

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnation

I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends

~THE FIGUREHEAD QUEEN IS STRONGEST AT HER OWN PACE~

3



YU

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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 3

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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 3

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Tweety
Laetitia's
Magic-loving
Cuddle Bird

Liddeus
A Magic Nerd

**Laetitia
Gramwell**

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

Leonard
Flirtatious
Bard

Lucian
Laetitia's
Loyal Servant

Helena
Krona's Sister
and Laetitia's
Maid-in-training



**King Glenreed
grabbed my hand
in a tight grip.**

**“...Your
Majesty?”**

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

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnation

I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends

~THE FIGUREHEAD QUEEN
Is STRONGEST AT HER OWN PACE~

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illust. KASUMI NAGI

Chapter 1: The Black Cat Sister and Tomato Seafood Stew

ONE day, I found myself lost in thought as I stroked Jenna, the wolf, in my villa's yard.

The early-summer season was upon us. A few months had passed since the last days of winter in which I regained the memories of my past life.

I, Laetitia, reincarnated into this world after living the life of a modern Japanese woman. I believed it was the shock I felt when my fiancé, the crown prince, abruptly called off our wedding that caused my memories to come back to me. The resulting fallout meant that at the age of seventeen, I was forced to leave the Kingdom of Elltoria—the country in which I'd spent my entire life. I ended up marrying King Glenreed, the Silver Wolf King, and becoming his figurehead queen in a new land.

"Wolfvarte... So much has happened since I arrived here."

I squinted in the pleasant early-summer sunlight.

His Majesty granted me this royal villa, and I began a leisurely life with lots of free time to cook. In that time, I met Lord Aroo and the other wolves, then harvested and dined on strawberries with Berry, the Gardener Cat.

There was a chiffon cake plagiarism scandal I put to rest, and in the process, I discovered an unexpected side to Lady Natalie, one of the candidates to become the next queen.

Just recently, I met Lady Kate, another candidate and member of the Wildcat clan. I brought the recipe of salt-crusted meat to this world for the very first time and even built a salt chandelier in order to put a stop to the schemes of Lady Kate's half sister.

"Thanks to all that, Lady Kate and I were able to become closer, although..."

I was currently in the midst of considering a certain request of hers.

"Now she wants to have a tea party with Lady Natalie..."

Lady Kate had informed me that she wished to learn more about Lady Natalie's character and form a relationship with her. I would certainly have liked to help her, but there were important considerations to be made.

As part of the Wildcat clan, Lady Kate still felt an invisible wall when interacting with humans. I needed to take into account the great differences in both their races and their individual personalities.

Lady Kate was outspoken, spirited, and emotional.

Lady Natalie was shy, thoughtful, and reserved.

On the surface, the two were total opposites. I couldn't predict how they would get along at all.

"It'd be terrible if they came to dislike each other..."

I cocked my head in thought.

Lady Kate was extremely eager to get to know more about Lady Natalie, but that energy could backfire and cause Lady Natalie to feel overwhelmed.

Lady Kate was eighteen. Lady Natalie was sixteen. They were close in age and both daughters of dukes; their families were well known throughout the land. I could picture these similarities bringing them closer together, while at the same time, I could see the problems that might arise.

"But I can't just force the two of them to be friends..."

What should I do?

Deep in thought, I stroked Jenna's soft, fluffy coat.

"Woof?"

Jenna cocked her head too and blinked her adorable amber eyes.

"Maybe they need an opportunity to hit things off...?"

An opportunity for the two girls to grow closer. They could engage in lively conversation, then use that as a way to get to know each other better...

"...That's it. I could— Whoa!!"

Lick, lick.

Jenna's warm tongue was tickling the back of my hand. This was how Jenna made her demands. I'd been petting her back this entire time, but now, she was ready for me to move on.

"All right, all right. Is this where you want to be pet?"

I put my hand on the side of Jenna's belly and she rolled right over for me. Her eyes were sparkling as she stared up at me expectantly. *"Hurry! Pet me!"*

"Aaahh!! I can't take it! You're so cute!!!"

"Guh-roof!"

Not wanting to keep her waiting, I sank both hands into her fur.

The friendly wolf loved to be petted by humans. While she also enjoyed the slicker brush, she seemed more interested in my hands today.

I buried my fingers even deeper into her soft undercoat and gently laid them flat to scratch her. Jenna rolled onto her back to show me her entire belly and let out a pleased cry.

"Arooooooof!"

"Does that feel nice, ma'am? Shall I use more pressure? Do you itch anywhere?"

This is fun.

I felt like one of those beauticians who give their clients scalp massages.

I scratched Jenna, being sure to use the right amount of force for her. She wriggled her body around in response to my enthusiastic massage. The more she cuddled up to me, the more I got my fill of her wonderful coat of fur.

My dress became coated in a layer of hair. Not that I minded in particular—I'd changed into a simpler dress after my tea party with Lady Kate. It had fewer frills and a plainer design than what you would usually see on a queen, but that made it all the easier to keep clean. It was the perfect outfit for playing with the wolves to my heart's content.

"Aruff?"

All of a sudden, Jenna stopped wiggling and perked her ears up. I turned to

see that all the other wolves had their eyes fixed in the same direction as well. Edgar, the boy in charge of them, seemed to take notice of this change too.

We were currently on an open patch of grass next to my villa. The grove of trees blocked our vision of the front lawn.

The wolves were staring toward the front of the house, where a young girl with black hair had just appeared.

“Wolves...?”

A pair of triangular ears sat atop the girl’s head. She was beastfolk.

As far as I could tell, she looked to be younger than ten years old.

If we were in Japan, I’d expect to see her with the leather-strapped backpack around her shoulders that was customary of elementary school students. Her black hair was split into two pigtails that hung down both sides of her face. I noted the soft skin of her cheeks, her small nose, the somewhat sharp corners of her golden eyes, and her long, thin pupils.

We’d never met before, but somehow, her face seemed familiar.

The beastfolk girl’s eyes were glued to the wolves.

“Those wolves... Are they...?”

The girl’s eyes moved from one wolf to another.

Aside from the wolves, only Lucian, Edgar, and I were with her in the yard. Edgar had reverted into his shy demeanor and was fidgeting visibly. Lucian had a perfectly pleasant smile on his face, but he was still a towering, adult man. I could see why such a young girl might struggle to speak up around them.

“...It’s nice to meet you, miss. Are these the wolves kept by the royal family?”

By apparent process of elimination, the girl had chosen me to address. Her diction was perfectly polite and she had a high-pitched, childlike voice. She seemed mature for her age.

“Indeed, they are. Cute, don’t you think?”

“Yes!! So adora— No, so cool!!”

She was just about to eagerly agree with me before she stopped to rephrase.

The wolves were representative of the royal family's prestige, so the girl likely feared that calling them "adorable" was inappropriate. Despite her youth, she appeared to sincerely care about that sort of thing—I could tell from her flustered correction.

"Hehe! There's no need to be nervous. Would you like to try petting them?"

"...!! Are you sure I'm allowed?!"

The girl was hesitant, but those golden eyes of hers were sparkling. Her black tail bounced up and down in a clear show of excitement.

The people of Wolfvarte revered the royal family's wolves. I certainly shared their love for those regal yet fluffy creatures too.

"The wolf here with me is very friendly. She won't bite you, so it's safe to pet her."

The outgoing Jenna was always open to being petted. She was very sociable.

"She likes when you reach up from below to pet her, just like this."

"Woof!!"

"Exactly! I love being petted!!" Jenna seemed to cry.

With Jenna's friendly display, the girl appeared to have lost all hesitation.

"Okay, here I go..."

She teetered over to us and reached her hand out to Jenna. Her golden eyes went wide as soon as she got a feel of that soft fur.

"So fluffy..."

The words slipped straight from her lips. I watched a smile form on the girl's face, and I broke into a smile too. *She's so cute. What a peaceful sight.*



The cat-eared girl playing with the wolf was overwhelmingly adorable.

It was the most I'd ever missed the lack of cameras in this world. I decided to file the scene away into my mental storage instead. As I worked on burning the image into my memory, the girl turned to look at me with a shy smile on her face.

"She's so nice!! Her fur is very soft."

"Thank you. I'm glad to hear my brushings had the intended effect."

I quickly wiped the silly grin off my face and smiled at the girl.

Edgar and I periodically groomed the entire wolf pack. Their fur was much smoother now that we were using slicker brushes. The newfound gloss to the wolves' coats was a secret pride of mine.

"You take care of them, miss? Are you a wolfke— Kyah!!"

"Aroof?!"

"Whoa!!"

Jenna was demanding more petting. She'd butted her head against the little girl, who'd staggered in shock. I quickly reached out to grab the girl.

"Are you all right? I'm sorry she scared you."

"Th-Thank you. ...Um, miss? What's your name?"

"Me? I'm—"

"Queen Laetitia!!"

One of the maids from my villa was calling for me.

I felt the little girl go stiff in my arms.

"...Queen...Laetitia...?" Her eyes went wide as saucers. "Forgive me! I'm so very sorry!!"

Her shrill voice echoed through the yard.



"I'M so sorry that I didn't realize you were the queen, Your Majesty..."

“There’s no need to apologize, Lelena. I sure wasn’t dressed like a queen, was I?”

That shabby dress of mine hardly made me look like nobility, much less royalty. I felt like I was the one who owed her an apology.

The cat-eared girl—Lelena—apparently had mistaken me for a wolfkeeper.

The two of us sat opposite each other on wrought-iron chairs set out in the front yard. The girl was now apologizing to me vehemently.

I spoke slowly, hoping to calm the nerves of the cowering girl.

“Lelena, you didn’t do anything wrong. You petted the wolf very gently, exactly as you were supposed to.”

“B-But...then I leaned up against you, Your Majesty...”

“That didn’t bother me a bit either.”

“But...”

“If you’re really that worried about it, the next time I’m about to fall, why don’t you be the one to catch me instead?”

“...Of course!! I’ll do...” Lelena trailed off midsentence. Biting her tongue, she looked at me, then down at her own body. She was still quite tiny. Lelena appeared to be deep in thought about how she could support me in the event of a fall.

I could tell she was the diligent, upstanding type.

“Hehe! It’s the thought that counts, Lelena. I want the two of us to get along, since you’ll be staying here with me for a while.”

“So do I! Yes, let’s get along!!” Lelena’s pigtails bounced as she bowed her head intensely. “Thank you so much for helping me, even though Big Si—even though Krona made such a mess for you.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m doing this because I want to.”

Whenever I thought of Krona—the maid who used to work at my villa—I felt a dull pain in my heart.

Krona betrayed my trust during the chiffon cake plagiarism scandal. She’d

tried to pay off a large debt to protect the young Lelena—her little sister. The two girls had no other relatives to rely on after the deaths of their parents.

Since Krona was currently serving time in jail, I decided to be the one to take care of Lelena for her.

“...Your Majesty, are you really sure I can stay at your villa?”

“There’s still plenty of unused rooms here, and I have His Majesty’s permission, so there’s no concern.”

“But I’m just making trouble for you...”

“I can’t exactly leave you on your own. Krona would be so sad if anything ever happened to you, you know.”

“Big Sister...”

Lelena bit down on her small lower lip.

As part of her atonement, Krona confessed to being involved in some of Diaz’s evil schemes. Diaz was Lady Natalie’s aunt and the mastermind behind the stolen recipe incident, in addition to many other crimes. With Krona’s confession, Diaz received the grave punishment of a few dozen years in jail. However, many of Diaz’s relatives escaped punishment, and they were left unhappy with the outcome of their schemes.

These were people who harbored contempt for beastfolk.

They could very well lash out violently at Lelena, Krona’s younger sister—in fact, there had already been multiple warning signs of such an event. So I went to the king to consult on how I should protect Lelena from those dangers.

I wanted to keep her safe, but it wasn’t possible to dispatch dozens of soldiers just for that purpose. Instead, I landed on the proposal to have her come work at my villa. Since it was located within castle grounds, the house came with a certain level of protection. His Majesty accepted my terms.

Lelena had arrived today with a personal guard in attendance. While the soldier waited to greet me—the head of the house—Lelena left to explore the villa grounds. Coincidentally, she then ran into me and had joined me in petting the wolves. It was then that the maid came to tell me a soldier was here to see

me. The two of us just happened to miss each other, since I was in the garden, not the house.

“Diaz’s relatives shouldn’t be able to lay a hand on you while you’re here. His Majesty is currently looking into whether those people have committed any other crimes, so while I hate to keep you cooped up, would you be willing to stay at the villa until the investigation is finished?”

“P-Please don’t feel bad! Thank you so very much for having me!”

As if shriveling with humility...Lelena bowed her head low toward me.



AFTER I’d welcomed Lelena into my home that day, I was in my bedroom, reading over documents relating to Lelena’s transfer to my villa.

“Lelena looks so much like Krona...”

It was part of why I felt such déjà vu when I first met her. Lelena’s hair and eyes were the exact same as Krona’s. Their facial features were similar as well. Once Lelena hit puberty in a few years, I could imagine her looking exactly like her big sister.

...But it was only their faces and hair that were identical. Lelena was very earnest and upright, unlike the more laid-back Krona.

“...Maybe Lelena couldn’t survive as an innocent child, considering her circumstances...”

“She lost her parents at such a young age, then was forced to separate from her big sister.”

At my side, Lucian narrowed his eyes as he responded to my remark. Lucian, my servant, was brought up in an orphanage without any relatives of his own. He seemed to connect with the circumstances surrounding the orphaned Lelena.

“Lucian, when you find yourself with free time, would you mind keeping an eye on Lelena for me? I’m sure she must be struggling, forced to live in a villa where she doesn’t know a soul.”

“Of course. I don’t want her to shed a single tear under your roof, my lady.”

“Thank you, Lucian.”

...Though, on the inside, I wished I could be the one to help take care of her. Unfortunately, Lelena was keeping her distance. Any careless action I took with her might just be a burden for her in the end.

“...But I’ll still do whatever I can for her too.”

I finished my paperwork, dressed myself, and left the room. My destination was a familiar one: the villa kitchen.

“Gilbert, I’ll be borrowing a corner of the kitchen.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! All the ingredients you requested are out on the counter, so please use any you like.”

Gilbert was standing in front of the stove. Evening was almost upon us. The kitchen always grew busy around this time of day in preparation for the coming meal.

“I hope Lelena likes it...” As I spoke under my breath, I took inventory of my ingredients.

I was about to cook a welcome meal to celebrate Lelena’s arrival.

The original plan was to have her arrive tomorrow, when a special dinner was supposed to be served. That was why I spent the day playing with the wolves, without a care in the world...

But plans change.

In a world without any kind of transit system, it wasn’t uncommon for schedules to run awry. It was nothing like Japan, with its public transportation that was always punctual down to the exact minute.

Though my plans had to be hastened, fortunately, the ingredients for the meal arrived today. I decided to cook it myself, as I happened to be free that evening.

“Tonight’s dinner will revolve around this fish.”

The plump river fish in front of me resembled a trout. I quickly put my knife into the flesh to remove the bones and innards. I’d cleaned fish before in my

past life and practiced it since coming to the villa, so this part was easy for me.

Leaving the skin on, I cut the fish into strips about two inches in length.

Tonight's menu was tomato stew. Krona had once told me that it was a favorite of Lelena's. The two girls were born in a town near a river, where even commoners could feast on fresh fish.

"First I heat up oil in the pot, add the garlic and fish, and then..."

The garlic let out a strong aroma from inside the pot.

I then seared the fish skin-side down and seasoned it with olive oil and wine.

After letting the juicy meat sauté for a bit, careful not to scorch it, I added sliced onions, boiled tomato puree, and a variety of herbs, then covered the pot with the lid.

The ingredients stewed together for a few minutes, at which point I moved the lid to see how it was doing. I took a taste, confirmed that the alcohol had cooked off, and added a bit more salt. With that, it was finished.

"My tomato seafood stew is ready...!"

The warm steam rising from the pot carried the scent of tomatoes with it. The boiled tomatoes coated the white fish to give its surface a glossy red shine.

When I tried a piece, it immediately began to melt in my mouth. I could feel the sizzling heat from the freshly cooked fish. When I bit down, the meat fell apart, and my mouth was filled with its juicy, savory flavor. I swallowed the fish and broth together. An acidic aftertaste of tomato and herbs lingered on my tongue.

The exact combination of herbs was something I'd consulted with Gilbert on. As a result, the aroma of the stew was an appetizing one, since the muddy scent of the tomatoes was overpowered.

"Yes, this is delicious. She might just enjoy this..."

I had attempted this dish many times in preparation for today.

I wonder if she'll like it?

I called in a maid to bring the dinner of tomato stew, salad, and bread up to

Lelena. Lelena had seemed tired, perhaps from the nerves of arriving in this brand-new environment, so I had ordered the dinner be sent to her room. I feared the act of dining with me or any other stranger might only add to her fatigue.

I decided to eat my own dinner as I waited. It was another exquisite creation by the skilled Gilbert and his chefs, and was as delicious as ever.

“I wonder if Lelena’s finished eating too...?”

I brought a spoonful of black tea ice cream, my after-dinner treat, to my lips. The aroma of the tea combined with the sweet flavor of cream, creating a tasty dessert that tasted like milk tea.

After the successful creation of my strawberry ice cream, I began to experiment with other flavors as well—honey, blueberry, cherry, and even apricot. I’d attempted many flavors, but black tea was the best received of the bunch. Even Gilbert loved it, calling the dessert a “soft, frozen tea.”

“Your Majesty, may I have a moment?”

With the pleasant aftertaste still in my mouth, I exited the dining room, only to be stopped by one of my beastfolk maids—a member of the Wildcat clan just like Lelena. I had tasked the maid with serving Lelena’s meals and keeping an eye on her.

“Did Lelena eat her dinner?”

“Yes, she finished her meal. However...” The maid trailed off, hesitant to continue.

What’s the matter?

“...She started to cry.”

“.....”

...Did she really hate it that much?

If she did, then I’d done something terri—

“Graaaah!!

“Mraw mraw!!”

What on earth?!

I heard the sound of cat-like screeching and something thumping rapidly against the floor. Once the noise came closer, I saw a four-legged shadow darting forward.

“Mraaaw!!”

“Berry?!”

“Please help me!!” she seemed to be pleading as she leaped for me. I swiftly caught her in my arms.

From the direction Berry had come, I saw a black cat appear around the corner.

“...I haven’t seen you before.”

We had a couple of cats—companion animals belonging to the Wildcat clan servants—living with us at the villa. However, I’d never seen this particular one before.

It puffed up its tail and glared sharply at Berry. As I tried to figure out what was wrong, I heard light footsteps pattering toward me.

“Wait u— Your Majesty?!”

It was Lelena. Her clothes and hair were askew from running. She bowed her head to me and scooped up the black cat.

“My apologies!! Melan’s making such a terrible fuss...!”

Apparently, the black cat’s name was Melan.

I looked from Melan to Lelena, then back to Berry. Fortunately, neither cat seemed to be injured.

“Is that your companion animal, Lelena?”

“He’s my late father’s. I take care of him now, so I brought him to the villa with me.”

“I see. He must be overwhelmed by the new environment.”

“Yes. I’m very sorry. I only took my eyes off him for a second... He’s a very

curious and energetic cat, and he doesn't get in very many fights, but something seems to have set him off..."

Now I get it. Melan probably can't help it.

I looked down at Berry.

"Berry, are you hurt at all?"

She shook her head from side to side.

I then asked if any furniture had been destroyed as Melan had chased her around the house, to which she shook her head again.

"Wow! What a clever cat."

"...Actually, she's not a cat at all."

"Huh?"

Lelena's mouth fell open.

Yeah, I know just how you feel.

The first time I met Berry, she didn't look any different from a normal cat to me either.

"Berry is a Mythical Beast known as a Gardener Cat."

"Gardener Cat... I've heard the legends..." Lelena looked Berry over from head to toe. She'd likely known about them since she was a member of the Wildcat clan. "Wow... I've never seen one in person before...!"

"Isn't she cute? The workers here know she's a Gardener Cat, but since they're a very rare type of Mythical Beast, I'd appreciate it if you didn't let that information outside the villa... Can I count on you for that?"

"Of course!" Lelena nodded at lightning speed.

Melan, the black cat in her arms, seemed a bit more relaxed than before. His fur didn't appear to be standing on end like it had been a moment ago.

"Her name is Berry. See how she looks exactly like a cat? I understand why Melan felt confused and scared by her."

The other villa cats avoided Berry at first too. By now, though, I would

occasionally see them sunbathing together, despite their initial fear.

Berry never got upset or picked a fight with anyone, unless they got in the way of her strawberries or her food. I hoped Melan could come to see that Berry was an open-minded creature.

“I look forward to them getting along someday. Will you help keep an eye on them as well?”

“I will. I’ll be careful not to let Melan bully Berry again.” With a bow of her head, Lelena moved to carry her cat out of the room.

“Hang on. There’s one more thing I’d like to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Was there something in tonight’s dinner you didn’t care for in particular?”

“I...” Lelena faltered. She looked as if she was unable to answer me.

“Everyone has foods and seasonings they dislike. If there’s something you prefer to avoid, I can be sure your meals don’t use it anymore. Can you let me know?”

“I can’t eat any vegetables at all”: an extreme diet restriction like that would be troublesome, of course. But judging by Lelena’s personality, I couldn’t picture her making such a request.

“Um, no, that’s not it. The meal was delicious, but as soon as I ate that fish, the tears just started to come...”

Wait, was my cooking the problem?

I tried not to let my worries show on my face as I listened.

“I couldn’t help but cry. I never imagined I would be able to eat the same seafood recipe here that I used to eat in my hometown.”

“...Oh, I see. That must have really startled you.”

I nodded and decided not to question her any further.

Startled likely didn’t cover it... She was surely overwhelmed with nostalgia.

Krona had once told me that tomato seafood stew was Lelena’s favorite food.

The meal was intended as a welcome gift, but it appeared that the actual result was inducing a sense of homesickness in the girl.

Lelena was still a child, despite how brave she acted. Her words served as a reminder—I needed to be more careful in the future.



“THAT was rough, wasn’t it, Berry?”

I carried the Gardener Cat back to my bedroom and asked how she was feeling. The earlier game of tag had been initiated by Melan. I wanted to comfort Berry, the victim in the whole situation.

“Mraw mraw...”

The Gardener Cat’s cry sounded like her usual self.

Only Berry, Lucian, and I occupied the room. Once she knew she was in a safe place, Berry jumped down from my arms. She then took to the task of grooming the fur I’d disheveled as I carried her.

...Hmm...

Berry didn’t seem particularly bothered by Melan’s presence, but maybe I simply couldn’t read her signs of stress properly. The correct method for introducing new cats into a house is to keep an eye on the original cat and be sure they’re properly cared for. But what could I do in Berry’s case?

As I pondered this question, Berry trotted over to my writing desk. She crouched, then leaped up on the desk.

“How unusual. And here I thought this cat had some manners...,” Lucian muttered.

Indeed, it was rare to see Berry on top of my desk, or any other area that was meant for me alone. It was a strange sight. She then began to paw at a bundle of paper sitting on a corner of my desk.

“Those are some recipes I’ve written down... You want to read them?”

“Meow!!” she responded.

With her right paw, Berry began to imitate the motion of flipping the pages.

It was downright adorable.

“Demanding use of Lady Laetitia’s hands... What a scoundrel.”

“I think Berry’s simply being thoughtful. She doesn’t want to tear the paper with her claws.”

I sat in my chair and began to turn the pages, one by one.

Berry couldn’t read, of course, but I’d also drawn simple illustrations on each of my recipes. As she stared carefully at each page, the one that caught her attention was the one I had kind of predicted.

“Strawberry jam cookies...”

“Meow meow meow!!”

She patted her paw pads against the drawing of the cookie before bringing them up to her mouth over and over again.

“You’d like to eat strawberry jam cookies tomorrow, wouldn’t you?”

“Meow!!”

Berry’s eyes lit up.

...The trick to having a happy multi-cat home is to care for the cat who lived there first.

I realized then that I had no choice but to make Berry a batch of her favorite cookies.



“**URK...** My precious strawberry jam...”

Reluctant to say goodbye to the product, I whined to myself in the kitchen.

I was going to bake strawberry jam cookies for Berry, and of course, I needed the right ingredients. One was the strawberry jam I’d kept stored away for my own use.

“I don’t want to use it up...but I don’t want to use Berry’s share either...”

A line of jars filled with strawberry jam sat atop a wooden shelf in one corner of the kitchen.

Each jar that sported a green ribbon belonged to Berry. The red ribbons indicated my own share, and the jars without ribbons were to be used by guests, Gilbert, or the other chefs.

Summer had only just arrived. Strawberry season was already behind us, and I planned to save these preserved berries for future use.

Berry's powers as a Gardener Cat gave her a limited ability to grow strawberries outside their normal season, but I couldn't ask her to overexert herself like that. I decided to make do with the finite amount of fruit she had provided me, so as not to impact her health.

...And by the way, the strawberry jars with distinctive ribbons were just one sign of the strict rules about who had ownership of the jam. It was the result of a riveting debate between Berry and me.

"...I was much too intense during that whole conversation..."

I let out a dry laugh when faced with the memory. Lucian seemed to be staring off into the distance beside me, thinking about the same thing.

It was the final night of jam-making, at the very end of strawberry season. Berry and I were in an intense face-off like never before.

"How about forty percent for your share, Berry?"

"Mraw!!"

"No good? Then forty-five percent should be ple—"

"Mraaaaw? Meow meow!!"

"What? Still no? Not even close? You want me to start over?"

Berry shook her head, and I gave offer after offer as the spring night grew late. Gradually, the discussion turned into a spewing of emotions about strawberries in general.

A human and a cat engaged in a fierce conversation.

Berry's meows grew unbelievably expressive when it came to the topic of strawberries. Her passion was palpable.

...Thanks to that ordeal, morning came in the blink of an eye, and Berry and I

greeted a more refreshing dawn than usual, strangely enough. Of course, it wasn't exactly normal to spend an entire night debating with a creature who can't even speak...

But I wasn't going to let that get to me.

Lucian had this to say: *"No matter what you may tell me, my lady, I still intend to keep my guard up around the creature."*

I decided not to mind his very serious tone.

To cheer myself up, I looked down at the ingredients laid out before me.

"This is for Berry, the biggest strawberry lover of them all."

I picked up the strawberry jam and began making the cookies.

Today, they'd be shaped simply with cookie cutters. I decided to make two kinds—those that used Berry's strawberry jam, and those that were meant for me and the villa servants.

As for the cookies themselves, I'd made them a number of times already. This batch was sure to turn out nice, so long as I kept the humidity, temperature, and measurements of each ingredient finely tuned.

I combined the butter and sugar with a wooden spoon, mashing the ingredients against one another. Then I started to beat them together with the back of a fork, in the same motion used to whisk scrambled eggs. Lucian was working on dough at my side as well, so I knew I was going to end up with the perfect amount.

Once the dough turned lighter in color, I stirred in a whisked egg, pausing two or three times to be sure it incorporated well. After more stirring and the addition of cake flour, the dough was complete. I then set it inside a box filled with ice—used in place of a refrigerator—to let it rest for a while.

While I waited, it was time to begin on the cookies that would contain some of Berry's strawberry jam.

I mixed together the same ingredients but this time added the strawberry jam at the end. I didn't hold back in the amount I used, and the dough turned out a nice pink color.

Next, I set the strawberry cookie dough next to the plain dough to rest and prepared the cookie cutters while the oven heated up. I made circles, stars, paw prints (modeled after Berry), and more paw prints (modeled after the wolves).

At a glance, the two paw prints strongly resembled each other, but I'd put great care in the details of each shape. Such attention to detail would result in a clear difference once they became cookies... Well, okay, that wasn't really true. All that mattered was that I had a fun time making them.

"All right. Now I just need to roll it out..."

I retrieved the resting dough, used a rolling pin to flatten it to about a quarter inch thick, shaped it using cookie cutters, and placed them in the oven.

"That's the smell of roasted wheat, butter, and sour-sweet strawberries..."

The very hint of such a scent was enough to induce pure bliss. I was taking in the delicious aroma when I spotted a small shadow in the kitchen entrance.

"...I knew you'd show up, Berry."

Berry was clearly lured in by the wafting scent of strawberries. The other chefs smiled when they spotted her.

"Oh, there she is again."

"Would she really be our Berry if she didn't come running at the first whiff of strawberries?"

"Such an adorable kitty."

Right?! I couldn't agree more! Berry's super cute! You see the truth!!

I mentally gave the chefs my seal of approval.

Berry, who always waited for her strawberry treats in the entrance of the kitchen, had become something of a mascot to the kitchen staff. She was used to their presence by now too.

She paid the fawning humans no attention as she stared at the strawberry cookies inside the oven. I could sense her silent pressure and demand, so I checked that the cookies were finished baking, removed them from the oven, and placed them on a rack.

Once I was sure they'd cooled enough, I placed one on Berry's plate and carried it outside the kitchen.

"It's ready, Berry."

"Meow!!"

She stood up on her hind legs. She couldn't wait any longer. Berry deftly grabbed the cookie between her paws and didn't waste any time in stuffing her cheeks.

"...She's like a hamster..."

Even though she looks exactly like a cat on the outside.

Berry devoured her cookie, paying no mind to the sound of me snickering to myself. Her whiskers twitched as she munched, and at times, she closed her eyes in pure delight.

"I'm such a lucky chef..."

It was gratitude for this experience that filled my mind as I watched Berry in her state of bliss. I didn't mind using the strawberry jam when I saw how happy it made her.



I returned to the kitchen after I fed Berry her strawberry cookie snack.

My next recipe for the day was a large serving of chicken legs. I began by sprinkling the legs, which were covered in pockets of light pink fat, with salt. I made sure the entire surface was properly salted, meaning the only remaining step was to cook the chicken.

"Last time, the inside ended up cooking too, so I had to serve it well done... But let's try it rare today."

I heated my frying pan and decided how long I would let the meat cook.

This chicken wasn't for me, but for Fon, my griffin.

Griffins like Fon, who'd claimed a human as their master, loved to be fed meat by that particular human. The act of feeding him meat directly seemed to strengthen our bond of trust.

However, if I fed him every single day, it would actually be detrimental to his health, or so I'd heard, so I was currently cooking meat for him on a schedule of once every ten days.

Fon generally consumed raw meat for his meals, but he didn't seem to mind the cooked variety either. I was currently working on finding the level of doneness and flavoring he would most enjoy.

Each meal contained somewhere around eleven pounds of meat. It wasn't particularly easy to prepare, but I made do by cooking each piece at a time in the frying pan.

Since I had the opportunity, I wanted Fon to eat meat I'd personally cooked for him. It made me feel like one of the zookeepers I'd seen on a documentary in my past life.

"As magnificent a meal as ever...," remarked Lucian as he swiftly placed each slab of cooked meat in a bucket.

"This could easily feed a few dozen humans."

I added a few kinds of herbs to another bucket and headed out to see Fon.

The habits of wild griffins were generally still shrouded in mystery, but what *was* known was how they enjoyed eating meat along with fragrant plants, which my two buckets would help facilitate.

"Kreeeh!!"

Click, click!

Fon began to rattle his beak when he saw Lucian and me. It was a sign he was hungry for meat. His beak was large enough to hold my entire head inside it, and he was capable of producing sound at an impressive volume.

It used to scare me at first, but when I learned it was a way for baby griffins to ask their parents for food, I started to find the habit rather endearing.

"There, there. I've got some rare meat for you today. Eat up!"

I stuffed meat and herbs together into his wide-open beak.

Chomp.

He gobbled the meat down in the blink of an eye. He always ate by gulping down his gigantic bites at once. He seemed to enjoy today's rare meat—he was eating much quicker than usual.

Once he'd finished the entire bucket, Fon leaned his head forward to nuzzle me, the white feathers of his plumage tickling my cheek.

"Fluffa fluffa... It's pure heaven... And the smell of meat...is so intense..."

"Krah?"

Fon cocked his head adorably, but the smell of his meal still hung heavy in the air. I stroked Fon's body, enjoying the appetizing scent.

"There, there. ...Do you want scratches anywhere else?"

Fon shook his head. He looked deeply satisfied, with a full belly and a well-scratched body.

I decided today would be a good day to train him, since his spirits were so high.

...Although, I wasn't going to be the trainer myself. That role fell to Lucian.

Fon had already learned to follow commands from me. But there was no guarantee I could be with Fon at all times, so I'd begun to train him to follow orders from other people as well.

"Stop right there."

"Kwaah!"

Fon let out a cry and stopped in his tracks when he heard Lucian. His front paws fell perfectly still into position. Having followed the orders precisely, he kept his eyes fixed on Lucian.

"Well done. Try petting him, Lucian."

"Yes, my lady. Here I go... You did well. You're a clever creature."

"Kyueeh!!"

Fon let out a cry as he accepted a neck petting from Lucian.



I expected nothing less from my servant Lucian. He'd shown the quickest progress in training Fon compared with the other villa servants I'd asked to give it a try.

"Lucian, you're so amazing."

"I pale in comparison to you, my lady."

"Fon already sees me as his master. You're the only other person who can get him to obey like that. Is there some kind of trick you're using?"

"A trick...?"

Lucian's black hair rustled in the breeze as he pondered my question. It cast a shadow over his sharp blue eyes.

With him standing next to Fon, who had his wings folded up neatly, they painted a compelling picture of a human with their pet.

...Ignoring the faint aroma of meat that hung in the air, of course.

I was starting to get a bit hungry.

"I wouldn't call it a 'trick,' per se...but perhaps he feels a sense of fellowship with me."

"Fellowship? Between you and Fon?"

"Fon is a griffin with a good enough head on his shoulders to choose you as his master. I believe the two of us can work well together, as two followers of the same master."

"Kwah!!"

Fon nodded in agreement. The two tufts of feathers on top of his head shook with each movement.

"...Thank you, Lucian. I'm glad I can rely on you."

I smiled at the sight of the perfectly matched human and beast. The pair even shared the same diligence and sense of duty between them. I could imagine them getting along well, despite the difference in species.

...I guess compatibility really is a factor.

Lucian didn't hold back in his praise for Fon, yet he still harbored somewhat biting words for Berry. He always had something to say about the Gardener Cat's extremely relaxed way of life, but when it came down to it, he never ignored Berry when she went to him for something. Berry, of course, didn't show the slightest annoyance whenever Lucian took care of her.

That was simply the state of their relationship.



AFTER Lucian finished training Fon, we returned to the villa and found Lena standing there waiting.

She clenched her fists tightly and pursed her lips together in a show of anxiety.

"What's the matter, Lena?"

"I have something I'd like to ask you, Your Majesty."

"...Was there a problem with the food and clothing I had prepared for you?"

I didn't want to burden Lena, whose environment had changed so dramatically, so I'd asked for her to be supplied with all living necessities... But perhaps something in particular had stuck out to her, just like with yesterday's tomato seafood stew.

"Not at all!! The bed is so soft, and the food is delicious... I hardly deserve any of it." She was showing her appreciation, yet her face showed no relief from those worries.

...I sensed what she was about to say next.

"...You've treated me so well, Your Majesty, and I'm incredibly grateful for that...which is why I don't think it's fair to only be on the receiving end of such kindness." Lena raised her head to look at my face. "So, please allow me to train as a maid while I stay in this villa, so that I might repay you for everything."

"Train as a maid..."

I considered it for a moment.

I'd been planning on taking care of everything Lena would need to live a life

free of worry at my villa. But maybe that wasn't enough...or rather, it was *too* much for her.

Lelena and I were strangers. We shared no blood relation or anything of the sort. The fact that I was providing her everything she could possibly need seemed to have spawned a deep guilt in her heart.

"Lelena, please don't fret. I know how much life has changed for you since you arrived here. I think it'd be best for you to rest for a while."

"...Thank you very much. But it's hard not to fret when I have nothing to do but sit in my room alone..." Lelena pressed on.

I wondered if she and I were opposites—instead of loving any free time she could spend slacking off, she preferred to stay on her feet. Not to mention, she had memories of her hometown and Krona that probably overwhelmed her when she was all alone.

"I see. ...So if I get the matter in order, would you like to apprentice here to learn how to become a maid?"

"Yes! Please allow me to!!"

After she accepted the offer, I asked her many questions about the arrangement and decided not to waste any time setting things up.

The more I thought about it, the more it felt like a good deal for me as well. I'd promised Krona that I would look after Lelena, but Krona was worried about not just Lelena's day-to-day life, but her future as well.

Lelena had lost her parents, who were merchants, and had no one left to rely on. Her best option would be to learn a trade she could live off of and avoid the difficult path of taking over her parents' business.

Because I was the queen, the servants who worked at my villa were incredibly skilled. In all likelihood, Lelena wouldn't have trouble obtaining work after she left here if these were the servants she learned from.

I wasn't able to pay her that much in salary, since she was only going to be apprenticing... However, for a child's pocket money, it was sure to be a hefty sum.

“...A few years from now, I believe you’ll be a wonderful maid with enough money to live a good life.”

With that, I went on to have things arranged for Lelena’s employment.

Chapter 2: Let's Make Crepes Together

THE day after I wrote a letter to His Majesty asking for permission to formally train Lelena as a maid, Lady Natalie had joined me at the villa for a tea party.

"Your Majesty, I have a favor to ask of you." Lady Natalie looked a bit stiffer than usual as she said this.

A favor?

I took my teacup away from my lips and sat up straight. "What kind of favor?"

"Thanks to Your Majesty's generosity, I've had the opportunity to meet lots of dogs and cats."

Lady Natalie had always taken time to pet my servants' companion animals when she came to visit. Just earlier, she'd been gleefully petting Snarl—a dog who resembled a beagle.

"I feel like it's helped me come to a better understanding of how to interact with these animals."

"Even I can see how much your petting technique has improved. Snarl was wagging his tail."

"He was so cute...!"

The two of us thought back to Snarl, who had wagged his tail as if to say "*I love attention!*" We both broke out into smiles.

"...Anyway, back to the subject at hand. What was it that you wanted to ask?"

"Would you allow me to get close to any of the wolves?"

Lady Natalie's gaze was earnest, but also visibly full of hope.

The wolves at the royal palace were considered special to many of the people of Wolfvarte. Lady Natalie, a true animal lover, was one such person who harbored an admiration for the wolves.

The pack that visited my villa had been well trained by their wolfkeepers. Due

to their large size, I'd been having them keep their distance from Lady Natalie. However...

"I think that would be fine. You're not scared of them, are you?"

"Actually, I've seen them from afar many times, and have always wanted to try petting them."

Lady Natalie had recently begun to pet larger, lop-eared breeds of dogs. I doubted the wolves would be frightening to her any longer.

"Very well. Let me consult with the wolfkeeper first."

I decided to speak with the one who already happened to be at the villa with the pack. Once I explained the situation, he didn't hesitate to accept my request.

This wolfkeeper had already witnessed Lady Natalie doting on dogs and cats on many separate occasions, so he gave his approval believing she probably knew the proper way to interact with the wolves.

"Wow...!" Lady Natalie exclaimed, cheeks flushed as she stared at the pack. "They're cute, but also so regal...! And fluffy, to boot!"

Her eyes were sparkling.

How adorable.

The girl known as the Doll Princess was like a completely different person in her current state.

"Woof?"

"Who's this new lady?"

One of the wolves cocked her head curiously as she approached us. She sat down in front of Lady Natalie and began to sniff her.

"You can go ahead and pet this wolf. Just be sure you do it gently, like you're petting one of the dogs."

"Okay...!"

I kept an eye on her as I began to play with the wolves myself. They seemed somewhat nervous at first, but grew calmer as they came to understand that

Lady Natalie wasn't a bad person.

"You're so popular, Your Majesty...!"

Jenna, the friendly wolf, and three others were nuzzling me.

"Pet us! Pet us!"

I reached down to pet each animal as they pressed their foreheads against me in wolfish head-butt.

"There, there. You're all so cute today!"

"Rooooof!" Jenna let out a pleased cry. The fur around her head was soft and bushy. It felt wonderful against my hands.

As I took in her fuzzy round head with strokes of my palms...

"Aroo...?"

It was Lord Aroo.

His blue-green eyes were fixed on Lady Natalie in apparent interest.

"Oh my...! What a beautiful silver wolf!"

"Indeed, Lord Aroo is quite the little hunk."

"Hunk...?"

Oh, right.

Of course someone like Lady Natalie wouldn't understand that word.

"I only meant that he's a handsome wolf."

"I see. I agree that he's very handsome...and strangely proud?"

"Grah!"

"Exactly. I'm proud indeed," he seemed to say in agreement.

His silver fur fluttered as he took step after confident step in our direction.

"Oh, that's right. Please don't pet Lord Aroo, Lady Natalie."

"Am I not allowed?"

"Well, he's a moody fellow. He didn't allow me to pet him at first either."

That thought took me back. The first time Lord Aroo let me pet him was when I was upset about the stolen chiffon cake recipe. He'd nestled close to me and stayed there by my side.

I could still vividly recall the feeling of stroking his soft coat.

"He's moody, but he's a kind wolf. Isn't that right?"

"Aroo!"

"That was just a whim!" I read from his grunt.

Lord Aroo then turned away from me. His tail swished a few times, perhaps out of embarrassment.

"Is Lord Aroo really so kind?" It was the wolfkeeper who voiced his doubts in response to my comment. "He's not aggressive, but he's not particularly fond of us wolfkeepers either. He never allows us to pet him at all, in fact."

"Oh my. Is that right?"

"I think Lord Aroo has taken quite a liking to you, Your M— Whoa!!"

"Grrruff!!"

Lord Aroo let out a menacing growl for the man to hear.

What's got him so upset now?

But that interaction *did* seem to support the statement that the silver wolf never allowed anyone else to pet him.

"Calm down, Lord Aroo. Are you hungry? Is that what's got you cranky?"

"Roo!!"

"Don't be ridiculous!" he indicated with a cry.

Lord Aroo seemed a bit on edge today. He separated himself from the rest of us, but unfortunately, I was busy watching over Lady Natalie, so I couldn't exactly pursue him.

I could feel Lord Aroo's eyes on me as I conversed with Lady Natalie. The wolf seemed to be sulking, though I wasn't quite certain what he wanted. He plopped down on the ground and closed his eyes like an angry spouse who

needed to sleep off their irritation after an argument.

“Hmm. I just don’t understand Lord Aroo’s fickle wolf heart...”

With a bitter smile, I continued my conversation with Lady Natalie. We talked about wolves, cats and dogs, and the treats we were served at our tea party. Somewhere along the way, the topic shifted to that of King Glenreed.

“You’ve been cooking meals for His Majesty as of late, right?” she asked.

“I have. We dine together and discuss certain topics.”

I felt a smile form on my face. I always looked forward to those opportunities to see His Majesty. Secretly, I’d grown very fond of the man I saw on those occasions—the man who praised my cooking and called it delicious.

“I’m eager to dine with him again. I just perfected a cookie recipe that uses blueberry jam, and I’m going to bring them with me next time.”

“Oh, that sounds delightful!”

“I have some extras from my last batch, as a matter of fact. Would you like to take some home with you?”

“Yes! Thank you very much!”

Lady Natalie sounded very happy. She was still stroking the wolf.

I smiled back at her and decided to offer a second suggestion.

“...You’d like to have a tea party with Lady Kate and me together?” Natalie asked.

“I would. What do you say?”

Lady Natalie took a moment to think about it. “Well...I do wish to form a better relationship with Lady Kate...”

“I’m sure you have some concerns, but what say we try it once? I’ll do whatever I can to aid the two of you.”

“...Very well. I’d be happy to join both of you for tea.”

Lady Natalie’s response was definitive, even if it was delivered with a bit of hesitation.

After deciding on a specific date, I saw Lady Natalie off for the day, and it was then that my head butler, Borgan, came to see me.

“Your Majesty, a letter from King Glenreed has arrived for you.”

I took the letter from Borgan and quickly scanned it.

“I have some things I’d like to ask you about. See me tomorrow night, and bring dinner with you.”

Those were His Majesty’s words for me on the page.



“**GOOD** evening, Your Majesty.”

“Yes, thanks for joining me.”

I raised my head after bowing in greeting and was met with the sight of the king’s lovely face. As always, he was stunningly beautiful.

Smooth strands of silver hair framed the king’s pale face. His almond-shaped eyes, both blue and green in color, were reminiscent of a frigid winter lake. His Majesty’s beauty rivaled that of a sculpture.

I sat across the table from King Glenreed as Lucian set out the sweets I’d brought with me.

“I’d like to present you with these blueberry jam cookies.”

“Oh, so these are the cookies you spoke of.”

...Hmm?

Did I tell him about these already?

This question hung in my mind as His Majesty picked the first one up to observe it.

“What a strange shape...”

“They’re shaped like paw pads.”

I alternated layers of plain and blueberry-jam dough, then baked them in the oven together to form a paw print pattern. Each cookie turned out very cute and had a fun combination of flavors in each bite.

“Oh, by the way, I designed these paws based on the wolves who come to visit my villa,” I explained.

“Eating the paws of wolves... It’s like eating one of my own...”

“...One of your own?”

Without thinking, I repeated what the king had said.

“...?!”

I felt something lurch into motion deep inside my head. It was a nostalgic feeling, like something I’d long forgotten. My face flushed as I tried to remember what it could be— “Laetitia, what’s the matter?”

His Majesty’s words snapped me out of it.

I thought I’d kept a smile on my face, but maybe I was unsuccessful after all. In the time it took to focus on my facial expression, the strange sensation was already gone from my mind. It was deeply confusing. I didn’t feel physically unwell in any way either.

“...No, it’s nothing. You seem quite taken by the cookies. What do you think?”

“They’re well made. The paw shape is very accurate.”

“Hehe, thank you, Your Majesty. Please go ahead and try one.”

King Glenreed sipped his black tea in between bites of a cookie. The snack crumbled under his teeth, hopefully allowing the sweetness of the jam to entertain his palate.

“These are very good. I liked the last cookies you brought too, but these have a different flavor.”

“I’m glad to hear you enjoy them. Would you like me to bring more cookies that use seasonal fruits in the future?”

“Certainly. I’ll look forward to them.” He smiled faintly, and a fire lit up in my chest.

I began to picture it. Summer had just arrived, and would be quickly followed by autumn. If I was going to have the opportunity to eat more seasonal fruit cookies with His Majesty...

...I was certain that meant many more enjoyable times together in the future.

I swallowed my final cookie as I quietly looked forward to this idea.

“I know you wished to ask me something today, Your Majesty. What’s on your mind?”

“I heard you’ve been having Natalie over at your villa recently. Are things going well between the two of you?”

He seemed concerned about my relationship with Lady Natalie. I smiled wider and responded to his inquiry.

“Yes, they are. Just yesterday, the two of us conversed as we played with the wolves together. It’s been helping Lady Natalie and me grow closer. However...”

“What is it?”

“A wolf named Lord Aroo became upset with me while she was visiting.”

“.....”

For a brief second, when I brought up Lord Aroo...

I could have sworn His Majesty turned a little stiffer.

“When I was speaking to Lady Natalie, Lord Aroo seemed strangely grumpy. He wouldn’t interact with me at all, so I was wondering if he felt lonely because I was—”

“It’s not loneliness,” His Majesty interrupted me. “You and Lady Natalie looked like you were having a good time, so that wolf named Lord Aroo only wanted to watch over you for the day. He wasn’t lonely or any such thing.”

“...Is that right?”

His Majesty, after speaking as if he’d witnessed the incident, turned his face away from me for some reason.

All I could do was cock my head slightly in confusion.

Though I harbored some lingering questions, the rest of my conversation with His Majesty finished without incident.

Lelena’s official training as a maid.

Mediating a friendship between Lady Kate and Lady Natalie.

I managed to receive permission to continue on both counts.

His Majesty revealed that he, too, harbored concerns about the bad blood between the candidates for queen. As the Wolfvartian king, he couldn't intervene directly, which was why he decided to support my actions instead.



"I hope everything works out..."

The day of my joint tea party with Lady Natalie and Lady Kate had finally arrived. Lucian and I welcomed the two of them to the villa.

"Lady Natalie, Lady Kate. Please make yourselves at home."

"Good day, and thank you for having us over."

"...Thank you for hosting us today."

The two women took turns answering my greeting.

Lady Kate's response was loud and rapid.

Lady Natalie's came stiffly and quietly.

Both of them appeared to be nervous.

"Please, come have a seat. Tea and snacks are already out for you."

I led them to the table in the front yard, which was already fully stocked. On top of the table were cookies, dried fruits, and other treats for us. In truth, I felt like it might be a bit lacking compared with most tea parties at my villa. But that was to ensure our conversation was the main focus of today's gathering, as well as for one other reason.

"Oh..."

I heard a bit of disappointment in Lady Kate's quiet murmur. It was a clear sign of how she'd been looking forward to the grander spread of treats she would typically be served at my villa.

On the other hand, Lady Natalie showed no change in expression as she quietly took her seat at the table. It was the unreadable look she'd stopped

using lately when the two of us spent time alone. I was well aware that it helped the shy Lady Natalie get by in life, but Lady Kate seemed to find her hard to approach in this state.

Nervous as I was, today's goal was for the two girls to get to know each other better. I decided to listen to their conversation without interrupting.

...But plans change.

"I love the apricots on top of these cookies. Don't you agree, Lady Natalie?"

"I think they're delicious. Do you like apricots, Lady Kate?"

"I do, both the taste and the aroma. What kinds of fruit do you enjoy, Lady Natalie?"

"Fruit? I like all kinds."

"...I see."

The conversation, once again, came to a halt.

Lady Natalie's not a very good conversationalist...

She likely worried about what to do if her preferences differed from Lady Kate's, so she landed on the safest answers she could think of. It was perfectly understandable. But it also made it impossible for the two to get acquainted.

On top of that, Lady Natalie remained nearly expressionless during the entire exchange, and Lady Kate seemed to hesitate in pressing her further.

Lady Kate was a lively and proactive young woman, but that emotional side of her could also cause missteps. The two ladies had recently been on opposing sides of a dispute, and with the differences between humans and beastfolks, Lady Kate appeared to be struggling with how to proceed.

I tried to bolster the conversation on more than one occasion, but too much meddling and I'd ruin the point of the gathering altogether. I was in a pickle.

"This tea is very delicious..."

Clink.

Lady Kate's dishes made a quiet sound.

It was all so awkward.

Lady Kate was already on her third cup of tea. She was constantly reaching out for her teacup and more snacks as if to kill time.

...Hmm. I guess their proximity in ages isn't as helpful as I thought it might be.

I thought back to my past life and how the class changes at the beginning of the school year often resulted in a period of shyness among all the newly acquainted students.

I think...I know what this is. It's like when you don't know how to act around your friend and their other friend whom you don't really know.

Perhaps time would put an end to that problem, but fortunately, I'd prepared for such an outcome.

"Lady Kate, Lady Natalie. Are the two of you free after this?"

"Hm? Is something going on?"

"...Your Majesty?"

Lady Kate and Lady Natalie simultaneously turned to look at me.

Despite their difficulty in bonding, in that moment, they were perfectly in sync.

"The two of you usually take some baked goods home with you when you visit my villa, right?"

"Yes, and they're always delicious when enjoyed at home. The sweets are popular among my servants as well."

"It's the same for me. They're always asking when I'm next going to visit Your Majesty's villa."

Lady Natalie, followed by Lady Kate, answered me happily.

The two always seemed much more relaxed when they were speaking with me directly. Ideally, they would interact in the same way with each other without any interference on my part.

"...But where did that come from all of a sudden?"

“Now that I think of it, we haven’t received any treats to take home today...”

Lady Kate flicked her cat ears.

Lady Natalie squinted slightly.

They were both signs of confusion in each respective girl.

It was time for me to make my proposal.

“What say the three of us do some baking together?”

“Huh?”

“Huh?!”

“You’ve both shared that you’d like to see how I cook. So why don’t the three of us have a go in the kitchen and bake some sweets for you two to take home?”

“The three of us...”

“In the kitchen...”

From the way Lady Kate’s ears twitched, I could tell she never even imagined such a possibility.

It isn’t unheard of for noblewomen of this kingdom to work in the kitchen, but never as anything more than a hobby. Lady Kate and Lady Natalie were both daughters of dukes—high-ranking nobles. Between the etiquette lessons and social events that kept them busy, it appeared they had no experience with cooking whatsoever.

“I’ve already prepared the necessary ingredients and utensils. It won’t take very long, so what do you say? Will you try making some simple treats with me?”

It might be kind of like a cooking class from my past life.

Conversations were more likely to bloom naturally as the three of us baked together.

My hope, anyway, was that it would yield more results than the previous attempt at a simple face-to-face chat.



“YOUR Majesty, how do these clothes look?”

“They suit you well, Lady Natalie.”

Lady Natalie fidgeted as she held up the apron she was wearing. I had asked her and Lady Kate to change into an outfit that would be easier to clean if stained. Fortunately enough, the two women were close to my height, so they were able to comfortably wear some of my spare aprons and kitchen dresses.

Lady Natalie wore a blue-and-white striped dress, reminiscent of her hair color. Lady Kate’s dress was made of a light green fabric. Both wore matching white aprons over their outfits.

Just having the two of them stand in the kitchen was already lightening the mood. I asked them to tie their hair up and out of the way, and with that, it was time to start baking.

“I’ll be having you both cook crepes with this batter today.”

A bowl of crepe batter was already sitting on the counter where I’d left it to rest.

At first, I had planned to have them make the batter as well, but that would’ve ended up taking too much time. It probably wouldn’t be easy for two beginners to mix it together either, so I took that step upon myself for today.

The way I saw it, cooking the crepes themselves would probably serve for a more entertaining kitchen experience.

“You’ll each place the crepe batter into this frying pan to cook.”

I gave the pan I was holding a little knock with my hand. It was a shallow pan, which I thought would make it easier to flip the crepes when the time came.

The two girls listened intently to my explanation. They were eager to absorb all the new information that came with their first venture into the kitchen.

I poured oil into the frying pan and let it get hot. Their eyes never left me. Once the pan was hot enough, I poured in crepe batter with my ladle.

“That smells so good.” Lady Kate breathed in deeply.

The warm scent of eggs and flour tickled our noses.

“Holes will form in the batter, so you have to tilt the frying pan in different directions to fill the holes. Take care to keep the crepe at an even thickness... then use your spatula to flip the crepe over to the other side.”

“Goodness!!” Lady Natalie let out a small cry. She appeared taken aback by her first glimpse of such a motion.

“Now we wait a bit for the other side to cook, at which point you simply take it out of the pan.”

I lifted the crepe with my spatula and slid it onto a plate. The thin crepe had browned in color. The two girls were fixated on it.

“Incredible. So this is how you make a delicious treat...”

“It’s very well made. What an appetizing color and aroma.”

“Hehe, thank you. Now you two can give it a try.”

“...Are you sure we’re capable?”

“I really don’t think I can do this...”

The girls appeared to be a combination of perplexed and anxious, but I felt like they really *did* want to give it a try for themselves.

“It’s okay if it’s not perfect at first. We can still use the batter, even if it doesn’t cook quite right, so please don’t worry about messing up.”

“...Then I guess we’ll have to give it a try.”

Lady Kate quickly slid forward to the stovetop as Lady Natalie kept a supportive gaze on her. With the frying pan in one hand and the ladle in the other, Lady Kate waited for the oil to heat, then poured a scoop of batter over the surface.

“The batter’s dripping...!!”

“P-Please don’t panic! You simply tilted the ladle too far!” Lady Natalie cried out to aid her.

Lady Kate had poured in more batter than I had, but it was still salvageable.

"Please tilt the frying pan so that the batter spreads evenly," I said calmly.

"Evenly? Like this?"

"Yes, you've got it. Well done!"

Lady Kate smiled shyly and continued to cook the batter as I'd shown her.

"It tore when I flipped it over..."

"Only at the corner. You're still doing great for your first time. Would you like to try next, Lady Natalie?"

"...Very well."

Lady Natalie stiffly gripped the handle of the frying pan. I heard Lady Kate chuckle quietly at the other girl's body language, which exuded nervousness.

"Hehe, you can relax a bit. Simply scoop up the batter and drizzle it in!"

"Scoop and drizzle..."

Lady Kate was already using her experience to coach Lady Natalie, who gave a nod and then reached out for the ladle.



"URK... She surpassed me in the blink of an eye..."

Lady Kate was muttering to herself as she stared at the crepes in front of her.

The two girls had each cooked ten crepes from the store of batter. Lady Kate produced one perfect crepe, while the rest turned out broken in at least one part.

"Lady Natalie, aren't we both beginners? How did you do that so well...?"

"Her Majesty helped me, as did you."

Shyly, Lady Natalie looked down at her ten crepes, four of which were completely perfect. She'd been so nervous to even pick up the ladle at first, but along the way, she really began to get the hang of it.

"I copied Queen Laetitia, followed your advice to scoop and drizzle, and they seemed to turn out well."

"Scoop and drizzle... I really thought that's what I was doing too..."

...Perhaps this came down to a fundamental difference in technique.

Lady Kate was skilled for an amateur, but Lady Natalie's handiwork was even more impressive. Her thoughtful personality seemed to shine in cooking as well.

She reached out to Lady Kate, who had picked the ladle back up to see what she had done wrong.

"May I? It's slightly easier when you hold the ladle like this."

"Show me, show me! Do I just put my middle finger on this side?"

Lady Natalie guided Lady Kate's fingers, showing her how to hold the ladle.

I could tell that some of the distance between them had closed during this experience.



Lady Kate had been enjoying herself, but now that the plate of crepes was set out in front of her, the look on her face had returned to one of disappointment.

“You helped me figure out how to hold the ladle, Lady Natalie...but most of the ones I already cooked are falling apart. My servants definitely won’t be smiling if they see these.”

“There’s no need to worry. There’s a simple way to make these look more presentable.”

With perfect timing, Lucian swooped in to deliver the other ingredients I’d prepared.

I put one of my crepes on a plate. Next, I piled whipped cream on top and spread it across the surface.

Crepe, cream. Crepe, cream. Crepe, cream...

Lady Natalie watched closely as I constructed layer after layer.

On top of the seventh crepe, I used a thin layer of strawberry jam instead of whipped cream. I was planning to share a portion with Berry later on.

“You stack the cooked crepes at the end like this...and it becomes what’s known as a mille crepe cake.”

“Oh my! What an adorable dessert.”

“It looks like it’s striped on the sides. That’s so neat!”

Lady Kate seemed taken with the design of the mille crepe cake. Her kinked tail bounced from side to side in excitement.

“Do you like stripes, Lady Kate?”

“Yes, I do. They remind me of my companion animal’s tail.”

“I didn’t know you had a companion animal with a striped tail, Lady Kate!!”

It was Lady Natalie who’d jumped into the conversation. She’d been hooked by one of her favorite topics—cute animals.

Lady Kate blinked her eyes at the sudden interjection, but she smiled.

“Do you like cats, Lady Natalie?”

“Yes, I do. I really, really do! In fact, I’d love to try petting your companion animal sometime.”

“Really? I don’t mind, but she can be very moody. Just today, she spent her time sunbathing at my villa like a normal cat instead of following me around at all.”

Lady Kate didn’t seem particularly bothered by this behavior despite commenting on it. Beastfolk loved their companion animals and treated them just like a family member. She seemed especially happy to hear of Lady Natalie’s interest in such an important part of her life.

After they wrapped up their enthusiastic conversation, I asked them to craft mille crepe cakes for themselves. It was easy to cover up imperfections in crepes by smothering them with cream. Since the two ladies were beginners when it came to this recipe, I decided to have them use cream only, no jam.

They stacked layer after layer, saving the flawless ones for the very top, and after a bit of adjustment to the shape, the cakes were ready.

I could tell how impressed they were with the end results.

“Who knew torn crepes would make such a lovely cake...?!”

“Fantastic! We did it! Let’s slice one up and eat it now!”

“Hehe, now wait a moment. These cakes are for you to take home. Let’s start with the remaining plain crepes first.”

Each cake used eight of the ten crepes they cooked, respectively. The remaining two were ready to eat here and now.

Lucian had been setting out some extra ingredients while the two women had eagerly built their cakes. There were various fruits like glossy oranges and plump blueberries, whipped cream, honey, different kinds of jam, and crumbled cookies. In addition to the sweet ingredients, Lucian had also brought out sliced boiled eggs, sausages, and leafy green vegetables. They were the perfect topping choices for our cooked crepes.

In this kingdom, it was normal to place a crepe and a pile of ingredients on top of a plate. The common method of serving crepes back in Japan—wrapped

up and placed in paper holders so that they were easy to eat on the go—didn't seem to be popular here.

"I'll take these sugared apricots, whipped cream...and what else should I add...?"

"How about those crushed cookies?"

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate were discussing which toppings to use.

Having a variety of options for building your own crepe is one element that makes it extra fun.

Lady Natalie was even voicing her own opinions more readily than before.

"How about this one?"

"I don't want to leave anything out..."

The three of us had a fun but challenging time in choosing which ingredients to pile onto our crepes.

For mine, I chose a classic combination of cream, jam, and a layer of cookie crumble on top. Lady Kate filled both of hers with her favorite ingredient—sugared apricots. Lady Natalie crafted one crepe with sweet jam, and another with savory sausage to balance it out. I found it especially amusing just how much our respective creations reflected our personalities.

The three of us stared at our plates, then dug in with forks.

"What a nice, fluffy crepe."

"I've never tried a sausage crepe before, but I really enjoy the saltiness."

The two girls seemed pleased as they continued to eat. I imagined their treats tasted even better with the knowledge that they'd cooked and assembled them on their own.

"Wow, that was delicious... I got so nervous while I was making them, but now I'm glad I gave it a try!"

"Me too. I feel like I now understand why Her Majesty loves to cook so much."

"I'm glad to hear you're satisfied. How would you like to cook with me again

some other time?”

“Definitely!! Yes, please!”

“...I’d love to as well.”

I smiled at their responses.

Over the course of the day, the two girls had opened up and become considerably less awkward with each other. I could tell they genuinely wanted to become closer. The crepe-making lesson seemed to have done its job in that respect.

Through the shared, though brief, experience of cooking, the relationship between the two candidates for queen began to change.



“**THANK** you for having us over today, Your Majesty. I hope to see you again sometime soon.”

“Me too, me too! Today was so much fun! See you again soon!”

Lady Natalie was formal and eloquent.

Lady Kate was bubbly and brisk.

With their respective farewells, the mood in the air was peaceful as the girls returned home.

I watched their carriages disappear down the road and went back inside the villa with a smile on my face. Pleased with the outcome of the day, I entered my bedroom and saw Berry fast asleep by the window. She had often been taking her naps in my room as of late. This was to avoid any interference from Melan, the black cat Lelena brought with her to the villa.

Berry’s little nose was twitching.

“Mrow?!”

Her eyes went wide as saucers.

“Do I smell strawberries?! This is no time for a nap!”

Her eyes harbored an intense blaze.

“Here you are, Berry. It’s a mille crepe cake with strawberry jam.”

“Meow!!”

She made a beeline directly for Lucian, who was carrying the cake.

“Kitty dive...!”

I admired Berry’s graceful leap and took a seat at the table Lucian had arranged for me.

Berry was practically drooling just from looking at her slice. She then swung her fork straight into the neatly layered mille crepe cake.

“Maw maw, maw mraaaw!!”

She closed her eyes as her cheeks launched into motion. With each bite, she nodded her head as if to say: *“This is a great strawberry treat. I love it, I love it, I absolutely love it!!”*

It really reminded me of how a human would convey the same thoughts. In fact, all her reactions had grown more human-like, perhaps because we always ate our strawberry treats together.

Berry had truly taken a passionate interest in my strawberry cooking.

Maybe at this rate, someday she’ll be able to voice her opinions with actual human speech?

As I came up with ridiculous fantasies, I took a bite of the mille crepe cake for myself. The delicate scent of strawberries tickled my nose. It was enough to make my heart sing out in joy. The tip of my tongue trailed over the layers of soft crepe in between smooth whipped cream.

“It feels so nice to bite through all the crepes at once.”

It was like a burst of sweet egg flavor combined with the acidity of the strawberry jam. My eyes drooped as I savored the taste. Just then...

“Meow!!”

Berry was holding her empty fork up in the air. It appeared she had finished her serving. She began to reach out for the remaining cake that wasn’t sliced up yet.

“No more, or you’ll spoil your appetite for dinner.”

Lucian quickly whisked away the cake.

“Mraw mraw mraaaaaw!!”

“Stay, Berry. Stay.”

That afternoon, I ended up finishing my cake while blocking the soft blow of kitty punches from the frustrated, yowling Berry.



AS I stood in the front yard of my villa, my eyes were drawn to a pair of brown ears.

They were fuzzy and bright, with a hint of red in their coloring.

The pointy, triangular ears were erect and perked atop the head where they rested.

“Jiro...”

The name slipped out of my mouth.

I was looking at a pair of soft brown ears that looked exactly like those of Jiro, my Shiba Inu. I knew this wasn’t Jiro, but I couldn’t help but stare.

“Your Majesty?”

The man with Jiro’s exact ears...had a name, which was Keith. Keith called out to me, sounding concerned.

He was a young beastfolk knight with dog ears and a tail. He was currently stationed at the villa after taking over the shift from his coworker. The two of us were on good terms, and we would occasionally chat while I waited in the yard for the wolves to arrive.

“Are you all right? You seem a bit spaced out.”

“...I was just relieved to see that you’re here to protect the villa for another day.”

“Wow, thank you!!”

Keith’s tail bobbed back and forth. It was straight and long, unlike Jiro’s.

Keith's personality was similarly straightforward. He was a cheerful knight with an expressive face.

"I'm good with a spear too! No matter the enemy, I'll protect you without fail, Your Majesty!"

"Wow! I'm impressed!!"

He swung the spear left and right, up and down through the air. It was much too fast for me to even follow the tip with my eyes.

"I'm just getting started! Look at what else my spear can do!"

Keith swung it even faster now, as if summoning a storm, and the gust of wind sent my own hair flying back. He possessed impressive strength, even for beastfolk, who were already naturally stronger in physical matters than humans.

I was holding my hair down, impressed with his work, when...

"Grrrrrrrrrr..."

I suddenly heard an angry growl.

It was none other than Lord Aroo. He'd appeared from the woods beside the front yard, and was now directing his growl at Keith.

"I think that wolf wants to kill me!!" cried Keith in shock, his entire body flinching. He gripped his spear tightly, clearly nervous.

"...Oh, you scared me. It's just Lord Aroo, as intense as ever today. Are we sure he's *really* just a wolf?"

"...I wish I had an answer to that as well."

Lord Aroo turned his head away to pout when he heard my response to Keith.

...Suspicious.

Lord Aroo really seemed to understand human speech at times. Perhaps it was nothing more than coincidence, but his reactions were always somewhat strange.

"Maybe Lord Aroo just has an IQ of two hundred for a wolf...?" I wondered aloud.

“Aroo?”

“‘IQ’? What’s that you speak of? Some kind of food ingredient?” Lord Aroo seemed to say with the cock of his head. He approached me, his nose sniffing at the air all the while.

“Sorry, but I don’t have any food for you today. Are you really that hungry?” I asked as I watched that black nose drawing closer.

“That’s not it. You don’t really think of me as such a glutton, do you?”

He snorted quietly as if to object.

“Then what’s the matter, Lord Aroo? It seemed like Keith was bothering you... Was that it?”

“Aroo...”

“I’m not bothered by him in particular.”

He looked away from Keith, as if to make his point...

But his body couldn’t help but be honest. Those silver ears were still twitching exactly in Keith’s direction.

“Hmm... I guess he just doesn’t like me?”

“Or maybe he’s scared of your spear?”

“I don’t think that’s it. He’s never acted that way around the other knights, has he?”

“That’s true...”

It didn’t make sense. When he first met Keith, Lord Aroo didn’t seem to react in any particular way, but from time to time, he became strangely menacing toward him.

As Keith and I were pondering this state of affairs, a fluffy white dog wandered up to us.

This was Sana—Edgar’s companion animal, who resembled a Samoyed dog. Her tail bounced in the air as she scampered toward us.

“Woof!!”

Sana was as adorable as ever. The corners of her mouth were curved upward. It always looked like she was smiling. Like a ball of white, fluffy cotton candy, she began to walk circles around me. Her black eyes looked at me expectantly.

“Welcome, Sana. I’m so glad to see you again.”

“Roooo!”

I stroked the top of her head with my palm, gripping the space behind her ears to massage her scalp. The black skin of her mouth began to stretch out on each side. It was a quirk of hers whenever she was happy or something felt good.

“Good afternoon, Your Majesty, and hello, Keith. I see you’re hard at work today.”

“The same goes for you with your wolves there, Edgar.”

Edgar, with the pack of wolves behind him, exchanged greetings with Keith. Though Edgar always acted awkward around humans, he didn’t seem to have a problem with Keith, who was beastfolk like him. It helped that Keith wasn’t shy either. The two got along fairly well, to my eyes.

“Oh, I see Lord Aroo’s here again. I figured I’d find him here.”

“...You did?”

“He passed us while I was leading the wolves to the villa, racing like the wind.”

“Lord Aroo, did you really rush here so quickly? Could it be that you were just that eager to see me?”

“.....”

Lord Aroo fell silent at my question.

He kept his head turned away from me and stubbornly refused to so much as cast me a glance.

I just don’t understand this wolf.

I decided it was time to play with the rest of the pack instead. One by one, I gave the wolves scratches in all their favorite spots.

“Roooo...”

I ruffled this one’s fur and dug my fingers into her body with a bit of strength. This caused the wolf to squirm around and collapse on top of the grass. She stared up at me with her belly exposed.

“There, there. Who’s a good girl?”

“Woof!!”

I made sure to scratch every inch of her tummy. As I did, her fur rustled softly under my fingers. It was much less coarse than the fur on her back, and the light-colored coat of her belly tickled my skin. The wolves had shed their winter coats, but they still had quite a lot of fur.

I moved my hands down her belly, stroke after stroke, going in the opposite direction at times too. The wolf fell into a daze, closed her eyes, and wriggled on the ground.

Wolves display their bellies as a show of trust.

I was deeply charmed by the way this wolf sought my attention. As I lost myself in the act of pampering her...

“What are you up to, Lord Aroo?”

I heard Keith speak up.

“Flowers...?”

Red, purple, white, yellow, and pink.

A rainbow of wildflowers was blooming in the early summer field.

Lord Aroo’s eyes were fixed on the colorful display.

“Do you like flowers, Lord Aroo?”

When I approached the wolf and called out to him, he turned his head to look at me.

“.....”

I suddenly felt a bit nervous.

Those blue-green eyes of his were beautiful and piercing, yet gentle too. The

color made me envision His Majesty's eyes. It almost felt like I was staring back at his face.

Unable to look away from the wolf, I watched as he narrowed his eyes and let out a breath, much like a human chuckle... At least, that's what it sounded like to me.

"...Lord Aroo?"

"Aroo..."

The wolf gave a nod of his head.

He turned toward the wildflowers, then once more to me, as if confirming something in his mind.

Once I noticed the unusual intensity in his stare, an idea hit me.

"Do you want to eat the flowers? Are you asking me to cook them for you...?"

"Grah!!"

"How rude!!" said Lord Aroo with his cry. "You see those flowers and think of cooking? Your appetite for food really trumps your appetite for romance..."

I could just see that judgmental statement coming from his astonished face.

He was really staring at those flowers, though. Maybe he's a wolf with a feminine side?

"...All right, I see... Wait just a minute, Lord Aroo."

I crouched down and stuck my hands into the grass. Once I'd gathered up a handful of wildflowers, I began to weave their stems together.

"There!! It's perfect!!"

"Aroo?"

It was a crown of flowers.

I'd failed to make a perfect circle, but the ringlet of mostly light blue flowers was still in a suitable shape.

As soon as I set it on top of Lord Aroo's head, I saw that it was the perfect size for him. It seemed to hang off his ears, and the colors of the green and blue

wreath stood out against his silver coat.

“What do you think, Lord Aroo? Do you like it? You look like the king of the wolves with that on your head.”

“Aroo...”

“I suppose that’s fitting, but I wasn’t after a flower crown in the first place...”

Lord Aroo’s expression was mixed, like that of a hesitant human. The other wolves began to approach him from all directions. Once they noticed the flower crown, they turned to look up at me and began wagging their tails.



“...Do you all want flower crowns too?”

“Woof!!”

“Ruff!!”

With sparkling eyes, they each barked in an apparent demand to be the first recipient.

One by one, I made each wolf a flower crown in the garden.



“A flower...crown...”

Glenreed, having returned to human form, set the ringlet on his desk.

Unable to refuse a gift from Laetitia, he ended up taking her creation all the way back to his own bedroom.

I've worn crowns plenty of times, as the king...

But this one was made with more affection than others. It was simple and lightweight too.

In fact, Glenreed's mind was filled with one thought in particular—that he wouldn't mind wearing that flower crown when he visited Laetitia in wolf form, since it would probably make her happy.

Chapter 3: Macarons in the Rose Garden

IT was two days after I crafted the flower crown for Lord Aroo.

“I don’t need to bring any food to my next visit with His Majesty?”

“Correct. You can skip such preparations on this occasion.”

It was Melvin, visiting me on behalf of King Glenreed, who delivered the surprising news.

On my previous dinner visit, I’d presented Gilbert’s special dish, roast beef, along with the jam cookies...

Was he not a fan of the meal after all?

I kept a smile on my face while my spirits fell quietly on the inside.

“Fear not. His Majesty quite enjoyed the roast beef. Aside from the portion used for poison testing, he ate the entire dish on his own. I was disappointed that I didn’t get to partake as well, in fact.”

What a relief.

Melvin was a clever but compassionate man. He saw right through me, even though I tried to keep the emotions off my face.

“I appreciate the kind words. Shall I send you a roast beef meal of your own sometime in the future?”

“Haha. That’s very thoughtful of you, but I’ll have to decline.”

The smile on Melvin’s face appeared somewhat teasing in nature.

“...His Majesty would probably be jealous if I accepted a meal from the queen...” He was whispering something under his breath.

“Melvin?”

“Pay me no mind. ...His Majesty would like you to meet him in the rose garden next time, instead of the dining room.”

“The rose garden... You mean the royal family’s rose garden?”

I’d heard the stories of the queen from four generations ago and her deep adoration of roses. She brought in roses from all across the land and made painstaking efforts to create a beautiful garden.

The one she established in the castle was said to be among the most impressive collections in the entire kingdom. However, only the royal family and their gardeners were allowed to enter under normal circumstances.

The carefully grown roses would be in full bloom as summer came upon us.

For one day only, guests could be invited into the bountiful garden by the king himself for what was known as a “Rose Gathering.”

“As the Wolfvartian queen, you have permission to enter the rose garden, Your Majesty. His Majesty plans to ask you to this year’s Rose Gathering as well, so he would like to invite you to the premises beforehand for a meeting.”

“Very well. I’d be honored to accept.”

I loved roses very much.

The Gramwell family crest was a rose, in fact, and I’d had many opportunities to look at roses throughout my life. I used to play hide-and-seek in the family rose garden with my older brothers. At some point, my second oldest brother decided he wanted to go all-out, and our simple games of hide-and-seek became full-on brawls with magic and swordplay allowed... Our gardener was absolutely furious with us, as I remember it.

I wonder how my big brothers are doing these days?

I knew them well enough to believe they were getting by, but I missed them all the same. Someday, I hoped to eat sweets with them again in the rose garden of our family home.

“...Um, may I ask you something, Melvin?”

“Of course.”

“Are there gazebos and benches in the rose garden? If there are, His Majesty and I would be able to eat a light meal or dine on snacks.”

I felt that His Majesty would probably enjoy some sweets during our outing as a nice change of pace during his busy schedule. Unlike Japan, with its yearly rainy season, summers in Wolfvarte always began with perfect weather. A delicious, sweet snack on a windy day would probably be a new experience for His Majesty.

“I seem to recall we had a simple table and place settings available to use. I’m sure His Majesty will be delighted if you brought some desserts for the two of you.”

“In that case, I’ll bring something simple. Aside from sweets and tea is there anything else I should prepare?”

“Hmm... Why don’t you have this as well? Please open it.”

Melvin handed me a mint-green cosmetics case.

“A rose... No, a hair ornament?”

For a brief moment, I truly thought it was an actual rose. But the gift was, in fact, a decoration for my hair—a dainty layer of thin fabric petals arranged to resemble a rose.

The light pink cloth was dotted with tiny pearls that resembled drops of morning dew. It was accented with ribbon and white lace.

“This is a gift from King Glenreed. It’s customary for guests of the rose garden to don a small rose accessory granted to them by the king, as the owner of the garden itself.”

“Thank you, Melvin. I’ll be sure to wear a dress that goes with this ornament.”

“Of course. I’m sure His Majesty will be most pleased. It was no easy task for him to decide which color of rose to gift you, by the sound of it.”

“...So he chose this piece himself.”

My heart began to speed up just slightly.

The last time I saw His Majesty, he didn’t seem to be grappling with anything internally, nor did he bring up the topic of hair accessories whatsoever. But still, he chose the piece he believed would suit me most. Such thoughtfulness lifted my spirits.

I saw Melvin off and didn't waste a moment in getting to the preparations.

An afternoon in the rose garden—bathing in the bright early-summer sunlight and pleasant winds, surrounded by roses in full bloom.

Excitedly, I began to picture what desserts I would make and what dress I should wear.



WHEN the day came, it was an agreeable, beautiful day out, as most early summer days were in this kingdom.

I felt the refreshing rays of sunlight on me as soon as I exited my carriage.

“Good day, King Glenreed. I’m honored to be invited as a guest in your rose garden today.”

I held on to my dress and bowed.

The dress was light pink and white to match the rose-shaped hair ornament I had placed above my ear.

I wore a choker around my neck made with the same fabric as my dress, and it was also lined with white lace. A bow was tied at my chest, with ribbons laced down the front of the bodice. The sleeves were puffy at my shoulders and fell loose just past my elbows, and the cuffs were lined in layers of dainty white lace to create a refined look. Though the dress was tight around my waist by design, below that, the pink fabric of my skirt flowed freely, like an upside-down rose in the wind.

I’d bowed, being careful not to wrinkle my dress, but the king was showing no reaction.

“...Your Majesty?”

“...Yes. Thank you for coming, and welcome.”

The corners of his eyes softened. Those beautiful lips of his moved just slightly.

“...well...”

“What was that?”

His Majesty responded to my question with...

“The hair ornament and dress suit you w—”

“Meow!!”

A familiar cry drowned out his voice.

“Berry?!”

I turned to follow the sound.

A familiar lump of gray fur was sitting on the roof of the carriage. It seemed as if she’d ridden all the way here.

“Why did you follow me?”

“Meow!!”

She leaped from the roof and scampered toward His Majesty, in the direction of the rose garden.

Berry was a Gardener Cat. While she was most known for her intense love of strawberries, Gardener Cats were Mythical Beasts that held close relationships with plants in general. Perhaps the rose garden, which only the royal family were permitted to enter under usual circumstances, had caught her interest.

“...She’s...”

“This is Berry, the Gardener Cat I’ve mentioned before. The one who lives at my villa...”

Berry kept her eyes fixed on the rose garden. She didn’t look bothered by the king’s presence at all.

But this was unusual for her.

Gardener Cats had been hunted throughout history, which was why I believed Berry to be so guarded around new people. She always took the time to observe humans first, of course, as well as animals like Lord Aroo. She normally wouldn’t approach anyone so quickly, unless they were holding strawberry treats.

“Your Majesty, have you perhaps met Berry before?”

“...No. It’s my first time seeing her.”

King Glenreed kept his eyes trained on Berry. It felt as if he was trying not to look at me.

Berry then began to meow some form of greeting to the man.

“...It looks like the two of you get along already.”

I wondered if His Majesty was the exact opposite of Hayruth, in that animals just naturally took to him.

...For a moment, I imagined the king fawning over a cat, though his face remained unchanged in real life. Maybe His Majesty really *would* show a more relaxed expression around dogs and cats.

The thought sparked my curiosity. I kept my eyes on the king as he spoke to Berry.

“You want to go in the rose garden?”

“Meow meow!!”

“Very well. Wait here a moment.”

“...You’re permitting Berry to enter the rose garden?”

“She’s the one who grew those strawberries, right? This is my way of repaying the favor.”

His Majesty is such a kind man.

I wondered if he was fond of cats and other furry creatures—something I deeply related to.

His Majesty headed to the entrance of the rose garden and returned with a single rose in his hand.

“Laetitia, do you have a handkerchief or ribbon with you?”

“Yes, here.”

I retrieved from my pocket a ribbon that I carried in case the ones on my dress came off.

“All guests in the rose garden must wear a rose accessory that I’ve given

them. For today, this rose will be the Gardener Cat's gift. Place it around her neck."

"Thank you. ...Berry, sit still for a moment, okay?"

Lucian wrapped the ribbon around Berry's neck and wove the stem of the pink rose through it.

"Hehe! You're even cuter now," I said.

"Mraw?"

It was only an accessory of convenience, but the rose suited her much more than I expected. Berry, the former stray cat (if it was right to call her that), was instantly giving off a much more elegant aura.

Roses really do hold such incredible power.

The three of us proceeded to the rose garden's entrance.

The garden was surrounded by walls of hedges. Guards stood at the entrance too. As soon as we passed through the brass gates...

"Wow...!"

Roses were in full bloom, their petals spread open. A sweet scent was drifting through the air.

A sea of roses was blossoming under the bright blue sky, ranging from a gentle pink to a practically transparent shade of white. The red roses reminded me of expensive velvet. Climbing roses around the garden were closer to a light purple.

They were all gorgeous, nearly large enough to break free from their stems, and in a greater number than I ever could have imagined.

"How breathtaking. It's incredibly beautiful."

"Meow!!"

Berry let out a cry—perhaps one of agreement. Her nose twitched as she looked from one rose to the next, and her tail swished in amusement the farther she walked through the garden.

The entire space was simply lovely—filled with the sweet aroma of the roses.

Petals sometimes drifted down toward us as we passed under the rose-entwined arches curving over the pathway.

His Majesty explained the various types of roses as well as the Rose Gathering event as we continued our stroll together. Along the way, I spotted a small table and chairs.

The little round table was painted all white and came with a set of three chairs. It matched its surrounding environment—light red roses and deep green ivy—quite well indeed.

“Shall we have tea at that table, Your Majesty?”

“Very well.”

I opened the basket I’d brought with me and quickly began to prepare.

First, I poured tea from the magic pot I’d transmuted, then set out a display of treats. Berry sat herself down in the extra seat, waiting until I finished.

“Your Majesty, today I’ve made an array of finger foods for you to try. Please have whichever one catches your eye.”

“...I think I’ll start with this, then.”

The king had picked up a small, plump macaron. It was light purple due to the early-harvested blueberries I’d added as an ingredient.

“...! What a strange texture... How amusing.”

The bites of macaron disappeared into His Majesty’s mouth.

The food had a unique texture—crisp on the outside, but soft on the inside in a way that dissolved in your mouth.

Each macaron was filled with a smooth layer of cream and carried the sweet scent of berries.

“Mraw!!”

Berry hadn’t hesitated to take a macaron into her paws. Naturally, she chose a strawberry one. She bit into the pink macaron with her tiny little mouth and devoured it in an instant, a blissful look on her face, then quickly reached her paw pads out for the next one.

“...Berry, could it be...?”

Did she follow me here just for these?

I let Berry have some strawberry macarons I made just for her before I even left the villa, but maybe that wasn't enough to satisfy her.

“Hehe! So you're like me too, Berry. Your appetite for food trumps your appetite for romance, right?” I said with a smile.

“...You realize you're talking to a Gardener Cat, right?” His Majesty paused, macaron in hand, to ask me that question.

“Oh, that reminds me. The silver wolf came to visit my villa recently, and he gave me a certain judging look, as if to say, ‘Your appetite for food really trumps your appetite for romance.’”

“...I see.” He nodded, then started to mutter something under his breath. “... So she can read my face that well, even when I'm in wolf form? She's no joke...”

It struck my curiosity, but by that point, he was already eating his next macaron.

I decided to join him in tasting another one.

Pink, off-white, purple, mint green, light lemon yellow: each colorful, plump macaron had a different flavor.

And there were even more treats than that—light brown madeleines, bite-sized fruit tarts, spiral-shaped cookies with black tea mixed into the dough, and a small, crunchy assortment of nuts.

I'd planned today's refreshments to mainly consist of finger foods and sweets. The wide variety was due to the fact that I didn't yet have a firm grasp on His Majesty's preferences.

Fortunately, however, the king didn't hesitate to sample one dessert after the next.

His long fingers reached out for yet another. I watched him part his lips for the macaron. It disappeared inside his mouth.

“...Yes. I like this white kind too. It's sweet, but not *too* sweet...”

“It’s made with buttercream and a bit of salt as an accent. I think it helps to bring out the sweetness even more. You enjoyed it?”

“I did.”

His response was brief. But perhaps that bluntness came from being distracted by the flavor of the macaron.

His blue-green eyes softened slightly at the corners. The small change caught my attention.

...I’m really happy.

He really seemed to enjoy my desserts.

Small as the changes were, I could see the subtle ways his expression softened. To see him up close like this made my heart speed up.

“.....”

I reached for a madeleine to distract myself.

The strong scent of butter filled my mouth. The sweet dough was soft and light, and it crumbled apart delicately on my tongue.

Mm. It’s delicious.

I mentally praised my own work. There was no better spell to bring joy than the sweetness of butter and flour.

I reached out for another—they were just that good. Between madeleines, I drank my tea. I really felt like I could eat these cookies forev— “Laetitia.”

“Aghem!!”

I choked on a piece that got stuck in my throat. I’d been so distracted by the food and drink that the king’s voice had really startled me.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have called out without warning.”

“No...I apologize. What...was it...you were saying, Your Majesty?”

“There’s a rose petal in your teacup.”

“Oh my. Thank you for telling me.”

A single petal was sending tiny ripples over the surface of my tea. It wasn’t

exactly proper etiquette, but I decided to use my fingers to move the—
“Wha?!”

Just as I reached for the petal...

King Glenreed grabbed my hand in a tight grip.

“...Your Majesty?”

What’s the matter?

I felt his smooth but firm skin against my own.

With those long, slightly bony fingers...

His Majesty refused to let go of me.



IT was the day of Laetitia’s visit to the rose garden.

Glenreed found himself completely captivated by the sight before him.

“Good day, King Glenreed. I’m honored to be invited as a guest in your rose garden today.”

Her golden hair fluttered as she bowed. The light pink rose ornament she wore above her ear perfectly matched the color of the dress adorning her slender body.

Laetitia raised her head and stared directly at Glenreed’s face. Her purple eyes caught the light and sparkled like amethysts. Accented against pale skin were her lips, nearly the same color as pink roses.

With the rose-shaped hair ornament, Laetitia looked truly beautif—

“...Your Majesty?”

“...Yes. Thank you for coming, and welcome.”

Glenreed couldn’t take his eyes off Laetitia as he returned her greeting. He squinted, as if that could capture the sight of her inside his brain.

The king had spent some time struggling over which color of ornament to send Laetitia. He even used his free time to transform into the silver wolf and go pick out a color with his own eyes...

But in the end, it was just as good as I imagined... No, even better...

Glenreed's lips began to move.

"...well..."

"What was that?"

"The hair ornament and dress suit you w—"

"Meow!!"

He gasped and followed the sound of the cry to see a familiar Gardener Cat.

I don't understand this cat...

The king relaxed a bit while he watched the conversation (or whatever it may have been) unfold between Laetitia and the Mythical Beast. Even though he'd met the creature many times during his visits to Laetitia's villa in wolf form, it was Glenreed's first time meeting her as a human. And yet...

...Did she figure out who I really am...?

The Gardener Cat approached Glenreed and meowed at him. Those eyes, staring up at the king, were indecipherable. The only thing he *could* tell for sure was the sense of familiarity and ease in that gaze.

"You want to go in the rose garden?"

"Meow meow!!"

"Absolutely!"

Glenreed could read that response from both the Gardener Cat's face and her scent as she stared in that direction. While normal communication between him and the cat was impossible, the king still had his special nose. He was able to somewhat understand the intentions of others, even if they couldn't speak with words.

I definitely can't chase her out of here...

If the Gardener Cat really did know who Glenreed was, carelessly upsetting her could cause her to reveal that secret to Laetitia. Sure, it would be easy enough to have the small creature removed...but Laetitia downright adored her.

Glenreed certainly didn't hate the animal either. She even rode on his back at times when he was in silver wolf form.

Cats can sometimes bring even the strongest of kings to their knees...

With a small nod, Glenreed allowed the Gardener Cat to enter.

Laetitia was taken aback by this, but then...

She smiled.

It was that soft, gentle smile that she usually never let emerge around Glenreed in his human form.

Why did she just look at me like that?

He couldn't understand it.

Glenreed turned around, both to enter the rose garden and to hide the look on his own face.

Accompanying Laetitia and the Gardener Cat with the rose tied to her neck, the king made his way through the garden in all its fully bloomed glory.

"How breathtaking. It's incredibly beautiful."

"Meow!!"

"Of course. This rose garden is the pride of the royal family."

The king explained the varieties and characteristics of each rose to his impressed guests. Laetitia listened intently and seemed to enjoy each moment she spent observing the roses.

Every now and again, strands of golden hair would sway in the breeze past Glenreed's face, glittering under the sunlight.

...I didn't realize how different we are in height.

The top of her head appeared in his line of sight.

The two had never stood side by side so close together before, at least not while the king was in human form. As a wolf, he always looked up at her. But this was the opposite situation.

Laetitia's body was small and slender—over a full head shorter than the tall

King Glenreed.

She always stands tall and proud when we meet as humans. I never noticed her true height until now...

His gaze was constantly being drawn to the hair upon her shoulders and her dainty neck. The distraction was bothering him, so he kept his eyes firmly set on the roses around them.

Glenreed had visited this garden many times, but it wasn't a love of roses that drew him there—it was simply a part of his job. The routine was something of an annual ritual for him. It had never particularly swayed his heart over all that time.

The roses this year are...

Beautiful.

It was as if they existed to adorn Laetitia herself.

The vivid colors of the thriving roses practically took his breath away.

“Shall we have tea at that table, Your Majesty?”

“Very well.”

Keeping those emotions from appearing on his face, Glenreed agreed with a calm and collected expression.

Laetitia swiftly laid out plates and sweets. She was so confident in how she set a table, it was hard to believe she was actually a duchess at all.

Glenreed felt his lips untense as her cheerful aura took over him.

...She must really love food and cooking.

He liked to see Laetitia like that.

The aroma of the baked goods on the table mixed in the air with Laetitia's scent. Ever since the day the two first met, something had always been strange about that scent. But right now, it was sweet... So sweet. It stirred up his appetite, along with something else he couldn't put his finger on.

...What the hell am I thinking about...?

With that question at the forefront of his mind, Glenreed reached for one of Laetitia's homemade treats. There were macarons, madeleines, fruit tarts, and cookies. Despite only laying eyes on some of them for the very first time that day, the king enjoyed each and every bite. One by one, he went back to try more.

"...Yes. I like this white kind too. It's sweet, but not *too* sweet..."

"It's made with buttercream and a bit of salt as an accent. I think it helps to bring out the sweetness even more. You enjoyed it?"

"I did."

As he savored his own macaron, Laetitia took a madeleine. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and she appeared to be in high spirits.

...Maybe she loves madeleines?

Glenreed watched her curiously...

Then the wind carried a fluttering rose petal down from above.

"Laetitia."

"Aghem!!"

He'd made her choke on her bite.

"Sorry. I shouldn't have called out without warning."

"No...I apologize. What...was it...you were saying, Your Majesty?"

"There's a rose petal in your teacup."

"Oh my. Thank you for telling me."

Laetitia reached for her tea. She seemed about to remove the petal with her fingers. But if it dripped on her, she might stain her dress.

"Wha?!"

The king grabbed hold of Laetitia's hand.

He'd made it just in time. She had been on the brink of making contact with the tea.

Glenreed let out a quiet sigh, then inhaled the air again.

So sweet. So soft...

It was Laetitia's scent that tickled his nose, and the feeling of her slender fingers against his skin.

He didn't even realize he was moving his hand.

He simply wanted to experience that smell even closer.

Glenreed drew Laetitia's fingers toward himself.



"...YOUR Majesty?"

What exactly is he doing?

His Majesty wasn't letting go of my fingers.

Those blue-green eyes of his were staring at my hand.

Before I even knew how to respond to such intensity, he began to lift my fingers up. They were headed toward the king's delicate, beautiful lips.

I could feel his breath tickling my fingertips. My heart nearly leapt out of my chest.

"Your Majesty, what are you...?"

I called out to him louder this time.

I was on the verge of full-on blushing.

"...Just being sure you didn't get tea on your fingers."

King Glenreed released me and returned his gaze to the teacup.

"You tried to take the rose petal out with your fingers. I didn't want you to drip tea on your dress."

"...I appreciate your concern."

I thanked him as I tried to quietly soothe my racing heart.

That really shook me up...

My fingertips still felt warm where His Majesty touched me.

Even though he looks like a beautiful ice sculpture on the outside.

He was a human with body heat, meaning any touch of his would be warm. That was only natural, of course, but it felt like something I'd forgotten until now.

I didn't want to let him see how shaken up I felt, so I reached for a treat. I grabbed a pink macaron and— "Mraaaw?"

It was Berry's cry, sounding lower than usual, that broke the silence.

She placed her paw pads on top of my hand to stop me. Then the realization hit me—this was the last strawberry-flavored macaron.

"Mraaaah?"

"You wanna go? You wanna fight for that strawberry macaron?"

I could hear her threatening tone. She didn't dare break eye contact with me. Her tail was puffed up in preparation for battle.

"Berry..."

Berry had been devouring strawberry macaron after strawberry macaron while His Majesty and I were speaking. She'd stuffed her cheeks, savoring the taste of each and every bite as she ate. When I came along to take the very last one, she had no choice but to get physical.

"Don't you worry. I won't take it from you." I smiled awkwardly as I released the macaron.

Berry was simply a strawberry fiend. She was usually laid-back and calm, but when it came to strawberries, she was dead serious.

"Meow!"

Berry reached for the macaron...

"What's the matter?"

Her front paws froze in place. She was staring at the macaron with wide eyes, whiskers twitching as if she was thinking something over.

"...Mraw!"

Up and down.

Berry was moving her front two paws.

Each time, she looked from me to the macaron.

“...Let’s see... You want to split this macaron in half to share with me?”

Does she mean for me to split it with a spell?

But Berry just shook her head.

“Meow!”

She pointed her paw pads at King Glenreed.

Could it be...?

“You want to share with His Majesty too? I should split it into three pieces?”

“Mraw-hah!”

“Exactly. Painful as it may be, I’ll share my macaron with both of you.”

She nodded with an air of deepest solemnity.

“...Berry, that’s so sweet of you...!”

I was so moved to learn that Berry still wanted to take care of His Majesty, a man she’d only just met for the first time. But then...

“...Heh!”

I heard a tiny little chuckle.

It was His Majesty. He couldn’t contain his laughter at the sight of my negotiation with Berry.

Oh no!

My face was on the verge of breaking out into a full blush. I’d been so busy chatting with Berry, I completely forgot that His Majesty was sitting at the same table with us.

...I know not to let my guard down like that. What happened to me?

It was a bit strange to realize how open I was around His Majesty. The two of us didn’t spend much time together, but for some inexplicable reason, he felt like a person I knew very well.

“I don’t need any. You can split it with the Gardener Cat.”

With the blank expression back on his face, His Majesty rejected the macaron and took another sip of his tea.



AFTER that, I spent the rest of the tea party learning about the “Rose Gathering” from His Majesty before returning home.

It was the one day of the year that the rose garden was open to outsiders. His Majesty and I would show our guests around and send them home with a bouquet of roses as a gift. In the past, these bouquets were sometimes composed of artificial flowers instead of real ones.

However, the true value of a rose comes from its temporary beauty, which will someday be lost. That was the idea behind using real roses over the past few dozen years. Some people still harbored the opinion that better offerings could be made, but the main reason for using real roses was to avoid the expense of manufacturing fake bouquets for every single guest.

I’d learned that His Majesty was going to give out real roses again this year.

“...Even the fanciest events have their own hidden stories.”

I reflected on the hard work His Majesty seemed to be putting into the event.

I was on my way home inside my carriage, stroking Berry’s soft fur. Having had her fill of macarons, the Gardener Cat was now curled up at my side, purring happily to herself.

The carriage finally pulled to a stop, and Lucian opened the door for me. Berry and I were about to go into the villa when...

“Berry?”

The Gardener Cat leaped to the ground and began heading in the opposite direction.

Berry almost always stayed inside the villa or ventured nearby for walks.

I wonder where she’s going?

I was curious, but I went straight inside the villa myself. Upon my arrival,

Borgan, my head butler, approached me.

“Your Majesty, you’ve received a letter from Mr. Bodorey, the head sorcerer of the royal court.”

Oh, it’s the director...

I first met the head sorcerer during His Majesty’s birthday celebration. He was quite excited when he saw how I was able to use transmutation to form a chiffon cake mold. I’d heard he was away from the capital on business for a while but had recently returned home.

By this point, I’d already received multiple invitations to the Bureau of Magic so that the two of us could discuss transmutation, general spells, and similar topics.

“What shall you do, my lady?” Lucian sounded a bit uneasy in his question. “It might cause trouble for you to have someone observe your magic skills up close. Why don’t you consider coming up with a reason to decline the invitation?”

“There’s no need for that. Besides, I don’t think a single rejection would be enough to sway him either way...”

I was currently hosting tea parties to mediate a relationship between Lady Natalie and Lady Kate. While I enjoyed my life of leisure at the villa, I also wanted to do what I could for the good of the kingdom. I didn’t feel that I could avoid any interactions with Director Bodorey, the head sorcerer of the royal court, in that pursuit.

“That’s why I think I should accept.”

“Very well. I’ll arm myself accordingly and be ready immediately.”

“Arm yourself...? No, there’s no need for that in this case.”

I couldn’t help the awkward smile from forming on my face.

The most memorable sorcerers Lucian ever encountered were my older brothers. The two oldest helped train me in spellcasting.

I say “helped,” but...

They were both, to put it bluntly, teachers from hell. It was tough love at its finest.

We began with the basics in spellcasting, then proceeded on to real combat practice. My second-oldest brother studied fencing, meaning he would use the full range of both his magic and swordsmanship abilities as my opponent. The youngest of my brothers, Lucian, and I all had to put in every effort we could to make it out of their training alive.

Although, this was why Lucian had ended up so skilled in weaponry and other shady tactics...

“Sorcerers aren’t all like my brothers, so fear not.”

“...Of course. I’m well aware. However...I suppose I’d say it makes me nervous not to have any weapons on hand.”

“...I know exactly how you feel...”

Lucian and I both stared off into the distance in a daze.

The scars my brothers’ magic training had left on our hearts simply ran that deep.



“AH, Your Majesty, are you going out today?”

When I stepped out of my villa, the Shiba Inu knight...or rather, Keith, approached me.

“I am. I received an invitation to visit the Bureau of Magic. Are you on duty as my guard today, Keith?”

“Yes! If you’re heading to the bureau, then I’ll be ready!”

Keith’s tail stiffened with that declaration.

He was ready, certainly. I watched him grip his spear tight.

Once Keith was seated in the driver’s seat, our carriage departed from the villa.

The Bureau of Magic was located on castle grounds, but it was actually quite far away, as the building was situated in a corner of the castle’s territory, just

like my own villa.

“It certainly tells a story, doesn’t it...?”

It was like a visual representation of the bureau’s place among Wolfvartian society.

Unlike the Kingdom of Elltoria, where I was born and raised, this land had few sorcerers among its population. They played little role in politics either, and were very often pushed to the side during negotiations.

“That must be it.”

Before me was a brick building nestled in front of a forest. Since I’d arrived a bit early, I exited my carriage and began to explore the bureau grounds. The land that surrounded the building was unoccupied.

Maybe that’s so they can conduct magical experiments and training?

I could see stands and other fixtures meant for magical catalysts.

I was walking around with Lucian and Keith, imagining the kinds of experiments they might conduct here, when...

“Hey, you!”

A voice called out to me from behind.

I turned around to find a young man who seemed to be about the same age as Lucian, or perhaps slightly older. He looked the part of a sorcerer—he wore a black cape over a collared shirt. His black bangs were slightly overgrown and cast dark shadows over his eyes.

“What’s your business here?”

“I was observing the location of your magical experiments. As a fellow sorcerer, I’m curious to see what kinds of work you take part in.”

“*You* wanted to observe the testing site...?”

He furrowed his brow in suspicion. His green eyes moved toward Keith, who stood behind me.

“Are you sure you’re a sorcerer? Even though you’ve got some beastfolk guy with you?”

“...What’s your problem?”

Keith opened his mouth to grumble out that retort.

The unusually belligerent attitude seemed to put the man on edge.

“You got something you wanna say to me?”

“It just doesn’t seem right.”

“Doesn’t seem right? You’re really doubting the words from Queen Laetitia’s own mouth?”

“...Queen...Laetitia...?” The wrinkles in the man’s brow only intensified. “That’s impossible. I know Her Majesty hails from the Kingdom of Elltoria. A girl like her would never be seen in the company of beastfolk. I demand to know why you’re impersonating the queen!”

He raised his arms, as if preparing to cast a spell.

Keith readied his spear in response.

Both parties were on the verge of attacking.

“Please calm down, the both of you. I really *am* Laetitia.”

I looked around at the testing site. It was a large, empty space devoid of people.

Good, this will work.

“...Hands of red. Power in my tongue. Now, bring forth a blooming inferno!!”

I focused my magical energy and chanted a spell. Flames formed and billowed above me. The crimson fire burned nearly thirty feet tall at our heads.

“...An advanced spell without a catalyst, and cast so quickly...?”

The man’s eyes went wide as the wave of heat grazed his cheeks.

“Was that enough proof that I’m Laetitia the sorcerer?”

“...Right. I apologize.”

The man shot his head down in an intense bow. His black ponytail bobbed up like a horse’s tail flicking behind him.

“To doubt a sorcerer of such skill...is unforgivable.”

I could make out the anguish in his voice. He appeared to understand and truly regret his wrongdoing.

“Everyone makes mista— What?!”

I unintentionally flinched when the man suddenly shoved his hand out toward me.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

Keith stepped forward protectively and took a look at the other man’s hand. It held a partially translucent blue rock around the size of a chicken egg.

“A magic stone...?”

“Please take it. It’s an apology gift.”

...In all honesty, I had no idea what to do.

I understood why he felt the need to apologize, but the stone was something on a different level altogether. It was a gigantic magic stone, and despite the cloudy color, it would fetch an incredible price if sold—enough for an entire commoner family to live on for a year.

If I accepted something so valuable here and now...

I’d be starting off on the wrong foot in my relationship with the Bureau of Magic. His attempt at an apology was much too expensive for me.

“I can’t accept this. Your words alone are plenty for me.”

“...This isn’t enough, is it?” He furrowed his brow and began to rummage inside his sleeves. “Then how about this water stone along with salamander scales...no, mandrake root would be better...”

“Um, please don’t worry about that. I have no need for any of them.”

Despite my insistence, he was muttering to himself as he searched for the right apology gift. He appeared to be the kind of person who shut out the world around him when he was deep in thought.

“What’s with this guy? Listen to him grumble like that...”

Keith was annoyed. But fortunately, he didn't seem as enraged by the man as he had earlier.

"You're not going to get through to him like this. Why don't I give him a jab with the blunt end of my sp—!!"

Keith readied himself for battle once more.

I whipped my head around to see...

"...Your Majesty?!" A young man with straw-colored hair was racing toward us.

"Good day. Are you a sorcerer with the bureau?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right. What's going on here?"

"I arrived before the scheduled time and decided to take a look at your magic testing grounds, when this man happened to strike up a conversation with me..."

When the new arrival caught sight of his acquaintance, who was still muttering under his breath, his face stiffened right up.

"Liddeus!! Now what have you done?!"

The man with the black hair was named Liddeus, and from what I gathered, he appeared to be something of a problem child at the bureau.



"**FORGIVE** me for not introducing myself earlier. My name is Orth, and I work here at the Bureau of Magic."

The sorcerer with the gentle face identified himself as Orth, and his smile was a fearful one. This was because I'd explained what had happened between Liddeus and me.

Orth and the others had been inside preparing for my arrival. But when they caught sight of the sudden billowing flames outside, Orth rushed out to determine what was going on.

"So that's what happened...? Then why was Liddeus outside at the time?" I asked.

“For my spells,” Liddeus said curtly.

“Your spells?”

Orth stepped in to explain Liddeus’s blunt response. “Forgive him, Your Majesty. Liddeus is a poor speaker and struggles with everything that isn’t magic... Shall I explain on his behalf?”

“...That would be appreciated.”

“Recently, Liddeus has been obsessively working on a new style of spell. I’m sure he was out at the test site to practice it.”

“That’s right. It took me three days and three nights, but the spell is finally ready.”

Orth sighed out loud. “Three days and nights... Does that mean you haven’t slept a wink in three days?”

“That’s nothing for the sake of magical research.”

“But it’s a big problem for everything else, right?!” A vein in Orth’s temple was visibly twitching. “I bet you weren’t listening this morning when the director informed us of Her Majesty’s visit, were you?”

“.....”

Liddeus, in an apparent feeling of awkwardness, turned his head away from Orth. I realized the man truly *did* feel guilty for what happened.

“Your Majesty, I sincerely apologize for Liddeus’s actions...”

I sympathized with Orth, his head bowed in apology. From there, we decided to head inside the bureau.

Before I decided to accept the apology or not, I needed to meet with Director Bodorey first.

“Welcome to the Bureau of Magic, Your Majesty!” Director Bodorey rushed over to us, his round belly bouncing with each step. “Were you the one who cast that fire spell just now? It was wonderful! Tell me, what type of spell did you use?”

His eyes sparkled as he voiced his praise, not waiting a second to hound me

with questions. His enthusiasm seemed fitting for the man who was Liddeus's boss. I remembered how excited he became when I used transmutation to create a chiffon cake mold.

"Please calm down, Director. You must hear what Liddeus has done to Her Majesty..." Orth quickly interrupted the director to catch him up to speed.

Orth appeared to be a levelheaded man caught between two magic fanatics—his boss and his coworker. I could see the toll it was taking on him.

You can do it, Orth. I just hope you don't get a stomachache...

Once Director Bodorey heard the whole story, he made a proposal.

"Your Majesty, as a means of apologizing, there's something I'd like to show you."

Show me? What could it be?

Director Bodorey rang a bell that was hanging from the wall. The noise chimed through the room, and what appeared before us were...

"Furballs...?"

No, that's not right.

They were birds. An entire flock of fluffy birds.

I was face-to-face with gigantic baby chicks...or something of the sort...that stood even taller than I did.

Chapter 4: The Cuddle Birds of the Bureau of Magic

ONE by one, a series of furry friends appeared before us during my conversation with Director Bodorey.

“Peep peep!”

“Cheep! Peep-a peep?”

“Peep peep peep?! ”

Each animal looked exactly like a baby chick. Only their size was significantly different. As they walked around upright on their two legs, their beaks reached higher than my head.

“Yellow, green-yellow, light blue, and pink...”

They differed in the colors of their feathers, too. Some were yellow, like a normal baby chick, while the rest were other pastel shades. The only shared color was the black of their beady eyes.

“Director, are they...?”

“These are Cuddle Birds. So you knew of them, Your Majesty?”

I nodded in response to Director Bodorey’s question and looked up at the faces of the Cuddle Birds.

“How adorable! ...Although their eyes are somewhat intense.”

Their harsh gaze was a bit surprising given their plushie-like appearance. They kept their black eyes fixed on me from above. I loved the combination of those soft feathers and piercing gazes.

“Their eyes are practically the size of my fists.”

“Indeed. They have large bodies, certainly, but they’re quite comfortable with humans, so there’s no need to fear. Here, have a look for yourself...”

“Peep!”

Director Bodorey stuck out his right arm, and a lime-green Cuddle Bird trotted over in his direction, then pushed its soft feathers against him.

“...Director Bodorey, you’ve been buried.”

His large body was almost completely enveloped in the wall of lime-green feathers. With a series of small head movements, the Cuddle Bird nuzzled closer.

I can only see Director Bodorey’s legs. I sure hope he can breathe.

“Haha! Fear not. I’m perfectly fine, Your Majesty,” he called out from inside the ball of fuzz. His voice was somewhat muffled as he attempted to ease my concerns. “The bird is being careful not to hurt me either. Are you aware of the Cuddle Bird’s quirks, Queen Laetitia?”

“It’s my first time seeing them in person... But I’ve heard that Cuddle Birds are a kind of Mythical Beast that enjoy nuzzling against creatures and objects that hold magical energy.”

These Mythical Beasts were attracted to magic, so they would approach sources of magic and cuddle them. That was where the name Cuddle Bird was said to come from.

“As impressive as always, Your Majesty. It speaks to the depth of your studies.”

“Hehe! Thank you, Director. As a fellow sorcerer, I’ve read about the Cuddle Birds in books.”

Plus, I always loved a good fuzzy animal.

Even before regaining my past-life memories a few months ago, I was still a fan of cats, dogs, and anything fuzzy. Apparently, reincarnating hadn’t changed that, so it should be no surprise why I’d chosen to research Cuddle Birds.

“Their feathers can easily store magical energy as a catalyst for high-caliber spells, correct? I believe it’s trying to replenish its magic stores by wrapping around you right now, Director.”

“That’s exactly right. This one in particular has taken a liking to my magic.” One section of the Cuddle Bird’s feathers rustled as Director Bodorey spoke. I

imagined his face was buried there. “Each Cuddle Bird has certain preferences for magical ener—”

“Achoo!!”

“Eeek!!”

A blast of wind sent my hair flying up. The Cuddle Bird had sneezed in my direction, probably because Director Bodorey’s voice and breath had tickled it. Since the creature was so huge, it had produced quite a fierce wind.

“Oh dear. If you’ll excuse me...” The director emerged from the mass of lime-green feathers. “All right, now that you’ve had your lunch, will you let me go free for a while?”

“Peep...”

“But I want some more...” the Cuddle Bird seemed to say. It appeared to be well trained, however, and it separated its fluffy body from the director.

“There, there. Good girl. ...Now then, where were we, Your Majesty?”

“The link between Cuddle Birds and magical energy.”

“Ah, of course. Perhaps you’re aware, Your Majesty, that just as their feathers differ in color, the Cuddle Birds each have a different taste for magic as well. As you can see, they enjoy engulfing anything that holds the magic they desire, and they’re reluctant to let go.”

The lime-green Cuddle Bird was still staring at Director Bodorey, watching for her next opportunity. Her eyes, both piercing and adorable, glinted from within her soft feathers.

There was no denying that Cuddle Birds were full-fledged Mythical Beasts, despite their giant chick-like appearances. They were nothing like baby birds in behavior.

Cuddle Birds were said to mainly consume magical energy for sustenance. Magical energy is normally a substanceless, invisible force, yet its existence is indisputable in this world. Cuddle Birds, by all accounts, amass this energy in their feathers and slowly digest it through their skin. With the right amount of magical energy, they have no need to consume anything other than a bit of

water through their actual mouths.

Just as Berry adored her strawberries, this Cuddle Bird seemed to have a particular preference for Director Bodorey's energy. All humans carry magical energy within them to some extent, though very few are capable of casting spells. That ability belongs to less than 1 percent of the population—those with the strongest energy. The volume and quality of Director Bodorey's energy, as head of the Bureau of Magic, appeared to be something of a treat for the Cuddle Birds.

“Peep peep...”

The bird who'd just been snuggled up to Director Bodorey was now sitting on the hallway floor. She lifted her head up and down, sending her feathers bobbing each time, as she soaked in the sensation of Director Bodorey's energy. The other colorful Cuddle Birds surrounding her seemed to be watching over her enviously as she relished in her meal.

“Do you feed these birds your energy multiple times each day?”

“Haha, well, they're a flock of gluttons, after all.”

The flavor of magic.

I could only attempt to imagine what it might taste like. But the Cuddle Birds certainly seemed to find it delicious. The pure indulgence on display made me feel like I could relate to these particular Mythical Beasts.

“Our Bureau of Magic has assembled folks throughout Wolfvarte who have the most powerful magical energy. These sorcerers keep the Cuddle Birds here to feed them with energy.”

“...I'd heard the rumors of Cuddle Birds before, but seeing so many of them together now is very impressive.”

Seemingly unable to wait any longer, each Cuddle Bird approached their favorite sorcerer. Liddeus, the sorcerer I'd butted heads with earlier, was buried up to his head underneath a heap of light-blue feathers.

“I'm most grateful to have the chance to see the Cuddle Birds up close... however, are you sure it's all right for me to be here?”

Like the majority of Mythical Beasts in the world, Cuddle Birds are a very rare and valuable creature. Their molted feathers can be used as catalysts for spells, meaning they fetched quite a price when sold.

The Bureau of Magic was the only place in all of Wolfvarte that had multiple Cuddle Birds. An outsider like myself wouldn't usually have such easy access to these Mythical Beasts.

"There's no problem in letting you see the Cuddle Birds, Your Majesty. As a token of my gratitude for your visit today, please feel free to return home with twenty feathers from whichever bird you prefer."

"...You're certain I can take something so valuable?"

Monetarily speaking, this was quite an expensive gift. Even putting that aside, the Cuddle Bird feathers were an extremely powerful magical catalyst. Between their value and the opportunity to pick ones that suited my magical energy in particular, this was turning out to be an incredible deal for me.

"Absolutely. You deserve even more than this, in fact." Director Bodorey murmured more quietly than before. "...Liddeus here took things too far earlier. I don't know how else to make things right if you won't accept these feathers."

He was asking me to forget my fight with Liddeus in exchange for the feathers.

Orth was staring at me from behind Director Bodorey. He appeared to be silently praying for my cooperation.

"Very well, then. Liddeus, what do you...?"

I trailed off at the sight of a gigantic light-blue creature.

Liddeus, the culprit in question, was completely enveloped by a light-blue Cuddle Bird. Only the black hair at the very top of his head bobbed forward in what appeared to be a nod—there was no chance of getting a verbal answer out in that state.

...As much as that sight lightened the mood, this was still the man who'd just offered me an apology earlier. I never meant to make a fuss over it anyway, so I decided to take Director Bodorey up on his offer.

“...I’d be happy to accept the Cuddle Bird feathers.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

“How should I decide which bird to take feathers from?”

There were about twenty Cuddle Birds in the area.

These birds mainly consumed magical energy, which constantly dwelled in the bodies of humans to a greater or lesser degree. Thanks to my brothers’ intense training and my memories from my past life, I was confident in my ability to control my magical energy. But I didn’t know how to measure my compatibility with a particular Cuddle Bird. I wondered if I needed to touch each one with my hand while I released my energy.

“Wait just a minute, please. I’ll gather the Cuddle Birds now.”

Director Bodorey retrieved a bell from his pocket and gave it a ring. It appeared he had multiple bells to give them different orders, just like the bell on the wall he used to call the birds over.

“There, there. Good birdies. Come gather around me!”

The sound of the bell drew the Cuddle Birds toward us.

Pink, light blue, light purple, cream yellow, and white.

The colorful, fluffy flock of birds was rushing toward us, when...

“Huh?! Too close! Too close, too close! Stop it!!”

“Your Majesty?!”

Lucian and Keith at my side both stiffened.

I had to stop Lucian, who had raised his hand to attack, but at that point, my entire vision went yellow.

“Whoa!!”

“Peep!!”

Whomp!

A cream-yellow Cuddle Bird crashed into me.

It wasn’t exactly moving at a slow pace, but its feathers were soft enough to

alleviate most of the impact. I reached my hands out to keep my balance, but the feathers enveloped my hands all the way down to the wrist.

“Wh-What’s the matter?”

“Peeeeep!!”

Its feathers tickled my cheek when I raised my head. I felt the creature’s large beak press down on the top of my head as it nuzzled against me.

The cream-yellow Cuddle Bird was living up to its name. It appeared to have taken a liking to me and my magical energy.



As nice as its fluffy, soft plumage felt, my vision was completely blocked.

“Oh dear. Are you all right in there, Your Majesty?”

I could hear Director Bodorey’s voice coming through. He sounded a bit startled.

“It’s rather ticklish...”

What do I do?

I attempted to forcefully separate myself from the Cuddle Bird, but the farther away I got, the closer it pressed itself against my body.

“Um...would you mind releasing me?”

“Peep!!”

“No thank you!!”

It let out a shrill chirp that sounded like rejection to me.

The bird was nuzzling into me with impressive force, refusing to let go.

“Whoa!!”

“Pardon me, my lady.”

I felt Lucian’s hands against my hips. I was being propped up between him and the aggressive snuggling of the Cuddle Bird.

“Knock it off, you! That’s too much!!”

Ring ring ring!

Director Bodorey kept ringing the bell as if in scolding. The Cuddle Bird ignored the signal at first, but eventually, it released me reluctantly.

“Peep...”

“Why’d you have to stop me at the best part?”

The bird’s intense stare looked a lot like it was lodging a complaint with the director. The strange sense of déjà vu I felt was probably from seeing Berry when she’d had a strawberry treat taken away from her.

“That bird’s got some nerve, hugging Queen Laetitia without any warning...

My lady, pardon me for a moment.” Lucian grumbled something under his breath, then quickly smoothed out my messed-up hair. The gesture was much appreciated.

I managed to hear him ask “Doesn’t chicken sound good for dinner tonight?” but decided to act like I hadn’t heard.

While Lucian was fixing my hair, I smoothed out my wrinkled dress.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty? I’m sorry if the Cuddle Bird surprised you.”

“It’s no trouble. I understand how they behave. This one must enjoy my energy in particular.”

I looked up at the cream-yellow Cuddle Bird who was still quite close to me. It was strangely moving its head from side to side as it watched me. It was as if its gaze and head movements were following along with Lucian’s hands on my hair.

“I was taken aback by the sudden embrace, certainly, but the creature is even cuter up close. Who does this bird favor among the sorcerers? It’s very active. I can imagine its feeding times are a bit of a hassle.”

“Actually...this bird hasn’t taken a liking to anyone yet.”

“What...?”

I looked around. Orth was nodding in agreement.

“He seems quite finicky when it comes to magical energy... None of our sorcerers have suited his palate for magic, it appears.”

“...So he’s a picky eater.”

I concluded that the Cuddle Bird must have had an unbalanced diet.

There are four types of magical energy typically found in this world—earth, air, fire, and water.

An exception would be someone like Sumia, the girl who stole my former fiancé from me, who possessed Light Magic. But there’s no need to go into all of that now.

Most humans harbor a mix of earth, air, fire, and water energies, but that

ratio differs from person to person. I'd heard that most Cuddle Birds preferred certain combinations of these four energies. Dozens of sorcerers worked here at the Bureau of Magic, and each would naturally have strong magical energy in those categories, but it appeared this bird hadn't taken to any of them.

"He's a bit of an unusual Cuddle Bird, this one. Most of his kind have their own preferences, but by the time they're grown, they've usually already found a few sorcerers who suit their tastes."

Though he looked like a baby chick, round and feathery in appearance, he was still a full-grown bird. I'd read that Cuddle Birds were around the size of chickens as babies, then grew to human height by the time they were adults.

"Our sorcerers feed him energy every single day, but he never took to any of them. He seems to choose his feeder by snuggling up to whoever happens to be closest to him in that moment. But seeing how quickly he took to you... It's my first time witnessing such behavior."

Director Bodorey watched the yellow Cuddle Bird and me intently.

"You possess Fire Magic, correct, Your Majesty?"

"That's right. I've inherited the strong Fire Magic of the Gramwell family line."

Magical energy is said to be partially determined by genetics, much like physical appearances. Between my three older brothers and me, three of us possessed a much larger amount of fire energy than any other element. It was Claude alone who possessed energy of the earth element, inherited from our mother.

"I'm sure many of your sorcerers here at the bureau wield Fire Magic as well, yes?"

"Yes, of course. But if you were to ask me if any of them rivaled yours in strength—"

"Not one of them can do that." It was Liddeus who cut Director Bodorey off midsentence. "After seeing that incredible fire spell earlier, it was obvious right away that a spell of such magnitude, not to mention one executed instantly and beautifully in a way that demonstrates such technical prowess, requires an incredibly rare and powerful magical energy to produce something so unique,

and it was downright amazing of you, Your Majesty.”

“Th-Thank you...”

All I could do was mutter appreciation for Liddeus’s intense rant. There was no doubt in my mind that he was a magic nerd through and through. It was obvious from his sudden talkativeness on the topic of spells.

Liddeus shook himself free from the clutches of the light-blue Cuddle Bird and rushed over to me. “Your Majesty, how would you feel about displaying that spell one more time, or no, not just a fire spell, but an earth or wind spell that I might be able to watch as you— *Urk!!*”

“Calm yourself, Liddeus. Her Majesty is speaking with Director Bodorey right now.”

Orth covered up Liddeus’s chatty mouth with his cloak. That cloak, part of the bureau’s uniform, seemed to come in handy in unexpected ways.

“...Ahem. Please excuse Liddeus’s enthusiasm.” Director Bodorey cleared his throat and returned to the topic at hand. “Cuddle Birds generally bond with sorcerers whose magic suits their preferences. When they share that compatibility with a sorcerer, their feathers will make for an even greater catalyst for spells. I believe this Cuddle Bird would be of perfect compatibility with you, Your Majesty.”

“Then I can have this bird’s feathers?”

“Yes, that’s what I was thinking. However...”

Director Bodorey looked up at the cream-yellow Cuddle Bird.

The creature had kept his eyes on me during my entire conversation with the director. Whenever I met the Cuddle Bird’s gaze, the bird would give a little hop like he was skipping in the air. It was downright adorable.

This fluffy, big baby of a bird was a treat for the eyes.

“...Are you a lover of animals, Your Majesty?”

“Y-Yes! Absolutely!”

I was so surprised by his practically telepathic question, my response ended

up coming out very forceful. I'd been trying not to let those feelings show on my face, but perhaps I was unsuccessful after all.

"That's wonderful to hear. ...If you don't object, what would you say to the prospect of letting this Cuddle Bird live with you at your villa?"

"Really? This one?"

"...Peep?"

I looked at the cream-yellow Cuddle Bird when he let out a chirp.

A few loose feathers were expensive enough, but it'd probably cost more than building a mansion to acquire one of the birds themselves.

"He's quite adorable, but I couldn't possibly take one of the birds from you..."

"Please, there's no need for restraint. You'll be doing us quite the favor, in fact."

A favor? What does he mean by that?

I cocked my head in confusion, so Director Bodorey began his explanation.

"This isn't public knowledge, but...when a sorcerer feeds their energy to a Cuddle Bird they're compatible with, the bird will shed more feathers than usual. Their feathers are like organs that hold on to that magical energy, so once they fulfill that role, the feathers are replaced with new ones."

"I see... I wasn't aware of that."

I understood why they didn't want that to become a well-known fact. The more people learned of this, the more Cuddle Birds would be hunted to procure an infinite supply of magical energy.

"Cuddle Birds don't have as many feathers compared with other birds. Normal birds may lose ten to twenty feathers every single day...and yet Cuddle Birds might go days without molting at all. Losing too many feathers can be detrimental to the creatures; however, removing them from time to time can also be good for their health..."

"...And can also fetch a fair price?"

"Haha! You're perceptive." Director Bodorey's large belly shook as he

laughed.

The study of magic wasn't exactly a cheap endeavor. I wondered if the director was struggling with how to raise the needed funds for the bureau.

"So am I to raise the Cuddle Bird at my villa and hand over any molted feathers to you and the bureau?"

"Yes, that would be the preferable situation. I won't ask for all of them, of course. I feel that a ratio of sixty to forty would be acceptable."

"So I'll receive forty percent of all feathers he sheds?" I asked to be certain.

"Oh, no, I meant to say that you may keep sixty percent for yourself, Your Majesty."

"...Really? You're quite certain?"

"It will be beneficial for the bird as well to live with you, after all."

Director Bodorey looked fondly at the cream-yellow Cuddle Bird. I could tell he cared for the creature as more than just a source for magical catalysts.

The Cuddle Bird looked at the director with tranquil eyes. Maybe he understood that he was a recipient of the man's affection.

"Very well. I'd be happy to keep this Cuddle Bird at my villa with me."

Once I'd voiced my agreement to his proposal...

The Cuddle Bird let out a shrill cry, which also sounded like it was filled with glee.



THERE was a certain process in place when it came to acquiring a Cuddle Bird, since he was a kind of Mythical Beast. But while the documents were being procured, Director Bodorey offered to give me a tour of the Bureau of Magic.

I learned that somewhere around two hundred sorcerers worked for the bureau. Many were located in different regions throughout Wolfvarte, so the building itself usually housed around a hundred residents or so.

"And here is the workshop where we manufacture magic stones."

The room had shelves along one of the walls, where magic stones and catalysts sat separated by metal dividers.

One job among the sorcerers was to produce tools and crests that used magic stones as a source of energy.

“They’re arranged very orderly. I’m sure your work proceeds smoothly.”

“Haha, thank you for noticing. Liddeus will be happy to hear it, I’m sure.”

“Is Liddeus a Crestmaker?”

Sorcerers who specialize in the creation of crest-based tools are known as Crestmakers. It was work not unlike that of scientific researchers in my past life.

“Indeed, he is, and a fine Crestmaker at that. His skill with magic catalysts is twice that of any one man. ...I only wish he showed that same thoughtfulness in other areas of his life as well...” Director Bodorey gave a strained smile.

I got the impression Liddeus was wholly devoted to his studies, and much less interested in everything else.

The director and I continued our chat as we left the magic stone workshop.

“Ah...”

Liddeus, the man we’d been speaking about, just happened to be standing there in the next room. He had multiple magic stones laid out on a desk for some experiment that was in progress

“Speak of the devil. Liddeus, our Crestmaker here, often uses this room, which has all the instruments in it.”

As long as one had a magic stone with their crest, anyone—not just sorcerers—would be capable of casting spells. As handy as crests were, they were very precious tools that wouldn’t allow a spell to activate without being precisely calibrated.

Liddeus glanced at us before returning his focus to some sort of cube-shaped instrument and the crest inside it. I remembered him saying earlier that he’d successfully constructed a new type of spell, and I wondered if that was what he’d inserted to measure in crest form.

I didn't want to interfere with his work, so I turned to leave, but just as I was about to hurry out of the room...

"Your Majesty, would you like to use this opportunity to measure your magical energy?"

Director Bodorey pointed out a metal plate in the back of the room, which appeared to have a crystal sitting on top of it. With the use of a single crest, the device would produce a light equivalent to the amount of magical energy it encountered. The crystal reacted when coming into contact with blood. It was an expensive apparatus, and I hadn't yet seen once since I arrived in this kingdom.

"You don't mind if I use it?"

"It's important for a sorcerer to understand the level of magical energy they possess. Of course, I promise not to peek at your results."

The strength of a sorcerer was deeply linked to the amount of magical energy they possessed. This measurement was considered private information, and it was unusual to reveal the number to anyone outside of family.

"Thank you, I think I'll take you up on the offer."

Magical energy can also vary with age, to some extent. Just like the body itself, this magic grows until around the age of twenty or so, then gradually depletes as time goes on. At the age of seventeen, I was still in the growth phase of my own magic. Thanks to the past-life memories I regained, the efficiency of my existing magical energy had had a sharp uptick, but the amount of energy itself was still likely growing as well.

Lucian handed me a small blade he kept for self-defense, and I slid it out gently from the sheath. I let the blade prick the pinkie of my left hand—my nondominant one.

I felt the tiny sting of pain as blood formed at the wound, but it didn't bother me, as I was looking forward to seeing the results of how my magical energy had grown since my last measurements.

The last time I measured my energy was a few months earlier, back in my homeland of Elltoria. The amount was slightly smaller than that of my oldest

brother—a number of around 7,500.

I sure hope I'm a little closer to his numbers now...

As soon as I let my blood drip down to the crystal below...

“Eek!!”

“What the?!”

An absolutely blinding light shot out through the room.

I had to shut my eyes out of reflex. I'd never seen such a reaction before.

“Your Majesty?! What in heaven's name...happened...?”

Director Bodorey's face had frozen stiff. He was staring at the metal plate, and although the light had disappeared already, a clear crack had formed in the plate.

“.....”

An awkward silence filled the room.

Between that and the light I just saw, all of this was a new experience to me, and I assumed I was the cause on both counts.

“What exactly did you do, Your Majesty?”

“I merely used it as normal, by placing a drop of my blood on the surface of the crys—”

“Give it to me. Let me see.”

Liddeus had appeared. He was staring intently at the instrument. He then picked it up and examined it from all angles to check for anomalies.

“The crystal was what lit up so bright, but it looks fine to me, or maybe it's a problem with the base itself? The crack runs from the twenty-third to the twenty-seventh circuits, meaning these were the ones that overloaded, which seems to imply...”

Liddeus's eyes were wide open as he mumbled his thoughts to himself. He gently set the device back down on the desk, and I awaited his conclusion on the matter...

“I get it! You’re an incredible person, Your Majesty!!”

“Huh?!”

Liddeus squeezed my shoulders. He seemed to be overwhelmed with emotion, while he also didn’t want me to flee. He drew closer to me.

“Take a look at the crack in the base. This is from your magical energy, Your Majesty, which clearly surpassed the limits that the device can measure!”

“...Surpassed the limits of the device...”

I turned my face away from the encroaching Liddeus to look at the cracked device. I was fascinated with his statement, but first, I had to deal with how close he was.

“Excuse me, but could you step back a little bit?”

“I’ve researched crests for over ten years now, but I’ve never seen anything like this before, and now that I know of a potential defect in the energy scale, I bet I can come up with ways to improve the ports on the base so that...”

Liddeus appeared lost in his own thoughts. He wasn’t hearing me at all.

I watched as Director Bodorey’s face twitched, and from behind me, I felt a dangerous aura coming from Lucian.

“Liddeus, please calm down a bit first.”

“...Oh.”

I squeezed his wrists as they still held my shoulders, which was enough to snap Liddeus out of his daze. Though Liddeus was a Crestmaker and devoted himself to research, he was still a man, and his wrists were thicker than mine. I wrapped my fingers around the bony skin and gently lifted his hands from my shoulders.

“You don’t need to get so close for me to hear you. I’d also like to know more about that light I saw, so would you tell me more about— What?!”

Liddeus’s face swooped in close to mine while I was midsentence. I tried to dodge him at first, but then I saw that his eyes were closed. He’d lost consciousness and fallen into me.

“My lady!”

Lucian rushed to support me as I caught Liddeus midfall. Lucian had a friendly smile on his face, though the eyes that stayed fixed on the sorcerer in my arms were dead serious.

“...He’s asleep...?”

As if Lucian’s glare were nothing at all...

Liddeus was fast asleep. I could hear the gentle sound of his breathing.

Lucian moved in to tear him off me, and while he was gentle in his handling, having known Lucian for all these years, I could feel the chill in the air around him.

“First those Cuddle Birds, and now another scoundrel tries to wrap himself around my lady...”

He was muttering something to himself with that same smile on his face. I couldn’t make out his words exactly, but there was no doubt that it was some form of complaint.

Lucian set Liddeus down in a nearby chair, then turned to bow toward me.

“Forgive me for my slow reaction.”

“No, you were just fine. I appreciate it. You and Keith were watching instead of acting this whole time because you understood that he wasn’t a threat, right?”

Keith, as a knight, and Lucian, as my trained guard, were perceptive when it came to sensing aggression and threats to my life. Thankfully, they’d let him approach me without incident so as not to cause a commotion.

“I didn’t perceive any hostility in Liddeus, nor any ulterior motives... If he dared to lean into you with something else in mind, I’d tie him up and bury him in the ground.”

Lucian’s murmurs were only loud enough to be heard by me. He was exaggerating, but it was surely a joke...I was almost certain...

“Your Majesty, Lucian, I’m so sorry for what Liddeus has done...” Orth also

bowed to me.

Just watching him apologize so intensely filled me with guilt. Even Keith, from behind me, who'd grown alert at Liddeus's strange behavior, seemed uncomfortable with Orth's response.

"Please, it's no worry. Liddeus said he spent three days and nights studying spell types. He probably didn't notice, in his pursuit of knowledge, that he was exhausted."

"I appreciate your kind words. ...Liddeus really didn't seem to be aware of his own actions. He's dedicated to his studies, but usually much more composed... well, not exactly 'composed,' but he generally has a bit more common sense than this...I think?"

His description ended up coming out as a question.

Though I didn't know the specifics, I could definitely tell that Liddeus's strange behavior was a normal occurrence.

Orth must have a lot of tough days here too.

That was what I took away from his words.



ORTH carried the sleeping Liddeus back to a room where he could rest.

Meanwhile, Director Bodorey and I looked at the cracked measuring device together.

"As for how Liddeus explained it earlier..." I started.

"I believe he's right. Liddeus is an expert at reading crests—among the finest of all the sorcerers I've ever met."

"...He must be very bright."

I was sure, by this point, that Liddeus must be the type of person whose genius intellect came at the expense of common sense. Perhaps his deep knowledge of spells and crests made his strange behavior more acceptable to others.

"Just as Liddeus said, I believe the crack in this device is due to the sheer

amount of magical energy you possess, Your Majesty.”

“...How much magical energy can this device measure?”

“Up to a value of ten thousand, though it should be able to handle as much as fifteen thousand...”

My magical energy appeared to have surpassed that number.

Crests were similar to precision measuring instruments. Once it came into contact with energy outside the standard range, the spell engraved in the metal board malfunctioned and burned up, or so it seemed.

“Fifteen thousand... Though I’ve seen it with my own eyes, I can hardly believe such an amount.” Director Bodorey was staring at me with both respect and shock in his eyes.

...I’m shocked too. I can’t believe it.

My oldest brother had as much energy as ten whole people, even within the kingdom of Elltoria, which was home to many sorcerers. But still, his only slightly surpassed 7,500. One could search the entire continent and find only a handful of sorcerers with an energy level over 10,000.

A high level was convenient for a sorcerer, of course, but over 15,000? That was much too high to fathom.

“...I apologize for the rude question, but is it possible the device was already broken?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so. Liddeus is in charge of keeping the device in order. I can’t imagine him ever being lax in his duties. In fact, when it comes to crests, I’d say he’s even more skilled than I am.”

The device must have been functioning properly, and my abnormal energy had broken this expensive instrument.

How exactly did this happen?

On the inside, I kind of wanted to scream.

“I apologize for damaging the device. I’ll be sure to compensate you properly, so I’d appreciate it if you don’t reveal what happened here to anyone on the

outside.”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing. I promised not to peek at your results in the first place, after all. I’d also appreciate it if you kept Liddeus’s various misdeeds a secret as well.”

“Very well. I’ll be sure to do that.”

The two of us had found ourselves in similar situations.

That’s a big relief.

If my level of magical energy became widely known, I could probably say goodbye to my current life of leisure.

...Both Director Bodorey and Liddeus had found out, but there was nothing I could do about that now.

“There’s no need to pay for the instrument either. It *did* fulfill its purpose. But perhaps you’d be so kind as to offer us a bit more of those Cuddle Bird feathers than we previously arranged...”

“...Shall I take forty percent, and you take sixty?”

“It would be much appreciated.”

Director Bodorey was smiling to himself. His behavior was quite calculating, but really, I was glad he didn’t ask for money in repayment. I’d be able to pay the sum, but paying with Cuddle Bird feathers instead was easier on the wallet, thankfully.

“Would it be possible to ask you yet another favor, while we’re on the subject?” he asked.

“...What would that be?”

I decided to hear him out.

“Might you join the sorcerers here at the bureau for a training match?”

“You mean a competition using magic?” I asked.

“What do you say? I’ll be sure to take the necessary precautions to ensure you’re not injured, Your Majesty.”

“What format would it take?”

“Our sorcerers would be no match for you in a one-on-one match, and that defeats the purpose of training, which is why I’d like to submit two sorcerers from the bureau to compete against you in a game of ‘capture the flag.’”

This was a common type of training match. The two competitors stood about thirty yards apart, with one flag on each side of their territory. Both parties kept to their respective sides and cast spells at each other, and whoever first knocked over the opposing team’s flag was the victor.

...That takes me back.

My older brothers often used to *torture*...or rather, train me with that method.

I decided it wasn’t a bad idea to participate in the training match after all. I didn’t want my skills to get rusty.

“Very well. I’d like to take a look at the playing field, just to be safe, and then I’ll decide whether or not to participate myself.”



DIRECTOR Bodorey explained the process to me as we exited the building together.

We’d arrived at a place near where I first met Liddeus outside. This flattened, empty lot was meant for training matches.

“This crest produces the barrier for the match.”

In one corner of the lot stood a three-foot-tall wooden box—the crest in question. It created a translucent light wall, much like a barrier, around the area of play.

Despite its convenience in both defense and visibility, Light Magic wasn’t yet well researched. A large crest was required to produce a border that shielded only a few people for a short period of time. However...

“This crest is rather small, isn’t it? It must be expensive and rare. Was it made here in the bureau?”

“This is Liddeus’s design, actually. He struggles with everything that isn’t magic, but when it comes to spells, he’s a top-notch craftsman.”

Wow, Liddeus made this too.

The crest would normally require the size of a small car to produce the same barrier. Such a small crest was indicative of significant technical skills.

“How is its strength?”

“It’s strong enough to withstand two direct blows from midtier spells.”

Directly hitting one’s opponent during a training match was a violation of the rules. But with spells, there was always the danger of being struck with shockwaves and stray bullets. As long as Liddeus’s crest was forming the barrier on the field, our protection was assured.

“I appreciate the explanation. I’ll ready myself, then.”

I thanked Director Bodorey and headed for one side of the empty lot.

The field expanded about three yards in each direction from the crest that sat in the very center. Just inside the barrier’s border were two poles for flags, about equal to human height, to be hung for the match.

“The flags will stand here and here, while I play over here, and my opponents play over there...” I took in the field positioning, confirming each location of note.

It had been a long time since I last took part in a training match with safety measures to rely on. All the matches I played with my brothers were, at heart, very much real battles, with no rules whatsoever. Fire, lightning, whirlwinds... The memory of one violent spell after another was etched in my mind. A single misstep could result in a fatal wound, and I certainly *had* experienced my hair burning on more than one occasion...

“Focus, focus...” I shook my head and redirected my attention back to the training match before me.

Stop it, stop it. Now’s not the time to dwell on memories of my brothers.

Carelessly dredging up those past battles probably meant I’d see them in my dreams again that night.

...My two oldest brothers were truly teachers from hell.

But I didn't want anyone finding out about those past disastrous training matches, so I focused entirely on the situation in front of me.

"Are you prepared, Your Majesty?"

The call came from the opposite side of the playing field.

Orth stood there as my opponent. Though the man often appeared uneasy, he was among the strongest of the younger sorcerers in the Bureau of Magic. This also made him one of the most powerful in the entire kingdom.

The other opponent was Belleas—a middle-aged man and diligent student of magic, whose strength I'd heard mentioned of before. I wondered if their status as coworkers at the bureau would result in perfect coordination between the two men.

"Yes, I'm ready. I'll activate the barrier now."

I set the round magic stone inside the crest's open slot. The crest shook slightly before silently enveloping the four walls of the playing field in a bright light.

I took up my post in front of the back wall, with Lucian standing behind me. He was much closer to me than usual. There was only so much space within the barrier, after all.

"Ah yes. This takes me back."

Servants wouldn't normally stand so near their master, but this was how Lucian often positioned himself back when we would engage in training matches with my brothers. We were long past the point of embarrassment, being so close together like this, but it did bring back memories.

"...Those matches with my lady's brothers were hell, but I certainly didn't despise them," Lucian was whispering to himself as well, seemingly lost in the same memories. "I enjoyed getting to work in such close proximity to you."

I took in Lucian's words from behind me and turned my gaze toward Orth and Belleas, my opponents. Once I'd looked them over, Director Bodorey, the game's referee, raised his right arm in the air.

“Five, four, three, two one. Begin!!”

With that signal, the match was on.

My first attack would be a specialty of mine—a fire spell.

“Soaring arrow, burning redder and redder, fly high and split to pieces!!”

The spell was split into three distinct parts. This was a midtier spell of the sixth level—the “Scarlet Arrowhead.”

My flames morphed into the shape of an arrow. It was flying straight for the enemy flag.

...But just before it could connect, Orth blocked the arrow with a wall of water.

My aim had been perfect, but it appeared it was going to take more than one hit to knock over their flag.

“That spell was so quick! What *was* that?! How terrifying!”

Despite Orth’s cries, he was quickly chanting a spell of his own. I took in the words of the spell, hypothesized which type he was using, and prepared to counteract.

This was a fifth-level spell type, and its element was water.

A barrage of water shot toward our flag, but my flaming arrows knocked it out of the air.

I confirmed that our flag remained standing, then turned my eyes toward Belleas.

“A golem...!”

Belleas had been working on a spell of his own while I dealt with Orth.

It was an earth spell of the seventh level. He’d created a gigantic clay doll—a golem that could move freely for a short amount of time. Golems stood at around human height and possessed thick, bulky limbs. They were slow to move, but their sturdiness was their specialty.

Belleas, Orth, and the golem stood opposite me.

This was only a training match, and there was no penalty for losing...

But in any competition, there could be no other outcome than victory. It was my older brothers who'd drilled that into my mind.

I quickly racked my brain, trying to figure out how to counterattack.

This was a battle of magic. Excluding exceptions like my second and third oldest brothers, battles between sorcerers generally came down to magical energy levels.

I'd been so startled earlier when I learned that my magical energy was over 15,000. Not even Orth and Belleas combined could rival that number in strength, I was quite certain.

I was supreme in measure of magical energy, but I was outnumbered by opponents.

"Soaring arrow, burning redder and redder, fly high and split to pieces!!"

My arrow aimed to destroy the golem, but Orth stopped it once again with a water spell.

The speed of my chanted spells was quicker than theirs as well, but if I aimed for their flag, then there was no way to prevent the golem's approach, and when I aimed for the golem, Orth simply blocked my attacks.

As soon as I hesitated for a single moment, Orth sent a spell flying straight for my flag.

"Those two are incredibly well synched."

Lucian's remark from behind me was correct. It was no easy task, taking on the two men simultaneously.

The higher level of spell that was cast, the easier it was to make a mistake in the chanting of the spell itself. During a training match, there was no way to buy time for the perfect chant, making higher-level spells difficult to use.

"But there's still ways to get by, hmm?"

As far as the specifics of back-and-forth spell battles like this, my brothers had taught me more than I probably ever needed to know.

I decided it was time to put that knowledge to use.

“Radiant arms, spread forth your power!!”

“Urk!”

Magic flames erupted, enveloping the area in a blinding light.

This fifth-level fire spell functioned like a flash grenade. My opponents had noticed it in time and were keeping their eyes closed, but they’d still be blinded for a few seconds.

I quickly chanted a spell as I observed the golem. The usual strength of the golem—its ability to move without direct interference—was now its ultimate weakness. It was defenseless once Belleas lost his vision. It was desperately moving in all directions, trying to avoid my spells, and had no time left over to proceed toward my flag.

I cast two or three bursts of flames toward the golem to see what would happen, but as expected, its erratic movements made it impossible to hit.

“Burst forth, orb of water!!”

Orth shot more spells my way while I was busy with the golem. The promising young sorcerer had been quick to recover. He defended the golem and aimed for my flag simultaneously.

Belleas had regained his vision as well, and the golem’s movements became more focused. It drew closer and closer to my flag until it was only feet away.

“Arms of blue, cut down the target!!”

Orth cried out his chanted spell, completely assured of his victory. His water walls caught and disarmed the flaming arrows I shot at the golem.

The golem charged straight for my flag, with nothing in its path to stop it, until...

“What?!”

“Huh?!”

Orth and Belleas both let out screams.

Their eyes traveled to about half the height at which the golem usually stood.

That was because the creature was currently sinking into the swamp at its feet.

I jumped on the opportunity and quickly chanted my spell.

“Soaring arrow, burning redder and redder, fly high and split to pieces!!”

“Oh no!”

Fwoosh!

The opposing flag was pierced by my flaming arrow. It burned up and fell to the ground. My own flag was completely unharmed, meaning I was the game’s victor.

“Game over! Both teams, please quickly remove your magic stones!”

Director Bodorey’s shouts signaled the end of the game.

I followed his instructions and swiftly took the magic stone out of the crest. It wasn’t as significant as the crest itself, but the stone, as a source of power, would fetch a fair price. Conserving the energy of the bureau’s magic stone was important for them.

“...You’re incredibly strong, Your Majesty. We were completely defeated.”

It was Belleas, my opponent, who approached me with those words of praise. He stared at the golem sinking into the swamp in front of my flag.

“That swamp came from an earth spell, didn’t it? I’d heard your specialty was fire spells, but I was also informed of the earth spell you use for transmutation, which I know you displayed at His Majesty’s birthday party. Are you equally as skilled in earth spells?”

I nodded in response to Belleas’s question.

In truth, I was capable of producing midtier spells in all four elements—earth, water, fire, and air. However, I’d been intentionally trying to avoid drawing attention to anything other than my fire spells during the match.

“It was a delayed spell aimed at the feet of the golem, right? It’s a fundamental strategy, but your method of application was most clever.”

Delayed spells involved a chant that activated after a period of time instead of

immediately, like with most spells. They were similar to the time bombs from my past life, but really, they were more like timed traps.

I'd quietly chanted that spell and laid my trap while they were blinded by my light.

"You're still so young, but you've mastered delayed spells as well. It's simply incredible. I'm impressed by how you lured the golem straight toward your delayed spell with perfect timing. We were applying a lot of pressure toward the end of the match, but you only acted as if you were overwhelmed so that we'd fall for the trap, didn't you?"

"That's right. I'm glad I was successful."

I internally pumped my fist and cheered for my victory.

According to Big Brother Claude, my brother closest to me in age, *"the man most assured in his victory is the easiest to lure into a trap."*

I'd been practicing laying the Swamp-Sinking Trap (the name I gave it as a child) in accordance with my brothers' teachings. It had been a while since I last had the opportunity to use it back in my homeland, but my practice had paid off.

"It was easier than usual to succeed against a golem in this match. They move much slower than humans do."

"But I'm sure it wasn't all easy, no? The timing of a delayed spell must be decided as it's chanted. If its activation was even slightly mistimed, or if the golem's position had been just a little off, it would have avoided the trap, and the victory would be ours, right? It was most impressive indeed."

"Hehe, thank you for saying so. But I still have many areas where I can improve."

I glanced at the swamp-sunken golem. The swamp itself was about ten feet in diameter, which was twice as large as needed for the creature who'd sunk all the way down to its torso.

...Hmm. It's too bad my swamp was larger than it needed to be.

If Big Brother Claude, my teacher in this method, had been in my place, he

surely would have created one that fit the golem's body to a tee.

"Big Brother Claude is incredible at calculating the exact amount of space needed for the Swamp-Sinking Trap..."

"...I couldn't agree more."

Lucian, when he heard the words I murmured to myself, momentarily wore a bitter look on his face.

He and I were the two most common victims of my brother's swamp trap. Big Brother Claude often played with me as a child, but when it came to training, he was dead serious. I'd been caught in his perfectly sized delayed swamp spell dozens of times throughout my life. Fortunately, my doting brother's mud-filled swamp spell was sure to never leave me gravely injured, but still...

"I never want to end up in a swamp again."

I agreed with Lucian from the very bottom of my heart.

That feeling of knowing your movements had been predicted perfectly, leading to you ending up covered in mud from head to toe, was more of an emotional attack than a physical one.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?"

"...No, nothing at all."

I turned my focus from those mud-filled days with Big Brother Claude back to the present. I looked in Belleas's direction and saw that the golem was already beginning to fall apart in the swamp.

The seventh-level earth spell that formed the golem was called the "Doll of Mud," and though it was convenient, the creature would return to dust after a few more minutes. It was unusual for magical creations to keep their form for long periods of time, unlike the items I'd been making recently with my transmutation spells.

"Your control of the golem was quite impressive, Belleas. Is that a specialty spell of yours?"

"Yes, indeed. It's nothing in comparison to your own brilliant spell work...but I've spent many years polishing my skills in war spells."

“You’re too modest, Belleas. You’re the best in the whole bureau!”

Belleas, and now Orth, continued their discussion of spells.

“I can see how an Elltorian upbringing has affected your sorcery skills. The most powerful children of noblemen and noblewomen are all trained at the Royal Elltoria Academy, right?”

The Royal Elltoria Academy.

It was the place where I had attended school, had my engagement publicly ended, and had regained the memories of my past life.

“Yes, that’s right. I attended the academy before I came here, as did my three older brothers. Their time at the school was very informative, and ever since I was little, they always trained me in the spells they studied.

“Your Majesty’s older brothers...? I’ve heard the names of the oldest two. The second-born son of the Gramwell family, Lord Bernard, is well known as the ‘Hero of the Lightning Spear.’ I have a deep respect for him as a fellow sorcerer.”

I smiled at Belleas’s praise.

The specialty spell of my second oldest brother was a combination of fire and air spells that formed a lightning strike. Bernard was a skilled and famous member of the military, and despite his young age, he was seen as a hero by some...although his personality left a lot to be desired.

On the outside, he was like a glittering character from a shoujo manga, while on the inside, he was more like a driven, combat-loving shounen manga protagonist... He was a diligent man and was devoted to the duties of his work, despite his rough personality.

He always loved to train me, his little sister, so when I was growing up in Elltoria, Lucian, Big Brother Claude, and I were often on the receiving end of hellish training sessions...

“I’d love to receive coaching from Lord Bernard myself someday. Though I’m one of the more experienced sorcerers here at the bureau, Wolfvarte, compared with the kingdom of Elltoria, rarely ever resorts to the use of magic in

military activities. I believe I could learn a lot from someone as famous as Lord Bernard.”

I sensed that Belleas wasn’t simply being polite. He truly meant every word he said. He was an ambitious man who yearned to improve his magic skills even further.

“Might I have a word, Your Majesty?” Director Bodorey called out to me from nearby.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Everything is ready for you to take the Cuddle Bird with you. I’m sure he’ll be here any moment, as he’s very eager to s—”

“Peep peep!!”

The cream-yellow fuzzball interrupted the director and charged straight for me.

“Peep!!”

“Whoa...!! Haha, that tickles.”

With a soft *fwump*, I felt my upper body be swallowed up by the Cuddle Bird’s feathers. His fluffy appearance and the warmth of his body made for the perfect embrace.

It seemed the creature couldn’t wait to be reunited with me.

The Cuddle Bird kept me wrapped in his feathers for some time, but once he was finally satisfied, he folded up his skinny legs and plopped down onto the floor.



THE sorcerers at the bureau finished providing me with information and explanations on how to care for the Cuddle Bird, and I decided it was time to return to my villa for the day. In the future, I would be making periodic trips to the bureau for further discussions, as well as to deliver the bird’s feathers.

“...It’s cramped in here,” Lucian muttered from inside our carriage.

We were traveling with a brand-new passenger this time.

“Peep peep?”

“*Why are you looking at me?*” the Cuddle Bird seemed to say as he cocked his head toward Lucian. The Cuddle Bird was sitting on the floor, with his head resting against the bottom of the seat.

The queen’s carriage was a spacious one, so *cramped* didn’t feel quite like an accurate description.

“...I’m usually the one who sits by my lady’s side...”

“Tweety here just didn’t want to separate from me.”

I stroked the bird’s head as he leaned it against the seat next to mine.

I was the one who gave Tweety, or “Twee” for short, his name. Despite having reached adulthood long ago, he never had a real name until now. When a Cuddle Bird took a liking to a sorcerer at the bureau, that person usually named them like they were the bird’s parent. But Tweety, who never had a favorite sorcerer, was referred to with whatever name worked best in the moment, like “yellow bird,” “picky eater,” and “the furball over there.”

“Now that I’m like your mom, Tweety, I’ll be sure to take good care of you.”

Tweety tweeted in response.

It was a simple, obvious name, but it felt nice to say, and suited his appearance as well. He didn’t seem to mind it either...or rather, I wasn’t sure if he understood that it was supposed to be his name, but as of yet, there didn’t seem to be a problem with it.

“...But I still want to know why Tweety likes me so much...”

“I completely understand my lady’s appeal, but I agree that this is a bit strange.”

Lucian and I both cocked our heads.

Tweety’s love for me was adorable, but it remained a mystery. I understood that the amount of magical energy I possessed surpassed that of almost everyone, and as lovers of that energy, the Cuddle Birds took a liking to me more easily. But they also found other sorcerers at the bureau who suited their tastes as well.

From the sound of it, Tweety's inability to find a favorite sorcerer, even once he grew into an adult bird, was unusual for his species.

Why did he grow so fond of me as soon as we happened to meet? Was it simply a coincidence? Or did it have to do with the past-life memories that had left me with an abundance of magical energy...?

"....."

I held out my right hand and began to gather the energy in my body. This was a familiar sensation for me, but when I really focused on it, it *did* feel like the amount had increased dramatically over the past few months.

...I'd been so busy lately with cooking and doting on my fluffy friends, I hardly had time to focus on magic at all.

The most I'd applied my magical energy since I came to this kingdom was when I helped Lady Kate by transmuting a chandelier made of salt, after a long process of trial and error. I'd been racing against time in a way that didn't allow for much deep thought about the process, but I did remember feeling as if I was capable of transmuting more than I expected. The improvement in energy efficiency was a blessing, but at the same time, I wondered why the raw amount I possessed seemed to be increasing as well.

Two changes to my magical energy occurred when I regained my past-life memories.

First, once I had the memories of the life I lived without any magic at all, I became much more sensitive to the existence of that new, foreign energy that dwelled in my body. This allowed for a dramatic increase in my own energy efficiency.

Second, though I didn't understand how or why, the raw amount of energy I possessed on its own had increased, and still continued to increase gradually now.

I'd never heard of either phenomenon in this world before.

Those were the only two changes I'd noticed for now...but if I looked into it further, I might discover more, or maybe even the reason for Tweety's attachment.

“...It’s very strange...”

Now that the issue had arisen in my mind, I only found it more and more enigmatic.

I didn’t think I’d find the answers to such unexplainable phenomena in books either, for that matter. I imagined that answering these questions was something that would only come over time, as I gained more experience in various areas...

“Sometimes you don’t see the value in things until they’re out of reach...”

I thought back to the Gramwell family home where I was raised.

I came from a long line of dukes in a kingdom that had strong roots in magic. The Gramwell family had access to all sorts of magical instruments and devices for experiments at their disposal.

For the past few years, I’d been busying myself in the studies required to become the next queen, and though I wasn’t particularly interested in the research of magic, looking back, I was blessed to have the opportunities that I did.

Sure, there was a measuring device for magical energy at the bureau, but I was still an outsider there. Seeing as how I’d managed to destroy that device by accident earlier, I didn’t want to partake in many more experiments at the bureau. Who knew what strange results might come up next?

Fortunately, I wasn’t currently experiencing any real problems when it came to my magic. There was no need to rush into experiments or examinations. Only my own internal confusion remained to nag at me.

“Peep!”

“...There, there. You want to be pet?”

Tweety stuck his beak on my lap, unaware of my swirling thoughts.

I gave in to his demands, and the bird partially closed his eyes with an extremely relaxed expression on his face. The soft feel of his feathers caused me to relax as well. Just petting him made me feel like all my troubles were dissolving into thin air.

I'd heard that bedding made with Cuddle Bird feathers had the ability to help restore the magical energy of those who slept on it. It was said to be very comfortable too, making it something of a luxury item.

"I bet I can make a blanket in the near future if I keep gathering your feathers, Tweety."

As I looked forward to the ultimate blanket, the carriage gradually slowed to a halt. I left the carriage at its usual stop outside my villa, with Tweety following right behind me. He took in the sights of his brand-new home and was wandering around the yard a bit when...

"Kwah?!"

A cry came from above us.

It was Fon, the griffin, flapping his wings up in the sky. He landed near my side, but seemed on edge at the sight of the unfamiliar Tweety.

"Peep!!"

"Krah?!"

Tweety suddenly charged forward. He nuzzled up against Fon, attempting to wrap the griffin in his special feathers. The Cuddle Bird's instincts seemed to draw him toward even this source of magical energy.

"Kyuwah...?"

Fon was frozen in confusion at the snuggling sensation. He knew Tweety wasn't a threat, so he made no attempt to attack with his talons, but he did look in my direction for help.

"Tweety, Fon doesn't like that. Can you step away?"

I retrieved a bell from my pocket. This was something Director Bodorey had sent with me. The Cuddle Birds at the Bureau of Magic were trained to respond to certain sounds, and the bell in my hand was for the "stand still and don't touch anyone" command.

"Peep..."

Tweety let go of Fon a bit more easily than I expected.

I was relieved, but just then, Tweety instead nuzzled up against me.

"It's okay, because this magic is my favorite!" he seemed to say.

Maybe he was so quick to obey because his real goal was my own magical energy.

"...He's such an ill-bred fuzzball, but it's still incredible that he doesn't fear Fon whatsoever." Lucian's tone sounded half bewildered, half impressed.

Tweety was a large bird, but his wings were tiny and round. He looked incredibly delicate in comparison to Fon, who had a gigantic wingspan and deadly talons.

"Cuddle Birds are probably naturally loveable."

"...Naturally loveable?" Keith, who'd accompanied me as my guard, cocked his head. "...What do you mean by that? I think the Cuddle Bird is cute, but from the eyes of a wild animal, doesn't he just look like a weak little snack?"

"Keith, do you know what defines a Mythical Beast?"

"Um, I think it was something like a creature with strong magical energy...?"

He was correct.

Mythical Beasts come in many shapes and sizes, and distinctly unlike all other animals, the use of magic plays a major role in their ways of life.

Some were creatures I'd never seen during my time on Earth, much like Hayruth's scaled horse companion, but if they didn't possess any magical energy, then they were simply normal animals to the people of this world.

Some were the opposite; they looked normal but weren't, like Berry—her use of magical energy to help grow plants was why she was considered a Mythical Beast.

In Fon's case, you could see a certain light coming off his wings while he was in flight, if you looked close enough. He used magic to control the wind around his wings, allowing even a creature with a body as large as his to achieve flight.

"Magical energy is absolutely vital in the life of a Mythical Beast, and Cuddle Birds carry that energy inside their feathers."

“...Um, in other words...?”

I could still see the question mark over Keith's head. As a knight and as beastfolk, he lacked knowledge of magical energy and spells.

“Humans and Mythical Beasts constantly leak a small amount of magical energy through the surface of their bodies. The energy is usually lost, but when it comes into contact with a Cuddle Bird's feathers, the creature is able to store it in the feathers themselves. Much like how specks of dust can come together to form a mountain, those that befriend the Cuddle Birds can receive their stored energy all at once in times of crisis.”

“I see... That must be very helpful for them.”

Keith accepted my explanation.

“I've read that most wild Cuddle Birds live together with other Mythical Beasts. The Mythical Beasts know about the special function of those feathers, so they take care of the Cuddle Birds as well. It's a symbiotic relationship.”

“They might look weak, but they've found a good way to get by in life.”

“Impressive, isn't it? They resemble baby chicks that never grew into chickens, which makes them so adorable, and those feathers must be extra fluffy because it's the easiest way to absorb magical energy.”

Cuddle Birds were fascinating creatures. Their cute appearance and unusual nature resulted in all kinds of interesting tales of their kind.

“There's even a firsthand account of someone who found a Cuddle Bird in the nest of a dragon they'd come to slay.”

I imagined the sight of a puffy Cuddle Bird waddling out from behind the back of a giant dragon. It seemed silly and amusing, but the man who witnessed it certainly wasn't laughing.

“He engaged in a deadly battle with the dragon, and just as he thought he'd finally exhausted its magical energy, the Cuddle Bird appeared to replenish it again...”

“I already defeated that dragon once! I'd rather die than fight it all over again!”

I was sure that's how it must have ended.

"...That hunter must see the Cuddle Birds as angels of death... They're much scarier than they look..." Keith trembled as he gave Tweety a good stare.

"Kwah...?"

Fon cocked his head and looked at Tweety too. The griffin was clever enough to know that the bird posed no threat to anyone, and he also seemed to understand the value of Tweety's feathers as magical energy storage, which was why he allowed Tweety to cuddle right up to him.

I was tickled by the sight of the ferocious griffin enveloped in soft yellow feathers.

"Peep!"

"Kaaah? Kwee kwah!!"

The two birdlike Mythical Beasts were engaged in some kind of conversation. I wasn't sure to what extent they understood each other, but they appeared to get along, at least.

Enjoying the sight of their chattering beaks, I watched as Tweety wandered away from Fon again.

"You're done with Fon?"

"...Peep!!"

Tweety took a look around the yard before waddling off into the distance. He'd found something else that interested him, by the look of it.

"Mra-hah?!"

Tweety approached Berry, who happened to be passing by. Her green eyes went wide, and she raced up to the top of a nearby tree.

"Peepa peep!!"

"....."

Berry silently gazed at the Cuddle Bird as he hopped up and down under the tree.

Despite Berry's disinterest in everything that wasn't strawberries, she was still a very cautious creature. She didn't want to approach Tweety, the newcomer, at all just yet.

"This way, Tweety. Let's leave her alone for today."

I rang the bell and called Tweety back to me.

When I glanced back at Berry, I saw her using the opportunity to leave the safety of her tree.

"Mraw!!"

"I'll be leaving for the day, since that fuzzball's hanging around."

That was the conclusion I took from the swish of her tail as she turned and disappeared into the trees.

"I wonder where Berry's going...?"

It was a mystery to me.

Just the other day, when we returned home from the rose garden, Berry had headed in the opposite direction of the villa too. It wasn't where her strawberry patch was located either, which was why it stuck out in my mind a bit. But Berry was carefree, much like a normal cat, so maybe she was simply taking aimless walks from time to time.

Even though I found it strange, I returned to the villa without looking into it any further, but the question of where Berry was headed remained in the back of my mind.

Chapter 5: The Search for Berry

AFTER visiting the Bureau of Magic, I became very busy.

I had to watch over Lelena as she trained to be a maid, instruct my servants in their care of the newly arrived Tweety, cook various meals with Gilbert, mediate a relationship between Lady Kate and Lady Natalie, spend time playing with the wolves, make appearances at the Bureau of Magic...

Both the time I spent in Elltoria training to become the queen and my days slaving away at a terrible company in my previous life were busier than I was now, but compared with when I first arrived at the villa, there was no denying that I had many more things to do.

Half of that—maybe even more—was simply my own hobbies, so despite how hectic things were, every day was a fulfilling one.

“Here is the list of attendees for tomorrow’s tea party, my lady.”

I had just finished the lunch that Gilbert prepared for me when Lucian came to my room to deliver a list.

Recently, I’d been hosting quite a few tea parties at my villa. It had all started with Lady Kate and Lady Natalie—ever since the day the three of us made crepes together, I’d been inviting them over more often so that we could drink tea and cook together. As a result, the two of them had opened up with each other quite a bit...

But I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the change, of course.

Lady Natalie was born to a duke who ruled over the western region of Wolfvarte, while Lady Kate’s father was the duke of the eastern region. Their families were the center of two respective factions formed throughout the aristocracies of the western and eastern territories. Young ladies of the upper classes greatly admired Lady Natalie and Lady Kate for their positions as daughters of dukes and candidates for queen.

“Once people found out that those two were having friendly tea parties at my villa...many other ladies started asking to join us.”

I’d learned that the young noblewomen had been visiting Lady Kate and Lady Natalie to solicit their own invitations, and I was currently on the receiving end of a number of requests to host tea parties for them. Some women specifically stated that they wanted to participate in gatherings that both beastfolk and humans could attend.

The kingdom of Wolfvarte in which we lived was formed by a territory that used to be made up of five smaller countries.

Each region differed greatly in various ways. In the western region where Lady Natalie hailed from, humans made up the majority of the population, while in Lady Kate’s eastern homeland, the majority were beastfolk. The two races looked down on each other and didn’t get along, meaning relationships between the two regions as a whole were just as strained. While some *did* try to meet the other race halfway, the current political climate in Wolfvarte made it difficult to publicly invite the opposite race to your home.

“...And that’s where my villa comes in,” I murmured to myself as I looked at the list.

As a foreigner in this kingdom, I had no ties to either region or their politics. This meant that humans of the western region and beastfolk of the eastern region could freely attend any tea party I held at my villa.

The noblewomen seemed to believe they could strengthen their bonds and form personal connections with each other through my parties.

“I’d certainly like to accept the ladies’ requests...”

There was a great divide between humans and beastfolk. If I could bridge that gap and improve the relationships between noblewomen, or even their families, the entire kingdom would surely be put on a better track. I wanted to achieve such an end, and hosting tea parties at my villa seemed like the least I could do.

“Lady Jerica Medissina, daughter of an earl, and Miss Lana Bartz, the daughter of a baron...”

I read the names on the list and memorized the information. Tomorrow's tea party would welcome as many as ten guests. These two women in particular were near the very top of the social pyramid.

"And Lady I-Liena and Lady Fillia will be joining us too."

Like Lady Kate and Lady Natalie, these two women were candidates to become the next queen and were also the daughters of dukes, but from the northern and southern regions of Wolfvarte. All the tea parties I'd been holding at my villa were well received, and rumors of them had reached the other two candidates, who now wished to attend as well.

"Since they'll be guests of my villa, I'll have to be sure they're entertained properly."

I'll be as careful as I can, but I can't make any mistakes.

I decided to go visit the kitchen and check on the snacks for tomorrow's tea party. As I walked down the hallway, a small shadow appeared at the other end.

"You're always hard at work, aren't you, Lelena?"

The girl looked just like a walking pile of fabric. She was carrying a hefty stack of ten folded linens with both of her hands.

Lelena, still only ten years old, was a beastfolk of the Wildcat clan. By this point in her life, she would already have as much muscle strength as I did, or perhaps even more. She clearly made use of it as she trained to be a maid.

"Thank you, Your Majesty! I hope you and Mr. Lucian keep up your hard work too."

Lelena gave a quick bow, though she kept the mountain of linens perfectly in place.

Her sense of balance was also superb due to her beastfolk blood. She was a quick learner when it came to work, and between that and her commendable personality, she was fondly looked after by the rest of the villa staff.

"Lelena, you should take those linens down to the first floor around this time of the day, where you can hand them over to Misha. She's in charge of ironing them."

“Okay! Thank you for the information!” Lelena responded to Lucian’s advice with a cheery smile.

From time to time, Lucian would instruct Lelena in her training. He was a gentle and kind man, and he also knew the specifics of all the villa servants and their work. Lelena really respected and cared for him.

...I was a little bit jealous, in all honesty. Seeing as how I held the title of “queen,” Lelena still put a certain distance between us. We came from very different classes, certainly, but it made me feel blue nonetheless.

“...As long as she’s adapting to life here at the villa, I shouldn’t ask anything else of her.”

That was what I murmured to myself as I watched her carry the stack of sheets off into the distance.



THE next day, my tea party began precisely as scheduled. It was a sunny day, so all we had to do was set the garden tables, and then it was time to begin.

I guided the ten guests to the three separate tables where they could snack on desserts and chat. I’d tried my best to take their families and relationships into consideration in forming the seating chart, hoping it would make conversations run smoother.

Though they weren’t in attendance, Lady Kate and Lady Natalie both supported the idea of me hosting public tea parties at my villa. They even provided me with information about the factions each guest belonged to, which was helpful when drawing up said seating chart.

“Good day, Your Majesty. I’m thrilled to be a guest at your tea party today,” Lady I-Liena greeted me with a very relaxed tone of voice.

I was sitting at the same table as her and Lady Fillia. As candidates for queen, it would be difficult for the other guests to speak freely with them. I’d seated them with myself so that I might entertain them instead.

“Hehe! I’m so happy you’re letting me indulge in some of your homemade treats. My friend here looks pleased to see you too, in fact. Don’t you think so?”

Down at Lady I-Liena's side were five brown fluffy tails that swished from one side to another.

This was Lady I-Liena's companion animal—a two-tailed fox. The creature, curled up elegantly beside her chair, was a rare variety, in that it actually had *five* tails to boast of.

I could tell how well groomed those tails were. The fur was vivid and glossy in the sunlight.

“Your companion animal is as beautiful as ever, Lady I-Liena. I feel as if I could stare at those swaying tails all day.”

“Ehehe! Your flattery is always appreciated. My friend is happy to hear your kind words too. As a thank you, he's quite insistent that you pet him, in fact.”

“Are you sure? May I take you up on that offer?”

“Of course, of course. Please give it a go.”

I received permission from Lady I-Liena.

Yes! Finally, I get to pet a fluffy fox!!

I stood up from my chair and approached the two-tailed fox, who brought his tails closer to my face so that it was easier to reach them. The puffy light-brown tails swished back and forth, and I was captivated.

“They're so nice and soft. You have very nice fur, don't you?”

I made a point not to let myself smile *too* much as I felt the fox's soft coat.

The fox kept a prim look on his face, his pointy ears sticking straight up.

He was such an elegant creature, even in his expression, with an adorable black nose at the tip of his muzzle. So beautiful and charming—a perfectly suited companion for Lady I-Liena. His fluffy tails were so noble in appearance, I couldn't help but think back to Tamamo-no-Mae, the nine-tailed fox of Japanese legend. Though this fox lacked the remaining four tails, if Tamamo-no-Mae really did exist, she would almost certainly resemble him in her wolf form.

...I busied my mind with such silly thoughts, until the time for petting had come to a close.

I washed my hands in a bowl of water Lucian brought me, then reached for a dessert on the table.

“This is delicious. This ‘chiffon cake’ is light and fluffy, almost as if I’m eating a cloud.” Lady Fillia smacked her lips, fork in hand.

Lady Fillia, the black-haired daughter of a duke, hailed from the southern region of Wolfvarte. She was eighteen years old, one year older than me, though she was cute and dainty in a way that made her look a good few years younger, and she had a petite build as well. Her slender fingers gripped the fork and gracefully carried the chiffon cake to her mouth.

Lady Fillia gave off a soft, delicate aura, much like the praise she’d given for the chiffon cake itself. She was quite the adorable young lady.

“That’s an interesting way of putting it, Lady Fillia. So you’re a fan of the chiffon cake, hmm?” It was Lady I-Liena who spoke between her own graceful bites of chiffon cake.

“Oh yes. It’s so delicious and cloudlike. Don’t you just feel like you couldn’t ever get sick of it?”

“Well, it saddens me to say I’ve never eaten a cloud before...but I agree that the cake is most delicious. Even if it was all we were blessed with, this alone makes me glad I attended today.”

The conversation between Lady I-Liena and Lady Fillia was pleasant and lighthearted. I didn’t sense any animosity between them at all, despite the fact that they were rivals in their battle to become the next queen.

Though I was quite certain that, deep down, they weren’t on friendly terms...

They simply preferred to avoid any open hostility while face-to-face. The two girls giggled and chuckled happily in a way that kept their true intentions hidden.

I just know Lady I-Liena is forming some kind of scheme in her mind right now...but what about Lady Fillia?

As delicate as she looked, it was hard to get a read on her emotions.

I watched over their conversation as the tea party carried on into the day.



BY the end of the party, I hadn't witnessed any troubling incidents at all. I'd even heard that the other two tables had also talked enthusiastically about the treats I served them.

There was a bit of awkwardness between the humans and beastfolk, but by the time the tea party was over, they appeared to be actually enjoying themselves.

"I think it's safe to say it was another successful tea party."

After seeing off the ladies, I began to instruct the servants on how to clean up.

My baked goods, like the chiffon cake, had received good reviews, but these ladies weren't actually heavy eaters. Since the goal of this party was to form connections with people of the opposite race, a lot of food was left sitting on the table in the end.

"Wow...! Today's treats look so yummy...!"

Lelena, who'd showed up to help clean, was staring at the table, her eyes completely lit up. Her childlike excitement was unlike her usual formal manner.

...Now that I think about it, her sister, Krona, had a weakness for sweets too.

Filled with a sense of nostalgia, I watched Lelena swiftly gather the remaining desserts. I'd already boxed up some leftover food to send home with the guests, so everything else that remained would go to my servants. The villa staff also looked forward to these sugary, fruit-filled desserts.

"Oh! I see you've got some more tasty-looking treats out here today."

It was Hayruth who called out to me. He was an artist who visited me from time to time for chats, and he'd wandered into my garden once again today.

"Good afternoon, Hayruth and Nimur."

"Gyauh!!"

Nimur, the scaled horse, bobbed its head in greeting.

For whatever reason, Hayruth was usually disliked by dogs, cats, horses, and other, more common animals. But Nimur, the lizard-like creature that stood on

two legs, did seem to get along with him. Hayruth was always able to ride him in place of a horse.

The scaled horse's body was entirely covered in scales, as the name suggested. While Nimur was taller than a human, his beady black eyes were round and endearing. His front legs were tiny, and his long tail swung from side to side like a dog. Each of his movements were rather silly-looking, which was another reason I found him cute.

"Gyah gyah?"

Nimur began to point his nose toward the tables and sniff at the air. I wondered if the scent of chiffon cake and the other unusual treats had caught his interest.

"Do you like the smell? I have a lot of leftover desserts from today's gathering. Would you like to take some with you, Hayruth?"

"Woo-hoo! Much appreciated, Your Majesty!!"

"Gyah!!"

Hayruth seemed extremely pleased. Perhaps the man had something of a sweet tooth. Nimur swished his tail from side to side too, appearing happy to see Hayruth so excited. They were a friendly pair indeed, this human and beast.

"Since you're here, would you care for a cup of tea?"

"Really? You wouldn't mind havin' tea with me?"

"I'd like to hear your tales of the Raiolbern Kingdom, and of my big brother Claude."

Hayruth wasn't born in the kingdom of Wolfvarte. He hailed from Raiolbern—a large country to the west of my homeland, Elltoria. As a young but successful painter for members of the aristocracy, Hayruth always had a wealth of topics to discuss, but he'd also managed to form a friendship with my older brother Claude since he arrived in Wolfvarte.

Big Brother Claude had been traveling to various countries for his work over the past few years. Despite being his sister, I'd been unable to see him at all, so I was curious as to how he was doing.

“I’d be honored to join you. I wouldn’t miss Your Majesty’s newly invented sweets for anything!”

He gave a friendly smile and was headed toward the shed to tie up Nimur when suddenly...

“Ugh. He caught me...”

“What’s the matter?”

Seeing the way his smile had contorted, I couldn’t help but respond, and then I heard the nearby bushes rustling.

“Arooo...!”

There, right before our eyes, was a visibly grumpy Lord Aroo.

Hmm? What’s got him so upset?

The wrinkles in his muzzle were creased, and his fur appeared to be standing on end, as if in anger.

“Roووو!!”

Lord Aroo crossed over the grass until he was close enough to glare straight at Hayruth.

“Leave this place immediately.”

That was the warning I felt as Lord Aroo came between Hayruth and me.

When Nimur saw the dignified presence of the wolf, he let out a faint “Krrr...” and curled his tail up behind him.

“No, no, Lord Aroo. You have to calm yourself. Look, you’re scaring Nimur.”

“Aroo...”

Lord Aroo’s blue-green eyes glanced at Nimur. The gesture alone was enough to make Nimur shrivel in fear. Lord Aroo let out something that sounded like a sigh.

“Guruff. Rrrroo...”

“I don’t like your master, but you’ve done me no harm. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Lord Aroo seemed to apologize with his cry, at which point he became a bit less menacing.

“How impressive, Your Majesty. Looks like you’ve got Kin—or rather, Lord Aroo under control.” Hayruth looked pleasantly surprised. He was smirking at the grumpy wolf.

“Despite his appearance, Lord Aroo is plenty rational when you reason with him.”

“Grah?”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean? You’re such a rude woman sometimes.”

He crinkled his nose once more in annoyance. The wolf was truly an expressive animal.

“Haha, I get it. I’ll head home for today. I can see that I’m just causing trouble.”

“Gyah gyah!!”

Hayruth took Nimur’s reins and hopped onto the scaled horse’s back. He settled into the saddle and stroked the beast’s neck.

While Hayruth looked to be quite slender, I was surprised by how strong he appeared. I’d heard that physical strength was important to some artists, and I wondered if Hayruth had been working out for that purpose.

I watched him depart atop Nimur’s back as I pondered the source of his strength.



IT was the day after my conversation with Hayruth.

At King Glenreed’s invitation, I joined him for dinner at the palace.

I was grateful for the opportunity to dine together, as I had several things I wanted to ask him about.

Today I’d brought ham, egg, and vegetable sandwiches, along with onion soup. The dark golden soup was filled to the brim with butter-cooked, thin-sliced onions that were soft and sweet on the tongue.

I placed the pot of soup along with the sandwiches on top of a metal grill I'd brought with me, then warmed them using a fire spell.

"How very aromatic."

His Majesty's blue-green eyes were focused on the roasting sandwiches. Though his face remained unchanged, I could sense excitement from him...or so it seemed.

"Don't they smell nice? Grilling bread like this makes it nice and crispy. It's quite delicious."

I presented His Majesty with the sandwich—now with grill marks on the surface. He picked it up with his hands, observed it for a moment, then took his first bite.

"Yes, this tastes very nice. It smells savory, and when I bite into the crispy bread, the softness inside comes through as well. It mixes nicely with the salt of the ham."

He'd devoured the entire sandwich in about three bites.

Does that mean he liked it?

His Majesty seemed so disinterested with food when we first met, but now, he was easily able to express his thoughts on the sandwich. The change I saw in him was a joy to my heart.

"...What is it? Why are you smiling like that?" he asked me.

"Hehe! It's nothing. I'm just glad to see you enjoyed it."

It was so much fun to eat with someone who enjoyed their meals.

Once we'd eagerly finished our sandwiches and our appetites were satisfied, it was time to have a conversation with His Majesty.

I asked him my first question over our after-dinner tea.

"...You want to go outside the castle?"

"Yes, I do, which is why I'd like your permission. I'm sure I'd attract a crowd if people caught sight of the queen in the city, so I'd like to disguise myself and explore the capital."

“What about your guards?”

“I’d prefer to have Lucian, my servant, at my side, as he’s trained in martial arts. I’ll also have the guards I brought from my homeland stay within a short distance.”

“I see. That doesn’t sound like it will be a problem... Shall I send some of my own knights too, just to be safe?”

“It would be much appreciated.”

While I had my own self-defense methods in the form of magic, I didn’t want to immediately resort to that while I was out in the town. As long as I had a few guards with me, along with Lucian, I was unlikely to find myself in any dangerous situations.

“When are you planning to go out?”

“Sooner would be better for me.”

“Do you have errands to do in town? Has something caught your interest?”

“I’m curious about the popular foods and shops throughout the capital. I’ve been hosting tea parties for the noble ladies of this kingdom, so I’d like to experience the things throughout the city that I heard from their stories.”

I can eat as I walk through the city. I’d definitely love to experience a capital stroll.

As much as I loved taking it easy at the villa, I was also looking forward to going out and exploring the city.

“Very well. I see why you’d need to understand the local fads as the host of those tea parties.” His Majesty gave a small nod of his head, apparently having accepted my explanation. “I’ve heard great things about the tea parties at your villa. They must be popular, as some of the young ladies have even attended more than once.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. ...I host humans and beastfolk; those hailing from the eastern region and those from the west. Some of the guests have sought an opportunity like this for a while but couldn’t express it due to the long history of bad blood between them.”

I wondered how His Majesty felt about the goal of my tea parties, so I had decided to push forward and mention it to him directly.

“...So I hear. I hope your tea parties are a way for the different regions and races to come to understand each other better.”

Thank goodness. So he supports my plans as well.

I knew that, as I was only a figurehead queen, he couldn't openly give his approval for my actions, but those words alone were plenty reassuring.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I hope to keep inviting all kinds of people to my future tea parties.”

“...All kinds...of people...”

The king was muttering something to himself.

Did I say something strange?

I suddenly got the sense he was somehow upset or annoyed.

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?”

“I don't mind you hosting and befriending the young noblewomen...but you're just being careless when you have tea with strange men you know nothing about. Just yesterday, a painter visited your villa and you invited him to tea, didn't you?”

He was referring to Hayruth.

It wasn't something I was trying to keep secret in particular, but the matter had somehow managed to reach the king's ears.

“I appreciate your concern; however, I don't believe Hayruth poses any danger. He's a friend of my older brother, and he possesses an entry pass for the castle grounds, which means he's been deemed a person of good standing.”

My villa was located in a corner of the castle territory. The land it was on was sprawling, and aside from a few certain spots, we were allowed to freely move about as we pleased. However, there were requirements that came with entering the territory. Aside from live-in staff members, all commoners required a thorough review before they could receive a visitor's pass.

“...Right, I’m sure that’s the case...”

The king still seemed somewhat unconvinced.

When I saw those blue-green eyes and their apparent disapproval of Hayruth...

“You remind me of Lord Aroo sometimes, Your Majesty.”

The words simply slipped from my mouth.



“YOU remind me of Lord Aroo sometimes, Your Majesty.”

Glenreed froze when he heard Laetitia’s remark.

Why on earth would she bring up Lord Aroo right now...?

He chose to press Laetitia for more information while he kept his unease from showing outwardly. “What do you mean by that? What about me is so wolflike, exactly?”

“Ah, my apologies. I must have confused you, didn’t I?”

Laetitia wasn’t acting strangely; she had the same beautiful smile on her face that she always did. Glenreed decided to keep a careful eye on how she responded.

“I didn’t mean anything by that. Yesterday, Lord Aroo acted very threatened by Hayruth’s visit to my villa. Your distrust of Hayruth simply reminded me of the wolf for a moment.”

“...I see.”

On the inside, Glenreed breathed a sigh of relief.

Laetitia wasn’t lying, nor did she appear at all suspicious. Glenreed’s special nose determined that her words were the entire truth.

Feeling a bit more at ease, Glenreed parted his lips. “I don’t know what this Lord Aroo’s reasoning may be, but I don’t dislike the artist. I only wanted to remind you to keep your guard up, now that you’re inviting so many people to your villa.”

Glenreed's words were a mix of truth and deception.

Hayruth may not look dangerous, but he's still a spy for the crown prince of Raiolbern.

Glenreed imagined that Laetitia hadn't worked out that fact yet.

But she was an intelligent woman, and the king didn't expect her to be outsmarted by Hayruth. He didn't know exactly why Hayruth's presence bothered him to such an extent, in fact.

...It may be in name only, but Laetitia is still my queen. I suppose it's natural to worry that something might happen to her.

Glenreed conjured up that explanation to blame his uncertainty on.

Laetitia seemed convinced as well. Although...

"I understand. I apologize for misinterpreting the situation. ...By the way, what do you think of Lord Aroo, Your Majesty?"

She had an unexpected question for the king as well.

What do I think...of Lord Aroo...? The question put Glenreed on edge once again. *I'm sure she hasn't realized that Lord Aroo and I are one and the same...*

But Glenreed's intuition warned him not to let his guard down.

"I'd like to know your thoughts. You have some knowledge about Lord Aroo, do you not?"

"....."

The king racked his brain.

In the past, he told Laetitia the following about Lord Aroo:

"He was, at one time, nearly abducted due to the unusual color of his eyes. As a result, he's become a grumpy creature who has to be kept separately from the wolves and wolfkeepers, so as to thwart the risk of future kidnappings."

...But that's not what Laetitia wants to hear right now.

Glenreed put his thoughts in order before speaking.

"Then let me ask you first. What about him is so curious to you?"

“...Sometimes I think that Lord Aroo might be more than just a normal wolf.”

“Because of his eye color?”

“That’s one reason, yes...”

Laetitia trailed off. Her amethyst eyes were glimmering at Glenreed. She was watching for his reaction.

“I believe he’s too clever to be a normal wolf,” she continued. “To me, it seems he perfectly understands human speech, don’t you think? There’s been a number of times now where Lord Aroo understood my words at face value, and even the deeper meanings behind them.”

“.....”

“It’s just your imagination,” he could attempt to say...

But unfortunately, she was already on the right track.

“As the king, I meet with many kinds of people, and occasionally encounter those who are unbelievably intelligent. Maybe this Lord Aroo just happens to possess a brain on the level of genius for a wolf.”

“...Is that really all it is?”

Laetitia wasn’t ready to drop the subject. She gazed at the tapestry on the wall. It was a colorful depiction of the forefather of the Wolfvartian kingdom—a silver wolf with a pair of blue-green eyes.

“Your Majesty, are you aware of the sacred lion that appeared in Raiolbern two years ago?”

“...Yes, I am. Though I’ve only heard rumors.”

The story went that the previous crown prince of Raiolbern was plotting a conspiracy, but was exposed by the current crown prince with the help of a young woman with a golden lion.

Legends stated that the forefather of the Raiolbern royal family was a Sacred Beast in the form of a golden lion. That golden lion returned to offer the current crown prince his divine protection in the face of danger to the kingdom...or so the story generally was told.

But only commoners and children were innocent enough to believe such a rumor. Most aristocrats understood it as a made-up story meant to heighten the prestige of the current crown prince and distract from the wrongdoings of the former...

“Could it be possible...that a Sacred Beast really did appear in Raiolbern?”

“...And what if it did?”

“What if the sacred wolf from the legends existed in this kingdom as well?”

When Glenreed heard this, he silently applauded Laetitia.

Well done. It's a wild idea, and yet it's not that far from the truth...

Of course, she didn't appear to have deduced that Glenreed was the one transforming into Lord Aroo, but she'd still managed to approach the correct answer with very few clues to work off of.

Now how do I respond to such a question...?

Laetitia was clever. If he tried to lie his way out of it, she would definitely see right through him.

Glenreed was very careful in the words he chose.

“...And if that were the case...and Lord Aroo really was a Sacred Beast and the forefather of my family, what would your intentions be? Would you capture him for your own use, or ostracize him out of fear?”

“Of course not. I would do no such thing.”

Laetitia didn't hesitate to reject Glenreed's hypothetical scenario.

“Lord Aroo will always be Lord Aroo, no matter what his true nature may be. If he wishes to keep pretending to be a normal wolf...then I'm going to dote on him exactly the same as I always have.”

Laetitia's words contained no lies. The king was certain of that much, but he couldn't help muttering under his breath anyway.

“...I don't remember receiving any 'doting,' per se...”

“What was that, Your Majesty?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

Glenreed heaved a sigh in his mind.

Still, she wants to treat a Sacred Beast like a normal wolf... I can’t tell if she’s simply an accepting person, or if she lacks common sense...

But regardless, Glenreed was pleased with Laetitia’s answer.

I don’t exactly hate the time I spend with her at the villa as Lord Aroo.

Glenreed was comfortable acknowledging that fact at this point. He felt distinctly soothed somehow whenever he watched Laetitia pet the wolves with that silly smile on her face.

At least Laetitia doesn’t seem to have any real proof about who Lord Aroo truly is. As long as I don’t reveal that fact, I can’t see it causing any major problems.

Glenreed nodded to himself and opened his mouth to reply to Laetitia.

“I simply can’t speak to any other information on Lord Aroo. Even if he truly was a Sacred Beast, as long as that didn’t bother you, then I believe there’s nothing more to do than treat the wolf as you always have.”



“I simply can’t speak to any other information on Lord Aroo. Even if he truly was a Sacred Beast, as long as that didn’t bother you, then I believe there’s nothing more to do than treat the wolf as you always have.”

I felt myself let out a sigh of relief when I heard His Majesty’s response. It wasn’t unthinkable that His Majesty would demand I stay away from Lord Aroo once I started asking questions about his true nature.

I was so glad to learn I’d be able to pet Lord Aroo from here out just like I always had.

“A Sacred Beast...” I mumbled those words to myself during the carriage ride home.

I still didn’t understand what Lord Aroo truly was, but judging by what His Majesty had said, I knew the creature was something more than a simple wolf.

“...But Lord Aroo will always be Lord Aroo.”

As long as he still came to visit me at the villa, I was going to dote on him like always.

Lord Aroo was a proud and moody creature, certainly, but he had a compassionate side as well. He was expressive, too, despite his lack of words, and had even tried to lift my spirits when I was feeling depressed in the past.

“I’d be so sad if he stopped visiting me...”

I quietly decided that Lord Aroo would be on the receiving end of many, many more pettings from me in the future.



“**BERRY**, are you here? It’s breakfast time!”

My voice echoed through the villa that morning. I was walking from room to room with a plate of strawberry jam in hand as I called out Berry’s name.

“...She still hasn’t shown up...”

I searched the entire villa and even did a lap around the outside walls, but...

“If the strawberry jam won’t lure her out, then she really must not be nearby at all.”

With a separate plate of strawberry jam in his hand, Lucian let out a small sigh. “Don’t tell me the creature’s run away from home, forgetting exactly how much my lady has done for her?”

Recently, Berry had occasionally been leaving the villa for an unknown destination. I was curious about her trips, of course, but as of yesterday, she’d failed to even show up for her meals.

I was a little concerned. Just then...

“I couldn’t find Berry over there either.”

“Thank you for letting me know. I appreciate it.”

It was Lelena who scampered up to me. The look on her face was strained as she bit her bottom lip.

“...It might be my fault that Berry is gone...” Lelena was mumbling, her voice trembling, as she gripped the sleeves of her maid uniform. “She got fed up with Melan after I brought him here, and that’s why she ran away...”

Melan, Lelena’s black cat, had once chased Berry all around the house. Berry had had to leap into my arms for safety.

“...I don’t think that’s the reason. Berry and Melan had some difficulties at first, yes, but things have remained pretty calm since then, and they’ve been growing more comfortable with each other.”

“But isn’t that just because Berry was putting up with him?”

“Well... I’m sure she *was* putting up with the situation, at least a little bit...”

If Berry really did have any big, long-lasting complaints about Melan, she probably would’ve come to me for help at least once, instead of immediately leaving the house without a word. Berry had already demanded that I stop Tweety from his cuddle attacks, after all.

“There are very few places in this kingdom where one can eat strawberry treats,” I said. “I certainly can’t think of any outside this villa. Given that Berry’s such a strawberry connoisseur, it’s hard to believe she would run away without any warning at all...”

“...Then why did she leave...?”

I didn’t have an answer for that either.

As I struggled to respond, Lelena suddenly took off running.

“...I’m going to go search inside the villa again!”

I watched Lelena disappear into the distance. With her beastfolk physical strength, she was probably faster than I was.

“I wonder where Berry is...?” I pondered.

I was worried, but at the same time, I had a feeling that Berry might return as if nothing had happened whatsoever.

Strawberry season was over now, and summer was nearly in full swing...

“...Maybe Berry’s like a bird, and she’ll migrate back here for the next

strawberry season...?”

“...I could see that being the case for such a greedy, gluttonous cat.”

Lucian was grumbling to himself, but when I looked him, I could have sworn his expression was tinged with sadness.



ANOTHER two days passed without any sign of Berry, and the day of my secret trip into the capital city was already upon me.

I wore a simple style of dress that was common among the people of Wolfvarte, with a brown wig over my hair to change my appearance. Once I donned a hat and veil, it wouldn't be possible to see my eyes.

“...It's been a long time since I disguised myself like this.”

Years ago, my older brother Claude and I often snuck out of our mansion to goof off together. I was too busy nowadays to take any secret trips, but it certainly wasn't my first time in a disguise either.

In my current state, I looked like any other commoner...well, no, not quite. My appearance was more like that of a lower-ranking noblewoman, or perhaps a wealthy commoner, but I certainly wasn't recognizable as the queen any longer.

“All right, then. Shall we head out?”

I met up with my guards, boarded the carriage, and set off for the capital.

Once I found what looked to be a good spot, I left the carriage and decided to take in the sights with Lucian at my side. The roadside windows were decorated with roses and other seasonal flowers—a real treat for everyone who saw them. As I strode along, I peeked in at all the boutiques and jewelers I'd heard were popular with the young ladies.

“There are so many beautiful wares here,” I said as I looked in at one particular jeweler's shop. Everything on display was so lovely, which made sense because this jeweler was very well known.

I noticed a silver item laid out on a velvet cloth.

“Well, don't you have an eye for fine goods, miss? How'd you like to try on

that hair ornament yourself?”

The merchant was pointing at the silver rose.

“A rose ornament...”

The realization hit me very suddenly.

Why exactly my eyes stopped on that out of everything on display...

...It was because I was unconsciously thinking of the one His Majesty had given me. It was the first present I had ever received from the king. I wasn't wearing it that day, but I kept it stored away safely in a box, as it was something of a treasure to me.

“...Thank you, but that won't be necessary. It only caught my eye because I have a similar ornament at home.”

“Is that right? Well, go ahead and take a look at the rest of our pieces here.”

I took the merchant up on his offer and began to browse the jewelry.

With rose season fully upon us, I noticed many pieces seemed to be rose themed. There were brooches carved into the shape of roses, miniature rose-shaped lockets, and more. Most were small in size, but some of the metal hair ornaments were three-dimensional and large enough to resemble actual roses.

“These look expensive...,” I quietly remarked.

They appeared to be made of silver. The petals were bulky, perhaps because of limitations in the smithing process, and I imagined they took quite a bit of material to manufacture.

There were other three-dimensional rose pieces, all made of metal, that came in gold, silver, and even bronze.

“That reminds me...”

The sight of the metal roses sparked something in my mind.

I would look into it when I returned to the villa. For now, I decided to head to the next location.

I spent some time visiting the shops I recognized from the rumors, and soon, it was time for lunch.

“Lucian, why don’t we go over there to eat?”

A row of carts sat at one corner of the large street. It looked like the kind of place we could purchase food quickly and take it with us to eat as we continued walking. I loved that I was able to do this kind of thing now that I was in disguise and no longer identifiable as the queen or a noblewoman.

“Does that bread have nuts in it?” I asked. “It looks freshly baked.”

“Yep, it’s hot out of the oven! It’s a real treat,” the woman at the stand replied.

I purchased bread for the two of us, as well as a bowl of bean soup.

“It’s still a bit warm. Lovely, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. It’s freshly baked, after all.”

Lucian and I each tore off pieces of our bread and felt the heat wafting into the air.

The texture of the bread in my mouth was a bit rough, and the flavor was a simple one, but the nuts baked in it made it even more interesting to eat, and tastier when dipped in the soup as well.

“Walking while eating makes the food taste almost twice as good.”

Once I’d soaked the last bite of bread in soup, I decided to take a stroll down the main street. The cobblestone surface gave the road an animated feel. It was an easy street to walk.

“His Majesty’s capital city is beautiful, of course. I wouldn’t mind liv—”

“My lady?”

I did a double take when I saw a small shadow dart by out of the corner of my eye. The gray creature that dashed down a side street looked just like...

“Berry...?”

It was the last place I expected to see her. I raced after her.

I wasn’t sure if Berry had noticed my presence at all, given that I was disguised at the moment, and Berry seemed to be in a hurry too.

“I think I saw her go down this alley...!”

I peered down the side street but didn't see any sign of the Gardener Cat. There was a turn in the road just up ahead and I wondered if that was where she went. I continued down the narrow street toward the corner, but after a thorough examination of the area, I couldn't find any trace of her.

“Maybe she didn't stay on the street, and jumped up on one of the rooftops instead...?”

I was stumped. Berry, like a normal cat, was very nimble. It wouldn't exactly be easy to search for her up high, instead of just at street level.

“Hmm, what should we do? If we call her name loudly enough, she might come our way...”

But as I was currently in disguise, I didn't want to draw attention to myself.

As I was figuring out how to proceed...

“Hey there, missy. What're you up to in a place like this?”

A beastfolk man, who was clearly up to no good, was approaching me from the other side of the street. It appeared that, in my search for Berry, I'd wandered into an area of town that wasn't quite as safe. I then realized that another beastfolk man—probably his friend—was also creeping up on me from behind.

“If I were you, I'd stay nice and calm for us. We're not gonna hurt ya, promise. All you've gotta do is empty those pockets for us. Simple, eh?”

There was one man in front of us and two behind. They advanced slowly, closing the distance.

“Don't tell me ya think this guy here's gonna save ya? He's skin and bones! A twerp like him's not gonna be any help.”

“...Such a clichéd volley of threats. It almost makes me nostalgic.”

Lucian narrowed his eyes. Apparently, this sort of thing wasn't uncommon in the life of a man who was raised in an orphanage in the slums. Though he looked at the beastfolk as if they bored him, I could see he was poised to take action at the drop of a hat.

“What shall we do, my lady?”

Lucian was a talented man.

We were outnumbered by beastfolk, but they clearly didn’t know who they were dealing with. Lucian was more than capable of taking all of them out alone, so long as he got the jump on them. Even if the unthinkable happened and he was overwhelmed, we still had our hidden guards in the distance. That was reassuring. However...

“I really don’t want to cause a fuss...”

Should I swallow my pride and just give them money?

Since I was in disguise, I only carried a small sum with me that day. But I wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to hand over my coins just so that we could pass through. I would only be encouraging them to continue this kind of behavior.

“Hey now, hey now, what’s the matter? Too scared of us to move? Or maybe you’re thinking you’ve got something even better than money to give us?”

The beastfolk followed up their taunting with even more threats.

...This simply won’t do.

“...Sorry, but I’m not the type to just give in without a fight.”

“Aaah!!”

I gave the beastfolk my most exquisite smile. It was the villainous, evil grin I’d inherited from my father. I hadn’t needed to use it in quite a while. I was hoping they would flee in fear without demanding any money, but it appeared they weren’t about to give up so easily.

The men raised their fists, and just as Lucian was about to strike...

“Gah!!”

The beast man in front of me was slammed into the wall.

This wasn’t Lucian’s doing, nor was it the work of my guards.

A door to the alley had flung open and launched the man into the wall.

“Whoops, sorry, miss. Didn’t mean to send any garbage flying your way.”

A tall man emerged from the doorway and stepped gracefully out into the alley, not appearing at all concerned by the vicious glares from the beastfolk.

“I was having such a lovely time playing around, but these noisy gentlemen just had to go and ruin it.”

The man was holding a lute in his left hand, and the place he’d come out of was a tavern. He must have been a bard of some sort.

“Shit, that hurts!! We’ve got business with the girl, so stay outta it!!”

“I highly doubt any of you people have business with such a beautiful woman.”

“Shut your mouth, bastard!”

The beastfolk rushed forward to attack the man.

My eyes opened wide, and I was on the verge of crying out for the man to run.

“Argh!!”

“Guh!!”

“Gah!!”

The three beastfolk each let out a pained grunt. They’d been knocked to the ground before I could even process what I was seeing.

“Your cries are as disgusting as your actions. Boring souls down to your very core, aren’t you?”

The man stood completely unharmed. He’d easily emerged victorious against three separate opponents.

“...Thank you for your help,” I said to the man, looking him over from head to toe.

Now that I had the time to take in his appearance, I saw that he possessed quite beautiful features. He looked to be in his mid to late twenties and had green eyes that drooped a bit, which gave him sort of an alluring, seductive look. There was a red tint to his brown hair, as if it had been brewed in the

finest red tea, and it was tied into a ponytail that draped across his shoulder. Over his coat, the man wore a cloak that was clasped together with a feathered fastener. He was tall, fit, and stylish.



“There’s no need to thank me. I simply silenced those pesky flies for you.”

“You’re very strong, aren’t you?”

“Well, I’m handsome, after all.”

“...Pardon?”

Where did that come from?

It wasn’t an untrue statement whatsoever, but hearing it from the man’s own mouth diminished the value a bit.

He shrugged and gave a knowing smile.

“Men are jealous creatures. When they see that they’ll never rival me in looks, they resort to brute force and attack me.”

“...Oh dear, that sounds very difficult.”

“Absolutely. It’s a nightmare. But now that I’ve met you, well, maybe it’s not *all* bad in the end.”

“...”

Is he trying to hit on me?

Lucian’s smile was turning cold beside me.

“Miss, would you stay and listen to a song? I promise it’ll be worth your time.”

“I’m sorry, but I have plans at the moment.”

“Don’t be like that. Maybe you’re just nervous to stay with a man whose name you don’t know? I’m Leonard.”

“No, that’s not the issue...”

I tried to reject him, but Leonard wasn’t budging.

“Sadly, I’m quite busy today. I’ll be on my way now.”

I turned away from Leonard to walk in the opposite direction, and fortunately, he didn’t seem to be following us. I was relieved, but then I heard his voice call out.

“All right, then. If today doesn’t work, how about the next time we meet?”

“...Sure, that would be best.”

I felt bad, but I knew the chance to see him again would never come. I was in disguise, and I hardly ever left castle grounds in the first pl— “It’s a promise. I’ll be sure to visit you at your royal villa sometime.”

“?!”

What did he just say?!

I whipped my head around and saw Leonard smirking at me.

“You’re Queen Laetitia, aren’t you, miss? I got a good look at you on the day you arrived in Wolfvarte. You waved at us all from up in your carriage.”

“...You only saw me that once? I’m surprised you remembered me.”

“I never forget the face of a beautiful woman.” He gave a wink and knocked on the neck of his lute. “Minstrels get around, you know. I’ll come visit you at your villa to sing you a song, so think of one you want to hear before I get there.”

“...I look forward to it.”

He gave a quick strum of the lute in his hands, and with that, he turned and left us there. I watched the cape flutter at his back as he disappeared into the alley with familiar ease.

“...What a smug man.”

I agreed with Lucian. He was smug and acted seductive, but both traits seemed to suit the man. I’d grown rather certain that Leonard and I would indeed meet again in the future...

“But before that, I want to try to find Berry.”

I took a look at our surroundings. A fair amount of time had passed in our ordeal with those thieves. Even if we returned to our search, Berry was probably long gone by now.



“I wonder where Berry could be...”

Ten days had passed since I met the man named Leonard. Berry’s

whereabouts were still a total mystery to me. Morning and night, I walked around in search of her with a plate of strawberry jam in one hand while attending to chores.

“We’re honored by your visit today, Your Majesty.”

I arrived at the Bureau of Magic and was greeted by Belleas. Ever since I took Tweety home with me, I made occasional trips back to the bureau and always spoke with Belleas upon my arrival.

As we discussed Cuddle Birds and various spells, Liddeus appeared and rushed over to us.

I bet he’s been up all night researching spells again.

The dark circles under his eyes only made his gaze more intense.

“Your Majesty, it’s great that you’re here. I wanted to speak to you about what we discussed earlier, the crest with a delayed spell and the composition of the magic base— Hey, what’re you doing?!” Liddeus let out a groan.

Keith, who was there as my guard, stopped him from approaching.

“Stay back, sorcerer. You’re too close to Her Majesty.”

“No, *you* stay back. I need to discuss magic with the queen. Get out of my way.”

“No, *you* get out of my way!”

The two were bickering. The bad blood between them seemed to stem from the first day they met.

“Please calm down, both of you. We can speak about magic at this distance.”

“Yeah, see?”

“...I understand.”

Liddeus was quiet, and Keith still seemed upset, but they both backed down.

Neither of them were bad people. They simply didn’t get along. Liddeus was a scholar and a bit of a magic nerd, while Keith was an outgoing, physically active knight. On top of the differences in their personalities, there was a deeper rift between them from their identities as sorcerer and beastfolk.

All beastfolk possessed incredible physical strength. Lelena, for example, rivaled me in strength even though she was only ten years old. While beastfolk were stronger on the whole, they were also completely unable to cast spells. This incompatibility with magic was the source of much mockery from humans. Beastfolk didn't think very highly of sorcerers either.

To Keith, Liddeus was never someone he would be able to get along with, and in turn, Liddeus didn't seem to care for Keith. The mood between the two of them was particularly biting.

As I silently wished the two could find a way to clear the air a bit, something caught my eye.

"Is that feather from your Cuddle Bird, Liddeus?"

The large light-blue feather was stuck between his cape and shirt. Each Cuddle Bird had a different color, which made identifying them from their feathers fairly easy.

"Oh, I guess so. He must have left it when he was clinging to me earlier."

It stood out like a sore thumb to me, but Liddeus didn't seem to have noticed it at all. He plucked the feather off with his bony fingers and began to offer his theories of magic to me.



"I believe that by connecting this base directly to a catalyst, I'll be able to improve and stabilize the conversion efficiency all at once."

Liddeus began to rattle off his thoughts regarding magic crests. His words were rapid and packed to the brim with information, but I managed to follow him and respond with my own opinions.

"Well, in that case, I believe the catalyst for the second base on the crest you're developing should be made of mercury instead of moonstone. What about connecting it with wire to the third base as well?"

"Connect a wire to the third base...? No, wait, that would mean I need to alter all the connecting points on every base, not just the second..."

Liddeus's rapid speech only increased in speed, perhaps because what I'd said

struck a chord with him. By that point, I couldn't even make out what he was saying any longer.

I had to throw in the towel, as there was no keeping up with him now.

I fell silent, though Liddeus hardly seemed to notice, as he continued to rush out one thought after another.

"Good to see you, Your Majesty. It appears that Liddeus has taken great interest in your suggestion." Belleas was kind enough to step in when he saw the signs of fatigue on my face. He was a caring, considerate person.

"I'm just glad I can be of help... However, I've only dabbled in magic research myself. I can't imagine my knowledge holds up to the standards of a scholar like Liddeus."

Liddeus devoted every waking moment of his life to the study of magic knowledge and the creation of crests. I was a sorcerer too, but my specialty was in the practical use of magic. There was no way my knowledge rivaled that of someone with as much research experience as him.

"That's not true! Your input has been a big help, as you have a unique point of view. Magic research differs from country to country, which is why Liddeus has been so eager to discuss it with you."

"Is that so...?"

That didn't quite sound right to me, but there was no way Liddeus was putting up an act. I was glad to learn that my simple knowledge was proving useful here.

"At such a young age, your knowledge of magic appears most impressive. It's what one would expect from someone brought up in the Kingdom of Elltoria. I envy you, in fact." Belleas continued on. "Elltoria conducts much more research on magic than we do, and I've heard they receive lots of capital in the pursuit of such studies.

"...It's true that we have more sorcerers back home than you do here."

Roughly half of the Wolfvartian population was beastfolk. This resulted in a lower proportion of sorcerers throughout the country, which appeared to be a

source of hardship for these men.

“I truly envy you. Our bureau is always pressed for funding, and the building itself is hidden away in a corner of the castle grounds.” Orth’s words came out like a sigh.

He seemed to have his own frustrations on the treatment of sorcerers in Wolfvarte.

“Beastfolk soldiers take up all the good jobs in the army and defense forces. That’s why there are fewer opportunities for us to prove the usefulness of magic, which leads to our budget getting cut. It’s a vicious cycle that’s gone on for many years now...” Orth sighed even deeper than before.

“Please don’t be so upset, Orth. If I remember correctly, hasn’t His Majesty increased the bureau’s budget since he took the throne?”

“...While I appreciate King Glenreed’s efforts, the truth is that it’s still not enough. I know it’s not something that can be fixed overnight, but still, it’s a painful situation...”

Orth seemed to have no shortage of complaints.

No matter how strong their motivation was, without funding, the bureau’s research couldn’t make progress. At the same time, however, they couldn’t take any funding from the military, which was controlled by beastfolk. The problem was complex. I wondered if this was another reason why Liddeus treated beastfolk like Keith with such hostility.



“I’M exhausted...”

I slumped back into the carriage seat.

The sun was already low in the sky by the time I left the Bureau of Magic.

It was a draining feat to keep up with Liddeus’s magic discussions. I was glad to be on the receiving end of such abundant knowledge and new theories about spells, but I felt like I’d practically overloaded my brain.

I leaned my forehead against the inner wall of the carriage, feeling like my head needed support before it broke out into a fever.

With my mind in a daze, I gazed out the window and watched the rose bushes pass by in a blur.

“Rose season is almost at its peak...”

Five days from now was the day of the Rose Gathering—just in time to see the roses at their best. Since the date was decided months in advance, the Rose Gathering tended to miss the peak from year to year. But we were lucky this time. The date fell right when the roses would be in their most beautiful state.

“I sure hope Berry comes back by the Rose Gathering...”

“I agree,” Lucian said with a nod.

I could tell he was saddened by Berry’s sudden disappearance too.

With a gloomy mood in the air, we exited the carriage, only to be met with yet another concerning incident.

“Lelena left the villa?”

“Yes, that appears to be what happened.” The ears of Borgan, my head butler, were drooping with guilt. “She was scheduled for a job she never showed up for, and when I went to her room, this was what I found.”

I ran my eyes over the scrap of paper Borgan handed me.

“Melan made Berry run away, and I feel very guilty for that after all you’ve done for me. I don’t want to cause you any more trouble, so Melan and I will be leaving the villa.”

That was what the slightly warped brush strokes of her message read.

Judging from her handwriting, I could tell how overwhelmed she must have felt.

“Why would Lelena do this...?”

It wasn’t Melan’s fault that Berry ran away from home. I had told that to Lelena so many times, and yet it appeared to not be enough for her. She was an upstanding young girl, and the worries inside her were enough to make her feel like she had to leave.

“It’s my job to oversee the servants, Your Majesty. I always intend to be sure

the villa is a safe place, and I must apologize for losing track of Elena.”

“There’s nothing more you can do. It’s perfectly protected from intruders on the outside, but I don’t believe it’s possible to prevent escapes from the inside.”

Elena was a fast learner and a diligent worker. Perhaps, as she’d been running around the villa during her maid training, she managed to memorize the guards’ patterns and find the perfect time to escape.

“We can review the guards’ defense of the villa later. Right now, the priority is finding Elena. How is the search going?”

“I’ve asked all servants who don’t have urgent business to look for her, but as of now, no one has s—”

“Your Majesty!!” A servant was rushing over to us in a panic. “Look at this! I found it on the ground outside by the woods!”

“...A maid’s hair covering?”

The white cloth was part of a maid uniform—it was worn in their hair. The cloth was smaller than usual, indicating it belonged to a child. It was Elena’s.

“I’m sure this belongs to Elena, and I also found this note with it.”

“What is this...?”

I could feel the look on my face turn grim.

A few simple sentences were written on the paper.

“Elena’s mine now. If you want her back, then you’ll have to meet my demands...”

That was how the note began.

Chapter 6: Lord Aroo and the Cascade of Memories

“WHAT poor timing...”

I let out a heavy sigh as I sat in my bedroom chair.

I’d already given out the necessary orders to my servants after learning of Lelena’s kidnapping, but there was still no foreseeable way to get her back just yet.

“If she’d simply felt overwhelmed and fled, that would have been the best outcome...”

Lelena was intelligent, but she was still just a child. It was hard to imagine she’d be able to escape the castle grounds on her own, even if she *did* manage to slip past the villa guards. If she’d simply run away, it would probably be easy to find her still in the vicinity.

...But it appeared that instead, she’d run into a third party outside the villa who was interested in capturing her.

“The kidnapper must be a relative of Diaz...”

Diaz was currently imprisoned for a long list of crimes. However, her relatives still walked free, and they harbored a great grudge against Krona and Lelena. Of course, they never tried to make their way into the villa itself, but on occasion, I’d heard of them checking out the property from a distance.

“...The kidnapper wants me to publicly announce my intent to cancel all future tea parties between humans and beastfolk...”

Diaz and her relatives were nobles, meaning they were allowed entry to the castle grounds, and they also looked down on beastfolk. It appeared that they were displeased with my attempt to bring the two races closer together.

“What shall you do, my lady?” Lucian was asking if I was prepared to accept the kidnapper’s demands.

“...I can’t abandon Lelena...”

But even if I did give in to their demands, chances were low that Lelena would

be returned safely. I imagined that if I obeyed, the kidnapper would only return with even more horrible conditions in exchange for Lelena's life.

"...I believe she's still somewhere in the castle grounds."

The territory within the castle walls was vast, but thankfully, there weren't too many places where a captive could be held without being noticed.

I prayed that we would find a clue as to Lelena's whereabouts, and on that night, there was nothing we could do but wait and see what happened next.



MORNING came to the villa. As I was eating breakfast, I heard the loud thumping of footsteps growing closer.

"They've found some clues in the search for Lelena!"

"I!"

I set my fork down and turned around to face Borgan.

"What is it? What kind of clues?"

"A number of items were uncovered during the search of a possible location you suggested, Your Majesty."

"Did they find Lelena?"

"Unfortunately, the place was empty. There were signs that it was recently occupied, but it appears she's already been moved somewhere else."

"I see..."

The situation wasn't resolved yet, but this was still an important lead.

"Was there a clue to the perpetrator's identity, or perhaps the next location where they took Lelena?"

"Nothing definitive, no. However, I've brought the items that were left at the scene. They are currently out in the front yard now. Will you come take a look at them, Your Majesty?"

"Of course."

The two of us rushed to the front yard. As soon as we exited the villa, I could

see a group of people gathered outside. The villa guards were also offering their help in the search for Lelena's kidnapper.

I saw Keith in the crowd too. He was gripping his spear.

"These were the items left behind at the scene."

He pointed at a cloth spread out on the lawn. On top of the cloth, I could see various objects such as chairs, sticks, scraps of fabric, and more. I surveyed them, one by one, until something caught my attention.

"That feather..."

It was a light blue feather, seemingly that of a bird, but it was as long as the palm of my hand. Judging by the size and the color...

"Liddeus's Cuddle Bird...?"

"Liddeus?!" Keith's sharp ears picked up my murmured remark. "That fiend! So he's involved with the kidnapping, huh?!"

Keith was crying out in anger. It appeared that when it came to Liddeus, the man he always disliked in the first place, he couldn't contain his suspicion and rage.

"I always knew that sorcerer was up to no good, but I never thought he'd do something as evil as kidn—"

"Pardon me, Your Majesty." Borgan's voice was loud enough to interrupt Keith's cries. His eyes were incredibly serious, and I could tell he had important information to share with me. "A guest has just arrived for you."

A guest? Who could it be?

The person who arrived upon Borgan's introduction...

"A Mr. Liddeus is here to see you."

...was none other than the man who'd found himself at the center of suspicion.



I met with Liddeus there in the villa yard once he'd passed through the front gates.

He didn't seem to care about the hostile aura around him—he simply walked toward me in a perfectly straight line.

“Good day, Liddeus. What brings you to my villa today?”

“A delivery. I found that book you said you wanted to read, so I came to hand it over.”

“...You came all the way here just for that?”

Liddeus, the man who was obsessed with research, seemed to have taken up partial residence in the Bureau of Magic. I remembered the pained smile on Orth's face when he explained that Liddeus hardly ever left the building, except in extreme circumstances.

“...I did it for you, Your Majesty.”

Liddeus averted his eyes as he said those words. Very suspicious.

“H-Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?!” Keith snapped at the man. He couldn't seem to hold in his emotions upon seeing Liddeus's abrupt behavior. “You kidnapped Lelena, didn't you, Liddeus?!”

“...What did you just say?” Liddeus's gaze sharpened as he glared back at Keith. “What are you talking about? Don't just make up wild accusations.”

“Wild accusations?! Then how do you explain this?!”

“That's...!!”

Liddeus's face stiffened when Keith pointed at the light blue feather. The sorcerer turned away from him as if to hide his expression.

“...I've finished my business here. I'll be leaving now.”

“Trying to run, are ya?!”

Liddeus walked off into the distance, paying no mind to Keith's cries.

“Wait! We have to stop hi— Your Majesty?!”

Just as Keith tried to point his spear at Liddeus, I moved forward to block his line of sight.

“Keith, put your spear away. You won't solve anything like that.”

“But...!!” Keith gritted his teeth. He squeezed the shaft of his spear tightly, as if to quell his rage.

“Calm down, Keith. I’m not just going to let Liddeus entirely off the hook.”

“...Do you have something in mind?”

In response to Keith’s question...

“Bait.”

I replied with that simple word.



NIGHT fell and covered the world in darkness. Lucian and I were hiding in the trees that surrounded the Bureau of Magic.

“...Do you think he’ll show up?”

“I’m sure of it.”

As the two of us whispered to each other, we caught sight of a figure emerging quietly from the back entrance of the building.

The man, with his black hair and black cloak, blended into the night. It was Liddeus, as I’d predicted, with a grim look on his face. He looked around at his surroundings, then headed into a dark thicket of trees. Silently, we tailed the man, taking great care not to lose sight of him. We eventually reached a spot in the dark forest where the trees were sparser. As Liddeus waited out there under the light of the moon, another figure approached him.

“...Liddeus, why did you call me out here in the middle of the woods? Explain yourself.”

The man was none other than Belleas—one of the sorcerers who worked at the Bureau of Magic.

Liddeus continued to stare down the dubious Belleas.

“There’s something I need to confirm.”

“What is it? It’s late, so keep it short.”

“...Belleas, you have something to do with Lelena’s kidnapping, don’t you?”

“...!” Belleas gulped, unable to hide his shock at the sudden question. “What are you talking about? Don’t tell me you stayed up all night researching again!”

“It’s not that. I’m perfectly sane. Now stop wasting time and tell me the truth.”

Liddeus held up the staff he’d been clutching. This staff had a spell engraved in the surface that would aid in the use of magic. When an experienced sorcerer wielded this staff, they only needed to chant a very brief spell in order to launch an offensive attack.

Belleas flinched a bit at Liddeus’s display of resolve.

“...I see.” Belleas’ shoulders slumped as he spoke. “How did you figure it out?”

“A coincidence.”

“You’ve got nothing but magic in your brain, yet you just happened to notice that I was acting strange?”

“...Yesterday, when I went to ask you where the magic catalysts were, I found you speaking to an outsider.”

“Oh, you saw that... We’re an unlucky pair, aren’t we?”

Belleas looked up at the sky. He seemed to have come to understand something.

Liddeus continued to stare intently at Belleas, who showed no signs of panic.

“I happened to overhear your conversation. ...I couldn’t make out much, but I heard ‘kidnapped,’ ‘captive,’ ‘help me out,’ and ‘co-conspirator.’ That’s how I knew it was serious.”

So Liddeus had begun to suspect Belleas after eavesdropping on his conversation. He must have secretly followed Belleas after that and arrived at the place where Lelena was being held. It was there that the light blue Cuddle Bird feather, which happened to be caught under his cloak, dislodged and fell to the ground.

“...Belleas, you can’t participate in this kidnapping anymore. Don’t add to your crimes.” Liddeus kept his staff at the ready as he spoke.

“So you’ve come to stop me then?”

“That’s the plan.”

“...And if I refuse?”

“I’ll use magic.” Liddeus began to quickly chant a spell. However...

“You fool.”

“Guh!!”

Belleas sent his knee flying straight into Liddeus’s stomach.

“Physical blows are much faster at this range.”

“Hey, what are you...?!”

“...There’s really nothing in your head but magic, is there?”

Belleas caught the now unconscious Liddeus as he fell. He laid the sorcerer down on the grass, then scratched his head in confusion.

“...But with nothing but magic in there, how’d you manage to figure it all out? You really are so pesky.” As Belleus muttered to himself, I knew it was time.

“Fly, net of lightning!!”

“Argh!!”

I sent out a lightning spell that hit Belleas head-on. It wasn’t lethal, but it would serve to immobilize him for a while. The spell was something like a stun gun. Once Belleas was a safe distance away from Liddeus, it was easy for me to target him with this spell.

“Wh— What are you...?”

Belleas, his limbs numb, stared up at me. Only his tongue and eyes could move freely, while his arms and legs stiffened in place.

“He certainly took the bait, didn’t he, my lady?” Lucian retrieved a rope and quickly began to tie Belleas up. This way, he wouldn’t be able to move even when the paralysis wore off.

“Bait...? Ah, I see... So that’s...what this was...”

He seemed to understand what Lucian was implying.

When Liddeus came to my villa and acted strangely, I could have chosen to have him restrained on the spot, but I decided to let him go instead. I simply had a strong hunch that Liddeus was not the culprit himself.

He was a man too obsessed with magic to possess any kind of convincing acting skills. There was absolutely no way, in my mind, that he would be so capable of deceiving everyone around him and participating in something like a kidnapping.

From that conclusion, I was able to work backward and form another hypothesis. It was at that point I realized the kidnapper must be someone close to Liddeus.

Liddeus himself had only dropped the Cuddle Bird feather as he pursued the real culprit. And if he believed he could find the right time to convince this culprit to surrender and refrain from any further involvement, then that explained why he didn't reveal the whole story when Keith accused him of the kidnapping. He wanted the offender to turn himself in so that he might face a lighter punishment.

"We could have captured Liddeus and forced him to reveal the kidnapper's identity, but who knows if he would've talked...and if the culprit was someone close to him, they might get suspicious and run. That's why I decided to let Liddeus go free and use him to search for the kidnapper myself." I looked at Belleas as I spoke.

The paralysis should have worn off by now, but Lucian had him completely tied up.

"Tell me, Belleas. Where is Lelena right now?"

"...A room in the bureau that no one uses." Belleas confessed instantly. He seemed to understand that resistance would be futile.

"How many lookouts are posted there?"

"...Not a single one. I was supposed to be the one guarding her, most of the time."

I cocked my head.

Not a single guard to watch over a kidnapped girl? Could it be possible?

I knew he might just be trying to trick us into letting our guard down, but for some reason, I got the sense he was telling the truth.

“...Thank you for the information. We’ll be going, then.”

When I turned to look toward the bureau building, I sensed a faint shift in Belleas’s demeanor. I knew he might make a run for it while we were off rescuing Lelena.

“You’ll join us, won’t you, Belleas?”

“...You’re going to make your servant carry me?”

“No, I’m not. I want him to keep his hands free.” I shook my head, while Belleas looked on, puzzled.

It was true that Lucian was the only person I’d brought there with me. I’d imagined that bringing a large group along might only serve to alert Lelena’s kidnappers, and I didn’t want her being harmed as a result of that.

“Don’t tell me you think you can carry me yourself, Your Majesty...?”

“Indeed, I do.”

Belleas was taken aback by the smile I gave him.

Immediately, I turned to face him and chanted a spell.

“Formless grasp, light as leaves, flutter and rise up high!”

“...!”

The whoosh of wind came with a silent scream. Belleas was swallowed up by the wind, and his body thrown up over the treetops and toward the Bureau of Magic. I kept the direction of the wind controlled so that it carried his scream off into the night.

I maintained enough control so as not to hurt him, but I knew how terrifying the experience must be. As soon as he crashed back down on the ground, I knew he wouldn’t be able to stand on two legs for some time.

“There you go. That was a perfect landing.”

“Well done, my lady. Was that the ‘slam dunk’ I’ve heard you refer to before?”

“I think that’s a little different...”

As Lucian expressed his praise for me, I turned back toward where Liddeus was collapsed on the ground. I used the wind to carry his body up as well, though much more gently this time.

When I returned to the bureau with Liddeus, I saw that Belleas was passed out near the back entrance of the building. I had Lucian search him for weapons, just to be safe, and found a single key in his pocket. It was a perfect fit for the backdoor lock, thankfully enough.

We proceeded deeper into the pitch-black, silent building where we’d been told that Lelena was being held. The room we arrived at was nestled in the back of the building. It appeared to be old and in a state of disrepair.

“Are you all right, Lelena?!”

After looking around the premises and opening the door, I saw that the room was a tiny one. A single bed was set up in the corner, where Lelena was laying on her side. It appeared that Belleas had been telling the truth. I didn’t see any guards around whatsoever.

“...She’s asleep.”

Lelena didn’t stir, even when Lucian poked her cheek.

I didn’t see any bruises or injuries on her body. She really did just appear to be sleeping. More than a full day had passed since Lelena was abducted and held captive, and I was sure she must have been drained from the whole experience. No wonder she was fast asleep.

“I don’t really want to wake her...”

The best option was to wake her up once we returned to the total safety of the villa, so I decided to gently carry her back with my wind spell.

As I returned to Belleas, now with the slumbering Lelena, I heard a groan from below.

“Mmph... Where am I...?” Liddeus, who’d lain slumped against a wall, was

regaining consciousness. “Your Majesty...? What’s going on...?”

“Belleas knocked you out, so I carried you back to the bureau.”

“Belleas?” Liddeus let out a gasp. He looked around at his surroundings, and the sorcerer’s eyes went wide when he saw Belleas tied up and the sleeping Lelena. “You’re the one who captured him, aren’t you, Your Majesty?”

“...Does that upset you?”

Liddeus closed his eyes.

“No, I’m glad. ...It’s best that he be detained before he adds to his list of crimes.”

“You were worried about him, weren’t you, Liddeus?”

“...Worried?”

Liddeus always behaved like nothing other than magic mattered an ounce to him. But I was certain that wasn’t the whole story.

“You realized he was behaving suspiciously because you care about him as a colleague, and that’s why you were paying close attention.”

“What are you talking about? All I cared about were his fascinating theories of magic.”

I couldn’t help but laugh when I saw how Liddeus cocked his head in total confusion. His words were expected, coming from the man who had nothing but magic on the brain.

“What is it? Why are you laughing?”

“It’s nothing. I just feel like you’re a kind person on the inside, and you must truly care about the people in your life.”

His Cuddle Bird cared about him so much, it wasn’t unusual to see those light blue feathers stuck to the sorcerer. He seemed to be the source of many problems when it came to his magic obsession, but in his own way, he cared a lot about the people of the bureau and the Cuddle Birds.

Feeling calmed by Liddeus’s awkwardness, I noticed he turned his face away from me.

“What is it, Liddeus?”

“...I think you’re much kinder than I am.”

As Liddeus muttered his response, I could’ve sworn his ears looked redder than usual. I was wondering what was wrong, when suddenly, a strange sensation crept over me.

“Hmm...?”

I looked around to find the source of my concern.

Is it Liddeus? No, it’s not him.

My eyes traveled past him and toward the back window, where I saw smoke billowing past.

“A fire?!”

I looked outside in a panic and saw that the surrounding forest was ablaze. The thick smoke carried a burning stench to our noses.

“Urk. What’s that smell...?” Belleas had just awoken. His eyes went wide when he realized what was going on. “Don’t tell me they started this fire?!”

“So you know what caused this?” I asked.

“...It’s from a crest.” Belleas’s face paled as he responded.

“Are your co-conspirators responsible?”

“I believe so. They must have activated the crest when you surprised them with your arrival, Your Majesty!!”

“...What I want to know is why you had such a dangerous crest at the ready...”

But putting out the fire was more important right now. The forest fire was on the verge of taking the entire building with it.

“Liddeus, do you know where the Cuddle Birds are kept?!”

“It’s the room on the back right.”

“Can you keep an eye on both Belleas and the Cuddle Birds for me?”

“Got it! But what about you?!” Liddeus cried out as the light of the fire reflected against him from the windows.

“I’m going to be sure the fire doesn’t spread to this building!”

“On your own?!”

“Yes! You’ll see!”

I had to answer him while I took off running. There was no time to waste.

Lucian and I made it outside, where I quickly chanted a spell.

“Blessed droplets!”

I formed a water spell to douse the flames. But the only result I observed was the water sizzling out against the fire in a plume of smoke.

“This isn’t enough.”

The fire roared back to life as soon as the steam evaporated.

I attempted to cover the flames with dirt, but they always leapt back up from the gaps in the earth.

The origin of the fire—a crest—seemed to make the flames all the more resilient. Even if I cut it down with a whirlwind spell, taking the trees with it, there was still a chance the fire would spread farther.

“...I may have to keep a sustained rainstorm over the area.”

Weather control involved high-tier spells, but with my current amount of magic energy, there was no reason it wasn’t possible.

There was, however, one problem...

“It will really stand out.”

“Most conspicuous indeed.”

Lucian and I spoke at the same time.

To cast a rainstorm spell, I had to first create rain clouds in the sky itself. Despite the late hour, this would be a sure cause for alarm. Their small size would only make them stand out due to their unnatural appearance.

Honestly, with the attention that the crimson flames were already sure to draw, I didn’t want to resort to this spell at all. It could even mean the end to my life of leisure entirely...

Lucian's eyes were on me, waiting for me to make a choice.

Sparks flew close to our direction.

There wasn't much time left. At this rate, Lelena or the Cuddle Birds could be injured in the fire. Drawing attention to myself didn't matter if such an outcome was preventable.

With my mind made up, I was just about to chant the spell, when suddenly...

"Huh...?"

Something unbelievable was happening right before my eyes.

"This white stuff..."

It was ice.

A layer of white snow and ice began to cover the trees, taking the flames out with it. It was as if this section of the woods alone had been sent plunging into the depths of winter.

"What's going on...?" Lucian couldn't hide his shock either.

The two of us, completely dumbfounded, stared at the transformed forest. Just then...

"...Aroo."

With the most familiar of cries, Lord Aroo himself appeared on the scene.



"...AROO."

Glenreed let out a low cry and gazed at Laetitia with his blue-green eyes.

...It doesn't look like she has any burns.

Still in silver wolf form, Glenreed let out a sigh of relief.

Laetitia had left on her own to apprehend Lelena's kidnapper. Once Glenreed learned of this, he took the form of the silver wolf and followed her in secret.

I was just supposed to be observing, not interfering...

But those plans didn't last long.

He caught a glimpse of Laetitia, lost in thought, as the forest burned right in front of her. Before he knew it, he'd sprung into action, worried that an ember might land on her at any moment.

Glenreed's rational thoughts always grew weaker whenever he was in wolf form.

"Why are you here...? Wait, could it be that you're the one who made this ice?"

"Aroo!!"

He nodded his head one time to show that she was correct. With this, he caused a pillar of ice to grow at his feet in a display of the power.

One of Glenreed's special abilities was the control of snow and ice. He was able to freeze anything he wanted without the use of a spell or crest.

"Lord Aroo, you really *were* an incredible Sacred Beast, weren't you...?"

Laetitia seemed deeply impressed as she surveyed the ice-covered forest. As a sorcerer herself, she had to know the incredible significance behind what she had just witnessed.

...I never meant to reveal this power to her.

Glenreed lowered his eyes sadly.

This was the last time he would be able to see her in this form. Sacred Beasts were powerful beings and had direct ties to the secrets of the royal family of this kingdom. Regardless of how Laetitia felt, now that she knew the true power of the Sacred Beast, they couldn't go on spending time together like they always had.

"Roo..."

Glenreed let out a farewell cry. The message seemed to reach her, and her face clouded with sadness.

"I won't be able to see you anymore, Lord Aroo?"

"....."

Silently, Glenreed took one step away from Laetitia.

Don't make that face. It's not like we'll never see each other again. We'll still be a king and figurehead queen, so we can meet when the occasion arises...

...But he didn't want that.

It was as if something deep inside his heart was calling out to him. He tried to crush those unsettled emotions to prevent them from appearing, and just as Glenreed was about to leave...

"Wha?"

He turned around when he heard that silly sound come out of Laetitia's mouth.

"What kind of noise...was...that...?" The more he spoke, the more Glenreed felt his face go stiff.

Those words weren't the grunts of a wolf.

It was the unmistakable sound of his own human vocal cords.

"You're..."

Speechless, Glenreed took a moment to comprehend the situation.

In wolf form, Glenreed's rational thoughts grew weaker, and his emotions tended to be much stronger. He hadn't wanted to leave Laetitia, and he didn't want her to be sad either. But it appeared that those desires had distracted him enough to override the control he wielded over his own transformations.



"YOU'RE..."

I was dumbfounded by the appearance of the most unexpected person imaginable.

"...King Glenreed?"

Incredulous, I called out the name of the man before me.



I don't understand.

It didn't make any sense.

Why was the king here, and where had Lord Aroo gone to?

My brain was on the verge of overload.

"Could it be..."

"....."

His Majesty didn't say a word.

The silence filled me with a deep sense of dread.

"King Glenreed, were you the one transforming into Lord Aroo...?"

That was the only logical conclusion: Lord Aroo was King Glenreed.

Suddenly, along with this shocking reveal, a cascade of memories involving Lord Aroo swirled around inside my brain.

"You're such a little hunk, Lord Aroo!"

"Fluffa fluffa fluffa fluff!"

"Paw pads make the world go round...!!"

"Hehe. The slicker brush feels nice, doesn't it?"

"Aaaahhh! This fur brings me back to life!!"

All the ridiculous things I said to Lord Aroo, and all those dumb smiles on my face...

King Glenreed had witnessed every last one of them.

"You've got to be kidding me!!"

My life is over.

I was screaming that from the depths of my very soul.



"**I'M** truly, truly sorry...!" I cried out in apology to His Majesty. It was the first thing I decided on, now that my shameful acts were exposed. "I'm so sorry for

petting you all those times when you were Lord Aroo...”

“...Stop it. I don’t know how to respond.”

His Majesty’s words came out indifferent. His face was as beautiful and rigid as ever, but right now, I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“I didn’t know it was you, Your Majesty, but still, the way I treated Lord Aroo...”

I just wanted to squirm in agony.

I was so intense when I petted Lord Aroo, and even teased him at times... It was an outright parade of disrespect in the face of the king. I wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if he chose to lock me up for such behavior.

“...Forget all about it. That’s what you need to do.”

“There’s no way I can do that...”

His Majesty’s face was calm, in contrast to my panic.

Maybe the two of us are just built differently.

That was the ridiculous thought that ended up in my brain.

“...I’m sorry for all of my shameful displays.”

I took a deep breath. I needed to get back on track. My mind couldn’t keep up with the shock of this situation, but there were still things I needed to do first.

“If we stay here, we’re just asking for someone to spot us. Why don’t we head someplace else so that we can share what we know?”

“...I agree. Let me come with you to your villa.”

His Majesty gave a little nod, and suddenly, his features began to change. A flash of light shot out, and Lord Aroo appeared where the king once stood.

“...So I really wasn’t seeing things.”

That was what Lucian muttered as he watched King Glenreed transform into Lord Aroo. He was the only other witness to the reveal of Lord Aroo’s secret.

Liddeus was still inside the Bureau of Magic, and I didn’t believe he could have seen anything.

“Lucian, about that transformation—”

“I understand. I’ll keep it to myself.”

“You’re always so quick. I appreciate it.”

I would expect nothing less from Lucian.

As long as Lucian stayed quiet, there was no reason to worry that His Majesty’s secret would be leaked to anyone on the outside.

I breathed a sigh of relief. The two of us stared down at Lord Aroo.

“I watched him cling to my lady because I believed him to be nothing more than an animal...”

Lord Aroo had fallen on the receiving end of a gaze filled with unbridled criticism.



ONCE I confirmed that Liddeus and the Cuddle Birds were safe, I decided to return to the villa. Belleas was powerless for now, and people would probably arrive soon when they saw what had happened to the forest.

Lord Aroo and I arrived at my villa with Lelena, and then the two of us agreed to take some time in the parlor together to sort out the day’s events.

“I see. I think I’ve got the whole story now. I’ll deal with Belleas and his crew of kidnappers myself.” His Majesty nodded when he heard the details of Lelena’s abduction. He was in his human form once again, sitting on the couch opposite from me.

“Thank you for your help. ...Now may I ask about your personal circumstances as well?”

“You mean my silver w— My transformation into Lord Aroo?”

I nodded.

My first question was one delivered with the utmost fear and hesitation.

“Do you remember everything that happens to you when you take the form of Lord Aroo?”

“...Mostly, yes.”

“...!!”

I couldn't help but recoil.

Urk...

Even though I knew it was coming, that answer knocked the wind out of me.

All those times I lost myself in petting Lord Aroo's fur, humming silly songs to myself, and everything else I'd done too...

As Lord Aroo, the king himself had witnessed all of it. He still remembered it right now. I felt like I could drop dead from shame. I had no idea how I was supposed to face His Majesty from now on.

“...Don't worry about it. I'm in the same position that you are,” His Majesty said as I writhed in agony. “The times I visited you as Lord Aroo, and the things I saw you do during those times. It'd be better if we both keep our mouths shut about all of it.”

“...You're right...”

All I could do was weakly accept the helpful words he offered me. Even though, on the inside, I was still ready to die of embarrassment...

His Majesty didn't strike me as the type to reveal the humiliating sides I'd shown during our time together.

“...By the way, why did you transform back into a human before me, when you've always kept your identity a secret?”

“The transformation was just a bit off.”

I guess the transformation from wolf to human isn't perfect every time?

I was so curious about many aspects of the situation, but decided not to voice my questions just yet.

Regardless of the king's circumstances, one thing was certain: he'd really helped me out by stopping that forest fire with his powers. I hadn't resorted to casting a high-tier rainstorm spell, which meant my peaceful life would go on as usual.

It was late, and the king would be busy when morning came, so I decided to press him for more details at a later date. His Majesty transformed back into Lord Aroo, and I headed for my bedroom.

“I’m exhausted...”

I dove into bed after saying farewell to His Majesty. But despite how tired my body was, my mind was still running wild, so I doubted I’d be falling asleep any time soon.

“Peep?”

Tweety cocked his head as he peered at me.

The Cuddle Bird who loved my magic always spent his nights in my room.

He pressed his soft, ticklish feathers against my body.

“Now that feels much better! This is cheering me up, but...”

Tweety’s black eyes stared closely at me.

“...I’m sure you’re not secretly another person who’s transforming into a Cuddle Bird, right, Tweety...?”

The shock of Lord Aroo’s identity was causing me to become distrustful of others.

As an answer to my question...

“Peepa peepa peep!”

“Want more cuddles? Want more cuddles?”

Tweety hugged me with his feathers, letting out a happy series of chirps.



“**I**M still sleepy...”

It was the next morning. Still in my bedroom, I had to force myself not to let out a yawn. Thanks to Tweety’s soft embrace, I’d fallen asleep faster than I even realized. However, perhaps due to the mental shock of last night’s events, my body still felt heavy and sleep-deprived.

“Lelena’s still asleep, isn’t she?”

“Yes. I checked on her earlier, but she appeared to still be out cold.”

Lucian stood completely alert and looked to be entirely well rested. It was hard to believe he’d been through the same events that I was last night.

“I’m sure she’s tired. Let’s let her rest until she awakens on her own.”

There were many things I wanted to discuss with her, but Lelena’s health came first. I decided to prioritize tying up loose ends after the kidnapping case.

I rubbed my tired eyes as I finished my breakfast, and it was then that Borgan appeared with a piece of paper in hand.

“A letter from His Majesty has arrived for you.”

“...From King Glenreed?”

Doubt filled my mind as I took the paper from his hands. I’d been planning on waiting for His Majesty to arrange a time for us to meet and discuss recent events. I never expected him to send a letter so soon.

““Come to the rose garden’...?”

The words in his handwriting were skewed, and I realized it must have been written in a rush.



“**OH** no...”

I stood at the entrance to the rose garden, completely lost for words.

It was nothing like the garden I’d seen during my last visit here. Most of the roses were scattered in the dirt, leaves had been ripped straight from the vines, and stems had snapped and collapsed, all throughout the grounds.

“They must have done this last night.” The tone of King Glenreed’s voice was much deeper than usual as he glared at the disastrous state of the rose garden. “This is certainly the work of those who plotted Lelena’s kidnapping.”

“So they had another goal in mind the whole time...”

Lelena’s kidnapping partially happened by chance. It was just a coincidence that she happened to run away from the villa and was spotted by her abductor. The lack of a concrete plan was probably also why she was being kept in the

bureau without a single guard on lookout.

“...Belleas and his gang wanted to destroy this rose garden,” I said ruefully.

“So it appears.”

His Majesty furrowed his brow at the state of the garden.

The king had interrogated Belleas first thing this morning. While Belleas hadn't confessed to everything just yet, the king came to learn the general details about the group's plot.

“Belleas really did join forces with Diaz's relatives,” he said.

“...And those relatives are people who despise beastfolk.”

This rose garden was special in that it belonged exclusively to the royal family. Naturally, it was guarded closely by the finest of knights, which in this kingdom meant beastfolk.

“The culprits must have been trying to sully the reputations of the garden's guards, as well as beastfolk as a whole.” I recalled Orth's words as I spoke.

Most of the kingdom's military budget was paid to beastfolk soldiers. Orth had complained that this was why the Bureau of Magic suffered from insufficient funds. Belleas was with him at that time too, and he didn't deny Orth's words. Perhaps Belleas had secretly been harboring resentment over the distribution of funds as well.

“By joining those criminals and damaging the reputation of beastfolk soldiers, he must have been attempting to secure a larger budget for the Bureau of Magic,” I said.

“It looks like that's the case. Diaz's relatives even promised to donate to the bureau if he helped them in their schemes,” His Majesty confirmed my suspicions.

“...So they made a deal behind the scenes...”

I let out a sigh.

Belleas's crimes were unforgivable, but I understood why a sorcerer such as him would grow frustrated with the state of the bureau. I wouldn't go so far as

to say that money ruled the world...but it was impossible to deny that everything, including magic research, needed a certain amount of financial support.

“...They can’t be let off the hook. Diaz’s relatives didn’t just attempt to hurt the reputation of beastfolk. They also tried to sully Your Majesty’s own name, right?”

His Majesty had played a big role in locking Diaz away in prison. Diaz’s imprisonment also meant that her relatives lost a great deal of political power, for which His Majesty had earned their scorn. Harassing the very king of Wolfvarte was a dangerous game, but it seemed they’d lost not just their social standing but their common sense as well.

“The Rose Gathering takes place in three days... But with the garden like this...”

There was almost no way the event could still be held.

“I suppose they might have chosen such reckless actions because the Rose Gathering is so soon,” I said.

The Rose Gathering had a history in this kingdom that spans many years. It was a tradition in which all the biggest figures throughout the land were invited to attend. Canceling the event now would hurt King Glenreed’s name.

“...Lelena’s kidnapping was only a lucky coincidence to the culprits,” he explained. “Their original plan was to use that flame-spawning crest to start a fire big enough to draw the attention of the guards while they snuck in and destroyed the rose garden.”

“So last night’s fire was a distraction...”

Though these guards were the most elite of their kind, a sudden, large fire within castle grounds would still be enough to throw them off, if only a little. The criminals used that opportunity to sneak into the garden. Their misdoings weren’t spotted until morning either, as they’d left the rose bushes closest to the entrance unharmed.

“I’m not letting them off the hook for Lelena’s kidnapping, but they sure did treat these roses terribly too.” I looked at the roses that had been plucked from

their stems.

The last time I was here, the garden was filled to the brim with large, beautiful flowers. That beauty was the result of the painstaking care and love the gardeners had poured into them. Such destruction couldn't be undone so easily.

"...Do you think you'll have to cancel this year's Rose Gathering?"

When he heard my question, King Glenreed looked conflicted.

"The gardeners are currently carrying out a thorough examination of the roses...but I'm not optimistic. I'm going to hear the results by the end of the day, and if it doesn't seem possible, I'll be formally announcing the cancellation of the Rose Gathering."



"...IT'S just one bad thing after another..."

I couldn't hold in a sigh as I sat in my carriage, departing from the rose garden.

It all began with Lelena's kidnapping, and now the Rose Gathering was at risk of cancellation. And in my personal life, Berry had gone missing from the villa, and then I learned the shocking truth behind Lord Aroo's identity. My head felt heavy with the weight of these events.

"I wonder where Berry could be...?"

I left my carriage and headed into the villa, choosing to ask that question aloud instead of letting out another sigh.

I really missed seeing the gray tabby-like pattern of Berry's fur. Her striped fuzzy coat alternated light and dark gray in color, and her tail casually bobbed from side to side in the air. Only her paw pads and nose were black, and the way she walked was like...

"Meow."

"...Huh?"

I blinked.

Huh? What?!

I blinked some more and started to wonder if I was now hallucinating Berry instead.

“Meow meow meow?”

Berry’s voice cried out once more.

She trotted up to me and began to nuzzle my legs.

Lucian, at my side, was just as startled, and that’s how I knew I wasn’t just dreaming or seeing things.

“Berry...!”

“Mragyah?!”

I scooped her up and squeezed her so tight. Berry’s gray fur tickled my cheek. I felt the soft warmth of her body in between my arms.

“Welcome home! Where have you been?”

I stroked her striped gray fur to my heart’s content, since I hadn’t experienced it in such a long time. After a while, Berry began to speak.

“Meow meow meow!!”

“Um, hold on. What are you...?”

I had to read the meaning behind her cries from her gestures and expressions.

“You can’t tell me where you went...?”

“Mrrraw mraw.”

“Oh, that’s not it? I’m a bit off?”

“Meow!!”

She was shaking her head, so I took a guess at where to go from there.

“You can’t tell me just yet, but you will sometime in the future... Is that it?”

“Meow meow!!”

I’d given the right answer this time.

...But what does that mean? Why can’t she tell me now?

Berry escaped from my arms and began to lick herself all over, grooming her messy fur back into place. She was acting cold, despite how long we'd been apart, but I could tell that the tip of her tail was swishing with happiness.

"...Such a troublesome little cat..."

Lucian looked somewhat bewildered by Berry's laid-back attitude. The concern he'd shown while she was missing was now completely hidden from his face.

"As long as you're back, that's all that matters. ...If you take more long trips away in the future, you'll be sure to return to the villa at some point, won't you?"

"Meow!!"

"Of course! This place is where I get my strawberry treats!"

With that implied sentiment, Berry gave a big nod.

I didn't feel as scared about her leaving the villa from here on out.

"Now I don't have to worry about Berry anymore. I just hope the rose garden situation works out too..."

"...Meow?"

"What did you just say?"

I heard that question in the tone of Berry's cry. She had visited the rose garden once before as well, so maybe that was why she recognized that phrase.

She stared up at me, demanding more of an explanation.

"You see..."

I told Berry all about the damage the rose garden had suffered. She silently listened to the whole story, appearing lost in thought.

"What is it, Berry? Are you thinking of using your magic to help out?"

Berry was a Gardener Cat. While most of her work went to growing and eating strawberries, she was capable of helping all plants grow. If she wanted to, Berry could probably heal the damaged roses and make them bloom again. However...

“The rose garden is a big place. Even if you give it your very best effort, I don’t think you can bring the roses back to the way they were before.”

“...Meow meow meow...”

“That’s true.”

Despite her response, she still appeared deep in thought.

“Mraw mraw mraw mraw, meow meow meow... Mrah!!”

It was as if she’d arrived at a conclusion of sorts.

Berry’s whiskers twitched as she turned around and took off in a run.

“Where are you going?”

She looked back at me, beckoning for me to follow her, then raced toward the back of the villa on all four legs. After some distance, Berry came to a stop. We’d come to a simple forest path with nothing in particular to note.

“What’s going on? Can you please expl—”

“Meow!!”

Berry cut me off loudly just as I demanded an explanation.

I looked around, wondering what was happening, when suddenly...

“Mraw!”

“Mee-ow!!”

“Mrah-raw-raw!!”

I suddenly heard a chorus of meows.

One by one, cats appeared through the rustling bushes and formed a group.

“Are these your friends, Berry? Or...are they...”

My eyes went wide.

All the cats around Berry began to stand up on their two hind legs.

“No, you’re not cats... Are you all...Gardener Cats...?”

The response I got was affirmative meows, one after another.

The large group was confirming that they were, in fact, Gardener Cats.

Chapter 7: What Makes a Meal Delicious

A total of twenty-nine Gardener Cats emerged from the bushes. They were white, black, gray, and orange, and some even had different colored paws, as if they were wearing socks. Each creature had a different fur pattern, but as proof that these were anything but normal cats, they stood up and walked around sturdily on their two hind legs.

“I can’t believe my eyes...”

As Mythical Beasts, Gardener Cats were supposed to be very rare creatures. Berry was the only one of her kind I’d seen until now, but all of a sudden, I was face-to-face with nearly thirty of them.

The Gardener Cats exchanged meows as they conversed with one another.

“...Berry, can you explain what’s going on?”

While Berry gazed up at me, I managed to extract information from her, piece by piece.

The entire group of Gardener Cats before me had been living in the capital, keeping their identities a secret. This wasn’t a difficult task either, since they resembled normal cats so strongly.

“You won’t be hunted if you live as cats...but you have no way to ask humans to cook for you either.”

Each and every Gardener Cat nodded their head.

Okay, that’s adorable.

The assembled Gardener Cats, all standing on two feet, looked like something straight out of a fairy tale or a fantasy book, and they all possessed the same habit of growing their favorite foods.

It didn’t sound like most of them were as passionate about food as Berry, but they still shared the desire to eat dishes that turned those favorite foods into something even more delicious. This was said to be something like an instinct of

theirs.

It was Berry who heard their many cries of discontent regarding their daily meals.

“So, Berry, you went all the way to the capital city and nearby towns to invite these Gardener Cats here, because you thought I might cook for them?”

“Mraw!!”

“Exactly!”

Berry let out a cry of agreement.

As a gourmet herself, Berry couldn't ignore the circumstances her fellow Gardener Cats found themselves in. Apparently, that time I'd spotted her in the city, she was right in the middle of extending her invitation.

“That's so sweet of you, Berry... But didn't you know I was worried about you? You should have told me you'd be leaving to bring more of your friends.”

I looked at her with teary eyes, and Berry made a gesture toward the other Gardener Cats. She then crossed her two paws into an X shape as if to deny something.

“Um, hang on, let me think...”

Lucian and I put our heads together to translate what Berry wanted to convey.

“...Oh, I see. It was the city Gardener Cats who wanted to keep it a secret, not you, right? They hadn't decided if they wanted to come here yet, so they didn't want a human like me to know they were out there.”

Gardener Cats had been hunted throughout history, and they were said to be very cautious animals. These ones made Berry keep their existence a secret from a complete stranger like me. It was only natural. Even now, the Gardener Cats were still keeping a bit of distance between us.

“It's nice to meet you all. I'm Laetitia, the owner of this villa. While personally, I'd love to welcome you all here...”

I should probably get His Majesty's permission before I let this many Gardner

Cats live with me.

Just as I arrived at that conclusion...

“Oh, I get it.” It hit me why Berry had chosen now to bring the Gardener Cats to meet with me. “You guys are going to help the roses in the rose garden bloom, aren’t you?”

I was looking at a group of twenty-nine Gardener Cats. It was very possible that a clowder this large would be capable of fixing the ravaged rose garden.

“So you want to work in the rose garden in exchange for His Majesty granting me permission to let you all live here...?”

I could hardly believe the plan Berry had come up with on the spot. As clever as she was, I found myself wondering if Gardener Cats were as intelligent as humans, or perhaps even more. Consider me impressed.

Berry let out a cry that, to my ears, sounded a lot like the words:

“So? You’ll take the deal, right?”



“DO you really think they can restore the rose garden to how it was before?”

His Majesty seemed doubtful as he gazed down at the Gardener Cats. I’d brought the group straight to the rose garden, where they were now crying out loudly to each other.

“Mew!”

“Meow!”

“Mraw mraw?”

They split up to take a look at the damaged roses. After a walk through the garden, they returned to one spot, where they seemed to be consulting each other on the matter. It was my first time seeing anything like a conference of bipedal cats.

“What do you think, Berry? Is it doable?”

“...Meow!”

Berry gave her approval. The Gardener Cats scattered to the four separate corners of the rose garden.

“Wow...!”

As one, they reached out their front legs, where their paw pads were glowing with light. In the very moment that light touched the cracked vines of the roses, the plants were healed almost instantly. The light enveloped the entirety of the rose garden, and then, a sweet scent began to waft toward us.



“I can’t believe I got to see that! They made the whole garden bloom at once...!”

It was like something out of a dream.

Buds sprouted from the wounded vines, and one after another, they opened to reveal beautiful petals.

The newly bloomed roses were fragrant and lovely—each and every one resembled a work of art.

“...Gardener Cats are such amazing creatures.” As I murmured to myself, a nearby white Gardener Cat stuck its chest out as if to boast. I could tell that they were proud of their fine work.

“Marvelous gardening work. I now see how they got their name.” His Majesty seemed just as impressed. He placed his hand on a purple rose, observing its petals. “The roses had bloomed so nicely this year...but these ones are just as beautiful, if not even more so.”

“Do you think this year’s Rose Gathering will be possible now?”

“I wonder...” His Majesty looked around the rose garden in thought. “...There aren’t quite enough flowers. It’s still a beautiful sight, since each bloom is perfectly formed, but I don’t think there will be enough to send every guest home with a bouquet too.”

“The souvenir roses...”

He was right about that. It wouldn’t be complete without those bouquets. Guests would be dissatisfied without so much as a single rose to take home with them.

“Is it possible to prepare the souvenirs with roses from another garden?”

“I don’t think so. The usual bouquets are made with the kinds that only grow here in this garden. I don’t think we’d fool any of the rose-loving noblewomen with anything else.”

“I see...”

“Some years ago, we used to give out rose-shaped goods instead of real

roses, but that probably wouldn't go over well these days."

The Rose Gathering was only three days away now. There was hardly enough time to arrange for some kind of fine good as a gift for everyone in attendance.

"...Ah."

I suddenly had an idea for something that might work. There was no precedent for such a gift, but if all went according to plan, we would probably be able to prepare the required amount by the day of the Rose Gathering.

"Your Majesty, I believe I have a suggestion for an alternative souvenir."



TWO days passed.

Though I was overwhelmingly busy, I managed to successfully carry out my plan in time. The day of the Rose Gathering arrived, and His Majesty and I stood in the rose garden, welcoming our guests.

"Goodness, they're such beautiful roses."

I overheard Lady Kate's cheerful voice. She was circling the garden, taking in the sights with a group of her noblewomen friends.

"Beautiful indeed. I feel like the roses this year are even more radiant than before."

"I agree. They even smell lovely too."

"Why, I don't think I've ever seen such perfect roses in all my life."

The girls were thrilled by the sights before them.

With His Majesty at my side, the two of us observed the guests. The remarks we overheard were overwhelmingly positive, and no one seemed to notice that this very garden had been ripped to shreds only a few days earlier.

"I'm not sure how we can ever thank Berry and the other Gardener Cats enough."

"I agr— Don't move."

"Huh?!"

His Majesty reached out and grabbed my shoulders.

He pulled me in close, and I was greeted by the sight of his beautiful face approaching mine.

“Your Majesty...?”

“It’s just a bee.”

I realized he’d pulled me away before a bee stung me.

“Thank y—”

I trailed off before I could finish.

His Majesty’s blue-green eyes, now so close to mine, were the exact same color as Lord Aroo’s. My whole body stiffened.

“What is it? Did it actually sting you?”

“N-No, it didn’t. Thank you for your help.”

I gently pulled away from the king while I tried to soothe my racing heart.

...I really *was* trying not to think about it...

But Lord Aroo and King Glenreed were the same person. On top of that, His Majesty had witnessed some of my most humiliating moments while he was in wolf form. Remembering either of those facts was proving to be a menace to my heart.

“What’s the matter? You’re acting a bit strange.”

His Majesty had sharp eyes. He approached me once more, this time to see if I was all right.

“Really, it’s nothing. I think you might want to keep some space between us, or else people might get the wrong impression.”

“...You’re right.”

The warmth of his body retreated out of reach. That distance made me feel a bit sad, but this was the appropriate amount of space to leave between us. Even though I’d bonded with His Majesty through food, and even though I’d learned the secret of Lord Aroo, I was still merely a temporary, placeholder

queen. No one would be pleased to see me acting too close with the king in a public setting.

“...Oh, look at that, Your Majesty. Liddeus has arrived too.”

Among the guests clad in brilliant colors was one man wearing black from head to toe. He stood out in the crowd, but he was wearing the official uniform of the Bureau of Magic, making it suitable formal attire for such an event.

Liddeus had attempted to cover for Belleas, the kidnapper. But it was also thanks to his actions that Lelena was returned safely, which meant he had avoided any punishment.

Liddeus, who was invited to the Rose Gathering as a young researcher from the Bureau of Magic, passed by a sneering group of aristocrats.

“Aren’t those people...”

“Yes. Friends of Diaz.” From my side, His Majesty stared at the group with an icy glare.

Thanks to Belleas’s confession, everyone involved in the kidnapping was successfully apprehended. The people here in attendance were, of course, friends of Diaz who had nothing directly to do with those crimes, but it was obvious, as they walked through the garden to view the roses, that they were displeased. It was very possible they knew of the kidnapping in advance and had been looking forward to seeing their schemes succeed.

“I knew it. They were aware of the whole plot and chose not to stop it, it seems. What a disgusting lot,” His Majesty growled at my side.

“What’s the matter, Your Majesty? Can you actually hear their conversation all the way over there?”

There was a good distance between us, and on top of that, the rest of the guests were chatting loudly throughout the whole garden...

“...Wolves have good ears. If I focus hard enough, I can make out their words.”

“That’s amazing...! What exactly are they discussing, might I ask?”

“Let’s see...” The king closed his eyes and focused intently. “I can’t hear it all...

but I think they're whispering things to each other like 'I thought the rose garden was destroyed' and 'How did they get these roses together?'"

His Majesty furrowed his brow as he repeated the conversation.

"I also hear 'Such annoying roses,' 'They must've brought them in from someplace else,' 'I doubt they'll have any souvenirs for us,' 'Serves them right,' and so on."

"...Souvenirs, eh?"

I'd managed to prepare them in time, and His Majesty even had high praise for them when I showed him, but I didn't yet know how they would be received by the guests.

I buried those fears and returned to greeting each guest, and soon enough, the Rose Gathering drew to a close. The royal servants took turns handing out souvenirs to each guest.

"How beautiful...! Just what *is* this transparent rose?" One of the guests immediately held their souvenir up to the sunlight.

"What is it? Some kind of crafted art?"

"It looks like it's made of glass, doesn't it?"

"I don't think you could make a glass rose with such thin, realistic-looking petals."

One by one, the guests relayed their thoughts on the souvenir roses.

With lustrous, transparent red petals, what they held were none other than candy roses that glimmered beautifully when held up to the light.

The guests were fascinated by their first glimpses of candy-sculpted roses.

Metal rose sculptures already existed in this kingdom, but the petals always came out thick, and the colors were metallic—completely unlike those of real roses.

Red, white, yellow, purple, and pink: the colorful and dainty candy petals were well received by the guests.

"...It's all thanks to Gilbert and the chefs."

They were the ones who'd crafted the candy roses, and they did it incredibly well in such a short period of time. They'd managed to make just the right amount for the number of guests at the Rose Gathering.

"...Honestly, I wasn't sure they'd make it in time," muttered His Majesty at my side.

His response was only to be expected. The art of candy sculpting hadn't yet been developed in this land, and it was His Majesty's first experience with the craft. I seemed to recall that back in Japan, the art was perfected around the Edo period or so.

"Everything came together perfectly," I said. "I just happened to be experimenting with candy sculpting recently too."

It stemmed from the metal flowers I saw during my secret trip into town. They brought me back to my past-life memories, and I remembered the existence of rose-shaped candy sculptures.

Candy in this kingdom was only the simple kind, but I believed that with careful work, detailed shapes could be crafted as well. Once I suggested the idea to Gilbert, we decided to take on the challenge with the other villa chefs.

"The candy sculptures may look very complex, but they're simpler to make than one might think."

"How is it done?"

"First, you heat up the candy with a flame, and once it's cooled a bit, you use your hands to stretch, fold, and knead it over and over again. That allows the oxygen...the air to enter the candy, which makes the surface glisten in the light. You have to be careful not to burn yourself, but the candy also solidifies if it cools, so it becomes a race against the clock... Anyway, you start to get the knack of it after enough attempts."

I'd failed at the process many times in my past life, so I was plenty used to it by now. There were differences in the tools and ingredients required in this world, but I managed to work it all out with the help of Gilbert.

"Then you tear off pieces of the finished, shiny candy, and stretch them out until they look like flower petals. Once you curve and layer them around a

center portion, the warm candy acts like an adhesive, so you can keep molding the rose until it's finished."

The trick was to keep the rose as large as the outer petals. That made it possible to craft a three-dimensional rose with petals that fanned out perfectly from the center.

"Listening to you explain it, it doesn't sound so hard... But each of the roses you brought here today is so detailed, from the petals to the folds, exactly like the real thing. I'm sure that wasn't easy, right?"

"I'm just as surprised as you are, in fact. I didn't imagine they'd produce such fine work in such a short period of time."

I gave thanks to the talent and spirit that Gilbert and his chefs possessed.

...Though the food culture in this kingdom was lacking in comparison to my past life, once you gathered the ingredients and gave instructions, the people were quick to learn and improve. Gilbert was the epitome of that idea. Even though I had past-life experience with candy crafting, he had already overtaken me in skill.

As I watched the guests, each of them looking impressed with the candy sculptures in their hands, I felt a smile form on my face.



"PHEEEEW! I think I finally get to relax today!"

It was a few days after the Rose Gathering came safely to an end, and I was taking it easy in my bedroom. I'd already given Gilbert and the chefs their bonus compensation. They'd been holed up in the kitchen before the Rose Gathering, doing nothing but making candy sculptures at my request. It was their hard work that had made the Rose Gathering the success that it was.

"These are so pretty when you hold them up to the light."

I angled the crimson rose-shaped candy toward my window. The finely molded petals were lustrous—both shiny and translucent at the same time. I turned it from side to side, taking in the beauty and the craftsmanship with each turn, when suddenly...

“Mraw!”

“Ah!”

Chomp!

Berry bit down on one of the petals.

Her tiny mouth became stuffed with the candy, and she seemed to enjoy licking it to savor the taste.

“Clever, aren’t you...?”

This candy rose was made with strawberry jam to give it the signature red coloring. In this house, there was never a strawberry without Berry nearby.

She licked the strawberry candy without a care in the world. Taste seemed to be much more important than aesthetics to her.

“Hmm. I feel like it’s a waste to just break it apart so soon...”

But the fleeting beauty in the craft was what gave it so much value. Just like with real roses, such beauty couldn’t last forever, which was exactly what made them so special.

The rose candy souvenirs I gave out during the Rose Gathering had been appreciated by everyone.

“Meow! Meow meow meow!!”

“More strawberry candy, please.”

Berry stared up at me.

The rose candy was gone without a trace. There was no doubt it had disappeared into Berry’s stomach.

“You sure do eat fast... You were chewing that candy instead of licking it, weren’t you?”

With a smile born from pain, I decided to bring her some strawberry cookies I hadn’t yet eaten. Berry had done a good deed by bringing the Gardener Cats here. I’d already made up my mind that she deserved a bit of spoiling for a while.



I watched Berry fall asleep once her belly was full of strawberry treats.

After that, I was relaxing in my room when I heard a knock at the door.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Lena. May I come in?”

I gave my permission and watched Lena enter the room nervously.

I’d been busy ever since the kidnapping, so I hadn’t had a chance to speak face-to-face with her like this in some time.

Her face was pale as she sent her head flying down in an apologetic bow.

“I’m sorry!! Really, really sorry!!” She gripped her apron with trembling hands as she apologized. “I left the villa without telling anyone and ended up abducted...! I’m so terribly sorry for all the trouble I’ve caused you...!”

“...You don’t need to apologize so many times.”

Sure, I was a bit angry over how she fled the villa without so much as a word, but I understood why she felt she had to, and the resulting kidnapping was really nothing more than a coincidence.

“The abduction was just a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. It wasn’t your fault, Lena.”

“...But...!”

She still didn’t seem satisfied with my answer. Since she was acting a bit stubborn, I decided to press further.

“...Lena, you said you left the house because you thought Melan caused Berry to run away, right?”

Lena nodded.

But the truth was that Berry had left for the capital city to gather up the Gardener Cats.

Although, it was understandable why Lena believed Melan to be the cause.

“And you thought Berry would come back if you took Melan and left?”

“...Yes, I really thought it would work...”

I believed her, but I also got the sense she wasn't telling me the whole truth.

“Lelena, there's something I want to ask you, and I promise not to get upset.”

Lelena stiffened. She seemed to have an idea of what was coming next.

“...What is it, Your Majesty?”

“The other reason you left the villa that day was because you felt lonely, didn't you?”

“...!”

I was right on the money, by the look of it.

Lelena opened her golden eyes wide and turned even paler. I started to feel sorry for her.

“Th-That's not true... You and everyone at the villa have treated me so kindly.”

“...But kindness doesn't erase loneliness. This isn't the house you grew up in, and Krona, your family, isn't here with you.”

She had been brought to a strange place, where she began a new life. The homesickness got the best of her, and it wasn't easy to grow accustomed to this life.

“I...”

“I'm not saying it's your fault. You tried to get into the swing of things here by training to become a maid. I'm proud of all the hard work you've put in, and no one is mad at you.”

Lelena worked harder and harder...until she pushed herself too far. Unable to say a single word of complaint, she was forced to bear the loneliness she felt in her heart.

“...It was just the timing that was the problem. You were blaming yourself over and over again, thinking you were the reason Berry ran away, and that made you want to go back to the home you shared with Krona, right?”

Even though it was just an empty house without Krona around, it was her

childhood home, in the town she was born in. It was only natural to want to return.

...When I really thought about it, it would be nearly impossible for the young Lelena to make it out of the castle and back to her hometown. But the fact that she even considered that choice at all was proof of how overwhelmed she was.

“...I can empathize a little, Lelena.”

“Really? Even with someone like me...?”

She let her disbelief be known.

“I left the town I was born and raised in to come to this kingdom as well. Fortunately, His Majesty granted me a royal villa, and I enjoy each and every day here...but I still miss my home from time to time too.”

My father, brothers, and a few friends remained behind in Elltoria. Some nights, I longed to return.

“I’m the one who chose this kingdom and went through with moving here, but I can’t erase the loneliness entirely.”

“You get lonely too, Your Majesty...?”

“I do. You’re quite a bit younger than me, but you’ve already been through so much. It’s only natural that you’d feel lonely.”

Gently and reassuringly, I stroked Lelena’s hair. She was still so much shorter than me.

“I’m sure I can’t make the loneliness go away for you...but maybe I can serve you some delicious meals instead.”

“...Delicious meals?”

“Like tomato seafood stew.”

Lelena’s face turned gloomy. On her first night here, she had cried after tasting my stew.

“Don’t worry. Starting today, I won’t make the same stew I served you last time.”

“What...?”

“I wrote a letter to Krona and received her recipe.”

Once a month, I was allowed to exchange letters with the imprisoned Krona. The content was inspected beforehand, but she was able to send me a detailed recipe without incident.

“Big Sister’s recipe...”

“Yes, that’s the stew I’ll make. ...It’s the one you wanted to eat, right?”

Lelena nodded slowly.

The last tomato seafood stew we served her was devised by Gilbert and me together. We were confident our flavors would bring out the taste of the river fish, but to Lelena, the true flavor of tomato seafood stew belonged to her big sister’s recipe.

I knew why Lelena must have cried on her first day here—she must have been startled and saddened to taste a stew so different from the one she’d always known.

Flavor isn’t the only thing that makes a meal delicious. When it comes to some meals, it’s the memories and emotions packed into every bite that make them worth eating.

“It’s not safe enough to let you go home right now...but until then, you can stay here, eat the same foods you did in the past, and wait for Krona to finish her sentence in prison.”

“...You don’t mind if I keep living here at the villa?” Lelena’s question came out hesitantly.

“Of course not. You’re welcome to continue training as a maid, if that suits you.”

I smiled back at the girl, hoping it would ease her nerves.



“**I’VE** finished carrying Lelena to her room, my lady.”

“Thank you, that’s great. Good work, Lucian.”

For a second time, Lelena had started to cry when she tasted the tomato

seafood stew. The nostalgia in the flavor was enough to break down the dam she'd been building inside her. She'd fallen asleep from all the tears, but the look on her face as she slumbered was, to my eyes, a peaceful one.

I hoped that the good cry was enough to release her pent-up emotions, and I reflected on that thought as I stared aimlessly out the window.

A group of fuzzy friends were resting outside—seeking shelter from the heat in the cool shade of the trees. Tweety was fast asleep, his face perfectly pressed into the ground. Berry was curled up on top of Tweety's soft feathers, and Melan was there too—though some distance separated the two cats.

"I wonder if it's too hot for them outside?"

I kept my eyes peeled, but Berry didn't move a muscle. I wondered if Tweety's feathers were comfortable enough to outweigh any concerns about the temperature.

It's so cute how they all get along.

I couldn't help but smile at the sight of the adorable nap-mates.

Berry and Melan had started out on bad terms when they were first introduced. Though they hadn't yet grown close enough to cuddle up together, it appeared they'd found just the right amount of distance between them to feel comfortable.

"Time always changes relationships..."

I was no exception to this rule myself.

I married into this kingdom as a figurehead queen, met the wolf named Lord Aroo, and learned the secret behind his existence...

His Majesty and I had been too busy ever since that day to sit down and have a real conversation about it, but who knew how our own relationship would change as time went by.

"But before all that, I have to look after the Gardener Cats..."

I turned my gaze toward the nearby forest that bordered the villa.

Berry's gathering of Gardener Cats was supposedly out near the strawberry

patch, working on growing the plants they each brought with them to the villa.

“Berry, Fon, Tweety, and now we have a clowder of Gardener Cats.”

I pictured each of the fluffy friends that had gathered to live at the villa with me.

On my face, I wore the most joyous of smiles.

Bonus Chapter 1: The Sorcerer's New Favorites

“MORNING already...?”

Liddeus blinked his eyes at the sunlight filtering in through the window. He had just pulled an all-nighter at the Bureau of Magic as he worked tirelessly on the formulation of a new type of spell.

It had been two days since he last got a good night's sleep.

“Or was it actually three days...?” he murmured to himself as he was suddenly overcome with drowsiness.

It seemed that once he'd managed to complete the new spell type of his imagining, he completely lost control of his ability to concentrate. His sleep-deprived head was spinning. Liddeus collapsed onto the desk in front of him.

“Kweep!”

The Cuddle Bird wasted no time in closing the distance between them, and its light blue feathers gently enveloped Liddeus's body. Seeing that Liddeus refused to sit up, the Cuddle Bird slumped his weight onto him.

“Kweepy kweepy...”

“Fine, then,” he seemed to grumble.

The Cuddle Bird's body shook. In one quick motion, the bird swooped Liddeus up onto his back and began to walk him toward the man's bed.

I appreciate it...

The Cuddle Birds were an integral part in the life of someone like Liddeus, who was so obsessed with magic. The light blue Cuddle Bird always looked after Liddeus as if the human were his own baby chick.

“You really need a Cuddle Bird to take care of you? That's quite sad, isn't it?”

Many people made fun of him like that, but Liddeus never paid them any attention. Everything unrelated to magic was meaningless to him.

Those people can say whatever they want. I don't care what others think of me...

But then, the image of a girl appeared in his mind.

Queen Laetitia...

Strangely, his heartbeat began to speed up.

Liddeus had never once encountered a sorcerer with as much magical energy as Laetitia. That was probably why her image had been burned into his mind so deeply.

Everything she said was so different.

His conversations with Laetitia were stimulating on an intellectual level. Her theories of magic, from the queen's own lips, and her views on sorcery were all fairly standard for someone from Elltoria. However, on occasion, the things she spoke of were completely foreign to Liddeus. She presented all sorts of new ideas, like "energy conservation" and "overloaded circuits," that, when expanded upon at Liddeus' request, proved to be logically sound.

I hardly ever meet people who can keep up with my conversations.

Liddeus was perfectly aware that he was a strange man. Most people he interacted with kept phony smiles on their faces as they avoided any real conversation with him whatsoever. Rarely did he ever meet someone who spoke with him in earnest like Laetitia.

Even when Liddeus fell under suspicion in the kidnapping case, Laetitia kept a calm head as she ascertained the situation, which eventually led to her resolving the entire incident. Thanks to her quick thinking on the day of the fire, the bureau building itself and all the Cuddle Birds avoided an awful fate. As a lover of magic and a recipient of kindness from the Cuddle Birds, Liddeus felt that he owed Laetitia a great debt.

...I want to meet Her Majesty again...

That was the thought that filled the dazed mind of Liddeus as he rode on the back of his Cuddle Bird.



LIDDEUS flung himself into the bed of his unoccupied napping room and fell straight to sleep. When he next awoke, he realized he must have been passed out for an entire day.

“...Hmm?”

As he began to stir, a blanket slipped from his body and fell. His vision was being blocked by the black bangs that hung past his eyes.

“Did you put this blanket on me...?”

“Peepa peep!”

The Cuddle Bird at his side chirped at him.

It was almost time for the bird’s morning feeding, so he’d shown up to get his fill of Liddeus’s magical energy. Liddeus fed the light blue Cuddle Bird breakfast, just as requested, and then it came time for the bureau’s morning assembly.

Liddeus listened expressionlessly to the relay of information coming from Director Bodorey. However...

“I want to make that delivery for Her Majesty.”

The other sorcerers in the room began to stir when they heard Liddeus volunteer himself. Liddeus, the man whose head was filled with only magic, and who rarely ever left the bureau, had just made the most unusual of requests.



“**GOOD** day, Liddeus. Welcome to my villa.”

Laetitia appeared at the front entrance to greet him.

But Liddeus fell silent.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, it’s nothing. Don’t mind me.”

He averted his gaze as he waved off his behavior. For some reason, as soon as he laid eyes on Laetitia, his heart began to race.

“I’m here to deliver magic stones for Director Bodorey.”

“Thank you for bringing them. Please allow me to check them over.” Laetitia

peered into the bag that Lucian had brought for her. “Three water stones and one earth stone... Yes, this is everything.”

“What are you planning to use them for?” Curious, Liddeus couldn’t help but ask a question when it came to the topic of magic.

“They’ll serve as power sources for the crest I received your help with recently.”

“That ‘refrigerator’ thing?”

“Yes, that’s the one. It’s incredibly convenient.” Laetitia smiled as she spoke. “Thanks to the spell type you engraved for me, cold air fills the box and keeps the inside at a constant temperature. It’s been getting warmer outside lately, so it’s an incredibly valuable tool for keeping perishable foods.”

“...Good, it’s working as planned. I want to keep hearing about how it continues to function in the future.”

The sight of Laetitia’s happy face was too dazzling, and Liddeus had to squint at her. He was used to hearing pleased reactions to the crests he made, but when it came from Laetitia, it was much more encouraging.

“I’d be happy to do that. As payment for the magic stones, here are Tweety’s feathers for you to take back.”

“Right. Is there anything else you want me to take to the bureau?”

“Not at the moment... But since you came all this way in the heat, would you like to rest here for a while and have a snack?”

Laetitia glanced over Liddeus from head to toe. The black cloak of the Bureau of Magic uniform was most certainly a burden during these hot summer days.

“I know a treat I can make quickly that also serves as a bit of magic practice.”

“Making a treat for magic practice? What is it? Show me!”

Liddeus was like a new man—suddenly filled with curiosity and vigor.



LIDDEUS waited for her in the parlor until Laetitia returned after a bit of time had passed.

Lucian stood at her back, carrying a lump of ice on a serving tray.

“We’re going to use spells to shave this ice apart.”

With that, she began to chant her spell—none other than a fifth-level wind spell. An invisible blade of wind was conjured, which was strong enough to send Liddeus’s cape fluttering in the breeze.

“Wow...!”

The lump of ice shattered into small pieces in the blink of an eye. It appeared to have been split apart entirely by Laetitia’s wind blade.

“Such impressive spell control, both fast and flawlessly executed!”

In his excitement, Liddeus took in the remains of the ice lump. The shavings were incredibly fine and uniform in consistency. It was a display of perfect spell precision.

“Hehe! Thank you, Liddeus. It looks like it shaved down nicely, so I’m sure it will have a pleasant texture when eaten as well.”

Laetitia scooped up the remains of the ice with a spoon and heaped them onto her plate. Once she’d constructed a small mountain of ice, she neatly placed cherries and blueberries around the base.

“All that’s left is to pour syrup over the top. I have lemon, blueberry, and honey syrups, so please choose whichever flavor you like.”

“I’ll take lemon.”

Laetitia poured the lemon-yellow syrup over the ice.

“Please, eat up. This treat is called shaved ice, and it cools the body down from the inside.”

“All right, I’ll dig in, then.”

He scooped up a bite with the spoon he was given. The shavings of ice barely added any weight at all. Each tiny fragment glinted in the light like newly fallen snow, and they began to dissolve the moment Liddeus brought the spoon into his mouth, which was suddenly filled with the chill of the ice and the flavor of lemon.

“Intriguing... I’ve never had anything made from a spell quite like this, so this texture is new to me.”

It wasn’t like eating a chunk of ice or sherbet—instead, it was a soft, fleeting sensation on the tongue. Even Liddeus, who always had a small appetite, felt like he could keep going back for more.

“Ah, wait just a moment. If you eat it too fast—”

“...!”

Liddeus squeezed his eyes shut and clutched at his head. Dull pain shot through him, like the inside of his skull was being pounded with a hammer.

“Eating ice too quickly can cause a headache.”

“...I didn’t know that.”

Liddeus smiled slightly as he looked down at the shaved ice.

How enjoyable.

It was a brand-new experience and a brand-new sensation for him. This was one of the reasons Liddeus loved magic: it was a physical way to bring about unknown phenomena with his own two hands. Laetitia appeared quite capable of producing such unknown phenomena for Liddeus to observe.

“Why are you smiling all of a sudden, Liddeus?”

“...I think it’s great.”

Both the shaved ice, born from a spell, and Laetitia herself. They were sources of great interest to the fascinated Liddeus.

“You really enjoyed the shaved ice, huh?”

“Yes, I did. I’m going straight back to the bureau to write up a special spell so that I can make it myself.”

“A special spell? Couldn’t you apply an existing one to achieve the same result?”

“A great amount of precision is needed to get the ice so finely shaved. I’m an expert in spell control, but I’m no match for Your Majesty at all. Rather than spending day and night fine-tuning my spell precision to create a uniform

consistency to the ice, it'll probably be faster to create a new spell altogether."

"...It's hard to imagine that creating a new one is a fast process at all..."

Though her smile was a strained one, Laetitia looked at Liddeus with respect in her eyes. For some strange reason, Liddeus felt a ticklish sensation in his chest, one that confused him and he couldn't help wondering about.

"For you, Liddeus, I bet that process really is the quicker one. I could picture you using a crest and magic stone to create an entire shaved ice machine."

"A shaved ice machine? Is that a real device?"

"It is. Unfortunately, it hasn't been physically brought to life, but if you created a fixed blade that was capable of scraping the ice at a uniform consistency, then anyone would be able to make shaved ice with ease."

"A fixed blade... Measures would have to be put in place to prevent it from slipping, but if I used the right spell, it probably would hold, and that means..."

Liddeus was already muttering his frenzied plans for the device to himself.

Some time later...

After a process of trial and error, this world saw the arrival of a shaved ice machine that was powered by magic stones.

Bonus Chapter 2: The Gardener Cats and Chocolate

“**THINGS** sure are getting busy out here, huh?”

Lucian and I stood in an open area of the forest that bordered my villa. Next to the strawberry patch I created with Berry, the rest of the Gardener Cats were working on their respective plants of choice. The land had become a rainbow of colorful plants—tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage, onions, and vegetables that resembled eggplants.

“Meow meeeow?”

“Mrrrrr...”

“Mew! Mew!”

The fur of the Gardener Cats themselves was just as varied. There were white cats, black cats, brown and orange tabbies, calicos, and those with uneven patterns in their coloring.

The clowder was diligently tending to their crops as they engaged in a conversation of meows with each other. They swatted away pests and insects with swift kitty punches, and even used the magic in their paw pads to heal any weakened plants.

“Mree!”

An orange tabby Gardener Cat approached me with a perfectly ripe tomato in its paws. The glossy red surface of the fruit looked delicious.

“What a nice tomato you have there. Would you like me to make you more minestrone with this?”

“Meow!”

The creature gave an enthusiastic nod. Just like Berry, the rest of the Gardener Cats were eager to eat meals cooked by humans. Despite their skills in growing crops, they couldn’t actually do anything to enhance the flavor of the resulting harvest.

“Mree!”

“Meow meow!!”

“Me too!” “Me too!”

A number of Gardener Cats approached me with their harvests in hand.

I’d become a popular figure among them, as I was the only human in the world who’d earned their trust.

“Let’s see. Tomatoes, pumpkins, spinach, and now grapes...”

Each fruit or vegetable the cats handed me was normally in season at very different times. But Gardener Cats were able to use their magic to speed up the growth of plants, meaning they could harvest crops at any point throughout the year.

Lucian and I worked together to fill up an entire basket with fruits and vegetables.

“Another bounty today, huh?”

“I’m itching to see it all put to use... Whoops.” Lucian trailed off as he stood upright on his long legs. A spotted Gardener Cat had scampered right past his feet.

“Such restless beasts, aren’t they?”

“Gardener Cats vary greatly both in personality and fur pattern.”

I watched the clowder of cats rushing in circles as they tended to their crops.

Ten days had passed since Berry first arrived with the other Gardener Cats, who had numbered twenty-nine in total. Since then, even more cats joined them, one by one, and there were now over forty Gardener Cats living here near my villa.

“The clowder has grown quite a bit, but now that I think of it—”

“Meow!”

A louder cry than usual sounded in the forest. It was then that I noticed the Gardener Cats staring off in one direction of the woods. I watched as a group of fluffy cats emerged from the bushes.

“One, two, three... There’s six of them.”

These cats were long-haired, with cream-white and light brown patterns of fur. They resembled the Ragdoll breed of cat I knew from my past life, with patches of light brown fur around the center of their faces and the bottom of their paws.

“...Are those Gardener Cats as well?”

“I’m not sure...”

Gardener Cats varied in their fur patterns and tail shapes, but they shared one trait in particular. As I’d been on the verge of saying a moment ago, all the present Gardener Cats had short fur, with no long-haired types among their numbers.

“Hello there. Are you all Gardener Cat friends of Berry too?”

I leaned down to speak to them and was met with pairs of bright blue eyes staring back at me. Their long, beautiful fur was elegant in a way that was hard to define. We gazed at each other for a while until Berry appeared and approached the long-haired group of cats. They meowed a conversation back and forth, and then I watched as the new arrivals stood up on their hind legs.

“I guess long-haired Gardener Cats do exist...”

Surprised by this discovery, I watched as one of the long-haired Gardener Cats stuck its paw into the fur of its own chest.

After some digging, it pulled its paw out to reveal...

“Seeds?”

The cat had retrieved a few small, white, almond-shaped seeds.

“I wonder what kind of seeds these are...?”

They looked familiar to me, but I couldn’t recall the specifics.

Since these seeds were going to be planted by the paws of a Gardener Cat, it probably wouldn’t take long at all for the mystery to be revealed.

“Hehe! I’m excited to find out.”

I looked forward to seeing what delicious fruit or vegetable they would bring to the garden. However...



“...I can’t believe it. Is it really possible...?”

Two days had passed since then. The plants that had quickly sprouted in the garden surpassed my wildest expectations.

“Cacao...?”

I knew this plant well from my past life. It was the main ingredient of chocolate.

Off a small number of sprouting trees hung yellow beans in the shape of footballs. The seeds from the other day had actually been the white, slightly meaty cacao beans surrounded by cacao pulp.

“I never thought I’d see cacao beans again...!” I stared up at them, overcome with emotion.

“So this is called cacao? You know of it, my lady?” Lucian asked.

“Yes, it’s delicious! It’s sweet, fragrant, and can be eaten in all kinds of ways!”

My response to Lucian came out a bit too enthusiastic.

Milk chocolate, dark chocolate, hot chocolate, chocolate cake, and warm chocolate soufflés! Just the thought of such a lineup was enough to steal my heart away.

I’d truly given up, thinking I’d never see those foods in this world at all...

But incredibly enough, it was here and now that we were reunited once more.

“Meow meow meow!”

“What do you think? Great cacao, no?”

The long-haired Gardener Cats held up their front paws, striking a proud pose.

“Hehe, it’s all thanks to you guys. Are these cacao beans ready to harvest?”

“Mraw!”

The cats nimbly scaled the cacao trees in the garden. They dug their claws straight into the stems of the beans to cut them loose.

“Can you help them, Lucian?”

“Very well.”

Lucian caught the beans as they fell from the trees. Inside those football-shaped pods would be dozens of cacao beans—the source of chocolate. We would extract those beans and the cacao pulp together, then let them ferment inside a wooden box. After a week or so, the next step would be to dry them under the light of the sun.

I gathered the beans that had the least amount of moisture and removed any dirt or spots from them. The clean cacao beans required further work to produce chocolate. However...

“How exactly am I supposed to do this...?”

I was at a dead end.

I knew how the process was supposed to continue, but I’d never actually carried it out before personally. I remembered it included roasting, crushing, and gently mashing the inner grains of the cacao beans until they were at a uniform consistency.

This was the general gist of the process, sure...

But there were several steps in there that I had no idea how to achieve in reality. Most of the chocolate in my past life was processed in factories, after all. Even with my spells, it might be difficult to reach the goal I had in mind without any outside help.

As I struggled to figure out what to do with the cacao beans in front of me, the group of long-haired Gardner Cats appeared on the scene.

“Meow meow!”

“What’s the matter? Wait, do you actually like eating the beans in this state alone?”

The cats shook their heads, then stood up on their hind legs to take a look at the cacao beans in the pot.

“Do you just want to try a ta— What?!”

Their paw pads were glowing. The Gardener Cats seemed to be using their magic on the cacao beans.

I watched each bean melt down into a sludge, at which point, a strong fragrance reached my nose.

“This scent...!”

It was a smell I’d experienced many times in my past life—the aroma of chocolate. The beans had dissolved into a thick, shiny liquid, entirely unlike the state they were in just a moment ago. I dipped a teaspoon into the mixture and savored the acidic, bitter taste of dark chocolate.

“Wow...! I never knew Gardener Cats could do something like this!!”

I’d really believed that their magic only functioned on plants that were actively rooted in the ground, but it appeared they were capable of affecting these cacao beans long after they were harvested as well.

I was curious as to how their magic worked, but not even Gardener Cats themselves knew the specifics. It was like an instinct that drove them to use magic and make the cacao beans even tastier.

“Even for Gardener Cats, you guys seem a little strange...”

I faced the long-haired cats and asked them for more information, which they conveyed with gestures.

I learned that these long-haired Gardener Cats were the only ones of their kind capable of using magic on already-harvested crops. Perhaps they belonged to a special subcategory of Gardener Cat, or even a related, but entirely different species altogether.

“Gardener Cats sure are fascinating...”

Impressed with the mysteries of their kind, I watched them dip their spoons into the pot and take bites of the raw chocolate.

The mixture had been too bitter for me, but they seemed to eat it right up.

“If I add just a few things to this dark chocolate...!”

What I craved was the sweet, delicious, nostalgic taste of chocolate that I loved.

It was time for the chefs and me to take on a process of trial and error.



“...**AND** here we have my completed milk chocolate.”

I unveiled my proud work atop the dining room table.

Each piece of chocolate was bite-sized and shaped with a mold. There were round pieces, stars, and some topped with nuts. I’d even made chocolates in the shape of cat faces and paw pads too. The sweet scent filled the dining room.

“So this is ‘chocolate’...?” Keith was staring closely at the spread on the table.

I’d been receiving help from Keith, the strong beastfolk man, in harvesting cacao whenever he had free time on the job. These chocolate treats were my way of thanking him for all the effort.

“It does smell good...but are you sure we can eat them? They kind of look like stones.”

“They’re actually soft and will melt once they’re in your mouth.”

I plucked up one of the chocolates and demonstrated for him.

The aroma of chocolate filled my mouth, and as my body heat warmed its surface, I could taste the sweet flavor of milk dissolving on my tongue.

As I savored the chocolate, Keith became eager to try one too. He reached for a piece.

“...Wow!”

Keith’s eyes opened wide. His tail stood up straight, then began to wag violently from side to side.

“It’s awesome! I mean, it’s quite delicious!! I can’t believe how sweet it tastes. When it melts so smoothly, it makes your whole mouth taste good!!” Keith rattled on, clearly excited. His tail was swinging with glee, as if he couldn’t contain his emotions.

“Hehe, I’m glad to hear it. There’s more on the table, so please eat up.”

“Are you sure it’s fine?! I mean they’re so tasty! I don’t know if I—”

“Excuse me.”

The dining room doors opened, cutting Keith off midsentence.

“Liddeus?!”

Keith’s eyes filled with shock

I imagined the arrival of the man he’d once accused of kidnapping was an awkward development.

“Why is he here...?”

“I finished the crest, so I brought it here for you.”

“The crest...?”

Liddeus was clutching a crest in the shape of what resembled a three-tiered water fountain.

“What’s with that weird shape?”

“The crest is called a chocolate fountain. It makes chocolate fondue once it’s activated.”

On a whim, I’d happened to mention the concept of a chocolate fondue fountain, which I remembered from my past life, to Liddeus as the two of us discussed magic together. Liddeus really took to the topic, and with only the small scraps of information I’d given him, he’d managed to produce a functioning chocolate fondue crest.

Just like with the mock refrigerator and shaved ice machines that were powered by magic stones, it was another incredible display of talent and skill.

“Once you activate the crest...”

“A chocolate fountain?!” Keith was blown away, which was an amusing sight.

“You take a food and dip it into the chocolate as it flows from above.”

It was easier to just demonstrate it myself, so I picked up the nearest fork. Lucian, my capable servant, had already prepared a selection of fruits for the fondue.

“If you do it like this, the fruit is coated in a layer of chocolate.”

“Whoa...!”

The surface of my orange slice became hidden under the thick, flowing chocolate. Oranges were refreshing and crisp in flavor, which perfectly suited the sweetness of chocolate.

“It’s delicious. Would you like to try it next, Keith?”

“Yes! I would, but...” Keith froze. It appeared that Liddeus’s presence was bothering him. “...Do you mind if I try?”

“Why are you asking me that?”

“...! You’re the one who made that crest, and I treated you like a criminal, which wasn’t fair...”

“And? What about it?” Liddeus’s words came out sounding indifferent. “Crests are incredible and unique because they can be used by anyone, as long as they have a magic stone. If you want to use the crest, then go ahead and use it.”

“...Okay.”

Keith didn’t seem to know how to react upon receiving such casual permission. He kept his eyes fixed on the sorcerer, then parted his lips just slightly.

“If you say so, then all right, I’ll use it too. ...Sorry about calling you a criminal, and all that.” With that murmured apology, he plunged his fork into a piece of fruit.

It wasn’t as if the two were suddenly on good terms, as if nothing ever happened between them...

But to my eyes, it looked as if both parties were interested in bridging the gap between them.



I said goodbye to Keith after he’d gotten his fill of the chocolate fondue, at which point Liddeus returned to the bureau as well. After that, the Gardener Cats gradually came to gather in the dining room.

“Meow meow!!”

“Mraw! Meow!!”

The Gardener Cats were forming a circle around the fondue crest. Chocolate fondue had become something of a fad among them, as of late—they were hooked on the sweet taste of chocolate.

The cats carried forks between their paw pads and dipped the fruits and vegetables they’d grown themselves into the chocolate.

It was an adorable sight. However...

“Cabbage chocolate fondue? I’m not so sure about that one...”

The Gardener Cats chose all kinds of ingredients, in addition to the standard fruits like oranges and berries. Just once, I’d tried dipping cabbage in the chocolate fondue, but...I’d prefer not to comment on the flavor I experienced in that moment.

The cabbage-loving Gardener Cat seemed to enjoy its snack, so I assumed that as a human, I simply experienced the taste differently.

“...Oh, I don’t see Berry in the fondue crowd today.”

Maybe she’s out patrolling her strawberry patch?

I knew she’d be grumpy if she found out she missed a fondue party, so I decided to go call her inside.

Lucian and I had just exited the villa when...

“Oh my, if it isn’t the queen?”

It was Leonard, the bard who oozed sensuality, who called out to me.

Ever since that day we first met in the capital city, Leonard had shown up at my villa on occasion.

“Good day, Leonard. What brings you here today?”

“I had business at the castle, so I thought I’d stop by and get a glimpse of your beautiful face.”

So he was already at the castle beforehand.

Lute in hand, he gazed at my villa.

“I’ve never smelled such a sweet aroma before. Are you baking something in there?”

“It’s a dessert known as ‘chocolate.’ Would you like to try some?”

“You don’t mind sharing with me?”

“As a traveling bard, you’ve eaten food from all across the land, right? I’m curious to hear your thoughts on chocolate.”

“I see. Well, in that case, I’d be honored to give it a try.” Leonard opened a wrapped bundle of chocolate and stuck a piece in his mouth. “...Wow, now what do we have here?”

His green eyes went wide in surprise.

“The rich aroma sings a song inside the mouth. It’s a brand-new, thrilling kind of flavor. I’ve been a guest at many fancy parties thrown by nobles, but this is my first time tasting anything so delicious.”

He plucked another piece of chocolate with his long fingers and gave it a good stare. He appeared quite taken with the treat.

“Hehe. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“And here I thought I knew everything about the popular desserts these days, but I’ve never heard of this one. I bet your husband, His Majesty, sure was startled when he tried this for the first time.”

“...His Majesty hasn’t yet had the chance to try it. He’s been busy as of late.” I smiled painfully in response to his statement.

It was true that His Majesty was a busy man, but I got the sense he’d been avoiding me ever since I found out about Lord Aroo’s secret. We hadn’t yet had a chance to discuss anything, just the two of us together, nor had he visited me in silver wolf form.

It was certainly awkward for me as well, so in some sense, I actually appreciated the distance...

But still, the whole ordeal made me a bit sad.

“Oh dear. Are you saying I’ve enjoyed a treat His Majesty’s never had? I hope

I'm not locked up for such a crime."

"...His Majesty wouldn't do that."

"Are you sure about that? You better have the king try some of this chocolate soon so that I can rest a little easier."

Leonard shrugged in jest, turned, and departed from the villa.



"CHOCOLATE...for His Majesty..."

After I'd visited Berry's strawberry patch to call her inside, I'd returned to my bedroom, where I stared at pieces of chocolate and muttered things to myself.

"I hope I'm not getting ahead of myself..."

I truly believed His Majesty had enjoyed the meals I'd presented to him so far. He didn't seem to dislike sweets either, which made me think he might like chocolate as well.

"...I think I'll try sending him some chocolates."

It was still too awkward to request a meeting with His Majesty right now. I decided, instead, to send him chocolates and a letter, rather than seeing him in person.

"I'm sending you these chocolates. When we next meet, if you have any thoughts on the treat, I hope you'll share them with me."

I kept my sentences simple and brief, so as not to overwhelm His Majesty with information. I decorated the box of chocolates with colored tissue paper and ribbons that matched the color of the letter's envelope.

"...Sending out a box of chocolates with a letter. It reminds me of Valentine's Day from my past life."

Sweet, but still a little bitter.

The feelings of dark chocolate filled my heart in that moment.



"YOUR Majesty, Queen Laetitia has sent you a letter, along with a box of her

latest dessert creations.”

“Laetitia?”

The quill in Glenreed’s hand fell still as he raised his head.

A mountain of documents filled the entire surface of the king’s work desk. These documents dealt with issues that arose throughout the kingdom, as well as things like approval for the visits of esteemed guests from foreign lands. Many of them were pressing matters, which kept Glenreed very busy. However...

I’m actually a little glad this is happening now.

Glenreed didn’t know how much distance to keep between himself and Laetitia, now that she knew Lord Aroo’s secret. Perhaps it was better to bury his head in work so that he had no time to be bothered by anything else that might weigh his mind down.

“.....”

He pushed his documents to the side of his desk, read the letter from Laetitia, and opened the box of chocolates.

One scent that wafted up to his nose was unfamiliar, but the other one was...

“Strawberries...”

That sweet-and-sour aroma filled his mind with images of Laetitia’s golden hair. It was as if she wanted to guarantee that his first experience with chocolate would be a good one.

Since Glenreed had once tasted strawberries and called them delicious, Laetitia had apparently chosen them as a vessel for the new treat—strawberries coated in chocolate.

“Laetitia...”

The scent of the strawberries made the image of her in his mind, as well as those feelings in his heart, all the more vivid.

“I want to see her.”

Though he didn’t know how his relationship with Laetitia might be changed

upon their next encounter...

Glenreed, in that moment, realized that maybe it didn't matter, so long as he got to see her again.

Afterword

THANK you so much for purchasing *Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 3*!

Your support for Volumes 1 and 2 is why I'm able to write this third afterword here for all of you to read.

The story of Laetitia began with the dissolution of her engagement, and from there, we saw her leave her kingdom and form connections with all sorts of people. I'm so glad I can continue this story in novel form once more.

We've seen the arrival of wolves, a Gardener Cat, and a griffin, and now in Volume 3, a new fuzzy friend—Tweety, the Cuddle Bird—has come to live at Laetitia's villa. I hope you enjoyed reading about all of these cute critters.

Kasumi Nagi-sensei has followed up Volumes 1 and 2 with even more lovely art for this new edition. Tweety's fluffy feathers look so adorable in all the illustrations!

You can see Liddeus's magic-obsessed brain from the way his face looks, and Leonard's eyes are noticeably seductive too. Kasumi Nagi-sensei did a fantastic job designing all the new characters that appeared in this volume.

Liddeus and Leonard, as they appear in the illustration at the front of the book, were modeled after their stories from Bonus Chapter 2. There's also art of Glenreed at the front, and as always, his handsome looks bring a tear to the eye.

By the way, I asked that Berry's illustration on the cover be taken from chapter 3 of this book, when she's dressed up with her ribbon to enter the rose garden. Please note the look of bliss on her face as she stuffs her cheeks with a macaron!

Thanks to the help of many people, including Kasumi Nagi-sensei, I was able to deliver this book into the hands of readers. I'm so grateful for this

experience.

Lord Aroo's true identity was finally discovered in Volume 3. How will Laetitia act around Glenreed, and will her life filled with fluffy friends continue as usual?

I hope to see you again in the next book.

-Yu Sakurai



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AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
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A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

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Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND
MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO
MAKE A LOVE POTION!
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES / VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA
VILLAINESS WANTS
HER FREEDOM!
STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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