.

"Why not leave the country and live as a free man? I'm sure His Majesty wouldn't refuse if you held such a desire," I said.



“Probably not. He’d grant whatever wish I took to him if I was serious about it. Despite how he looks, he’s naive.”

Leonard was certainly correct on that point.

...If King Glenreed thought only of politics and his own best interest...

He surely would have killed Leonard, his biggest obstacle, right away. It was a cruel, but optimal choice that King Glenreed didn’t take. Indeed, it was probably naive as a politician.

“...But his naivety comes from kindness. There are times when kindness can become the strongest weapon of them all,” I pointed out.

Killing Leonard would be the end of it. It was the most logical guarantee that he would run into no further trouble in the future...

But there was no telling how the people would react to a ruler who was nothing but “logical.”

“I believe His Majesty’s naivety is the kind that makes people like him. Isn’t that why you want to support him, Leonard? I know you care about your brother.”

“Who knows? I just do whatever I feel like.”

He strummed at his lute once again. Leonard’s voice and expression remained unchanged, but I swore I heard the strings of his instrument trembling slightly.

*Is he trying to hide his embarrassment...?*

Leonard’s thoughts were difficult to read from his words and behavior. He was a former prince, of course, but even so, I felt like it was rare to meet such enigmas of people.

“So why did you come to my villa today?” I asked. “Did you come across someone suspicious here or nearby?”

The residents of my villa included Berry and the animals, as well as Lelena and the servants. I wanted to handle any potential threats as quickly as possible.

“Remember? I already told you. I felt like coming to talk with you when I saw your beautiful face.”

“...Do you really not have any shame?”

I felt myself start to glare at him with disgust.

Leonard had always been flirtatious with me ever since we first met. I'd assumed he only did that to get closer to me, since he was a spy... But now that I knew what I did about him, another reason came to mind.

“Your attempts at flirting with me have been to observe my character as King Glenreed's queen, even if I'm merely a placeholder. Am I correct?”

In other words, he was testing me.

What would happen if he determined I was capable of being seduced, stepping into the wrong path, and causing harm to His Majesty?

I didn't particularly want to think about the details of Leonard's plan.

“I'm not such a busybody. It's a man's duty to flirt with beautiful women he encounters. And you're not just beautiful, you're fascinating too. Could a butterfly manage to stay away from a flower in its sights?”

“...I've never heard of such a duty.”

“Well, I'm one practitioner, anyway.”

He seemed to always have his own retort. There was no arguing with him. Leonard always spoke in a pleasant tone that made it impossible to read his true motives.

“It makes me sad when you don't believe me,” he pouted.

But he certainly didn't sound sad. In fact, he was enjoying himself, as far as I could tell.

“My feelings for you are real,” he continued. “I even have proof. Think back to what His Majesty said right before I showed up. He may be my dear little brother, but his love— Whoa!”

“Tsk. Dodged it, did you?” Lucian clicked his tongue.

A silver spoon was on the ground where Leonard had just been standing. It was round enough not to stab him, like a knife or fork would, but I was sure it would still hurt to be struck with.

“Lucian, what was that about?” I asked.

“I simply wanted to get back at him for getting the drop on us earlier.”

Lucian’s facade of pleasantries was completely gone, now holding his weapon of cutlery with a smile on his face. He appeared to still be annoyed that he didn’t notice Leonard eavesdropping on us. The grudge had built up over the other times Leonard slipped past his defenses too. He was an intelligent, sophisticated, and calm man, but he was also stubborn and hated to lose.

Lucian couldn’t maintain his pleasant disposition with someone possessing absolutely no restraint like Leonard.

“Who knew that guard dogs these days wore butler’s uniforms?” Leonard remarked.

“You’re probably a real nuisance to the legitimate traveling bards. I should shut you up for their sakes.”

Leonard and Lucian attempted to get a rise out of each other.

Although, I didn’t know what had them so fired up...

“Kraaaaah?”

Fon was letting out anxious cries. He apparently couldn’t settle down in the presence of the two men openly exposing their hostility toward each other. Fon stared at them, his eyes still lethargic.

“This is Fon’s house,” I said. “If you’re going to fight, could you please take it outside?”

*Humans are truly such fools.*

That was what I thought to myself as I chased them both outside.



**LEONARD** apparently decided to head home entirely after leaving Fon’s shed.

“I don’t dislike crossing swords with people, but I think I’ll call it quits for today.”

Perhaps I’d killed his interest by interrupting. He disappeared off into the distance like the wind, strumming a little tune on his lute as he went.

His complete dedication to living life on his own whims reminded me of a cat.

Leonard's younger brother would be more of a dog-like person, or rather, a wolf. Perhaps those opposite personalities complemented each other and helped them get along so well.

"My lady, you have my sincerest apologies for allowing my anger to get control of me at the wrong time."

Lucian had apologized. However, he was only noting the circumstances in which he chose to provoke Leonard instead of apologizing for the entire incident.

"I was also displeased that he chose to eavesdrop on us, but is there something else about Leonard that gets under your skin?"

"It's a servant's job to rid their master's pests."

Despite his soft smile, Lucian's eyes told a different story. There was no humor in them whatsoever. He appeared to be extra alert around Leonard, hating him for his repeated surprise attacks on us.

"Aggravating as it is, I don't see me defeating him with any ordinary means. However, a simple manner of discouragement such as what I attempted will hopefully be enough to stop him from approaching you for some time."

"Hmm, I'm not so sure about that..."

I looked off in the direction Leonard had left with a strained smile on my face.

I got the impression that he was the type to get a thrill out of provocations and violent encounters. It was possible his continued activities as a spy were because that way of life suited his personality better, not just because he wanted to help His Majesty.

"Well, it's true that he's an elusive person. I don't think he'll cause me any harm as long as I'm King Glenreed's figurehead queen, so I don't see the point in worrying about him."

"...That's not what you should be worried about," Lucian mumbled.

"Did you say something?"

“No, nothing at all. More importantly, isn’t it about time to begin cooking?”

“Ah, you’re right. Let’s hurry back.”

Between speaking to His Majesty and ushering Leonard away, too much time had passed after I had my fun with the wolves.

My plans were to have lunch that day with Big Brother Claude, who was currently staying in the country. I would cook up a few dishes to take to his place.

I quickly changed my clothes before entering the kitchen.

Big Brother Claude loved alcohol and also had the day off. My sense of time had dulled since becoming the queen, but this country’s weekly structure was the same as Japan’s, with five workdays and two days off. Since today was essentially a Sunday, Claude may have started his drinking in the afternoon.

“This lunch will have to pair well with alcohol.”

I took note of the ingredients and utensils. The Gardener Cats had provided me with a bounty of treasures—crops that wouldn’t have otherwise grown in this season.

I would be using plenty of winter mushrooms and king oyster mushrooms, as well as the native plants in this country that resembled polypore mushrooms and curved light brown mushrooms. I chopped off the dirty portions and stub ends.

Next, I cut a lump of bacon into strips about 1/16 inch thick.

I poured olive oil into my frying pan, lit the stove, and roasted some garlic until its aroma filled the air. Then I added the bacon, removed the oil, and fried it up with the mushrooms and seasonings. The spice blend was mostly black pepper with some added salt and lemon juice.

Once the spices were properly mixed in and the mushrooms turned tender, I took them off the heat.

Then I laid out a bed of leafy greens resembling spinach on a nearby plate which were to be eaten raw. I placed the contents of the frying pan on top of the bed of greens, sprinkled them with powdered cheese, and finally, my bacon



mushroom garlic salad was complete.

“Yes, this is quite delicious. It has the textures of thick bacon and mushrooms, permeated by the flavors of bacon grease and pepper.”

I had a lot of praise for my own meal once I tried it. The pepper flavor was sure to go well with wine or beer.

“I’ll make one more dish, and then I’ll take the roast beef I made earlier too...”

I didn’t waste a moment, since I wanted to make it in time for lunch. Lucian and I packaged the food up, then we headed toward Claude’s residence in a carriage.

We traveled some distance away from the castle. Big Brother Claude was renting a house in a hard-to-access district, with cheap residence for nobility.

“Oh my. That’s...”

We were greeted outside the building today.

“Meow meow meow!”

The black and white fluffy cat had a glint in her golden eyes. This was Clementine, a Gardener Cat staying with Big Brother.

“Mraw mraw, mraw mraw, mraw mraw mraw mraw!”

She started talking to me as soon as I approached. I didn’t speak cat, but I knew what she wanted to say all the same.

“Hehe! Just wait a moment for your oranges. I need to see Big Brother first.”

She clung to my legs as I entered the building.

“Hey there, Letty. Thanks for coming.”

Big Brother Claude greeted me from his seat under the magic-crest-powered kotatsu. The tabletop was stacked with books—perhaps from an early morning desire to read—and his dark brown hair was sticking up all over his head. He must have been too busy reading to bother doing anything more than smoothing his hair down after he woke up that morning.

He looked like a real mess, but Big Brother Claude had always been like this. I was used to it, so I simply greeted him and joined him under the kotatsu.

“So cozy... Kotatsu are wonderful.”

“Agreed.”

We didn't need many words to communicate.

The warmth of the kotatsu seeped into my body, chilled from the outside air. I wished I could live there forever.

I decided I needed to get moving unless I wanted to fall asleep. We needed to eat before that happened.

Just as I was placing the dishes out on the table from my basket, a new guest showed up at the house.

“Hello, Your Majesty. I thought I'd stop by again today.” Hayruth raised one hand as a greeting.

Hayruth was an artist and a friend of Big Brother Claude's. He loved my cooking and often paid visits to eat with us when I was at Claude's place.

“I roasted some bacon and mushrooms for today,” I explained. “There's fried foods too.”

“Oh, what kind?” Hayruth was excited about that.

He'd come to adore fried foods ever since he helped me make them through the process of trial and error. I still had him try many of my fried foods, both as a thank-you present, but also to see what he thought of them.”

“Here. These are sliced sweet potatoes, fried and drizzled with molasses.”

The exact ingredient I used wasn't “sweet potato,” but the flavor and taste were just about identical. I'd removed the impurities from the sweet potatoes, fried them in oil at a lower temperature, and drizzled them with sugar and a reduction of molasses. Essentially, they were candied sweet potatoes.

“The surface is so shiny. It's pretty.” Hayruth was staring at one of the potatoes on the end of his fork.

I trusted his artist's eyes. Judging by his reaction, I could probably serve this to others without any trouble.

“So sweet... I didn't know fried foods could be sweet.” Hayruth paused to

chew on his bite of potato some more.

Then he took another, and then another massive bite of the sweet potatoes.

“I liked the tonkatsu and fried cheese, but I could really get hooked on this one. The outside is crisp and fragrant, but the inside is sweet and rich. I like the taste of the sesame seeds on top too.”

“Hehe! I’m glad to hear that,” I replied before eating some of the candied sweet potatoes myself.

Warm and fluffy sweet potatoes were perfect for the cold winter season.

I had the kotatsu for my legs and the candied sweet potatoes for my mouth and belly. The warming of my body from both the inside and out gently melted the tension in my heart.

Since I felt satiated before the other two, I began to simply sit back and relax when I felt something touch my hip.

“Meow meow!”

It was Clementine. She stood up on her hind legs, carrying a few clementine oranges in her arms, and pressed her head against me for attention.

“But it’s cold outside the kotatsu.” I left it with all the reluctance in the world and followed Clementine outside. A tiny garden was set up in the back of the house Big Brother was renting. A single wooden signpost stood in the snow-covered ground as a marker.

“Blade of wind.”

The wind spell burst from my hand and cut through the thick layer of snow. I followed up with another wind spell that gathered the snow off to the side, revealing a translucent cluster of ice underneath.

“Mraw mraw!”

Clementine’s tail swayed from side to side with excitement.

The ice contained a few clementine oranges inside of it. These were, as they looked, frozen oranges.

“Now we just crack the ice.”

This ice was the result of the freezing spell I did on the oranges.

In the current season, it was possible to make frozen oranges just by burying oranges in the snow. But this only resulted in oranges with weakened flavor. It was probably due to the slower speed at which the freezing process progressed.

That sort of thing was exactly what spells were for.

I briefly washed the oranges, dried them, froze them in that state, removed and washed them again, then sealed them back in ice one more time.

Freezing the oranges twice created a double layer of ice over their peel. This was said to be a way of preventing the flavor from dissipating. That was how it worked in my past life, at least.

I also attempted freezing the oranges on a metal tray with good heat conduction, but the best results in terms of taste came from freezing them in ice with a spell.

Each time I visited Big Brother, I dug up the previously frozen oranges and replaced them with new ones. Big Brother Claude could cast spells too, but his specialty was earth spells, so he struggled to efficiently cast water spells.

That was why Clementine was always pestering me to make more frozen oranges for her.

I placed them in a bucket Lucian brought with us, swung the bucket so that the water went to the middle, and froze it on top of the snow at the right time with a spell.

It took a while for the oranges to freeze all the way down to the center, so I could take it easy inside until then. But first, I cracked the ice around the oranges I'd already extracted. Clementine and I then returned to the room.

"It smells like booze in here..." I groaned.

The place had turned into something of a drunken party in the short time we were away. There were already a number of bottles lined up around the kotatsu. Hayruth, in a jovial mood from his finished drinks, reached out and took his next bottle.

"Wanna see who can drink more, Your Majesty?"

“No, thank you. I’ll have fun at my own pace instead of getting horribly drunk.” I smiled awkwardly as I entered the kotatsu.

Big Brother Claude and Hayruth could both handle their liquor very well. It was legal for me to drink at my age in Wolfvarte, but trying to keep up with the two of them could surely result in nothing other than a hangover tomorrow.

“Here, have this one, my lady.”

“Thanks. I’ll take it.”

I accepted the glass Lucian handed to me. It was red wine from my villa.

Red wine was also great to use in cooking, but it was a delicious drink as well.

It was a medium-bodied wine, bold in its fruitiness and acidity. This variety was said to pair well with food, and the proof of that was how it made for the perfect drink alongside my mushroom garlic salad.

“Soooo good!”

I had my favorite wine, delicious snacks, a comforting kotatsu, and conversation with my trusted brother and his friend.

Each day I spent at the villa was enjoyable, but having a relaxing drinking party at home was nice too. The mushrooms were delicious, the sweet potatoes turned out brilliantly, and I did great work making them both.

Clementine was also adorable. She was perfect.

I stacked the frozen oranges on the table. Once she reached out for one...

*“Too cold!”*

I could practically hear her cry as she yanked her paw back. So very funny and cute.

The frozen oranges needed to sit for a bit before they were ready to eat. It should take about thirty minutes, given the current room temperature.

Waiting was a part of dining. The longer you waited, the more and more your excitement built. I would ask Clementine to share an orange or two with me as well.

I drank from my glass of wine, enjoying the faint tipsiness that was starting to

kick in.

Hayruth had emptied an entire bottle while I worked on my single glass.

*He's such a fast drinker.*

Big Brother Claude looked like he was enjoying himself too. Despite the difference in their statuses and homelands, the two men were able to sit down and drink together.

"Now that I think of it..."

"Yeah?"

"What is it?"

The two men easily picked up on my quiet words.

Despite all their drinking, they were still fully aware of their surroundings.

"Hayruth, you met Big Brother in this country, right? How did the two of you become friends?" I asked them the question I'd been curious about for a while now. Their personalities seemed very compatible, but there had to be a story about how they first met.

"We drank together at a bar," Hayruth said simply.

This answer made sense, coming from the man who'd finished off all the nearby liquor. He explained that they'd become friends after getting drunk and rowdy at a bar, as I somewhat expected.

"Were you both drinking alone at first?"

"Yep, we sure were. I went up and talked to Lord Claude, who happened to be nearby, and we really hit it off that day. Now we still drink together like this."

"Wow. I never knew that."

I nibbled on some of the roast beef I had brought as I listened to Hayruth's story. It paired great with my wine too. I went from dish to dish as I finished off my wine, constantly remarking on how all of it was delicious.



**"HAYRUTH,** you met Big Brother in this country, right? How did the two of

you become friends?”

Hayruth had to respond to Laetitia’s question. He told her they got drunk and rowdy together in a bar. It was a response that came easily and smoothly.

*It’s not a lie, and she doesn’t seem to suspect anything.*

Laetitia ate more of the food, appearing to be in good spirits. Not only was she relaxed, but she let her guard down around Hayruth too.

*She hasn’t figured out who I really am? Or did she already sense it, and she’s pretending not to know? ...I can’t read her, but for now, I think we’re building a good relationship.*

Hayruth had a good impression of Laetitia.

Her capability as a queen and a sorcerer left no doubts in his mind as to her skill. She was friendly, kind, and at times, capable of shocking things. He liked that about her.

However, Hayruth was not only an artist, but a spy who had sworn allegiance to the crown prince of Raiolbern. This line of work sometimes left him with blood on his hands, be it directly or indirectly.

Despite this, Hayruth truly didn’t want to find himself enemies with Laetitia.

That outcome would only result in a hard-fought battle. It was better to avoid this at all costs, both for his emotions and his own self-interest.

*If Queen Laetitia and I became enemies, I know I’ll find King Glenreed and everyone coming after me. How annoying...*

He chuckled awkwardly in his mind and stared straight ahead.

Claude, seated across the kotatsu from him, would become one of those annoying opponents. As he took sip after sip of his drink, Hayruth thought back to that day when he and Claude first met.



## Interlude: The Things Seen by His Eyes

“**HEY** there, buddy. Could you hand over the book you just bought at that secondhand bookstore?”

Two years ago, in a town within the kingdom of Wolfvarte.

Hayruth called out to a young man walking a deserted path outside of town. The man held a small book in his hands.

“I’ve been searching for it for a long time. I’ll pay you double what you spent on it, so what do you say?”

“What a coincidence. I’ve been looking for this book too. Today, I finally found it.”

The young man with the faint smile on his face, Claude, stopped in his tracks, turning only his face toward Hayruth. Claude didn’t appear on guard or frightened, but he also didn’t look like he intended to hand it over either.

*Now what do we do about this...?*

Hayruth’s true object of desire wasn’t the book itself, but a slip of paper stuck between the leather binding and the pages. Just like any other country, Wolfvarte was home to numerous spies and conspirators.

One country in particular had their spies using books to communicate with each other. They would put on the act of innocently selling off books at used bookstores for their fellow agents to buy after a few days had passed. Deciding on the stores and books to search for in advance meant that they could communicate without ever having to come face-to-face.

Though it was less efficient, this method of exchanging information was much safer. Hayruth had come to discover this method thanks to a small coincidence.

He began to search carefully for the agents, unable to let such a fortunate opportunity escape, and succeeded in capturing two spies. After the “chat” he had with them, he was able to form a good relationship with the two agents.

Using the information they gave him, he had been on his way to acquire that specific book from the shop...when Claude showed up unexpectedly.

Hayruth had been staking out the bookshop and its customers for a while, but today was the first day he ever laid eyes on Claude. The young man had appeared out of nowhere, browsed over a few books, then ultimately purchased the one with the information inside.

Was it a coincidence? Or was he a spy working with other forces?

Hayruth worked on hatching a plan while following Claude from behind. Once they made it out of town to an isolated area, Hayruth decided to call out to him and see how the other man reacted.

“Does the book really mean that much to you?” Hayruth asked.

“I just think it will be worth reading.” Claude stroked the cover of the book with his black-gloved hands. With the same faint smile on his face, he tucked the book into his breast pocket.

“Couldn’t you lend it to me, just for a day? How about I triple the price?” Hayruth pushed.

“Is there any better indulgence than reading a book when you’re in the mood for it? You’ll have to wait until I’m finished with it.” Claude ended the conversation there and began to walk again.

But just then...

“How dangerous...” Claude cocked his head diagonally. “You’re an artist, right? I don’t like seeing someone waste the tools of their trade.”

Just next to the grumbling Claude, where his head had been seconds ago, a black lump was sticking out of the tree.

Hayruth had thrown one of his art supplies—a charcoal pencil about the length of his pinky.

*I thought so. He’s definitely in the same line of work as me.*

He could tell the other man had been trained. Claude hadn’t shown any signs of shock upon dodging a surprise attack. Clearly, he was no ordinary person.

*It seems like he recognizes me and knows I'm an artist. Has he been watching me for a while now?*

The other possibility was that it was simply a good guess, but that also meant someone as intuitive as Claude wasn't to be taken lightly. There was no reason not to resort to force if this was indeed someone in a similar profession as Hayruth. He took out the knives he had hidden on him and sent them flying toward Claude.

"Whoa! ...Geez. There's no need for violence."

He sounded frightened, but Claude easily dodged the knives.

Hayruth squinted at him. He expected the man to dodge the knives aimed at his chest, but not the simultaneous single knife aimed at his leg.

*I can usually trick someone into guarding their chest. It's the one aimed at their leg that always gets them.*

Hayruth possessed ancestral reversion powers and had the ability to transform into a sacred beast—a snake. His physical powers were unparalleled, and close-range combat should pose no threat to him.

But Claude managed to dodge not one, but two attacks from Hayruth. Perhaps he was a more formidable opponent than Hayruth first thought.

In the single second it took Hayruth to start coming up with a plan of attack, Claude suddenly took off in a sprint.

*I'm not letting you get away!*

Hayruth launched his attack right in that same moment. His knives soared through the air, but only managed to graze Claude's shoulder.

He was about to follow up with more, when his target changed at the last second. He launched a knife at the object Claude had just lobbed toward him.

"A smoke screen?!" Hayruth cried.

The knife struck the object, which began to produce an intense amount of smoke. A cloud of dust also kicked up at the worst timing. That part came from Claude's spell.

Smoke and dust.

The two clouds stole Hayruth's vision to help Claude get away.

*He knows how to hold off an enemy too...*

As Hayruth gave chase, the ground beneath him began to spike up like spears. This was an earth attack spell called Clay-bodied Spear, but most referred to it as Earth Spear.

"That's not going to hit me. Oop!"

Hayruth nimbly dodged the dirt spears that attempted to skewer him.

One spear, two spears, three spears...

He moved out of the way each time they appeared.

Up ahead, Claude's next move was to open up holes with his spells. Hayruth easily stayed on solid ground by jumping over each pit. This wave of spells wasn't enough to land a single scratch on him.

*Of course I can avoid the attacks that I "see".*

His golden eyes had turned to vertical slits when he landed after jumping over one of the holes. His Sight was a power that came with his inherited snake powers and indicated he was using vision not available to humans.

The world in those golden eyes informed Hayruth of heat, magical energy, and how they both moved. Living humans were a mass of heat, and magical energy always flowed right before a spell was cast.

A smokescreen was no match for Hayruth. He could tell exactly where Claude and his spells were at any moment.

Even now, he saw Claude's body heat running up ahead to the right, about ten steps forward or so. Claude's plot to escape while Hayruth was blinded had failed. It was the worst move he could make against Hayruth.

Dodging the approaching earth spears, Hayruth jumped over a pitfall, landed right next to Claude, and used the momentum to twist his body and kick his leg out.

"Ngh!" Claude let out a muted scream as he went flying.

*Tsk! Too short!*

Claude had leaped backward just before the kick landed.

The distance he got sent was superficial. It was far from a fatal wound.

Hayruth rushed forward to deliver a second attack before Claude could recover. But Claude suddenly made a sharp turn right.

Just then, the ground caved in out of nowhere.

A hole had opened up in the ground where Hayruth was about to step.

*That was a bit scary, but now I know his strategies and strengths.*

There was a way of activating spells at a chosen time instead of once the chant was finished. This was called the delay method and was used as a trap during battles. Using the delay method in advance once you'd calculated the enemy's actions was a way of hitting them with a sneak attack.

*Not that it ever slips past my eyes.*

The problem with the delay method was that you never knew where the spell was planted. As someone who could view magical energy, it was no threat at all to Hayruth. Visible traps were no traps at all. It was perfectly easy for him to escape the delayed attacks.

Claude's biggest strength appeared to be his ability to read the opponent and predict their next move. Being hit by Hayruth's kick was probably part of his plan. He was going to use a delayed spell to kill Hayruth once he moved in for the finishing blow. That would be the end of things in a normal battle, but not with Hayruth's special eyes. He escaped the delayed spells and managed to enter a counterattack.

"Take that!"

"Whoa!"

A single cut had formed on Claude's arm, sending red blood flying out of him.

After the knife slash, it was a throw, kick, punch, and leg sweep.

But the unilateral beating started to feel strange to Hayruth.

*He's not hitting me with spells at all. I'm landing all the hits...*

Claude always managed to avoid direct hits right at the last second. Hayruth's superiority there shouldn't have been at risk, but something wasn't right.

*This is weird. He should be the one without any magical energy left to fight with too...*

Hayruth's Sight also allowed him to discern certain qualities and amounts of magical energy in a person.

Claude possessed more magical energy than the average sorcerer, but it wasn't particularly extraordinary. He was still within the limits that put him toward the bottom of the top tier or perhaps the top of the middle. The spells he had used so far had already drained his energy to less than half of what he started with—probably just over 30 percent remaining. Continuing the battle at this rate should drain the rest of that magical energy.

No matter how he thought about it, Hayruth couldn't see any outcome other than his own victory... But when he noted how the knife he threw at Claude's stomach only left the slightest cut in his side, Hayruth shuddered slightly.

*Wait, hang on. This isn't right. He shouldn't be able to dodge my attacks so well in the first place!*

The smoke from Claude's spells and smokescreen had mostly faded by now, but it still clouded his target slightly. Claude shouldn't be able to see so well. However, even though he was barely managing, Claude was handling Hayruth's most powerful attacks.

Something about this entire fight was off from the start.

Claude was reacting precisely to Hayruth's attacks even through the smoke. He was even setting delayed spells. It was almost as if he could see Hayruth's movements perfectly.

*I could move easily in the smoke because I see heat and magical energy, which gives me a read on the surrounding terrain and people's movements...but he shouldn't be able to do the same.*

Then why was he able to fight exactly like Hayruth and his special eyes?

The answer to that was probably simply that Claude understood everything.

He'd flawlessly memorized the details of their surroundings and the fight itself before the smoke clouded his vision.

Claude was even able to dodge Hayruth's attacks in the smoke because he'd calculated Hayruth's every last attack.

*I thought he was just a quick-witted man with good instincts...*

But it wasn't so simple after all.

If Hayruth's conclusion was correct, then that made Claude...

"...A monster..."

Hayruth's eyes went wide when he heard the voice.

Those words came from Claude. He had spoken the exact thought on the tip of Hayruth's tongue.

"Hahaha..."

All he could do now was laugh.

Having his thoughts guessed so accurately could only mean that Claude, indeed, had been calculating Hayruth's every last move.

*This world sure does have some crazy people in it...*

Even with Hayruth's extremely unique eyes, Claude was on another level of his own too.

Hayruth laughed dryly. But when he remembered that this was the man he was currently fighting, he refocused his attention and held up another knife.

"...What's your plan from here?"

Now prepared for combat again, Hayruth asked the other man a question. He'd been overpowered by the realization of what a monster Claude was, but that was the only question he came up with.

*It doesn't matter how smart he is. He has to have some flaws at least. If he's got backup nearby or a plan to turn the tables, he must have come up with the plan earlier, when my defenses were down for that single second.*

But a counterattack didn't come. Hayruth could only see that Claude had



stayed there cornered for some time.

“You’re planning to keep attacking me until I run out of magical energy, right?” Claude guessed.

“...Could you please stop reading my mind and saying it out loud?” Hayruth grumbled.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“That’s exactly why I hate it.”

Despite the lighthearted exchange, Hayruth was paying close attention to his surroundings.

*Okay. This will work.*

There were no signs of an ambush.

This was a road outside of town that was rarely used. Only a few deserted houses and trees surrounded them on either side. Even if someone was hidden in the nearby houses or behind the trees, if it wasn’t too far away, they wouldn’t slip past Hayruth’s Sight. His glance around the area told him that no one was nearby.

He didn’t spot any delayed spell traps either. With Claude’s current level of energy, there was little chance of him using a single, massive spell to turn things around.

Claude appeared to have his back against the wall...

“Why are you so confident?” Claude asked him. “Isn’t it a bit too soon for that?”

“You’re just talking tough...”

Hayruth listened closely. He felt like he just heard something. It was coming from the ground. As soon as he spotted it, a fierce ripple ran through the earth.

“What...?!”

Hayruth leaped backward in a panic. The tears in the ground seemed to follow his feet. Those tears turned to crevices that broke the earth into pieces.

The thunderous roar felt like it would burst his eardrums.

The place where Hayruth had just stood was a shattered remnant of what it once was. Dirt stood at broken, tilted angles, while mud went spurting out from the cracks in the ground. It looked nearly impossible to stay standing there at all.

“It can’t be...”

“This area actually used to be a swamp,” Claude told him casually. He had taken shelter on the opposite side of the fissure from Hayruth. He’d managed to put distance between them despite just having his back against the wall.

“They filled in the swamp to build a town here, but it only took a little rain to make the ground muddy again. Lasting rainstorms caused the houses to slant and sink into the softened ground. No one dares come here anymore, now that they know the ground isn’t livable.” Claude explained the history smoothly, almost like a teacher or an older brother lecturing his younger siblings.

“So you knew the ground here was unstable...” Hayruth said.

Claude had clearly made use of this advantage.

The earth spears and pitfalls were all cast for the sake of disrupting the ground.

Hayruth jumped back in time as soon as he noticed something was wrong, but the shockwaves of the rupture had caused a few stones to strike him. It wasn’t deadly, but it could have resulted in serious injury if he’d made a single wrong move.

He felt the blood drain from his face for real this time.

He thought he’d been handling Claude’s spells perfectly. But Claude’s real goal was to break up the ground and nothing more.

Just as Hayruth’s eyes could see heat and magical energy...

It was like Claude’s eyes could see the distant, distant future. Hayruth knew all he was doing was calculating outcomes, but at such a high level, it was essentially the same as having precognition.

“Did I surprise you?” Claude asked. “You definitely let your guard down because of everything you can see.”

“...What do you mean?”

“You can see magical energy, and probably heat discrepancies, too, right?”

“...!”

Hayruth’s face twitched for a moment, revealing his defeat. It was a reaction equal to confirming Claude’s theory.

*Calm down, damn it. He’s not the first person to know about my Sight, even if there aren’t many others. How did he figure it out? What did I do to give it away? Was it something I did while we fought? I can’t imagine that, but with a guy like this, it might be possible...*

Either way, this blatantly made Claude a much greater threat.

Hayruth racked his brain, a cold sweat dripping from his body.

Being able to see magical energy turned most sorcerers into sitting ducks. Hayruth would never fall behind their pace, so long as they didn’t launch a surprise attack from far away or use high-tier spells.

Hayruth’s Sight made him a natural enemy of sorcerers. But when it came to Claude, he was incapable of landing a decisive hit.

He had the upper hand in their dynamic and was also much stronger physically. Hayruth’s victory should have been overwhelming. But instead, he was unable to make out as the victor due to his extremely pesky opponent.

*What now? I don’t think I’ll lose, but even if I get him to the point where he can’t fight anymore, I might end up in real trouble too.*

Should he fall back or continue the battle, prepared to deal with the painful consequences?

Claude smirked at the puzzled Hayruth. “Neither of us want to get hurt, right? I hate all these theatrics. I’ll let you have the book once I’ve finished reading it, what do you say? Just wait a little while first.”

With that, Claude retrieved the source of their turbulence from his breast pocket and began to flip through the pages. He read further and further into it, remaining absolutely silent the entire time.

*...Don't tell me he's actually reading the contents of the book right now.*

Hayruth assumed he was buying time or something of the sort, but this was Claude, the monster, that he was dealing with. It was possible that he was capable of reading the entire book in a short period of time.

"...Done. Thanks for waiting. You can have it now, so please let me be on my way. I think you'll agree to those terms, right?"

"You think I can trust you at your word? If you're serious, then throw me the book now."

"I can't do that."

Hayruth narrowed his eyes at Claude. That hastily thought-up excuse was clearly nothing more than a way of buying time.

"No, for real, for real. I'll actually give you the book," Claude said.

"...Are you messing with me?"

"I mean it. I just can't throw a book, you know? I'm a bookworm, so I won't allow books to be treated like that. I'll leave it here for you, so feel free to pick it up and check it over."

Claude bent down and placed it on the ground gently. He even used his handkerchief to be sure it didn't get dirty.

*How courteous. Maybe he really does just love books.*

Claude released the book and began to step back.

Cautiously, Hayruth followed him toward the book, making sure there weren't any other delayed spells or traps around. The handkerchief under the book looked perfectly normal as well.

With his eye on Claude's movements, he finally picked up the book he was after. There didn't appear to be any traps on it, but he was scowling on the inside.

*The gap between the binding and the pages is open... He definitely took the paper first before he read the book and gave it back to me.*

Despite tailing him after he left the bookstore, there were a few brief

moments, such as when Claude rounded corners, that Hayruth didn't have his eyes on him. He definitely used those opportunities to grab the paper and read its contents.

*Well, there's no point in getting hung up on that now.*

Hayruth turned his focus to what would have to come next.

Hayruth had already captured the author of the note—a spy operating in town. After his “conversation” with the spy, he was able to obtain other writings from the same man. He should be able to compare the handwriting of the remaining note in the book to the original author's writing later to see if Claude left a forgery behind.

He stood there, book in hand, thinking about what to do next, but then he silently jumped up and angled his body to the right.

A cluster of ice soared past his left shoulder.

It didn't come from Claude.

There were multiple heat sources coming from the men hidden inside the deserted houses and tree line.

Hayruth concluded after his “chat” with the spies that there were probably other agents working secretly throughout the country.

They were currently taking up position to surround Hayruth and Claude.

“Are they here for their paper?” Claude asked with a grin. “They're certainly passionate about their work.”

“...You set me up, didn't you? How much of this did you plan?” Hayruth stared at the perfectly calm man.

Claude's smokescreen had apparently been both a beacon and a marker.

Despite being so far from the city, the combination of smoke and an earthquake would be enough to draw the attention of anyone keeping watch. The spies in hiding certainly spotted this and moved in to surround them.

Hayruth had his Sight, but he found himself forgetting to look out for his surroundings whenever he spoke with Claude.

The agents used that time to sneak forward, observe them, and determine that not only was Hayruth the one who captured their allies, but that he'd obtained the book with the message inside. Hayruth was exhausted after the back-and-forth battle he just went through with Claude.

In his weakened state, the spies knew it was their chance to attack and steal the book back. They were waiting for the right time to strike.

"You let go of the book so easily because you knew they'd focus on me, didn't you?" Hayruth hissed.

"I just wanted to give you the book you wanted so badly." Claude grinned. It was an irritating answer.

Claude was probably planning to use this next fight as his chance to run away. He expected the two parties to end up destroying each other, if possible.

"As I mentioned earlier, I hate fighting," Claude said. "I'm a lazy guy. I'm going to head home and take it easy, so you guys can do whatever you want out here."

"...Are you sure you won't regret that?"

Hayruth looked down at the book.

Claude's victory and safe escape were all but assured. This irritated Hayruth, so he decided to see if threats would work against him.

"Unfortunately, I don't love books as much as you. It won't break my heart to use this book as a weapon or a shield if these agents attack me. It might get all torn up."

Hayruth held up the book for Claude to see.

"Besides, I'm sure you understand. Leaving me to deal with all these guys alone means some of them will probably escape. Those who slip away will be sure to tell the others that you were here too. It's probably going to be pretty rough for you, having that information out there."

Hayruth's words were a threat disguised as pity.

If Claude was determined to run away now as the victor...

Then Hayruth was prepared to let a spy or two go unharmed so that they informed the rest of their group about Claude. That was sure to throw a wrench in his plans.

Of course, information about Hayruth would be circulated too, but if it was a chance at putting limitations on a monster like Claude in the future, then it certainly didn't seem like a terrible option.

"You know, I like your personality," Claude replied.

"But it's nothing compared to yours. ...So, what do you think? Come on, now. If you don't act fast, these spies will swarm me, and your book will get torn to shreds." He waved the book in his hand, pressing Claude for an answer. The other man scratched his head and smirked.

"You leave me with no choice. I can't let a book be used as a shield. I'll lend you a hand here to turn the tables on these spies."

The negotiations were successful.

For now, the two men found themselves in a truce. They decided to take care of the spies together.



***ALTHOUGH**, back then, I was still planning to wait for the right moment to betray him in that fight...*

Hayruth reflected on that past while tucked underneath the kotatsu, liquor bottle in hand. He knew Claude's promise to cooperate was nothing more than a way to get by. With that in mind, Hayruth wanted to be ready for the moment when Claude turned on him.

*But nothing else scary happened after that. Lord Claude and I finished up the fight and captured the spies alive. He kept his promise in the end.*

Hayruth still wasn't sure if Claude was simply an honest person at heart, if he couldn't find a moment when Hayruth had his guard let down, or if there was something else going on in his mind entirely.

Despite this, Hayruth ended up walking away with less ill will toward Claude than he originally felt.



The two began to chat as they tied up the unconscious spies, using it as an opportunity to dig deeper into each other's motives, but the conversation continued until they eventually decided to head to a bar together.

They ended up getting drunk and rowdy together, perhaps out of a mutual love for alcohol or something else entirely, and after that day, they ended up drinking every time they met up. That developed into the friendship they had today.

Hayruth's original motives were to get to the bottom of what Claude was up to, but at this point, they were a normal pair of drinking buddies. They had this in common despite the difference in their homelands, social status, and interests.

Hayruth had once been treated as a monster for his inhuman eyes that could see heat and magical energy. He learned that Claude had once been treated as a monster too. The cause was his natural intelligence, so perceptive that people became convinced he could see the future.

Neither of them was particularly interested in revisiting old wounds, but both of them felt a connection over this shared experience.

*...Well, the biggest reason we're friends is probably because we have no one else we can get drunk with and not have to keep our guard up around.*

Hayruth lived a life of many secrets. It came with his job as a spy for the kingdom of Raiolbern. Claude appeared to be in a similar position and also lacked friends he could drink casually with. Since neither of them cared to drink alone in particular, they made their meetings a regular thing.

"Ahaha! Clementine's wearing a clementine! Get another one on there so she's a triple Clementine."

Claude, now completely drunk at this point, was stacking oranges on top of the black and white Gardener Cat's head.

One orange, two oranges, three oranges...

In a total waste of talent, Claude had succeeded in stacking a tower of oranges on top of her head. He was the type of person who maintained his motor functions even while drunk.

“Meow meow meow...”

The Gardener Cat seemed used to her owner’s eccentric behavior.

*“This servant of mine turns into a total fool when he’s drunk...”*

That’s what she seemed to be saying, judging by her narrowed eyes. It looked like she’d just given up.

*It’s true that Lord Claude, the defenseless, drunken fool in front of me now, is nothing like that monster I saw when we first met... But even now, he has his own ways of looking out for his surroundings.*

Hayruth had never seen Claude get so drunk around him before.

Laetitia was around this time. Having his trusted sister around to watch out for him seemed to be the cause of Claude’s intense drinking and the ease with which he let his guard down.

They were a shining example of the hopeless older brother and the little sister who had her act together.

Hayruth nodded tipsily at them and pretended to draw them with a brush.



**HAYRUTH** looked at me, smiled and nodded, then started to do something with his right hand.

*What’s this all about? Is the alcohol hitting him too hard?*

I used a spell to fill his empty glass with water.

“Why don’t you drink some water to sober up a little?” I suggested.

“Thanks! But I can handle this amount just fine. Alcohol is like water to me anyway.” With that, Hayruth finished off the alcohol in his wooden wine cup.

The way he drank made it look so delicious and fun. I enjoyed watching him.

“Hayruth, you truly love your liquor, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I really do. Liquor loves me back too. You know what I mean? What’s that word again for when you can really handle your alcohol?”

“A heavyweight... No, *uwabami*?”

A question mark appeared over Hayruth's head when I listed another name for a heavy drinker.

"What's an *uwabami*?"

*Ah, I see.*

Hayruth's question made sense.

"Uwabami" was a term used in my past life in Japan.

I forgot that I could only be open about those sayings around Big Brother Claude and Lucian. I'd tried to stick to a safe amount of alcohol myself, but it was possible that I was actually quite tipsy already.

Even before I regained my past life memories, bits of knowledge from my life in Japan would occasionally creep into my head, causing me to have to explain myself when I said them out loud. Lucian and Big Brother Claude were used to this, as they'd been around me for so long, but this was a new phenomenon for Hayruth.

"It's a word for a big snake," I explained. "You remind me of a snake, Hayruth, so it fits you perfectly."

"...Ack!"

"Whoa!"

Hayruth suddenly choked on his drink.

"Are you all right?"

"...No worries. It just went down the wrong pipe." Hayruth caught his breath again. "Why do I remind you of a snake?"

"You have eyes that can see heat levels, right? That means you have the same sight as snakes do, so it seemed similar."

I remembered that snakes had something called pit organs in their bodies that were capable of sensing heat.

"You also hate the cold just like a snake does," I observed. "You have a naturally low body temperature, right?"

"Yep, that's right. I hate winter, but I sure do like this kotatsu." He shivered

and clutched at his shoulders.

Hayruth was always under the kotatsu at Big Brother's place since he was so sensitive to the cold. It appeared that more and more people in this world were getting hooked on the magic of the kotatsu.

"But why would you compare a heavy drinker to a snake?" he asked.

"You know how snakes swallow their prey whole, no matter how big it is? I think it's a way of comparing someone who drinks a lot to those snakes," I explained.

"Huh, that's an interesting phrase. Uwabami, uwabami." Hayruth repeated the word, seemingly having taken a liking to it.

As we continued to chat, Clementine came up and held out one of the frozen oranges from the basket.

"Mraw!"

She wanted me to peel it for her. The orange still had a bit of frost on the surface, meaning it was the perfect time to be eaten.

I peeled the half-thawed skin while Hayruth continued to talk to me.

"What a strange cat, choosing to eat cold foods in the winter."

"But it's delicious in its own way. I like them too. Why not try one, Hayruth?"

One orange shouldn't be enough to chill his body too bad. I handed him a frozen orange.

"Hmm... If you say so, Your Majesty, then it might actually be good..." Hayruth carefully removed the peel. Then he timidly bit into a section of the orange. "It's cold! I mean, of course it is, but it's *really* cold!"

"You'll grow to like it," I told him.

"I will? ...Ah, I see... I think it's a great thing to eat in a kotatsu."

Hayruth had seen the light.

The colder your mouth becomes, the stronger the warmth of the kotatsu feels.

It was the same sensation as ice cream becoming more delicious when eaten in a heated room.

Once I finished peeling away the fibers, I put the orange in my mouth. The fruit had become cold and smooth with a consistency just like sherbet. As it melted, it produced a faint orange scent and invigorated my tongue with sweetness.

Freezing foods usually made them taste less sweet, but the fruit sugar in the clementine oranges actually made them sweeter, so they were perfect for a delicious treat.

I wanted to eat more and more of them, but I decided to hold off so as not to chill my body.

I finished my frozen orange and was enjoying a leisurely chat with Hayruth, when the drunken Claude raised his head.

“Mmm... Laetitia, Hayruth, you guys should leave soon.”

“The party’s over already? That was fast,” Hayruth said, sounding disappointed.

“It’s going to start snowing soon.”

“But it’s really sunny today. Isn’t it unusual for the weather to change so quickly in the capital city at this time of year?” Hayruth asked.

“A snowstorm’s almost here,” Claude insisted. “You don’t want to get snowed on and catch a cold.”

“Meow meow maw!” Clementine nodded to agree with Big Brother’s suggestion. She waved her front paw left and right to say goodbye.

“Very well,” I conceded. “You should leave too, Hayruth. Big Brother’s always right about his weather forecasts. I can’t remember a single time he was ever wrong.”

“Wow, Lord Claude. I didn’t know you had such a skill. Then I’ll have to get going too. Farewell, my dear kotatsu.” Hayruth stood up, looking deeply reluctant to separate from the kotatsu. He’d become a true believer by the look of things.

Hayruth and I exited the house, parted ways outside, and then I walked a bit down the road to where the carriage was waiting.

We drove past the palace gates until we reached my villa.

"It really did start snowing," I remarked.

Tiny flakes of snow were fluttering down to the earth amongst the rain. The black clouds had rapidly invaded from a corner of the sunny sky.

"This way, my lady."

Lucian opened an umbrella for me. We were only a short way away from the house. I wouldn't get soaked in that time, but Lucian was overprotective when it came to me.

"I treasure Lord Claude's weather reports, but it's strange how he's never wrong. How does he always guess correctly?" Lucian asked.

"He explained it to me once, but it didn't make much sense to me either," I admitted.

Big Brother said he simply compared past weather reports against what he experienced with his own senses, but that didn't explain his abnormal accuracy rate.

*...Despite how he acts, Big Brother Claude's brain and observational skills are on a completely different level.*

Just like Hayruth, he was the kind of person who could see things others didn't.

"Sometimes I feel like I don't know Lord Claude at all. It's a little frightening," Lucian looked up at the sky and murmured to himself.

"Perhaps. But I still love my big brother."

I understood where Lucian was coming from, but Big Brother Claude always spoiled me, and he was very special to me too.

...Sure, there were a few things about him that piqued my curiosity...

But what I wanted most was for us to continue having a pleasant sibling relationship. And it's not like I didn't have secrets of my own...

## Chapter 2: Nostalgic Food, Nostalgic People

**“TODAY’S** dinner...is *hot pot*?” King Glenreed asked.

It was the week after I rode the wolf sled and went drinking at Big Brother Claude’s house. I had come to visit His Majesty as promised.

“What is hot pot? Well, I understand that it’s a meal made with a pot, at least...”

King Glenreed didn’t seem to get the dish right away. This was natural, as the aristocrats who were born near the capital city never gathered around the table to eat hot pot together.

“It’s a bit of a process, but it’s a dish where a group of people add ingredients to a pot, let them stew, and eat it together,” I explained. “I was thinking we could have pork and cabbage hot pot today.”

I lined up the pot and utensils Lucian brought with us. Tonight’s pot would be an earthenware pot—made with my very own transmutation. I went through a lot of trial and error to determine the correct mixture of clay, resulting in an extremely heat-efficient pot that was only pleasantly warm on the outside when touched. I was quite proud of the job I did.

The temperature was starting to grow a bit warmer, but the mornings and nights were still chilly. I wanted this hot pot dinner to warm up His Majesty.

“I’ll start by laying out the ingredients,” I said.

It was important for a meal served to the king to be satisfying in appearance as well. The trick to making a presentable hot pot was to arrange the ingredients nicely before adding the soup. Once you slowly add the soup to the pot, the ingredients rise to the surface, maintaining their layout and arrangement.

I started by layering the bottom of the pot with cabbage. Keeping them closest to the heat source would allow the stiff leaves to become nice and

tender as they cooked. Then I arranged the other ingredients on top of the bed of cabbage.

The next thing I did was organize them based on the colors of the cabbage leaves, radishes, carrots, green onions, and the rest. I'd already boiled the root vegetables in advance because they were harder to cook all the way through in a short period of time. This made them softer and more able to absorb the soup, but they wouldn't dilute the other flavors by expelling their water.

"Is this orange food carrots?" King Glenreed asked, looking over my ingredients.

"Correct. I cut them into the shape of flowers."

The bright orange carrot flowers were blooming on a bed of cabbage and green onions to look like a garden.

"It's like a flower bed. Charming."

Fortunately, he seemed to like the design.

I finished arranging the ingredients and poured in the soup next.

The soup used my homemade consommé as a base which I then seasoned with salt and pepper to give it a more Western flavor. I didn't want His Majesty's first hot pot experience to stray too far from the norm in a way he might not care for.

Once I finished pouring the soup, making sure that the ingredients kept their arrangement, I lit the coals underneath the pot with a spell.

They began to glow a faint red and let out audible crackles.

I added the enoki and other mushroom types once the soup was slightly warm. Then I let the pot's contents boil, occasionally adjusting the layout of the ingredients with my chopsticks.

The rising steam brought a delicious aroma with it.

After the soup boiled for a while, I finished by adding pork ribs to the pot.

"These are in the shape of roses," His Majesty commented.

"Hehe! I'm glad you spotted that."



I'd rolled up thin slices of pork ribs to make them resemble roses. This also made them easier to remove from the pot. His Majesty couldn't use chopsticks, so everything in the hot pot was shaped to be retrievable with a fork and spoon.

"It's just about done now," I announced. "The meat has turned nice and tender. ...All right, there we are. Please be sure to blow on it so that you don't burn yourself."

"Right. I'll try it now."

Once I filled a bowl with a nice balance of ingredients, I passed it over to His Majesty. I quickly filled my own bowl next, blew on my spoonful, then took my first taste.

The cabbage was perfectly crispy, and each piece of carrot was soaked fully with soup. The root vegetables were the work of the Gardener Cats, so the transparent radishes paired perfectly with the rest of the hot pot. They glittered in the candlelight when coated with soup.

When I chewed on the pork, the meat's juices flooded my mouth along with the warm soup. I let out a sigh.

"It's hot, but it tastes good. I feel it warming me from the inside out." King Glenreed, while huffing to cool his mouth down, seemed to be enjoying the hot pot to the fullest.

I decided to make a second hot pot, this time with His Majesty's favorite foods. Once I saw that everything had boiled properly, I placed them in a bowl with my chopsticks and had His Majesty dig in.

The finishing touch was the addition of cheese to change the flavors. He could drink it along with the soup.

"Phew. That was so delicious," I said, happy with my handiwork.

"Yes. I like this 'hot pot' meal," His Majesty said.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. Shall I serve you hot pots with different flavorings in the future as well?"

"Sure. I look forward to it."

With our hot pots finished and our bellies full and warm, King Glenreed and I

began our main topics of conversation. The most important subject was our upcoming trip to Elltoria. We worked out the finer details, such as the specific dates and necessary procedures.

“I’m planning to take Lucian, a few maids and guards, and Gilbert with me,” I said.

Elltoria and Wolfvarte had very different tastes when it came to food. Gilbert asked to join me so that he could learn some new recipes.

“May I also borrow a few Wolfvartian soldiers to join my guards?” I requested.

“Very well. I’ll assign you soldiers who are already guarding your villa.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Of course. ...I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you.”

“Your Majesty...”

My heart skipped a beat.

His voice came out so much more stern than I expected.

I was so happy.

I was happy, but I couldn’t jump to the wrong conclusion.

King Glenreed’s expressions were as cold as ice, but he was a kind person at heart. He looked out for those around him, even if he didn’t show it outwardly, and I was still his queen after all, even if it was only a placeholder role. He was being extra cautious so that his own reputation wouldn’t be hurt if anything bad happened to me.

Grateful for those feelings, I continued our conversation.

“In addition to those members, I would also like to bring Berry and Tweety... Ah, do you know who Tweety is?”

“The yellow Cuddle Bird who took a liking to you?”

“Exactly. May I bring Tweety along with us?”

“Fine, as long as you look after him.”

“Of course. I’ll be careful.”

Cuddle Birds consumed magical energy as their main source of food.

Tweety enjoyed my magical energy in particular, so if I left him behind, he would certainly have some sort of breakdown. But he listened to just about anything I asked of him so long as his stomach was full, so I knew I had to bring him with us.

“Is that everyone coming with you then?” King Glenreed asked.

“That will be the entirety of my party, but Big Brother Claude and Hayruth, the painter, also said they’ll be leaving for Elltoria after us.”

Since our travel plans would be officially released, we would have our route guarded to fend off threats such as robbers. Traders and travelers would increase on that route for a while after we left so as to ensure their own safe passage in our shadow.

Big Brother Claude had apparently been invited to the ceremony as a member of the Library Bureau, and since Hayruth had few responsibilities to tend to, he decided he wanted to visit Elltoria as well.

“That’s everything on my end. Is there anything you’d like to discuss on your end, Your Majesty?”

“There’s something I want to ask of you on the journey.”

“What would that be?”

“I-Liena’s companion animal. ...Bring her in.”

At the king’s signal, Melvin opened up the door he’d been stationed by.

“Good day, Queen Laetitia. It’s been such a long time since we last met.” Lady I-Liena’s glossy red lips formed a gentle smile.

Lady I-Liena remained extremely busy cleaning up after last autumn’s conspiracy. I hadn’t been able to see her in nearly a month. Her companion animal, Fifu, a fox with five tails, sat at her side.

Fifu wagged his many tails, approached me, and rubbed his head against my arm.

*"Hello, Queen Laetitia! Have you been well?"*

His voice, which resembled that of a young boy, echoed directly in my mind.

Fifu belonged to a species of Mythical Beasts known as two-tailed foxes. They possessed the power to communicate by using their magical energy. This skill became more powerful with each extra tail the animal possessed, so with five tails in total, Fifu was able to communicate with the humans he touched.

*"I want to go with you on your trip. What do you say, Your Majesty?"*

"I'd be happy to let you join us, but..."

I looked at Lady I-Liena, his owner.

"Well? I'd like to ask for your help, too," she said.

"Are you sure you don't mind me taking him?"

Companion animals were like family to beastfolk. They cared for them very deeply. Entrusting me with her companion animal was proof of her complete trust in me.

"Yes, I want the two of you to take him. I'm sure you understand what I mean by this, yes, Queen Laetitia?"

She was leaving her own companion animal in the care of higher-status individuals. It was the same as swearing an oath of devout loyalty.

"You two handled Lord Kernell and his plot so wonderfully. Without you, Fifu and I might not have ever been able to step foot in this castle again."

*"Yeah, exactly. We really appreciate it!"* Fifu backed up Lady I-Liena's remark.

"Those stern but reasonable things you said to Mi-Milsha, combined with how you've acted since arriving in this country...was all I needed to make my decision to trust you as someone born in a foreign land."

Lady I-Liena drew one foot back elegantly and performed the highest level of bow to me. Fifu joined her, lowering his head in a bow as well.

"I pledge my loyalty to the both of you. Please make use of myself and Fifu for the benefit of this country's future."

"Yes, I accept your pledge. I intend to take you up on those words." His

Majesty bowed his head calmly.

I nodded and returned the bow to Lady I-Liena. "I agree with His Majesty. With your pledge of loyalty, I would be happy to look after Fifu on our trip."

*"Yay! She's gonna take care of me!"* Fifu wagged his tails. He was really adorable.

"Hehe. Thank you, Your Majesty. I appreciate you taking Fifu to Elltoria in my place."

Lady I-Liena was a contender to become the next queen of this country. It was difficult for her to leave Wolfvarte, considering how much the balance of power mattered to her, but perhaps she held an interest in Elltoria.

Fifu was intelligent enough to understand human speech, yet most people saw him as nothing more than a normal pet. There were sure to be people who let their guards down and revealed their true thoughts around him. It seemed like a great method of gathering information.

"Think of Queen Laetitia as your master during the trip," she told Fifu. "Be sure to obey her at every moment. All right?"

*"Leave it to me! I just know I can help you out, Your Majesty. Most humans get totally distracted by our tails!"*

"Hehe! I understand exactly how they feel."

Two-tailed foxes had golden, silky tails that were the ultimate fluff experience to pet. They were popular both within and without Wolfvarte, but since they almost never left the country, their scarcity value increased sharply.

Fifu had particularly exceptional tails for his species too.

He spoke like an innocent human child, but on the outside, he was a beautiful, elegant creature. Fifu was a perfect fit to sit by the majestic king's side. The pair looked like a painting on a scroll.

"All right then, Queen Laetitia. There's a few things I'd like you to know about Fifu as well." Lady I-Liena shared each piece of information I would need to look after Fifu.

We agreed that Fifu would come back home to the villa with me that very

day, as I needed time before we departed to test out the arrangement.



***“HELLO! I’m gonna be staying here!”***

As soon as we arrived at the villa and exited the carriage, Fifu went trotting off.

He didn’t seem to mind the remaining snow still on the ground. He was a creature who hailed from the cold regions of Wolfvarte where the Snow-Fox clan resided, so it made sense that this level of snow didn’t bother him whatsoever.

Fifu did a quick lap around the garden before taking a seat in front of the door. Lady I-Liena had clearly trained him not to go inside with snow on his paws.

I wiped his paws, let him inside, and watched the fox wander down the hallway.

“Hmmf?”

Fifu sniffed around to process the different scents.

He suddenly lifted his head and took off sprinting toward the back.

“Squeeee!”

“Peep?!”

Tweety was at the back of the hall.

Fifu was jumping to bury his face in Tweety’s feathers.

“Peep?! Peep peep peep peep peep...”

Tweety was alarmed at first, but didn’t appear terribly disturbed by this. He swayed his head left and right to follow Fifu’s tails, apparently curious about them.

“I’m sure you’ll get along with Tweety, judging by this. ...But I wonder about Berry?”

I turned around and called out to her. She stuck her head out from the corner

at the end of the hallway to observe the situation.

“Meow meow...”

After some thought, she nodded slightly. Berry pointed her paw pads at Fifu, then at me.

“...You’re okay with it as long as I look after the fox properly... Do I have that right?”

“Mraw!”

Berry gave a bigger nod this time. She was a very cautious creature, but I was glad to see how she trusted me in times like these.

“Thanks, Ber— Oh?”

She suddenly yanked her head back.

Just as I wondered what was wrong...

“Pardon me, my lady!”

“Eek!”

I felt myself yanked back by the shoulders.

As soon as I realized it was Lucian, I watched Tweety and Fifu take off running.

“Squeeerah!”

“Peep peeeep!”

The two animals stomped off down the hallway in a tremendous rush. They’d gotten too worked up by playing together, causing a game of tag to start up unexpectedly.

“How dangerous. Are you hurt, my lady?”

“Thank you, Lucian. I’m fine. ...I don’t think the two of them are going to have trouble getting along, although...”

If anything, they seemed a bit *too* friendly. Their equally innocent personalities came together in a single fluffy mass that raced down hallways.

“...I’ll have to do my best in training and caring for Fifu...”

From right next to me, as I was hardening my resolve...

*“You’ve sure got that right.”*

That’s what it sounded like Berry was saying. Though, I was too distracted to even notice her approach me.



**THE** end of the harsh winter was in sight. The fallen snow was starting to melt.

It was time for us to depart for our scheduled visit to Elltoria.

His Majesty and I, the king and queen, were traveling together. A line of more than ten carriages was forming outside the castle entrance. We had a full retinue joining us for this official trip.

After the final confirmations, King Glenreed and I entered our carriage. Our plan was to share one for the length of the trip.

“I’ll be back soon,” I said. “Please take care of things for me.” I stuck my head out the window and waved at the people remaining behind.

“Of course! Do be most careful on your trip.”

Borgan, the head servant at my villa, would be managing the home while I was away. There were many people standing in a line to see us off. But there were also some visitors up in the trees.

“Mew mew!”

A cluster of Gardener Cats stood perched on the tree branches. They had come to say goodbye to Gilbert and me.

I smiled, waved at them, and watched them match my gesture with paw waves of their own.



**“PHEW.** I’m a little tired now.” I sank back into my seat and let out a brief sigh.

I’d just spent over an hour waving goodbye to people.



We left the castle and proceeded at what was no more than walking speed until we were out of the capital city.

Watching the extravagant carriage belonging to their king was also a form of entertainment for the townspeople. The route turned into something of a parade, which was a way of displaying the power of the royal family.

I spent the entirety of that parade waving to the people watching us from the street. My muscles weren't entirely weak, since I needed enough strength to do my cooking, but I knew I'd be feeling sore once I woke up tomorrow.

I was massaging my arms when King Glenreed suddenly drew his fingers near me.

"Your Majesty...?"

"Sit still."

"Ah..."

I felt a pleasantly cold sensation on my skin.

A chilly layer of air wrapped around my arms. It followed them, no matter how I moved, providing them with a constant source of cold, like ice packs.

"Is this part of your ancestral powers, Your Majesty?"

"Yes. I can create this level of cold air even in human form. Chilling overworked muscles will dull the pain later on. Is it too cold?"

"It's just perfect. Thank you, I appreciate it. Do you often perform this kind of treatment?" I asked.

"I did it years ago, when I trained in fencing."

"I see." I nodded, my gaze shifting to the king's arms.

King Glenreed was definitely on the slender side, but I knew he had to have decent muscles too. He didn't seem fatigued at all by waving to the townsfolk.

A closer look at his long fingers revealed calluses where he would normally hold a sword. Even in these busy times, he must have been taking time out of his schedule to train.

"...What is it?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at me.

“Nothing. Forgive me.” I jumped before casually turning my eyes away. Staring at him too much might upset him. “I was just remembering how one of my brothers used to get blisters from his sword too.”

“Is that Bernard, your second oldest brother? He’s a famous soldier, and I’ve heard about his incredible talents. I’d like to talk to him if the chance comes up on this trip.”

“I’m honored to hear that. I’m sure Big Brother Bernard will be delighted too.” I smiled to hide the bit of fright that struck me in that moment.

*Big Brother Bernard is an outstanding soldier, but he’s quite the character too...*

It was hard not to worry about whether or not he would do something he shouldn’t, even in front of King Glenreed.

I changed the subject to hide my fears.

“Now that we’re out of the city, would you like to take the form of Lord Aroo?”

The preparations for our trip to Elltoria had left His Majesty too busy to transform into Lord Aroo recently.

Spending too long in his human form left him at risk of unintentionally turning into the silver wolf at random. The only people inside our carriage were me, His Majesty, and Berry, who was curled up in my lap. It was the perfect time for him to transform without worrying about the prying eyes of others.

“Right. I’ll do that now.”

He nodded, becoming enveloped in a bright light that dimmed to reveal Lord Aroo. He sniffed the air a bit, then turned his blue-green eyes toward me.

“Aroof!”

“...You want to come over here?”

“Woof!”

He crossed the carriage to take the seat next to me.

The royal family’s carriages were luxurious and spacious on the inside. Each

seat was big enough for a few people to fit. Lord Aroo curled up and let his head rest on my lap.

“Hehe! Looks like I’m your pillow.”

I talked to the wolf, and after he’d been silent for a while, it was time to pet him to my heart’s desire. I still got a bit nervous around King Glenreed in human form, but that wasn’t the case whatsoever with Lord Aroo. His silver fur was entirely silky and fluffy. It sparkled in the sunlight coming through the window.

Our carriage was silent, save only for the sound of the wheels outside.

On my lap was a comfortable, soft weight.

I felt my eyelids grow heavier and heavier.



“...**WHAT’S** the meaning of this?” Glenreed murmured to himself in the swaying carriage.

When he came to, he was sitting up in human form.

That much was fine, but Laetitia was sitting right next to him with her cheek resting against his shoulder. Her golden eyelashes were downturned, and he could hear her quiet, gentle breaths. Glenreed felt himself on the verge of staring at her face, so defenseless as she slept, but he forced his eyes to turn away.

*How did this happen...?*

The last thing he remembered was transforming into a wolf and having Laetitia pet his fur. After that, Laetitia nodded off, and her head was starting to bob from the movement of the carriage. The ride began to get bumpier, and once he propped up her head to support her, his memories stopped at that point.

*I must have fallen asleep too.*

Glenreed had been growing more and more fatigued over his recent busy schedule. He reasoned that his weakened logical abilities in wolf form must have stopped him from being able to prevent himself from falling asleep. Then he returned to human form in his sleep, and that was how they both ended up

like that.

*...How unusual for me.*

It wasn't unprecedented at all for him to turn from wolf to human, or even human to wolf, while he slept. The reason for this was rational—his weakened defenses while he slept meant that he could no longer control his transformations.

But that made his present situation all the more unthinkable.

*How many years has it been since I slept in front of someone...?*

Accidentally transforming in front of the wrong person while he was asleep could be a major disaster. He never let that happen, no matter how tired he grew—even around Melvin, his trusted aide who knew his true identity.

It had been over ten years since Glenreed last slept so near to someone.

"I guess it's because...it was with Laetitia..."

The words slipped out of his mouth, and he quickly squeezed his lips shut. He didn't want to wake her.

*She's been very busy with the travel preparations too.*

Though she appeared full of energy, there was no doubting the fatigue she felt on the inside. Laetitia's body was warm against his. Her shoulders were so much daintier than Glenreed's.

*...This won't do.*

He was able to turn his eyes away from her face, but there was no way to ignore the sweet scent that wafted off of her, tormenting his nostrils. Despite finding it strange at first, Laetitia's scent was nothing more than sweet and enticing to Glenreed now.

Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself lifting her golden hair with his fingertips.





Then he slid his fingers down the blonde strands until they were touching her soft, pink cheek. He followed the contour of her cheeks, trailing his fingers toward her lips...

“Jiro...”

Glenreed felt like he was hit with cold water. His whole body stiffened.

*What am I even doing...?*

There was nothing honorable about stroking the face of an unconscious person, much less a woman.

Laetitia being his queen was no exception. Their relationship was nothing more than a political convenience. But the biggest reason of all was simply that Laetitia had feelings for someone else.

*Jiro...huh...?*

Glenreed had heard that name from Laetitia many times while he was in silver wolf form. He recognized the love in her voice as she said it. But also, the pain.

Glenreed could never forget how heartbroken she sounded.

*Of course I had the people in her life researched before she came to be my queen, but...*

The investigations never turned up anyone named Jiro. That was how Glenreed knew the truth. No one else in the world knew she loved this person. He was either a secret lover, or a secret unrequited love. Those were the only two possibilities.

Filled with longing for her beloved, a man she knew she could never be with, she'd been unable to stop herself from whispering his name out loud.

Laetitia was once engaged to a prince named Fritz.

She could never make it known if she'd fallen in love with another man, nor had there been any rumors of a secret love affair. Glenreed only ever heard her mention the name “Jiro” back when she believed Lord Aroo was just a normal wolf. He never once heard it come from her mouth when she was in the presence of anyone else.

Laetitia was a clever woman who knew how to be sure her feelings were never exposed. Jiro probably wasn't even the man's real name. It was surely a nickname meant to keep others from knowing his true identity if she was ever overheard.

Love wasn't something that faded away so simply, even if you knew it would never come to fruition. Glenreed knew that more than anyone. He held no ill will toward Laetitia for those feelings.

*It's hard to imagine that, with Laetitia's personality, she would take a lover other than her fiancé. She's only maintained her secret feelings and longed for him quietly... Even after departing to a distant land and entering a marriage in name only.*

But Glenreed knew there was a man she still cared for deeply.

That fact was a chilling, fiery, burning emotion inside of him.

Flames of jealousy smoldered in Glenreed's chest, raging forth when the occasion called for it.

*I'm sure this man with the nickname "Jiro" is nothing like me at all.* That was the thought Glenreed concluded with his burning emotions and frigid brain.

Laetitia often murmured the name "Jiro" when she looked at Keith, her beastfolk knight. Surely, something about Keith reminded her of Jiro, and she became unable to contain the love that welled up inside her.

Keith was a friendly, open-hearted, emotional, lively person.

He was the polar opposite of Glenreed, the quiet, expressionless king.

*That means Laetitia would never fall in love with someone like me...*

When he realized that, the burning jealousy in his body exploded into a storm of numbing flames.

Glenreed, with his special Sacred Beast powers, had a unique nose. To him, a person's heart, attitude, perhaps even their soul, gave off a unique scent perceptible to that nose of his. He was able to sense the general emotions that a person was feeling at any given time.

That was why he knew the painful truth.



Laetitia cared for Glenreed.

But, to his despair, she didn't care for him in a romantic way.

*This is all such a bad joke...*

In a way, he almost would have preferred to be hated by Laetitia.

If there was some sort of misunderstanding that caused her to despise him, he could correct the record, improve their relationship, and maybe even cause her feelings for him to turn to those of love.

But Laetitia already did care for Glenreed. They even regularly enjoyed pleasant dinners together. The fact that she wasn't in love with him was only proof that the situation couldn't be changed.

“.....”

Laetitia leaned against Glenreed as she slept.

Knowing that Laetitia loved someone else only made Glenreed more enticed by her strange, sweet smell. Even now, he felt like he might lose focus and end up pulling her closer to him.

*Hearts are difficult to control...*

Glenreed sighed.

If he couldn't get enough of a grip on his own heart to pull himself together, he would need another method of restraining himself.

Glenreed had another trick up his sleeve to stop himself from touching her while his emotions were so out of balance.



**WHEN** I opened my eyes, King Glenreed was frozen.

“...Hello?”

I looked again, but he was still frozen. The elbows of his crossed arms were covered in ice that stretched all the way down to his fingertips.

“.....”

I rubbed my eyes, thinking I must be seeing things, but King Glenreed looked

perfectly unfazed by the state of his icy arms.

*Am I dreaming?*

I pinched my cheeks to see if I could wake myself up.

“Ouch, that hurts...”

“...What are you doing over there?”

His Majesty, with his arms still crossed in the ice, looked at me with confusion on his face. He was acting like *I’d* done something strange, even though he was clearly the one behaving inexplicably.

“That ice is real, isn’t it? Aren’t you cold?” I asked.

“It’s real. And it’s cold.” The king answered me calmly.

I gave the ice a touch to see how it felt. Indeed, it was hard and freezing.

“Why is there ice on your arms? I’ll melt it, so please don’t move for a moment,” I offered.

“Stop worrying. I did it to myself.”

“...Come again?”

The response stunned me for a moment. Such a thick layer of ice should be enough to cause frostbite or even extreme pain. So why would he do such a thing to himself...?

“...Your Majesty, have you just perhaps found out that you enjoy the sensation of pain?” I gulped and asked him that question fearfully.

Everyone in the world had different things they were into, but “ice play” was on a completely different level.

As I tried not to show the mild disgust I was feeling, His Majesty furrowed his brow.

“Knock it off. I’m no pervert.”

“Whaaat...?” A question mark was blinking over my head. It didn’t make sense. “Then why *did* you do it...?”

“I just wanted to stop my arms from moving.”

“???”

I understood the logic, at least. Freezing one’s arms certainly stopped them from moving. But why did he need his arms to be still in the first place?

In my confusion, His Majesty looked off to the side and murmured something to me. “It’s medical treatment.”

“Medical treatment?” I repeated.

“Yes. Medical treatment. I actually waved too much too, so my muscles hurt. That’s why I’m icing them.”

“...And you don’t think that’s too much ice?” I eyed his arms dubiously.

They were completely frozen solid. Ice formed below freezing temperatures. He was well on his way to frostbite.

“Quit worrying. I have a high cold tolerance because of my ancestral powers. This is perfect for me.”

“Is that how ancestral powers work...?”

“Of course.” He nodded, though his head was still turned away from me.

*These ancestral powers never fail to impress me.* I stared at the side of King Glenreed’s face with that thought in mind.



**“WELCOME,** King Glenreed, Queen Laetitia. It’s an honor to have you here.”

We were greeted by the cheery smile of Countess Bargel. She resided in the home where we were staying for the day. She would also be dining together with us shortly.

The Bargel family owned land in the eastern region of Elltoria. As we progressed further down the road, the snow melting more and more as we went, we finally reached my homeland, the kingdom of Elltoria.

“How nostalgic...”

I couldn’t help but remark on the row of food in front of me.

...The nostalgia was real, but it didn’t mean I was happy. I had to force the

smile on my face from faltering.

“I’ve heard you enjoy gourmet food, Queen Laetitia. Please help yourself to the feast I have prepared for Your Majesties tonight. My chefs worked hard to showcase their talents.”

“Right, I’d be happy to.”

*I appreciate the effort, at least...*

My tongue was instantly trampled by a stampede of spices. What was once a fine cut of beef had turned into nothing more than a weapon for stinging and burning my mouth.

*“The more spices, the better.”*

That was the custom among the nobility in my homeland.



“**UGH...** My tongue’s still tingling...” I groaned.

I drank some fruit juice that was sent to my private chambers.

The Bargels were eager to give us the warmest of welcomes. The dinner dishes were heavily seasoned and full of high-quality ingredients, and the flavor was incredibly intense because of it.

“But His Majesty certainly seemed unaffected...” I mused.

King Glenreed had a powerful nose, which should have made the spices particularly hard on him, but he showed no signs of being affected as he chatted with the Bargels throughout dinner. I would expect nothing less from him.

Then there was me—I managed to get through dinner with a smile on my face, but I was in quite a fog now that I was alone.

I’d grown used to Elltorian cooking in the nearly seventeen years I spent there after my reincarnation...but I never actually found the food itself delicious. I enjoyed the meals Gilbert and the other chefs served to me at my villa. Tonight’s downgrade in food quality made it even more difficult for me to get through the evening.

“I wonder if His Majesty is still eating spicy food...”

He was currently socializing with the other men over some after-dinner drinks. The snacks served would most likely be equally spicy as our dinner. He had my sympathies.

*“Humans sure have it rough. Want some of my food?”*

Fifu placed his paw on my knee and communicated telepathically. His dinner was a simple meal of boiled chicken with a sprinkling of salt. Berry had a slice of bread with strawberry jam. It looked much more delicious than my dinner did, that was for sure.

“Thank you. But I don’t want you to be hungry, Fifu, so I’ll pass.” I stroked his head. Fifu then returned to his bowl.

“Kyuwah?”

“Squee squee squee!”

Another fox sat next to Fifu—this one with four tails.

Her name was Fos. Lady I-Liena sent her with us so that Fifu wouldn’t be lonely on the trip as the only two-tailed fox. Since she had only just turned one year old and didn’t have an owner yet, it was easy to take her along, and she could also learn about the world outside of Wolfvarte.

She was an innocent but clever creature, just like Fifu. Not only was she easy to care for, but her fluffy coat was another form of therapy for me on this trip.

“Tweet tweet tweet!”

*“I want food too!”* Tweety seemed to say as he came up to cuddle with me. His cream-yellow feathers completely enveloped me until I could no longer see. The sensation was soft and pleasant, but I was struggling to get any air.

“Hang on, Tweety. I can’t breathe, so let’s...”

When I lifted my head, I froze in place.

I saw Big Brother Yurius standing there...

*Why is he here?!*

Big Brother Yurius, as familiar but intimidating as ever, was standing on the

balcony outside my window.

“Sorry, Tweety, I’ll be a minute!”

“Tweet?!”

I tore the startled bird away from me and went straight to the window. Despite my rush, I made sure my dress and appearance remained perfectly presentable before opening the window and bowing.

“Good evening, Big Brother Yurius. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Yeah, me too. But you get only 70 points,” he responded.

“...How harsh.”

Big Brother Yurius was one of my etiquette teachers. He would occasionally surprise me with strict ratings about my etiquette and manners as a way of reviewing me.

He always adhered to the most scrutinous of standards. My big brothers, who were teachers from hell, always said that the family of a duke should behave elegantly and dignified at all times. To be frank, it was a point of trauma to me now.

Today’s score was 70 points. This was on the low end, since in recent years, I’d almost always managed a score of 90 or higher. Twenty of those missing points were probably because I jumped when I spotted him, even though it was only a single instant. But what were the other ten points?

“Pay more attention. You have a giant feather sticking to your head. Are you trying to act like a chicken? Because I don’t remember having a chicken for a sister.”







“Ah...”

It was Tweety’s feather. I’d tried to fix my hair, but never touched the very top.

I expected my scolding to last a while, but instead, Big Brother Yurius reached his hand out to my head.

He silently stroked my hair. This lasted a bit longer than usual, probably because we’d been apart for so long. Big Brother’s eyes, the same purple color as mine, were a bit slimmer. His shiny golden hair was slightly curly.

Looking at him again after so long, Big Brother Yurius really did have a handsome face. His personality meant that he was just as strict and merciless with himself as well, though his looks were those of a gentle beauty.

Big Brother Yurius only revealed his true nature to his family and close friends. To everyone else, his gentle smile made him look like the ideal young nobleman and an excellent heir to his father’s title. He was greatly respected, even to the point that he had the nickname “Rose Heir” due to our family’s crest being a rose. My brother even lived up to such a romantic nickname. When I looked at those slightly drooping, purple eyes, even I could see why the young ladies swooned over him.

“...Could you please stop now, Big Brother?” When I called out to him, still stroking my hair, he seemed to come to his senses.

“Ah, right. I got the feather for you.”

“Hehe, thank you, Big Brother.”

Big Brother Yurius’s severity was the result of his love.

He constantly looked out for me since I was the youngest child. That was why I always stuck to my hellish lessons and did my best. Though he never failed to point out my every mistake, once I did it right, he always praised me and patted my hair. It was a true carrot-and-stick relationship.

“I see you came to visit the Bargels too. You should have told me you’d be here,” I said.

“There’s no reason for that. I told Lord Bargel that I wanted to surprise my

sister, since I haven't seen her in so long, and he was happy to help."

Of course Lord Bargel was involved.

The balcony outside my window was connected to the garden by a staircase. With Lord Bargel's help, as the owner of this home, it was perfectly easy to reach me.

"...I imagine you didn't tell him you wanted to surprise your sister with a pop quiz," I teased.

"There's no point in going into that much detail."

Big Brother Yurius glided elegantly to the couch in my room and sat down.

I sat across from him, paying extra attention to my own movements.

"You must have come here because Lord Bargel is a very important person, yes?" I queried.

"Right. He's been getting closer to our family lately. I'm sure you know about him though."

"Yes, of course. He holds the title of earl, but the current family head, Lord Gilta..." I rattled off the information I knew about the Bargel family.

This was another one of Big Brother's tests. He had been the one to teach me the names of nobles, as well as their special traits, territory, and relationships with other families. He appeared to be testing whether or not I'd forgotten this knowledge after leaving the country.

"...That about sums it up, yes?" I concluded. "Have I left anything out?"

"No, that was good enough. It sounds like you've kept up your studies in Wolfvarte." My brother's eyes turned toward Lucian, who was standing in a corner of the room.

"Of course she has," Lucian said, taking Big Brother's look as a signal to speak. "Lady Laetitia spends every day in Wolfvarte bettering herself. The people hold great respect for her."

*Thank you, Lucian.*

Although, if I told my eldest brother that all my studying was just so I could

cook better, I expected I would receive a full course of scolding. Big Brother Yurius deeply believed that nobles should exist as the model person who constantly improved themselves. Completely unlike Big Brother Claude, he was a diligent, prideful person.

“I see. I’m glad you’re doing well,” he said. “Even though you’re back at home now, be careful not to bring shame to the Gramwell family. ...Try not to become completely engrossed in cooking while here.”

“...Of course.”

*Ah, he knows.*

My brother knew to warn me. His smile was very intense. His handsome face made him all the more frightening.

“Have you noticed anything about Lord Bargel?” he suddenly asked.

“By that, you must be referring to the fact that His Lordship is in poor health?” I ventured.

He had acted pleasant and sociable during dinner. But his movements seemed to lack energy. I also felt that he was drinking more water than normal.

“Correct. There’s been rumors lately that the earl is ill. One reason he’s been getting close to our family is probably so that he can improve our relations while he’s still able to. The end goal would be to have his son, the next earl, marry into our family or at least have a strong enough connection with us.”

Lord Bargel was forty-eight years old as of this year. The average lifespan of a nobleman in this country was about sixty years old, so it wasn’t unthinkable that he would start declining in health around now.

“What are His Lordship’s symptoms?” I asked.

“He gets fatigued easily, and even in cold weather like we’re having now, he’s always parched. These could be signs of aging, but a lot of the nobility are starting to see similar symptoms over the past few years. Keep in mind that there may be a new disease whose symptoms advance quietly and slowly going around.”

“A disease that advances slowly and makes you thirsty...” I repeated.

*Could it be?*

There was a similar illness I saw often in my past life.

“We haven’t met. You must be Laetitia’s older brother.”

King Glenreed entered my room. He didn’t seem surprised to see Big Brother Yurius there. Lord Bargel must have told him about the visit.

“My name is Yurius, the heir to the Gramwell Dukedom. Your reputation is well known even in this faraway land, King Glenreed. It is truly an honor to meet you.” Big Brother Yurius kept a bold, elegant smile on his face, showing no signs of wavering in the king’s presence.

It was nothing like the expression he wore with me only seconds ago. He was incredibly fast at switching dispositions.



“**SO** this is the capital of this country?”

It was a few days after I met with Big Brother Yurius. We’d finally reached our destination—the Elltorian capital of Edilushia.

The streets were made of cobblestone that radiated out in waves from the castle to the north. I stared out at them from the window of our carriage.

Edilushia has a very long history. It was founded over a thousand years earlier, and remnants of the original town and its surroundings still remained. I wanted to take His Majesty sightseeing if we ever found the opportunity.

“We’ll take the carriage a bit further until we arrive at my family’s townhouse,” I said.

The capital townhouse we lived in was massive and had a long history of its own. Unlike our main manor house in the territory we governed, this house was an impressive terraced building that stood in a prime location of the capital city.

King Glenreed would be staying with us for the duration of our trip—just under a month.

Distinguished guests from many other lands were gathered for the ceremonies, and because Elltoria didn’t have enough guest homes for all of

them, I would stay at my family home despite being a queen.

We drove through the familiar capital on the way there.

*I wonder if Father is doing well?*

He was such a doting parent when it came to his only daughter. I remembered how sad he was when we parted ways. My heart raced at the thought of seeing him for the first time in a year.

“Mraw?!” Berry’s tail had puffed up.

Wondering what had startled her, King Glenreed and I both looked out the carriage window. Contrasted against the sunny, spring weather was a person giving off an aura of pure intimidation.

“...Is that the *Devil*?” King Glenreed asked.

“No, that’s my father.”

Although, he did look particularly devilish...

Father had naturally glaring eyes that made him look ready to kill. I comforted the frightened Berry and stepped out of our carriage once it had stopped.

“It’s been so long, Father. How is your health?”

“I’ve been well, my dear. Laetitia, I’m so glad to see you looking healthy too.”

He furrowed his brow, deepening his wrinkles and making him look even more menacing. Despite the terrifying look, this was how Father smiled. Smiling failed to soften his features at all. It only made him look more villainous...

But this felt like the first time I’d ever sensed this level of intimidation coming from him.

“Thank you for choosing to stay here on your journey, King Glenreed.”

I swore I saw a 50 percent increase in pressure coming from his face as soon as he turned to greet the king. His Majesty remained collected, but a person fainter of heart probably would have fled immediately.

“Of course. Laetitia, my queen, and I are grateful for your hospitality.”

*“My queen.”*

As soon as he said those words, Father's face intensified into something even more evil.

*...What's going on here? Is this the "I'll never let you steal my daughter!" sort of thing?*

But I'd already married King Glenreed, even if it was only for political purposes...

"Please wait, Father." I forced a strained smile on my face as I stepped in between the two men. "King Glenreed treats me very well in Wolfvarte. I hope for him to have a pleasant stay here after everything he's done for me."

"...Well, of course. It's an honor to have a foreign king stay with me. As the head of the Gramwell family, I'll be sure that you enjoy your stay here to the fullest."

Father's oppressive aura was starting to ease up. His face remained as frightening as ever, but that was business as usual.

The three of us moved to the parlor inside to have tea together. Father kept the pressure to a minimum and behaved as a wise, dignified host.

Neither Father nor King Glenreed were particularly the types to smile much, but they kept the mood pleasant from beginning to end.

"All right. I'm going to turn in first," King Glenreed said. "I'm sure you two have much to discuss."

I gratefully accepted His Majesty's offer to give us time alone and saw him to the door. Then I turned back toward Father. "Father, I'm just so pleased to see you again...!"

"Not as pleased as me. How have things been? Are you eating properly? Is there anything you need that you're not getting? No one's bullying you, are they? If anyone's tried to hurt you, I swear I'll—"

Father bombarded me with a dozen questions.

The dignified conduct he displayed earlier was replaced with a concerned, yet pleased stare in my direction.

"Goodness, Father. I'm perfectly fine. My brothers have trained me well. I can

get my revenge and then some on anyone who harms me, and His Majesty is also doing as much as he can to be sure I never come in any danger.”

“As much as he can? So that means you *have* been in danger? Were you injured?”

He grabbed my shoulders and looked over my arms and neck, trying to see if I’d been hurt. He had always been the type who cared deeply for his family, but this felt like an even more dramatic escalation of a doting parent. Perhaps this was just the manifestation of his concerns for the daughter who married away to a different country.

“I’m not hurt. Even aside from His Majesty, there are lots of people in Wolfvarte who take care of me. I’ve gotten wrapped up in a little trouble here and there, but aside from that, my life there is fun and... Oh?”

“Pardon me, Lord Gardocia.”

A knock came at the door and an old butler, who had worked for our family for many years, stepped into the room. It was unusual for a servant to interrupt our private conversations. Father’s expression turned grim.

“What is it?” Father asked.

“You have a visitor. Princess Velta has just arrived.”

“...I see.” He let out a heavy sigh and furrowed his brow. “I’ll deal with her first. If you could keep her at the front door—”

“Good day. Is this where I’ll find King Glenreed?”

Princess Velta entered through the door with imposing steps. Her mother was the second queen, making her Prince Fritz’s half sister. Princess Velta’s blonde hair fluttered around her. She wore a blue dress, the same color as her eyes, with impeccably done makeup and hair. Her red lips were curled into a determined smile.

“Oh dear. Where is the king? I came all this way. Let me see him right away,” she demanded.

“Please wait, Your Highness,” Father spoke up as if to scold her. “King Glenreed has only just arrived and is tired from his journey. Please come back

another day when you can meet with him.”

“I can’t wait that long. He’s here, isn’t he? Bring him to me now.” The princess showed no signs of backing down.

I could tell that Father was backed into a corner. There was little he could do to refuse a member of the Elltorian royal family.

“You have my sincerest apologies, but I’ll have to ask that you leave.” I decided to handle Princess Velta instead. “There are currently no plans scheduled for Your Highness to meet with King Glenreed. His Majesty intends to stay in the capital for some time, so you’ll be able to speak with him another day.”

“You expect me to come back later?” Princess Velta fanned herself as she pouted openly. “How dare you speak to me that way? Who do you think you are? You’re just a duke’s daughter.”

“Actually, I’m currently the queen of the Wolfvartian kingdom,” I corrected her.

“The queen? Aren’t you just a placeholder?” She sneered at me. Her blue eyes sparkled with a sadistic light. “You’re just a sad woman, expelled from your own country and clinging to a throne you have no claim to. What gives you the right to challenge me, a true member of royalty?” She snickered from behind her folding fan.

Father’s face had turned back into that of the Devil as he listened to the princess insult me. But she didn’t seem even slightly fazed by this. In a way, it was impressive.

“I’ll ask that you go through the proper procedures if you wish to have an audience with His Majesty,” I said, unruffled by her provocation. “Isn’t it all the more important to follow the rules and formalities when interacting with fellow royalty?”

“Are you mocking me? A placeholder queen could never understand the thinking of a real princess. How utterly conceited of you.” Princess Velta made no attempts to hide her hostility toward me.

The princess hated me for political reasons as well as an issue from our past.



From my perspective, she was being nothing more than a spoiled brat in this situation, but as royalty, it was hard to just ignore her.

“It’s always been so grating to listen to the ridiculous things you say,” she spat. “That vanity must be why my brother got rid of you, hmm?”

“Prince Fritz’s hatred of me has nothing to do with this situation.”

“Are you sure about that? If you couldn’t even win my idiot brother’s heart, what makes you think King Glenreed doesn’t despise you too? What right do you have to speak on his behalf? I just know he’s waiting for the day to kick you off your throne too.”

“King Glenreed isn’t that kind of person.”

I made that point as clear as I could.

I had no way of knowing how His Majesty really felt about me deep down. But I was certain he wasn’t lying when he said he enjoyed my cooking, and he clearly respected me as his queen too. At the very least, he definitely wasn’t the kind of person to openly treat others with hostility because of his own emotions, like Princess Velta was.

“And what would a fake queen even know about the king?” Her voice was growing louder and more unhinged. “Get out of my way. I’m going to talk to King Glenreed myself. I just know he’s sick of you already and wants to—”

“Silence.”

“Eek!!” The princess gulped and dropped her fan.

King Glenreed’s icy voice cut through the room. He must have returned once he heard the commotion.

“Are the royalty in this country not educated in manners?” His Majesty stood in front of me to confront Princess Velta. Calmly, he narrowed his blue-green eyes at her. “Insulting *my* queen is the same as declaring yourself my enemy. Do you understand?”

“.....”

“You wanted to talk to me, right? If you have an excuse for your insolence, now’s the time to share it.” His pressure cut through the room like a blade of

ice.

Princess Velta was frozen in silence, but eventually, her lips twitched. "...Fine."

"What's fine?"

"I can make do with you." She licked her taut, smiling lips in a challenge. There was an intense fire burning in those eyes of hers as she looked up at King Glenreed. "When I heard about the king who ruled a kingdom of mutts, I assumed he'd be a terrible beast...but I never expected someone so beautiful."

"...Mutts...?"

King Glenreed's eyes narrowed to slits when he heard the insult to beastfolk.

But Princess Velta rambled on passionately, ignoring his response. "I've taken a liking to you. I wouldn't mind pairing up with you, King Glenreed. What do you say? Shall we have a talk?"

"...What are you talking about?" He tensed his brow in confusion. "First, you need to apologize to Laetitia. And don't ever use the term 'mutt' again. It's unthinkable that you would impose yourself on me without knowing anything of my own plans. If you want to talk to me, I expect the bare minimum of courtesy."

"Why does any of that matter now? Let's go into the other room and speak alone—"

"Don't touch me." King Glenreed bluntly brushed her outstretched arm away.

This caused Princess Velta's eyebrows to rise in shock. "Why...? Why won't you take my arm and escort me...?!"

"I told you. I have no interest in speaking with you. If you cling to me any further, I'll be forced to raise objections with the Elltorian king."

"...!" When she heard her father's name, Princess Velta bit down on her lip. She snapped her folding fan closed and pointed it straight at me. "You! It has to be you! You told King Glenreed terrible things about me so that I couldn't get close to him, didn't you?!"

"That's a baseless accusation."

I had to stop myself from sighing. The fact that this woman was a princess in my homeland was threatening to give me a headache. I sort of wanted to cry.

“Just you wait! You’ll soon learn how wonderful I am, Your Majesty!”

With that last declaration from the red-faced princess, she took her servants and left. Once I saw her carriage depart from the manor, I turned to King Glenreed and bowed my head.

“I’m terribly sorry for how a princess from my homeland has treated you.”

“You don’t need to apologize. It was obvious that you and your father were the victims here.”

“...I thank you sincerely for your generous words.” Father bowed his head too. “Princess Velta was seeking an audience with Your Majesty once she found out you would be staying here. Of course, I rejected this pursuit, since I had no say in your schedule...”

“So she abused her royal privileges to show up unannounced?”

“Indeed. I apologize for exposing you to such a humiliating scene.”

It was clear that Father had been struggling with Princess Velta too. But fortunately, His Majesty showed no signs of reprimanding Father for the encounter.

“She must have wanted to obtain me and my country as allies for the next heir to the throne, right?” King Glenreed said.

“That’s what I believe,” Father nodded grimly. “She was likely scheming to have you join her side before the other factions managed to get you in their camp.”

“I see. That adds up with why she would come here as soon as I arrived in the capital...” King Glenreed’s face darkened as he seemed to recall the tumultuous encounter with the princess. “But did she really want to win my country over with that attitude? Her insulting my queen and use of the word ‘mutt’ could only have the opposite effect, as I see it.”

“...Princess Velta is bad at interpersonal relationships.”

“...I see.” His Majesty seemed to understand what Father was suggesting with

his bitter words. “It sounds like this country’s people are also burdened by having someone like her in the royal family. She refuses to follow proper procedures for a royal meeting, can’t contain her truest feelings, and even tried to grab my arm. Was that her attempt at seducing me? What was she thinking when I already have Laetitia?”

I could hear the bitterness in King Glenreed’s words as he thought back to it all.

“I believe...that Princess Velta didn’t have anything deeper in mind when it came to your interaction just now,” I said.

“What?”

I explained Princess Velta’s true nature to the grimacing king. “Princess Velta is extremely attracted to men with good looks, and you’re very beautiful, Your Majesty...”

In fact, looks were all that mattered to her.

In the castle, Princess Velta was waited on by beautiful men. She enjoyed numerous love affairs since she wasn’t yet engaged herself. Some of these men even had fiancées of their own, causing many young ladies to cry themselves to sleep at night.

“I get that she values looks...but still, isn’t it too soon? How could she try to get so cozy with me when we’d only just met?” King Glenreed asked.

“...You were probably her type in every way.” I smiled awkwardly.

As Glenreed’s queen, I was used to seeing him, but even I sometimes found my heart speeding up at the sight of His Majesty’s perfect good looks. I understood why it was love at first sight for someone like Princess Velta.

“Princess Velta once felt strongly for Big Brother Bernard as well,” I explained. “Even as his sister, I think Big Brother Bernard has a very manly and handsome face. He resembles you somewhat in that regard, Your Majesty.”

The two of them both had stiff, beautiful features and silver hair. They were also tall and talented with swords. These appeared to also be some of the traits that put a target on their backs for Princess Velta.

“When Princess Velta tried to start a relationship with him, Big Brother Bernard apparently said, ‘Sorry, but my sister’s much cuter than you, and I have more fun being with my younger brother and sister than in your company.’ ...So that’s why Princess Velta still sees me as the enemy,” I sighed.

I’d been completely dragged into the whole thing against my will. Big Brother Bernard wasn’t trying to be hostile, and I’m sure he simply wanted to reject her honestly since he wasn’t attracted to her as a romantic interest... But I wished he would have been a bit more cautious when it came to the subtleties of male-female relationships.

*Big Brother Bernard is a brilliant soldier, but there’s a lot of stuff he doesn’t understand...*

With that thought in mind, His Majesty and I had to discuss how to handle Princess Velta from here on out.



**IT** was the day after Princess Velta’s ambush.

We headed toward the Elltorian castle after receiving an invitation from the king.

“Silver Wolf King. Thank you for traveling so far to see me.”

King Maldias, the Elltorian king sitting upon his throne, was forty-three years old. Prince Atialdo, his younger brother, was nearly twenty years younger than him.

His blonde hair was beginning to gray, and he also looked like he’d lost weight since the last time we met. His Majesty’s slender body was wrapped in a fancy cloak, and he appeared to be leaning back against his throne.

“It’s been a while, Laetitia. You’re a wise woman, so I’m sure you’re doing well in Wolfvarte.”

“I am also honored to see you once again, King Maldias. Thanks in part to King Glenreed, my life in Wolfvarte is full of health and happiness.” I exchanged greetings with the king as was customary.

King Maldias had approved of my marriage to King Glenreed in order to clean

up after Prince Fritz and follow through with my exile, but we didn't have a hostile relationship in particular. I'd always respected the king of my homeland, and His Majesty also treated me properly as a duke's daughter and the once future queen of his kingdom.

King Maldias had few major accomplishments as a ruler, and the war that occurred five years prior had ended in what was essentially a loss for Elltoria, but compared to Prince Fritz or Princess Velta, he was much easier to get along with.

King Glenreed provided an outline of his schedule during his stay in Elltoria and exchanged simple pleasantries with King Maldias.

"All right. I'll do what I can to ensure your plans go smoothly. My children, Fritz and Velta, have told me they want to meet with you. Do you think that will be possible?"

"...Yes, I can meet them."

King Glenreed and I exchanged glances.

Naturally, Princess Velta's surprise visit to my house yesterday was done without His Majesty's approval. He asked us to disregard her actions and not think of them as representing the kingdom of Elltoria.

King Glenreed agreed to ignore yesterday's events as well, since he didn't want to worsen the situation or cause any trouble. The political situation in this country was growing less and less stable. King Glenreed didn't want to stick his nose in it either.

The termination of my engagement was one cause of the political turmoil in Elltoria. Prince Fritz took a major blow to his reputation by abandoning and exiling me. He held onto his title of crown prince, but the position was no longer a peaceful one.

He now had a rival in the form of Princess Velta, his half sister six years his elder. Despite the fact that most marriages in this country took place from the late teens to early twenties, the twenty-four-year-old princess wasn't even engaged yet. Marrying a subject of the royal family would result in a near total loss of her spot in the line of succession to the throne. What Princess Velta was

after was the removal of Prince Fritz so that she could become queen.

Men generally inherited the throne in this country, and even after a thousand years of history, there were only a few queens who reigned in their own right. But it wasn't unprecedented. Princess Velta also had many backers. Since Prince Fritz was the only son of King Maldias, her chances were higher than usual.

Prince Fritz wasn't even attending the present meeting between kings.

If King Maldias had already decided that Prince Fritz would be his heir, then he should have used this opportunity to introduce him to King Glenreed. But the absence of both the prince and princess seemed to indicate that His Majesty had yet to decide on a successor.

The instability of this situation was probably why Princess Velta was so aggressive with King Glenreed yesterday. She was desperate to get to him and turn him into an ally as quickly as possible.

As I reached my conclusions about the political affairs of my homeland, we eventually wrapped up our conversation with the king.

King Glenreed and I were heading back to our carriage when we heard someone call out to us from the side.

"King Glenreed, Queen Laetitia. How were your talks with King Maldias?"

It was Prince Atialdo, the younger brother of King Maldias. He was a handsome young man who wore his dark brown hair tied up, his black eyes lit with a calm intelligence deep inside them. He was the member of royalty in charge of diplomatic affairs and had recently visited me in Wolfvarte to deliver invitations to His Majesty and me.

Since this was a good opportunity, we invited him to return home with us so that we could discuss things together. However...

"He certainly did turn into a deer."

Almost as soon as the three of us were alone in the carriage, the prince transformed into a deer. He had a brown body and long eyelashes that surrounded his dark black eyes. A pair of branching antlers sprouted from his head.

*“Not again...”*

I could tell that was what His Highness was saying from his gloomy body language. He hung his head, but this caused his antlers to strike the wall of the carriage, which only further depressed him.

“Please don’t worry about it. You won’t damage the carriage, and we’re the only ones around right now,” I assured him.

Prince Atialdo possessed the power to transform into an ancestral deer. Very few people knew of this ability. He must have let his guard down, since we were the only occupants of the carriage, and we’d seen this in action before.

Prince Atialdo was famous for his warm demeanor and wise personality. I could tell this made his failures even harder on him. He kept his head turned away, facing the ground while he dug at the floor timidly with his hooves. I could only guess, since he was unable to speak in this state, but I imagined he was too upset to make a sound right now.

“...Now that I think of it, I wonder what sounds deer make?” I muttered aloud.

I felt like the deer I fed crackers to in Nara didn’t make sounds either. They were herbivores and quiet creatures, so it was possible they rarely cried.

*“Prrrrrooooo...”*

Prince Atioldo let out a delicate, shrill cry that sounded like air coming out of a flute.

*So that’s what deer sound like.*

This was surprising, because I’d expected them to make something like horse whinnies based on their appearance.

“Thank you for that, Your Highness. Now I’ve solved the mystery,” I said with a smile.

*“Pyooooo...”*

My gratitude prompted him to let out another slightly sad cry in our carriage.



**PRINCE** Atialdo returned to human form before we arrived at my house.



“I’m terribly sorry that you’ve had to witness me in that state twice now.”

The prince had nothing but apologies for us as soon as we set foot in the parlor.

“Don’t worry about it. I know just how fickle ancestral reversion can be.” Glenreed’s own feelings were palpable. “You must have lost control again because you came close to me and my powers, right? In a way, it’s all my fault.”

“Please don’t be ridiculous. I was in the wrong. My ancestral powers are severely lacking, which means I have no real powers I can use, nor can I control my transformations. I’m so sorry to make you lay eyes on that pathetic deer.”

“Please don’t be so hard on yourself. I really like your deer form, Your Highness.”

My condolences only roused a bitter smile from the prince. It looked like it had the opposite effect.

“Queen Laetitia, you are most kind... But it’s all right. I understand. We may both possess ancestral transformations, but I lack your dignity, grace, and powers, Your Majesty. Unlike the proud wolves who sit on top of the food chain, I am a deer who can eat nothing but plants...”

He let out a deep sigh. I could tell how sensitive Prince Atialdo was about his deer form. It appeared that men may not appreciate their transformative animal being herbivores.

“I think deer are beautiful animals,” I told him. “Their long legs are elegant but powerful, and even just now, your form was very impressive to me. Of course, you’re plenty appealing as you are now too. I think both forms are wonderful.”

“Thank you. But please don’t say any more.” His Highness cast his gaze down, perhaps not used to being praised for his deer form. “But wolves are jealous creatures. I don’t want him to think I’m stealing his mate...”

His voice trembled as he whispered something under his breath.

I was curious about what he’d said, but King Glenreed ended up clearing his throat to change subjects.

“Did it strike you as odd that Fritz and Velta weren’t present in the meeting with Maldias?”

“I predicted as much. It seems like His Majesty is struggling to pick an heir,” I said.

“What about you?” he asked Prince Atialdo. “Which of the two would you want to lead the country?” King Glenreed wasted no time getting to the point. Since the two of them knew of each other’s secret, they seemed to share a reluctance to waste any time with roundabout conversations.

“I don’t intend to become an ally or an enemy of either side. No matter who takes the throne, I’ll be working for them in the end.”

“Do you really see any value in serving either of them?” The king’s question was merciless.

Prince Atialdo’s face fell a bit in response, but then he laughed awkwardly. “Serving the king means dedicating yourself to the country. As a member of the royal family myself, it’s my duty to do whatever I can for the good of the kingdom.”

“If you really care about Elltoria, then I think you’re the most worthy candidate to take the throne over either of them.”

It appeared that King Glenreed couldn’t forget Princess Velta’s pitiful display that he witnessed firsthand, nor what he knew of Prince Fritz from me.

Prince Atialdo’s smile turned to one of self-deprecation. He sighed with his reply. “I’m not fit to be king. I’m timid, not confident in the things I need to be, and I fail at so many things I do. Didn’t you see how I just transformed into a deer in front of you?”

“But aren’t you famous for being a brilliant diplomat? You’ve never transformed at the worst timing before. You may have failed here and there, but you’re doing the job a member of royalty should.”

“No, I just have good luck in getting results. I’m certainly not deserving of your praise, King Glenreed.”

“In that case, then aren’t my results just good luck too? I sometimes

transform into a wolf unintentionally as well. My ancestral powers may be a burden, but that's not all they are, right?" King Glenreed watched Prince Atialdo closely in an attempt to read him better.

Part of King Glenreed's wolf powers was his ability to control ice as well as his special nose. Prince Atialdo may have had unique powers of his own too.

"You're being much too kind, Your Majesty. My character as a person and the purity of my ancestral powers don't rival yours whatsoever. I don't even have the power to control plants like the sacred deer from the legend. All I can do is change forms, and even that I can't control properly. It's simply a means of disgracing myself."

Prince Atialdo shook his head lightly. His smile showed traces of resignation.

"I lack the spirit, abilities, and results required to become a ruler. When I look at Your Majesty, who has earned the title of Silver Wolf King at such a young age, I can't ignore my own inadequacy."

"...I see. So that's how you feel." King Glenreed didn't seem to want to press the issue any further.

It would be impossible to speak to anyone in Prince Fritz or Princess Velta's camps about this without stirring up issues. It appeared he decided to lightly dig into the matter here for good.

After that, we continued with easier conversations until it was time for Prince Atialdo to return home.

## Chapter 3: Part Time Student, Full Time Queen

“I never thought I would wear this outfit again.”

I did a little spin in front of the mirror, checking to be sure everything looked to be in order. I was dressed in the Royal Elltorian Academy uniform. It was the most prestigious school in the kingdom, and its uniforms were fittingly stylish. A white bolero covered the top of my dress with a ribbon tied at the chest.

My maid looked me over to be sure the size around my hips and the length were correct for me. Then I put on a bit of makeup, tied my hair back with a bow, and with that, the look was complete.

“All right, Father. I’ll be going now.”

“Right. Take care.”

After stopping by the library to greet Father, Lucian and I entered the carriage.

Starting today, I was going to make multiple visits to the academy during my stay in Elltoria. The reason for this was to attend the necessary lectures to ultimately take my graduation exam.

I left the country last winter, during my second year at the academy, when I had my engagement called off suddenly. The school ended up treating my absence as a break, not a withdrawal, which meant I was still qualified to take a graduation exam.

Most nobles in the country, especially those of higher rank and the royal family, graduated from school. I decided to try my hand at the exam too, since there was no harm in having an academic history.

People generally married or inherited a title after graduation. But since some students had to leave the academy in the middle of their education for one reason or another, they were allowed to take special lectures in preparation for their graduation exams if they’d been enrolled for over a year. However, even

students with these special circumstances still had to take the same exam as everyone else. Each year saw 30 percent of students fail the exam, so I needed to study properly.

“Although, I feel that in my case, I could get by just fine with Big Brother Yurius’s hellish lessons...” I muttered.

Thinking back on my days of fun and excitement studying under Big Brother Yurius, the teacher from hell, had my eyes glazing over.

After a noble’s graduation from the academy came lessons in etiquette, geography, language, and magic theory and practice. But my brothers had already hammered all of these subjects into me. On top of that, I reviewed everything I needed to know when I trained to become the queen.

King Glenreed and I would have separate schedules while I was away taking my classes and exam. I wanted to wrap this up quickly so that I wouldn’t extend our stay longer than necessary.

My carriage passed through the nostalgic gates, approaching the marble schoolhouse. I exited at the designated space for carriages, leaving Lucian behind, and began to hear the whispers coming from all around.

“I can’t believe she’s showing her face here again.”

“Is that the same Queen Laetitia from all the rumors?”

“Prince Fritz dumped her and sent her out of the country, right? That would be too much for me to bear.”

I took in their whispers and murmurs.

*Yeah, it’s awkward, all right. Not that it’s a surprise.*

Elltoria held its noble families and their long histories as a source of pride. They were proud of them to a fault. Being expelled from the country was a humiliation equal to death, but considering that I ended up in Wolfvarte, a kingdom home to beastfolk, I was an object of total pity and ridicule. There was no solving this problem, so I simply passed by the other students with a smile on my face.

“She comes back with the smell of those mutts on her— EEK!”

*“Those mutts.”*

I couldn't let that go, so I showed the student the overpowering smile I'd inherited from my father. Anyone who would use a word like that in private, much less publicly where they could be heard, was clearly not a good person. I believed the boy who said it was the third son of Viscount Rockishy. I would mention this to Father later so that he could caution the Rockishy family.

As I passed through the crowd of students, now hushed, someone called out to me.

“It's been a while, Queen Laetitia. I see your smile is as effective as ever.”

“You look well too, Elsha.”

The black-haired earl's daughter, Elsha, was one of my only friends at the academy. She was carrying a stack of books in her arms like I was used to seeing her with. Both her older brother and her were bookworms. We came to know each other because our brothers were friends before us.

“Have you found any interesting books in Wolfvarte?” she asked.

“I picked out a few to bring home as souvenirs. I'd been planning on taking them to your house along with Big Brother Claude, but...” I stared at Elsha as she walked alongside me. “You just called my smile ‘effective,’ right? Could it be that you've always known I have a villain's smile?”

“Of course I did. Are you saying you didn't notice, Lady Laetitia?”

No comment.

Until a year ago, I never knew that the smile I worked so hard to put on my face was completely identical to Father's. Thinking back, there were many instances where I could have figured this out, but I was so busy with my training to become queen...

“Pfft... Hehehe... I figured you were doing it on purpose, but you had no clue all along. Hehehehe!”

“Do you really need to laugh so much?”

“Hehe. How could I not? You can be surprisingly dense at times, Queen Laetitia.”

“Geez. If you knew, I wish you’d have told me sooner.”

“How could I? I had no idea you weren’t aware of it. Ehehehe!”

The two of us continued down through the hallways of the school, Elsha seeming to now be in the middle of a laughing fit.

But these peaceful moments didn’t last long.

“Laetitia!”

I went still when I heard my name called. The source of the voice was none other than the blond-haired, blue-eyed Prince Fritz—my former fiancé.

“How can you show your face in this school again?!” he bellowed at me.

“I’m taking my graduation exam. I’ve received permission to be here.” I turned around and put on my most passable smile.

This was the man I’d once sworn my future to. He was also the person who expelled me from my homeland. I felt neither love nor hatred toward him. My heart didn’t stir at all now. If anything, it was the same feeling as being barked at by a random dog.

“Don’t make trouble,” he hissed at me. “You’ve been banned from this country for over a year. Don’t you know how hard the graduation exam is? You’re only going to embarrass yourself.”

“I’ve prepared to ensure that I pass. Are you making progress in your studies too, Your Highness?”

“...! Shut your mouth!” His face twisted up in pain as he lashed out at me.

*...Could this reaction mean he’s at risk of not graduating?*

Even with a passing rate of 70 percent, the royal family usually studied under private tutors. Only a few members have failed to graduate throughout history. Most of these failures came down to health issues too. Having a member of the royal family fail to graduate, much less the crown prince himself, seemed like a bad sign.

“Laetitia!! This is all your fault!” he accused.

“Excuse me?”

*What's this about?*

My mouth was nearly hanging open out of genuine confusion.

“What could I possibly have to do with Your Highness’s studies?”

“You have everything to do with it! All of it! My grades only went down after you left. The same goes for Mother’s scoldings and all the trouble in my life. It all started once I ended our engagement! I know you must’ve pulled something in the background because you were jealous of my and Sumia’s happiness!”

“...How could you reach such a conclusion?” I had to focus on my face to maintain an expression that didn’t show my total disgust.

Prince Fritz’s mother, the third queen, was the one who arranged for our engagement. It made sense that she would scold him after he not only broke off the engagement but expelled me from the kingdom as well.

“I’ve spent the last year in Wolfvarte and nowhere else,” I told him. “It would be impossible for me to harass you here at school.”

“You must have ordered others to do it, right? How else would I be running into all this trouble all of a sudden?”

“You shouldn’t make accusations against people without any proof.”

I definitely hadn’t harassed anyone, so I expected that what Prince Fritz was experiencing was the result of his own actions.

When I was engaged to him, I had to act as an intermediary agent for the many students who wanted to get closer to him at school. I was busy with my studies to become the queen, and of course, the incident with Sumia ending my engagement had occurred, but my school life was generally peaceful. I was the one who always shared in Prince Fritz’s burdens.

All that had changed was the prince now being forced to experience the brunt of those problems by himself. There was nothing I could do to help, since he was the one who ended things, nor was there anything I was obligated to do either.

“All right then, Your Highness. It’s time for my special lectures, so I’ll be on my way now,” I said curtly.



“Wait! Are you running away?!”

I ignored his cries and headed to my classroom.

Sighing at the immediate arrival of the gloomy climate in which I would have to spend my school days, I felt Elsha pat my shoulder from the side to cheer me up.



**THOUGH** it didn’t come as a surprise, I was not treated very well at school.

The nobles in this country were generally split into either Prince Fritz’s or Princess Velta’s factions. Some students belonged to neutral families like mine, but most were just quietly waiting for the storm to pass. This left the other two factions to stand out even more in comparison. Since Prince Fritz actually attended this school, he’d won over more students than his sister.

I always heard people snickering at me in between classes. I was someone Prince Fritz hated. Insulting me was a sure way to win Prince Fritz’s favor, even if only slightly.

“I’m not sure if I should call them foolish or brave...”

I was still the queen of Wolfvarte, even if I was only a figurehead. Publicly gossiping about a foreign country’s queen was the same as looking down on the entire country. The same went for Prince Fritz, who not only failed to stop them but actually fanned the flames. Quite frankly, it concerned me greatly that someone like him was the crown prince of Elltoria.

With a sigh, I was about to head to lunch when I was met head-on with my next attacker.

“Queen Laetitia, I want to talk to you, so come with me.”

This was Dustin, the red-haired third son of the royal army commander. He was a follower of Prince Fritz and had feelings for Sumia as well. He was also the person who pushed me into the fountain last year.

I prepared to cast a spell in case he was about to use me as a display of strength again.

“W-Wait! Calm down! Violence is bad!” he shouted in a panic.

“You’re one to talk. I haven’t forgotten how you pushed me into the fountain,” I reminded him.

“That was to protect Sumia...no...I do feel bad about that.” Dustin scratched his head uncomfortably.

That was unexpected. I fully expected him to fight back and come at me with insults next... It appeared that he had actually reflected on his actions. He even referred to me properly as “queen.”

“...I went and collected myself after that. You’re scary, Your Majesty, but you’re still a lady. There was someone who told me that strong men shouldn’t resort to violence with no warning.”

“I’m glad to hear you have someone sensible in your life,” I remarked.

“Yeah, me too... Wait! I’m not done talking yet!”

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

“But I do, so just wait!!” He could easily catch up to me as I walked away.

“What is it? I’m trying to go have my lunch,” I said coolly.

“It’s about the harassment toward Sumia. The person who pushed her down the stairs—”

“Lord Dustin?!”

The boy went completely stiff when he heard that shrill voice.

Sumia, Prince Fritz’s fiancée, rushed up to him, her chestnut-brown hair bobbing.

“Why are you with Lady Laetitia?! She’s dangerous! Come over to me, quickly!”

She was treating me like some sort of dangerous animal on the loose.

This probably stemmed from the time she trapped me inside her magic barrier. I broke free with a spell, but I ended up taking some of her hair along with the barrier itself. Sumia’s hair still hadn’t returned to its former length, and she was staring at me with a pale face.

“Calm down, Sumia,” Dustin said. “Queen Laetitia isn’t going to turn violent

out of nowhere.”

“How can you say that?! You’re so cruel! You trust her more than me?!” she cried. Though her body trembled with fear, she was clearly irritated as well. I knew she must be frustrated to see that Dustin refused to leave me.

Dustin, on the other hand, had frozen up in response. He stood there stiffly like a decorative plant.

“Sumia! There you are!”

Hearing the commotion, Prince Fritz’s second follower, the glasses-wearing Ilius, rushed up to us. He furrowed his brow at Sumia when he saw our odd group. Then his face tensed as if he didn’t know what to do.

“...Long time no see,” he said to me. “You look well despite the exile— Ahem, no, how shameless of you to show your face here.”

Not even the cough in the middle could stop him from spitting the insult out in the end. As always, his personality remained impressive.

“Good day, Lord Ilius. ...I see your glasses continue to give you a sinister look.” I whispered the second half of that remark so that only he could hear it now that he was closer to me.

Ilius used to be the rival I competed with for the top grades in our class. We weren’t friends, but we interacted quite a lot, so we were at the point where we could stop playing nice and exchange amicable insults. The familiar interaction made me chuckle softly. For some reason, this caused Ilius’s eyes to go wide.

“...I’ve never seen you laugh like that in front of others before.”

He was muttering something to himself quietly. I felt comfortable ignoring this, since it was probably just some insult or sarcastic retort.

“If you have something to say to Sumia, please go ahead,” I told him. “I’m sure you intend to make her study, right?”

“...Yes, that’s right. Sumia still hasn’t studied enough.” Ilius let out a sigh.

Sumia was also feeling the pressure of the impending graduation exam. Sumia, who pretended to be the illegitimate child of a baron, but who was

actually a commoner, only had a superficial knowledge of aristocratic matters. I knew she would be at risk of failing unless she dedicated herself to learning.

“Let’s go, Sumia,” Ilius said to her. “I’ll help you study so as not to embarrass His Highness as his fiancée.”

“No! It’s nothing but studies, studies, studies with you! I hate it!” She smacked his hand away and went to cling to Dustin.

“Sumia...”

“Let’s go, Lord Dustin. Lady Laetitia and Lord Ilius here both like to bully me. I’m sick of them.” She took his arm to pull him away from me.

Dustin blushed from having her body pressed so close to his. My understanding was that having grown up in a military family of all boys, Dustin had no immunity when it came to girls his own age.

“Please don’t whine, Sumia,” Ilius said. “Come now, let’s go.”

“Stop it! I’ll tell His Highness!”

Ilius dragged the crying Sumia off down the hall. Though he spoke formally to her, Ilius showed no hesitation in resorting to force. I imagined this exact exchange had occurred many times over the year I was gone.

“...Sumia’s changed.”

With that comment from me, the muscular Dustin seemed to shrink into himself.

“I think it started after you left, Your Majesty. She’s still sweet around Prince Fritz, but with others, she’s bitter and emotional all the time now.”

“She doesn’t feel the need to put on an act now that she’s won the title of Prince Fritz’s fiancée,” I pointed out.

The girls in our class, and even some of the more clever boys, had always known that Sumia’s personality was an act. It appeared that Dustin had finally managed to see through it as well.

“So the Sumia I loved is gone forever...” Dustin’s shoulders slumped sadly.

I couldn’t help but feel bad for the boy who’d just lost his first love.

“...After you left, she still kept telling His Highness that people were pushing her down staircases or bullying her.”

“Did she have any proof? Were there witnesses?”

“...No.” He shook his head weakly.

I could tell that Sumia had been encouraged by her success in driving me away. Lying and playing the victim proved to be a good way to get Prince Fritz to cause harm to anyone she didn't care for.

“After a few times, I felt like something was wrong. She named a lot of people who had never bullied her once before. So I knew it didn't add up... Was she lying about Your Majesty pushing her down the stairs too?” Dustin asked me, a pleading look in his eyes.

“I never did that. As I said before, all I ever did to Sumia was warn her about her rude attitude. I promise you I never pushed her down a staircase or bullied her.”

“I see... I'm sorry. Allow me to apologize. So Lord Bernard was right, and you really had nothing to do with it after all.”

“Big Brother Bernard...?” I didn't expect his name to come up so suddenly.

“Yeah, I really respect Lord Bernard. The same goes for all soldiers and aspiring soldiers in this country, right?”

I nodded.

Big Brother Bernard had a unique personality in certain ways, but he was a brilliant and accomplished soldier, both brave and logical. Some people also treated him like a god of war due to his good looks, and he was on the receiving end of near-worship from people like Dustin, who aspired to join the military.

“I just couldn't accept that Your Majesty, his younger sister, would hurt people and push them down the stairs like that... Last year, when Lord Bernard returned from a nearby country, I asked him what he thought of you.”

“How did he respond?”

“I don't know what Laetitia thinks of Sumia, but no matter how much she hated someone, my sister would never respond so cowardly.”

“That sounds like him.”

Big Brother didn't know what was going on in my mind, but he still trusted me not to act rashly. That answer was exactly what I would expect from my blunt yet awkward brother.

“Did that answer convince you, Lord Dustin?” I asked.

“No, it wasn't enough for me at the time since I was still clinging to hope... Then we ended up having a practice battle.”

“...I see.”

*How did that conversation turn into a fight?*

Before I could ask him this, I pictured Big Brother Bernard in my mind again, and suddenly it made sense. He was a total battle enthusiast. He loved any strong opponent, be it at close quarters or as part of an army, so he was always eager to spar viciously with a person who showed potential. I was on the receiving end of this treatment many, many times...

But Dustin's eyes lit up as he spoke despite my dejected state. “I heard you pushed Laetitia into a fountain. It's not good for strong men like you to resort to violence with no warning. I'm going to have to beat some sense into you before you get drunk on your own power.’ That's what he told me, so we ended up having a practice fight.”

“What were the results?”

I knew the answer, but I thought I might as well ask anyway.

“He totally crushed me.” Despite this response, Dustin had a massive grin on his face. “I'd never lost a sparring match here at school...but Lord Bernard totally broke down all my pride. He was so amazing and strong. He was just great...!”

Dustin was running out of unique ways to describe my brother. Thinking back on that day seemed to excite him. Big Brother Bernard was clearly growing his fanbase.

“I decided I wanted to trust you too, since Lord Bernard believed in you so much. When I looked back on things, I started to see how Sumia's story didn't

add up...and this time, I couldn't stop myself from doubting her." His face was completely unlike that of when he spoke about Big Brother Bernard. His entire expression was gloomy. "She's been frightening me lately. Now I know why Father and my brothers said girls are scary..."

"Yet you still stay by Sumia's side?"

I'd heard the rumors and now witnessed Sumia's dependence on Dustin with my own eyes. It was possible that, despite his fears, he found it impossible to separate from someone he once loved.

"It still makes my heart race when she smiles at me and touches me. But that's not the only reason. Father and Grandfather want me to stay close to Prince Fritz."

"...I see."

I recalled the power structure of this country's nobility.

Prince Fritz's supporters were the Franbere marquess family, whom his mother belonged to, and the Ilegar duke family that Ilius belonged to. These families were influential in the number of civil officials they produced.

Princess Velta was supported by her mother's family, the Dartan Dukedom, which Dustin belonged to. The foundation of her support were the Dartans and all other top military families underneath them. It appeared Dustin's straying from his family wasn't just because of his feelings for Sumia.

By having their son take a different side, they were positioning themselves to maintain a relationship with whichever side came out victorious. This was a strategy for survival as well as a means of protection. As I remember it, Inubushi's leaving of the Sanada family during the Sengoku period was thought to be part of the same strategy.

It appeared that separations of parent and child happened in the same way amongst the nobility of this country.

"I'm sure you know by now, Your Majesty, but my family wants to survive even if Princess Velta gets defeated."

"...Thank you for telling me about your family."

Perhaps Dustin was revealing so much of their plans because he felt guilty about what he'd done to me. There was a chance that this was a foolish choice that could hurt his family's schemes, but I appreciated his honesty in opening up to me.

"It must be hard to have to stay around Sumia and the others just to protect your family," I commented.

"Yeah, if that's all it was, I wouldn't be worried."

"What do you mean?"

Dustin didn't seem like someone with a strong enough character to spend time with people he disliked without complaint just for the good of his family...

"I'm done with Sumia and Prince Fritz. From here on out, I'm going to stick with you at school, Your Majesty," he declared out of the blue.

"...Excuse me?"

*Where did that come from all of a sudden?*

My response was meant to convey my confusion. Dustin simply smiled.

"I'm the Dartan family's trump card. They're the ones who told me to stay close to whoever has the highest chance of winning. That's why I'm joining your faction."

"But the Gramwells haven't aligned themselves with either side yet," I reminded him.

"Not yet, sure. But whatever side you pick, I think that's going to be the side that wins in the end. Lord Bernard is an incredible person who trusts you a lot. I think you're really great too, Your Majesty." He stared at me, his eyes sparkling with a deep respect. "Now that I think about it, you didn't look scared at all when Prince Fritz called off your engagement and you were surrounded by enemies on all sides. You've got guts, so I bet you're making waves in Wolfvarte too."

"I appreciate your compliments..."

This didn't make any sense to me, though I was glad he set his hostility aside to try to understand me. Still, this felt like an extremely dramatic shift in his



feelings for me...

“Also! I heard you blew up Lord Bernard with your spells during lots of practice battles too! How could I not respect you? Fight me too sometime, okay?” Dustin clenched his fists as he insisted on fighting me sometime.

*...I see now. He’s the same type of person as Big Brother Bernard.*

He was a soldier who loved fights, training, and tests of strength.

“Please, Queen Laetitia! Just once is fine! So please fight me!”

“No way. I refuse. Please find someone else to practice with.”

Unlike Big Brother Bernard, I hated fighting and pain. A spell fight alone would be an annoyance, but Dustin’s specialty was sword fighting. I didn’t want to spar with him.

I decided to take off running just to get away. But Dustin didn’t give up. His muscular body allowed him to easily catch up to me.

“Practice fight! Practice fight! Practice fight!”

“Please don’t follow me around just to chant!”

Dustin still showed no sign of giving up, even in the face of my genuine scream.

With the loss of an enemy, what I gained was an annoying ally. I went without lunch that day and had to spend the rest of the day hungry.



**“I’M** done with this! Let me out of here!”

Sumia’s cries caused Ilius to let out the next in a long line of sighs.

“Please be reasonable. Crying, shouting, and running away won’t do anything to lessen your studies.”

He explained his thinking logically so as to quell her irritation. A more honest admission would be that he wanted to tie Sumia to this desk.

But this was a private study room in the library of the royal academy. While other students tried to stay away, there was no telling when anyone would pass

by, and thus Ilius was unable to drop the act.

*Damn this girl. Why does she insist on taking up so much of my time? This is all because Prince Fritz spoils her...!*

Fritz was failing to keep up with his studies just as much. The two school-haters usually ended up skipping classes when they were together. So in order to keep Sumia away from Fritz, Ilius had spent the past few days dragging her to the study room as soon as classes were over.

“You’re so mean! I’m telling Prince Fritz tomorrow!” she threatened.

“His Highness is currently working with a private tutor in order to reach the necessary level to graduate. He won’t have enough free time to listen to your demands until after the graduation exam.”

Ilius was equally pained by the state of Fritz’s studies. He was never a wise prince, but the past year had been particularly brutal. He was at risk of failing his exam at this rate. It was the source of a constant stomachache for Ilius. He pressed the frame of his glasses up to distract from the pain.

“Things won’t be good for you either if you fail the exam, Sumia,” he said, trying to reason with her. “Please think about this rationally. I know you can do it if you try. It hasn’t been very thorough, but you’ve spent the last few years being trained as a noblewoman. Don’t forget how far you’ve managed to come.”

Ilius was the one who spent the past few years teaching Sumia, a commoner, the basics of being a noblewoman. He knew she had a good memory, since she learned to read and write in that time period alone.

“You want me to study even *more*?!” she shrieked. “No, I’ve had enough! Why do I still have to listen to your orders now that I’m engaged to His Highness?!”

“It’s *because* you’re engaged to him.”

Sumia’s knowledge as a noblewoman had taken enough form to get engaged, but she needed more training in culture and grace to be a proper crown princess. If she failed her graduation exam now, Velta’s camp would be sure to go on the attack.

“If you don’t want to be a burden to Prince Fritz, you should be at least half as educated as Lady Laetitia— Whoa!”

Ilius quickly ducked his head down, causing his glasses to nearly fall off his face.

A beam of light from a light spell had shot right at his face. It struck the curtain and began to send smoke bubbling up from the fabric.

“What was the point of that?!” he shouted.

“It’s all your fault! ‘Lady Laetitia could have done that!’ ‘Learn from Lady Laetitia!’ I’ve heard that crap a million times already from everyone else!” Sumia’s shrill cry was dripping with irritation.

Not everyone within the school approved of Sumia’s engagement to Fritz. Students in Velta’s camp would mock her relentlessly and find glee in comparing her to Laetitia, Fritz’s previous fiancée.

*She gets what she deserves, but everyone’s much harder on Sumia now compared to when Laetitia was in attendance at the academy,* Ilius thought.

Laetitia never bullied Sumia. She only criticized her conduct as a member of high society. Since Laetitia was the daughter of a duke, Fritz’s fiancée, and already at the top of the hierarchy of all the young ladies at the academy, the other students followed her example and made no attempts to bully Sumia either.

But Sumia preferred to repay that favor with malice. She got Laetitia expelled from the country and stole her role as Fritz’s fiancée. Naturally, this hurt Sumia’s reputation at school, and by this point, the only people who still treated her well were the students who supported Fritz’s faction. But even they had started to avoid Sumia in droves. It was only a matter of time before cracks formed in their solidarity.

“...I’ve had it.” Ilius couldn’t take any more. He decided to remove the mask that was his good-boy act, if only slightly. “You have to have known this would happen when you stole the title of Prince Fritz’s fiancée from Lady Laetitia.”

His words were a storm of rage, impatience, and dejection. He couldn’t stop them from slipping from his mouth. To this day, Ilius was still upset about how

Laetitia's engagement had ended.

Sumia possessed the very rare power of light magic. The reason she pretended to be a baron's daughter and enrolled in their academy was to get close to Fritz, a fellow student, and become his fiancée years later in a peaceful manner. The person behind this plot was Ilius's father. But not even he expected his plan to result in much.

However, the results came in the most undesirable of conditions.

*We never expected Prince Fritz to be completely thoughtless about the whole thing...*

Unfortunately, everything occurred while the king, who would usually be the one to handle Fritz, was unwell. His mother, the third queen, acted in the king's place and only gave Fritz a mere warning to be cautious.

Ilius was also very busy during that period of time. Laetitia was too. She had her brilliant older brothers to look after her, but coincidentally, they weren't in the capital at that point either.

It was all the result of a series of cascading, unlucky events.

The end result was Fritz calling off his engagement to Laetitia in front of the school fountain in public, then exiling her from their kingdom. It was the complete opposite of the peaceful fiancée swap they'd been going for at the time.

The many nobles who witnessed Fritz's foolish actions decided to distance themselves from him. That was what led to Velta's faction, which was very weak at the time, becoming powerful enough to rival him.

Sumia also suffered the effects of the poorly ended engagement.

Becoming Fritz's fiancée caused her to become prideful. Her previous aspirations for good grades vanished. She became drunk on Fritz's love and the power that came with it. She begged him for expensive items and framed anyone she didn't like.

"It's time for you to wake up! At this rate, both you and His Highness are going to be ruined! If you want to keep living a life of luxury, then do your

studies already!”

Ilius’s breath was ragged after shouting at her. He was probably so winded because he never raised his voice like that. His words were meant as advice that took the form of pure anger. But Sumia was taken aback.

“What...is that supposed to mean? How can you yell at *me*...? I’m going to be the crown princess soon, which makes me the second most powerful woman in the kingdom. Someone like me could never be ruined!”

“...Hah, hah... Don’t get the wrong idea! Although, you might not understand...”

Sumia was once a commoner.

Ilius had the painful realization in this moment that no matter how high she rose in the ranks, her fundamental perception of things was different from that of a noble.

“The crown prince and princess aren’t as stable as you seem to think. If you study and learn your history, you’ll see that—”

“Really?! More studying?! Just shut your mouth already!”

“Enough!”

Enraged, Sumia picked a textbook on the desk as her weapon this time, instead of a spell. Ilius just barely dodged the blow, but...

“Ah! Ow, ow, ow...”

The person behind him ended up being struck by the book. He was rubbing his head with one hand where he was hit. With the other, he held the book, having caught it as it fell.

“You’re—”

“It’s wrong to treat books like that.”

The man was Claude—one of Laetitia’s older brothers. Before Ilius could even voice his confusion, Claude began to explain his presence there.

“I just got back to the capital city, so I wanted to come here to visit the library. It has the most books of almost anywhere in the area, after all. Even though I’ve

graduated, I still like to come here and read sometimes.”

Claude began to flip through the pages of the book Sumia had thrown.

“Ah, I know this one. The actual content isn’t too bad, but it’s explained in a strange way, don’t you think? Like this page. Was it hard for you to understand on your own?” He held the book out in front of Sumia.

Sumia remained quiet and listened intently to his explanation. This could have been because his gesture was so natural or perhaps because she knew she was wrong to strike Claude, an outsider, with a book.

“...Now read this paragraph, but remember this part here that you just read, because it applies to this...”

“...I see!” Sumia was nodding her head at Claude’s explanation.

Even Ilius felt that his manner of teaching was easy to understand. He emphasized the important points and was pleasant to listen to. It appeared that Claude’s strangely relaxed personality meant that even Sumia, who had just met him for the first time, could naturally focus on the book with him.

“...Yeah. I think that’s about it for this passage. All you need to do is review it now. It should stay in your head that way.”

“Th-Thank you! I’ll go home and review it!” She jumped up out of her chair and quickly left the room. Despite Claude’s expert teaching, she seemed to have remembered that her primary objective was to escape Ilius.

Ilius pretended to adjust his glasses to hide his expression. Then he asked a question of Claude. “What’s your goal in coming here?”

“I told you, right? I wanted to come to the library, but I heard a scream coming from this room. I just thought I’d come take a look.” Claude shrugged his shoulders.

Nothing was strange about this, but Ilius kept his guard up. He felt the same way in their previous meetings. Claude seemed like a relaxed person, but in a way that made him more mysterious.

“Then why did you help Sumia study? If you were listening to us, then you knew she was the girl who expelled Lady Laetitia from the country, right? I’ve

heard how you dote on your sister, Lord Claude. Why help someone like Sumia at all?”

“I didn’t have a major reason for it. It’s hard to ignore someone struggling, especially when they’re the same age as my sister. Besides, Laetitia won’t mind a little salt being sent to the enemy, so there’s no problem there.”

“Salt to the enemy...?”

“Laetitia told me it was something that happened in a foreign land somewhere. It supposedly means ‘to do something that helps the enemy.’ Salt’s important, after all.”

Claude gave a carefree smile and let his eyes drift down to the textbook Sumia had been reading. He was the kind of person who always said whatever he wanted to say. He didn’t let anyone disrupt his own pace.

“...You sure seem like you have experience teaching people. Did you used to teach Lady Laetitia, too?”

“Yeah, I sure did. Laetitia was my first student, and later on in school, I tutored the kids in my grade and above so that I could earn money to buy books.”

“Couldn’t your family afford to buy books without having to work for pocket change?”

“It’s hard to escape the eyes of my father, much less Big Brother Yurius. They would make me work even harder for the books I wanted. It was better for me to avoid Big Brother Yurius’s ridiculous demands and pretend to be a private tutor instead. I would also stay up all night making instruction books for a mountain of tests at school, which I sold for book money too. I worked pretty hard.”

Ilius was slightly taken aback to hear Claude fondly retelling stories from his school days.

*Maybe he isn’t someone worth worrying about, after all...?*

Claude was the third son, but his father was still a duke. He surely could have worked as something more profitable than a private tutor. But that wasn’t the

case if Claude himself had no desire to do so.

*Laetitia's two oldest brothers are very talented. They're popular in high society, and Lord Yurius, the "Rose Heir," is looked to as the family's next great duke. Lord Bernard is a distinguished soldier and earned the nickname "Thunder Spear" at a young age. Compared to them, Lord Claude is...*

It was hard to describe him as anything other than "plain."

He didn't appear to be unintelligent, but when compared to his brothers and even Laetitia, there was nothing remarkable about him. After graduation, Claude completed the minimum military service expected of noblemen, then took up a leisurely post with the Library Bureau.

*...I don't want to end up like him.*

Ilius and Claude were both the third sons of dukes.

Sons of the same mother in Elltoria had an order of hierarchy. The oldest would generally be the heir to his father's title, followed by the second son as a spare, and the third son as the second backup heir.

The only noblemen excused from mandatory military service were the heir and the first spare. Ilius's future was to complete the two-year service, then spend the rest of his life without the title of "duke."

*The service is no joke. The army's still weakened from the debts of the war five years ago, and an empire in the south is starting to threaten us with their power. Becoming a soldier now means you might not make it out with your life anymore.*

Ilius, to a certain extent, understood his own personality.

He was confident in his learning skills and his own brain, but didn't have faith that he would survive on a battlefield. Book smarts didn't guarantee that he would make it back alive—reading many history textbooks over the years made that fact sickeningly clear to him.

That was why Ilius quickly needed to gain some achievements that he could use to beat out his two older brothers and become the heir to the dukedom. It was one reason he agreed to participate in his father's plot to get Sumia



engaged to Fritz.

Even after the prideful Sumia began to grow more corrupt, putting the plan at risk, it wasn't a situation he could easily extract himself from.

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going to head home now." Ilius gave a brief bow and turned toward the door.

Unlike the laidback Claude, Ilius was very busy with all the things he had to do.

*Lord Claude can provide Laetitia with information, so I'll have to stop using the study rooms starting tomorrow. I don't think she'll try anything reckless, but just to be safe, I'll have to study somewhere else with Sumia...*

With his future plans in mind, Ilius rushed away from the room. Claude spent a moment watching the boy leave.



**"I'VE** been invited to a banquet with the Elltorian King?"

"Would you care to join us, Gilbert?" I asked him about his plans to participate. Gilbert's eyebrows furrowed in bewilderment, though a curious light was gleaming in his eyes. It was an impressive expression to pull off.

"Are you sure...I'm allowed to come?" he asked. "It's the ultimate honor, but I'm just a commoner."

"I was asked to bring some of my chefs," I explained.

It was Prince Fritz's mother, the third queen, who invited us. I often spoke with her during the period that I was engaged to Prince Fritz. She seemed to like me, and we'd been exchanging letters since I returned to Elltoria's capital.

I'd decided to accept her invitation as a way of making amends.

My devotion to cooking during my time in Wolfvarte had reached the ears of Elltorian nobility through various rumors. It made sense that the royal family might have been inviting me to a banquet to try to win my favor by pandering to my interests. The third queen didn't want to make an enemy of me.

Neither my father nor I had any intention of joining hands with Prince Fritz's

camp, as he was the man who unfairly ended our engagement and exiled me from the country. But I didn't want to antagonize them either. Her Majesty understood me, so I hoped to preserve our relationship without any further deterioration.

"Royal banquets in this country serve many different dishes. It's a form of hospitality here. The idea is to overwhelm the guests with more food than they can eat as a display of kindness as well as wealth," I explained. "Of course, since the guests can't finish the food on their own, anything that hasn't been served on a plate is divided up and given to the servants. You'll definitely be able to eat some of the dishes if you attend, Gilbert."

Though the food was technically leftovers, the servants appreciated the rare opportunity to eat the same luxurious meals as the royal family. I was sure that, as a chef, someone like Gilbert wouldn't let such an opportunity go to waste.

"That sounds wonderful! I would love to attend! I'll do my best to live up to their expectations...!" Gilbert was fired up despite the way his body trembled with nerves.



**"THANK** you all for coming to my banquet this evening. Enjoy the food that our palace chefs put their excellent talents to work for." King Maldias looked out at his guests from the head seat of the table.

The Elltorian royal family were all seated around the long table—even Prince Fritz and Princess Velta. His Majesty had surely invited both of them so as not to be seen as playing favorites.

Lined up against the wall behind the table were the guests' servants and palace chefs. Gilbert was among them, staring closely at the various dishes on display.

I glanced over the food myself and saw King Glenreed at my side, also taking it all in.

There was a warm vegetable garnish, stuffed duck, freshwater fish with sauce...

Naturally, food served at a royal banquet was both visually intricate and

tragically bombarded with spices. They weren't so rich to the point that they couldn't be eaten, but it was still depressing to see ingredients I knew I would actually enjoy being destroyed by the mishandled seasoning.

I kept my cutlery going back and forth to the various foods to look polite and elegant. I was also carefully observing my surroundings.

King Maldias was eating even less than I expected. He used to enjoy food and was on the heavier side, but I definitely felt that he'd lost visible weight since I last saw him.

Prince Atialdo seemed to be eating very little too. While he clearly didn't dislike the food itself, anyone would expect an adult man to be eating much more than he did. It was possible that, with the same power of ancestral reversion that King Glenreed had, his nose was also sensitive to all the spices in the food.

"King Glenreed, what kind of food do you like?" Princess Velta was continuously trying to talk to King Glenreed, her eyes locked on him in a passionate gaze. His Majesty gave her vague answers since he was unable to ignore her in such a setting.

"...Tsk."

It was Prince Fritz who clicked his tongue, though the sound was drowned out by the rest of the dinner noises. He would glance at me, clearly angered by my presence, then take his irritation out on his cutlery, making loud clinks and clangs as he ate.

I found his display shameless, but he wasn't my fiancé anymore, so all I could do was simply ignore him in this situation. I noticed the occasional stiffness in the third queen's face, although chastising her son publicly would be grounds for Princess Velta to have a field day. I could tell she was waiting until after the banquet to scold him.

The banquet came to an uneventful end—peaceful on a surface level. We parted ways with the food.

After some pleasant idle conversation, I decided it was time to leave with King Glenreed and Prince Atialdo. We had plans to talk with Prince Atialdo tonight,

so it was easier to head to a location where we could speak together.

Prince Atialdo let out a sigh of relief once we were all in the carriage.

“Did you not care for the food either, Your Highness?” I asked him.

“*Either?* So you don’t care for their cooking as well, Queen Laetitia?”

“Unfortunately not. I appreciate the abundance of spices, but it just doesn’t suit my palate.”

Prince Atialdo would gain nothing from using my food preferences against me. Instead, we sympathized with each other as people who disliked the style of cooking served to royalty and nobility in our homeland.

“I remembered that you ate more during our banquet in Wolfvarte, so I assumed you must prefer that style of cooking,” I noted.

Flavors in Wolfvarte varied depending on the region, but the food served in King Glenreed’s castle was always seasoned exactly how I liked it.

“Yes, it was very delicious. I was only there on a diplomatic trip, but a part of me genuinely felt like I could live in Wolfvarte forever.” Prince Atialdo’s smile was surely a mix of flattery and sincerity.

One’s food palate plays a huge part in their life, after all.

“Hehe! I’m glad you enjoyed it so much. Diplomats get the perk of being able to taste foods from many regions as part of their job,” I enthused.

“A...perk? I suppose that’s true. Food is part of the reason why I was given this job.”

His smile became much more forced. Prince Atialdo stared at the passing castle outside the carriage window.

“Embarrassing as it may be, I always hated the food served at the castle. I didn’t care for the overly spiced meals prepared by the palace chefs, but I never had the courage to tell them outright. That’s why I asked to be put in charge of foreign affairs. I know it’s not acceptable to choose a job just to eat good food, though.”

“Please don’t be so hard on yourself. I understand exactly how you feel.” I

offered him my deepest sympathies.

Food was one reason why I wasn't terribly depressed about being expelled from my homeland. I was finally released from the hell of overly seasoned meals and found the freedom to cook what I pleased. Even from the early days, I was grateful to have been banished to Wolfvarte with all of its freedom.

"I'm so very impressed by you, Queen Laetitia. You don't resent the royal family for sending you away. Instead, you've formed new ties with people in a distant land and changed the world around you, including their food. I could never do what you've done." His Highness cast his eyes downward.

...For a while now, I'd been getting the impression that he was much too hard on himself.

"You're impressive too, Prince Atialdo," I told him earnestly. "Without you, diplomatic affairs in this country would surely be much worse than they are now. I believe you should hold your head high and proud."

"I've done what little I can."

"Little...?"

Foreign affairs were extremely important to a country.

Diplomacy tended to be belittled by the nobles of this country—a kingdom that looked down on other countries and cultures—but the higher up you looked in the ranks of the upper classes, the closer the members were to the center of government. Those were the ones who understood the value of diplomacy.

Everyone knew Prince Atialdo was a wise man. Nobles generally looked at him favorably too. However, he seemed to have no interest in participating in the battle for the succession of the throne. He'd kept the perfect amount of distance between the camps of both Prince Fritz and Princess Velta—something he wouldn't have been able to do without a talent for observation and political maneuvers.

"I believe that few members of the royal family are as exceptional as Your Highness. Respectfully, why not have a bit more confidence in yourself?" I suggested.

“You think too much of me. ...I wouldn’t be here right now if I was as exceptional as you say.”

*What does he mean by that?*

I wanted to know more, but our carriage had just arrived at our destination, so we had to exit and head inside Prince Atialdo’s townhouse.

The question remained in the back of my mind as King Glenreed and I headed to His Highness’s parlor.



“**PRINCE** Atialdo really knows how to get things done...”

I’d returned to my bedroom at home and was now massaging the tension out of my shoulders.

The objective of our conversation was to communicate about relations and trade between our two countries from here out. This conversation would become the basis for a tangible plan put together later by our politicians and civil officials.

Prince Atialdo, as the man put in charge of Elltoria’s diplomatic affairs, was a very capable man. His quiet, reserved demeanor meant he was skilled at conversation. As soon as I let my guard down, he would start to guide the topic in the direction he wanted. King Glenreed even found himself in a hard-fought battle of knowledge when it came to geography, bordering countries, and political affairs. His Majesty had praise for the formidable yet respectable Prince Atialdo.

“So why does he think so poorly of himself...?” I wondered.

It didn’t make sense. I could come up with a few reasons, but none of them were certain. As I thought this over in a daze, Lucian came to tell me that Gilbert wished to speak with me.

“Come in,” I said, inviting him into my room. “How did you like the banquet food? I thought it was all too rich, but did you feel differently, Gilbert? Did anything pique your curiosity as a chef?”

When I got my questions out, Gilbert opened his mouth with a very serious

expression on his face.

“There are a lot of things I’d like to ask you about the food I received at the banquet...”



“**ARE** you doing all right, Laetitia? Did you sleep well? Do you have everything you’ll need?”

It was the day of the graduation exam. Father kept checking in with me about every last detail. He seemed much more nervous about the exam than I did as the one actually taking it.

“Hehe! Please don’t worry so much. I’m perfectly prepared, and I feel great too. It would be harder for me to fail in this state.”

I’d attended school a few times, even after the day Dustin hounded me for a practice battle, and finished up all my special lectures. I was ready for whatever the graduation exam would throw at me. There was no failing it now.

But Father was still incredibly anxious. His tension was actually having a calming effect on me.

I left home in my carriage extra early that morning just to be safe.

Once I arrived at the academy, there were other students around the campus already too. They’d all showed up early, too, so that there was no chance of being late for the exam.

On my way to the lecture hall where the exam would be administered, a few female students approached me. They were young ladies who belonged to Prince Fritz’s camp and wanted to win Sumia’s favor.

“Good day, Lady Laetitia. Are you alone today?”

“I am. What about it?” I kept my features schooled.

“Do you recognize this?” The lady leading the group held out a paper bookmark. It belonged to Elsha, the bookworm, and was a beloved item of hers.

“...What’s the meaning of this?”

“She’s your good friend here at school, right? But it looks like she’s going to

be late to the exam today.”

“Don’t you mean that you’re going to make her late?” I brought out Father’s intimidating smile.

The girls flinched but showed no signs of backing down.

“You can’t threaten us with your face! You’re a smart girl, aren’t you? I’m sure you can guess what will happen to Elsha if you go to take your test.”

They were using Elsha as a hostage to threaten me.

I was certain they wouldn’t cause physical harm to the daughter of an earl, but I could picture them locking her up in a room somewhere so that she couldn’t take the exam. Their demands were that I not attend the exam if I wanted Elsha to have a chance at it.

“Do you really think you’re doing the right thing?” I asked, my tone icy. “Creating obstacles for me won’t raise Sumia’s score.”

“Lady Sumia and Prince Fritz will decide what’s right. I want to get to the exam already too, so could you please hurry up and make your choice?” The lady waved the bookmark around in an attempt to pressure me.

“...Very well. I’ll be the late one. So promise me I can watch as you release Elsha.”

“Of course. I’m glad you made the right choice.” She gestured for me to follow her.

We headed away from the schoolhouse to an isolated area. The girls stopped in front of a room that looked like it was used for storage now.

“This is it. Please stay in this room until the exam is over, Lady Laetitia.”

“Where’s Elsha? You’ll let her go, right?”

“We’ll take care of that. You’ll be free to see her once the exam is finished.” The girl sneered at me while she spoke. It was hard to believe she had any intention whatsoever of following through with her promise.

“...Great, then.” I sighed.

The girls scowled when they saw that I didn’t look upset at all.



“What’s great? You’re going to humiliate yourself by failing because you couldn’t take your test.”

“Haha! What a terrible thing to say. But that’s what makes it great. ...I don’t think this will weigh on my conscience.”

At first, I’d felt bad for these girls, since I thought they were forced into a kidnapping under Sumia’s orders... But this was actually a choice they made on their own in an attempt to win her favor.

That meant I could respond appropriately and without any guilt.

“Charge, flaming soldier!”

“Eek!”

My shortened chant caused a flaming arrow to appear. It flew past one of the girls, grazing her nose.

“What have you— Eek! Stop it!”

“I’m simply getting revenge. Why shouldn’t I?”

I shot a second and third fire arrow after that.

They tried to counterattack with spells of their own, but I anticipated each one and shot them right back down. It was an easy win for me, with all the training I once did with my brothers.

“It’s five against one! So why are we— Aaahhh!!”

Smoke started to rise from her hair where I’d grazed her. She started hysterically trying to pat out the flames.

“It would be better not to move. You’ll be in trouble if I miss my target,” I warned.

“...!”

The girls went stiff.

*Good, good. It looks like my threat worked.*

I didn’t want to actually burn them, but I hated when anyone got the best of me, so my goal was to scare them as much as possible.

“So you don’t even care what happens to Elsha?!” she shrieked at me.

“I’m not worried. Elsha is perfectly safe.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Berry hiding in the shadows.

I knew that a certain group of students were behaving suspiciously leading up to the graduation exam. Since they were clearly hovering around Elsha and me, I asked a student I knew to gather information about this.

Despite the students at the academy being educated as nobles, they were still teenagers. Some had yet to learn the difference between right and wrong. I knew from the start that these girls would be too scared to do anything to me directly. Instead, they would target anyone around me who seemed weak.

For better or worse, I had few people in the school that I actually cared about. It was only natural that they would aim for Elsha, so I told her about their plot and asked for her cooperation.

I ended up assigning Berry to stay with Elsha instead of any guards. Berry looked exactly like a normal cat and wouldn’t raise anyone’s suspicions by being around Elsha. Berry appeared to have found the location of Elsha’s kidnapping and successfully brought her help.

“I’ve brought Elsha as you requested, Your Majesty.” Dustin arrived with Elsha in tow. I was relieved to see that they both appeared uninjured.

“Thank you, Dustin. I’m glad I can rely on you,” I said.

“Of course. Now you’ll do a practice fight with me like you promised, right? Let’s hurry up and do one!”

“Yes, yes... But we’ll talk about that later, okay?”

I promised to have a practice fight with Dustin as a reward for his help. Berry’s reward was four jars of strawberry jam, which really hurt for me to part with.

“...Well, you did save her...” I said.

No outsiders were allowed to enter the school on the day of the graduation exam. I didn’t want to turn this into a major incident, so I ended up going to Dustin and Berry for help.

“None of you know when to stop, do you? You’re the worst of the worst for what you did today. Are you really not ashamed of yourselves?” Dustin’s merciless torrent of insults caused the girls to bite their lips.

They seemed to understand that their cowardly plot had failed and that they were completely out of options. They may have planned to try to wiggle out of it if I was the only witness, but the son of the royal army commander becoming involved left them with no escape now.

“Queen Laetitia, why are you looking around like that?” Dustin asked me.

“I believe the ringleader must be nearby.”

As I surveyed the area, I spotted Berry moving. She went into the shadows, started to meow, and that was when Sumia jumped out.

“Eeek?!”

Sumia’s leg had three little vertical wounds in it. Berry had scratched her, sending her flying out of her hiding spot.

“I knew you’d be here, Sumia,” I said with a sigh.

Sumia possessed very powerful light magic. Perhaps she was prepared to protect the girls if anything went wrong, but it appeared the opportunity never arose once I started using spell after spell.

“Sumia...you really were a part of this kidnapping too...” Dustin’s voice was full of disappointment. I knew it must be even harder on him if he still believed deep down in the Sumia he’d once loved.

Sumia’s eyes went wide at the depressed, sullen Dustin. “Why are you here?!” she yelled. “You betrayed me?! How cruel!”

Dustin was silent in the face of Sumia’s insults.

I had to speak up, unable to watch this farce any longer. “You betrayed him first. You’ve been selfish and irresponsible ever since you became engaged to Prince Fritz, haven’t you?”

“What does it matter?! I can do what I want if I’m engaged to the crown prince! It’s only natural!”

“But it wasn’t natural to Lord Dustin.”

“...! Don’t act so arrogant...!!” She glared at me, seeming lost for retorts at this point. Her eyes were wide in a harsh glare. It was a waste of her cute face.

“You! Why are you so...?!” The voice that escaped her lips was dripping with desperation. “Why are you like this?! You act so arrogant, yet everyone loves you, spoils you, and praises you! You even have kind brothers that make you happy! So why do you still get in my way?!”

“You’re the one who made the first move.”

I knew that Sumia, the girl who went from commoner to crown princess, was suffering. But that was what came with the position she stole from me. She had no right to take her anger out on me.

“Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!!”

She was past the point where words could reach her. She glared at me with sheer murderous intent in her eyes, her hair a disheveled mess.

“Bindings, release your—” She chanted a spell. But it was too late. “Eek!”

I beat her to the punch.

Sumia shrieked and stopped her spell.

My rapid, brief chant unleashed a water spell on her first.

She was hit with compressed water. The water cutter struck the right side of her neck, taking her hair and a bit of skin with it.

“Ah... Ah... Ah...” She shuddered like her trauma was all coming back to her again.

“I showed you this before, didn’t I?” I reminded her.

A few days after my engagement was canceled, Sumia called me out to meet with her. She attacked me, so I retaliated with my water cutter spell.

“Back then, I only cut your hair because my aim was off... But just now, it hit perfectly. I’ve been practicing since then. If you wish, I’d be happy to hit the left side of your hair too, or perhaps your eye, your leg, your arm, or even your heart.”

“EEK?!”

Sumia sank to the ground when I pointed my index finger at her, pretending to aim. Even from down on the ground, she was trying to escape me. It was as if her heart had snapped into pieces.

“That was scary, but I know you’re tough... I’m really looking forward to that practice fight now!”

I ignored whatever Dustin was saying next to me.

I’d surely threatened Sumia enough to ensure that, at the very least, she would behave until I left the country again.

The guards arrived soon after to take away Sumia and the girls. After that, Elsha and I headed to the graduation exam room together.



“I can’t even begin to describe how disappointed I am in you.”

The woman’s words and her icy cold voice reached Sumia’s eardrums. Fritz’s mother, the third queen, was staring at Sumia with a face as white as a sheet.

“Do you have any idea how many favors Fritz and I had to call in to clean up your mess?”

“...I’m very sorry.”

Sumia’s apology went no deeper than those words.

The queen gritted her teeth, sensing that the girl didn’t mean it whatsoever.

“I’ve looked the other way so many times now, despite all your missteps, since you’re the one Fritz chose... But you’re not even sorry. I don’t get why, out of all the girls, it had to be you.”

Sumia smiled sarcastically in response to these grievances. She tried to play the victim, but this was the third queen, the woman who raised Fritz, before her. Being proposed to by Fritz and having the queen approve of her disqualified her from acting like a victim ever again.

“...Why are you smiling like that? Do you really not understand what you’ve done?”

“I just wanted to scare Lady Laetitia a bit. That’s all.”

“Scare her a bit?!” The queen’s eyebrows shot up. “You don’t even get what you’ve done by harassing not only the daughter of one of our most powerful dukes, but a foreign queen?!”

“But Lady Laetitia wasn’t even slightly harmed.”

“Because she was clever enough to put a stop to it well in advance! I can’t take this anymore. Why can’t you act at least a quarter as smart as her...?”

Sumia hung her head and bit her lip when she heard herself compared to Laetitia yet again.

*Why does everyone always harass me?! I was a commoner who made it all the way up the food chain to become the crown prince’s fiancée! I worked a million times harder than someone like Laetitia, who was born with what she has...!*

As Sumia saw it, Laetitia had been blessed far too many times in life.

She was a beautiful young woman with blonde hair and purple eyes, she was born as the beloved daughter of a powerful duke, and possessed a lot of magical energy, even if it wasn’t as much as Sumia’s. She was a young lady of status born with anything she could ever want. She was even blessed with all the people in her life. Laetitia had loyal servants, a handful of good friends, and a father who loved and protected her.

He was nothing like Sumia’s parents, who abandoned her as a burden due to their poverty.

*It’s not fair. It’s just too much to take...!*

Sumia pictured Laetitia’s older brother, Claude. Her jealousy of Laetitia only intensified when she met Claude.

Sumia took a liking to him after he taught her something from a book in an understandable, friendly manner. She had even imagined having a big brother of her own and if he would be just like Claude. So when she found out he was, in fact, Laetitia’s brother, she felt like she’d been beaten over the head.

*Why?! Why does Laetitia get such a nice brother when I always have to suffer so much?!*

It became harder and harder for her to study with such intense hatred building inside her. She couldn't just let Laetitia seem so happy while she herself was suffering. That's why she formed that plot for the day of the exam.

"Sumia, I just can't understand what goes on in your head. I don't want to, either...but the truth of this is that you've now failed your graduation exam." The third queen let out a deep sigh.

She didn't want Sumia's grudge to intensify if she wasn't allowed to take the exam. With Laetitia's concessions, the investigation of the entire case was postponed until after the graduation exam to avoid worsening the situation, and so Sumia was able to take it in the end.

But her results were disastrous.

Sumia's book smarts were already lacking, but being bested by Laetitia caused her mind to take a terrible blow right before the test. Three of the other students involved also failed due to the stress they felt after the incident. Both those girls and their parents now carried grudges against Sumia.

"I'm not the only one disappointed in you. Many of the noble families see you as a joke, and now they're using you to mock Fritz. In this situation, I can no longer approve of your marriage. The wedding that was to take place in ten days will now be postponed indefinitely."

"You can't...!" Sumia lifted her head back up in a rush.

The graduation exam was over now, and she no longer cared about it. But canceling the wedding was too much for her to bear. She was going to bask in the blessings of her marriage to Fritz in front of Laetitia to get back at her. It would be her very first victory over Laetitia and the road to her future happiness.

"You can't! The wedding's preparations are all set and the invitations have been sent!" Sumia protested.

"What of it? If you can't even pass a graduation exam, marrying Fritz when you're not fit to be the crown princess will only bring him more shame."

The third queen let out a long, long sigh.

“Fortunately, unlike all the foreign monarch guests for His Majesty’s ten-year reign celebration, the wedding was only going to be a small affair attended mainly by Elltorian nobles. The other guests were only foreign diplomats and King Glenreed, who you insisted be invited. Unfortunately, it looks like I was correct in my decision not to invite foreign monarchs...”

Once the queen finished her complaints, she gave Sumia a cold stare.

“Until His Majesty’s celebration is over and things have quieted down in the kingdom, you’ll stay here and not cause any more trouble.”

Sumia was currently in a luxurious yet windowless room. It was a place to lock away troublesome members of the royal family when they’d done something wrong.

When the queen tried to leave, a gloomy look still on her face, Sumia chased after her in desperation.

“Wait! Please wait! I want you to think it over again!”

“You’re so stubborn. His Majesty and Fritz have already agreed to this arrangement.”

“...What?” Sumia fell completely still as if she’d been frozen. “Prince Fritz has abandoned me...?”

“It looks like even Fritz has had enough of you.”

“No... It can’t be! You’re lying!” She repeated this denial over and over again.

Everything she did, she did knowing she had Fritz’s favor. Things had been rocky between them lately with the approaching exam, but she thought they would be able to make up again without any trouble.

“That’s a load of lies! If Prince Fritz really hated me, then he would end our engagement like he did to Lady Laetitia!”

The queen felt a headache forming, watching Sumia cling to hope and refusing to accept reality.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Royal family members aren’t supposed to be allowed to call off engagements singlehandedly like that. Even if he didn’t like you anymore, he wouldn’t be able to get rid of you so easily. It seems that you don’t



understand anything, all the way down to your core. How sad.”

“...What?”

A chill ran down Sumia’s spine when she saw how the queen’s expression had turned to one of pity.

“He can’t end another engagement after what happened with sweet Laetitia. I’m sure you see that, right? In other words, it’s going to take some time to be rid of you as his fiancée.”

“Ah...”

Sumia fell silent. She’d lost all words and the expression on her face.

The queen had no more words for her either. She simply left the room in silence.

## Chapter 4: Leopard in the Cage

“**AAAAAAAARGH!** I lost, I lost! It was a total defeat! You’re so strong, Queen Laetitia!!” Dustin plunged his sword into the ground as an admission of defeat.

We had come to a sloped hill a short distance from the capital city by carriage. Here there was an open plot of land on Gramwell territory where we could have practice fights.

After successfully passing my graduation exam, I fulfilled my promise to Dustin and engaged in a sparring match with him.

“Do you think you can move, Lord Dustin?”

“Yep. This is nothing for— Whoa!” As soon as he spoke, Dustin staggered dramatically.

The ground into which he plunged that sword was muddy, as if there had just been a rainstorm. It was difficult for him to walk. The ground had turned into something like a swamp for about 200 feet in every direction around him. Of course, this was all the result of my spells.

I was clearly superior to Dustin when it came to magical energy, spells, and unique moves. But I was lacking when it came to things like physical abilities and swordsmanship, so I struggled whenever we found ourselves in close-range combat. My battle strategy was to start off with my biggest spells to be sure there was always distance between us.

I didn’t want him to be gravely injured, so I successfully cut him off with a spell to turn the ground around him into a swamp. Then I added some hail pellets raining down on him from above. The hail was small enough not to hurt him, but if I felt like it, I could have enlarged them more than enough to flatten my opponent. Dustin ended up waving the white flag early on, as soon as he figured that out.

Having acknowledged his defeat, Dustin appeared to now be struggling with

the swamp that came out of nowhere. Whenever he yanked one leg out, the other sunk in deeper. He wasn't getting anywhere at this rate.

"Lord Dustin, could you please stand still for a moment?" I requested.

"What are you up to?"

"I'll harden the ground beneath you."

I was going to apply a fire spell. This was a large-scale spell that required precision, so I made sure to chant the whole thing without shortening it. Fire magic was my specialty, so the spell only took about twenty seconds to chant.

"Descend to the ground, flaming kiss!"

Hot wind rushed down from the sky above. It blew into the swamp and slowly began to dry it up.

Once the spell ceased after a minute or so, the swamp was completely gone. Excluding the ten feet directly around Dustin, the ground had returned to its normal state.

"Now it's like a drought after a rainstorm. So cool!" Dustin poked at the ground with his sword before approaching me. "You're easily one of the top ten fighters in the country. Maybe even top five!"

"It was my pleasure. Are you satisfied now?"

Our practice fight and its cleanup were now finished.

But Dustin pursed his lips, frustrated. "I'll admit that I lost. But you just attacked me from far away and then it was over. Does that even count as a match?"

"All I did was play to my own strengths. The winner takes it all in a single practice battle, right?"

"Hmph, that's true...but please, just one more? Please? I'm begging you. Can't we do another round where we start at close range?"

"But I don't want to. I'm helpless at close range. Are you asking me to die?" I stared at him with a feigned shimmer of tears in my eyes, but he didn't fall for it.

“Helpless...? You’ll be just fine at close range, Your Majesty. You’ve still got a lot of tricks up your sleeve, don’t you?”

Dustin appeared to have good intuition. He was right—I did have methods for handling close-range combat, but I was too worried about getting hurt or hurting him to agree to his request.

“My tricks are meant to be used when I need them. This isn’t the right time for that,” I told him.

“You’ve got a trump card?! That’s so cool!” Dustin wasn’t ready to back down yet.

He wasn’t a bad person. He was a lot like a large, friendly dog, but he also had trouble changing his mind once it was made up.

Since it was looking like he was on the verge of following me around without end, I decided to give in and use a spell to create an area for training grounds.

There were hills, valleys, and even pitfalls.

I used more earth spells to shape the ground into an impromptu training area. It actually turned out to be fun, like I was playing in a giant sandbox. I got a little carried away and even built a tunnel into one of the hills.

“There...all done!”

I’d finished perfecting the balance of the area. Spells were handy tools to work with.

Training in this world usually consisted of simple exercises that could be done on flat ground, such as distance running. Dustin seemed enthused to see a new sort of training course with obstacles in its environment.

“Whoa...!! Why’s there a swamp here?!”

Dustin fell straight into a trap with a loud scream.

My training grounds included a few traps in the form of delayed spells. They were designed to activate once a person was comfortable with running around the grounds. Dustin had been perfectly tricked by it.

“Hehehe! It’s fun having someone fall for Big Brother Claude’s swamp trap

strategy.”

I sat underneath a small tree on a blanket Lucian had laid out for me, watching as Dustin raced around the grounds and became a victim of the swamp traps.

It was an early spring afternoon. Sunlight filtered through the trees as a pleasant wind caressed me.

I had passed my graduation exam, and my social visits to Elltorian nobles with King Glenreed were mostly finished. All that remained was to meet with the foreign guests here to attend the upcoming ceremony and join the audience for King Maldias’s ten-year reign celebration.

“Lord Dustin certainly has a lot of energy...” I remarked.

He was covered in mud from his multiple falls into the traps, but that didn’t seem to stop him from having the time of his life.

Watching him brought back memories of the very first time I took my dog, Jiro, to the dog park in my past life. I still remember how Jiro had the time of his life at first, but after the second visit, he was always quiet, as if he’d turned into an entirely different dog. But Jiro was just the kind of Shiba Inu to go from hot to cold very easily. He had strong preferences for certain toys.

“Jiro...” I whispered his name.

*Are you having a good life back in Japan?*

I enjoyed my new life too, but there were still times I thought about Jiro and started to feel down. He was an old dog, but he still never missed the sound of his food or a treat being prepared. I felt my chest tighten with love and pain as I pictured him.

“Aroooo...”

Then came a grumpy-sounding cry.

When I turned around, there was Lord Aroo, sitting under a tree and groaning at me.

“Lord Aroo? Why are you here?”

We were supposed to have time to ourselves right now. I expected him to be at the manor, working on letters and information gathering regarding his new acquaintances. He must have finished up his work early and slipped away.

“Did you come here to see if I got hurt in my practice fight with Lord Dustin?”

“Rooooor.” Lord Aroo was nodding.

*“If I let my queen get hurt, it will affect my reputation too.”*

That was what I felt like he wanted to tell me.

“Hehe! Thank you. As you can see, I haven’t suffered a single scratch, so I’m all right. In fact, were you able to get here safely yourself, Lord Aroo?”

I stared at the wolf and his fluttering silver fur.

The same thought I experienced in the Wolfvartian capital hit me once again—Lord Aroo really sticks out. He was large, even compared to the bigger dogs, and was more comparable to a small horse in size. He would catch the eye of anyone in town. In fact, I could picture people chasing him down if they spotted him.

“Lord Aroo, were you followed by bad guys, but then you got the drop on them in the end...?”

“Grrrruff?”

*“Do you think I’m some sort of brute?”* he seemed to say.

The wolf looked a bit angry at the moment. He watched Dustin continue to be absorbed in his training, making sure the boy wasn’t focused on us.

“Woof!”

“Whoa!”

With that bark, Lord Aroo was suddenly enveloped in light. When the light dispersed, sitting in his place was a little ball of fur the size of a normal puppy.

“Are you...Lord Aroo...?”

“Ruff!”

He barked back with a shrill voice. The color of his fur and eyes was exactly

the same. He was like a smaller version of Lord Aroo.

“I didn’t know you could even do that, Lord Aroo! Now it makes sense. You wouldn’t stand out if you traveled here in that size.” Impressed with him, I felt a smile form on my face.

*Cuuute. So very, very cute.*

His legs were short, his snout was stubby, and his head was too big for his body. But he wasn’t just a shrunken-down version. This was a real-life wolf pup before me.

His piercing eyes remained the same, but it actually looked better that way.

“Arf arf?!”

Fluffa fluffa fluffa fluff.

I placed him on my lap for easier access and began to pet the puppy Lord Aroo to my heart’s content. His fur and body were softer than usual. It felt like petting a cloud.

The pup’s head was round and his triangular little ears were fat. I was completely lost for words to be in the presence of such an adorable little puppy that I could practically hold with just two hands.

“Aaaah! So cute, so cute, you’re so ridiculously c— Whoa!”

I closed my eyes when the same light flashed again.

Sitting next to me was King Glenreed all of a sudden. He was scowling at me.

“...My sincerest apologies,” I choked out.

The puppy was Lord Aroo. Lord Aroo was King Glenreed.

I’d been so absorbed in petting the animal that I completely forgot his true identity.

*Will he forgive me...?*

Fearfully, I peered over at the king’s face.

“Stop calling me ‘cute’ so much.”

“Huh?!”

That was not what I expected him to be mad about.

His Majesty stared down at me and pouted. “I’m a man. Men don’t like being called cute.”

“Is that so...? That’s true. In your current form, the word ‘cool’ fits you much better. It’s hard not to be captivated by you.”

When I shared my honest impression, the wrinkle in King Glenreed’s brow deepened.

“...Is she doing this on purpose? No, she’s just being herself...”

“Your Majesty?”

I cocked my head at the king, who appeared to be murmuring something to himself. That was when Dustin came over to us.

“King Glenreed? When did you arrive?” he asked.

“My carriage dropped me off while you were busy with all your training.” King Glenreed appeared to be watching Dustin closely as he told that lie.

*Is something about Dustin bothering him?*

Despite this being one of their first ever meetings, and certainly their first time exchanging words in private, His Majesty seemed strangely irritated about the situation.



**“I’M** a man. Men don’t like being called cute.”

That was almost the first thing Glenreed told Laetitia when he returned from pup to human form...

“Is that so...? That’s true. In your current form, the word ‘cool’ fits you much better. It’s hard not to be captivated by you.”

But Laetitia’s reaction was a surprise attack.

*Captivated? Laetitia is captivated by me?*

Glenreed had to tense himself to stop the smile from forming on his lips.

He knew he shouldn’t misunderstand.



Laetitia had no romantic interest in him. He was all too aware that Laetitia was simply voicing her true thoughts without any deeper intent.

“Your Majesty?”

Glenreed was about to answer Laetitia’s call when he noticed Dustin approaching them. He quickly thought up an excuse to cover his presence there. Acting boldly was surprisingly effective in covering up these lies.

Dustin chatted with them for a bit before returning to his training. He was a friendly, loud boy, who was expressive with his emotions. His personality was nothing like that of Glenreed’s.

*He reminds me of Keith. ...That means he probably reminds her of Jiro too.*

In other words, he was the type of person Laetitia was attracted to.

Just before, Laetitia had been staring at Dustin when she murmured Jiro’s name sadly to herself. That made it impossible for the king to stop thinking about Dustin, as well as this “Jiro” he had yet to see.

“See you next time, Queen Laetitia! Let’s fight again sometime!”

“No thank you. See you again.”

After some more training, Dustin eventually had to drag himself away because he had plans. Laetitia didn’t mind cracking jokes with him, either. They seemed to get along fairly well.

“I heard that Dustin was cruel to you, but it seems you like him now,” Glenreed remarked.

“I wouldn’t say I ‘like’ him, I just find him hard to hate. I don’t need to act a certain way around him, since we’re the same age and are both the children of dukes, so it’s easy to talk to him.”

“...I see.”

He confirmed that Laetitia didn’t think poorly of Dustin. Glenreed’s nose could still pick up her faint affection for Dustin. If they continued to get closer, they might very well end up as lovers someday.

“...It makes me so jealous.”

The emotions poured out of him, unable to be contained as mere thoughts.

Laetitia didn't seem to hear him, fortunately, but the flames of jealousy refused to fade.

*Laetitia is a placeholder queen. She'll leave me in a little over a year...*

He couldn't take it. He couldn't take it, but as someone who wasn't her lover, Glenreed had no right to stop her.

Options might have existed, either by abusing his rights as the king, or by appealing to the kind-hearted Laetitia's emotions, but Glenreed would have never forgiven himself by resorting to either.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty? You've seemed a bit out of sorts since you arrived."

This wasn't good.

He was causing Laetitia to worry now too.

"I think I just feel strange because I haven't transformed into a wolf pup in so long. I'll feel better soon enough, so it's not a problem."

"Is that so? I think you should rest underneath this tree just to be safe. I'll use that time to walk around and return the ground to its normal state."

Glenreed watched Laetitia head over and begin to cast spells.

The sight of her, her eyes slightly downcast as she chanted, made her look somehow majestic. It was a different sort of appeal than the one she usually carried.

As soon as she was reaching the climax of her long spell, Glenreed's eyes went wide.

"On the left! A spell's coming!!"

He screamed at her and took off running.

Glenreed used every bit of his ancestral powers to ensure he got to Laetitia as fast as possible.

"Kyah!"

He wrapped her in his arms and stumbled a few more steps forward.

The place where Laetitia had just been standing was pelted with a ball of water.

“Who’s there?!” Glenreed barked out at their surroundings, still keeping Laetitia safe in his arms.



**“WHO’S** there?!”

While His Majesty was shouting out to the source of the spell, my eyes were wide as saucers in his arms.

*He’s close. He’s so close to me.*

My body and heart trembled to hear his voice such a short distance from my ears.

His arms were strong as they stayed firmly wrapped around my back. I felt his sturdy chest against my cheek. My heart was beating so loudly, I thought His Majesty might be able to hear it from such a short distance.

“Do you know who would want to attack you?” His Majesty continued to hold me close as he glared from left to right. The intensity of his reaction filled me with guilt.

“It’s most likely Big Brother Bernard,” I confessed.

“...What did you say?” His Majesty couldn’t seem to believe it. “Do you and this brother not get along?”

“No, we do. That’s exactly why he trains me like this. He says he doesn’t want his adorable little sister to fall victim to surprise attacks.”

Big Brother Bernard used to occasionally come at me with sneak attacks.

“I’d been expecting Big Brother Bernard to try something again at any point now. I’m very sorry that he frightened you.”

“Are you sure your brother did this? I still feel like that’s taking it too far, even if it’s supposed to be training...”

“I’m quite certain. The water ball that came toward me looked like it would

be wet and cold, but was weakened enough so as not to hurt me.”

Being hit with such a spell would result in no pain—only scoldings from my brothers. It was just like my merciless Big Brother Bernard to wait for the peak of the spell I was chanting, when my defenses were most relaxed, to strike.

Confirming my theory, Big Brother Bernard started to stroll forward out of the direction where the water ball came from.

“Long time no see, Laetitia.”

He had silver hair, purple eyes, and an incredibly handsome face.

I looked up to meet the gaze of my tall brother. He had returned from his post in the neighboring country of Raiolbern about six months ago, but we hadn’t seen each other in over two years, since he’d been so busy even after coming home.

“You’re King Glenreed, right? It’s nice to meet you. I’m Bernard, another one of Laetitia’s big brothers. I should probably apologize for involving you in our sibling training session, although...” Big Brother Bernard’s purple eyes narrowed as they turned toward King Glenreed. “You protected Laetitia perfectly just now. I didn’t spot a single flaw in your stance. What do you say we have a match against each other?”

Big Brother stared King Glenreed directly in the eyes and challenged him.

*Ah... Big Brother Bernard’s true self is on full display.*

Though he held desires for fame as a soldier, Big Brother’s true nature was that of a hothead fighter. Father and Big Brother Yurius had worked hard to curb these urges, which helped him improve, but even now, he would occasionally become reckless. Such recklessness resulted in him making use of his natural, incredible talents. That was just the man my brother was.

“I’m truly sorry that my brother dragged you into this...!” I apologized to King Glenreed.

“...You must have it rough,” he said, sounding sympathetic.

“He’s really not a bad person...”

It wasn’t as if he was trying to hurt anyone. In fact, he always took very good

care of me. Big Brother Bernard's intense training was how I was able to take on an opponent like Sumia without any fear, which is part of why I appreciated him so much, although...he was a man with certain quirks, and some of his training had become a point of trauma for me.

"...By the way, Your Majesty. Would you mind letting me go now?"

Being wrapped up in his arms was uncomfortable. Though, that was more so for me than His Majesty. King Glenreed looked perfectly calm, but I couldn't seem to put the fact that I was in his arms out of my mind.

"...Fine. I'll have a battle with Bernard, so wait here."

"You'll fight him?"

"Yes. ...Fighting someone strong will help extinguish the fire in my heart, so this is perfect timing." King Glenreed was saying something too quiet to hear as he looked over the sword he kept on him for self-protection.

I didn't know why he suddenly decided to fight Big Brother Bernard, but I agreed to stay there and watch them.



**"HUFF!"**

"I see what you're trying!"

Silver trails crossed and glimmered in the air in between panted breaths.

I listened to the sound of metal clanging together.

His Majesty and Big Brother Bernard were crossing swords with each other. Both parties were being careful not to injure each other, but the fight was still quite intense.

"They're both so ridiculous."

I agreed completely with those words from Lucian behind me.

I didn't know much about sword fighting, but even I could tell that this was an overwhelming battle between two formidable men. They were on a completely different level than Dustin. Just watching them had me mesmerized.

"...But I'm glad His Majesty seems to be having fun," I said.

Perhaps he was happy to finally meet someone he could fight at his full potential, since he didn't know anyone else at his own skill level.

*His Majesty is a very serious person. I bet he has a lot of stress built up...*

Big Brother Bernard was happy to be having a battle with a strong opponent. His Majesty got the benefit of stress relief. On top of that, it was good luck for me, who wouldn't have to deal with Big Brother Bernard's training if this fight drained all his energy.

...But that was before the second party arrived. It was my fault for letting my guard down.

"Laetitia, aren't you bored just watching them? Come and fight with me."

"...Geh!"

It was Big Brother Yurius.

Big Brother Claude emerged from the carriage with our family crest on it as well. He had a look of despair in his eyes, apparently unable to resist Big Brother Yurius's orders to come along.

When Big Brother Yurius arrived, His Majesty stopped fighting and turned toward us.

"Did you both come here to train Laetitia, too?" he asked.

"That's the plan. The four of us haven't been together like this in a long time, so I thought we could see what's become of our skills."

"I see. I'll head home first then," King Glenreed said. It was time for him to return to his work, it seemed.

Now that I was alone, Big Brother Claude smiled and sighed deeply. "Let's do our best, Letty. As soon as this is all over, I want to get home and read my books..."

Big Brother Claude was subtly putting up death flags. The two of us both had pained smiles on our faces.

Big Brother Yurius, the oldest, was a teacher from hell. Big Brother Bernard, the second oldest, was obsessed with fighting.

The intensity of their lessons that both Big Brother Claude and I had endured would always be a trauma we shared.









**BIG** Brother Bernard, clutching his sword, charged forward past the exchange of fire and thunder spells. I found myself grazed by passing spells many times throughout the intense training session.

“I’m probably going to dream about it all over again tonight...” I muttered under my breath now that I was inside the carriage.

The merciless battle had left me completely exhausted. My fellow passenger in the second of our two carriages, Big Brother Claude, looked to be equally on death’s door.

He ended up finding himself on the receiving end of our brothers’ focus and spent the entire time being chased around frantically. He’d managed to escape with his swamp traps, but his only consolation prize appeared to be complete mental exhaustion.

“Big Brother Claude, did you do something to upset them?” I asked.

“...I can think of a lot of things, unfortunately.”

Big Brother Yurius was often scolding the slacker, Big Brother Claude.

*“Have more pride in yourself as a nobleman.”*

*“Don’t drink so much all the time.”*

*“You can do anything if you just apply yourself.”*

Despite all these reminders, Claude remained the kind of person who dedicated himself to following his own desires.

“...But you really love our brothers too, don’t you?” I said.

Big Brother Yurius and Big Brother Bernard had unique personalities too, but their relationships actually came around and worked better just because of how different they were.

Big Brother Yurius sought to become an exemplary nobleman, Big Brother Bernard sought fame and power as a soldier, and Big Brother Claude sought a life where he could be lazy. Perhaps the fact that none of their goals aligned was what allowed them to have a peaceful relationship.

*...I hope they can keep getting along forever without any real fights breaking out.*

I felt that desire even stronger in my heart as I looked at the groggy Claude.



*“**ARE** you okay, Queen Laetitia? You look really tired!”*

The two fluffy foxes greeted me when I returned to my bedroom at home.

*“Come on, cheer up. You can pet my tails!”*

*“Please pet my tails too.”*

*...Did I die and go to heaven?*

Fifu and Fos nuzzled up to me and wrapped me in their bushy tails. I was surrounded by fluffy fur on every side. The total of nine tails gently caressed my skin, melting the fatigue out of my body.

*“Haaaaaaaaa!”*

I let out a long sigh like I’d just sunken into a hot bath. This was probably doing even more for my physical and mental health than a hot bath would.

*“Thank you, Fifu, Fos. That was a big help.”*

*“Good!”*

*“It was no trouble at all.”*

They both swished their tails proudly. To thank them, I massaged their heads and necks with my fingers, enjoying the soft fluffy sensation that was slightly different from that of their tails.

*“That felt wonderful. We’ll see you again soon.”*

*“See you!”*

They bounced away, satisfied with their treatment.

The two of them were staying at my family home with us. They joined His Majesty or me on our outings when they felt like it, apparently interested in gathering information about Elltoria for Lady I-Liena too.

*“...I still have some time before dinner.”*

The foxes had cheered me up, so I decided to check on something that was bothering me.

Once I left my room, the attentive Lucian called for a butler.

I explained my request to the butler and had him bring me the key to our storage closet. I wanted access to the crest tool inside—a device for measuring magical energy.

Lucian handed me a blade to put a small cut into my pinky. I felt the pain and made sure I'd produced blood. I let the blood drip down onto the crystal ball about the size of a baby's head.

The ball began to glow. It sent light down into the attached metal plate.

After some time, the light dimmed again, and a number appeared on the plate.

"Thirty-five thousand..."

I expected as much, but this was still an incredible amount.

Big Brother Yurius, one of the top ten people in the country when it came to magical energy amounts, had a value of 7,500. There were only a few sorcerers on the entire continent who surpassed a value of 10,000. But mine was all the way up to 35,000.

"Of course an average instrument wouldn't be able to measure such a value..."

I once ended up breaking the tool when I tried to measure my amount back in Wolfvarte. All the magical energy I possessed surpassed its capacity, causing it to malfunction and break down.

The crest tool before me now was much higher quality than the one in Wolfvarte. Ducal families passed these down from generation to generation, as Elltoria was a kingdom full of powerful sorcerers, so it was top of the line. The tool was also a very expensive, rare item, since it was made with special materials.

Such a precise crest could accurately measure amounts up to 20,000. It was believed that no one in the world could ever surpass such a number. After that

point, the numbers became less accurate. I wasn't sure if I could entirely believe a reading of 35,000.

"...No change."

My readout remained at 35,000 even after testing it again. I couldn't believe it, but it did make a few things come to mind.

Today, I held off Dustin with spells, created a training area, and then ended up fighting with Big Brother Yurius, one of the most powerful sorcerers in the whole kingdom.

However, it barely made a dent in my own magical energy.

Big Brother Yurius's training only drained me mentally. I still had plenty of magical energy remaining. It was a frightening amount that could be called nothing other than "abnormal."

...The source of this power was likely the return of my past life memories.

The last time I measured on this same crest gave me a result of 7,500. A little over a year later, and I'd now more than doubled it, crossing the 30,000 mark. That would be unthinkable under normal conditions.

The absurdity of the whole thing made me shudder slightly.

I'd also measured on the same crest a few days prior. I wanted to try it on different days to see if anything changed, but seeing as how I received the same result, the chances of this being the result of a malfunction were much lower.

"...It's the same for this one, most likely."

I decided to use another crest tool. This one was a long glass cylinder with a circular metal plate fixed to the bottom. I let a few drops of blood drop into the glass, waited for a moment, and watched it flow into a portion of the metal plate.

The plate was split into seven sections—one for each element of magic.

My blood was being sorted into the element of "Air."

"I thought so. This one hasn't changed either."

Most humans held a mixture of Earth, Water, Fire, or Wind energies. The

exact ratio was different depending on the person, but more than 95 percent of people were born with these four varieties of magic throughout the world.

The remaining few people possessed elements that the others didn't. There was Dark Magic, Light Magic, and the rarest of them all was Air Magic.

With so few users of Air Magic, little research had been done on the element at all, nor did any real methods of using it exist.

What could be done with Air Magic? What qualities did it possess?

Not even those basic questions had been answered yet. It was practically an unknown element.

Air Magic didn't exist within me before I regained my past life memories. This change in magical energy capacity as well as the element itself was one of many continuous abnormalities. It was hard to believe it could be related to anything other than my past life...

But that was all I knew at the moment.

Sorcerers in this world didn't deal with matters such as souls and past lives. It was possible that Air Magic had something to do with a sorcerer's soul or past life, but I didn't know how to go about researching that, so I was stuck where I was in terms of information.

"Hmm... I guess now I know that I don't know anything at all..." I smiled wryly, then cleaned my blood from the instruments with a special cloth.

Fortunately, an increase in magical energy only came with benefits so far, so it hadn't caused me any trouble. I decided to be patient in my investigation, since rushing things wouldn't help me find the answer I was after.

I cleaned up, left the storage room, and ran into Tweety outside.

"Chirp chirp! Tweet tweet!"

"All right, all right. You're hungry, aren't you?"

I stroked his cream-yellow feathers, allowing him to cuddle up to me like he wanted. Once my vision was completely swallowed up, I knew Tweety had begun to feed.

“Chirp chirp, tweet tweet tweet tweet...”

*“Queen Laetitia has the most delicious magical energy!”* I could practically hear those words in Tweety’s cry.

Tweety was a strange Cuddle Bird. I’d been told that he was never satisfied with anyone else’s magical energy until he met me. That pickiness suddenly made sense when I discovered the element of my own energy.

Tweety surely must have had a preference for Air Magic. Since Air Magic users were so incredibly rare, he never found what he was looking for before me.

“Tweety... This Air Magic that you love so much. Tell me, what’s it like?”

When I asked the bird this question...

*“I don’t really know. I guess it’s just really tasty.”*

That was the answer I perceived in the way he cocked his head.



**“FIFU? Fos? Where are you?”**

I was searching around for the two foxes after dinner. I wanted to feed them and ask them something while I was at it.

“They usually show up at dinnertime...”

*I wonder what they’re up to?*

I’d already searched everywhere I thought they might be. The only remaining room was King Glenreed’s bedroom. Though we were husband and wife, Father insisted we have separate bedrooms while staying here, since I was just his wife in name only.

“Your Majesty? May I come in?” I asked with a knock on his door.

“Come in,” I heard him say through the door.

“Ah, there you two are,” I said when I entered the room.

Fifu and Fos were with King Glenreed.

When I looked closer, I realized that their tails were glowing faintly. This was proof that they had used magical energy. It appeared they were touching His

Majesty so that they could converse with him.

“Fifu, Fos. Do you have a moment to speak?” I approached them and touched the two foxes.

*“Sure.”*

*“What’s up?”*

“I’d like you two to attend a party with us tomorrow night. There are special circumstances concerning the party’s host. Do you know Earl Zamiel?”

*“Nooope!”*

*“I think I’ve heard the name before, but that’s it.”*

I wanted to introduce the two of them to him.

“Lord Zamiel is famous as a proprietor of rare animals and Mythical Beasts. Once he heard that King Glenreed and I came here with you two, he asked us to bring you to the party with us.”

*“Proprietor? What’s that?”* Fifu cocked his head, a bit confused by my big word.

“It means he’s someone who gathers Mythical Beasts and animals.”

*“I see. So he loves Mythical Beasts like us!”*

“I’m sure...that he does love them, yes, but I think you might have the wrong idea. As far as I’ve heard, he loves Mythical Beasts because they’re such rare ‘things.’ It’s probably a different sort of love than what Lady I-Liena and beastfolk feel.”

In other words, he was a collector.

This was just another way of interacting with animals, but personally, I didn’t care for it. I felt like I wouldn’t get along with Lord Zamiel even before regaining my past life memories, so I never interacted with him very much.

*“Huh. There’s all kinds of people in the world, aren’t there?”*

“Does it not bother either of you? You’re fine with that?”

*“It’s no big deal. People are people, and we’re us. That’s how I see it.”*



*Fifu is so clever.*

It was possible that he had the intelligence of a normal person despite speaking like a child.

“All right. Would one of you be able to join us tomorrow night?”

*“Sure thing. Leave it to me!”*

*“I leave it to Fifu.”*

It looked like he was up to the task. I thanked them, took out the boiled chicken Lucian had given me, and fed them their dinners.

They hopped in place before digging into the chicken.

*“That was good!”*

*“I’m full. Time to go play.”*

The pair ran off together, clearly bursting with energy. I started to hear chirping off in the distance and realized Tweety must have joined them in their games.

“Hehe! They’re so cute. I love how friendly the two foxes are. They remind me of siblings.”

“...Siblings, huh?” King Glenreed looked up from the book in his hands.

“Your Majesty, what are you reading?”

“Bernard recommended it to me today. He said it offers new approaches on how to use spells on the battlefield. I thought I’d borrow it, since you happened to have it in your home library.”

“Is it any good?”

“I haven’t finished yet, but it’s very interesting. I guess that’s natural, since Bernard was the one who suggested it. I want to talk to him about it if we get the chance sometime.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m sure Big Brother will be honored as well.”

That was a relief. Despite the unfortunate circumstance surrounding how they first met, His Majesty and Big Brother Bernard didn’t seem to experience a

clash of personalities.

“You siblings get along much better than most siblings born into noble families,” King Glenreed said.

“Big Brother Claude looked after me a lot, and my brothers all care about each other too.”

“That’s a good thing. Nobles and royalty are rarely so lucky as to have those good relationships.” King Glenreed’s expression softened into a sad smile. Though he reunited with Leonard last year, he probably wasn’t satisfied with a relationship where they could never meet publicly.

“Yes, I agree. I am who I am today because I’ve had my brothers.”

“I’m sure. I’m grateful to your brothers too, since I’m glad to have met you as you are. They all seem to adore you, and they’re incredibly talented, but...” His Majesty trailed off halfway through his thoughts.

“I understand how you feel, Your Majesty. It’s an undeniable fact that they’re talented, but they all have unique, or perhaps, troubling personalities. I understand why it’s hard to praise them and leave it at that.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just thought it was a bit strange.”

“What was?”

“...How your engagement came to an end.”

It seemed difficult for him to get the words out. I could tell he didn’t want to offend me.

“As far I’m concerned, that’s all part of the past now.”

“I see... Then I’ll say that your engagement being called off in the first place should have been unthinkable. I’d always assumed it was the result of a series of strange coincidences and Fritz’s own idiocy...but now that I’ve seen how brilliant your father and brothers are, even with all that bad luck, it just seems a little strange that they couldn’t stop Fritz from going through with it. That’s all.”

“...Is that so?”

I neither confirmed nor denied His Majesty’s words.

I simply smiled back at him.



**FROM** a visual standpoint, Lord Zamiel’s party venue was strikingly unique.

“Wow! How beautiful.”

The hall was colored in the light of the chandeliers and the fluttering butterflies. Their delicate wings were an eye-catching blue with glossy scales that reflected the light. Each flap of those wings changed the tint of the light slightly. I felt like I could stare at them forever.

The butterflies gathered around King Glenreed and me when we entered the hall together.

“There’s a lot of them coming over to us,” King Glenreed observed.

“They’re Magic Butterflies,” I explained. “I’ve heard they’re attracted to people with strong magical energy.”

These were a kind of Mythical Beast I had never laid eyes on before. They were like the butterfly version of Tweety and lived off a diet of magical energy.

To these tiny creatures, the small amount of magical energy leaking out of my body was a feast. The Magic Butterflies all fluttered around me. As Mythical Beasts, it was no surprise that they lived up to such an impressive name. The blue insects filling my vision were like something from a fantasy setting.

“Screee! Squee squee squee!”

Fifu, on the other hand, was having fun chasing the Magic Butterflies down.

“Ah, wait. Don’t eat th— It’s gone?”

As soon as Fifu got one in his mouth, it dispersed like smoke and disappeared. I looked on in shock until someone arrived to help me out.

“They say that Magic Butterflies aren’t so much living creatures as they are a form of magical energy itself that takes the shape of a butterfly.”

It was Prince Atialdo. He took graceful steps toward me with about a dozen butterflies of his own surrounding him.

“Good day, Prince Atialdo. You’re very knowledgeable about them,” I

commented.

“I just had it explained to me for the first time recently too. Earl Zamiel is the one who brought Magic Butterflies to the capital for the first time. In preparation for tonight’s party, he sent a few butterflies to each member of the royal family as a gift.”

“I see. Are those the ones that are following you at the moment?”

“Yes, I received them just the other day. By keeping Magic Butterflies in a cage and feeding them your magical energy for a few days, they become dependent on that specific energy to survive and will follow its source even outside their cage. That’s the explanation Lord Zamiel provided when he gifted them.”

The prince held out his palm. The butterflies landed on it, their wings falling still. He stared at the blue creatures lovingly as if he’d grown attached to them.

“Magic Butterflies are very mysterious creatures. When struck with any force, they dissolve into magical energy and disappear as if they never existed at all. The qualities of the magical energy they’re fed can even change the shape, color, and size of their wings. Most fascinating indeed.”

I nodded at his statement. I’d thought they were just like Tweety at first, but it seemed I might have been mistaken. Unlike Tweety, with his material body and a will of his own, I wasn’t even sure if Magic Butterflies had a sense of self at all. It was hard to describe the mysterious creatures as anything other than magical energy in the shape of a butterfly.

“I’m surprised Lord Zamiel managed to capture such strange Mythical Beasts,” I said.

Even with my interest in and research into Mythical Beasts, I knew nothing about the ecology of Magic Butterflies. I imagined they didn’t live anywhere close to this country’s population. I wondered where he managed to catch them. I was still curious, but it was time for His Majesty and me to make our way around the hall to greet the other guests.

“Good day, Queen Laetitia. Have you seen the Heaven’s Horse in that room over there?”

“Heaven’s Horse?”

I didn’t recognize the name brought up by the familiar viscountess.

*Is that a rare type of Mythical Beast?*

“Over there. It’s in that room.”

“Thank you.”

I decided to go take a look since she took the time to point me in the right direction. The caged animal inside the small room was...

“...A giraffe,” I whispered.

*So this world has giraffes in it too.*

These ones had a different name, but the long neck, slender legs, and color pattern were exactly that of a giraffe’s.

“It looks cramped...”

The ceiling in the room was high, but not quite high enough for the giraffe. Its neck was bent inside the cage, and it had to fold its limbs up, looking quite uncomfortable.

“Oh my. Is this King Glenreed and Queen Laetitia we have here?”

While we stared at the caged giraffe, an old man came up from behind to greet us.

“Good day. You must be Lord Zamiel, yes?” I greeted.

“Oh, I’m utterly delighted to hear that you already know of me, Queen Laetitia.” Zamiel gave the usual fluent greetings that all nobles did upon encountering each other, but his eyes were locked onto Fifu at my side. “Beautiful...! What a lovely coat of fur. May I touch him, if only for a moment?”

I gently stroked Fifu when I heard his request.

*“I don’t wanna. I don’t think I like this guy very much.”*

Fifu didn’t seem willing.

“I’m sorry. I think he’s a bit tired out from all the sights and strangers at the party,” I said, turning him down.

“I see... That’s unfortunate, but I would still love to add such beauty to my collection. Please come see me if you ever change your mind.” Despite those words, Lord Zamiel continued to stare at Fifu, apparently not yet ready to give up.

I understood the draw he felt to fluffy creatures, but not the way he expressed that affection. Even if he did love animals, between referring to Fifu as part of his collection and the state of his giraffe, I definitely felt like the two of us wouldn’t get along.

“Did you bring this Heaven’s Horse here from the south?” I inquired.

“Indeed I did. They are a very rare breed, not usually kept by people on our continent yet. I’m not surprised to hear you’re well-informed on them, however.”

I simply thought that, since they were identical to giraffes, they must live in warm climates. It appeared I was correct. It was possible that their ways of life were also equal to those of giraffes.

“This Heaven’s Horse appears to be too cramped to extend its neck. Do you usually keep it outside the cage?” I asked, hoping to draw his attention to the terrible conditions he was keeping the animal in.

“No, it stays in there. See how its limbs are long, just like its neck? If I let it outside, it would jump over the walls and fences to make its escape before anyone could stop it,” he lamented.

“...I see.”

I felt bad for the giraffe. I knew the earl was feeding it, but I felt like it could still fall ill in such a small cage.

“Oh dear, Your Majesty. Is the Heaven’s Horse not to your liking? Come, I have something special for you. I’m sure it will be exactly what you’re looking for.” Lord Zamiel left the giraffe cage and led us to another room. “Feast your eyes! This is my latest, and most prized possession!”

“...Could this be a Snow Cat?”

A fluffy white Mythical Beast was lying down inside the cage. Its white coat

was covered in dark gray leopard spots, giving it a strong resemblance to a snow leopard. The cat's entire coat was soft and fluffy, with a long, bushy tail too.

"Why, yes, it is! Isn't she beautiful? Do you not find her stunning? This rare find is the perfect centerpiece for tonight's party!!" Lord Zamiel was very talkative in front of the Mythical Beast, his pride and joy. "Snow Cats possess extremely powerful magical energy. That is what makes them so famous, and thus, so rare. Their breath creates blizzards, and their claws freeze whatever they scratch. Most frightening powers indeed. They're more than capable of beating up groups of the strongest sorcerers all put together."

They were a particularly dangerous species even amongst Mythical Beasts.

Gardener Cats could grow trees and plants, but their attack skills were only those of regular cats. Cuddle Birds like Tweety didn't seem to have any instinct to attack at all. But unlike them, these Mythical Beasts sounded like they were far more formidable than the average human.

"However, this Snow Cat is safe, so please enjoy the sight of her as much as you please. Her cage and collar are not like the others. This locking iron absorbs magical energy to seal away the powers of Mythical Beasts."

"The collar...?"

Locking iron was a special material that absorbed magical energy. This was also used in things like handcuffs and chains meant to restrain criminal sorcerers, but it was said to be more valuable than gold per pound.

"Both a locking iron collar and a cage? I'm surprised you managed to procure those," I remarked.

"Oh dear. Do you doubt their authenticity? Please, by all means, give them a touch. You'll feel the magical energy absorbed right out of your body."

"...Allow me, then."

When I made contact with the cage, I felt a mysterious sensation against my skin—not quite cold, but not quite warm. The cage began to glow and I felt my magical energy being absorbed.

“It appears to be real,” I agreed. “Where did you manage to obtain this cage, your Snow Cat, and the Magic Butterflies? If you’re revealing them for the first time today, then they must have been obtained recently, yes?”

“Haha. I’m afraid that’s a trade secret. Revealing my methods might end with everyone aspiring to become collectors and causing a scramble to obtain goods.”

*Of course, he’s going to keep it a secret.*

I knew this all must have cost a fortune, but even with money, these things shouldn’t be so easy to procure. As curious as I was, I didn’t particularly want to be this man’s friend, so I decided to stop asking about it altogether.

I turned my gaze away from him and toward the Snow Cat.

She seemed to be leaning her head against the bottom of the cage due to the weight of the collar. Her gold eyes darted all around the room anxiously, letting out a displeased noise from deep in her throat. She appeared to be leery when it came to humans due to being forcefully taken out of her habitat. I’d heard Snow Cats were very intelligent too, so perhaps it was even more upsetting to the animal if she knew what was going on.

“...Fifu?”

Fifu stuck his nose through a gap in the cage to peer in.

I was worried the Snow Cat might bite, but when Fifu let out a quiet cry to the Mythical Beast, the Snow Cat responded with one of her own.

*They’re different species, but do they still understand each other?*

I was highly curious, but I couldn’t ask Fifu about it with so many eyes on us. I would have to ask him later. Instead, I left Lord Zamiel and returned to socializing with the other guests.

“It’s been a while, Laetitia.”

“Prince Ernest? I didn’t know you were here too.”

The black-haired man was the crown prince of the Winged Wildam Empire. It appeared that he’d come to this country by flying on the back of his prized companion, the Pegasus.



“That chocolate of yours I brought back to my country was really popular,” he said. “Father keeps asking and asking when he’ll get to eat some more.”

“Even His Majesty the Emperor? That makes me happy to hear.”

The conversation switched off chocolate into all sorts of topics. After we spent some time chatting, happy to see each other again...

“We need to go, Laetitia. The people over there look like they want to talk to you too.” King Glenreed tugged on my arm, so I turned the other way.

“Ah, very well. Farewell then, Prince Ernest.”

I’d apparently gone on too long once I spotted the familiar face.

“...He’s as frantic as ever.” Prince Ernest was smirking, muttering something under his breath. But I turned my attention to the next party guest.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both. My name is Frambere. I’m one of many diplomats sent by His Majesty, the emperor of Ringrard.”

It was unusual to see people from his country here.

The Ringrard Empire had been rapidly amassing power within the last few years. But since relations between our two countries were quite poor, diplomatic missions were almost nonexistent. Our country boasted a long history and had a very powerful system of nobility, while the Ringrard Empire was a young nation that operated on meritocracy. That was why both lands mocked and looked down on the other.

This Frambere man didn’t seem to be faking his polite manner, but I also got the sense that he didn’t take me seriously somehow. It was just my intuition, but this intuition had proven correct many times already.

After subtly trying to read into each other’s intentions, we finished our conversation, and I looked out at the hall to see who I should speak to next.

“...It looks like Prince Fritz was invited too.”

He was standing with Lord Zamiel’s butterfly gift swarming him, although he looked like he was in a bad mood. I heard that Prince Fritz had just barely managed to pass his graduation exam, but the same wasn’t true of Sumia. His irritation had only grown once the wedding was postponed.

I saw Lord Zamiel approach the visibly sulking Prince Fritz and try to put in some good words for himself. The earl was part of Prince Fritz's faction. It was too late for him to change sides now, so chances seemed high that he was planning on supporting His Highness from here out as well.

Lord Zamiel let out a quiet sigh once he separated from the prince. It clearly wasn't easy for him to interact with His Highness. I sympathized in that regard.

"And Princess Velta is here too," I hummed to myself.

Though she was the leader of the faction opposing that of Lord Zamiel, she was still a member of royalty. Princess Velta was probably invited simply because the earl didn't want to be seen as rude for ignoring her.

As I looked over all the party guests, both from close and from afar...

"Laetitia." King Glenreed called my name in a sharp tone. "Be careful. I just heard a scream in the distance."

"A scream...?"

I didn't hear anything, but the king's ancestral powers made his senses much sharper than mine. King Glenreed was staring at the part of the room that connected to the area with the Snow Cat's cage.

"Aaaaah!"

"Damn it! Run away!!"

That time, I heard it.

Party guests came scuttering our way like bugs. After their screams, a white figure came leaping out in pursuit.

"The Snow Cat?! What happened to the cage?!"

Her collar was gone, and her white coat was splattered with something red.

*Oh no. This is really bad. People have already been injured.*

The Snow Cat ignored those who were fleeing, looking around at the large hall.

"EEEK!"

The person being targeted as the animal's next prey was Princess Velta.

With a short bending of her graceful back legs, the Snow Cat lifted off and jumped toward the princess.

"Hammering gusts!"

I sent a ball of wind shooting out toward the Snow Cat. But she spotted it at the last moment and managed to dodge the surprise attack completely.

*Wait, did she do a spin in the air?!*

Shocked, I looked at the ground and realized the Snow Cat was standing on ice. She'd used her magical energy to turn the floor into an ice pad, which let her maneuver in the air with ease.

She was tough, that was for sure.

I shot a few more wind spells at her, but she avoided them all too. This Snow Cat's mobility was difficult to handle.

Princess Velta and the other fleeing guests were able to get further away, but the Snow Cat was still enraged.

"Squeeee..."

The Snow Cat glared at me, then took off running to the exit of the hall. She left like the passing of a storm, but just to be safe, I remained ready to fire another spell if needed.

"...Well done. That was brave of you."

Just as I was starting to relax at the sound of King Glenreed's appreciative voice...

"Laetitia! Why did you stop attacking?! Go finish that thing already!" Prince Fritz stepped forward and started to screech at me.

"Are you all right, Prince Fritz?" I asked him calmly.

"Of course not! I could have been killed! I was right next to that beast when it slipped out of its cage! Now go chase it down and make it pay!" Prince Fritz pointed at me fervently.

"I would rather not... I'll leave the rest in the hands of the party's security

team,” I said.

“What did you just say?! You got the drop on Sumia the other day, right?! So do the same thing and go kill that thing!”

“Prince Fritz...”

After the incident with Sumia on the day of the exam, I sat down and talked to the third queen in private. We ended up working out an arrangement to keep everything secret. Yet there was Prince Fritz, now screaming about the whole thing for everyone to hear...

I knew he was losing his mind over the danger of this situation, but this was nothing more than self-destruction at this point.

“Are you listening to me, Laetitia?! I’m telling you to do something! Depending on what you choose, I’ll even take you back as my fiancée!”

“...What was that?”

My mind went completely blank.

*I...would be...His Highness’ fiancée...again...?*

*...No. No way. Absolutely not.*

I was too confused to do anything. King Glenreed was the one to speak up on my behalf.

“Silence, child. Laetitia is *my* queen. What are you thinking, trying to propose to another man’s queen?”

“Ah!!”

This appeared to be a rare moment of genuine anger for King Glenreed. Prince Fritz stiffened up, finding himself on the receiving end of such a bloodthirsty intensity. The entire hall of guests fell silent too.

“...! I’ll be leaving now! I can’t stay in such a dangerous place any longer!” Princess Velta broke the silence. She headed right for the door with her group of followers behind her.

One by one, the rest of the guests filed out too. They began to push and shove, nearing a state of panic over the prospect of the Snow Cat returning.

“Your Majesty, shall we head home too?” I asked King Glenreed. “Prince Fritz might try something foolish again if we stay too long.”

“Yes, let’s go. But I want to see the Snow Cat’s cage before that.”

“So do I. Let’s head that way.”

We departed to the opposite side of the room from the rest of the crowd. People naturally moved aside for His Majesty to pass, which made it easier to get around.

Blood was splattered on the floor in front of the Snow Cat’s cage, and part of the bars were bent, forming a gap. Not even the locking iron, with its power to absorb magical energy, had resistance to physical manipulation. The material could have deteriorated or been broken in an accident...but this had to be intentional. The collar was in pieces on the ground too.

“What’s the meaning of this, Lord Zamiel? Did you set the Snow Cat loose on purpose?” I asked, my tone stern.

The earl was standing next to the cage in a daze. “No... It wasn’t me. I locked the Snow Cat up properly with the locking iron cage and collar... So how...? How...?”

Lord Zamiel repeated that question over and over again.

## Chapter 5: A Qualified King and the Wings of the Butterflies

**“PRINCE** Atialdo was wounded, and now he’s being treated?” I asked.

It was the day after the Snow Cat’s escape. Lucian and I were listening to the information Father had gained so far.

“The Snow Cat attacked Prince Atialdo as soon as she got out of her cage. There were many witnesses,” he continued. “They even said His Highness’s blood was splattered on the floor.”

“So all that blood...”

*It belonged to Prince Atialdo.*

I was worried about him. Judging by how much blood I saw, he definitely suffered more than just a few scratches.

“How bad are Prince Atialdo’s injuries?” I asked, unable to hide my concern.

“Unfortunately, they sound pretty serious, but I don’t have the full details right now,” Father said with a shake of his head. “Princess Velta’s people carted off Prince Atialdo while he was still unconscious from the attack, making it difficult to gain access.”

“Is he still with her people?”

“That’s what I’ve heard. Princess Velta herself isn’t injured, but she’s furious about the whole ordeal. She thinks Lord Zamiel and Prince Fritz planned the Snow Cat’s escape to kill her and Prince Atialdo. You also saw how the Snow Cat seemed to ignore the other guests just to attack Princess Velta, right?” Father asked.

“Yes, I did see that for myself.” I nodded grimly.

It looked like the Snow Cat was targeting only Princess Velta. I did find that strange...

“Snow Cats are said to be wise and powerful Mythical Beasts,” Father continued. “Princess Velta insists that Lord Zamiel and Prince Fritz trained the Snow Cat to target her and Prince Atialdo. By faking the escape of an animal, Lord Zamiel could take out Princess Velta, a likely candidate for the throne, and Prince Atialdo all at once. Then his candidate, Prince Fritz, would have a solid chance to become the heir. That’s what she’s declaring.”

“I see. The logic does make sense...” After thinking for a moment, I spoke up again. “I think it might be the opposite, actually. Couldn’t Princess Velta have organized the whole thing to frame Prince Fritz and his camp?”

Even if it was all set up to look like an accident, Lord Zamiel wouldn’t be able to escape responsibility for the Snow Cat’s rampage either way. It was hard to imagine he would agree to carry out a plan that came with so much personal risk.

“Yes, I agree. Princess Velta is too clever. She must be keeping Prince Atialdo locked away and is only pretending to care for him. She’s probably going to try to secure the title of heir while both Prince Fritz and Prince Atialdo are out of center stage.”

I held the same opinion as Father.

But the problem with this theory was that there was no explanation for how Princess Velta could have freed Lord Zamiel’s Snow Cat in the first place. Accusing a member of the royal family without proof would have consequences, even for a duke like my father.

“Yurius and I are going to try to find where Prince Atialdo is being held,” Father said. “Let us know if you figure anything out on your end.”

“I will. Please be safe, Father.”

I watched him leave to start giving orders to his subordinates.

When I returned to my room, Fifu let out a big yawn. He appeared to be fatigued after being around the crowd last night, and from the Snow Cat’s rampage too. He fell asleep as soon as we made it back to my room, only to have finally woken up again now.

*“I slept so good. Morning!”* Fifu rubbed his front paws on his face to groom

himself.

“Good morning, Fifu. I’m sorry to ask you this right as you’ve awoken, but yesterday, when you were staring into the Snow Cat’s cage, were you able to talk to her?” I inquired.

*“Mmm... We couldn’t talk. We’re different species, so we don’t use the same words.”* Fifu cocked his head to one side.

“I see... Then why were you staring at her? Was something bothering you?”

*“Her child. The Snow Cat was calling for her child.”*

“Her *child*...? I thought you said you couldn’t understand what she was saying?”

*“We don’t use the same words, but we can understand the important stuff. I don’t have any kids yet, but I know that kids are the world to their moms and dad. That Snow Cat was begging for someone to give her baby back.”*

“...Now I see.”

Fifu’s information filled in a few missing pieces.

The Snow Cat had her child taken hostage in a plot to force her into acting as a pawn. Such an intelligent Mythical Beast would understand the concept of a hostage, so she knew she had no choice but to obey.

“So whoever sold Lord Zamiel the Snow Cat must be the culprit,” I concluded.

They probably provided him with the locking iron cage and collar set too. Confined by the powers of the cage and collar, the Snow Cat couldn’t attack this seller, and Lord Zamiel felt safe in his purchase.

But it was all a trap. The Snow Cat only refused to attack anyone because her cub was being held hostage. The collar and cage were nothing more than props—easily breakable if the Snow Cat felt like it. I knew they had to have been tampered with somehow.

“So wouldn’t it be best to track down the seller before anything else...?” I pondered. “Or I could investigate Princess Velta and her people...?”

But no matter what action I took, Prince Atialdo’s confinement was a major



risk. Princess Velta and her subordinates might end up putting him in harm's way if I pressured them too hard.

As I pondered this tangled mess of a situation, I suddenly heard a soft tap against my window.

"Who is it...?"

"I'll take a look, my lady." Lucian cautiously peered outside the window. "It's... My lady, please come over here."

"...Oh no..." I gasped.

There stood a deer—his torso stained with blood, dragging his front left leg limply.

He had tapped on the window with his antlers.

This was none other than Prince Atialdo in deer form.



**"YOU** saved me, Your Majesty."

Prince Atialdo had transformed back into a human. He mustered up a weak smile. His body carried the same wounded areas that I saw on the deer. They were wrapped up in bloodied bandages.

*...Where did his clothes and bandages go when he was in deer form?* Distracted by a pointless question, I discussed the situation with Prince Atialdo.

"Did you come straight here after you escaped from Princess Velta's people?" I asked him.

"Yes, that's exactly what happened. They confined me in a place that was being watched from all sides by more guards than I could count, but of course, they never expected me to transform into a deer and make a break for it."

"What a splendid use of your ancestral powers," I praised.

Prince Atialdo's escape had removed one major obstacle already.

"But why did you come to me? King Maldias surely knows about ancestral reversion, so wouldn't he have rescued you if you showed up in deer form?"

“...King Maldias has also been taken prisoner.”

“What?!”

It sounded like the situation was even worse than I thought. This was a twist I never saw coming.

“Really? His Majesty is a prisoner too? Are you certain? Even if his security was slightly weakened just between today and yesterday, it’s hard to imagine that his capable guards would fail to protect him and allow him to be taken away...”

“It’s all my fault.” Prince Atialdo pressed his palm to his forehead, revealing the truth that weighed on him. “‘Don’t resist, or else he’ll be killed.’ That sort of threat would leave King Maldias with no choice but to obey.”

“Is that even possible...?” I couldn’t hide my disbelief.

It was unthinkable under normal conditions. The king’s safety would never be prioritized over that of his brother, Prince Atialdo.

“It’s because of my ancestral powers.”

“...I’m not sure I follow?”

I didn’t understand why the conversation ended up there. I simply waited for His Highness to continue.

“Ancestral reversion means I inherit the powers of the sacred deer. It’s a bloodline that isn’t supposed to come to an end,” he told me. “That’s what each generation of the royal family is taught on the subject. King Maldias knows that too, of course, as does Princess Velta, most likely. ...Her Highness doesn’t seem to know about the legends or that I can transform into a deer, but I believe she’s caught on to the fact that His Majesty is unable to abandon me due to certain traditions...”

Prince Atialdo let out a deep, long sigh.

“Everything is all my fault. I have ancestral powers, yet I’m incredibly helpless. I was attacked by the Snow Cat and even taken prisoner. Now King Maldias has been captured too. I don’t know what I can do. I don’t know how to make it right...”

“Your Highness...”

He spoke to the negative sides of ancestral reversion. It was as if he thought of himself as a fool bound by others, unable to escape, like a deer with its leg caught in a hunter’s trap.

“It’s too soon to give up yet,” I told him firmly. “With Princess Velta having taken the king hostage, she won’t have won until he’s publicly declared he’s abdicating the throne to her. Until then, we can find a way to turn things around. I believe that Princess Velta is afraid of you, Your Highness.”

“It’s only a matter of time before the announcement is made,” he said darkly.

“That’s why it’s all the more important to act fast,” I asserted. “Princess Velta may have military allies, but she doesn’t control the entire army. She has few supporters outside of them too. If we can get His Majesty back, it will mean the end of Princess Velta’s camp for good.”

There were still plenty of ways to win. We still had moves we could make. I could never just sit back and let Princess Velta become the queen.

“We need you if we’re going to fight back, Your Highness. Please join us to make things right.”

“I can’t.” He bluntly refused to help. Prince Atialdo kept his head hung low. “I can’t live up to your expectations for me, Your Majesty.”

“...Why not?”

I had to know why. It was a question that was constantly plaguing me.

“Why are you always so hard on yourself? You never embarrass the royal family and you’re such a skilled diplomat as well. What is it that weighs on you so heavily?” I pressed.

“...Do you remember when I told you that if I was an exceptional person, I wouldn’t be here right now?” I nodded. Prince Atialdo closed his eyes and began to speak. “I meant exactly what I said... I’m sure you’ve noticed something by now. Don’t you find Prince Fritz and Princess Velta to be far too foolish, both as members of royalty and as people?”

“Well, I...”

I couldn't answer him. I just trailed off instead. An honest answer would almost certainly have me locked up for disrespecting the royal family.

"It's all right. Even if you don't respond, I know what it is you're thinking. Prince Fritz and Princess Velta are extreme fools. ...But that's how they've made it out alive to this point."

"....."

This was dark. Prince Atialdo continued to reveal the darkness of the royal family.

"The nobles feel that the more foolish the king, the easier he is to control. The queens want their own children to become the heirs, so they'll try to remove the other children from power... To all of them, a capable child of the royal family is merely a nuisance. They get rid of them while they're young, before they gain too much power."

It was an endless struggle. Nothing good could ever come from such a system, but this was the true state of the Elltorian royal family.

"I had three older brothers, two older sisters, and a younger brother. They were all clever and talented, but not one of them lived past the age of twenty. I know I was spared because of my ancestral powers, but also because I was completely incompetent compared to the others. You know that all too well, right, Queen Laetitia? I am only one and two years apart from your brothers, Lord Bernard and Lord Claude, but I am nowhere near as capable as them. Compared to those men, I'm a pathetic shell of a person."

A smile crept onto his tired face.

The fact that my brothers were so talented meant that, for better or for worse, they had a huge influence on the world around them. Perhaps he had come to think so poorly of himself because he was comparing himself to fellow Elltorians who were close to him in both age and status.

"My brothers are very talented, but I think there are plenty of things that only you are capable of, Your Highness," I insisted.

"Like what? I lack an ounce of their abilities or character. I'm an incompetent person with nothing to boast of."

“I don’t think you’re incompetent. Unlike my brothers and their striking wits, the light you possess is much gentler. The softness of that light is what makes it such a blessing to others. It’s why people take a liking to you on your diplomatic missions and why you can form real relationships with them. Don’t you agree?”

Even the beastfolk of Wolfvarte accepted Prince Atialdo for his warm personality. It wasn’t untrue that Prince Atialdo might not stand out at a glance when compared to people like my brothers or even King Glenreed. But that wasn’t strictly a negative.

“I believe that lots of people like and trust you because you never succumb to pride as a member of the royal family. You merely devote yourself sincerely to carrying out everything you’re capable of.”

“Thank you for saying so. ...But I’ve come to hate Elltorian politics, which is why I used diplomacy as an excuse to stay out of the country. That’s all. In other words, the only results I’ve achieved are the result of running away from my problems all this time. There’s no way that someone like me, who only knows how to run, could do anything about—”

“Of course you can!” I cut him off with a firm declaration. “You can do it. You may have started out by running, but you’ve turned into a wonderful diplomat who never fails to get the job done. You’re not incompetent. You have achievements almost no one else can boast of.”

“Those achievements only come because of luck...”

“But luck needs the necessary groundwork put in first to manifest. I don’t think you’ve actually given up in the first place, Your Highness,” I told him.

“I haven’t given up...?”

A light was glittering in his eyes as he repeated my words. I wasn’t sure how aware of it he was himself, but I knew that even Prince Atialdo had something he wasn’t ready to let go of.

“Exactly. If you merely hated the royal family and politics, you would either shut yourself inside your home or take up a post where nothing was required of you. But instead, you accepted the difficult job of a diplomat, which you’ve done for years now. I know you love your country and never gave up on doing

whatever you could for it.”

Despite his constant belittling of himself, he remained faithful to making any progress he could. I could tell that was simply who he was as a person.

“You still haven’t given up, have you, Prince Atialdo? If you really thought it was hopeless, you would never have transformed into a deer to escape and come to me, would you?”

“I...”

He was lost for a response. But that was the ultimate answer of them all.

“...Yes, that’s it. You’re right. I don’t think I’ve given up either...” Despite the awkward smile on the prince’s face... “I don’t have the talents of my deceased siblings, the terrifying brains of Lord Claude, or the strength of King Glenreed with his fellow ancestral powers...but at the very least, I don’t like to give up on things.”

An intense light was gleaming in his black eyes.









“**LAETITIA** sent a messenger? She wants to talk to me?”

Velta raised her eyebrows when she received the report in her manor.

A few days had passed since the Snow Cat’s escape. Momentum in the fight for the crown had shifted in favor of Velta’s camp. It was possible that Laetitia saw the inevitable and now wanted to cozy up to Velta for power.

“Took her long enough. I’m sure she wants to join the winning side, but it’s too late for that now. What a sad, foolish girl. She completely lacks foresight.”

Velta sneered. Nobles had spent the past two days joining her side once they saw that she was likely to emerge the victor. She would be perfectly fine without the help of the Gramwell family.

“Send them away. Finding Uncle Atialdo takes priority right now.”

Velta already had Maldias locked away. People were leaving Fritz’s camp due to his repeated blunders. Velta shouldn’t have had any enemies left in her way. Once she regained control of the escaped Atialdo, all that was left was to start laying the groundwork for her rise.

“I believe...you should speak with her, Your Highness.”

“Why?”

“The messenger said Prince Atialdo is currently with Queen Laetitia.”

“...He’s *what?*”

She scowled at unexpected words, turning to look at the young nobleman who’d brought her the report. This favorite, beautiful young man of hers was less interesting than the information he just brought her now.

“Why is Uncle Atialdo with *her*? I was having Laetitia and the Gramwell townhouse watched, wasn’t I? Don’t tell me those imbeciles botched the job?” She slammed her folding fan into the palm of her hand and glared at the man.

“N-No! The surveillance was perfect, of course. They never saw Prince Atialdo enter the house, which means they must have a hidden passage or secret hideout we don’t know about.”

“Or they’re just lying because they want to talk to me?”

“Yes! Of course, you may be right, Princess Velta... But the messenger said Queen Laetitia would bring His Highness with her to the meeting.”

“Wow. That girl can be clever sometimes.”

Velta’s red lips pulled up into a taut smile. Victory was hers if she managed to recapture Atialdo. If Laetitia was willing to give him up, then she would gladly meet with the figurehead queen.

“Tell them we’ll meet up at a place of my choosing tomorrow. That will be checkmate. I’ve all but won now. Hehe... Hehehe... Ahahaha...!”

Drunk on her inevitable victory, Velta couldn’t hold her laughter in for a single second.



**WE** headed to Princess Velta’s meeting place at the appointed time.

As expected, the area around the manor was guarded heavily by soldiers from Princess Velta’s camp. If our negotiations fell apart, it was likely to devolve into a physical battle.

I arrived at the room and curtsied elegantly before her.

“Good day, Princess Velta. I’m very grateful that you’ve agreed to speak with me.”

“...Y-Yeah. You got here fast. Sit down.”

Her response came after a moment of delay. Her blue eyes were glancing behind me where Big Brother Bernard stood.

Big Brother Bernard’s face was Princess Velta’s exact physical preference. Even though he blatantly rejected her once before, it was possible that she was still interested in him. Once Princess Velta saw Prince Atialdo at my side, she seemed to calm down again.

“Uncle Atialdo, why did you run away from us? Your wounds weren’t fully treated yet, were they?”

“I had something more important than healing to do. Release King Maldias at

once.”

When she heard this retort, Princess Velta opened her folding fan and made a show of letting her eyebrows slump into a sad expression.

“How terrible of you to say that, dear uncle. What could you possibly mean? I’m only protecting Father. If Fritz is deranged enough to try to kill you, we don’t know when he’ll turn on Father next. Plus, that terrible Snow Cat is still wandering the capital somewhere. I’m the only person who can protect Father right now. I’m very worried about you too, Uncle. Please, won’t you accept my offer and stay here with me?”

Her speech was blatantly transparent.

Prince Atialdo ignored her outstretched hand toward him. “Whatever your reason, there’s no excuse for tying His Majesty up and preventing him from moving freely. I’m still willing to mediate, which means it’s possible to stop this situation from getting even worse. Where is King Maldias right now?”

“So you still have no interest in helping me?”

“I’m only acting for the good of the country.”

“I see... You have your own views.” She slapped her fan against her palm. This signaled a transformation in her expression to one of total arrogance. It looked like the games were over now. “How sad. I can see all that pain from your injuries has you confused, Uncle. I’ll be sure to take you under my care. Laetitia, hold him down so that he can’t move.”

“I don’t think so.”

Princess Velta narrowed her eyes at my instantaneous response. “...Did I hear you correctly? Tie up Uncle Atialdo this instant. You don’t get a choice in this. If you agree to help us keep him here, I might change my mind about you. Didn’t you come here to join my side?”

“No, I did not. I simply wanted to be sure that King Maldias is safe.” I smiled at the spoiled princess.

“What do you mean? Didn’t you show up to make sure the next queen took a liking to you?” she asked, confused.

“King Maldias is still the Elltorian ruler right now,” I asserted.

“...What a stupid girl you are.” Her Highness knit her brows together and snapped her fan open again. That appeared to be the signal. The soldiers around us all drew their weapons.

“Do you really want me as your enemy, gentlemen?” Big Brother Bernard’s voice came out quietly in the tense room. It was still enough to make many of the soldiers flinch.

Big Brother Bernard was a flawless soldier and was considered to be a prodigy. Despite Princess Velta having many top military leaders in her camp, Big Brother paved his own way in the army through his many accomplishments. The soldiers knew all too well that they never wanted my brother on the opposite side of a fight.

“I won’t go easy on you if you hurt Prince Atialdo or Laetitia. Want to find out why people call me Thunder Spear?” Big Brother Bernard pressed them further, his words spoken in a commanding tone. Despite his obsession with fighting, he could be cool and collected at times like these and was always a reliable person in the end.

“...You little...!” The boy-crazy Princess Velta couldn’t seem to take her eyes off his face. She squeezed her folding fan, her cheeks turning pink. “So you’re going to defy me?! I won’t allow it! You better get on your knees now and beg me for—”

“Please wait, Princess Velta! You can’t make Lord Bernard your enemy!”

A young man, apparently the princess’s aide, desperately tried to calm her down.

I looked on, assuming he was going to use his looks as a tool of the trade. He did manage to calm Princess Velta down a bit.

“...Do you really not get it?” she said, changing tactics. “Father’s safety is entirely in my hands. Do you know what happens if you do anything to me right now?”

She was resorting to threats. Princess Velta had the trump card—King Maldias’s direct safety.

“Your threats are useless,” I said. “The reason so many nobles have their eyes on this situation is because King Maldias is a hostage. If you kill him, your enemies will gather under Fritz’s banner and push to attack you.”

“The nobles would never follow that idiot brother of mine.”

“Idiots are still preferable to regicide,” I declared.

“You think you’re so smart...!” Princess Velta bit down on her lip.

Though she had King Maldias in her possession, she was one wrong move away from having a lot more enemies to deal with. The worst-case scenario was having her kill the king and forcibly take the throne herself, but I knew she likely wanted to avoid that option as well.

“What do you even want?! If you won’t obey me, then why did you come here?!” she shouted.

“For the good of the country, of course. I don’t want you and Prince Fritz to divide the kingdom and lead us into a civil war. If King Maldias chooses you as the next heir, then I’ll be happy to obey you. Would you please allow me to meet with him?” I requested.

“Can you stop your games already? I know you want to steal Father away from me! I see right through your stupid plan!”

“No, that’s not my intention. I just want to ask for King Maldias’s thoughts directly. If you’re uneasy about this, then please feel free to use this on me.”

“What are those...?”

Lucian quickly held out an ordinary metal collar.

“This was made with a mixture of locking iron. I will wear this collar if you agree to let me see His Majesty. I’m sure you’re aware of how locking iron works. When I’m unable to cast spells with my magical energy absorbed, I’ll be nothing more than a normal, delicate woman. I won’t be a match for any soldier, nor will I be able to run away with the king in this state.”

As I spoke, I took the collar from Lucian and set it on the table in front of Princess Velta.

“Please test it out if you’re concerned about it. It can’t be unlocked without

the key once it's worn, and it is also very effective at absorbing magical energy. ...As a member of the Elltorian royal family, I'm sure Your Highness has some of the most superior energy in the entire kingdom, yes?"

"What's this about? Of course my energy is outstanding."

"Then please try it out by pouring some of your magical energy into the collar. If it doesn't break, then surely, there's nothing I'll be able to do to escape the collar either. Locking iron can't be broken without a sword or a single pump of more magical energy than can be measured. If you're unable to do that, then of course, it will be impossible for me as well."

"...I see."

Once she'd poured her magical energy in and seen that there was no issue, she seemed to consider it for a moment.

"Fine. I'll let you see Father if you have this collar on."

Twirling the collar with one hand, the princess smiled at me.



**"WAIT** a minute. You're bringing that animal with you?"

After the negotiations finished, Prince Atialdo and Big Brother Bernard returned home. Princess Velta suddenly complained about Fifu's presence as we headed to her carriage.

"King Glenreed and I have been asked to take care of him," I said. "I'm sure many people have witnessed me around Elltoria with this fox already. I'll be scared on my own, so I'd like to take him with me. ...Is that a problem?"

"...Fine. Bring him, then."

She side-eyed Fifu but ultimately gave her permission.

Whatever she was plotting in her mind, she'd outwardly made a promise to take me to King Maldias. Her Highness couldn't seem to think of a fitting reason to deny Fifu from joining me.

Before Fifu and I could exit the room, Princess Velta stood before us to block our path.

“Wait. You have to put the collar on before you can see Father.”

“I intend to do so, of course. But I haven’t actually seen any signs of His Majesty yet. I don’t want you to break our promise. Even if it’s from a distance, I’ll put the collar on once I’ve gotten a look at him. Does that cause any problem?”

Princess Velta’s face puckered in response to the smile on my face. “You’re still such a shrewd, cocky girl. ...Fine. Come with me. I’ll lead you to Father.”

She walked forward, surrounded by her soldiers. I followed her lead.

We ended up at a carriage without any windows. Along the way, we switched carriages a few times to avoid being followed, until we eventually arrived at a large house.

“King Maldias! You’re safe!”

The king was brought out to the back of the hallway once we were inside. He was wearing a collar and surrounded by soldiers on all sides. I knew it had to be a locking iron collar meant to prevent him from escaping with spells.

King Maldias wore no other restraints except for the collar, nor did he appear injured, which was a relief. I felt much better knowing the possibility that he’d already been killed was off the table now.

“I’m putting the collar on you like you promised. Hold still.”

I stopped moving for Princess Velta, having no reason to deny her.

I did consider putting up a fight at this point, but the idea was rejected, since King Maldias would probably end up as a hostage. I simply allowed her to put the collar on me without a struggle.

She fastened the lock and I felt the weight of the mechanism on my neck. I was wearing the collar properly now.

“Hehe! You look nice like this.”

“Kyah!”

Princess Velta struck my cheek with her folding fan. I managed to turn my face with the hit so it didn’t hurt, but I knew the princess wanted to humiliate

me.

“Why did you do that?!” I asked in a purposefully hurt-sounding voice.

“I just wanted to punish you for all the nerve you have.” Snickering, Princess Velta barked out orders. “Take Father away!”

“Please stop this! It’s not what you promised!” I cried.

“Why would I keep a promise with you? You foolishly offered yourself up on a silver platter to me when you showed up with that collar. How could I not use you? You’re such a stupid girl.”

I ended up being separated from King Maldias while Princess Velta sneered at me.



“...**WELL**, I knew that would happen,” I murmured under my breath inside the room I was now locked in.

I’d been handcuffed in addition to the collar. The handcuffs were made of normal metal, but I wouldn’t be able to get out of them with my physical strength alone. The room was about sixty feet in all directions with two guards standing post both inside and out.

“Squee?”

A cry of concern echoed through the room.

Fifu also had his back legs chained to the wall. All Princess Velta knew was that Fifu was someone very important to King Glenreed. When they tried to separate us, Fifu struggled enough that they ended up locking him in the room with me. Either way, we were both going to be used as hostages against King Glenreed.

“This isn’t news to me, but Princess Velta and her people really come up with some awful plans...” I sighed, causing one of the guards to glare at me.

I shuddered in an act of fear. Then I slumped down and sat on the edge of my bed. I would only have to suffer through this a little longer before everything was in place.



I spent a bit more time acting scared, and then...

“What was that?!”

A roar echoed through the room.

As soon as the guards looked away, I unleashed all of my magical energy at once.

My magical energy was off the charts. It was many times more powerful than Princess Velta's. The locking iron collar's energy absorption capacity was powerless against me. I filled it with my magical energy, felt it break apart, and didn't waste a moment to start using spells.

“Argh!”

My wind spell was enough to make two of the guards faint before it cut through Fifu's chains. When the two outer guards ran in to see what was happening, I took them out too and made my escape.

I ran toward the source of the roar. Fifu then turned toward the opposite hallway.

“Laetitia! You're safe!”

“Your Majesty!”

I stopped when I heard my name. King Glenreed and Fos were racing up to me. He let out a sigh when he saw me, but his face quickly turned serious.

“What happened to your cheek? Did Velta or a soldier *hit* you?”

“It's nothing. It'll be gone by tomorrow.” Flustered, I tried to comfort him.

King Glenreed was giving off a bit of a chill, perhaps because he was so angry. This was a part of his ancestral powers. It made me happy to know he was so concerned for me, but revealing his powers in this situation was a bad idea.

“I'm just fine. How is King Maldias?”

Once I changed subjects, the cold chill disappeared as he calmed down a bit.

“...He's safe with us. He doesn't seem too badly injured.”

“Thank goodness...”

I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Everything had gone according to plan, but I was still relieved to know that no one had been harmed so far.

*“Well? I helped, didn’t I?”*

“Yes, you saved the day, Fifu.”

I pet Fifu as he nuzzled his head against my hand. Praising Fifu’s valiant efforts, I thought back to our past two days of planning.



“I object to this. You’ll be in too much danger.”

King Glenreed’s voice was determined in his rejection.

The plan was to bait Princess Velta into a meeting by using Prince Atialdo, get her to let her guard down by putting on a locking iron collar, and find out where King Maldias was being held.

But King Glenreed strongly opposed the idea.

“It may be slightly dangerous, but there’s no reason that I would be in harm’s way. Her Highness knows that hurting me will turn the Gramwell Dukedom against her, so I don’t expect to be treated poorly. If I ever do find myself facing any real threat, I intend to break the collar and escape. My brothers will surely find the destination of the carriage before it gets to that point, so they’ll know where I’m being held too. I’ve even asked the Gardener Cats for their help. They won’t lose sight of my carriage.”

“Meow!”

Berry followed up with a meow of her own.

Aside from Berry, a few other Gardener Cats had come with me from Wolfvarte in order to search for a new home. Those cats who grew crops boarded my carriage in search of a new land where they could find owners to cook for them.

“I’m sure she’ll have countermeasures in place to stop people from following us, but it’s nigh impossible to shake off the Gardener Cats in the city. Won’t you trust me?” I asked him.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you...” Still, it didn’t seem that His Majesty was going to agree to my plan.

“Squee?”

Fifu approached His Majesty, who was deep in thought. His tails lit up faintly. He was communicating something to the king.

“...But...I...”

“What is it?” I asked.

King Glenreed looked at Fifu, then back at me.

“Fifu said he’ll help too.”

“He will? ...What does he mean by that? He can communicate with people he touches, but I don’t think that will be of use this time...” I said.

“Exactly. But that isn’t the only power two-tailed foxes have. ...Try touching Fifu.”

*What other power does he mean?*

Confused, I followed his instructions and placed my hand on Fifu.

*“Good day. Tell me, can you hear my voice? Hmm?”*

“What?!”

That voice belonged to Lady I-Liena. It wasn’t just my imagination. Her voice was reverberating in my mind as clear as day.

*“I hope you’ll respond if you can hear me. Are you there, Your Majesty?”*

“Y-Yes. I hear you...but how did this...?”

I looked in every direction of the room, but of course, I couldn’t see Lady I-Liena. She was far away in the kingdom of Wolfvarte.

*“Hehe! I’m glad I startled you. This is another power of two-tailed foxes. Anyone with four or more tails can communicate with other foxes, even from a distance. Of course, they can transmit their own voices, but also the voices of those they touch.”*

“I had no idea...”

*“But here we are. Surprising, isn’t it?”*

I could hear Lady I-Liena chuckling. It was as if she was right here with Fifu and me in the same room. Her voice was so clear.

*“This is why I asked His Majesty to take Fifu with you. He could communicate with me through Fifu if anything bad happened. Yes, that’s why he was able to go to Elltoria with you.”*

“Ah... Now I understand.”

Lady I-Liena’s words brought me back. King Glenreed had mentioned having a powerful ally back in Wolfvarte before we left. At the time, I assumed he just meant Lady I-Liena...

But now I realized he meant the two-tailed fox.

“Long-distance communication. What an incredible power indeed...” I mused.

This world had no inventions such as phones. Horses and beacons were the fastest way of sending information on this continent. That made the power of the two-tailed foxes even more valuable. They would probably be hunted if the public ever found out about this ability.

“So that’s why you didn’t want to tell me about the power either?”

Now that I thought back on it, Lady I-Liena and the Snow Fox clan were slightly more careful with their two-tailed foxes, even if they *were* their companion animals.

I thought the explanation for this was the secret of how the foxes could communicate with people they touched, but the true reason was probably their remote communication.

*“Exactly. Only a handful of two-tailed foxes can use that ability. The only people who know of it are the Snow Fox clan and the highest figures in Wolfvarte.”*

“I see...”

This reminded me of how Lord Kernell once made a huge mess in his attempt to get his hands on a two-tailed fox. I thought that was only secondary to his true motive at the time, but now that I knew of their power, I understood why

he was so desperate to obtain one.

*“I’ve decided to tell you about this power as proof of my trust in you. I just know you’ll use it well instead of for your own gain.”*

“...Thank you!”

*“Proof of my trust.”* I digested those words and stared at Fifu.

King Glenreed was right.

Involving Fifu in my plan would raise the chance of success.

Fifu and I would go to see King Maldias together while King Glenreed kept Fos with him. Fifu and Fos were going to communicate for us.

Supposedly, this remote communication allowed one to not only hear the voice of a speaker, but also see the direction it was coming from. This was the perfect trick for our plan.



**“GREAT** work, Fifu. You really helped us out.”

*“Hehehe! Wasn’t I so cool?”* He giggled proudly.

I pet the boasting Fifu, then continued down the hall with King Glenreed and Fos.

His Majesty had worked with my brothers to surround this property with soldiers once they determined its location. The building itself appeared to be just about under their control already. They were now heading toward the rescued King Maldias.

“I’m so glad to see you’re safe, Queen Laetitia.” Prince Atialdo emerged from the other end of the hall. He had agreed with my plan and been a crucial part of carrying it out.

“How were things on your end?” I asked.

Since we knew King Maldias was being kept in this house, but not which specific room, attacking first could have allowed our enemies to escape with him, ruining the entire plan in the end. Instead, Prince Atialdo used his deer form to come to the king’s rescue.

“I was able to find King Maldias’s room before the attack as planned. Queen Laetitia, it was all thanks to your brilliant idea, as well as these Magic Butterflies.”

He held up a small iron cage with one hand. Inside, the blue-winged Magic Butterflies were fluttering around. They all faced toward a fixed direction no matter how he turned the cage—the exact direction that King Maldias was in.

“We were lucky that King Maldias kept the butterflies from Lord Zamiel in his room at the castle,” I said. “They’re extremely sensitive to the tiniest amounts of magical energy that even humans can’t detect.”

I recalled the habits of the Magic Butterflies when we were thinking up a way to locate King Maldias’s exact room. Once Magic Butterflies were fed a certain amount of magical energy, they became reliant on that person’s energy as a food source and would pursue them to continue feeding.

Since King Maldias was feeding these specific butterflies, which were Lord Zamiel’s gift meant to curry favor with the royal family, the creatures now acted as a living compass that constantly pointed us in the king’s direction. Prince Atialdo had secretly swept the house with this cage until he pinned down His Majesty’s location.

The prince could transform into a fawn just as King Glenreed could transform into a wolf pup. This was how he managed to escape Princess Velta’s grasp the first time, and how he was able to slip past the guards and scout the property for his brother this time. He kept the butterfly cage in his mouth and surveyed the outside of the house without anyone doubting his presence.

“The Magic Butterflies guided us to King Maldias. I’m going to release them now that their job is done.” Prince Atialdo seemed to find it sad that the creatures remained trapped in the cage the entire time to be used as tools. He unlocked the cage for them.

Now free, the Magic Butterflies spread their wings and headed off in the direction of the king. Prince Atialdo watched the faint flap of their wings as they sought their food source.

“...Thank you so much for everything, Queen Laetitia. Without you, King Maldias never would have been saved, and now I...” He hushed his voice so that

no one else could hear him. “Now I feel confident in myself, knowing my ancestral powers can help others, and that there’s things even I can do.”

Even if only a little, it seemed that Prince Atialdo had come to acknowledge his own strengths.



**WITH** the help of Prince Atialdo, King Glenreed, the Magic Butterflies, Fifu, and Fos, we successfully managed to free King Maldias. But unfortunately, Princess Velta was able to make her escape. We prioritized King Maldias’s rescue, so this was just the result of our plan, but it still bothered me.

King Maldias went back to the castle with Prince Atialdo and the others to be certain that his health was unaffected. I remained behind to see if I could find any clue as to Princess Velta’s whereabouts.

“Hmm... Yes, I can’t seem to dig anything up after all.”

Lucian and I searched every inch of the townhouse together. I was now checking over the garden, but I couldn’t find a single potential clue.

“We even borrowed some Magic Butterflies, but it doesn’t seem like they’ll be of help.”

The inside of the house was full of the fluttering creatures. These weren’t the ones given to the royal family. They were seized from Lord Zamiel after his arrest for negligence in the escape of the Snow Cat, meaning I’d been able to borrow them.

These butterflies hadn’t been trained to seek a single source of energy, meaning they would fly around freely until they found any magical energy to consume.

Princess Velta possessed a large quantity of magical energy, as all members of the royal family did. The butterflies should have swarmed any hidden room she might have been hiding out in, although...

“Um...I’m really covered in butterflies...”

Most of them were flying up to me instead. The others were scattered throughout the premises. It didn’t look like Princess Velta was hiding here.

Just as I was about to give up and head home, I heard a small growl coming from Lord Aroo.

“Grrrrr...”

At the same time came another menacing, threatening growl.

The Snow Cat’s fur was standing on end as she glared at us. I looked behind her and saw that, a bit off in the distance, there was a strange hole big enough for a single person to pass through.

“I see. So there was no secret room, just a secret passage,” I commented.

Princess Velta had chosen this manor as the place to hold King Maldias. I had suspected that it was rigged with secret passages. It appeared she used one to send the Snow Cat after us.

But I predicted this development too.

With Princess Velta’s downfall now assured, I knew how deeply she must resent me. I was being extra careful since she would almost certainly try to take me down with her.

“Grrrrrrrr....” The Snow Cat continued to threaten me. An icy chill radiated out from between her fangs.

Lord Aroo was lurking in the garden. King Glenreed only pretended to leave so that he could return as Lord Aroo. He was there to get the drop on any enemies who approached me, since he felt that I wouldn’t be protected enough otherwise.

The Snow Cat seemed to have animal instincts that informed her of Lord Aroo’s presence and pressure. I used spells on the night of the party to chase the Snow Cat away. Between that and the combined intimidation of Lord Aroo, she knew she couldn’t get any closer to us.

The Snow Cat was following Princess Velta’s orders because her cub was taken hostage. It was probably one of Her Highness’s followers, hidden away deep in the secret passage, who ordered the Snow Cat to come after us now.

The Snow Cat couldn’t run away with her cub’s fate in the balance. Despite the look of desperation on her face, she crouched down, prepared to attack us.



Snow Cats were extremely agile, efficient killers. Even between my spells and having Lord Aroo there, it would be difficult to put a stop to her without being hurt. Our injuries could even be serious if we let our guard down.

Just as I was about to chant an attack spell at the near-pouncing Snow Cat...

“Sorry I’m late. Did I make it in time?”

Big Brother Claude showed up suddenly, his voice showing no signs of stress. In his hand was a caged kitten, white with gray leopard spots. It was a Snow Cat cub.

“Mrrrrraw!”

“Mrrr? Mraw mraw!”

The cub cried out happily when he heard his mother’s cries. His voice sounded normal, and as far as I could see, he looked uninjured.

“It’s all right now. We got your baby back,” I called out to the mother ever so slowly and softly. I didn’t know how well she could understand my words, but she seemed to understand my emotions.

After a cry of gratitude in return, the Snow Cat raced off down the secret passage.

“ARGH!”

I heard the sound of a collision followed by a brief scream from the secret tunnel.

The Snow Cat returned, dragging a man along with her. This was definitely the person who was giving her orders. I didn’t see any blood, but his legs were frozen in ice from the knees down, immobilizing him.

“Clever girl. I once read that Snow Cats try to capture their prey alive without making them bleed, then freeze them and take them back to their dens to preserve the freshness of the meat... It appears that was true after all.” My leisurely Big Brother Claude shared this information while the man was tied up just to be safe.

Lucian swiftly gagged the man and bound his legs and arms. This way, he would be unable to escape even after the ice melted. Big Brother Claude finally

let his arms dangle at his sides once Lucian finished with the man and accepted the cage with the cub inside.

“Snow Cat cubs are cute, but they’re heavy to carry around. I don’t think I’ll be able to read heavy books for the next few days,” he grumbled.

“Thank you for your help. It looks like you were right, Big Brother.”

After investigating places where the Snow Cat cub might be being held, we narrowed it down to a few buildings owned by people in Princess Velta’s camp. But without any real proof or witness testimony, it would’ve been difficult to search them all. Instead, we assigned people to observe each building.

Big Brother Claude picked one building in particular that he thought was the location of the cub and went to stake it out himself. There, he was able to find some sort of proof that led to him rescuing the cub.

“...Big Brother Claude definitely knew it all from the beginning,” I sighed quietly and looked at my brother. Despite the kindness in the dark green eyes watching me, I couldn’t see what was behind them whatsoever.

Big Brother Claude had a mind that far surpassed anyone’s. It was just like his near-clairvoyant weather forecasts. Even now, I knew he saw things with those eyes that were invisible to the rest of us.

“When you say ‘the beginning,’ which point do you mean, Letty?” he asked with a smile.

“The very beginning of all of this. You even knew Prince Fritz was going to end our engagement, didn’t you?”

I let all the suspicions I’d been harboring come out. Having my marriage canceled and being exiled from the country like I was should have been impossible. Despite Prince Fritz’s recklessness, someone should have put a stop to it all before it blew up into the mess that it did.

“But King Maldias got sick just before that, Her Majesty became busy as she took over for the king, and no one was left to watch over Prince Fritz. Ilius was supposed to keep an eye on him at school, but he happened to have his hands full at the time too. Even I was working overtime right before my engagement ended. ...Every last person in a position to stop him was out of the picture. I

always thought that was strange,” I said.

Still, at this point, it could fall under the label of “bad luck.” A series of unfortunate coincidences. That was what I thought at first too, but the further away from the situation I got, the more questions about it arose.

“Even Father had an idea that Prince Fritz might do something foolish before my engagement was canceled. That’s why Father, Big Brother Yurius, and Big Brother Bernard were cautioning and pressuring the prince. But coincidentally, all three of them became busy with different matters at that time and were away from the capital... This was all your doing, right, Big Brother Claude?”

“...Hang on. What are you saying?”

It was King Glenreed who responded to me. He had gone out of sight at some point to transform back into his human form. Perhaps our conversation piqued his curiosity to the point that he couldn’t sit back and listen anymore.

“You’re jumping to too many conclusions. Your father, Yurius, Bernard, and Claude are all family. I’m sure he could influence them to an extent, but how could he possibly control people like Fritz and Sumia too?”

King Glenreed’s argument made sense...

But logic didn’t apply to Big Brother Claude.

“*He* could do it. It would be a cinch for Big Brother Claude.” I made that declaration as his little sister. Confident in my conclusion, I continued in response to King Glenreed. “Years ago, when Big Brother Claude was in school, he was bullied by the other students.”

The cause was feelings of jealousy directed at Big Brother Bernard.

Big Brother Bernard’s talents were already easily observable when he was a teenager. He managed to acquire excellent grades at school too. People being jealous of those traits was natural, but Bernard was an incredibly powerful fighter. They began to go after his younger brother, Claude, in his place, knowing that he was an easier target.

“With Big Brother Claude’s personality being the way it is, he simply read his books without paying them any mind...but once they learned they couldn’t get

under his skin, I became their next target. That was the exact moment that he took them all out without any mercy.”

“By taking them out, do you mean he bullied them back? Or did he use his authority as a duke’s son to inform them that he wouldn’t tolerate any more bullying?”

I shook my head in response to His Majesty’s question.

“Neither. All of the bullies either had their wrongdoings exposed, found themselves in worse relationships with their families, suddenly had major problems with their fiancées... The reasons were all very different, but the result was that none of them were able to bully me anymore.”

“But that’s just too convenient...”

“At the time, I thought it seemed impossible too. So I asked Big Brother Claude about it. What he said to me was, ‘I made sure none of them have time to bully you anymore, so you can rest easy now.’ ...Isn’t that right, brother?”

“Yep, I sure did.” He nodded his head when I turned the conversation toward him. “I don’t like trying to get the drop on every little thing, but I couldn’t just ignore the fact that Letty was being bullied because of me. As her big brother, I knew I had to do something.”

“...I understand how you feel, but what did you do, exactly?”

Big Brother Claude shrugged his shoulders in response to King Glenreed’s question.

“Nothing special. I researched the relationships, situations, and personalities of the bullies, determined what I had to do to keep them occupied enough that Letty didn’t matter to them anymore, and put my plans into action. That’s all. I nudged people into realizing what the bullies were up to, caused cracks in the relationships with their parents, that sort of thing... There were lots of little things, but just calling it a ‘butterfly effect’ situation would probably sum it all up.”

“Butterfly effect...?” King Glenreed repeated the strange phrase.

“It’s something I read about once in a book,” I said.

Actually, it was a phrase we used in my past life. Even before I regained the entirety of my past life memories, pieces of information from them would occasionally surface in my mind. Hearing how Big Brother Claude handled the bullies made me recall a fitting phrase. That was when the term “butterfly effect” returned to my brain.

“It’s a bit complicated to explain how I applied it...but the butterfly effect refers to when something very small that seems unrelated at first ends up spiraling and spiraling into something massive.” I looked at the fluttering Magic Butterflies all around me. “Butterfly wings are very delicate. Flapping them only causes the slightest movement of the air...but that minuscule, distinct movement can cause a chain reaction that leads to something greater. It’s an extremely small change, but that change is real, don’t you think?”

A butterfly’s wings could result in a storm on the other side of the world. This was all just hypothetical talk, but I also didn’t feel that it was completely impossible either.

We had the expression “as a strong wind blows, the barrel maker prospers” in Japan too. Simple things that seemed unrelated at first were capable of coming around to have unexpected effects.

“If a butterfly causes a storm far away with its wings, that’s nothing more than a series of coincidences...but Big Brother Claude can cause similar events like that if he tries intentionally,” I explained.

To others, it appeared to be a series of coincidences. But there was no doubting Claude was behind all of it. In other words, he knew exactly how to maneuver the butterflies to make that storm show up.

Big Brother Claude could see the future outcome of every last flap of their wings.

“Right, Big Brother? I’m correct, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, that’s something I can do. It’s a real pain, but I can do it if I try.” Big Brother Claude smiled pleasantly at my repeated question. He cast his gaze downward slightly, stretching a finger out to one of the Magic Butterflies.

“I don’t doubt Laetitia...but is such a thing really possible? If it is...” King

Glenreed struggled to find the words, but he still tried to press Claude. His blue-green eyes pierced right into him, trying to get a read.

“I’m not lying. Let’s see, for example...please take a look at the Snow Cat cub.”

“For what reason?”

“It’s about to yawn.”

Just as Big Brother Claude finished that statement...

The baby Snow Cat opened its mouth big and wide in a yawn.

“What...?!” King Glenreed’s eyes went wide with shock. He stared at my brother. The look on his face said he couldn’t believe it, but he knew he had to. “Don’t tell me it’s for real...? Did you make the Snow Cat yawn when you reached out to the Magic Butterfly a second ago...? Or did you have some other way of making it yawn...?”

“...Please tell me something, Big Brother Claude.” I decided to question my brother in place of the awestruck King Glenreed. “Ilius told me that you helped Sumia study something just before the graduation exam. A few days later, Sumia had a breakdown and tried to attack me. ...Was this a coincidence, or did you plan that too?”

“Yep, that was all me. But Sumia was already in a rough state mentally. I just gave her the final push.” Big Brother Claude didn’t hesitate to reveal the nature of his plot.

I tried to picture what would have happened if Sumia didn’t resort to that scheme when she did. Sumia very well may have passed the exam. Her reputation wouldn’t have dropped nearly as much as it had now, nor would that of her fiancé, Prince Fritz.

In that outcome, this entire conspiracy of Princess Velta’s that started from the Snow Leopard escape probably wouldn’t have happened either. Making such a big play with Prince Fritz still having a center of power could have resulted in a huge backlash against Princess Velta and her camp.

Going even further ahead, if Princess Velta hadn’t hatched her plot with the Snow Cat, she wouldn’t have been ruined like she was now. The power struggle

between Her Highness and Prince Fritz would be dragged out, potentially even leading to a fracturing of the country and a civil war.

“...In other words, you predicted what would be best for the country and acted on it?” It appeared that King Glenreed and I had reached the same conclusion. However...

“I don’t think that’s quite right. Big Brother Claude is a lazy person. He’s not motivated or patriotic enough to act for the good of Elltoria. ...Isn’t that right, Big Brother Claude?”

He was smiling at my question. “Yeah, that’s true. I thought of it as good for the country ‘too,’ but that wasn’t my main goal.”

“...I thought as much...”

I was forced to admit that Big Brother Claude was just that kind of person.

If he really wanted to help the country, he could find a proper job as a nobleman or enter the military to fight alongside Big Brother Bernard for the good of Elltoria. There were lots of options for him. But since he was content with his leisurely job, only scheming things behind the scenes, it was pretty easy to tell that he didn’t have the nation’s interest at heart.

“What do you mean...? You said you were behind Laetitia’s engagement being canceled, right? If you care about her so much, then why would you do such a thing? I don’t understand.” His Majesty furrowed his brow even further, almost like he was glaring at Claude. “Or was all of that in her best interest too? You made sure the engagement was called off because you knew she would never be happy with Fritz as her husband?”

“That’s not exactly right either.”

Big Brother Claude showed no signs of fear on the receiving end of the intense look from King Glenreed. He held a Magic Butterfly perched on his finger.

“I wasn’t happy about Letty and His Highness getting engaged, and I knew she wouldn’t have a great life with him...but Letty and Father were the ones who made that decision. I’m not arrogant or motivated enough to go to all that trouble, breaking up an engagement just because I don’t like it myself. Besides,

things never would have gone this far if all I wanted to do was break them up. I hate dealing with messes.”

Big Brother Claude murmured the last part quietly.







“...So in other words, you had something else in mind that aligned with ending Laetitia’s engagement? What exactly is your goal in all this?” King Glenreed’s voice, as piercing as a dagger, was pressing Big Brother Claude.

Now that he was aware of Big Brother Claude’s true abilities and the things he’d done up to this point, I could tell he saw my brother as a potential threat.

“Answer me,” he demanded. “Or is it something you can’t even tell Laetitia, your own sister?”

“Who can say? I don’t have any big dreams. All of my goals are normal things. Not everyone shares them, but a lot of people sure do.” He shrugged his shoulders and gave a weak smile.

My little sister instincts told me he probably wasn’t lying, but I didn’t foresee him revealing any more details either.

“Do you really think I’ll believe that?” King Glenreed asked, his voice as cold as ice.

“Probably not. But let me just say one thing. I pray for Letty’s happiness the same as you do, Your Majesty. I’ll always try to avoid hurting her, as much as I possibly can.”

“Big Brother...”

Big Brother Claude wasn’t lying. I really wanted to believe he wasn’t lying...

But it concerned me that he wouldn’t even share his true objective with me.

I spent more time with Big Brother Claude than anyone else after reincarnating, but we’d been apart far more over the past few years. I became busy in my training to become the queen, but maybe it started even earlier, when he was sent to the battlefield during his military service. Maybe even earlier than that. Something must have happened to drive Big Brother Claude’s actions while I wasn’t around.

It was only natural that we would have to be apart at times, even if we were siblings. But I was still worried and sad about it.

“I don’t know what you’re after exactly...just don’t do anything too dangerous, okay?” I reached out and squeezed his hand. Big Brother Claude

squeezed mine back.

“I’ll try not to. Anyway, I have to get going now, Letty. We probably won’t see each other for a while, so I look forward to the day we next meet.”

With that, he let go of my hand, smiled warmly at me, and headed off in the opposite direction.

## Chapter 6: Return to the Villa

**“FATHER,** what did you just say?”

Prince Fritz’s weak voice echoed through the banquet hall.

It was a few days after we rescued King Maldias. King Glenreed and I were invited to the castle three days before King Maldias’s ten-year reign ceremony.

Naturally, Princess Velta was not given a seat at the dinner table that night. She had been captured by troops under Big Brother Bernard’s command. Big Brother Yurius was also working to cut off anyone supporting her, meaning that no one openly protected her anymore.

Princess Velta’s sentence was life imprisonment and a marriage on paper. The official marriage, done only for form’s sake, meant she was removed from the royal family’s register and no longer had any claim to the throne. She would spend the rest of her life in a small tower room.

With Princess Velta out of the running, Prince Fritz was the only remaining heir to the crown. Or at least, that was what Prince Fritz thought. But King Maldias didn’t share his vision.

“You must be joking, right, Father? How could you think of demoting me from crown prince?” Prince Fritz asked.

“It’s no joke. I’m serious. I’ve decided to hand the throne to Atialdo. I’ll announce my intentions formally at the ceremony in three days, and in one year’s time, we’ll hold the coronation.”

“You can’t mean that...!” Prince Fritz’s fists trembled. King Maldias’s words left him with no recourse. “Is it Sumia?! If she’s the problem, I’ll break up with her at once! There will be no one else to drag me down once that awful Sumia is gone!”

“Sumia isn’t the only problem. I’ve finally realized that I cannot allow you to be king so long as you are who you are.”

“But why?! I’ve never tried to hurt you like Velta, Father! So why remove my title as crown prince?!”

“That’s true. You haven’t tried to hurt me. But that’s all you’ve done. What were you doing while Velta held me prisoner? Atialdo and Laetitia were the ones trying to help, both for my sake and the good of the kingdom. You just sat here and cowered, didn’t you?” The unforgiving light in King Maldias’s eyes pierced straight through Prince Fritz.

“I...! I was praying for your safety...!”

“Do you really think I can give the throne to someone capable of nothing more than prayer? ...Take him away.”

“Father?! No! Please wait!”

At the king’s signal, his guards came and dragged Prince Fritz out of the throne room. After the prince’s wails faded into the distance, King Maldias let out a deep sigh.

“All of the wise children born to this royal family were culled, leaving only the fools behind... What a painful situation we’re in.”

“Your Majesty...” It was Prince Atialdo, one such member of the royal family, who spoke.

“What is it? If you’ve got something to say, then say it.”

“...Are you sure you want me to be the next king? As you say, there are plenty of wiser people out there than me... And besides, don’t you despise me, Your Majesty?”

“Yes, I do. Of course I do.” King Maldias began to unleash his feelings on his brother. “You have the power of ancestral reversion. That’s why you’ve managed to survive in this family, despite not being one of the fools. There were strict orders for you to never be killed... My other siblings met the end of their short-lived lives, while I survived many attempts on my life myself. But Father always protected you. How could I ever come to love you after that?”

“...You’re completely right.” Prince Atialdo bit his lip.

The king, watching his brother bear the unleashing of loathing upon him,

clicked his tongue quietly. “That’s it. That’s why I hate you. Why do you sit and take it? Why not fight back? You have the power of ancestral reversion and were blessed with a good head on your shoulders. If you wanted to, you probably could have even deposed me and saved the royal family from reaching such a wretched state. Yet you’re always completely docile...”

“I’m very sorry th—”

“Don’t apologize. A future king shouldn’t be so quick to apologize for things.”

The king had nothing but harsh words for the prince.

But somehow, I got the sense that such harshness came from high expectations.

It was true that he despised Prince Atialdo. But still, having chosen him to be the next king, King Maldias had to expect that he was capable of greatness. His Majesty could have very well abandoned his brother when he was taken hostage.

Even if it was a tradition in the royal family to protect the heir of their ancestral power, this wasn’t the case if it came at the expense of the ruling monarch’s safety. Choosing to leave Prince Atialdo behind was a perfectly reasonable option.

But King Maldias must have prioritized his brother because he knew what he would be capable of. Prince Atialdo was the one fit to be his heir, not Prince Fritz or Princess Velta. Knowing this, King Maldias could never abandon Prince Atialdo.

“I took the throne because I was enough of an imbecile so as not to be targeted, and because you didn’t seem to have the guts to go after the crown yourself back then. But thanks to Laetitia, you’ve finally found something of a drive, haven’t you? It’s time for you to cling to the throne with everything you’ve got in you and do what needs to be done.”

The king was giving his blessing. Even if it sounded like criticism.

Prince Atialdo clenched his fists and parted his trembling lips. “For the sake of Your Majesty and all of our departed siblings...and to live up to the hopes of the Elltorian people...I will humbly accept the crown.”

“Hmph. I see. I’ll be hoping that you never stray from those words.” With one last snort from King Maldias, he then clapped his hands and called out, “Enough politics! It’s time to eat! Bring the food!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

The palace chefs began to file into the room. Gilbert was among them.

“Here you are. Your Majesty, are you sure it’s acceptable for us to dine with you this evening?” The head chef of the palace, holding a dish in his hands, quietly asked that of the king.

“Of course. You’re tonight’s guests of honor.”

“What...?” The head chef was visibly shocked.

But King Maldias ignored his look and called for Gilbert next. “It’s ready. Have some.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” The pale-faced Gilbert nodded, hiding his trembling face.

He didn’t look very dependable in such a state, but that all changed once he got in front of the plate. He stared carefully at the meat dish and brought a bite to his lips, scrutinizing its flavor.

One by one, he tested the flavors of each meal at the table. Then he pointed at two plates.

“It’s these two. These two contain the same poison as last time.”

“What?!”

The head chef jumped out of his seat when he heard the word “poison.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! This food has already been tested for poison! It’s obviously safe to eat!”

“This is a type that causes no symptoms when consumed in small amounts. A few bites won’t harm you, but eating it daily will take its toll on the body,” Gilbert explained.

“What proof do you have?! How dare you spread such baseless accusations?!”

“I have proof.” This time, I stood up and walked forward to protect Gilbert.



“We fed the food from the previous banquet to a rat, which caused it to start stumbling. Even traces of this poison have effects on small animals.”

It was a sad thing to do, but it was how we confirmed the theory for good. At our request, Prince Atialdo brought us various foods made by the palace chefs. A portion of the meals contained poison.

“The poison used is tasteless and odorless...but despite that, mixing any foreign substance into food while cooking will change the flavor of the meal. It’s hard to tell under all those spices. But my chef still spotted it.”

Gilbert was a man of many talents.

His intense passion for cooking meant that he had tried his hand at poison testing before too. Gilbert would describe his motivations as wanting to be sure he would be able to tell if poison was ever added to his food, the real reason appeared to be plain and simple curiosity.

It was slightly unnerving, but he said he’d been able to avoid any lasting side effects so far, and that curious mind of his was what led to discovering the poisoning here at the Elltorian castle. The poison itself didn’t have any flavor, but when mixed with other ingredients, it left a faintly bitter aftertaste... according to Gilbert. I had no intention of trying it for myself.

“I’ve already ordered the chefs who aren’t present to be arrested if they seem suspicious. You here won’t resist either, I’m sure.” King Maldias glared at the chefs in the room, causing a few of them to start visibly shaking.



**THE** resulting investigation revealed that a number of high-ranking chefs in the castle were involved in the poisonings. The conspirators behind the chefs’ plot turned out to be the family of Prince Fritz’s mother.

I learned that, after Prince Fritz disgraced himself in the way that he ended our engagement, King Maldias was seriously considering demoting him from crown prince. They needed King Maldias out of the picture before Prince Fritz’s chances at the throne were gone for good. That’s why they came up with the idea of poisoning King Maldias’s food little by little. His Majesty’s recent weight loss was one effect of the poison in his system.

Poisoning the king was the gravest of crimes. It was unforgivable.

The third queen, Prince Fritz's mother, wasn't involved in the plot herself, but she deeply regretted the fact that she was unable to stop the horrific actions taken by her family. She and King Maldias would end up divorcing for this reason.

Now that he had lost all his supporters, and having reached the point of heartlessness long ago, Prince Fritz would go on to become a total outcast in the world of politics.



**“ARE** you ready, Laetitia?”

“Yes, let's get going.”

With my purple dress fluttering around my legs, I stepped into the carriage alongside King Glenreed. It was the day of King Maldias's ten-year reign ceremony. I was dressed up extra nicely to suit the occasion. The fabric of my dress was the same color as my eyes. Dainty white lace hung on top, complete with subtle embroidery that cast a pattern over the dress in the light. It was a bit hard to move in, but the flashy, gorgeous design was worth it.

“It's so sunny out. What lovely weather,” I commented.

The ceremony was being held outside due to the large crowd of guests. It rarely rained at this time of the year in the capital city. The new leaves on the trees were beautiful during this season.

I took in the lovely sights from the window of the carriage until the castle came into view. A bit of a line was forming outside, since the identity of each guest needed to be confirmed before entry.

“What would you like to do, Your Majesty?” I asked. “Should we get out now and stand in line, or wait in the carriage until it looks shorter?”

“We're still early. Let's wait a little.”

“Very well. Wait with us too, okay, Fifu?”

*“Got it!”*

Fifu was curled up next to me. I heard his answer in my head. Since the ceremony was a place for distinguished guests from many countries to gather, Fifu ended up coming with us because he wanted to get a look at all of their faces.

*“Could I get groomies in while we wait?”*

*“Very well. Just a moment.”*

Our carriage was equipped with different varieties of brushes. I often rode with Berry, Tweety, or the other fluffy friends, so I kept them on hand just in case.

*“That feels soooo good!”*

I brushed the squirming Fifu from the back down to his legs. I even worked on his tails too. Fifu’s five tails made it difficult for him to groom them all, so he always loved when I brushed him. I finished fluffing up his fur and realized King Glenreed was staring at my hands.

“Would you like to have me brush you the next time you turn into Lord Aroo?” I asked.

“...You can do whatever you...” But then the king trailed off. He looked up at the ceiling. “I hear wings. Is that a Flying Dragon?”

“Flying Dragon?”

I stood right up when I heard the name of the Mythical Beast I’d always dreamed of seeing. I stepped out of the carriage and looked up at the sky, eager to see one in real life.

Soaring above us was a creature with dark red wings that thundered with each flap. The golden-eyed Flying Dragon scowled down at the world below, soaring through the air until it landed near the carriage. A man with a cape was riding on its back. He dismounted the beast, his red hair flowing behind him like a trail of fire when he jumped down.

“...!”

Our eyes met. He gazed at me with gray, foxlike eyes and a pair of thin lips that curled into a smile.

*...He's very beautiful.*

The man's overwhelmingly good looks made him look like a statue that had come to life. He stood with the Flying Dragon against his back.

This had to be Emperor Ishnad of the Ringrard Empire. I was sure of that when I felt the overwhelming presence he gave off with his entire body.

"You must be Laetitia."

His voice was deep and velvety. Even the guests in the area were stunned into silence by the commanding aura he gave off.

In the midst of that silence, I smiled and bowed.

"I am Laetitia, the queen of the Kingdom of Wolfvarte. It is an honor to meet you, Emperor Ishnad."

He was elegant and sophisticated—his manner lacked a single flaw.

The Snow Cat involved in Princess Velta's plot had been obtained thanks in part to the Ringrard Empire. It appeared that Lord Zamiel was reluctant to provide that information due to the poor relationship between our two countries.

In other words, it was possible that the emperor currently standing before me was the originator of Princess Velta's conspiracy. The Ringrard Empire had a powerful army and was currently in the process of expanding their territory, but even before the actual war broke out, they were clever in how they operated.

Their specialty was fanning the flames between opposing forces, splitting them up, finding weaknesses, and using those to attack and defeat their foe all in one swoop.

They were surely trying to start an insurrection within Elltoria by stirring up Princess Velta.

It never came to violence thanks to Prince Atialdo's actions, and there was no definite proof that the empire had been directly involved in the incident yet. The person who sold Lord Zamiel the Snow Cat had vanished into thin air, leaving only the faintest bits of evidence.

It was the very ruler of such a land that came directly to our carriage to greet

me. A coincidence was a possible explanation, but more likely, he'd seen the crest on our carriage from above and had his Flying Dragon land nearby.

I'd assumed that I would at least be able to get a look at Emperor Ishnad at today's ceremony, but instead, he came and approached me first.

Ignorant of my thoughts, Emperor Ishnad smiled boldly at me. He was giving off a showy air of superiority. I smiled, wondering what he wanted with me, but then...

"The chocolate was delicious."

All of a sudden, I received a food review.

*...What does that mean?*

After sending chocolate to Prince Ernest, I started sending them as gifts to other nobles and acquaintances on occasion. It wasn't unthinkable that they'd been divided amongst others and ended up in the hands of Emperor Ishnad...

*But is this really the time to bring that up?*

I was unable to read his intentions. The emperor laughed, amused with me.

"Bring your favorite foods to my country too someday. I'll be glad to welcome you."

"I'm very grateful for your kind words."

"How about we make your visit a year from now?"

"...Who can say when that time will come?" I returned with a vague smile.

One year from now. That was when my time as Wolfvarte's figurehead queen would be over. I didn't know if that was what he meant by his offer or not.

I tried to determine the intentions behind his invitation, but then, Emperor Ishnad turned gallantly on his heel and walked away from me. He'd said what he had to say and left. What an elusive person he was.

"Such a driven person. I see now why they say he was able to develop his empire in a single generation."

When I made that remark to King Glenreed at my side...

“...Yes. That’s true.”

His voice was stiff and hoarse in response.



**WHEN** Ishnad approached them...

Glenreed was suffering from a silent attack. Shocked, he looked at Ishnad while the single question in his head only grew stronger and stronger.

*It’s the same...*

The scent that wafted off of Ishnad in front of them.

The scent of Laetitia at his side.

They were two different people, and yet something about them was so very similar.



**“WE’RE** finally home!” I looked out the window of our carriage and cheered.

With the ceremony for King Maldias’s reign now finished, we headed straight for Wolfvarte by carriage. The nostalgic sight of the Wolfvartian capital was drawing closer. We had been away for roughly two entire months.

“Myah?”

Something popped up next to my hand on the window. A tiny little head was trying to get a look at the outside world.

“What do you think? This is your new home, Purr.”

“Pyah!”

I let the baby Snow Cat, Purr, look through the window. Purr’s round ears twitched. He seemed extremely interested in what was outside.

“Kru myaw myaw! Mrrrah!”

Excited by his first look at the capital city, he cried out to Wintelle, his mother. He looked back and forth between the window and his mother, exactly like an energetic human kid on a family trip.

Though the two Snow Cats procured by Lord Zamiel weren’t at fault, one had

gravely injured Prince Atialdo, the heir to the throne, meaning it wasn't really possible to keep them in Elltoria any longer. We ended up taking them back to Wolfvarte instead.

Purr became friends with Berry, a fellow feline Mythical Beast, on the carriage ride back, so he'd taken a liking to me too as Berry's owner. Wintelle, the mother cat, seemed to see me as someone who had done her a great kindness. She was perfectly relaxed inside the carriage.

"Would it be best to keep these two at my villa, do you think?" I asked.

"...Yes. That's fine."

His Majesty's response was brief and to the point. I wasn't sure if he was simply tired from the long trip, or if he had something else weighing on his mind.

I felt like King Glenreed had been silently pondering something ever since we met Emperor Ishnad. Though there was no direct border between their two countries, the Ringrard Empire was starting to become a force he couldn't ignore. He appeared to be working out how to deal with them in the future.

I stared silently out the window so that I wouldn't distract him.

*I'm home.*

Over and over again, I felt those words well up in my heart. I only moved to Wolfvarte a bit over a year ago, but the capital city and the royal villa truly felt like home now.

"Myah?"

Purr placed his paw on the window and looked up at me. His round, golden eyes were blinking. I stroked his circular head to reassure him, causing Purr to let out a happy purr of his own.

"This is a good place. There's fluffy friends, delicious food, and a lot of nice people. I just know you'll have fun here."

*I hope Purr likes the villa too.*

That was the thought in my mind as I stroked the cub's little head.

# Bonus Chapter 1: A Big Brother's Hopes and Schemes

**“LORD** Claude is so creepy.”

Claude just happened to hear the complaint of a nearby servant while strolling through the garden. He listened closer.

“He’ll just be reading a book all on his own, then suddenly say the craziest things to me. It’s freaky.”

“Don’t you dare say that. He’s only seven years old still!”

From the other side of the window, he heard a middle-aged man scolding the younger servant.

“It doesn’t matter that he’s a kid. Just yesterday, he told me I shouldn’t hang the laundry outside since it’s going to rain today. I knew that couldn’t be true, since yesterday it was perfectly sunny outside, but do you see these clouds overhead now? Lord Claude never mistakes his weather forecasts. He predicts the future in other ways too. It’s frightening to think that he can see things we can’t.”

“And why shouldn’t he? Unlike us commoners, Lord Claude is the third son of a duke. He’s just inherited the wisdom of his mother and father.”

“No, it’s nothing so cute. There’s more...”

Claude simply continued to walk on by, ignoring the fountain of complaints spilling from the young servant.

Claude knew people found him creepy. About six servants in total at the manor had made the same complaint, and he knew another seventeen felt the same way, though they never said it out loud.

He knew, certainly, but that was all. Trying to stop them was a waste of time.

People were allowed to think whatever they wanted. Claude had far more important things to focus on.



*...But that man won't do. I should tell a butler and have him write a recommendation for the servant to work at another house.*

Later, the servant's fear of Claude would cause him to fumble and drop an expensive dish. This would be a bad outcome for both the servant and the family, so it was better to have him work at another house. With this plan in mind, Claude headed to his destination—the old groundskeeper who was currently at work in the garden.

“Why hello, Lord Claude. Is this what you're here to see? I'm glad you got here before it started to rain.”

The groundskeeper pointed at a bush of large white roses. He'd taken good care of them, so their beautiful petals had no holes or damage whatsoever.

“That's right. May I have a few of the roses?”

“By all means. Her Ladyship will be delighted.”

The old man picked the white roses that Claude pointed at. Once he had enough, Claude raced to see his mother.

The white rose bush had originally been a gift to Claude's mother when his father proposed to her. She looked forward to seeing the roses bloom every year. When he returned to the manor and reached his mother's room, she greeted him with a warm smile.

“Hehe! They bloomed so beautifully again this year. Thank you for bringing me some. I'm ever so happy.” His mother, Selina, leaned her face in closer to the roses to smell them.

Despite the pleasant smile on her face, her skin was terribly pale, and her golden hair lay spread out against her pillow since she was unable to sit up.

*Mother's wrists look even skinnier...*

Claude clenched his fists.

Selina had failed to recover after giving birth to Laetitia and spent the past year confined to bed. She doted lovingly on Claude and her other children just as she had before, but with the passing of each day, she was physically unable to speak to them as long as she was the day before.

Claude spent his days confined to the library. He was searching for a way to restore Selina's health.

"I appreciate everything you're doing, but don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

Selina's expression changed subtly to one of concern. She was good at reading people and understood her son's personality, allowing her to guess exactly what he was thinking.

"I wish you'd smile instead of looking so gloomy all the time because of me," she said. "All I want is for you to play with Yurius and Bernard, let your father spoil you from time to time, and grow up strong and healthy."

Her slender hands stroked Claude's head gently.

*But I don't want Mother to die. I want her to keep stroking my hair and talking to me forever...*

It was too much for him to bear.

Watching Selina deteriorate with each passing day was torture. He wanted to find a way to heal her, no matter what it took.

He refused to give up, even in the face of doctors who rejected his ideas, and he essentially lived in the library now so that he could keep reading about medical treatments.

Claude had read far more books than the average adult. He'd read hundreds that even specialists would struggle to interpret. That was part of the reason why the servants found him creepy, but Claude was desperate. He spent morning through the night reading medical books to find a way to bring Selina back to health.

"Waaaaah?"

From her cradle next to Selina's bed, Laetitia was reaching her hand out toward Claude.

"Why look at that! She wants to cheer you up, Claude."

"Letty..."

Her chubby fingers gently squeezed Claude's hand.

Selina smiled, watching her son comfort her daughter.

"She's a kind little girl. I know things will be tough for her in life...but I have faith she'll be happy. Claude, be sure to take good care of Letty and smile at her lots, okay?"

Selina wished for the happiness of her children...

But her health never recovered after that. It was the last time she ever saw those roses bloom.

The death of his mother sent Claude into a deep despair. With it, he came to learn a few things. He was capable of figuring out more than the average person. But when it came to certain things, he was still powerless.

No matter how hard he worked in pursuit of a desire, not all of them could come true. He also learned that reading was a fun activity.

He didn't particularly care for the necessary process of confirming information while he was searching for methods to cure Selina, but upon rereading the books, the act of stumbling upon new things he didn't take in before was actually quite addictive.

One day, he found himself having finished the studies given by his father and older brothers as quickly as possible so that he could, once again, get straight to his reading.

"Broooother. Are you reading books again?"

Sitting next to Claude was Laetitia, playing with her dolls and eyeing the mountain of books in front of him. He stroked the hair of his sister, who was able to speak even more than before. She beamed up at him, her purple eyes reflecting Claude in them.

*Letty got her blonde hair and facial features from Mother. But her purple eyes come from Father. She's a different person than Mother, who isn't here anymore, but it's not as if there aren't any more traces of her to be found...*

People died. This was a fundamental rule of life for all, no matter how they begged or protested.

But now, Claude had learned that death wasn't the end of it all. Those people left things behind in the world too.

*What kind of person will Letty grow up to be? I can't wait to see if she's bright and friendly like Mother, a diligent worker like Father, or if she ends up like our brothers. But if I could get to choose one thing, I hope she grows up to like books.*

Even if there was no replacing those who had passed, there was always the potential to nurture new relationships with others.

This was what Claude came to comprehend at the mere age of eight years old.



**“WHAT** exactly are you trying to accomplish, Lord Claude?”

Claude turned around at the sound of Hayruth's voice.

It was the day that Laetitia's efforts had rescued King Maldias from Velta. Claude was heading to his carriage in order to leave Elltoria before his sister did.

“You said your boss in the Library Bureau is sending you out to all these different countries, but this is all part of your plan, right?”

“I'll leave that to your imagination, Hayruth.” Claude shrugged his shoulders and chuckled.

He'd been scheming to be able to visit the exact countries he had in mind, but those deployments all came as formal orders from his boss. Claude's actions may be looked at with suspicion, but not enough to cause any real damage.

“Aren't you leaving this place soon too? You're always on the move for work,” Claude said.

“I do it for my own hobbies too, so it's not that big of a burden. ...But that's not the case for you, is it?”

Hayruth kept his eyes fixed on Claude. He was an excellent observer as both a spy and an artist. Here he tried to discern any change in Claude's internal thoughts.

“At first, I thought you were working for your employer just like me, Lord Claude. But what I’ve seen lately tells me I was wrong. You’re definitely not a spy taking orders from your country, monarchy, or even your own family, are you?”

Hayruth was an excellent spy. He appeared to have been investigating Claude’s movements and reached this conclusion due to many different factors.

“I don’t know what your goal is, but you’re acting in your own interest. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right. I tend to do as I please,” Claude said with a shrug.

“...So what’s your goal? Aren’t you causing enough trouble? We’ve fought in hand-to-hand combat before, but your true strength is seizing power and making people act how you want. You may be the third son, but you were born to a duke and you’ve got that brain of yours, so you could easily get to the center of political power or earn glory as a soldier. So why bother playing spy like this?”

“You think too much of me. With my personality, I’m not suited for either of those routes. It would take me forever to climb the ladders.”

“I know you, Lord Claude. You can put on an act and blend into your surroundings. I still remember how you read my mind and knew exactly how I was going to act.” Hayruth narrowed his eyes.

Even if he held no grudge against Claude over their past, he knew better than to ever let his guard down around him now.

“If you’re resorting to all this, you must be up to something that the people around you won’t understand or welcome. It stands against your very country and could harm their national interests. ...Am I wrong?”

“I’m just not serious enough to live for my homeland or for anyone else.”

“Stop beating around the bush. ...Tell me what you’re plotting.”

Claude forced a strained smile at Hayruth’s near-interrogation. “Everyone’s so curious about my objective, including King Glenreed, but it’s really nothing so major.”

“Then why hide your goal and work in the shadows? You’ve even deceived Queen Laetitia—”

When Hayruth tried to press him harder...

“And does that apple-loving girl know about what you’re up to?” For a brief second, Claude’s words held a deep hostility not unlike bloodlust.

“...I suppose there’s no use in asking you how you found out about her.” Hayruth was out of energy. He’d come to the conclusion that Claude, if he felt like it, could expose Hayruth’s entire past and feelings at any time.

Hayruth had been in love with a hardworking girl who loved apples. Despite this love failing to come to fruition, he still cared deeply for her and held a special place in his heart for her.

“You’ve never told her any details about your spy work, have you? The way I feel about Laetitia is a different kind of love, but we’re in similar situations, in a way.”

Claude meant this as a threat. If Hayruth decided to meddle in Claude’s work, or if he said too much about it to Laetitia, then he would gladly do the same to the apple-loving girl.

Having read this subtext, Hayruth let out a deep sigh. “Very well. As a person with secrets just like me, I see I have no right to criticize you.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“I don’t know what your plan or goal is, but just please don’t make Queen Laetitia cry. I like her too, after all.”

“I know exactly how you feel. Let’s talk about Letty sometime soon.”

“I see you’re as doting a big brother as ever today... Not that I’d hesitate to join, as long as you’ve got some good alcohol to go with this talk.” Hayruth scratched his head and asked Claude a question that had been bothering him. “Lord Claude, this plan of yours involved becoming drinking buddies with me and having me meet Queen Laetitia, didn’t it?”

“Who knows? But...I really do enjoy being your friend, Hayruth. That’s the truth.”

Claude stroked the black and white Gardener Cat on his shoulder and laughed.

## Bonus Chapter 2: A Farewell and the Oldest Son's Thoughts

**“NOW** then, Father, Big Brother Yurius. We'll be on our way.”

Laetitia, standing before the carriage with Glenreed, bid farewell to her family.

Her destination was the distant country of Wolfvarte. She didn't know when she would next see them again. Gardocia, her father, was unable to hide his sadness, but he still bid her a pleasant farewell.

*Father really took a liking to King Glenreed.*

Yurius was stealing glances at Glenreed, the famous “Rose Heir” smile still on his face. Glenreed was the man who became Laetitia's husband after the cancellation of her engagement to Prince Fritz. Despite his status as a foreign king and the rumors of his hatred for women, he seemed surprisingly close to Laetitia.

Not only was he an honest and clever king when it came to dealing with others, but he was a quick thinker, an accomplished fighter, and an intellectual person. Yurius still thought highly of Glenreed.

“Can I help you with something?” Glenreed turned toward Yurius.

*He's sharp. I didn't think my face would give me away at all...*

It seemed it was time for him to give Glenreed yet another upgrade to his personal score. Yurius pondered this calmly as he spoke.

“I was just thinking that I can leave Laetitia in your care without any worry, Your Majesty. Bernard thinks very highly of you too.”

Bernard, Yurius's younger brother, loved strong people. Since there were few people to rival his talent, he took an instant liking to Glenreed, whose strength surpassed even his own.



Bernard hadn't come to say farewell, but there was no helping that.

Princess Velta's loss of power had affected the Dartan Dukedom—her greatest supporters. Many of the Dartans, who controlled the top ranks of the military, and people in their faction lost their jobs or were demoted, but Bernard was aggressively petitioning the military to fill those positions. As a younger man who was already referred to as a hero, Bernard's influence in the army would surely only grow stronger from there out.

*My brothers are freakishly talented...* As Yurius listened to his father converse with Glenreed, he thought of Claude, his youngest brother. Yurius had been focused on Claude's very recent exit from Elltoria.

*He said his boss at the Library Bureau ordered it, but I'm not sure how true that is.*

For some time now, he'd been sensing that Claude was up to something. Claude wouldn't do anything to hurt his family or country, so Yurius never pressed him too hard on it, but once he realized that Claude was behind Laetitia's engagement coming to an end, he couldn't go without pressing him.

Claude simply smiled, looking a bit troubled, and refused to divulge any details.

Yurius was unable to get any information out of the lazy, stubborn, highly intelligent Claude. He still didn't understand his brother's motives or goals in getting the engagement ended.

Bernard was apparently equally annoyed and upset with Claude. The two older brothers channeled that anger and mercilessly pelted Claude with attacks during the other day's training session.

*"Stop, stop, stop! I can't see anything other than Big Brother Yurius's flames, and then Big Brother Bernard charges in from behind them! What am I supposed to do?! Please, save me, Laetitia!"*

*"Big Brother Claude, if you can still speak, then you're fine. You'd be silent if you were really in trouble. Come on, you've got this, so please give it your all."*

Laetitia's response to Claude's plea had been cold and blunt. She had enough faith in him to know he could still dodge these attacks, but also had a faint idea

about the truth behind her engagement's end now, so it was possible she was taking it out on Claude ever so slightly.

*“Letty’s being mean?! I’m so sad! Can I cry?”*

Now abandoned, Claude continued to dodge the attacks, just as Laetitia urged, and didn’t let a single one hit him. The result of this training session against Yurius, the man with the most magical energy in the kingdom, and Bernard, the brilliant soldier, was a very surprising stalemate.

That was what made Yurius all the angrier.

It wasn’t just about Laetitia’s engagement. Claude could have surely done a lot of good for Elltoria or his family if he had decided to actually work a real job. But his life consisted of booze, books, and some sort of secret plot. Yurius felt a combination of impatience, concern, and even jealousy.

*I used to think I was a special person too...*

Compared to the other young noblemen his age, as a child, Yurius was a fast learner and received plenty of praise from adults.

He believed himself to be exceptional, but that perception changed as his younger brothers grew. Bernard was a genius when it came to both school and fighting. His graduation exam result was only one of many national records he broke, and even in actual combat as a soldier, he was an active participant. Claude didn’t care for studying or interacting with fellow nobles, but he seemed to perceive ten times more information than anyone else could—or perhaps as high as one or two hundred times as much. His brain was the kind that could interpret absolutely anything.

*Unlike Bernard or Claude, I’m just an ordinary person with a bit of talent. All I am is a good student.*

That was why Yurius studied so hard to become a good heir that his brothers wouldn’t surpass. The result was earning the nickname “Rose Heir” from the people in his life, meant as a sign of praise and respect, but Yurius knew he was nothing more than a good student who was blessed with a good life from birth.

*When she was young, I thought Laetitia was nothing more than a good student like me...*

But Yurius noticed it eventually.

Laetitia belonged to a different category than their brothers, but she was also a special kind of person. She was able to do things a simple genius like Yurius could never accomplish, but most of all, she possessed the rare talent of charming everyone around her.

*My brothers have monstrous talents, but Laetitia might just be the most valuable of us all.*

He felt sad when he thought about how Laetitia was leaving their homeland once again...

But he knew all too well that his sister would find ways to enjoy herself in Wolfvarte. Thus, Yurius was able to send her off with a smile.

## Bonus Chapter 3: New Year's Festival with His Majesty

**“WOW,** look at all the people!”

When I exited the carriage and stepped out onto the main street, it was completely packed with people. Humans and beastfolk strolled down the road, which had been cleared of snow for easier accessibility.

“I heard that the new year's festivals in the capital are always crowded, but this is more than I expected,” I said.

There were three days left in the year.

King Glenreed and I decided to visit the festival together this year. We weren't exactly in disguise, but we wore hoods and plain clothes so that we wouldn't stand out, nor had official word of our attendance been released. Anyone who didn't already know us would see us as a pair of unremarkable nobles out for a walk.

“There's a lot of people here, but it will probably be even more crowded for the next two days,” King Glenreed explained. “The main street is lit up all night on New Year's Eve. It's very bright and lively.”

“So it becomes even more packed than today? I'm sure it will be fun, but it sounds a bit overwhelming.”

I was already surrounded by people everywhere I looked.

The bundled-up attendees traveled the road, illuminated to the point of looking like daytime, together with their friends and family. Each side of the road was lined with carts and performers earning small sums from the festivalgoers.

Flags flew between each stall and the houses lining the street were lit up, displaying wooden carvings of wolves. Wolves were symbols of the royal family in this country and were seen as blessings. The wooden carvings were illuminated in warm light, casting shadows on the snow beneath where they

hung.

“Ah, that stall is selling wolf decorations,” I pointed out.

The line of cute wolf ornaments caught my eye. They were tiny, but you could still tell they were standing on four legs, sticking their nose out ahead of them.

“How adorable. I think I’ll buy one to— Huh?”

His Majesty grabbed my hand as I reached out for a wooden wolf.

“What’s wrong...?”

“...You already have a wolf.” His Majesty turned his head away in a huff. “You have me...and the wolves who come to your villa. They’ll get jealous if you add a new one.”

“Jealous...? True. I could see that of them.”

The wolves cared for by the wolfkeepers were very clever. They might not think kindly of me doting on a brand-new wolf, even if it was just a carving.

“What’s this? You won’t buy one, Miss?” The shopkeeper interrupted my whispered conversation with His Majesty. “I couldn’t see under your hood at first, but you’re such a fine young lady. It’s a treat to have you here at my stall. I’ll give you a discount, so why not have your boyfriend there buy you one?”

“...I’m not her boyfriend.” His Majesty stepped in to correct the shopkeeper.

The two of us were husband and wife in a political marriage, so technically, he was correct in that description. His words saddened me for some reason, even though they were accurate.

“...I’m not the one you’re in love with. You have Jiro.” His Majesty was murmuring something under his breath.

“Is that so? Sorry to get the wrong idea. I just assumed you were a couple, since you looked all cuddled up together. ...You don’t look like siblings, so you’re just friends then?” The shopkeeper spoke over King Glenreed, so I couldn’t hear exactly what he was saying.

“...That’s correct. May I buy three wolf ornaments?”

I decided to purchase some wolves in part to avoid any further questions

from the shopkeeper. These would be souvenirs for Father and two of my brothers when I returned to Elltoria next spring. I had other presents for them as well, but they might like handmade crafts such as these too.

“Isn’t it said that the wolves’ mouths are opened up so that they can eat all the bad things that happened to you in the previous year?” I asked.

I received the wooden wolves and continued down the street with King Glenreed. Appetizing smells wafted from nearby stalls, threatening to get my stomach growling as we passed them.

“Yes, that’s right. The four legs are to carry you to next year’s happiness—”

“Look! The wolves are coming!”

A sudden cheer from the people around us interrupted His Majesty’s explanation.

The sea of people parted ways so that the wolfkeepers could pass through, leading wolves by their fancy, decorated collars.

The Wolfvartian people revered the wolves kept by the wolfkeepers. They usually never left the castle grounds, but on festival days such as this, they passed through the capital city in a sort of parade.

“Woof?!”

“Now, now. Don’t get distracted by the crowd.”

The wolves barked happily as soon as they recognized me. But that scolding returned their attention to the path in front of them.

The source of the scolding was none other than Edgar, one of the wolfkeepers I knew. He was a timid, hesitant sort of person, but today he led the wolves with perfect confidence. The animals were well-behaved and carried themselves majestically—their winter coats were also very fluffy.

“The wolves’ ears are all sticking up today. They look so much primmer than usual,” I said to King Glenreed.

“They probably know the audience admires them. ...Someone else is coming.”

While we walked for a short distance, watching the wolf parade, we heard a

cheerful voice coming from nearby.

“Queen Laetitia, King Glenreed. I see you’ve come to the festival too.”

The voice belonged to the well-dressed Lady Kate, a candidate to become the next queen. Her fellow candidate, Lady Natalie, stood at her side.

I looked around and saw that their guards were stationed nearby too, just like ours. This was an area of the festival around the most expensive shops meant for the wealthy or nobility. It looked like the two of them, who had become friends over the past year, had come to the festival together.

“Did you buy something at a stall, Queen Laetitia?” Lady Natalie asked.

“I bought some wooden wolf carvings. What about you, Lady Natalie?”

“No, we haven’t been there yet. We were watching the snowball fight.”

The snowball fight was a famous winter event in Wolfvarte. It was a good opportunity to have some fun and excitement in an otherwise limiting season, so a snowball fight venue was built not too far from the festival. They even took bets on the matches.

“Have you been in a snowball fight before, Your Majesty?” Lady Kate chuckled as she directed her question at me.

“I used to have them with my older brothers.”

“That’s perfect. Want to join Lady Natalie and me then?”

“What?!” Lady Natalie was shocked by Lady Kate’s free-spirited suggestion. “I can’t! I’ve never been in a snowball fight before!”

“I know, you told me. Your parents were strict and never let you play, right? You might not have any experience, but I saw you staring at the snowball fighters all jealous. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

Lady Kate launched into a convincing speech. She had a strong personality, but Lady Natalie did look excited despite her hesitation. I could tell she was curious about the prospect of a snowball fight. Lady Natalie’s timid nature seemed to be a good match for Lady Kate’s boldness.

“I’m part of the Wildcat clan, so I usually go against two humans at once. You

can pair up with Queen Laetitia, and it'll be perfect."

Lady Kate seemed confident in her snowball-fighting skills. These fights were a game the Wolfvartian nobles engaged in during winter for entertainment. I'd heard that many beastfolk took snowball fights extremely seriously. This appeared to include Lady Kate.

"You want me to team up with Queen Laetitia?! I'll just harm her chances!!"

"Everyone has to start somewhere. I don't mind," I said.

"Exactly! What if you love it once you give it a try? There's a few places around the festival where you can pay to have a snowball fight, and the more expensive ones really pull out all the stops. The snow at your feet is soft, so you won't get hurt if you fall, and the snowballs are made with just enough firmness that they don't hurt. There's even snow walls so you can build strategies with your team. It's really fun, so let's go try it!"

Lady Kate, the snowball fight enthusiast, nodded her head over and over again before leading us to the arena.



"**WHAT** a shock! Queen Laetitia, you're really good for both a human and someone who didn't grow up here!"

The result of the snowball fight was Lady Kate's defeat. With snow stuck to her cat ears, I could tell she was really surprised.

"Hehehe! Despite how I look, I had my older brothers to train me," I grinned.

We had snowball fights in our homeland of Elltoria whenever it snowed. They saw it as a form of training.

Big Brother Yurius used spells to create a massive amount of snowballs, pelting me with them all at once. Big Brother Bernard threw so fast, I couldn't help but wonder if he was a gorilla in his past life. Then there was Big Brother Claude, who would always fake me out, lead me around, and lay traps. They were all tricky opponents in their own right, which resulted in me becoming a master snowball warrior.

Lady Kate had outstanding reflexes as a member of the Wildcat clan, but she



had an honest personality, and this made her moves easy to predict.

Lady Natalie and I ended up making a good team with her own snowball talents, which eventually led us to victory.

“Urgh, I’m so mad! I’ll definitely beat you next time!”

With that declaration, Lady Kate headed off to the front desk of the arena.

Now left behind, Lady Natalie wore a confused look on her face. “Where did Lady Kate just go? Don’t tell me she wants to have another battle right now...”

“She went to go claim her loser’s prize.”

“Loser’s prize...? Ah, you mean...?”

Lady Kate returned with a small bag.

She opened it up to reveal a sweet scent wafting out.

“Are these chocolate cookies...?”

“Yep. You like chocolate too, right, Lady Natalie? You can have one.”

“Wow! Really?”

“It’s to celebrate your first real snowball fight.”

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate amicably shared the cookies.

It was difficult for humans to defeat beastfolk in snowball fights, so many of them were hesitant to even try. That’s why I thought it would be a way for humans and beastfolk to further bond through beastfolk losing the occasional match.

I had the staff from the snowball fight venue participate in distributing some of the treats I made at the villa. I came to the festival today to see everyone’s reactions to my plan.

It was a bit more expensive to use the venue here, but now anyone who lost could receive sweets, and four consecutive victories even won you an extra luxurious baked good. The snowball warriors throughout the building were already covered in snow, fighting valiantly to claim that prize.

“It looks like this distribution method is working out well for now,” I said.

“Looks like it. ...If the winner gets to eat your baked goods, then I feel like joining them too,” King Glenreed replied.

“Hehe! You’d just send them all running if you had a snowball fight, Your Majesty. You can have this if you’d like something sweet.”

I pulled a small box wrapped neatly in cloth out of my pocket. It was customary at this festival to give presents to those who took care of you throughout the previous year.

“Thank you for everything this year, King Glenreed. This treat is called Fondant au Chocolat. Melted chocolate seeps out of it if you warm it up, but would you care to give it a try now?”

I used a fire spell to warm it up to his liking. The oozing sweet, rich chocolate made it the perfect treat for winter.

“Yes, your sweets are very appealing...but hold still for a minute.”

*What does he mean?*

I looked up at His Majesty, waiting for what would come next...

“Ah...!”

“I’m thankful for you too. This is a token of my appreciation.”

I felt a soft sensation around my neck that reminded me of Lord Aroo’s fur. He’d draped a silver scarf around me.

His Majesty’s long fingers fumbled with the scarf to wrap it up nicely for me.

“You were raised in another land. I got this for you since you probably can’t handle the cold as well as us...”

“...It’s very warm.”

I thanked King Glenreed and tugged the scarf upwards. I wanted to cover the smile that was forming on my lips.

“Thank you so much, Your Majesty. I know a lot happened this year...but I’m truly glad to have met you.”

“...Yes. So am I.”

When I saw the smile on his face...

*I hope we can spend next year together too.*

That was the wish I felt in my heart as I nestled up closer to him.





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