

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating

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

The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace

6

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 6

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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 6

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Ishnad
Emperor of
Ringrard.


Featherio
A member of the
Heaven-Wing
clan with an
important duty.

Silverio
Wolfvarte's
first king.

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

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

Fillia
South Villa
Queen
Candidate.



**"It's a strawberry!
Come back so we can
eat strawberries
together every
single day!"**

**His voice
moved my heart
so dearly, I reached
my hand out again.**

Chapter 1: Seasons Change, Strawberries Ripen

“I’VE eaten so many delicious things over this past year.” I smiled as I turned the pages of my recipe book.

I’d returned from my homeland of Elltoria to the kingdom of Wolfvarte, where spring had come at my royal villa. I gazed at the recipe book from my seat on the sofa by the window.

Sponge cake, shortcake, sandwiches, salt-crusted fish, chocolate fondue.

The taste of each meal returned to my mind as I flipped to a new page.

My recipe book—full of tasty, delightful memories—was my treasure. Each one brought joy to my days, thanks to the help of many people and my own past life memories. I had over twenty recipes using strawberries alone.

Strawberries are just so delicious.

They were my favorite fruit of them all. Not only were they a treat when eaten fresh, but they were wonderful in a jam or a dessert...

Although, the more I recalled these strawberry sweets, the stranger I started to feel.

Why? When did this start?

It was impossible to remember the cause of my intense love for strawberries.

I stopped turning the pages and pondered it for a moment.

Somewhere along the way, it simply became my favorite food. That was a perfectly reasonable explanation, and yet something still felt off. I tried racking my brain for any past life memories related to this subject, but it was no use.

As I furrowed my brow, trying to process a sensation almost like something was stuck in my throat, I suddenly felt a tug on my dress.

“Meow meow!”

“What is it, Berry?”

Berry stared up at me with her light green eyes. I knew that look—she wanted to join me on the sofa. I scooted over to the left and watched her jump up to my side.

“Mraw!”

I stroked her gently, down from her tiny head to her neck like a massage. Berry squinted her eyes and folded her ears back to make it easier for me. She was utterly adorable.

I was enjoying my fill of her fuzzy coat when she seemed to have enough, leaning forward toward my recipe book. She began to skillfully turn the pages with the pads of her paws, careful to keep her claws retracted and not tear the paper. As much as I wanted to praise her with more petting, I decided not to disturb her. She was staring closely at each illustration in the book.

“Meow, meow, meow. Mraw mraw meow meow meow...”

“Not this one. Or this one either,” she was saying, apparently looking for something in particular.

It had been just over a year since I arrived at the royal villa. All four seasons had passed now, and Berry had the blissful dilemma of how to utilize our second strawberry season together.

“Meow! Meow meow meow meow meow!”

“Hm? What is it? You want shortcake? No, something else? Plain strawberries? No... Ah, I get it now. You want a dessert that leaves the strawberries preserved in their original shape.” I translated her gestures and motions into human-speak.

Berry, despite looking exactly like a gray tabby cat, was actually a Mythical Beast known as a Gardener Cat. They were very clever creatures, able to understand most of what humans said to them even if they couldn’t speak themselves.

“I just made shortcake three days ago, and Gilbert and I were going to make tarts the day after tomorrow. What else would fit...?”

The two of us put our heads together to come up with a good treat for today.

Then it came to me at last.

“What about something like this? It’s pretty simple to make, and I think it’s exactly what you’re looking for.”

“Meow meow?”

It was something I had yet to come across in this world, but I knew Berry would love it.

I gave her a brief explanation, and with Berry’s approval, I headed to the kitchen.



“**OH** my! How lovely! Are they really all edible?”

Lady Kate’s eyes lit up when she saw what was on the platter. Her pupils dilated, though I wasn’t sure if that was from sheer excitement, or a natural trait of all members of the Wildcat clan. Her cat ears twitched between gaps in her golden-brown hair.

“Of course. Please help yourself to this gem candy.”

Lady Kate, with Lady Natalie standing behind her, listened as I confidently offered them the gem candy—a kind of candied fruit.

As Berry requested, I candied the strawberries whole to maintain their shape. Once that turned out to be a success, I repeated the process with other fruits and set them out on the garden table for my guests to sample.

“They’re so beautiful. It feels like a waste to eat them.” Lady Natalie was staring closely at the gem candy. I’d definitely succeeded in gaining her interest.

Both of their eyes were fixed on the glittering strawberries and tiny crab apples. Next to those were grapes that had been coated whole with the caramelized sugar and glossy bite-sized pieces of oranges. The trick was to carefully remove moisture from the fruit’s surface before preparing it. This allowed for a more even distribution of candy coating.

Each piece of fruit, stuck with a skewer for easier consumption, resembled a beautiful gemstone.

I'd decided to name them "gem candy" to make them sound a bit fancier.

This was a popular treat in my past life, commonly purchased at food stalls during festivals, but I was quite certain the people of this world would be fascinated by such a rare sight. It was relatively simple to make while producing an eye-catching, delicious treat.

"Meow meow!"

Berry was nodding her head as if to give her approval of the flavor. She'd already gotten her fill of the strawberry gem candies I made for her beforehand.

"Hehe! It's time for us to dig in too." Lady Natalie, a cat-lover, smiled at Berry. It was an adorable sight to see on the usually expressionless girl's face.

We all picked up our skewers and bit into the candy coating.

Crack! Crunch!

The candy split apart with a satisfying sound, making way for a simple sweetness to dance across my tongue.

Next, I bit into the fruit.

Chewing on the strawberry fruit inside produced the perfect balance of sweet and sour. The juices seeped out and combined with the candy coating, allowing the opposite textures an equal opportunity to shine through.

"Why yes, these are sweet and tasty," Lady Kate said. "It's also fun how the candy splits apart."

First a strawberry, then a grape, then a candy apple. Lady Kate was continuously scooping up more gem candy with swift and elegant mannerisms. Her wagging tail revealed how pleased she was.

"I'm glad you like them," I said. "I see you've finally come around on strawberries, Lady Kate."

Despite how delicious and pretty strawberries were, the people of this country hated the fruit they referred to as the "poor man's gem."

This was due to the existence of a different fruit, identical to strawberries in

all but color, known as “demon’s gems.” Their poisonous nature made the people of Wolfvarte wary of consuming anything similar-looking. Many refused to consume jam or pureed strawberries, and almost no one dared eat anything that retained the strawberry’s natural shape.

Even Lady Kate’s tail had puffed up with fear the first time she saw them, so I was most pleased by her progress. It seemed exposing her to them and baking strawberry sweets over time had been a success.

“Hehe!” Lady Kate giggled. “Well, you were so passionate when you recommended them, it was impossible *not* to fall in love with these strawberries. All of Your Majesty’s sweets have been really tasty.”

“I feel exactly the same way.” Lady Natalie nodded eagerly in agreement. “You certainly love your strawberries, Queen Laetitia, and that’s why they’ve become a favorite of mine too. It’s another thing to look forward to every time I visit this villa.”

“Meow!”

“You’ve got good tastes for a human if you like strawberries that much.” That was how I interpreted Berry’s cry as she patted Lady Natalie’s shoulder.

“...!” Lady Natalie was silently trembling. She seemed to be screaming with glee on the inside, overwhelmed by the direct contact with those little toe beans. I knew the feeling all too well.

Berry’s so cute. What an adorable creature. I would be acting just as strangely if Berry had placed her paw pads on me in approval.

Lady Natalie took a sip of tea to distract from her red cheeks. Then she took a deep breath to calm herself. “...Thank you very much for treating us to more delicious desserts today. I’ll be sure to repay your kindness when we next meet.”

“You’re making too much of it,” I said. “All I want is to enjoy tea with the two of you.”

Every tea party with Lady Natalie and Lady Kate was a delightful affair. Both women had lovely personalities, and perhaps because we came from similar backgrounds, they’d opened up to me over the past year to become my dearest

friends.

Of course, I was also glad to have these connections with them on a larger, societal level.

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate were candidates to become Wolfvarte's next queen, and had therefore been granted villas of their own on the palace grounds. They were two of the country's highest-ranking noblewomen.

Both women's families opposed the other, so Lady Natalie and Lady Kate were cold to each other when they first met, but after going through a series of events that allowed them to clear the air, their relationship had improved considerably. They even held tea parties of their own to strengthen their friendship and exchange information when I was too busy to join them.

I'd learned they also recently began to correspond more with Lady I-Liena, a candidate for queen like themselves, and were on friendly terms with her now.

"I could never tell what Lady I-Liena was thinking at first. That made me worry she was a scary person, but fortunately, she's started to be a bit more friendly."

"I felt the same. She used to be so nasty and always made fun of me. But she's a little gentler these days. I wonder why?"

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate both cocked their heads.

While they welcomed Lady I-Liena's softening attitude, it appeared they didn't understand it either.

"I believe Lady I-Liena approves of how the two of you have grown," I said. "Perhaps she sees you as companions who will help support this country's future alongside her."

Lady I-Liena's motives were hard to read.

But she *did* appear to genuinely care about Wolfvarte and her own homeland, the northern region. She'd prioritized her duties as a noblewoman over her own happiness or romantic inclinations, and these days, I saw her as a woman prepared to sacrifice her desires for the good of the kingdom.

That was why I was so certain—Lady I-Liena must have viewed Lady Natalie and Lady Kate as immature people when she first met them. Perhaps she felt

they weren't worth taking the time to know until now.

Ultimately, it was also of benefit to the kingdom for them to slowly forge a friendship with her.

"You two have both changed so much over this past year," I said.

They smiled.

"...That's true," Lady Kate said. "It's already been a year since you married His Majesty."

The words slipped from her lips, drawing a silence between the three of us.

I had first come to this country to be its temporary queen. The kingdom of Wolfvarte dictated that a "white marriage," or marriage without physical relations between the husband and wife, could be safely nullified after two years.

My role was to spend two years shielding King Glenreed from political pressure before we went our separate ways. I was buying him two years' worth of time where he wouldn't need to choose a wife from one of the other four candidates.

Lady Natalie and Lady Kate. I gazed at the two candidates for queen.

They were both diligent people who'd grown a lot since I met them. But the idea of either of them becoming the queen made me somewhat apprehensive.

Lady Natalie was intelligent, but it was her family that concerned me. They made no attempt to hide their hatred of beastfolk, and I heard they didn't approve of Lady Natalie's newfound friendship with Lady Kate either. Lady Natalie struggled to oppose her parents and was still working out how to have a relationship with her family.

I didn't expect King Glenreed to retaliate against Lady Natalie's family if he chose her as his queen, but unfortunately, I could see her family feeling empowered enough to start acting out in some way.

Then there was Lady Kate, who had overcome a dispute with Lady Sienna, her little sister, but managed to maintain a good relationship with her family. Lord Gallon, her father, was a tolerant man, but Lady Kate herself tended to be a bit

too forward in her personality. She needed work expressing herself more subtly and taking the time to think things over.

Lady Kate herself was aware of these flaws, and didn't currently think of herself as a suitable queen yet. Instead, she'd told me that she would help me find a better pick to be queen.

...I wonder who Lady Kate's current pick for the next queen would be? She might tell me if I asked...

Lady Kate was an honest person. She was quick to speak whatever was on her mind, so the fact that she remained quiet on this subject probably meant that she wasn't ready to reveal the person she had in mind yet.

One year. Only one more year left.

Considering the preparation and laying of groundwork I would have to do for the next queen, it wasn't much time at all. How was I supposed to act when the day finally came?

Thinking about it caused a slight ache in my chest.

One year from now, I wouldn't be able to be by King Glenreed's side anymore. It would be much harder to approach His Majesty at all when I was no longer the queen. Hanging around him when his next wife was officially named would only cause more disputes.

I couldn't allow such an outcome.

I didn't want that to happen.

I didn't, but...

...I still feel lonely.

I was sad to think I would be separated from King Glenreed's eyes, his voice, and Lord Aroo's warmth. Just picturing that future was like having a hole burned in my heart.

It was a lot like when I regained my past life memories and realized I would never see my Japanese family again. But it wasn't exactly the same, either. It was almost as if I was sensing something still to come.

“Queen Laetitia, I...” Lady Kate opened her mouth and spoke—her tone both quiet and firm.

Lady Natalie flinched slightly, startled by the noise.

“The next queen should be— Achoo!!”

Her sudden sneeze gave us both a scare. Even Berry was startled, her tail sticking straight up in the air.

Lady Kate clasped her hand over her mouth in a panic. “I-I’m sorry. My nose suddenly started to itch...”

“...Is it because of this?” I wondered.

A feather was now sitting on the table in front of Lady Kate. It was a large, white feather. I didn’t know where it came from, but perhaps it tickled Lady Kate’s nose on the way down as it fell.

“What a wonderful feather. Was there a large bird flying overhead?” I picked up the feather and looked to the sky. It was a clear day, and I couldn’t make out anything that could be the source of said feather.

Did the wind bring it here from far away?

It was clean and appeared untouched, but was much too big to have come from any local birds.

“Could this be a griffin feather?”

“Um... I don’t think so.”

To confirm Lady Natalie’s theory, I took a deep breath.

“Fon!!” I shouted out as loud as I could.

It wasn’t long before the sound of wings reached us overhead.

“Eeeeeek!”

Fon, the griffin, descended to the ground and folded up his wings. He clicked his yellow beak and nuzzled his face against me.

“There, there. Good boy, good boy,” I soothed. “Thanks for coming. Can I take a look at your wings for a minute?”

“Kreh!”

“*But of course,*” he seemed to say as he spread his wings. He unfolded them slowly, so as not to mess up my hair or dress with the wind they were capable of. Fon was a clever and considerate griffin.

“There, there. Would it have come from here?” I brought the single feather up to Fon’s white wings. However, it turned out to be quite different. The texture and shape didn’t resemble Fon’s feathers at all. “The wind really must have blown it here after all.”

I still wasn’t quite satisfied, but it was the only answer I could come up with.

But that was when I sensed Fon looking eagerly at the table.

“...You’re hungry?” I asked.

He was staring directly at the remaining gem candies on the table. I picked a candy apple up by the skewer and watched him nibble it with his beak.

“Hehe! Is it yummy?”

“Kreh kreh!”

He squinted his eyes, as if he was enjoying the texture of the apple in his mouth. Then he nudged me with his beak, begging for seconds, so I obliged and gave him another apple. He skillfully removed it from the skewer with his beak.

“It’s amazing he can do that, even when he’s so large.” Lady Natalie watched him, impressed. I got the sense that Fon was pleased by her praise.

“Would you like to try feeding Fon a candy gem, Lady Natalie?” I asked.

“Can I really?”

“So long as you don’t move the skewer too suddenly, it should be fine,” I instructed. “Fon doesn’t bite, and he’s careful not to move in ways that would injure a human.”

With my guarantee, Lady Natalie timidly reached out for a gem candy.

“Whoa, that looks fun. Can I try too?”

“Of course.”

Lady Kate joined us next. She clasped her hand firmly around the skewer and held it out for the griffin.

“Kreeeh!”

Fon squinted and cried out with delight.

That was how the four of us carried out the rest of our tea party.



IT was after I’d said goodbye to Lady Kate and Lady Natalie that day. Lucian and I decided to head out and see what the Gardener Cats were up to.

“Oh my! Good job, everyone. You’re such energetic workers.”

The woods behind my villa had been cleared out into a field roughly the size of a schoolyard.

In the gentle spring sunlight, the hoes of the Gardener Cats sparkled in their paws.

“Meow!”

“Meow!”

“Meow!”

“Meow!”

With each cry, they swung their hoes into the dirt—special tools I’d made for them with my transmutation skill. They were the perfect size to fit in between their paw pads.

As Mythical Beasts, these creatures possessed the magical energy to grow plants. However, it seemed that preparing the soil and environment for optimal growth resulted in better crops using less energy—at least, compared to aimlessly pouring their energy into random places.

With one eye on the Gardener Cats as they diligently tilled their fields, I headed to the Snow Cats.

“Mreh mraw!”

Purr’s tiny body leapt from side to side as he hunted his prey. The prey in

question was a fluffy, white, leopard print object—the tail belonging to Purr’s mother, Wintelle.

“So cute...!” I could hardly contain myself watching his tiny limbs chase after that tail.

Snow Cats were beautiful Mythical Beasts with smooth coats that resembled snow leopards. Purr, the kitten, already looked like an elegant creature at his young age. Although, he was currently playing his heart out like any other cat.

His slightly round ears bobbed as he bounced around, chasing after his mother’s tail. Purr laid his own tail down on the ground to maintain balance, raising his front two paws up in the air.

“Mraw, mraw, mreee!”

He stretched his front paws out and leapt toward the tail.

But Wintelle seemed to predict this, as she swished her tail just before Purr could reach it. I could tell this was a regular game of theirs. She watched over her dear child, calmly blinking her golden eyes.

When she noticed us approaching, Wintelle draped her tail on top of Purr’s head.

That seemed to be a signal that the tail-hunting game was over. Purr froze, looked at us, and raced over.

“Pyah!”

“Whoa!!”

Purr pounced toward me with his full force. That was when Lucian stepped in front of me and intercepted the small creature.

“Meow?”

“Goodness, what a troublemaker you are. You may be a child, but I refuse to just let you jump on Lady Laetitia without even retracting your claws.” Despite his harsh words, Lucian cradled Purr gently, so as not to accidentally drop him. I’d expect nothing less from my outstanding servant. “What’s this...?”

As he checked to see that his uniform was unharmed, Lucian appeared

particularly impressed by something. There looked to be a thin layer of ice in between Purr's claws and the black fabric of Lucian's uniform. That ice had prevented him from leaving any scratch marks.

"Did you do this, Wintelle?" I asked.

"Graaah!" She nodded.

"I certainly did. I'm sorry for the trouble my son has caused you."

That seemed to be an accurate translation, in my mind. She must have used her power as a Snow Cat to control ice. Wintelle was as clever and as kind as any human.

"Meeyow!" Purr had started to squirm in Lucian's arms. He turned to look at me.

"You want me to hold you? Very well. But be slow, and don't release your claws, okay?"

"Myah!"

Once Lucian saw Purr nod his head, he stretched his arms out to me. Purr made sure to keep his claws retracted and maintain his balance. I embraced his body and felt his long, soft tail graze my chin.

"Hehe! That tickles. Did you get even bigger, Purr?"

"Pyah?" He cocked his head as I stroked it, as if he didn't know what I meant.

The Snow Cat felt slightly heavier than when I'd last held him two days earlier. Purr was in the middle of a growth period, and would someday reach the size of his mother, Wintelle. He was still a child, but was already a bit larger than his neighboring Gardener Cats. It was about time I taught him not to pounce on people if he didn't want to hurt them, now that I could feel his heaviness in my arms.

But I wouldn't be able to cradle him like this forever, so I made sure to enjoy it while it lasted. With that thought in my head, I cuddled his soft fur and felt a nostalgic sense come over me.

"Jiro..." I let out a sigh, my breath gently shaking the fur on Purr's head.

Jiro was my pet shiba inu in my past life. My final memory of that life was Jiro running up to me after I'd been hit by a truck.

Jiro, did you have a long life in that world?

It was also possible that, if time passed differently between this world and Japan, Jiro might still be alive. Maybe he was still enjoying his food every single day like before. I didn't know what had happened to him, but I remembered his weight feeling exactly like Purr's did now.

The familiar sensation in my arms had been so nostalgic, I couldn't help but call out his name.

That was when Wintelle suddenly sat up.

"Grah..."

She seated herself on all fours and lowered her head respectfully.

Then the forest bushes rustled, making way for a silver wolf to emerge.

"Lord Aroo!" I cried.

With his silver fur sparkling brilliantly, Lord Aroo, also known as King Glenreed, appeared before us.

"Arooooo..."

He seemed strangely uncomfortable. I noted his unusually sluggish steps toward us too.

What's the matter?

I hoped I was imagining it, but I was still a bit concerned.

"Lord Aroo, are you feeling unwell?" I asked.

The wolf's nose suddenly started to twitch.

"Whoa!!"

"What?!"

Lucian and I cried out at the same moment.

Lord Aroo ignored us both, and instead began to sniff incessantly around my waist.

“Wait, Lord Aroo, th-that tickles!”

“Get away from her, you little o×□●!”

Lucian shouted some sort of insult as he grabbed me by the shoulders to get me away from Lord Aroo.

It...didn't hurt. He'd yanked me toward him, but I never felt any pain or sense of impact. Instead, he'd wrapped his arms around me from behind and kept me tucked away there.

“Lucian, what did you just say?!”

“...It's not a word you need to concern yourself with, my lady. Isn't that right, Your Majesty? I'm sure a king such as yourself would never do something as vulgar as to sniff a young lady's dress, wouldn't you say?”

He was speaking so rapidly, it was almost hard to make out what he was saying.

I separated from Lucian, checked my dress to make sure it was still all right, and heard Lord Aroo let out an apologetic cry.

“Rurr...”

“I'm sorry I did something so thoughtless,” he seemed to be saying.

But he was still focused on my dress like before. He never took his eyes off of my waist.

“What's the matter? Ah, is this what caught your interest?”

I rummaged around in the pocket at my hip. It was the white feather that had landed on our table earlier. I'd been wanting to take it to the library later and research what sort of bird it might have come from.

“Lord Aroo, do you recognize the bird that lost this feather?”

Even once he'd given it a sniff, the wolf remained silent, with a serious look on his face. Finally, after a lot of thought, he slowly shook his head.

“...You don't have any proof that it is what you think it is?”

“Woof!”

“Basically, yes,” he was saying with a nod.

“Very well. Would you like to take this feather with you, Lord Aroo?”

Despite my suggestion, he told me it wasn’t necessary. He gave it another good sniff before stepping back and taking a seat on the ground.

That was when I noticed the Gardener Cats gathering around us. They’d stopped their farmwork to come see what Lord Aroo and I were doing.

“...I know. Why don’t we take a snack break?” I suggested. “It’s a great time for one.”

“Meow!”

“Purrrrrfect idea!”

The Gardener Cats began to rejoice.

With their chorus of meows behind me, I led them to a hole that had been dug next to the fields. The hole didn’t go directly into the ground, but had instead been dug like a slope. It was giving off a faint icy chill.

“Grah!”

Wintelle used her large paws to remove the boulder covering the hole, and we instantly felt the chill get stronger.

“It looks like the special treat I made is still frozen,” I said.

At the bottom of the hole was an ice box—a simple freezer built with Wintelle’s ice.

Wild Snow Cats were said to freeze the meat of their prey to preserve it for longer. They were intelligent enough to pick the best seasons for hunting and preserve their prey in icy holes like these.

Wintelle carried those same instincts, and even preserved some of the food my villa gave her to eat. When I saw that, I knew I had to request her help in making a cold room.

But Wintelle didn’t seem pleased with a relationship where she was only fed and left to do as she pleased otherwise, as the Snow Cat was willing to use her power more proactively. This allowed me to have both the crest tool that

functioned as my refrigerator, and now an additional cold room to preserve all kinds of food.

“It’s nice to have a cold room for the upcoming season!”

I chanted a quick spell to cut through the surface of the ice box. Even Wintelle’s thick ice quickly split apart into two halves. Inside were rows of metal jars filled with sherbet.

“This is for Wheat. Here’s Tomato, Shiota, and Nobunaga’s shares,” I read off the labels on each jar for Lucian to distribute to the Gardener Cats.

Wheat, Tomato, Shiota, and Nobunaga—they were all names of different Gardener Cats.

At first, I named them all after their favorite crops, but that method didn’t work as more Gardener Cats came to the villa, since some shared the same favorite crop. Those had to be given distinct names. Gardener Cats supposedly didn’t function any differently without names, but us humans needed a way to refer to them.

Gilbert, the other villa chefs, and I were the ones to name them.

I decided to borrow words from my past life so that my name choices wouldn’t overlap with the other chefs’ ideas. Shiota was a white cat, so I borrowed the Japanese word “shiro” meaning white. Nobunaga would often break out into a strange dance that reminded me of Atsumori, which is what I named him for.

I watched Nobunaga dance with joy as he claimed his sherbet. Then I called out to Lord Aroo. “Would you like some sherbet, Lord Aroo? There’s still some left. You like pears, don’t you?”

“Aroo!”

“I’d love some,” he said before approaching me.

I unscrewed the lid and placed it on a group of rocks I’d combined with a spell to serve as our table. But that was when it hit me.

Lord Aroo can’t hold a spoon like the Gardener Cats, can he?

Watching him poke at the sherbet with his nose, I decided to scoop some up

and present it to him.

“Here you go, Lord Aroo. Please eat it before it melts.”

I was particularly confident that my pear sherbet was one of the best.

Packed inside the soft, sweet ice were juicy pieces of pear. Its refreshing and sweet chill was the perfect sensation now that the weather was getting warmer.

I smiled, held the spoon out for him, and suddenly...

“Whoa!”

Light shot out from Lord Aroo’s body. When it faded, he was standing there in human form.

“Your Majesty? Is it all right for you to be in your human form?” I asked.

“I’ve determined that no one else is around. Is there some problem?”

“No, it’s not a problem...”

My heart skipped a beat. My pulse started to race.

His silver wolf form was lovely, but His Majesty’s human face was incredibly intense. Underneath his sparkling, silver hair was a pair of sharp eyes—greenish-blue like a winter lake, and mesmerizing enough to draw you into them. His handsome nose and jawline were made with perfect lines, as if he’d been sculpted out of ice by a master artist. He was masculine, yet elegant. His looks were something pure, without a single flaw to speak of.

It was only natural that my face would flush, suddenly staring back at the king’s beauty without any warning.

“Give me that. I can eat on my own,” he said.

“Ah...!”

He snatched the spoon from my grasp.

With an emotionless look on his face, King Glenreed brought the sherbet up to his lips.



COLD, sweet, delicious.

As he silently consumed his helping of sherbet, Glenreed couldn't seem to rid himself of the irritation bubbling up in him.

Just what was she thinking...?!

Laetitia had held a spoonful of sherbet out to him.

It was almost like...

Yes, that was *exactly* what it was. He'd heard about such things before.

Lovers sometimes feed each other little bites of their food, don't they?

...But I know that wasn't Laetitia's intention.

She was a kind woman who only wanted to help him, since he had no real way to try the sherbet for himself. But that knowledge only fanned the flames of the king's anger.

She hadn't hesitated for a moment to do something that was usually a sweet gesture between lovers. It was proof that she didn't see Glenreed as a man at all. He was upset over something so trivial, and his pathetic reaction to it was irritating on its own too.

I always lose my mind whenever I'm around Laetitia...

Her every word and action made the waves in his heart surge. He couldn't compose himself, and yet he couldn't look away from her either.

Just before, he'd gotten lost in a daze and started to sniff at her feather without thinking. Even though that scent was something that left him wary, he never expected to end up clinging to her so inappropriately.

If Laetitia came into contact with the owner of that scent... He suddenly didn't know what would happen if his hunch was correct, so he began to sniff around frantically, trying to find any other clues.

I lose some sense of reason when I'm in silver wolf form, but to completely relinquish control like that...?

He was so embarrassed. He felt like he was on the verge of a headache.

"*Jiro.*" That was the name Laetitia had absently muttered before he made his

appearance. Thinking back to her longing for the faraway man she loved so dearly, only worsened Glenreed's pain.

“.....”

No, he wasn't just imagining it.

His head was truly aching now. It throbbed, like something was wrenching on his skull from the inside. He wondered why this was happening, but then Laetitia leaned in to look at this face.

“Are you all right, Your Majesty?”

He looked at her brilliant purple eyes and his heart skipped a beat.

Right now, the reflection in those eyes was of him and him alone—not Jiro. He was startled and apologetic, and yet some part of him was also wickedly happy.

But Glenreed forced his emotions down and desperately tried to act calm as he spoke. “...I made sure not to show it on my face. How did you know?”

“Because I understand you. We've spent a lot of time together over this past year.” Mixed in with Laetitia's sweet smile was a hint of embarrassment. It was a friendly, gentle, lovely smile.

She'd completely stolen all of Glenreed's words from his mind.

“Forgive me, but I forgot to mention something. Your head might hurt if you eat too much of something frozen at once.” When Laetitia said that, she slowly extended her hand toward Glenreed's temple. “It hurts right here, doesn't it? The pain should go away natur—?!”

Glenreed didn't even realize what he was doing.

He grabbed her slender arm and pulled her close.

Then he wrapped his arms around Laetitia.



“**YOUR** Majesty...?”

I stiffened when I felt his strong arms embrace me.

Hang on! He's so close!! What's going on?! Why did he do that?! Did I do something wrong?!

"....."

...I knew it. I was being over-familiar again.

Once I'd calmed down a little, I was able to recognize my own mistake. I'd been concerned about King Glenreed's brain freeze and reached out to touch him without thinking. But touching him wouldn't have helped anything in the first place. The king's head wasn't something for me to touch.

I looked up at His Majesty, prepared to apologize, but then...

"...!"

He squeezed his arms around me so tightly, it crushed my words before I could get them out.

It hurts. My lungs, my body, and maybe even something else.

It grew and grew like a raging fever.

When I took a breath, I caught the aroma of pears mixed in with the scent of his clothes.

The world, my mind, my vision—it was all spinning and spinning and spinning.

"...Why?"

"Your Majesty...?!"

He grabbed my shoulders and pushed me off of him.

King Glenreed took a few steps back, creating more space between us. His beautiful face was frighteningly emotionless, like it was nothing more than a mask. The winter lake in his eyes was masked by an indecipherable layer of ice.

"Why did you reach your hand out to me?"

I fell silent. His voice was icy cold. It seemed I had overstepped in trying to touch him after all. That was only natural, and I expected him to chastise me. But still...

It was as if he was rejecting me, and it suddenly became hard to move.

“Please...forgive me. I won’t ever do something like that again,” I managed to choke out.

“...Good. I don’t want you getting the wrong idea,” he said in a detached voice before turning his back to me.

He’s so far away.

I wasn’t sensing His Majesty’s physical body, but the distance between our hearts in that moment.

“We’re only husband and wife because of politics, after all,” he said coolly.

Yes. I knew that. It was the reason I came to this kingdom in the first place.

King Glenreed left me with that factual reminder before quickly walking away.



“**UGH**, I’m so embarrassed... I want to dig a hole and hide in it...”

I sank to the ground and covered my face once King Glenreed was gone.

My actions replayed again in my mind.

His Majesty saw my hand coming toward him while he struggled with his headache. It must have upset him.

There was nothing more irritating than a busybody disguising their actions as kindness. Of *course* he hated being touched without permission by someone who wasn’t family or a romantic partner.

He’d only embraced me like that because he wanted me to understand how uncomfortable he felt. While it wasn’t necessarily uncomfortable for me, the shock, uncertainty, and difficulty breathing had certainly made my head spin.

I was mortified to think I made King Glenreed feel the same way. It was the most embarrassing thing in the whole world.

“Aaaaaaah!! ...Hm?” I was agonizing over my mistake when I felt something tug on my dress. When I looked down, the Gardener Cats had dug a hole in the ground and were watching me proudly. “...No, wanting to hide in a hole is just an expression people say...”

Gardener Cats wouldn’t understand such a thing...or would they?

They were intelligent and loyal Mythical Beasts. Perhaps they saw my state of despair and thought to lighten the mood with a little joke.

My heart *did* feel more at peace, if only a little.

“Hehe! Thank you, everyone.”

I crouched in the hole and stroked the head of the nearest black Gardener Cat, Cucumber. Cucumber blinked her golden eyes at me, allowing me to keep petting her.

“Meow!”

“Mraw mraw!”

“Mrrrrraw!”

“Whoa!”

“*Pet me too!*”

“*Me next!*”

The other Gardener Cats began to push their way up to me.

“Hang on! I’ll pet you all, just please wait in line!”

Fluffa fluffa fluff.

Ambushed by soft furballs, it wasn’t long before my sadness had disappeared to some unknown place.



“**I’M** sorry for the wait.”

“Grah!”

I finally finished petting the Gardener Cats and returned to Wintelle. Purr, perhaps tired of waiting for me, was curled up in a deep sleep.

My plan was to take the two of them to the Bureau of Magic that day. Snow Cats were extremely rare Mythical Beasts who rarely showed their faces in areas populated by humans. That was why the bureau had requested my help in researching Wintelle’s powers. This came as good news, since I also wanted to understand what she was capable of. We’d already visited the bureau a few

times together.

I returned to my room, quickly changed into a clean dress, and hopped into my carriage to depart the villa. Since there was still a bit of time before my scheduled visit, we took the carriage to get a look at the second Gardener Cat field along the road.

Gardener Cats had come to the villa one after another, and we'd now amassed over one hundred of them. The single field behind my villa didn't offer enough space for them to share, but I didn't want to cut into the woods any more than I already had. I ended up getting permission from King Glenreed to borrow a corner of the palace territory that wasn't being used by anyone else.

Unlike the first field, which was surrounded by trees, this field allowed for ventilation, so many Gardener Cats chose to grow their crops in the secondary location. It was a bit far away from the villa, where they slept at night, so the Gardener Cats had to trot down the road as a group every morning to reach the second field. Their commute had become a famous attraction on the palace grounds. Lady Natalie was one of their biggest fans, of course.

The Gardener Cats once lived out of sight from human eyes, but now that their great results were being acknowledged by everyone, they were turning into splendid little palace workers themselves.

"Yep, they're doing a great job with this field too."

I exited the carriage and observed the Gardener Cats as they worked. Some of them spotted me, so they raised their free paws and waved in my direction. I waved back, looked around the field, and searched for anything out of the ordinary.

"Hmm...? There's nothing growing in that one spot."

A patch of soil, about fifteen feet long and wide, was left completely empty.

Are they preparing to plant something else there?

Curious, I asked the cats for the answer. They exchanged looks before shaking their heads from side to side.

"What? It's a secret...?"

This was unusual. The Gardener Cats hardly ever kept secrets about their fields.

Humans and Gardener Cats had different norms and understandings of things, which sometimes resulted in disagreements or information leaks that weren't supposed to happen. But they rarely refused to answer when I asked them a question.

"I'm supposed to be surprised when I see what you've grown?"

This time, they nodded their little heads at me. As interested as I was, I didn't want to force it out of them. I decided to let it go and leave it for a future surprise.

I said goodbye to the Gardener Cats and got back inside the carriage with Wintelle and Purr.



"YOU want...to borrow Wintelle's power?"

We'd arrived at the Bureau of Magic office, and they'd just finished Wintelle's standard examination and measurements. It was then that I was approached by Liddeus, the black cape of his uniform looking particularly wrinkled that day.

"That's fine with me if it doesn't cause her any harm. However..." I trailed off when I got a good look at Liddeus.

His bangs had grown out too long and the rest of his hair was sticking up all over the place like he'd just rolled out of bed. The black cloak wrapped around his slim body was singed in places—signs that he'd worn it during his magic experiments. That much was normal, but the dark circles under his eyes were even more intense than what I was used to seeing. I couldn't help but be startled.

"Liddeus, do you remember the last time you got a good night's sleep?" I asked.

"Last night. I slept a full two hours."

"That's not nearly long enough!"

I hadn't meant to shout back at him like that. Between my cry and his lack of

sleep, Liddeus was startled enough to whip his head back too quickly. He was about to fall all the way backwards and hit the ground, when a blue mass raced up to him from behind.

“Peep!”

It was a Cuddle Bird with light blue feathers. She skillfully caught Liddeus’ body and held him up before he could tumble over. The Cuddle Bird exhaled from her beak and then adjusted her torso to support Liddeus better. She carried him to a nearby desk, set him down, and carefully draped a blanket over him with her beak.

“She’s like his mom...!”

It was exactly like watching a devoted mother dote on her troubled son. I could see the affection in her eyes as she watched over Liddeus, who’d fallen fast asleep.

“They’re both Cuddle Birds, but my Tweety has an entirely different personality,” I mused.

Tweety was a childish creature and chose to do as he pleased. But that just contributed to how cute he was. He reminded me of a rambunctious kindergartener. I’d learned that, like humans, Cuddle Birds had very distinct personalities as individuals.

“I’m sorry that Liddeus always embarrasses himself whenever you visit, Your Majesty.” Orth, an employee at the Bureau of Magic, approached me. He was carrying a bundle of papers with magical formulas written on them, as if he’d been in the middle of an experiment himself.

“It’s no trouble,” I said. “I’m the one intruding on your workplace, after all. Was Liddeus busy researching and developing a new crest tool?”

“Yes, it sure seems—”

“That’s right, that’s right, I finally created my brand-new crest tool!” Liddeus suddenly shot up and began to speak over Orth.

“Eek!”

“Peep!”

The Cuddle Bird and I jumped simultaneously.

He must have reacted when he heard the term “crest tool,” even while in a dead sleep. The hardcore magic enthusiast was still alive and well today.

“Liddeus, how is your health...?” I asked, worried.

“It’s fine. I made sure to finish my crest tool so it would be ready for your visit.”

“You planned that? I appreciate the effort, but please take care of yourself too, okay?” I was actually starting to develop a genuine concern for his health. He always tended to skimp on eating and sleeping, but I feared that one day, he might break down in a way he could truly never recover from.

The blue Cuddle Bird seemed to agree with me, judging by her half-exasperated, half-concerned gaze...or at least, that was what it looked like to me.

“Do you hear what Queen Laetitia is saying to you?” Orth interjected. “You’re a grown man now, so you ought to learn how to take care of your own health.”

“I always get enough sleep to make up for my all-nighters,” Liddeus argued.

“You mean you *collapse* from exhaustion afterwards! That’s not sleep!” Orth angrily lectured his coworker. As always, he was at a loss for what to do with his troublesome coworker.

I suddenly felt like offering him some kindness. After all, I was a corporate drone in my past life. “Thank you for everything, Orth. My chefs and I are going to be sampling some of our newest recipes at the villa soon. Would you care to join us when we do?”

“Huh? You wouldn’t mind having me there?” He sounded surprised by the offer.

“I’d like to get opinions from many people, not just my villa’s servants. I’ll be using the crest tool made by the Bureau of Magic to cook some—”

“I’ll come too,” Liddeus cut me off and butted into the conversation.

It was exactly what I’d been aiming for.

“You’d like to join us, Liddeus?”

I tried my best to sound casual about it. I’d expected a magic-obsessed man like Liddeus to jump at my mention of the crest tool.

“If you’re coming to the tasting party, then please be sure you’re in a healthy state. We can’t have you collapsing in the middle of the party.”

That was what I planned to say next, hoping it would be of help to Orth. However...

“I want to eat...the crest tool,” he muttered.

“Pardon?”

What is he talking about?

I was taken aback. Liddeus, still with the incredibly dark circles under his eyes, opened his mouth again.

“No, that’s wrong, I meant I want to eat the crest tool alone with Queen Laetitia.”

“What in the world?!” Orth shouted.

I was startled too, but I soon understood what was going on.

Is Liddeus so exhausted that his brain is now glitching out?

In support of that theory, Liddeus had just started to tip forward.

“Ah, no, not that either. I want to have dinner alone with Queen Laetitia, and eat her cooking that came from the crest t—”

“...He really used up the last of his energy for that, didn’t he?” Lucian watched with an ice-cold smile as Liddeus once again collapsed onto the Cuddle Bird. “How terribly offensive, wishing to dine alone with the queen like that.”

“...He just got confused,” I said. “You don’t have to be so hard on him.”

“That’s exactly why I *must* be hard on him. ...Sometimes one’s true feelings slip out in moments of confusion.” Despite Lucian’s words, he adjusted Liddeus’ cloak on the back of the Cuddle Bird and gave her instructions. “Please bring this unstable individual to the office’s nap room. As for us, Lady Laetitia, let’s finish up our business and promptly return to the villa.”



“**WINTELLE** is ready. How are things on your end?”

“I’ve finished preparing as well. Please begin as planned,” Orth replied from his place about a hundred feet away.

There was an empty plot of land outside the bureau where they could conduct their experiments. Liddeus had asked us to help test his brand-new crest tool today. Liddeus himself was still out cold, but it sounded like the tool was ready to use. We would simply report our findings to him later. I felt a bit guilty about that, but I didn’t exactly want to wake him up either.

“All right, Wintelle. Go ahead,” I instructed.

“Grah!”

With that response, Wintelle spawned a series of ice spears in the space around her body.

This experiment was meant to test the intensity of a defensive crest tool.

Crest tools ran off of the magical energy stored in magic stones, allowing anyone to replicate the magic cast by sorcerers. They were very useful items.

Orth activated the large, ring-shaped crest tool, causing a wall of dirt to rise upwards. He quickly left the tool there and ran for cover. Behind the wall, I could see he’d left a human-shaped target.

“That target has always been destroyed whenever we test it...” I muttered.

What would it be today?

We’d already tested the intensity of the defensive crest tool a number of times, but the wall was destroyed each and every time. The defensive wall created by this crest tool was as strong as anything a sorcerer could achieve on their own, so long as it wasn’t extremely large. Wintelle’s ice spears were fast and strong enough to destroy wood, dirt, and even steel plates on the thinner side.

“Grrrah!” With a roar, she sent her ice spears flying out.

Every last one of them hit their target with perfect accuracy. They thundered

toward the wall...but it remained standing. Only the ice spears snapped and crumbled. The dirt wall was dented but remained standing and unpenetrated.

“Grrrruh...” Wintelle grit her teeth and let out a disappointed growl. She’d just attacked with the maximum amount of power she was capable of. I knew her pride must be wounded to see that her spears were now failing to pierce the wall.

“Don’t be so upset, Wintelle,” I said. “Ice isn’t your only strength. You have incredible mobility because you’re physically powerful too, remember? In a real fight, you could run around the wall and carve out your own opportunity to attack.”

“Rurr...”

I tried to cheer her up, but she still seemed disappointed. She stared up at me with a pouty look on her face.

“...Um, are you asking me to knock down that wall myself?”

“Grah!” Wintelle nodded. It appeared that she wanted me, her master, to be the one who got revenge on that wall.

It was the same with Fon the griffin—intelligent and powerful Mythical Beasts always wanted their masters to show off their abilities.

“Orth! May I try to destroy the wall with my magic next?” I asked in a loud voice. “There’s a spell I’d like to test out!”

“Certainly! I’d love to see that!”

I detected a bit of excitement in his response.

Orth had a more stable head on his shoulders than Liddeus, but everyone who worked for the Bureau of Magic seemed to care about magic much more than the average person. He was waiting for me to use my spell.

I could feel the eager eyes of both Orth and Wintelle on me as I focused.

It probably wouldn’t be hard to pierce the defensive wall with a high-tier spell. However, that would result in a loss of magical energy, and using something so overpowered would defeat the point of the experiment.

I decided to go with a seventh-level, mid-tier attack spell.

Once I'd assembled it to my personal liking, I activated it just as I pictured.

"Circular fire, crimson fists. Turn to a racing bullet!"

Flames erupted in the air and instantly condensed.

My improved "Crimson Pebble" left dazzling trails of light as it shot into the dirt wall.

"Yes! It went through!!" I struck a victory pose, celebrating my success.

The small hole opened up in the wall revealed that it had shot through cleanly to the other side.

"Gyahah!"

"Well done!"

Wintelle seemed to praise me as she looked up at me, her tail swishing from side to side.

"I did it! How was that?" I petted Wintelle and called out to Orth and Director Bodorey, his boss who'd come to watch the experiment as well.

"...That startled me," Director Bodorey said. "You just chanted 'Crimson Pebble,' did you not? How are you able to cast that spell with such great force?"

"I simply intensified the flames and condensed them before firing," I explained. "It reduces the range of attack, but it's better at penetrating a target."

Casting spells consisted of constructing a formula, with an emphasis on the sorcerer's own imagination. In that regard, my past life memories made things much easier.

My mind was packed full of things they didn't have in this world—all sorts of phenomena, scientific achievements, and images from works of fiction. I had no lack of material to create with. I'd been picturing a gun from my past life when I cast the spell at the wall.

Crimson Pebble usually consisted of firing off flames that were anywhere from the size of a fist to a human head. But I'd condensed mine down to about

the size of a marble.

Normal attack spells had a very wide range and were difficult to use without harming those near the target. That was why I'd gone through multiple stages of improving the spell, so that I could concentrate the firepower only where it was needed.

It was better to have no need for attack magic, but I couldn't be naive either. I'd just gone through an incident in my homeland of Elltoria where I needed to use my magic in such a way.

There was no harm in being prepared, at least.

My brothers had been training me my whole life to be prepared in case of an emergency. I would have to keep devoting myself to magic if I wanted to guarantee my safety each and every day.

"You merely intensified the flames and condensed them...? There'd be no need for researchers like ourselves if that was a simple feat... You've outdone yourself today, Queen Laetitia." Director Bodorey approached me, scratching his head.

"Thank you very much. Does that conclude the experiment?" I asked.

"Yes, that will do it. The crest tool appears to be functioning very well."

"Oh?"

Even though I broke through the wall?

Director Bodorey beckoned me over in my confusion. I came around to the other side of the wall and was instantly impressed.

"I see. So there are two layers of protection," I observed. "The wall appears to be the main target, but behind it is a hidden hole in the ground where you can take shelter and wait out the attacks."

A hole large enough for a person to sit in had appeared on the other side of the wall. The human-shaped target had laid down inside the hole, completely unharmed.

"Hohoho! Isn't Liddeus clever?"

“It defied my expectations. It’s wonderful.”

It wasn’t unusual to use dirt magic to dig holes. I’d also used these methods to create pitfalls at an enemy’s feet, and knew the method of placing a hole between yourself and an enemy to obstruct their path forward.

Of course, a simple hole could be circumvented, and it wasn’t effective against spells that flew through the air like arrows.

That was why Liddeus had built his crest tool to provide a hole for the sorcerer to hide in, not to trap their enemy. It also crafted a protective dirt wall, as it would be hard for the sorcerer to move defensively while in the hole. This crest tool was a brilliant invention indeed.

I surveyed the dirt wall, the hole, and the crest tool placed inside it with fascination.

The idea of hiding in a hole to dodge attacks reminded me of war trenches from my past life. It would probably be effective against an opponent who was seeing it for the first time, even if coming up with a countermeasure was still possible once you knew how it worked.

“The dirt dug up to form the hole becomes the protective wall, allowing the sorcerer to save their magical energy while still creating a strong wall...?”

“He was clever, wasn’t he? It’s hard enough to implement it even with an idea in your mind, but Liddeus is more than capable. That’s how he manages to get by, even as he struggles in other areas of life.” Director Bodorey smiled awkwardly.

The Bureau of Magic was a place where the most skilled sorcerers in all of Wolfvarte gathered. Liddeus had still managed to climb toward the top of such an elite institution.

“How amazing. This crest tool would probably be a great defense against flying instruments and spells. Liddeus achieved something wonderful with this,” I said.

“Yes, that’s true. Well, there’s only one problem... It cost a considerable amount to create. That Liddeus went and used so many valuable catalysts to get the results he wanted...” Director Bodorey trailed off.

“...May I ask how much it cost?”

I was only curious. But the response I received came as a shock. It was enough money to build a commoner's house—maybe even a nobleman's manor. Even I, the queen, would hesitate to pay such a sum.

All I could say was that I'd expect nothing less of Liddeus to spare no cost in his experiments. Everyone knew that his brain's creations were well worth it.

Once the general formula for the crest tool was completed, it was more cost-effective to finish its actual development with help from everyone else.

“The Ringrard Empire to the south has started to make troubling moves in recent times,” Director Bodorey said. “We're under lots of pressure to develop useful spells and crest tools.”

“Everyone expects great things from your magic and your minds, after all.” I tried consoling Director Bodorey as I pictured the threats throughout the western continent in my mind.

Up until ten years ago, the Ringrard Empire controlled only a few medium-sized countries throughout the continent. But ever since the reign of the current emperor, Emperor Ishnad, they'd rapidly conquered a number of other countries and were developing into a world power.

I'd exchanged words with Emperor Ishnad just that spring in Elltoria, where I got a very real sense of his character. His powerful and mysterious aura left a strong impression on me during our brief interaction.

Fortunately, Wolfvarte didn't share a border with the Ringrard Empire. There were a few smaller countries between us. But I didn't know how things might change over the next few years.

King Glenreed had earned the nickname “Silver Wolf King” after emerging victorious in battles against his neighboring nations. I hoped this was proof that he wouldn't allow the Ringrard Empire to overpower this country either...

Director Bodorey seemed just as concerned by the many looming international threats. “King Glenreed has greatly increased the Bureau of Magic's budget since he took the throne,” he said. “We're extremely grateful for the provisions of magic stones as well. Improving relations with the Wildcat

clan played an important role. We owe it to you, Queen Laetitia, for bringing the Wildcat clan together in solidarity with humans.”

“They’re certainly a great help.”

Contributions from Lady Kate’s family and Wildcat clan members in the eastern region were crucial in supplying magic stones for crest tool development.

Most magic stones were harvested from the corpses of demons.

The kingdom of Wolfvarte was surrounded by monster-inhabited land on all sides, earning it the title of “Great Shield.” The borders were heavily protected, but it was impossible to prevent monsters from setting foot in the country entirely. However, these were valuable opportunities to acquire magic stones, and their sale was an important source of funds to the eastern region.

“They used to try to squeeze every penny they could out of those stones, but now that Lady Kate and her father are on friendlier terms with humans, they sell them cheaper to be of benefit to the bureau and the country. We began to sell them our successful crest tools at a lower price as well, but even then, we still come out with a much better deal than before.”

“It’s a clever trade that benefits both sides, yes,” I agreed.

With the plentiful magic stones in the eastern region, the Wildcat clan alone wasn’t able to put them to practical use. Their members possessed incredible physical abilities but were unable to control magical energy and cast spells. Crest tools were usable to anyone so long as a magic stone powered them, although, developing and fine-tuning them was next to impossible without a human’s magical abilities.

By providing magic stones at a low price, the members of the Bureau of Magic could develop crest tools and offer them to the Wildcat Clan. The arrangement suited both of their strengths and was beneficial overall to the strength of Wolfvarte.

What would have been an impractical plan while the two sides antagonized each other was now steadily becoming a reality.

“I myself believed all beastfolk to be brutes who relied solely on physical

strength, with no comprehension of magic at all, but when I actually sat down and talked to them, I found we had much more in common than I first thought,” the director admitted. “Even Liddeus spends a lot of time chatting with the young Dog-Fang knight.”

“You mean Keith? They enjoyed eating chocolate fondue together using Liddeus’ crest tool at my villa.” I smiled at the memory.

Liddeus and Keith were at odds with each other after an incident involving the Bureau of Magic, but it seemed that what didn’t kill them only made them stronger. These days, they were entirely friendly with each other. I’d seen them getting along well, even with the occasional bumping of heads and disputes.

“That clumsy, bothersome, homebody and magic-lover Liddeus actually became friends with a beastfolk. It doesn’t seem possible, but personally, I’m glad it’s happened. I’d have no complaints about Liddeus’ character if he could just learn to be even *slightly* more responsible...”

I had no comment in response to Director Bodorey’s criticism.

Liddeus is not only extremely talented, but his personality isn’t so terrible either... He was like my older brother Claude in that way. They were extremely intelligent, but they just couldn’t develop healthy lifestyles. *I wonder why that is?*

There were different factors at play, but the two of them could definitely be considered “hopeless.”

“Mr. Liddeus reminds me of Lord Claude,” Lucian said with a strained smile.

Perhaps we’d communicated telepathically as mistress and servant to come to the same conclusion.

Of my three older brothers, Big Brother Claude was the closest to me in age. I got along with him the best as well.

However, it seemed that he’d planned...or rather, used his exceptional brain to guide Prince Fritz into breaking up with me—the event that would later bring me to Wolfvarte.

Why would my brother, who always doted on me with such fondness, ever do

a thing like that?

More accurately, my engagement falling apart wasn't his goal, but one step in a larger plan. His true desire in all of this remained a mystery, however.

"But let me just say one thing. I pray for Letty's happiness the same as you do, Your Majesty. I'll always try to avoid hurting her, as much as I possibly can."

I believed the words Big Brother Claude had said to me. That belief was exactly why I was apprehensive about where he was and what he was getting up to these days.

I only hoped he was taking it easy and drinking alcohol under his *kotatsu*—not meddling in anything dangerous.

I sent my love out to Big Brother Claude, wherever he was under that distant sky.

Interlude: What the Brothers Were Up To

A bit of time had passed since Laetitia visited the Bureau of Magic and participated in their crest tool experiment.

A reunion was taking place on the southeastern side of the western continent—a city within the Ringrard Empire.

“Howdy, Hayruth. Long time no see.”

It was a casual encounter, like one would expect after wandering a city and running into a friend. Claude smiled dully as he approached Hayruth.

“What a coincidence. You look like you’re doing well, Lord Claude. How’s the kitty?”

“Meow!”

When Hayruth asked that question, a smile on his own face as well, the black and white Gardener Cat on Claude’s shoulder bowed in greeting. This was Clementine, the orange-loving Gardener Cat, who had apparently taken a liking to Claude enough to follow him around.

Animals usually hate me, but she’s not shy around me at all. She’s just as strange a character as Lord Claude. Hayruth, who could transform into the spirit of his ancestor and take the form of a snake, was a source of fear to dogs, cats, horses, sheep, and other animals. The only exceptions were scaley creatures such as scaled horses or lizards, but Hayruth rarely interacted with warm-blooded animals at all. That was why he took a liking to Clementine, who wasn’t afraid of him.

Claude also saw Hayruth as a good drinking buddy, but knew he wasn’t someone he could let his guard down around.

“Would you like to go out for a drink? Well, that’s what I wanted to ask, anyway...” Hayruth stared up at the sky. The sun was setting—usually a peaceful hour where day faded to night, but something was amiss that evening. He

listened closely and heard what sounded like the distant screams of soldiers. “Was this your doing, Lord Claude?”

Hayruth was asking both about the soldiers’ frenzy and the coincidence of bumping into Claude in town.

Claude must have been after this country’s classified information and set off a commotion in the process.

It looks like he beat me to the punch. Now what shall I do...? Hayruth was after the same information Claude had likely obtained. But they weren’t going to be sharing this information as fellow parties concerned with the Ringrard Empire.

It wasn’t just Hayruth this time—other spies from his homeland of Raiolbern had infiltrated the city. But if he called for them now, Claude would probably put all of this to an end.

Just as he was deciding what to do next...

Hayruth glanced to the side, and Claude instantly leaned backwards.

“Mraw?!”

A dagger was sticking out into the air where Claude had just stood. Clementine cried out, nearly shaken off of Claude’s shoulder.

A man patted Claude. His golden eyes blazed as he glared at the other side of the alleyway.

“Ah, I apologize. I didn’t mean to harm you. If you forgive me, I’ll sing you a song some other time.”

This man was Leonard, the bard, and his apology was blatantly insincere.

I didn’t expect Leonard to be here too. Hayruth knew the full story. Leonard wasn’t just a traveling bard, but a spy working for the kingdom of Wolfvarte. He was also the older brother of King Glenreed—a former prince who was believed by the public to be dead. Hayruth’s special eyes had left him nearly convinced of these facts.

Those eyes were able to perceive heat and magical energy that others couldn’t.

A human's flow of magical energy and its distribution within the body varied from person to person, but blood relatives often shared similar makeups of energy within the body.

Leonard's magical energy greatly resembled family members of the previous king's wife. Then there was his age, his behavior, the history of Wolfvarte's royal family, and various other pieces of information that painted a complete picture in Hayruth's mind.

Leonard played with the dagger between his fingertips and cast a glance toward Hayruth. "Can you stay out of this? I think you'd agree it would be best for you, no?"

"....."

Hayruth instantly began to calculate the situation. He'd assumed that the soldiers were raging because Claude had stolen classified information. But it was possible that Leonard had succeeded on the same mission.

Is he trying to get rid of Lord Claude so that he can have the information all to himself? No, or did he fail to steal it, and now he wants to take what Lord Claude found? He seems relatively calm, so he probably did obtain some sort of info. Or is he putting on an act to fool me? He might be focusing on Lord Claude and ignoring me just so that I'll feel safe letting my guard down...

As his mind raced, Hayruth focused on the two men's movements.

Any two of them could team up to take out the other.

Remaining vigilant, he decided to stay back and watch what unfolded.

Leonard smiled at Claude and spread his arms dramatically. "Three men together with nothing beautiful to lighten the mood? Such a pity. Could I ask you to quickly hand over the information and be on your way?"

"Sure thing. I'll head home, as you wish."

Hayruth watched Claude shrug his shoulders, while Clementine dismounted down to the ground. His eyes perceived the intensifying flow of magical energy.

"Whichever two are left can fight it out to decide who walks away with the information." Claude turned around and made that declaration over his

shoulder.

Naturally, Leonard had predicted his escape, so he took off toward Claude on foot.

So fast! He's definitely "half-beast," all right.

Leonard was capable of much greater physical feats than any human. Hayruth had always found his magical energy strange for a pure-blood human, but now he was certain of the explanation.

Sometimes "half-beasts," children of human and beastfolk parents, inherited the strengths of both bloodlines. The strength of a beastfolk, and the magic of a human.

The man before his eyes now, Leonard, was its embodiment.

Leonard threw his dagger forward, where it turned into a blade of wind to cut across Claude's path. It was a masterful use of physical strength and magic, but Claude wasn't going to be bested so easily.

"Oops! That's dangerous."

Leonard nimbly jumped off to the side.

Claude had fired off an earth magic spell to lay a series of pitfalls, though Leonard easily avoided them all. It seemed his talents didn't end at strength and magic—he knew how to read a situation too.

But Claude had managed to buy a bit of time with that, so he sprinted further away from Leonard.

"That's a little harsh, even for Lord Claude. Don't you think?" Hayruth was speaking to his feet. That was where Clementine had come up to sit. She produced a peeled orange from somewhere unknown and munched on it while watching the fight. "How shameless of you. Or are you just really convinced Lord Claude is going to win?"

Clementine didn't answer Hayruth's question. Instead, she continued to watch Claude and Leonard.

Claude was completely out of breath, but he never once stopped chanting spells. "Wow, you're a stubborn one. Why don't you head down to a tavern and

sing a song like a good little bard?”

“I intend to perform a song about a victorious homecoming,” Leonard replied. “Want to hear it?”

“A victorious homecoming? You sound drunk, but you haven’t even been to the tavern yet.” Claude smiled sympathetically, ignoring the matter of his own drinking habits.

Hayruth had initially thought that Claude was trying to buy time by fighting Leonard, however...

Ah, I might be wrong. I think Lord Claude just wants to get under Leonard’s skin. It was possible Claude simply didn’t like Leonard, though Hayruth didn’t know why that would be. He also got the sense that Leonard hated Claude too.

They were still hurling insults at each other as they exchanged spells.

“You really don’t know when to quit!” Claude shouted.

“I could say the same about you!” Leonard shouted back. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you women hate stubborn men?”

“I don’t need your advice. Letty is suspicious of you because you act like this!” Claude snapped back at him, dodging Leonard’s blade by less than an inch. Hayruth wondered if he was actually *extremely* angry with Leonard. After all, he answered Leonard’s every last quip despite being out of breath himself.

Leonard sounded irritated about something too, snapping back at Claude. “Haha! I’m still better than a big brother who does nothing but lie to his little sister!” As he said that, Leonard unleashed a slashing attack that was faster than the eye could see.

Claude seemed to perfectly read the timing and dodge the blows, but now, he was out of energy to return the attack.

Still refusing to let his guard down, Hayruth watched their mudslinging contest as he racked his brain. *Maybe they just don’t like each other on a fundamental level...but Lord Claude adores his little sister. He probably hates seeing a playboy like Leonard hanging around Queen Laetitia. Then there’s Leonard, who can’t publicly live as King Glenreed’s brother. I’ll bet he doesn’t*

like how Lord Claude lies to his own little sister and makes her worry, even though they have such a strong sibling relationship.

Sure, it was all silly, but neither of them seemed willing to yield to the other.

Queen Laetitia and King Glenreed, the younger siblings, are both such honest people. It's the big brothers who are disappointments... Hayruth pictured how hard it must be for Laetitia and Glenreed to live with those strange characters for older brothers.

Hayruth had severed ties with his siblings and was therefore a bit jealous of Claude and Leonard. But for now, he only mentally sent his sympathies to Laetitia and Glenreed.

He considered jumping into the fight, targeting whichever of the two was more vulnerable, but neither man was showing any particular weakness. He determined it was best to watch and wait for the time being.

As Hayruth and Clementine spectated the battle, the once-distant voices of the soldiers started to draw closer.

Leonard and Claude seemed to notice too. The pair silently glared at each other.

"...I guess there's no choice. I'll be on my merry way before those rude intruders get here." Leonard immediately changed gears and slipped into the darkness of the alleyway. His footsteps were inaudible, and Hayruth knew the soldiers would be unable to track him.

"Ah, that was exhausting. I want to get home quickly and read my books too." Claude sighed. He'd readily given up on the battle too. He was bleeding in a few spots, but didn't appear to have any serious wounds. Claude definitely wasn't concerned about it.

His nonchalant attitude was surprising for someone who'd just been viciously fighting with Leon, both with words and actual attacks. Hayruth decided to ask him about it.

"Lord Claude, was insulting Lord Leonard like that just part of the performance?" Hayruth asked.

“I’ll leave it to your imagination.” Claude shrugged, then stuck his left arm out.

“Meow!” Clementine instantly jumped up to his arm and climbed on his shoulder. She returned to her usual spot, her tail swishing calmly behind her.

“See you, Hayruth. I’ll be praying we can drink together next time we meet.”

“Please wait a moment.”

Claude had waved his hand and started to leave with Clementine when Hayruth stopped them.

“What is it?”

“...What’s got you so panicked, Lord Claude?”

This was Hayruth’s intuition.

At first glance, Claude seemed to be acting as aloof as ever. But Hayruth sensed much more urgency in him than before. Even earlier, when Leonard had ambushed him, Claude watched for Hayruth’s reaction before taking countermeasures.

Claude was a very cautious man. But what if he had failed to predict Leonard’s attack until the second it happened?

Well, it’s possible that was all part of the performance, but considering how Lord Claude was acting, it was as if watching for Leonard was only his second priority. Or maybe his guard was down because he’s scared about something.

It was nothing more than instinct. But Hayruth was confident in his ability to read people, and he’d spent plenty of time drinking with Claude.

Those instincts were telling him that Claude was nervous, for some reason.

“What’s this about? I can’t even imagine a person or thing that would make you feel threatened, but if you’d like, I’d be happy to listen to your worries at the tavern. As long as you pay the tab, of course.” He added that last bit as he watched for Claude’s reaction.

The other man cast his eyes down slightly, smiling with Clementine resting on his shoulder. “...No, it’s too soon for that. We only go to taverns after we finish

up a job, isn't that right?"

"You've actually decided to work for once? That's surprising." Hayruth cracked a joke, but squinted his eyes at him.

It was just a hunch, but it seems like he's truly wrestling with something that isn't going well. That must be why he seems uneasy.

Claude had seemingly no interest in his country or his honor. He even told lies to his beloved Laetitia. Hayruth didn't know what was driving Claude to these ends, and if he wasn't willing to tell him himself, there was nothing Hayruth could do about it.

Hayruth was curious, as Claude's friend. But he still had work to do as a spy. He sighed, watching Claude's back as he left the alleyway. The soldiers would spot him if he stayed there any longer.

Just before he headed out, Hayruth's lips started to move.

"The king and queen, the sacred beasts and heaven's wings, the old and new nations, and the sorcerers. ...The actors are all settling into place, but I wonder what will happen next?"

His words were too quiet for anyone to hear, like a faint whisper of the wind. Even Hayruth himself didn't sense them anymore as they faded into the evening sky.

Chapter 2: Delicious Treats of Honey

“LOOK, look, Big Brother Claude! There’s so much honey!”

Honey was dripping and oozing down to the ground. The golden liquid overflowed from the part of the hive that had been removed.

My lips trembled. Just looking at the sight was making my mouth water with delight. “It’s so pretty! It looks yummy! Can we eat it yet?” I leaned forward, unable to contain my excitement.

Just then...

“Eek!”

A strong wind kicked up and blew through my hair. The gust had cast the honeybees around the hive in the opposite direction of me. I cleared the hair off my face clumsily with my little hands.

“Ahaha! You’re too hasty, Letty.”

“Geez, Big Brother Claude! Stop laughing and help me!”

“My bad, my bad. I’ll give you a hand.” He stroked my head to quell my anger. I hated being teased.

Big Brother Claude helped gather my hair away from my face. Satisfied by his gentle manner, I looked back at the honey with a renewed drive.

The honeycomb had been retrieved from a beehive in a box. The thick honey covering its surface dripped into a container below.

“Can we eat it right away?” I got as close as I could without hitting the wind again, licking my lips.

“No, not yet. You have to strain it through cloth first to remove the dirt and dust.” He wrapped his arms around me from behind, preventing me from getting too close, as he explained his reasoning.

“...I really can’t eat just a little?” I asked.

Big Brother Claude smiled like he didn’t know what to do with me. “No, not even a little. You don’t want to get sick, do you, Letty? You won’t be able to eat your cookies that way.”

“Hmph...” I grumbled when he brought up my snack for that day. I wanted my cookies, but it was hard to give up on the honey before my eyes. That inner war was going on when I took a look at the honeybees. “Hey, the bees seem kind of slow!”

“We hit them with smoke so that it’s harder for them to sting us while we harvest the honey, but it slows them down too. They’re perfectly fine over at the hives we aren’t harvesting from.” Big Brother Claude looked over at the other honeybees buzzing in and out of their hives. They were hard at work making their honey.

“There’s so many, but they all live in one house together?”

The answer to my clueless question would come from our family’s beekeeper, who was working on a nearby box. “Each nest contains a very important honeybee called the ‘queen bee.’ Most of the others are worker bees, so they work and live together every single day, never getting in fights, all so they can serve their queen.”

“Woow. That’s amazing!” I exclaimed.

“It is, isn’t it? Bees are hard workers, after all.” The servant smiled proudly at the honeybees. “Bees are revered in many countries as an embodiment of how the king and his vassals should live, since the honeybees work selflessly in service of their single queen. I hope you grow up to be a wonderful noblewoman who serves her country and her king as well, Lady Laetitia.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!” I nodded firmly back at the servant. His big words made it a little hard for me to understand, but I enthusiastically shared my feelings anyway. “I’ll work hard! I want to be a great noble just like Father!”

“That’s splendid. I’d expect nothing less from His Grace’s daughter.”

“Yay! Thank you!” I threw my hands up, rejoicing over the praise. In the midst of my happy hops into the air, I suddenly realized Big Brother Claude’s smile

had lost some of its vigor. “What’s wrong, Big Brother Claude? You don’t want me to be a great noblewoman?”

“No, it’s not that. I was just thinking about something else. I think it’s good that you’re motivated to be like our father.” His smile softened and he stroked my head gently.

It was a ticklish, pleasant sensation. I squinted my eyes and giggled. “Hehe! Thanks, Big Brother. But what were you just thinking about?”

“It’s nothing. I was just...thinking about those hives built all for a single queen bee. Personally, I don’t know if that’s something people should be imitating.”



“...A dream,” I muttered quietly before blinking my eyes. The morning sunlight pouring through the window was incredibly bright. It was more than enough to wake me up, even filtered through my lace curtains. “That was a memory from when I was six years old, or maybe five...?”

I tried to think back on any childhood memories that might add to the now-fading dream. Even back then, I was a glutton...or rather, I was highly interested in food. That was why I’d asked a servant to let me watch him harvest honey.

Big Brother Claude was there to escort me. Our mother had already passed away by that time, so Father and our other two older brothers were always very busy. It was why I naturally ended up playing with Big Brother Claude most of the time.

“I remember that moment. Big Brother Claude had a strange look on his face when he saw the queen bee and worker bees.”

I didn’t understand why at the time, and still wasn’t entirely certain of the reason now either. But Big Brother Claude felt little loyalty to the royal family and was a fundamentally lazy person. He’d even declared that he wanted to spend an entire year or two inside the house, with nothing but books and alcohol to pass the time. He was so hopeless sometimes.

Perhaps, as the exact opposite of those worker bees tirelessly serving the queen, he’d felt offended watching them.

“Well, it’s not as if he stopped eating honey over it...”

He didn’t seem to have any sort of grudge over the honey itself, at least. I’d never have even remembered that little exchange if it wasn’t for that dream. But I knew why it came to me—I was going to eat some delicious honey treats today.

“I haven’t been to Lady Fillia’s villa in so long.”

Lady Fillia was a candidate for queen who resided in the southern villa. She wasn’t particularly active as a noblewoman, but she seemed interested in keeping up her social relations, which was why I visited her from time to time. However, I didn’t know her as well as the other three candidates. We simply hadn’t found many opportunities to really sit down and engage in conversation.

I’d already served half of my time as queen. I wanted to understand her on a deeper level while I still had the chance.

Fortunately, I just so happened to receive an invitation from her.

Honey, the specialty product of the southern region, was now in season. Lady Fillia had invited me over knowing that I loved food and cooking.

“Hehe! I’m so excited.”

Of course, my main objective was to get to know her better. But on the inside, my heart danced at the thought of getting to try that honey. I’d always heard that it was absolutely delicious.



LELENA and my maids helped me change and get ready before I boarded my carriage. I had a brief stop to make before heading to Lady Fillia’s villa.

“I want to know what the Gardener Cats are up to...” I said to Lucian.

The Gardener Cats had been strangely tense for the past few days. I spent the most time with Berry, who hadn’t changed much—perhaps because of her carefree personality. But the others were acting strange to various degrees.

Did I do something to offend them? Or did another human upset them in some way? I tried asking out of concern, but the Gardener Cats refused to reveal anything. The ones who used the second Gardener Cat field were acting

particularly unusual, though I didn't know why.

We arrived at the second field, where we were greeted by a very small party of Gardener Cats. It wasn't as if they were collectively rejecting me, but their overall mood had obviously changed. They were busy tilling the soil and watering their crops, all the while sneaking glances in my direction.

"These Gardener Cats truly *are* acting strange," Lucian said. "They were on edge when they first came to the villa, but it wasn't as bad as this."

"That's how I feel too, Lucian," I agreed.

It seemed it wasn't just my imagination after all. I cast my eyes over the Gardener Cats, searching for a source of this change, and spotted one corner of the field. The area that had been empty only a few days ago was now sprouting little green buds.

"...That reminds me. They wouldn't tell me what crop they were growing either."

It was unusual for the Gardener Cats to keep secrets from me.

Curious, I took a closer look and discovered something interesting. The plants were unidentifiable, with nothing more than buds coming up. It was the Gardener Cats around them who were acting strangely. A few of them were standing around the space protectively at all times, checking for abnormalities. It was obvious that they were paying close attention to those plants in particular.

"Are you worried that the crop isn't going to grow safely?" I asked Wheat, a light brown Gardener Cat, and watched as he broke eye contact with me. My suspicions had been confirmed. "Don't worry, I won't get in your way. I'd like to help ensure no one comes near and that the plants don't die. Would that be all right?"

After a bit of thought, the Gardener Cat called for his friends. Wheat was trusted by the other Gardener Cats and had become something of a leader for them, but it seemed he still relied on the others when it came to big decisions.

"Meow meow!"

“Mraw?”

“Meeeeow?”

“Mrawoh!”

They huddled together, conversing and glancing at me from time to time.

Their discussion continued for a while until Wheat gave one last cry. The others all nodded and turned to stare up at me.

“Meow meow, meow meow meow!”

“We’ll accept your proposal. Thank you for your help.”

With that, Wheat bowed his tiny body toward me.



“WELCOME, Your Majesty. I’m honored to have you in my home today.”

Lady Fillia bowed elegantly outside of the shrubs spanning the perimeter of her royal villa. She wore a lemon yellow dress that was a perfect match for the spring garden. Its many frills and bows suited her small, dainty body.

Lady Fillia’s large eyes were slightly drooping—a light blue just like the sky in spring. Her curly black hair was glossy from the care she put into it. Not only was her family prominent enough to make her a candidate for queen, but the young noblewoman certainly wasn’t lacking in looks either.



“Thank you for inviting me,” I replied. “I’ve really been looking forward to this honey from the southern region you mentioned.”

“Hehe! That makes me happy. I pray that it’s to your liking.”

We smiled, exchanged greetings, and headed to a table that had been prepared in the courtyard.

Lucian drew the chair back for me to have a seat. Lady Fillia and I chatted for a while, but I was still having a hard time getting a good read on her. She was responding to me properly, but to be frank, that was *all* she was doing. It was impossible to dig deeper into what kind of person she was or how she felt about being a candidate for queen.

On the surface alone, she was a prim, proper, beautiful young lady—no one could say a bad word about her. However, the title of queen candidate wasn’t something an innocent girl like that could obtain so easily. I continued to make conversation as I watched Lady Fillia closely, waiting to catch a glimpse of her character.

“Hehe. I see. In that case, could I ask you to share your recommended shops and sweets throughout the royal capital?” I asked. “I’ve only been here a bit over a year, and I’m sure there’s plenty of nice places I haven’t visited yet.”

I made sure to emphasize the words “a bit over a year.” Still, she had no reaction. I’d spent the entire time trying to naturally bring up being “the temporary queen” that “only had a year left and was already halfway done.” But it went entirely ignored.

It was as if Lady Fillia had no intention of sharing her true thoughts with me at all. She kept a sweet smile on her face and responded only with careful answers.

This is irritating.

We finally had a chance to talk just the two of us, and I clearly wasn’t getting anywhere with a surface-level conversation. I decided to take the next step forward.

“I see. Those all sound like lovely shops,” I said, thanking her after she politely

listed her recommendations. “I believe you lived in the royal capital when you were younger, right, Lady Fillia? Is that why you know so much about it?”

“Yes, perhaps that’s it. My father had yet to inherit his title at that point in time, so we spent most of our time in the royal capital instead of my family’s territory,” she said. “I quite enjoyed my time in the lively city whenever Father brought me there.”

“I’m sure your father was a man of good tastes as well. I can tell when I look at you. Are you still close with him now?” I inquired.

“Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to speak as much these days. He lives in the family territory and isn’t very fond of writing letters.” Her eyebrows lowered slightly as she smiled.

It seemed the rumors were true. She wasn’t in very frequent contact with her father—a duke like my own father. One would think that he would be extremely curious about his daughter’s life since she moved to the castle to become a candidate for queen. Her every action could determine the fate of her family and their territory, after all.

Lady Fillia would also need to be in some sort of correspondence with her father if she planned to use his authority for her own benefit.

Despite all this, she told me they were rarely in contact.

I didn’t know if that was true or not, but I could guess why she might have revealed such a thing to me.

“My father and I don’t see things the same way.” I doubted she would reveal such a weakness to me, so perhaps it was something else. *“I’m not so eager to claim the title of queen that I’m willing to keep up frequent correspondence with him.”*

Lady Fillia had always been in the weakest position of all four candidates, and without her father’s full support, it would be impossible for her to be named the next queen.

She had two good reasons for falling behind the rest of the candidates.

The first was her being tripped up by the customs of this country. The

previous king, King Glenreed's father, had also done as was customary and gathered one queen candidate from each of the four regions of Wolfvarte. He selected one of these noblewomen to marry, making her his first queen. This previous first queen hailed from the dukedom in the southern region, just as Lady Fillia did.

Selecting two queens from the same region across successive generations would displease noble families from the other regions. So long as there were no other circumstances at play, it was customary to choose a candidate from one of the other three regions in the next generation.

The second reason was the crimes of the first queen.

The official story was that she had passed away in a landslide. But the truth was that she lost her life when she attempted to murder the third queen, King Glenreed's mother. This was essentially accepted as truth amongst the nobility.

...It was actually a bit more complicated than that, but that was a story for another time.

The duke of the southern region at that time was the queen's older brother, and her crimes forced him to renounce his title—a title inherited by Lady Fillia's father next.

That was how it ended on paper, but in truth, Lady Fillia's family went through internal disputes about who would take the title. This family quarrel resulted in their dukedom being weakened once it was all said and done.

It was entirely possible that Lady Fillia spent her childhood in the royal capital to avoid interference or even assassination at the hands of a relative. She came from the same region as the former queen, and her family's power wasn't what it once was. This left Lady Fillia at a disadvantage against the other candidates, but maybe she hadn't completely given up hope either.

I processed all this information while Lady Fillia had to leave her seat for a moment.

She would have to implement some sort of backup plan if she accepted that she had no chance of being selected as the next queen.

Marrying the king wasn't the only means of gaining political influence.

If she knew she wasn't going to be queen, she could work with the other candidates to be granted a favorable position once one of them married King Glenreed. It wasn't much more than riding the victor's coattails, but even still, Lady Fillia seemed to be maintaining only the bare minimum of relationships with the rest of them.

Lady Natalie was a human like her and had been established as the most likely candidate to be selected. I'd assumed Lady Fillia would go to her for help once Lady Natalie was essentially out of the running, but that wasn't the case...

It had been almost a year since Lady Natalie withdrew from consideration, so it surprised me that Lady Fillia wasn't approaching Lady Kate or Lady I-Liena either. Did she not want to join hands with Lady Kate because she was beastfolk? Was she just uninterested in politics, trying to stay out of the queen selection entirely?

There were many possibilities. It was even possible that Lady Fillia hadn't given up on becoming the next queen herself. Was she waiting vigilantly for the opportunity to overthrow the other three candidates?

I would have to keep my guard up around her if that was true. As the queen, I had a duty to watch over her and prevent any disputes from turning too hostile.

"...What's this?"

Suddenly, I heard a commotion coming from the villa.

I listened in and picked up the sound of heeled footsteps. Their source was a woman wearing an utterly magnificent dress. This person accompanying Lady Fillia wasn't someone I was glad to see.

"Good day, Princess Ileze. It's lovely to see you." I stood and bowed politely, yet the princess seemed entirely unamused.

Princess Ileze was the fourth-born princess of the Maldion Empire—the largest country on the western continent. She'd come to this country a month ago for an opportunity to study abroad. But that was merely the official story. In all likelihood, she was here to harass and interfere with me.

"Good day, Queen Laetitia. I see you're as clever as always, making sure to spend quality time with all the candidates for queen." She spoke confidently,

fanning herself with her folding fan.

The princess was certainly acting full of herself for an uninvited guest. I could tell she had total confidence with a country like the Maldion Empire at her back. She overshadowed Lady Fillia and conducted herself like she was this villa's mistress.

"I apologize for the surprise, Your Majesty," Lady Fillia said. "Princess Ileze tells me she coincidentally had business nearby, so she decided to visit me on the way."

"You needn't apologize, Lady Fillia. ...It was just a coincidence, after all," I said.

A coincidence.

I would go with that story for the time being. I didn't know if Lady Fillia had something to do with it, but at the very least, I was all but certain that Princess Ileze had planned this encounter. She was very observant of my each and every action.

Princess Ileze was smiling, but her eyes revealed the true hostility she felt.

I continued our icy-cold pleasantries, making sure I had a smile on my face too.

My homeland of Elltoria did not have a friendly relationship with the Maldion Empire. Our countries had devolved into conflict only a few years earlier, with both sides deciding to walk away before they suffered further losses.

From what I'd gathered, Maldion was unwilling to accept that someone from Elltoria was garnering influence within the kingdom of Wolfvarte. Instead of directly meddling with Wolfvartian affairs, as the two lands were very far apart, they sent Princess Ileze to do their work instead.

Princess Ileze's objective was to strip me of my influence, however much she could. She'd spent the past month meddling in my life and making trouble for me.

Lady Natalie, Lady Kate, and I had formed a trusting relationship, so the princess was unsuccessful in driving us apart. But she didn't stop there.

King Glenreed didn't welcome Princess Ileze to his country either, but sending

a princess from the Maldion Empire away was simply not an option. Thus, she remained something of a headache to him.

The princess tried every means at her disposal to get at me, until finally, she'd come to make sure the relationship between Lady Fillia and me remained weak. I felt like we were already on that track, even without Princess Ileze's interference, but it was still an irritating development.

I feel bad that she dragged Lady Fillia into it this time...

But it was also possible that this was something Lady Fillia and Princess Ileze plotted together in advance. Even Lady Fillia, the candidate at the biggest disadvantage to become the queen, might be able to turn the tables with the help of Princess Ileze and the Maldion Empire behind her.

I glanced at her, but couldn't read her expression.

Lady Fillia had seemed a bit overpowered by the strong-willed Princess Ileze, but I didn't feel like she'd been set up either. She continued to speak evasively with a smile I didn't know how to interpret.

I decided to follow her example and keep up a surface-level smile so that Princess Ileze couldn't see how I felt.

"I've enjoyed speaking with you both, but I invited Queen Laetitia here for a reason today. Shall we go and harvest the honey now?" With that, Lady Fillia brought our unpleasant conversation to a close.

I walked over to a ceramic box in the courtyard where the hive was contained.

"What in the world are you doing, Queen Laetitia? Hehe! It's so foolish to approach a beehive without taking precautions. I can't help but laugh. Don't you know you'll be stung if you're careless around bees?" The princess smirked. She was openly mocking me.

I imagined she must have been waiting for an opportunity to insult me. She even made a show of covering her mouth with her folding fan to hide her laughter.

"Ah, can you not use a wind spell to avoid the bees?" she taunted. "How terrible of me. I laughed at you without knowing you couldn't use magic, you

poor thing.”

“No, there’s no need to use a spell,” I said. “I feel very sorry that you don’t understand such a simple concept.”

“...What did you just say?”

Smack!

The princess had slammed her fan against her palm—an expression of her anger.

“Could you repeat that? I must have misheard you,” she hissed.

“I just said that I pity your ignorance,” I stated.

“How dare y— What are you doing?!”

Before she could finish, I’d started approaching the hive. The loud buzzing of their wings made me a bit anxious, but I kept my pace steady.

“Stop that! What if they sting you and fly over to...us...?” Princess Ileze froze, still clutching her fan. Her eyes were wide open in shock. She stared at me as I stood next to the box without so much as a single sting. “...What’s going on? Why aren’t they stinging you when you’re so close?”

“Are you aware of what makes these bees unique, Your Highness?” I inquired.

“H-How rude! Of course I know! This country’s southern region is famous for its beekeeping. The southern dukedom keeps bees that make a special, high-quality honey. Isn’t that right?!”

She was partially correct. Perhaps that level of knowledge was the norm amongst foreigners.

“It sounds like you don’t know *why* the dukedom’s honey products are such high quality,” I said.

“What are you trying to say?”

“These bees have a certain nickname. Please take a look at Lady Fillia.” I cast my eyes in her direction, prompting Princess Ileze to turn around.

Lady Fillia was clutching a long flute. She stood off to the side while the two of us quarreled.

“Who cares about some flute?” the princess snapped. “I don’t care to hear you play, I just—”

“Quiet. Listen and you’ll understand.” I silenced the princess with the overpowering smile I inherited from my father. Then I nodded to Lady Fillia, who began to play.

“What...?!”

Suddenly, the swarm of bees dove at Princess Ileze. Each note of the flute steered them left, right, up, and down. They navigated through the air with perfect coordination.

“What’s going on...? How can bees move like this...?” the princess gasped.

“This is what makes the dukedom’s honey so exceptional,” I said. “One can freely control the bees by playing a tune on a flute. You can make them gather nectar from only certain kinds of flowers or from a variety of flowers that will produce unique flavors of honey.”

They were a very mysterious sort of bee. These bees, referred to as Flute Bees, had been kept in Lady Fillia’s family for generations. Physically, they looked no different from honeybees. But they obeyed the sound of flutes—perhaps because they had magical energy, though that wasn’t known for sure. While they weren’t very famous creatures, I personally wondered if they were a variety of Mythical Beast.

Mythical Beasts were living creatures who contained magical energy and were capable of strange powers.

It wasn’t as striking of a power as a griffin, Snow Cat, or Gardener Cat, but I couldn’t think of any rational explanation for why the bees would obey the sound of a flute. I was certain that no insects in my past life reacted to noises so precisely, at the very least.

“I’ve heard that well-trained Flute Bees don’t sting, so long as the flute doesn’t command them to,” I said. “That’s why I can safely approach them without using my magic.”

Princess Ileze had mocked me for being unable to use a spell, but I simply didn’t have a need for one. I conveyed that to her nonverbally and watched her

face go red.

“What...?! You should have told me about that!” she snapped.

“I just told you. Is there some sort of problem?” I responded to her nonchalantly.

Princess Ileze had been the one to start this fight. I would hate to have her get the better of me without being able to respond. I didn’t want her underestimating me either.

All I did was use the opportunity provided for a little counterattack.

“You...! Just who do you think I am?!” she demanded.

“You’re the fourth-born princess of the Maldion Empire, Princess Ileze,” I stated coolly.

“That’s not what I meant! You think I’ll just allow you to make a fool of me?!”

“Please don’t be upset with me. If you’re going to get angry, then get angry at your own ignorance.”

“...!” Lost for a response, Princess Ileze bit down on her lip.

The existence of Flute Bees was no secret. Anyone with the desire could research and learn about them.

The princess was living in a foreign country and didn’t necessarily *need* to know more about Flute Bees, but this was Lady Fillia’s villa. Her family were the ones who kept these bees throughout the generations. It was easy to embarrass oneself by being ignorant about these bees, even if you *were* a foreigner.

Princess Ileze had clearly rushed straight to this villa for the opportunity to sabotage me. That was why she didn’t do any research into Lady Fillia’s family, and knew only the bare minimum about how the southern region produced a famous local honey.

It was natural for her to be ignorant about this, but it would be in her best interest to learn such information before coming to this country and pretending to be an expert. I’d made sure to research the Flute Bees even before I first met Lady Fillia.

In that way, it seemed Princess Ileze wasn't a particularly clever person. Her Highness had supposedly only come here in the first place because a political opponent forced her away to Wolfvarte. Her homeland, the Maldion Empire, was very similar to my homeland of Elltoria. Most royals and nobles were sorcerers, prideful people with a sense of being the chosen ones, and they hated leaving their homeland to visit foreign countries.

Still, perhaps Princess Ileze would have retained some of her pride if she'd been sent to the kingdoms of Raiolbern or Alphasar—their countries still being fairly large powers. However, Wolfvarte held less power than the other two kingdoms, and since it was known as the "Great Shield" that bordered territory full of monsters, Maldion's royals and nobles wanted little to do with the country.

Princess Ileze, like other royalty in her homeland, seemed to be very biased against beastfolk. Nearly half of Wolfvarte's population was comprised of beastfolk, so I knew she was probably extremely reluctant to come here at all.

However, she'd been essentially ousted from her home over a political dispute—a situation that resembled my own... But I didn't want to be treated as the same kind of person as Princess Ileze, someone who refused to learn about a new country in her efforts to get in my way, nor did I have the slightest intention of befriending her if it meant abasing myself to meet her halfway.

It wasn't just me either. I'd learned that the human Wolfvartian nobles like Lady Natalie were quick to start distancing themselves from Princess Ileze. The same went for beastfolk nobility like Lady Kate, of course. They were merely staying quiet, not wanting to make enemies of the Maldion Empire, refusing to go anywhere near the princess, like she was some sort of poisonous snake.

Perhaps they could have swallowed their pride and joined hands with someone they disliked if it was of benefit to them. But Princess Ileze didn't seem like she'd be able to provide the slightest political value.

The fourth-born princess of the Maldion Empire. It was a title that carried weight, but she'd lost her power within the country due to political conflicts, while her personality and behavior made it clear that there was no hope of climbing back to the top of that ladder.

Princess Ileze herself seemed to think that she would regain favor within her homeland if she managed to ruin the influence I held in Wolfvarte. But I certainly had no intention of letting her get the best of me.

“Let me speak...!”

Criiick!

Princess Ileze squeezed her folding fan hard enough to break bones. She seemed to be desperately searching for a mistake or flaw in my argument that she could grab hold of.

“You’ve been just as careless as I have!” she exclaimed. “It’s your first time seeing the Flute Bees in real life, isn’t it?! You could have been wrong about all that knowledge of yours and ended up getting stung anyway! You were stupid to still approach the bees without using magic or any kind of plan in mind!!”

“I wasn’t stupid. I knew how Flute Bees behaved, and even in the incredibly slim chance that they still tried to sting me, I determined that I would be safe so long as Lady Fillia had that flute in her hands. I placed my trust in her.” I glanced at Lady Fillia as I refuted the princess’ attack.

“Must you always get the last word...?!” Princess Ileze closed her mouth, unable to come up with a retort. She seemed to figure out that if she objected any further, it would be the same as saying that Lady Fillia wasn’t trustworthy in her mind.

Her lips squeezed together tighter and tighter. Still, she refused to give up. Her Highness hurled even more abuse my way.

“Hmph! Sure, you trusted Lady Fillia. That certainly sounds nice, doesn’t it? But really, you weren’t confident that you could make a wall of wind safely if you were in danger. That’s why you didn’t even attempt to cast a spell at all, isn’t it? I heard you were a skilled sorcerer, yet you can’t even make a simple wall!”

“Shall I prove it to you, in that case?”

“...*Prove* it?”

She scowled at me suspiciously. But I turned to look at Lady Fillia.

She smiled and nodded at me like she'd already guessed my intentions. "By all means, feel free to use magic in this courtyard, so long as you don't break anything."

"Thank you very much."

With that, I wasted no time chanting my spell.

I would be using a fifth level spell—a western wind shield.

The breeze started to pick up, growing stronger until a defensive wall of wind stood between Princess Ileze and me.

She stuck her hands out, but the fierce wind kept her from touching me. "What's that supposed to show? So you can cast a mid-tier spell, but that's... all..."

Her Highness' voice got quieter and quieter. She took a look around the courtyard, disbelief written all over her face.

"It can't be... The spell reaches this far...?" She'd noticed that the wall of wind I constructed spanned the entire perimeter of the courtyard. "That's impossible. A simple mid-tier wind spell can't produce such a large wall..."

"Are you satisfied now?" I asked. The spell wore off and the wall dissolved, so I used the opportunity to amp up the pressure by smiling at her.

Princess Ileze flinched. Then, in desperation, she unleashed another attack at me. "Y-You just managed to cast that spell because you were so calm! If the bees had attacked you, you never would have managed something like that!"

"You might be right about that."

"So you admit it?! Then that means—"

"But you weren't able to cast a spell earlier, when you were afraid of being stung by the bees too, were you?"

"...!"

This time, she was silent. Perhaps I'd struck a nerve.

It seemed Princess Ileze had some sort of inferiority complex about her own sorcery skills, causing her to attack me for not using magic when I initially

approached the bees.

The Maldion Empire tended to place a lot of value on the amount of magical energy people possessed. Most members of the imperial family boasted of strong magical energy, but I'd heard Princess Ileze's energy was much weaker than the rest.

Her lack of magical energy was one reason for her political defeat. It made sense that she would see me, a particularly skilled sorcerer, as someone she just *had* to challenge.

Her Highness cast me a glare before turning and leaving the courtyard at a brisk pace, without so much as a farewell to Lady Fillia.

"That was splendid." Lady Fillia returned after hastily chasing down Princess Ileze to see her off. "After all that, I don't think Princess Ileze will be interested in bothering you anymore, at least for some time."

"I pray that you're right about that. I'm sorry for causing such a disturbance at your villa," I apologized.

"Please don't mind any of that. I'm the one who was unable to refuse Her Highness' visit in the first place." She answered me smoothly, a gentle smile appearing on her lips. As always, it was impossible to read the true emotions behind that expression.

I still wasn't sure if Lady Fillia had anything to do with Princess Ileze showing up at the villa. However, even if she *was* planning to use Princess Ileze's support to become the next queen, that disgraceful scene probably would have made her reconsider.

Regardless of who married King Glenreed next, I only hoped to stop anyone being supported by Princess Ileze.

That was in part because I didn't want the Maldion Empire, a country hostile to my homeland, to gain even more influence. But on a more honest level, I simply hated the idea of Princess Ileze creeping her way into the heart of this country.

The gradually improving relationship between humans and beastfolk would have its progress crushed by that spoiled princess—someone who made no

attempt to hide her contempt for beastfolk.



“OH, how lovely! They all look so delicious.”

I was staring down at a table covered in various sweets made with honey. My words of praise truly came straight from the heart. There were honey-glazed nuts, cookies with honey baked into the dough, honey tarts, fruit preserved in honey, and black tea blended with honey that gave off a sweet aroma.

Lady Fillia suggested I must be tired from standing for so long, so we decided to move forward with our plans and try the sweets now.

“All right, with your permission, I am going to dive right in,” I said. I took a cookie from the eye-catching assortment on the tray and bit into it. A tender sweetness filled my whole mouth. With each satisfying crunch, I tasted the aromatic nuts bringing out even more of the honey’s sweetness.

I could have kept eating those cookies forever. But there were plenty of other honeyed treats to try. I contained myself after a few cookies, then moved on to the tarts and honey-preserved fruit.

Absolutely delicious.

I’d eaten honey sweets before, but these were easily contenders for the best I’d ever tasted.

“They’ve used different mixtures of honey for each dessert, haven’t they?” I observed.

“I thought you might notice that,” Lady Fillia said. “You’re very perceptive to pick up on something so subtle.”

“It’s impossible not to notice when the food is so delicious. You must have instructed the Flute Bees to gather nectar from certain flowers at the right time, so that they’d produce the optimal kind of honey for each dessert.”

“Yes, exactly. The precise mixtures and varieties of flowers are a family secret, but we’re still permitted to treat others to the honey once it’s finished,” she said. “Please take some home with you, if you’d like.”

“Thank you very much. I’d love to have some, but are there any special

instructions pertaining to this kind of honey?” I asked.

“You should be able to cook with it like normal honey, however...” Lady Fillia was suddenly hesitant to speak.

That’s unlike her. I watched her, wondering what was wrong, when she finally found the resolve to continue.

“Your Majesty, are you planning to cook something for King Glenreed’s birthday again this year?”

It was a bit more personal of a question than I was used to from her.

A person’s status in this country could be measured by what they gifted King Glenreed for his birthday. The idea was to present him with the highest quality, most impactful item—one that no one else would come up with.

Nobles invited to His Majesty’s birthday party were currently in the process of thinking up ideas and exchanging information with each other.

Last year, my gift of sponge cake was very nearly stolen from me, so I had really only planned on telling people I trusted about this year’s gift...

Lady Fillia had kept her distance from me, but was now finally taking a step into more personal territory. Perhaps she’d changed her mind about Princess Ileze after seeing her embarrass herself earlier, and now she wanted to get closer to me.

It was a valuable opportunity, and one I’d been waiting for. I decided to answer her honestly.

“Yes, I am. I can’t share the details with you, but I don’t believe anyone else will come with the same gift... I promise not to use any honey I receive from you either.”

Once I said that, I sensed a palpable relief from Lady Fillia.

It seemed my theory had been correct.

I predicted that, after the high praise I received for last year’s sponge cake, more nobles would be presenting His Majesty with gifts of food this year. It seemed Lady Fillia was one such noble. She was planning to bake sweets with her special honey as her birthday gift to King Glenreed.

By confirming my plans, she knew there was no worry of us showing up with similar gifts.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “Now I don’t have to worry about presenting King Glenreed with honey sweets after all.”

“Of course. I look forward to seeing what you gift as well. I’m certain that King Glenreed will enjoy them if they turn out as well as these,” I said.

“Hehe! It’s reassuring to hear that from you. King Glenreed seems to really love honey, so I believe he’ll be pleased.”

“...He loves honey?”

The question slipped out of me involuntarily. I’d dined with King Glenreed many times now, but this was the first I was hearing of his love for honey. As surprised as I was, Lady Fillia smiled shyly, like a delicate flower starting to bloom.

“I once met with King Glenreed as a child when I lived in the royal capital. He told me the honey sweets I gave him were delicious. He ate so many of them too.”

When I watched her cheeks turn faintly pink, I froze for a moment.

I never expected this.

That went for Lady Fillia’s expression, the first time I’d ever seen her smile like a young girl. But it also went for this new piece of King Glenreed’s past.

His Majesty had no interest in food whatsoever when we first met. He saw the act of eating as a mere chore to preserve his body. He had no preferences for certain flavors, much less any sort of favorite food. But now I’d just learned he not only had a favorite food as a child, but experienced the joy of eating with someone too.

That’s a nice thing, and yet...

When I looked at Lady Fillia, blushing from the memory she shared with King Glenreed, I just couldn’t find it in my heart to be happy for them both. Instead, I sat there in total bewilderment.



“MYAW MYAW! Meow meow meow meow meow!!”

“No trespassing!”

“No one is allowed past this point!!”

The brown tabby Gardener Cat cried out to me persistently. She stood on her back legs, spreading her arms out to show me that I wasn't allowed past her.

“She certainly is menacing for a simple cat,” Lucian muttered under his breath at my side, sounding a little exasperated.

The Gardener Cats of the second field were only getting more vigilant as the days passed. Aside from Lucian, myself, and a few others, they were now stopping everyone else from getting close to the field at all. I was the person they trusted most of all, but they still ran over to stop me if I got anywhere close to the corner of the field with the mystery crops.

“You don't have to be so careful. I won't get any closer to those plants, okay?” I promised. Even when I backed away, the Gardener Cats just closed the distance between us again. They were like an impenetrable fortress. “...I didn't want to get closer anyway,” I said quietly enough that they couldn't hear me.

But to be honest, I was extremely curious about what they could be growing.

The mystery crops were steadily growing thanks to the care and attention of the Gardener Cats. The buds at the ends of their vines were about fist-sized now, glossy and sparkling under the light of the sun.

Judging by the way the stems extend, they sort of look like tulips?

The Gardener Cats were constantly focused on those buds, even as they tended to the rest of the field.

“Just like I promised last time, I'm here to build a fence to keep others out,” I said to the cats. “King Glenreed granted me permission in a letter, and it won't take long, so can I ask you to be patient for just a little while?”

“...Meow.” The cat nodded. She seemed to remember our promise.

I would have to get this over with quickly if I didn't want to get in their way.

I followed the carpenters I'd brought with me, focused, and unleashed a spell.

“Blade of wind!”

An invisible blade shot downward and carved out deep chunks of land.

Following the holes I left in the ground, the carpenters plugged them up with wooden sticks from their wagons, which I used an earth spell to secure in place. Spells that would semi-permanently change the shape of the land were inefficient and required lots of magical energy, but I had more than enough of that, so it mattered little to me.

“Excellent work, Your Majesty. Please leave the rest to us.”

“Of course. Thank you for your help.”

With that, I returned to the edge of the field.

These were the same carpenters who’d helped me work on the area around my villa before. I knew they were talented, and I decided to ask for their help when I learned they happened to be free that day.

Next, the carpenters added railing and hammered the pieces together until they were firmly in place. After a little bit of noise from all that hammering, the fence was complete in no time at all.

A ten-foot space in the Gardener Cats’ second field was now enclosed by a waist-high fence. Not only was there a sign to forbid trespassing, but King Glenreed would be informing palace visitors to stay out of this area, so it was almost guaranteed to remain safe.

“I’m excited to see what kind of plant grows there.” I felt a bit sad about how this new fence separated us, but for now, all I could do was pray the mystery crop grew safely.

I took a look around the fence to make sure it was all sturdy. Then I noticed the Gardener Cats watching me.

“Okay, we’re going to return to the villa now...” I announced to them. “We’ll be having an outdoor luncheon I’ve been planning now that it’s a nice, sunny day. Would you care to join us?”

“Meow? Meow, meow meow meow...”

Their eyes glinted when they heard the word “luncheon,” but then they

seemed to snap out of it. The cats shook their heads, reluctantly turning me down.

“Meow! Mraw mraw meow meow meow!”

“As much as it pains us, we have no choice but to decline.” That was how I interpreted the response.

There was a lot of sadness and disappointment in the Gardener Cat’s meows.

It was extremely unlike the gluttonous Gardener Cats to choose guarding their mystery crop over a delicious meal. They’d been taking turns watching over it during the nights too, with the lookout cats staying in the field instead of returning to the villa. I could tell just how attached they were to these plants.

“Is that so? Very well. I’m sad too, but it sounds like you’re busy. Let’s have a nice meal some other time, okay?”

“Meow!”

“Of course!”

I waved goodbye to the Gardener Cats and headed home to my villa.



“YOUR Majesty! Should I bring all these dishes over?”

I turned around when I heard a voice calling to me. My apron dress twirled around my body.

The young girl with a maid’s uniform and black hair—Lelena—was carrying out a load of dishes. Her arms were still small and slender like the rest of her body, but the dishes remained completely stable.

Lelena was beastfolk—a member of the Wildcat clan. This meant she was already stronger than the average adult human. A pair of black, fluffy, triangular ears peeked out on each side of her maid’s brim.

“Yes, please leave them on that table over there,” I instructed. “Lucian, you can lay them out.”

“As you wish.”

Lucian had been helping me finish my cooking. He headed over to Lelena and

began to instruct her. Lelena worked to quickly and accurately bring out one dish of food after another, placing them precisely on the table.

“This one goes here,” Lucian said. “Now take this one and place it in the front. Yes, that’s good. You’re very quick to catch on, Lelena.”

“Thank you so much...!” Lelena’s cheeks turned red when Lucian smiled and praised her. Her facial expression remained stable, but her tail revealed her feelings when it started to wag softly.

...Maybe it’s happening yet again.

“You’re as popular as ever, Lucian,” I whispered to him, continuing my task at hand.

Lucian was a capable worker and a dashing man. He had a pair of gentle, blue eyes and black hair that he wore neatly styled. He possessed a calm demeanor despite his young age and handsome features that suited his personality. This made him an object of attraction to women both young and old—even girls Lelena’s age.

It was only natural that someone like Lucian would be popular with the opposite sex, yet he never let it interfere with his work and always managed to maintain careful, harmonious relationships with others. As his mistress, I was incredibly proud of him.

Lelena would likely never end up in a relationship with Lucian due to the difference in their ages, but I believed she would look back one day with fond memories of her first love. Lucian was the perfect person for it, after all.

Ah, how bittersweet. I nodded my head, savoring the tiny scene of love I’d witnessed, when Lucian returned to my side.

“Is something the matter?” he asked.

“I was just thinking about how cute Lelena is. She works very hard too.”

“Certainly. She puts in a great amount of effort for her age. I look forward to seeing her grow as a maid, however...” His eager praise for Lelena suddenly slipped away as he trailed off mysteriously.

“Is something bothering you?” I asked.

“I have no intention of accepting Lelena or any other woman’s feelings for me.” He told me that while he worked on arranging the food on the plate. When he noticed I was looking at him, Lucian smiled, his blue eyes softening. “I am your servant, my lady, and my heart will always be with you. Those feelings will never change, regardless of any woman I may meet in the future.”

“Thank you, Lucian. I’m glad I have your loyalty. But if you *do* meet a woman you truly love with all your heart someday, don’t hesitate to come and tell me,” I said. “I’d be sad to lose you, but your happiness is most important.”

“There will be no such day. My happiness is to be found wherever you are, Lady Laetitia.” Lucian calmly made that declaration before turning to look at me. His eyes reminded me of how my brothers looked at me, but there was something else in there too. As I stared back at those eyes...

“Aaaah! It’s so bittersweet!!”

A half-chuckle, half-cry came from beside us.

“Welcome, Hans,” I greeted. “You’re here early.”

This man was Hans, a young carpenter. I’d invited the carpenters to this luncheon as thanks for their help with the Gardener Cats’ fence.

“It’s an honor to be invited into your home, Your Majesty. Still, what a bittersweet relationship, huh?”

“Hm?” I cocked my head. “Are you talking about Lelena? I know how you feel. It’s sort of sweet to watch, isn’t it?”

“...That too, but I meant—”

“Shut it. Don’t make trouble for my lady, you fool. Can’t you see she’s busy?” The smile was still on Lucian’s lips as he cursed this man. The true Lucian had managed to slip out.

While he looked and behaved like a refined gentleman, Lucian had actually been raised as a commoner in the city. He occasionally spoke like a commoner around Big Brother Claude and me, but he’d started taking a rougher approach with other people ever since we came to the villa. Perhaps the relaxed atmosphere was causing him to let his guard down.

“If you’ve got nothing better to do, then help Lady Laetitia set the table,” Lucian ordered. “Here, take these over to that table, if you’d please.”

“Whoa! You’re so mean to your workers! But I don’t mind... I’ll leave if I’m in the way. You want these plates on the table? I’ll do whatever you need if I get to eat some delicious food!” Hans smirked at Lucian and me before lifting up some plates and taking them off toward the table.

It was no struggle for him to haul all that food, as his carpentry job had given him strong muscles. He helped set the table, all the while flirting with the maids like the womanizer that I knew him to be.

It was a bit amusing to see Lelena look at him with disgust.

Since she seems to like Lucian, maybe she prefers a calm, reliable man over the outgoing, flirty type. As I pondered that, Hans, Lelena, and the maids finished the remaining preparations in no time at all.

Laid out on the table was a spread of pizza, sandwiches, cookies, bite-sized pieces of fruit, and more. It was a lineup of light snacks that could be eaten easily without silverware.

That day’s guests were my villa servants and the carpenters, which resulted in more of a casual gathering than the ones I usually hosted with nobles like Lady Natalie. We had these luncheons regularly, both so that the servants could mingle and also so I’d have people to try my latest culinary inventions.

We enjoyed conversing and eating underneath the sunny, blue sky.

My lunch consisted of pizza fresh from the brick oven in my garden. I was savoring the delicious, warm cheese, when my head chef—Gilbert—approached me.

“Queen Laetitia, it seems most of the guests have finished eating. Shall we bring out dessert?”

“Certainly. I think it’s time for the special treat.”

With that, Gilbert and the chefs who worked under him went back into the villa before returning with a tray.

“I’ve never seen anything like that before. What’s it called?” The sharp-eyed

Hans had come up to us.

“These are called ‘pancakes.’ They’re tasty and sweet, but when you spread butter on them like this...”

“Mmmm! That smells so good!”

The butter melted over the surface of the warm pancakes. Its savory aroma stirred up both Hans’ appetite and his excitement.

“Please have some before they get cold. They can also be eaten with jam, if you’d prefer.”

I went around offering pancakes to guests and taking in their impressions.

Everyone seemed to enjoy them. The entire batch I’d made was eventually finished off. Satisfied, I watched the servants return to their posts, as the chefs who’d finished their jobs gathered around me.

“Thank you for preparing today’s luncheon. Your efforts allowed everyone to enjoy their time here.” I praised them as I took a bottle of honey from Lucian. It was the Flute Bee honey I’d received from Lady Fillia.

“Oh! I’ve heard rumors of this...!”

Their eyes, filled with excitement and glee, were glued to the jar. It was very precious honey, but I decided to treat them to it today both to thank them and to motivate them for their future work.

I dished out pancakes with honey to every last chef. They were practically exploding with anticipation as they took the plates from me.

“What a blessing...! I’m so lucky I get to work at this villa...!”

Some chefs were overcome with emotions...

“.....”

...while others silently held the honey on their tongue, desperate to hone their taste buds on it.

I poured some honey on a pancake and tried a bite too.

“Mmm, it’s incredible!”

The honey had soaked into the fluffy pancake just the perfect amount. It oozed more and more sweetness as I chewed. The faint scent of flowers wafted up from the slightly burnt pancake surface, which mingled pleasantly with the sweetness of the cake.

Pancakes are so delicious.

I had them serve me a second one, this time covering it with strawberry jam.

I'd struggled to make them rise without baking powder at first, but once I tried folding in air while mixing up the batter and using egg whites I'd whipped into a meringue, I finally achieved the perfect, fluffy texture.

I was enjoying my pancake with strawberry jam when Lord Aroo suddenly emerged from the bushes bordering my villa.

"Lord Aroo..."

It was a bit harder to react than normal. I'd felt the distance between our hearts the last time I saw him. But I also thought back to Lady Fillia's touching account of her memory with King Glenreed.

For a brief moment, I went entirely still.

"Roo...?"

Whether or not he knew how I felt, Lord Aroo walked right up to me anyway. Then he pressed his nose up to the table and sniffed at the pancakes. There was one pancake left—one I'd made in case someone dropped theirs or needed an extra.

"Ah! No! You can't eat that!" I whisked the plate away from him in a panic.

That pancake was drizzled with Flute Bee honey. I'd promised Lady Fillia that I wouldn't treat King Glenreed to any honey snacks on his birthday.

The birthday party was still a few days away, but I would feel guilty feeding His Majesty something that spoiled Lady Fillia's surprise. As I held the plate out of Lord Aroo's reach, I felt Lucian take it from my hands and walk away briskly.

"Arooo..." Lord Aroo sounded a bit disappointed, but he readily stepped back.

Is he not very hungry after all? That doesn't feel like a reaction to something

that was supposed to be his favorite food...

As I racked my brain for an explanation, the wolf changed course and came over to sniff me a bit too.

“Lord Aroo?”

He wrinkled his nose and made a face resembling a scowl.

Do I smell like the ingredients I was cooking with?

I brought my arm to my nose to see if I detected anything, but that was when Lord Aroo moved away from me and started to sniff the villa’s perimeter instead. He pressed his nose to the trees surrounding the garden, checking them one by one, until...

“Wh-What?!”

Lord Aroo had suddenly started to ram his head into one of the tree trunks. He hit it over and over again, as if it required his dedicated concentration.

“What’s wrong, Lord Aroo?!” I rushed over to see if he’d gone mad. But that was when I heard something above me.

When I looked up, I saw...

“A man?! A bird?!”

My eyes landed on large, white wings and sparkling golden hair.

Something was falling down toward me from above.

“Lady Laetitia!”

“Aroo!!”

“Eek!!”

I felt an impact against my stomach and shoulders. It sent me tumbling backwards, but I landed safely in Lucian’s arms.

“My lady! Are you hurt?!”

“N-No, I’m fine, Lucian. Thank you for your help as well, Lord Aroo.”

“Woof!”

“Of course. This was nothing,” he seemed to say.

Lord Aroo had pushed me backwards for Lucian to catch, so thankfully, I didn't seem injured. I smoothed down my wrinkled dress and took a look at the strange man who was face down on the ground.

He appeared to have used a wind spell just before he fell, allowing him to land safely on a cushion of air. The strange man shuddered slightly before slowly rising to his feet.

“.....”

“.....”

We stared at each other wordlessly for a while.

The man's incredible beauty could be described as “divine.”

His long, platinum blonde hair billowed around him and his clear blue eyes reflected the hue of the sky. His eyelashes were long enough to cast faint shadows on his face.

The man had pale skin without so much as a blemish on his body—like he was made out of the finest alabaster. Something about his beautiful face struck me as melancholic, but the most eye-catching feature on his body was the pair of massive white wings on his back.

“...You must be a member of the Heaven-Wing clan,” I proposed my theory to the young man with the otherworldly beauty and wings that were so obviously the real thing.

The Heaven-Wing clan.

I'd never met one of their members before either. They were an incredibly rare clan who hardly ever showed their faces around humans. Though they were treated as a type of beastfolk, many humans worshiped them for their beautiful wings, flying ability, and various other reasons.

“It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Laetitia. I am this country's queen and mistress of this villa, which was given to me by King Glenreed himself.”

“I know.”

He answered bluntly—the beauty of his voice rivaling that of his looks. Though the man kept his face still and impossible to read, I didn't presently sense that he was hostile. At least, I hoped he wasn't.

“Featherio.”

He presented that puzzling word with no further explanation.

A question mark formed over my head. But then I realized he was introducing himself.

“In that case, may I call you Lord Featherio?”

“Fine.”

“All right, Lord Featherio. May I ask why you've come to my villa? How long were you up in that tree?”

Lord Featherio looked up at the tree he'd fallen from.

The thick trunk was surrounded by lush green leaves, but we really should have noticed a man up on one of the branches. The man's hair was long and shiny, and he wore white clothes with gold embroidery—all things that should make him stand out in a tree. Yet despite the dozens of people at our luncheon, not a single person managed to spot him above.

Lord Featherio fell silent.

Realizing there must be a story behind this, I sent everyone aside from Lucian and Lord Aroo back inside the villa.

“Thank you for your consideration.” Lord Featherio said that before spreading his wings. The giant, white masses of feathers folded around his body, causing the man to gradually fade from sight. He was completely invisible within mere seconds.

“...Lord Featherio?”

“I'm here.” His voice came from the empty air, and once he spread his wings again, he returned to my sight. It seemed he could turn invisible at will.

“I see. So Heaven-Wing clan members can do this with their wings?” I said.

“It's a secret.” His face was still blank, but he pressed his index finger to his

lips. It was a childish gesture for someone as serious as he appeared to be.

“I understand. I’d be happy to keep this between the two of us, however...” I glanced at Lord Aroo. He sniffed before scowling at Lord Featherio.

“It’s fine. King Glenreed already knows.”

How surprising. It seemed Lord Featherio already knew exactly who Lord Aroo was. Lord Aroo didn’t deny it or show any signs of panic. He simply squinted his greenish-blue eyes uncomfortably at the man.

I watched them, recalling two pieces of legend regarding the Heaven-Wing clan.

First, the Heaven-Wing clan were said to be holy beings who protected the country and judged the actions of its king.

Second, the kingdom was said to be safe from ruin so long as members of the Heaven-Wing clan still dwelled in its land.

Both of these things seemed plausible, though I couldn’t know for sure.

It was possible they were total fiction. History books told that, a few hundred years ago, the Desert King slaughtered his country’s Heaven-Wing clan, leading to the country’s downfall as well as his own.

As for the present-day western continent, Heaven-Wing clans could be found in all countries with the lengthiest histories—Wolfvarte, my homeland of Elltoria, the great Maldion Empire, Raiolbern, and Alphasar.

But why would one of these Heaven-Wing clan members come to my villa?

Never letting my guard down, I observed Lord Featherio until suddenly...

Gurgle, gurgle.

I heard someone’s stomach growling.

It came not from Lord Aroo or me, but from Lord Featherio himself.

“I’m hungry.” There was no trace of embarrassment or unrest on his face whatsoever. “Will you share your food?”

I met his eyes, fixed directly on me.

Though I couldn't tell from his completely blank expression, I felt like I detected a distinct eagerness in those eyes.





“**ALL** I have are leftovers and extras I made for today’s luncheon. Does that sound all right?”

We’d returned to the villa, where I asked Gilbert and my chefs to prepare whatever they easily could. They brought it up to us in the second-floor drawing room.

Lord Featherio was seated on the sofa. He stretched his wings, staring at the food presented to him.

“I personally recommend these fruit sandwiches,” I said. “What looks good to you?”

“Meat.”

The answer I received was succinct.

Meat...? I hadn’t quite expected that. His looks and sublime aura made me picture him eating fruit or nectar, if not just clouds or air altogether. But now it turned out he was actually a carnivore.

“What kind of meat do you like?”

“Boar, deer, or bear.”

“Bear...”

So he’s the wild type. It sounds like he enjoys hunting game.

The more I thought about it, the more sense it made.

Heaven-Wing clan members dwelled in remote areas far away from civilization. Supposedly, that meant deep in the mountains, where they were unlikely to be stumbled across. I doubted they could farm at all, so perhaps wild animals and plants made up the majority of their diet.

“Then why don’t you try one of these sandwiches? You can eat them with your hands this way. They have ham in between slices of bread, which is a little like boar meat.”

“Fine.”

I presented him with the plate, from which he picked up a sandwich with his long fingers. He lifted it up to his face, stared at it for a while, then began to eat. It wasn't long before he was silently reaching for his second sandwich. He must have enjoyed it after all.

It might have just been my imagination, but Lord Featherio seemed pleased.

It was almost impossible to tell with how little he spoke, but I was getting the sense that maybe he was something of a strange character. Lord Aroo had transformed back into his human form at this point and was sitting beside me on the sofa. He glared at Lord Featherio, who didn't seem concerned in the slightest.

My eyes drifted to Lord Featherio's wings. That was when I realized something.

"Lord Featherio, have you been to my villa before today?"

The white feather that had landed in front of Lady Kate during our tea party was a match to Lord Featherio's wings.

He swallowed his bite of sandwich and nodded. "Yes. I come here a lot."

"And how long have you been watching me?" I asked.

"Since the start of the summer after you came here."

"That was almost a year ago..."

"Correct. At first, I watched you from far enough away that King Glenreed couldn't smell me. But you always eat your food outside, don't you?"

"Yes, I enjoy eating outside when the weather permits."

"It made me curious. But I got too close and King Glenreed found me with his nose."

"I see...?"

In other words, he was lured here by my cooking, only for His Majesty to discover him? Now that I thought back, the feather had landed on my outdoor tea party with Lady Natalie and Lady Kate.

...Is this man just sort of a ditz?

The divine presence he'd first appeared to have was slowly starting to crumble.

"I would have given you food sooner if you were that curious..." I said.

"I couldn't be seen and couldn't take the food without asking either. Stealing is wrong."

"That's true..."

Feeling a bit exhausted from all of this, I brought my eyes up to meet his. I couldn't be careless, even as his aloof aura threatened to distract me from that fact.

"Lord Featherio, why were you watching me for so long? Were you making sure that I, the temporary queen, wouldn't cause any harm to this country? Were you going to remove me if I proved unneeded to Wolfvarte?"

I was speaking about the legends surrounding the Heaven-Wing clan, even though I didn't know how much of it was true. But I didn't get the sense that he would be observing me, this country's queen, without a good reason.

Lord Featherio blinked his sky-blue eyes and parted his slim, attractive lips. "I only watched. Nothing more. I have no desire to remove you."

"Is that true? I've heard legends that the Heaven-Wing clan exists to protect their countries."

"Our role is to watch over the country. The king and nobles are the ones who rule. That is your purpose." He pointed at King Glenreed and me with fingers that looked like they'd been sculpted from marble. Those blue eyes, as clear as the sky, revealed no traces of animosity. "I fulfill my duty and pray that the kingdom takes a path of righteousness."

It was as if he'd delivered a revelation. With that, he stood up. Lord Featherio proceeded to the window with those white wings at his back.

"I'm leaving. Farewell."

"W-Wait a minute, please!"

I had a bad feeling about that. I stood up.

Lord Featherio had opened up the large window that went down to the floor.

“Are you going to leave through the window?” I asked.

“Of course. That’s what we do in my homeland.”

“I’m sorry, but could I ask you to walk to the front door like you did to get here?”

“Why? I won’t be seen once I spread my wings. It’s not a problem.”

“Yes, it is. In this villa—”

“Kreh!!”

“Suspicious man detected!”

Fon had spotted Lord Featherio sticking halfway out the window.

Fon, the winged creature, was greatly concerned by other flying things. That was why he perceived the man with wings on his back as a potential threat. Fon had stared him down when he first entered the villa too.

“I see.” Lord Featherio seemed somewhat impressed, though he was unmoved by the way Fon kicked up wind by flapping his wings. “So humans these days keep griffins at their homes instead of watchdogs. Clever. They can protect the sky as they do the ground.”

“...No, that’s just something unique about this villa.”

Unable to put up with Lord Featherio’s airheadedness anymore, King Glenreed finally broke his silence with that single retort.



“**YOU** took an interest in the feather I found because you were concerned about Lord Featherio’s presence, isn’t that right, King Glenreed?”

I’d convinced Lord Featherio to use his feet to leave the villa so as not to upset Fon. Afterwards, I decided to bring this topic up with King Glenreed.

“Right. Heaven-Wing clan members don’t follow common sense, so it’s impossible to tell what’s going on in their heads. I didn’t know what his intentions were in observing you,” the usually composed king revealed with contempt in his tone.

“So you’ve interacted with his people before, I see. Legends say that the Heaven-Wing clan judges the king. Does the royal family share a connection to them?” I asked.

“I don’t know any details, and the texts with their accurate history have been lost to time. Maybe my father would have known something, but he passed away before he could teach me.”

“...Yes, I remember hearing he was found unconscious in the bath one winter.”

The castle went into an uproar, believing it to be a poisoning or some manner of assassination. But they never found any evidence.

Dying suddenly in the bath during winter. It felt like heat shock—something I knew from my past life memories—but the answer was still shrouded in darkness.

Four years ago, sometime after the previous king’s passing, King Glenreed began to concentrate his efforts on the wars with neighboring countries. He emerged victorious, but when the wars were over, it was time for him to pick a queen from one of the four candidates.

I imagined he’d been at his wit’s end during his entire reign and had little time to consider the Heaven-Wing clan at all. While they were residents of this country too, they essentially existed as an independent group. They didn’t openly antagonize the kingdom of Wolfvarte or interfere with domestic affairs, but from what I gathered, they didn’t care to follow King Glenreed’s orders either.

“I didn’t smell any lies when Featherio said he wasn’t going to remove you, so that’s a relief... But I still can’t let my guard down either,” he said.

“I found him to be strange, but nothing more. What makes you so wary of him?” I asked.

“He smells strange.”

“Strange? Do you mean you don’t care for his scent?”

King Glenreed’s power of ancestral reversion granted him a unique sense of

smell. He was able to detect lies, and so long as there was a scent, he could perceive a person's emotions and character. This was how he managed to detect Lord Featherio, even when he was invisible.

"No, it's not that. If anything, he smells rather pleasant... But that scent is exactly the same as the other Heaven-Wing clan members who live in this country. Parents and siblings with similar personalities tend to smell alike, but this was something more than that. Even twins with nearly identical dispositions don't smell exactly the same."

"They smell the same..."

I took a moment to try and think of an answer. However, human cloning was the only thing I could come up with.

Clones were said to be genetically identical to each other, though human cloning wasn't achievable, even on twenty-first-century Earth. It was hard to imagine this country had managed it with their inferior science and technology.

Magic in this world generally didn't have an effect on the human body itself. As far as I knew, there were no spells to heal someone, revive them, or turn them young again.

But if it's not a part of science or magic, does that mean there's some other factor involved?

Of course, King Glenreed's ability to transform into a wolf wasn't explained by this world's system of magic either. It seemed possible that the Heaven-Wing clan might hold similar strange abilities.

"Lord Featherio really *does* resemble an angel, even if his personality is a different story," I mused. "Perhaps it's only natural that he would possess powers that surpass human understanding."

"An angel?"

When I heard His Majesty repeat my words, I remembered something.

That's right. This world has no angels or any concept of them.

There *was* a concept of gods—as well as the customs of revering ancestors and mourning the dead—but there were no large state religions or powerful

spiritual leaders. That part was a bit strange.

The history of Japan in my past life made different religions unavoidable, and I knew Europe and other Asian countries to be the same.

On the other hand, there was little religion to be found in this world—at least not on the western continent. Aside from simple prayer rituals to the gods, there were no clergy members to be found in the centers of any government. Glimpses of religions could be seen before the time known as the “Great Darkness” over five hundred years ago, but no one knew their specifics, as most documents were lost during the long period of war.

Well, this world had things like magic and Mythical Beasts, so it wasn’t that surprising that other aspects would be different from Earth too. The clothes and food of the people here were relatively familiar to me, but it was possible that religion was just a different thing here.

“Angels are people with wings on their backs who follow God’s will and deliver blessings,” I explained.

“That sounds convenient. Such things could only exist in fairy tales.”

“That’s true. I only learned about them in a fictional story I read long ago.”

Or, more accurately, it was a book I read in my past life. But I didn’t clarify that point. I decided to change subjects so he wouldn’t press me any further.

“That reminds me. You said I had a strange scent when we first met, didn’t you, King Glenreed?”

“...I did. I’m sorry I said something rude during our first time meeting.”

“No, that’s all right. May I ask what kind of scent I have?”

“It’s like...” King Glenreed’s brow wrinkled slightly, like he didn’t know how to respond. I tried not to laugh when I noticed how much it made him look like Lord Aroo. “...It’s hard to explain. It’s something I’ve never smelled again before or since. I’m not saying it’s unpleasant. In fact, these days, I can’t get eno— No, never mind.”

King Glenreed started to cough to cover up the point he’d trailed off from.

“Sorry, but it’s hard to explain these things in ways you would understand. It’s

just a strange smell that neither your father nor your brothers shared.”

“I see...”

If it had nothing to do with my family’s blood, then perhaps my past life memories were involved somehow. This made me curious, but it didn’t seem like anything urgent, so I would have to put it out of my mind for now.

“Thank you for talking to me about it,” I said. “There are some other things I’d like to discuss with you, but you seem very busy, so let’s speak after your birthday party when the two of us can be alone.”

After that, King Glenreed left in the form of Lord Aroo again, and I went outside to give Fon some special attention.



“...I hid something from Laetitia.”

Glenreed leaned back in his chair and sighed quietly. He furrowed his brow, squeezed his eyes shut, and let the chair carry his full weight.

“What’s the matter, Your Majesty? Haven’t you lied to Queen Laetitia many times before this? Why let it trouble you now?”

Despite his harsh words, Melvin, the king’s aide, presented him with a cup of his favorite tea. This tea was made with leaves Laetitia had selected for him. The faint scent of strawberries tickled his nose.

“.....”

He thought of the man with fiery red hair, so much redder than the surface of that tea.

Emperor Ishnad...

Despite not coming from royalty, the man had risen to the top of his country at a young age, then turned his homeland of Ringrard into a massive empire not long after. He was a masterful ruler with bright, crimson hair.

He’d met the emperor once at the start of spring and confirmed that he was a talented, powerful man like so many rumors said. But for some reason, he also smelled like Laetitia.

How can that be? Why does Ishnad have the same strange scent as Laetitia?

Glenreed could never come up with an answer to that question, no matter how much he thought it over. But he was hesitant to ask Laetitia directly, so he'd been avoiding the topic just as he did earlier.

This was a problem with Glenreed's unique sense of smell alone. There was so little information he could use as reference.

"...Has Leonard reported anything from his infiltration into Ringrard?" he asked.

"We haven't received any word yet, no. I don't think he's the kind of person who would blunder a mission like this."

"Of course not." Glenreed nodded confidently.

Leonard, the former prince who now worked as a spy, was a very capable man. Glenreed hadn't wanted to assign his brother such a dangerous role—having just reunited with him after more than ten years—but there was no one more capable of carrying out this important work. As the king, Glenreed suppressed his personal feelings as he ordered Leonard to infiltrate the Ringrard Empire.

"Keep an eye out for word from him."

"As you wish." Melvin bowed before returning to his own work.

Glenreed finished his cup of tea and turned toward the map on his wall.

"It's going to get rough out there very soon."

A certain emperor would be the one standing in the eye of the storm.

Glenreed was staring, intensely and silently, at the map of the countries throughout the western continent.

Chapter 3: Wings of Heaven & the Sound of Wings

“LET us now commence with His Majesty’s birthday festivities.”

The announcer’s voice resonated all the way up the ballroom’s high ceilings.

It was the day of King Glenreed’s twenty-fifth birthday.

I was seated on the queen’s throne beside him, dressed in my formalwear.

Nobles and important figures, both from within the country and outside of it, had gathered for this celebration. Men wore justaucorps sewn with gold and silver thread, while women showed off their finest dresses covered in lace and silk. Their tailors had spared no expense. They all stood in line, waiting their turn to present His Majesty with a gift.

I was allowed to see the guest list and noticed it was much lengthier than last year’s party.

One such guest was Prince Ernest of the Winged Wildam Empire. He must have decided not to send a servant or representative after personally visiting Wolfvarte last year.

Prince Ernest had come with a gift of the highest quality horse-riding gear. The Winged Wildam Empire was home to the very rare creature known as the Pegasus, and they devoted themselves as a country to researching and improving riding tools related to Pegasi or horses. There was no nation on the western continent with a higher standard for riding gear.

It was neither too expensive nor too cheap—a useful gift that was also a symbol of his country’s specialty field. I was impressed. It was a solid choice and felt like something personal from Prince Ernest. That was when our eyes happened to meet.

“It’s been a while, Laetitia,” he said. “Are you doing better at riding Fon these days?”

“I still practice flying with him when I can, and I always make sure to recall

Your Highness' instructions," I replied.

"I see. So you think of me when you fly?" He smiled cheerfully. "In that case, I'm sure you're getting better. I look forward to seeing you fly."

"I hope I'm able to live up to your expectations," I said with a light giggle.

The two of us made plans to fly Fon and his Pegasus together a few days later.

Prince Ernest was the heir to his throne and had come from far away to attend the party. It would be a waste not to build on our friendship and improve diplomacy between countries. Personally, I simply enjoyed speaking with him too.

He smiled at me, flashed an oddly challenging smirk at King Glenreed, and then made way for the next guest in line to approach.

After that, I memorized each guest's face, name, gift, how they responded to His Majesty, and whatever glimpses of their personality I could obtain. The party continued on schedule without incident.

This year's increase in prominent and influential guests was proof of how King Glenreed had become an even more powerful unifier.

The Ringrard Empire's growth in recent years was on the verge of becoming an international crisis, but many believed Wolfvarte would remain unharmed so long as King Glenreed was leading it.

I didn't want to be someone who held him back. I was going to do whatever I could to support him.

"King Glenreed, I wish you the happiest of birthdays."

It was finally Lady Fillia's turn in line. She wore a spring-themed light pink dress and greeted him with a lovely smile. As she'd told me, she seemed to have brought a gift of sweets made with honey.

As soon as she opened the basket's lid...

The fragrant aroma of butter wafted up to our noses. I looked inside and saw the desserts had been baked to a lovely brown color.

"They were baked with the special honey my family's dukedom produces,"

she explained.

“This is honey from those Flute Bees I’ve heard about?” King Glenreed asked.

“Yes. It’s the honey you once told me was delicious, so I made sure to use lots of it.”

“...I see. I’ll enjoy this, thank you.”

Hm? That was strange. King Glenreed had paused a little longer than usual before responding to her. *Could he not recall any memory of eating honey sweets in the past?*

Even Lady Fillia had a sad look on her face for a fleeting moment—perhaps noticing His Majesty’s delayed reaction. But it was quickly replaced by an elegant smile. Then she returned gracefully to her place in the crowd.



“THAT was a lovely party, Your Majesty.”

King Glenreed and I were sitting across from each other in a palace drawing room after the festivities came to a close. The table between us was covered in gifts of food to His Majesty that had been tested for poison. It was clearly more than the king could ever eat on his own, which was why, as queen, I was permitted to join him. It was a perk of the job.

“Which would you like to try first?” I asked. “They’re all so lovely, it’s difficult to choose.”

Just gazing at all the local specialties was a treat in itself. I’d only spent a year in this country and still had lots of foods to learn about and try for the first time.

The kingdom of Wolfvarte came to be when five smaller countries unified into one. The regions to the north, south, east, and west still have vastly different culinary cultures to this day. It would be a long time before I ran out of things to try, in other words.

King Glenreed smirked slightly when he saw how excited I was. “You really love food, don’t you?”

“I love both making it and eating it,” I admitted freely.

“I thought so. It’s easy to forget how tired the party made me when I watch you. I used to think these events were such a chore every year, but maybe they’re not so bad if I get to see that look on your face.”

“...Thank you.”

I’m not blushing, am I? It’s like he knows exactly what to say.

It wasn’t fair. I was nothing more than a figurehead queen, yet he knew precisely what I wanted to hear. It made me happy.

...But I remembered my place. There was no misunderstanding the situation.

King Glenreed had only shown me a bit of basic human kindness. He was a compassionate, caring person, even to the placeholder queen he married out of convenience.

I cast my eyes down to the food, persuading myself not to get the wrong idea.

“I’d like to start with the herb-roasted pork. What about you, Your Majesty?” I asked to change the topic.

“I’ll do the same. For drinks, we can open up one of the bottles you gave me.”

“I’m honored, thank you.”

I was smiling on the outside. Inside, I was striking a victory pose.

My birthday present to the king was a set of colorful fruit juices. The Gardener Cats had provided the fruit, and when you set all the bottles next to each other, they looked like a lovely rainbow.

Of course, I was confident the juices had turned out delicious as well. Gilbert and I spent a lot of time changing parts of the recipes through trial and error until every last bottle was something that would be delicious on its own.

The variety of flavors meant that some would pair nicely with a meat dish, some were delicious when added to alcohol, and others were light and easy to drink when one’s stomach was upset.

After I gave His Majesty a sponge cake the previous year, I’d predicted that there would now be an influx of food gifts. It was why I decided to make juice, in hopes it would complement the rest of his birthday presents. It proved to be

a wise choice.

The two of us drank from cups of juice as we dug into the food. Once we finished, I decided to move on to dessert before we got too full.

“Your Majesty, which would you prefer? I heard you like honey, so why don’t we try Lady Fillia’s baked goods?” I suggested.

“No, you’re wrong.” King Glenreed shot a puzzled look at Lady Fillia’s gift. “I don’t know why she thinks I love honey, but she’s got the wrong idea. I don’t hate it, but it’s definitely not a favorite of mine.”

“...Is that so?” I cocked my head, but this didn’t come as a surprise.

King Glenreed wasn’t interested in food at all when we first met. It was highly unlikely that he would have any favorite foods at all.

On the other hand, Lady Fillia didn’t appear to be lying either. Her cheeks had turned pink as she thought back on the memory with King Glenreed, leaving me with a faint ache in my heart that I couldn’t forget. I didn’t know what she would gain from lying about such a thing in the first place.

“I wonder why Lady Fillia said that?” I pondered.

“I don’t know. I didn’t smell any lies when she spoke, so she must think she’s telling the truth, at the very least,” he said.

“So she had some sort of false memory?”

“I think she confused me with someone else. Maybe she used to eat honey sweets with someone else when she was young.”

“The wrong person...” I looked up at King Glenreed’s face, still unconvinced.

...No, it’s impossible.

King Glenreed didn’t seem very aware of it himself, but his face was one of absolute beauty—every last feature was without the slightest flaw. I didn’t see how someone could confuse a less perfect face for that of His Majesty’s.

There was little doubt that King Glenreed had his striking looks while he was still a child as well. I wished I could have seen what he looked like at that age. *I just know he’d be adorable!*

“Why are you so silent all of a sudden?” he asked.

“...It’s nothing.”

King Glenreed’s voice pulled me back to reality. I took a gulp of juice to try to distract from my silence.

“...Just to be clear, you really, *really* don’t remember eating honey sweets with Lady Fillia many years ago?” I asked.

“Nothing like that, no. I spent most of my childhood sick in bed until I was about twelve or thirteen. After that, I can still remember most things that have happened in my life.”

“I see...”

It still didn’t make sense to me, but if King Glenreed insisted, then Lady Fillia must have been mistaken after all. Still confused, I filled up on dessert until our dinner reached its end.



“**QUEEN** Laetitia! Who is that man?!” Edgar, the young wolfkeeper, let out a cry that echoed throughout my garden.

A few days had passed since King Glenreed’s birthday. The weather outside was sunny and beautiful. I’d been playing with the wolves out in front of my villa, and I smiled awkwardly at Edgar’s panic.

“I see Lord Featherio has returned...” I murmured.

Ever since we first met, Lord Featherio had come to visit my villa once every few days, for some reason. The Heaven-Wing clan rarely made appearances around others and were treated almost like legends. Many people had been extremely startled to see Lord Featherio at my villa.

“Woof!!”

I tried to stand up to go calm Edgar down, but the wolves on my lap began to cry out.

“*You haven’t pet me enough yet!*”

“*Pet me more!*”

They looked up at me and wiggled their noses, pleading with me to stay.

“Y-You’re so cute...!”

I was completely powerless against those puppy-dog eyes.

But I still had a mission. I had to get over to Edgar. I steeled my heart, gently set the wolves on the ground, and headed over to the source of the screams.

“Q-Queen Laetitia! Th-th-th-th-th-that man! Is he really from the Heaven-Wing clan?!”

“That’s right. He really stands out, but he won’t cause any trouble, so try to calm yourself, okay?” I patted Edgar’s trembling shoulders.

Edgar was still a novice wolfkeeper, but he handled them well and had a bright future on the horizon. Despite this, he was a rather cowardly young man. He used to jump whenever a stranger approached him, and although he’d grown braver these days, it seemed a member of the Heaven-Wing clan was a bit much for him to handle.

I comforted Edgar and looked at Lord Featherio, who was now surrounded by wolves. He remained completely unaffected by the curious creatures sniffing him from every angle.

Perhaps he didn’t mind them licking the tips of his feathers because he was a tolerant individual. Or maybe he was too airheaded to notice. I didn’t know how to interpret such behavior.

“I hunted this.” Lord Featherio held out a wild bird in his right hand. This bird was famous for its unique white feathering on its stomach and the delicious flavor of its meat. Even the wolves started to shuffle closer to it when they caught the bird’s scent. “A trade. I brought meat, so you’ll cook it for me. I look forward to Your Majesty’s meals.”

As always, his face lacked any readable emotions on it, but he didn’t appear to be lying, at least. He really *did* seem to enjoy my cooking. He requested food every time he came to the villa now.

I had no reason to refuse. I once told him that I didn’t need him to bring me wild birds and other things he’d hunted, but...

“It’s better to have a fair exchange.”

That was the answer I received. He basically forced his catches into my hands in exchange for my cooking ever since.

I was a bit nervous around him at first too, but the more we interacted, the more I saw Lord Featherio as someone unattached to this world—both for better and for worse.

Perhaps he was more like a baby bird than an angel.

He appeared to be in his early twenties, though he told me he only began to interact with human society a few years prior, so his behavior wasn’t really so strange after all.

Lord Featherio’s birthplace was cut off from the outside world, meaning he grew up with food that lacked variety and flavor. He didn’t think anything of it back then, as it was all he knew, but seeing my cooking on the outside had sparked his interest in food, or so he told me.

That was why I wasted no time preparing and cooking the wild bird for him. I couldn’t clean it myself, so I had another knowledgeable chef work on that while I prepared the seasonings.

I stuck to the basics and went with a simple blend of flavors, since Lord Featherio still wasn’t accustomed to recipes from the outside world yet. I seasoned the meat with salt, pepper, and some basic herbs like rosemary before roasting it.

Though it wasn’t complicated, its simplicity actually made the meat taste even more delicious.

Lord Featherio seemed pleased as well. He finished his meal in the blink of an eye.

“Cooking is a great thing.”

After that briefest of remarks, he flapped his wings and flew off into the sky again, just like how he arrived.



“WELCOME, Queen Laetitia. It’s very nice to see you today.” Lady Fillia

greeted me with an adorable smile at the entrance to the southern villa.

I returned her greeting politely. The two of us chatted as we headed to her drawing room.

“I want to thank you for accepting my request and inviting me to your home today,” I said.

“I’m happy to see you as well. Thank you for keeping your promise at King Glenreed’s birthday party. I’d been trying to think of how I might express my gratitude to you when your request came.”

“It was nothing worth thanking me for. I’d already planned to gift him with juice for his birthday, and I would never have been able to make better honey sweets than you if I decided I wanted to challenge you.”

“You’re too modest. I’m certain anything you cooked would have captured King Glenreed’s heart.” Lady Fillia gave a weak smile as she spoke. That was when I decided to ask her about what had been on my mind.

“Lady Fillia, may I ask you about something you said to His Majesty at the party?”

“What would that be?”

“You mentioned before how the two of you had once eaten honey sweets together. Do you remember where this was, and what kind of things you talked about together?”

“Of course!” It was like watching a flower bloom. A lovely smile spread across Lady Fillia’s face as she began to speak. “It’s a very precious memory to me that no one could ever replace. I am who I am today because of how I first met King Glenreed.” She spoke lovingly, with the utmost care, as she revealed this moment close to her heart. “Are you aware of my family’s turmoil around the time I was a young girl?”

“Yes, although I’ve only heard the rumors.”

“They’re probably accurate. No, it was likely even worse than what you’ve heard. Both Mother and Father were very strict people, and as a child, I felt like there was nowhere I truly belonged.”

The fate of their family's title was up in the air. Blood relatives battled against each other to claim the reins to the dukedom. Lady Fillia wasn't even ten years old at the time. My heart ached when I thought of her being caught up in such a vicious family quarrel.

"The mood in the air at home frightened me, so I ran from our manor and became lost in the streets of the royal capital. It's a disgrace to do something so foolish as a duke's daughter, don't you agree?"

"No, I don't agree at all."

I truly meant those words. If that was enough for Lady Fillia to be a disgrace, then I would be much more of a failure than she ever was.

Big Brother Claude had taken me out to town many times as a child, and even now, I often snuck out to walk around the royal capital. Fleeing to town to escape her troubling situation at home wasn't anything deserving of blame. If anything, I sympathized greatly.

"That's very kind of you," she said with a soft laugh. "I only wish I'd had someone like you in my life at that time, but unfortunately, no one gave me any real consideration as a child. I believe Mother and Father were at their wits' end already from the family strife. The only person to have a genuine conversation with me was King Glenreed, who'd snuck out of the castle."

I compared her memories to the King Glenreed that I knew.

King Glenreed was a serious man, but he also possessed the power of ancestral reversion to transform into a wolf.

He'd told me that he lost control of his rational thoughts when he was in wolf form, and when he was young, he would sometimes lose control and transform accidentally, fleeing the castle to hide his wolf self.

Perhaps he'd coincidentally bumped into Lady Fillia during one of those outings.

"His Majesty must have seen me as a pathetic, pitiable thing," she continued. "He took my trembling hands, smiled kindly at me, and offered me words of encouragement. We shared the honey sweets I brought with me from home and laughed about silly little things together."

“That must have been so reassuring.”

I knew that, despite his icy, beautiful looks, King Glenreed was actually a kind-hearted man on the inside. Even as a child, it was easy to imagine him taking care of the vulnerable Lady Fillia.

However, it was his disinterest in food that made me hesitate. I just couldn't picture him smiling because of those sweets.

“Yes, it really was. I thought of King Glenreed as the most precious person in my life. To repay him for what he did for me, I decided to grow up and become a fine young lady who could come to this villa and support him.”

“I think that's a wonderful aspiration.”

I sensed all the hard work Lady Fillia must have put into achieving that goal.

It involved learning manners, the art of conversation, how to conduct herself in high society, and a dedication to getting an education. She'd devoted herself to these ends, chiseling away at herself in the process, and managed to get to where she was today. Her smile, so difficult to read, and her calculated behavior were definitely the fruits of all that labor.

“Thank you for listening to such a dull tale. I'm honored to receive your praise, Queen Laetitia.”

“No, I should be the one thanking you for telling me your story. I'm merely a figurehead queen, but I do hope to understand you all a bit better and be of help to you, if I can.” As I thanked her for sharing her precious memory with me, I shifted the conversation to my main business. “You shared your Flute Bees' honey with me the other day, which is why I wanted to come here and express my gratitude.”

“But there's no need. I'm the one who's grateful you kept your promise concerning His Majesty's birthday gift.”

We smiled and thanked each other. The conversation wasn't getting anywhere, so I decided to change my approach before Lady Fillia evaded me entirely.

“This is both a way of showing my thanks and something I wanted to do for

my own sake. It's something I'd like to try out, and I was wondering if you'd be willing to help me."

"Help you?"

"Yes. Might I ask to borrow one level of your Flute Bee hive?"

Honeybees and Flute Bees built their hives in porcelain boxes in this country. Inside were rectangular frames separating the box into multiple levels, which the bees built their hives inside. The beekeepers could then harvest honey from these nests.

"I don't mind lending it to Your Majesty, so long as it's only one level..." Despite her words, Lady Fillia seemed somewhat unenthusiastic. "My family prides themselves on having the best methods of handling Flute Bees. Would it not be easier for us to harvest the honey here and send it home with you?"

"I appreciate your consideration, but my experiment involves the process of harvesting the honey. I've tried it successfully a few times on the hive at my villa, but I'd like to try it on your own Flute Bees and have you observe."

"...I see."

She took a moment to consider it, that smile still on her face all the while. It seemed my suggestion wasn't one she could ignore. She came from a family that prided themselves on their treatment of the bees, and I must have lit a spark of interest in her.

"Very well. I'm eager to see what it is you've come up with."

She smiled like a flower again, but this time, something in it felt like a challenge. She was evaluating me carefully. It was finally starting to feel like she was revealing her emotions to me, even if I only caught a small glimpse at a time.



THE villa courtyard where the Flute Bee nest sat looked beautiful in the height of spring.

There were poppies, violets, rhododendrons, and even some early blooming roses throughout the garden. Perhaps they were planted there not just to

please the eye, but for the Flute Bees to collect nectar from as well.

“All right, allow me to begin. Please watch closely.” Lady Fillia began to play notes from the transverse flute in her hands.

I wasn't able to watch her play the previous time due to Princess Ileze's intrusion, so I fixed my attention on her now that I had a second opportunity. She looked like something out of a painting, playing her flute against a backdrop of colorful flowers.

The Flute Bees buzzed around in harmony with Lady Fillia's song. They drew circles in the air, but were capable of detailed maneuvers without a single bee straying. No average honeybee could do what they did.

The melody gracefully slid from low notes to high notes, its tempo speeding and slowing.

Finally, she guided the Flute Bees into the box with her tune. They would stay still until Lady Fillia played the flute again, allowing me to safely harvest their honey.

“How did you like seeing them fly?” Lady Fillia removed the flute from her lips to ask me that.

“It was wonderful. Your performance and the way you guided those bees were both splendid to watch.”

“Thank you very much. ...What do you think of the Flute Bees, Queen Laetitia?” Her voice came out somewhat hesitant.

I felt like she was seeking something deeper than my flowery words of praise.

“They're insects with abilities that are very useful to humans...but as a single species, I can't help but think of them as somewhat weak,” I said.

“Weak?”

“Yes. Their abilities are why they're kept and protected by humans, but I don't think they'd be able to live in the wild without that protection.”

They were just like silkworms.

In the natural world, with no humans to care for them or instruct them with

flutes, there was little chance of survival for a Flute Bee. That was why they could only be found in an area within the southern region—anywhere else, and they were quick to die in the wild.

“For example, if you guided them into a river with your flute, every last one of them would fall in and drown. Isn’t that true?”

“It’s true. Tragic things like that have happened when the flute player isn’t skilled enough.”

“That’s why I called them weak. They’re short-lived creatures whose entire hive will die together if the flute player can’t protect them. It’s genuinely very impressive that your dukedom has kept these Flute Bees for generations and used them to create your specialty honey.” I made sure to work in some praise for her family to end the discussion on a positive note.

“...Thank you for your interesting remarks. I’ll take them into consideration.” Lady Fillia closed her eyes and smiled softly. She put her flute away and gave orders to a servant to retrieve the hive from the bees’ box. “Please wait a moment. Larvae are supposed to be in a separate compartment, but I’m going to have them confirm there aren’t any in this one.”

“Of course.”

Once the servant finished up, it was finally my turn. I would start by removing the top portion of the hive so that the honey inside would remain enclosed.

“Blade of wind!”

A light, whooshing sound emitted.

My precise blade had cleanly removed the “lid” portion from the rest of the hive.

“I see. I never thought that magic could be used like that. It’s faster and more precise than a real blade, and it seems to cause almost no damage to the rest of the hive.” Lady Fillia looked impressed.

I’d cleared the very first stage.

“Oh, but please keep watching. I haven’t finished yet.”

I chanted another spell, producing arms of wind that lifted the hive and began

to spin it around in the air. Then I enveloped the rotating hive in a wall of wind. The centrifugal force of the motion ejected the honey outside of the hive, where it hit the wall and dripped downward.

On a basic level, it was no different from a centrifuge.

At the bottom of the circular wall was a hole for the honey to drain out, landing safely in the bucket underneath.

“I’m finished now. I believe this method produces honey with even fewer impurities.”

In this country, honey was usually harvested by slicing off the top of the hive, tilting the hive on its side, and allowing gravity to take over. But the sticky substance wouldn’t drip down cleanly and often got stuck inside the hive. The process of removing that remaining honey could contaminate it with crumbs of the hive itself.

Filtering the honey became a difficult process when there were so many impurities mixed in, and the more of them that remained, the more the taste of the honey was affected.

But my method of utilizing centrifugal force greatly reduced these impurities as a way of extracting honey without damaging the hive. This also meant the bees needed less time to produce the next batch of honey, since their hive remained intact. There were many significant merits.

Lady Fillia stared at the honey I’d harvested, seeming to understand the benefits of the method I just demonstrated.

“That’s amazing. I had no idea a method like this existed...” Her eyes moved from the honey back to me. “There are only one or two sorcerers within this country that would be capable of controlling wind spells with such subtlety. Unfortunately, I don’t think we could recreate it without a sorcerer such as yourself.”

“That might not be the case for long.”

“...Is that so?”

I nodded firmly. “I had someone from the Bureau of Magic take a look at this

method, and they advised me that it might be possible to recreate independently through the use of a specially developed crest tool.”

I had the seal of approval from the Bureau of Magic.

The fundamentals behind a centrifuge weren’t particularly complicated, and crest tools that rotated items already existed as well. The bureau told me it should be possible to create what I needed by modifying one of these existing tools.

Effective crest tools required the calculation of a magical formula and the technology to create it. On top of that, there was physical manufacturing to consider too.

Some were even made with metal coverings to prevent the spell’s effects from spreading. In other cases, the crest tools came with special pipelines to get the concentrated magic where it needed to go.

This was how the Bureau of Magic also accumulated the know-how to work with metals and other materials in addition to the purely magical aspects. They were very much a scientific institution, even if their name seemed contradictory.

Back on Earth, I’d heard that Western science originated from alchemy as well—a kind of magic in itself. Perhaps it was a natural occurrence for this world to develop scientifically as people demanded new uses of magic.

“The bureau believes that, after another year or two of research and improvements, they’ll be able to develop an effective crest tool for harvesting honey that isn’t too expensive either,” I said.

“...And they want my family to provide the funds to develop it?”

“Yes, they told me as much.”

I was glad to see she picked up on things quickly.

Be it science or magic, money was a requirement in all forms of research and development. Production of the crest tool would probably go smoothly with Lady Fillia’s investment.

The bureau would then offer her family the latest honey-harvesting crest tool

at a low price, compensating them for the investment. The more research they put into it, the greater the benefits for both parties.

The Bureau of Magic could simply go to another noble family who practiced beekeeping if Lady Fillia refused to fund their efforts. If they successfully completed the crest tool with this new investment, the quality and speed of that family's harvests would improve. It would also make Lady Fillia's family's honey less valuable.

Lady Fillia was definitely clever enough to recognize that threat.

After pondering it for a moment, she reached a conclusion. "Very well. I can't decide this on my own, but I'll discuss it with Father and try to persuade him to help."

"Thank you. I hope you receive a favorable response."

If the duke made the investment and the crest tool was developed successfully, my reputation would be bolstered as well. After all, I was the one to bring Lady Fillia and the Bureau of Magic together.

I was eager to see the fruits of the bureau's hard labor.

"I've heard that you're extremely intelligent, Queen Laetitia, but it seems those rumors were accurate."

"Thank you for saying so."

I was very pleased to hear Lady Fillia's opinion of me had improved.

Keeping my promise about my birthday gift probably helped too, but little by little, it felt like Lady Fillia was opening up to me. The optimal outcome would be to forge a friendship with her. If we couldn't make it that far, we could at least prevent unnecessary disputes if we knew each other's skills, personalities, and principles.

I was calculating our relationship in my head as I discussed methods of harvesting honey with Lady Fillia. But suddenly...

"Meow meow meow!!"

"Wheat?!"

Wheat, the Gardener Cat, burst into the courtyard. His tail was puffed up in a show of his total panic.

“Meow meow! Mraw mraw, mraw! Meow meow meow meow meow!!”

“Calm down, Wheat. I can’t understand what you’re saying.” I tried to soothe the agitated cat, urging him to explain it with gestures and hand motions instead. But then...

“Laetitia! What have you done?!”

It was Princess Ileze who flew out into the courtyard next. She pursed her lips furiously and glared down at Wheat.

“You...! Just what have you been teaching these disgusting cats?!”

“What’s all this about?” I stood in front of Wheat protectively and questioned the princess. “Gardener Cats are intelligent Mythical Beasts. They wouldn’t harm someone or cause a disturbance without a good reason.”

“Intelligent?! Is that what you call *this*?!”

“...!”

A young maid followed Princess Ileze into the courtyard.

Her black and white uniform was stained with spots of blood, and her right arm had visible claw marks.

“Only a vile cat would do such a thing! What if it leaves scars?! This maid is no commoner servant like yours! She belongs to an earl’s family in the Maldion Empire! How do you intend to make this right?!”

“A Gardener Cat would never scratch someone without warning. What did she do to him?”

“Liar! She merely walked next to him and he attacked her for no reason!!”

“Was she walking next to the Gardener Cats’ field? There’s a fence put up there, and King Glenreed has given official orders that no one should enter that field. But it sounds like she went and did it anyway.”

My voice was cold. Anger was starting to build up inside of me. She’d ignored the fence and the orders, and now she was acting like a victim. I didn’t

understand how she had the nerve.

The Gardener Cats had already been on edge too. I wasn't going to let this slide. I shot Princess Ileze a glare.

"How dare you make that face?! Are you defying me?!" she hissed.

"*You're* the one being defiant. If she entered an area that's supposed to be off-limits, it's her own fault for getting hurt," I said.

"All she did was chase after her hat when the wind blew it away! Then the Gardener Cats swarmed my maid and hurt her! They're the ones who are in the wrong!!" Princess Ileze pointed her folding fan at me, emphasizing her reckless claim. "You better be ready! You're going to pay for this, no matter how you try to get out of it!!"

Her Highness shrieked that declaration at me before promptly turning on her heel.

As I watched her strut away, looking oddly proud of herself, a realization came over me. This was no accident. It had been entirely orchestrated. She must have lured her maid into getting scratched by the Gardener Cats so that she could damage my reputation.

I knew the princess was thoughtless, but this was on a completely different level...

"I'm sorry, Wheat," I said. "You shouldn't have been dragged into a fight between humans like this."

"Mraw..."

Wheat's ears flattened against his head. I wasn't sure if that was because he'd managed to calm down a little, or because he felt as apologetic as he sounded.



I promptly bid farewell to Lady Fillia and headed to see the Gardener Cats.

Once the carriage was close enough, I could make out a group of people gathered around the fence. They appeared to be onlookers who'd caught a glimpse of the commotion.

The Gardener Cats on the other side of the fence had their fur puffed up as a warning sign directed at this crowd.

I asked the onlookers to leave and began to get the full story out of the Gardener Cats.

“Meow! Meow! Meow meow meow meow meow!”

They howled their grief at me, as if they couldn’t process their own resentment.

To summarize what they told me...

The Gardener Cats had been tending to their field like normal, when Princess Ileze’s maid essentially threw her hat into the field across the fence. When she tried to enter the field, the cats naturally gave her warnings using their cries and gestures, but she trespassed as if they weren’t even there.

Even so, the Gardener Cats were anxious about harming my reputation. They tried not to put their paws or claws on her, fearing it would cause an incident, until...

“A rock went flying at you, so you got scared and scratched the maid next to you. Do I have that right?” I asked.

“Meow!”

“This is the rock,” Wheat told me. He presented me with a round, black pebble slightly smaller than a marble.

This pebble flying straight at the Gardener Cat was enough to finally send him from “alert” to “panicked.”

“Who threw the rock, and where did they go?” I asked.

The Gardener Cats all shook their heads.

It seemed none of them had witnessed the culprit or their path of escape. Most of the cats were sent into a panic once the rock came their way, so chasing the culprit was the last thing on their minds. They said it came at them incredibly fast—so fast that, even with their excellent kinetic vision, they only had a vague sense of which direction it came from.

The Gardener Cats pointed their paws toward a grove of trees just outside of the fence. It would definitely have plenty of space for someone to hide.

Some of the cats told me that they heard a loud bang and caught a glimpse of light in the grove just before the rock went flying. It was possible someone had used a crest tool to shoot the rock out at a high speed.

Not even beastfolk should be able to throw a rock fast enough that the Gardener Cats couldn't track it.

"...I don't see anything suspicious." I searched the tree grove for evidence, but was left empty-handed.

Princess Ileze will have to drop her act if I can find proof that someone provoked the Gardener Cats...

"I suppose I'll just have to ask the Bureau of Magic for help."

There should still be traces of magical energy lingering about if someone used a spell. The bureau possessed crest tools that could detect minute amounts of energy too faint for humans to perceive. Perhaps we could find some sort of clue that way.

I went straight to the bureau to speak with Director Bodorey, but he was away on business, and since the sun was already starting to set, I decided to wait until tomorrow to begin the investigation.



"IT seems most people in the castle are taking yours and the Gardener Cats' side of things, my lady."

It was the morning after the incident in the field. Lucian came to me and reported his findings. It was like a weight had been lifted from me.

"That's good news," I said. "I don't know what I would have done if the Gardener Cats became villains to everyone."

"This is the natural result. The difference between you and Princess Ileze, both in trustworthiness and good will, is greater than the span of any ocean. She gets what she deserves." Lucian smiled as he insulted the princess with his sharp tongue. This time, I fully supported his choice of words.

Princess Ileze probably didn't expect this outcome, even if she'd brought it on herself entirely. Maybe some people would have taken her side if this had happened within the Maldion Empire. But it was an entirely different story in Wolfvarte.

This kingdom was full of beastfolk, many of them with dogs or cats they called their companion animals. No one could harm or entrap a dog or cat in this country without facing severe backlash.

As the Gardener Cats became a familiar sight within the palace territory, they also became a beloved presence to people both near and far.

Then there was Princess Ileze. She'd made plenty of trouble for people other than myself and wasn't looked at fondly by anyone around her. They couldn't outwardly reject or harass her, seeing as she came from a very powerful country, but the Wolfvartian people had long run out of good will toward her.

It seemed that, when trouble arose between Princess Ileze and the Gardener Cats, most people were more willing to take the Gardener Cats' side.

"In that case, things shouldn't get worse for us as long as we don't make any mistakes..."

However, I was still eager to find the culprit who threw the rock at the Gardener Cats. If I could prove they had connections to Princess Ileze, I could eliminate the last of her credibility and probably ward off any future attempts at harassing me.

I'll find the culprit and force them to apologize to the Gardener Cats.

With that newfound resolve, I headed to the front door when I heard nimble footsteps darting toward me from behind.

"Peep peep!" It was Tweety, the Cuddle Bird. He puffed up his cream-yellow feathers and nuzzled up against me. "Pip! Pip! Peep peep peep peep!"

"Out of the way, furball. Lady Laetitia is trying to leave." Lucian tried to peel him away, but Tweety refused to budge.

Tweety physically resembled an adorable baby bird, only he was taller than me and rather heavy. He dug his feet into the ground to resist Lucian's pulling.

“You leave me no choice. Won’t you join us, Tweety?” I invited.

“Peep!”

Tweety let out a happy chirp and cuddled up to me with even more force.
He’s so heavy...

“Are you *sure* you want to take this furball with us?” Lucian asked.

“It shouldn’t be an issue. The people at the Bureau of Magic raised him, after all. Besides, Tweety’s been lonely now that the Gardener Cats don’t play with him as much as they used to.”

Tweety and the Gardener Cats were fellow furry residents of my villa. They used to get along quite well. However, ever since the Gardener Cats started to focus so intensely on their work, they no longer had the time or energy to play with Tweety.

Tweety consumed magical energy as his main source of food, so playing with the Gardener Cats, themselves possessing that energy, was like having a little snack. His stomach and his heart both seemed to miss them now that they were absent.

Our first stop was the Gardener Cats’ second field. We left Tweety in the carriage so we wouldn’t startle the cats, then I went up to them to get their report about recent events.

“I see. So there hasn’t been anything strange since we left yesterday?” I asked.

Wheat nodded back at me. That was a relief. But then Wheat shared something peculiar.

“What?! Poison?!”

“Meow meow!”

He stuck out his claws, revealing some sort of shimmering liquid dripping from them. Apparently, this type of poison wasn’t meant to kill, but to put someone to sleep without causing any harm. The Gardener Cats were expert farmers and knew how to extract the drug from the plants they grew. They saw it as a convenient sleeping drug.

Wheat also explained that they would be using it as a self-defense measure. They were particularly on edge after yesterday's incident.

I warned them not to use too much of it and told them to flee and find me if they were up against someone too dangerous. That was when Orth arrived from the Bureau of Magic.

"I'm not getting any reaction on this side either."

"I see..."

Orth and I used detection crest tools to survey the area, but sadly, there were no traces of anyone using a spell.

"...Does that confirm that they had to have used a crest tool to shoot the rock?" I asked.

"That's the only explanation I can think of. A high-efficiency crest tool won't lose much energy from its magic stone, so it wouldn't show with our detectors." He was nodding his head, but the expression on his face told me he still wasn't satisfied. "However, the tool would really have to be the best of the best to shoot a rock at that speed without leaving any trace of magical energy. It would be a large device too. Even if they were really rattled, I don't see how the Gardener Cats wouldn't have noticed someone carrying that thing."

Orth was exactly right.

The two of us were putting our heads together when the driver of my carriage ran up to me.

"Queen Laetitia, please return home at once. His Majesty has summoned you."



KING *Glenreed is so busy. I can't believe he came all the way out to my villa.*

I'd assumed it was about yesterday's incident with Princess Ileze, but I was wrong. His Majesty had received intelligence from one of his spies. It was a blueprint for a new kind of crest tool weapon from the Ringrard Empire.

"...Is this something I, a temporary queen from a foreign country, should participate in?" I asked.

This was clearly classified information and would influence this country's military. While I had no intention of using it for personal benefit, it was a great responsibility just to know about it.

"I need *your* help specifically. I summoned Director Bodorey from the Bureau of Magic yesterday, where he told me you carry unique knowledge and concepts relating to the development of crest tools. Those talents of yours are a necessity right now. We have to analyze Ringrard's military actions as soon as humanly possible." King Glenreed's eyes were locked on mine.

Faced with the sheer earnestness I saw in them, I decided to answer him honestly as well.

"...I understand. I'm not a specialist and may not be able to provide the help you need, but I'll do everything I can to analyze the blueprints."

Once I said that, King Glenreed handed me the classified documents.

"It can't be..."

I couldn't stop myself from gulping quietly.



ONE month had passed since King Glenreed put me in charge of analyzing and researching the Ringrard Empire's new weaponized crest tool.

Time flew by unimaginably fast when the Bureau of Magic and I were putting our heads together for research.

Today, I was going to see King Glenreed at the palace for the first time in a month.

"I'm sorry to bother you while you're busy, but there's something we need to discuss." He'd summoned me with that message.

Our servants waited outside, as this drawing room was to become a place of absolute secrecy. We were left there to speak alone.

"Thank you for coming, Laetitia," he said. "Director Bodorey has had kind things to say about you. He told me your input has helped them make great strides in their research."

“No, I’m not deserving of such praise.”

I wasn’t merely being humble. It was the utter truth I believed. The majority of my contributions came from my past life knowledge. But most of all...

The truth was that I felt reluctant to research weapons, even if I was doing it for the good of the country. The experience proved that I was much more cut out for developing things like recipes and cooking utensils.

“You said there was something important to discuss,” I began. “Would this be about the Ringrard Empire?”

“No, although they’re not entirely unrelated...”

He was hesitant to speak further—an unusual sight from the king. It wasn’t like King Glenreed to bring me here for an important subject, only to be lost for words when it came time to speak.

“If it’s not about Ringrard, it must be about Princess Ileze. Is that right?”

I’d been keeping one eye on Princess Ileze as I spent the past month working alongside the Bureau of Magic. Fortunately, she never tried to harm the Gardener Cats again, but she proved to be as much of a nuisance as ever.

“...Yes, you’re right. The princess is involved too,” he confirmed.

“Did Her Highness do something else?”

“She asked me to make her this country’s next queen.”

“What?” I completely froze for a full second. It was the last thing I expected to hear. “...I thought Princess Ileze was going to support Lady Fillia or Lady Natalie so that they would owe her favors, and that was why she was trying to diminish my influence in the country...”

“That was probably her plan at first.” King Glenreed nodded. “But the situation in the Maldion Empire has changed drastically. A war between them and Ringrard could break out at any moment, so they’re desperate to get Wolfvarte on their side. Ileze wants to become our queen and form an alliance between our countries, even if it means doing it by force.”

“.....”

I was starting to get a clearer picture.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest louder than usual.

“You don’t want to make Princess Ileze your queen, therefore you’re eager to choose my replacement as soon as possible so that she won’t have any chance to scheme her way in. Do I understand correctly?”

Out of nowhere, my time as the figurehead queen was coming to an end. Desperately, I tried to soothe my unsettled heart. I set my mind to the task of working out the optimal solution—one that would be for the good of this country.

Lady Natalie didn’t trust her own family, and Lady Kate didn’t want to be the queen at all. I still had much to learn about Lady Fillia, but considering the circumstances of her family, she would be a difficult choice.

“Are you going to choose Lady I-Liena?” I tried my best not to let my voice tremble, revealing the answer I was led to.

But King Glenreed didn’t react. It seemed I was mistaken.

He kept his eyes on me, and then he slowly parted his lips. “...It’s you.”

“...Pardon?”

“I want you to be my queen for the rest of my reign.”

My brain was incapable of processing those words.

Me? The queen? For the rest of his reign?

I could comprehend the words, but not what they really meant.

“What are you talking about...?” I asked, my mouth dry.

“I meant what I said. Laetitia, I want you to be my official queen, not just the two-year-long placeholder.”

“But...I... I’m not from this country. The official queen has always been selected from the noblewomen hailing from within Wolfvarte...”

“These are extraordinary times. The Ringrard Empire is expanding at a rate never seen before, and tensions are rising all across the continent. I won’t be able to protect my country if I rely on traditions.”

“But...”

“I’ve already spoken to the other four candidates. Natalie and Kate gave you their blessings, and I-Liena said you’d be a suitable queen. Fillia didn’t say anything definitive, but she didn’t reject you either.”

“.....”

I was happy to learn that the others wanted me to be the official queen. Yet my thoughts were still unable to catch up to my emotions.

“It’s not just the candidates either,” he continued. “The people who live in the palace, the residents of the royal capital, both human and beastfolk, they all know how hard you’ve worked for the sake of this kingdom. Even the poor reputation you first came here with, due to how your prior engagement ended, has been erased thanks to your efforts in your homeland. The only thing that can stop this is your own will.”

“My will...”

I looked to the ground and placed my hands on my chest. Then I mentally sorted out the factors in this decision—emotions, calculations, desires, duties, and obligations.

I loved this country.

It was full of kind people, delicious food, and fluffy friends.

I wanted to do whatever I could to ensure everyone could continue their peaceful lives. And yet...

“.....”

I was only going to be a figurehead queen for two years. I’d drawn that line in my head throughout my time here. I loved Wolfvarte and its king, but those reasons alone didn’t feel like enough to justify becoming the queen.

“I want you.”

“...?!”

His Majesty’s sudden confession made both my mind and heart start to race.

“Wha...?!”

“Your kindness, your passion for food, your proud demeanor, that happy smile you get on your face when you interact with the Wolfvartian people. They’re all so rare and so radiant. I have faith that you can light a path to greatness for this country.”

When he finished speaking...

King Glenreed stretched his slender fingers out toward me.



“...I...”

I reached out as well, but my hand was trembling too much to take his.

That was when King Glenreed got a pained, sorrowful look in his eyes.

“...I know I’m asking something awful of you. Here I’ve pressured you to take my hand for the good of this country and its people, all while I know you have a man in your homeland that your heart yearns for.”

“...Uh?” I accidentally let out a very inelegant response to His Majesty’s words.

A man in my homeland I yearn for? I couldn’t imagine who he was talking about.

“You don’t need to hide it anymore. I already know. His name is Jiro, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?!”

What did he just say?! Who exactly does he think Jiro is?!

“N-No!! Jiro is—”

“There’s no need to lie. Your feelings for Jiro are—”

“Jiro is a dog! An adorable Shiba Inu!! He’s not a person!!” I shouted with all my might.

“...He’s a what?” King Glenreed seemed to completely freeze up. “But...you’re always calling his name so longingly...”

“You’ve misunderstood! Those are normal emotions toward my beloved dog!!” I could hardly believe how badly he’d confused things.

The king stiffly wrenched his lips apart to speak. “...No, wait a minute. I had you and your family investigated before you came here to be my queen, but they never came across any dog named Jiro.”

“That’s because...”

It was only natural. I’d loved that dog in my past life, before I reincarnated into this world. As I tried to figure out how to explain this, I realized something.

Keeping secrets is wrong.

That was one of the reasons I'd hesitated to take King Glenreed's hand. All this time, I'd never once opened up to anyone about my past life. I didn't want to upset people, nor did I think they'd believe me in the first place.

While I didn't think that was the wrong decision, if I wanted to keep walking the same path in life as King Glenreed...

I shouldn't keep such a big secret from him. That was the honest opinion I arrived at.

"...I don't know if you'll believe me..." My voice was shaking. *I'm so scared. I don't want to do this.*

I didn't think King Glenreed would refute me before I gave my explanation...

But I was still so terrified when I imagined him rejecting me.

"Laetitia?"

I mustered up whatever courage I could, and then I revealed my secret to him. "Jiro was the name of my pet dog, one I had in Japan long before I was born."

"Before you were born? 'In Japan'...?"

"Yes. That was my past life." I finally brought my eyes back up to look at King Glenreed. "You might not believe me, but I have memories of a life I lived before this one."

It was the greatest confession of my life. His answer came in the form of...

"?!"

A glint of light came out of nowhere.

And then...

"I see. So you're someone who needs to die."

King Glenreed's blade was pointed straight at my exposed neck.

"...!"

I gulped.

The blade was real. It wasn't a prop.

King Glenreed was pointing his glinting, deadly sword at me.

“What...?”

I didn’t understand what was going on. Rational thoughts weren’t connecting in my head. All I could do, with my throat now dry as a bone, was call out his name.

“King Glenreed? Why...?”

He heard my hoarse cry, and the corners of his lips curled upwards.

No. Something else is going on. I can sense it.

This wasn’t King Glenreed at all.

“What...*are* you...?” I asked.

“‘What,’ you ask? Haha! You have sharp instincts.”

The thing taking the form of King Glenreed spoke to me. His smile was gentle, but frigid to its very core. This was the exact opposite of the King Glenreed I knew—a cold exterior hiding a warm heart underneath.

“My name is Silverio. Would it be easier to introduce myself as this country’s very first king?”

“Silverio...” I repeated the name, completely dumbfounded.

That was the name of the kingdom’s founder—long before Wolfvarte had taken its present-day form.

“What is someone who died ages ago doing here? Where’s King Glenreed?” I asked.

“How rude. Isn’t it obvious? I’m no different than you.”

My heart skipped a beat. My bones creaked. I squeezed my fists tight.

Silverio flashed me an elegant, inhuman smile. “I reincarnated. I have the same soul as King Glenreed, but from many generations ago.”

“You’re King Glenreed’s past life...?”

“Wrong. His past, past, past life, or even further back. I was the very first incarnation of my soul in this world.”

“Incarnation...”

The word had an inhuman sound to it. I shuddered. That bad feeling inside of me only got worse.

“Your hunch is correct. ...All right, I think it’s time I fulfill my role.”

Fwish! I heard the sound of the blade cutting through air.

He swung the sword down and—

“Ngh...!”

There was no pain. Still holding the sword above me, Silverio—no, this was King Glenreed. His face was contorted in agony.

“King Glenreed?!”

“Nnngh, damn it...! Get away from me!!” He screamed at me, his entire body shaking.

I could practically see Silverio—his face so similar to King Glenreed’s—looming over the king’s body.

I froze. I couldn’t just leave King Glenreed behind and run away. But then...

“Enough. It’s not your time yet.”

“Argh!!”

Lord Featherio appeared.

I didn’t know where he’d come from, but he placed his hand on King Glenreed’s body and a faint glimmer of light appeared. The light grew stronger before disappearing, revealing Lord Featherio was now holding an elegant sword he didn’t have before.

“Lord Featherio! What are you doing...?!” I shouted as I steadied King Glenreed on his feet.

It was almost as if he couldn’t comprehend the situation either.

Lord Featherio looked at the sword, then at us. He nodded.

“I see. I’ll explain. I’m not good at this, so I will switch. ...I’m sure you’re confused as well, but try to calm down and listen to everything I tell you, okay?”

“Huh? Lord Featherio? I didn’t know you could talk like that...”

I was completely bewildered by this new, fluent way of speaking.

“I’ll explain that too, so just listen for now. It all started six hundred years ago...”



“**THE Great Darkness.**” That was the name of the era six hundred years ago.

The western continent was home to more than a hundred countries, all constantly at war with each other. Even the greatest emperors were succeeded by fools who tyrannized their country’s people.

The wisest leaders were useless when their followers proved witless.

Any brilliant king was sure to die on the battlefield at a young age.

Finally, in an era of so much suffering, a manifestation of the gods came forth.

They heard the wails of the people, answered their prayers, and incarnated in the forms desired of them.

Lion, snake, wolf, deer, bird, fox, dragon, tiger.

The gods had become humans with the traits of sacred beasts. They scattered across the world, bound small countries together, and created powerful kingdoms. They were beautiful people with strong bodies, clever minds, and the mysterious ability to control the forces of nature.

These incarnated gods possessed every trait one could seek from a king, so they were quick to take thrones, stabilize their countries, and put an end to the Great Darkness. They unified their kingdoms and amassed power, eliminating anyone inconvenient in the process, such as organized religions that could siphon the kings’ power for themselves.

If they were human kings, it probably would have stopped there. They brought an end to the wars and stabilized their countries. But these were gods. They wanted their people to live in peace for generations to come, so that another Great Darkness would never fall over them.

The gods had children and reincarnated into their own bloodlines over and

over again to rule their countries. One of the eight gods, the sacred wolf, was the first king of the Wolfvarte royal family—the progenitor of today's bloodline.

In other words, those with the power of ancestral reversion had been reborn with the souls of the first-generation kings.

The people with these powers didn't realize it themselves, but should their countries end up on the decline, the first-generation king would take control of their body and steer them back on the right path, turning them into wise leaders.

It is us, the Heaven-Wing clan who dwell in these countries, who assist them.

Our clan was created by the gods themselves. Deep within ourselves, in the recesses of our hearts, we are all connected by an ocean of unconsciousness. With this, we may live hundreds of years without forgetting our duties.

Our orders are to judge rulers, and should they prove incompetent, we will play the "Wing Chord" that started it all.

The Wing Chord has dramatic effects, even when played only once. If it reaches someone with ancestral reversion, the god will take over that person's body and become the king. If no one affected by the Wing Chord has that power, the god will take the body of their most direct descendent and use it to become the king.

This Wing Chord will also affect every member of the royal bloodline, as well as the nobles whose families once bred with royal blood.

Even outstanding rulers can't function when their vassals are fools. History before the Great Darkness proves this.

That is why the Wing Chord transforms even nobles through a process called the Renewal.

These people undergoing their renewals will have their priorities altered. Suddenly, they will find the greatest joys in life to be the acts of following their ruler's orders and leading the country into prosperity. All other desires are secondary to them.

The more royal blood a person has in their veins, the more they are affected

by the Renewal. Even the most selfish of direct royalty will turn to honest, hardworking souls after their Renewal.

The king returns after many generations of reincarnation. The nobles are renewed into loyal vassals. The country's people are governed fairly so that they may lead happy lives.

It's a fairy tale that's been repeated in many countries, including this one, for six hundred years—a fairy tale of endless blessings bestowed by the gods.



“THERE you have it. The person talking to you now is both Featherio and not Featherio, as one person preserved in the Heaven-Wing clan's ocean of unconsciousness. Think of it as Featherio calling up someone from that ocean who's good at speaking to explain it to you. Our clan members are connected in the depths of our hearts and can communicate without speech, so many don't develop good speaking skills. I hope that doesn't bother you. ...Do you have any questions about anything I've explained to you?”

“...Um...”

I had a *lot* of questions. But I couldn't say that outright, so I glanced at King Glenreed instead.

“.....”

His face was pale and he'd gone totally silent.

I gently placed my hands around his clenched fist.

“Please calm down, Your Majesty. You're digging your nails into your skin.”

“...Right, I'm sorry. Are you all right? You must have been terrified when Silverio took over my body.”

“I'm all right. Your nose should be able to tell that that's the truth.”

“...So it seems. You're very strong, Laetitia.”

“No, I'm just shameless.”

After everything that happened, my emotions had actually come around and were stable again. I'd been asked to become the official queen, had a sword

pointed at my neck, taken in six hundred years of secret history, and was on the verge of my brain short-circuiting.

“Um, may I ask a question?” I said.

“Yes. What is it?”

“What is your sword for?”

Lord Featherio was seated on the sofa with his long sword lying next to him. I’d been too overwhelmed to notice it until now, but it was so much more beautiful and ornately decorated than King Glenreed’s personal sword.

“Ah, allow me to explain this one.”

“The sword?! It’s talking?!” I jumped up to my feet.

The sword had spoken. Not only that, but the voice was none other than that of Silverio—the man who just tried to kill me.

King Glenreed was on full alert toward the sword. I ran and hid behind him.

“Don’t treat me like a monster. That hurts, you know. Is this better?”

A glint of light poured out of the sword and transformed into a transparent version of Silverio. He had silver hair and greenish-blue eyes. Though his face strongly resembled King Glenreed, his soft, chilly expression was something unique to him.

“This is a sacred sword. It’s part of my power that has taken a form, but it’s usually stored inside the body of the person with ancestral reversion powers. This man from the Heaven-Wing clan just pulled it out of Glenreed’s body, taking me with it.”

“...Didn’t you say these two shared the same soul? How are they able to exist separately like this?” I asked.

“My soul is a special one, unlike that of any human. We can’t be separated too far apart, but we can still both talk at this range.”

“I see...”

This was like a supernatural phenomenon. I was starting to feel like there was no comprehending it at all. I let out a big sigh. Then I looked toward Lord

Featherio...or rather, the person who was borrowing Lord Featherio's mouth.

"Are you allowed to oppose Silverio's will like you did, Lord Featherio? Wasn't your clan made by gods like him?" I asked.

"It's not a problem. We were granted our role by King Silverio, but we do not act as his servants. We have yet to play the Wing Chord in this country. However, King Silverio tried to forcibly take over King Glenreed's body, which sent out waves that even I could feel from afar. I came here because I believe King Glenreed, not King Silverio, should have the use of his body at this time. I'm glad I stopped him before things turned deadly."

Is that really how it works?

I still wasn't quite grasping everything, but it was a relief to know Lord Featherio wasn't an ally of Silverio.

"But you're not disturbed at all, are you?"

Silverio had turned to look at me with a grin. It was a smile that didn't reach his eyes. Even though he looked so much like King Glenreed, the impression he left on me couldn't have been more different.

"Nobles usually get furious or terrified when they learn about this Renewal process. Do you understand? The Heaven-Wing clan dwelling in Elltoria have played their Wing Chord and carried out the Renewal many times already."

"...So it really is the same in my homeland, isn't it?"

I'd had a bad feeling about this ever since Lord Featherio mentioned the gods taking the form of animals.

If the eight gods became the rulers of eight countries, where they created Heaven-Wing clans in all of them...

"Would the Heaven-Wing clan have played the Wing Chord this winter if the coup d'état in my homeland was successful?"

"Most likely, yes."

The clan member in Lord Featherio's body nodded.

"There are a few conditions under which the Wing Chord is played. The

country might lose a large amount of territory in a short timespan or suffer a loss of many of its people. It can even be played in times that the royal family devolves into a power struggle and ceases to function.”

“...So we were in real danger...” I sighed. “This Renewal is essentially a form of brainwashing, yes? You say you only change the order of their priorities, but to me, that’s no different than turning them into a different person.”

What things did they cherish? What did they wish for in this world?

Perhaps it was dramatic, but those questions were essentially what made up a person’s true nature. It was what they lived for.

Just imagining those desires being rewritten was a dreadful thing.

“It may seem that way to nobles and royalty such as yourselves, since you’re candidates for this Renewal.” Silverio squinted his eyes slightly. “But to the many people of a country, the Renewal comes as an unmistakable salvation. Statesmen who wouldn’t be able to run a country without the Renewal are all reborn as loyal subjects who serve without selfishness. What better turn of fortune could there be? You nobles won’t be able to maintain a living if the country falls into ruin. Instead, the country is rebuilt before it can completely devolve. It’s not a bad deal for your kind, is it?”

“.....”

Silverio was correct, in a way.

If the Renewal wasn’t carried out unless the country faced a crisis, you could say that all Renewals were actually the fault of the nobles, who’d failed to run the country adequately and were left to pay the price.

Indeed, it was an act of salvation to be able to reconstruct the country while we settled that debt. But something stuck out to me—something I just couldn’t accept.

“The Flute Bees...”

Once the words were out of my mouth, it clicked.

The nobles worked diligently and loyally, serving their countries at the king’s orders, all while undergoing these “Renewals.”

It was a way of life that greatly resembled that of the Flute Bees—creatures who had no choice but to follow the sound of the flute.

They were weak because they could only move as a group, controlled by the will of a single person. It was all over if that person led them down the wrong path.

These renewal orders were being given by beings on the same level as gods, so perhaps it wasn't a process that could result in any mistakes...

Still, I couldn't rid myself of that uneasy feeling.

But it wasn't something with a simple answer, so I decided to stop thinking about it for the time being. My homeland had evaded the Wing Chord, but I wanted to know more about the other countries.

"Is the Maldion Empire the country most likely to experience the next Wing Chord?" I asked.

"Probably." Silverio nodded. "Corruption is rampant throughout the empire's high society. The royal family is no better. I don't think they'd survive an invasion of the Ringrard Empire on their own."

When Silverio finished saying that, King Glenreed shot him a glare.

"I agree that the Maldion Empire is in danger, but things are different here. Wolfvarte is a peaceful place, even if there are a few lingering problems that need resolving. So how dare you steal my body and try to hurt Laetitia, of all people?" The hostility in King Glenreed's voice was deadly. It pierced my skin like it was out for blood. "You said it was your role, as a god, to preserve this country. What does Laetitia have to do with that? Killing her would have the opposite effect."

"Because she said she had memories of her past life." Silverio moved his eyes toward me. Those icy, greenish-blue eyes chilled me to my core. "One soul with memories of two lives. If she doesn't have a special soul like mine, her egos will become blended and she'll experience a collapse of the self."

"Collapse of the self..." I stared at my own palms. I'd never had any symptoms of it, but suddenly, I was very apprehensive. "...How long does it usually take for symptoms to occur after regaining those memories?"

“It can happen the same day, at the earliest. Usually within a month at the latest. The better cases end with the person losing their mind, but if it’s really bad, you could wipe out an entire town.”

“What...?”

Something wasn’t right. I’d regained my past life memories over a year ago now. Besides, what on earth could he mean by wiping out a town?

“Why would a town be destroyed from regaining past life memories?” I asked.

“Because the soul gets overloaded and goes on a rampage. The soul is the source of magical energy, so if it gets out of control, it will lead to tragedies far greater than anything a spell could ever produce.”

“.....”

My magical energy had increased sharply since I regained my past life memories. It wasn’t out of control, but maybe it was still capable of causing harm someday.

I was concerned, but then I noticed Silverio watching me closely.

“You don’t know anything about curses, do you?”

“Curses...?”

“It’s a system of magic that meddles with the soul itself. One can curse the soul of anyone whose name they know, killing them or causing any manner of trouble. It’s why there were so many casualties during the Great Darkness. We believed we’d eradicated such curses, and they’re not supposed to exist in present times.”

Of course I didn’t know any of that.

I shook my head while Silverio’s eyes remained fixed on me.

“But I smell a curse lingering on your soul. You must have met a black magic practitioner at some point. That’s how you reincarnated into this world with your past life memories intact, I’d assume.”

Silverio stretched his hand out toward me.

King Glenreed instantly hid me behind him, but those transparent fingers

didn't stop.

“Our duty is to kill those with past life memories as soon as we find them. Your brain will deteriorate sooner or later, so it's an act of mercy to kill you before you can hurt anyone else, wouldn't you say?”

“How dare you...?!” King Glenreed unleashed his anger at him.

Silverio stroked my chin with those transparent fingers. His smile was like ice.



“How has your ego survived, even with all those memories in your head? What kind of life did you live before this one?”

It was something I couldn't answer.

All I could do was remain silent.

“Too bad. This could have gone quicker if you had some clue in mind. It exhausts me to stay in this form for too long, so I'll let you live for today.”

Silverio practically purred the word “goodnight” before closing his eyes. The outlines of his body faded away until he was absorbed back into King Glenreed's body, leaving not the slightest trace behind.

“...Do you feel any different, King Glenreed?” I asked.

“...It's like something is holed up deep inside of me.” He stared at his hands, practically spitting the words with venom. “It's infuriating. How could I turn my sword on *you* of all people...?”

“Your Majesty?!”

He put his hand to his brow. Once he started to slump over, I grabbed him and brought him down gently to the sofa.

“Why...am I...so drowsy...?”

“Backlash from Silverio leaving so fast.” Lord Featherio was the one to answer him. He stared down at us. His normal, authentic way of speaking had returned. “You'll recover once you sleep. Probably.”

“Probably...”

That wasn't reassuring. But I helped King Glenreed lie down, fixing his clothes to make sure they wouldn't wrinkle.

Moving my hands with a purpose allowed me to finally feel a bit less helpless. Once I confirmed King Glenreed was asleep, I looked up at Lord Featherio.

“Thank you, Lord Featherio. Your support has been a great help throughout everything.”

Silverio would have killed me if Lord Featherio hadn't forced his way into the drawing room through the large window. I owed him my life.

“Repayment for your food. I would be sad if I couldn’t eat your cooking anymore.”

When he said that, he brought the tips of his white wings down to my head. The feathers tickled my scalp. I found myself giggling.

“Wh-What are you doing...?”

“I heard this helps humans when they’re upset.”

He draped his white wings across my head, just barely touching me. It seemed he was trying to stroke my hair without using his hands.

“Hehe! Thank you.”

His straightforward, awkward expression of kindness sunk into me deeply. It felt like my tired heart had found a bit of relief. I thanked Lord Featherio and centered my thoughts around what was to come next.

Chapter 4: The Emperor and the New Weapon

“**PRINCESS** Ileze wants to visit me to apologize for the incident with the Gardener Cats?” I furrowed my brow at the letter Lucian brought me.

A week had passed since Silverio tried to kill me. I’d spent that time dealing with the creeping anxiety that came with everything I learned, but to the rest of the world, I was still living my normal life.

The mysteries of reincarnation, collapse of the ego, black magic...

I was curious about all of these things, but couldn’t find anyone who would be a reliable source of information. Silverio had remained inside of King Glenreed ever since, and even if we *were* able to speak again, I highly doubted he would provide me with anything of value.

All I could do for the time being was fulfill my role as the figurehead queen.

My ego had yet to collapse, but I had no idea what the future would hold. That was why I left the matter of becoming the official queen up in the air for now.

“I wonder if Her Highness is plotting something again...” I muttered.

Frankly, this whole affair was an annoyance, but rejecting her offer to apologize would only make things worse. With a sigh, I began to pen a response to Princess Ileze.



PRINCESS Ileze arrived at my villa on the appointed date. She said she’d come to apologize, but she did a poor job of hiding the contempt for me in her eyes.

I kept my guard up, even more certain now that she was plotting something. As I conversed with her over tea...

“Huh...?”

Prickle!

Something rippled through my body for the briefest instant. I accidentally brought my cup down hard against the table. As I struggled to keep a straight face in the midst of such a sensation, I heard an even louder thud.

“Princess Ileze...?!”

Princess Ileze had collapsed onto the table across from me. Her long hair fanned out over the top of it, soaking up the spilled tea. I called out to her, but she was unresponsive.

Poison.

The dreadful word flashed in my mind. I looked around to take in the situation, trying not to lose my composure.

Princess Ileze wasn't the only one in trouble.

The two maids waiting behind her had collapsed to the ground as well.

Help came and tended to the women, but they didn't respond. They had pulses and were breathing, at least, but none of the three showed any signs of rousing.

We called a doctor next, contacted Princess Ileze's Wolfvartian residence... and in the flurry of activity, before long, evening had come without any change in the situation.

Princess Ileze had come to my villa in a party of four. Three of them had collapsed, excluding one of her maids. This completely unexpected outcome was making my head hurt.

“It really looks like I poisoned them...” I groaned.

I wasn't the culprit, of course, but it was a terrible set of circumstances.

Everyone knew Princess Ileze and I were at odds over the incident in the Gardener Cats' field. To an outsider, it would look like I poisoned her in an act of revenge.

“And what was that strange sensation right before she collapsed...?”

Did it have something to do with her losing consciousness?

Still puzzled, I began to search for a method of proving my innocence.



MY question would be answered the next day. It was delivered by King Glenreed himself.

“Princess Ileze was cursed?” I repeated.

“That’s right. I’m certain of it. I smelled it when I went and visited her.”

A curse.

It was something I didn’t even know existed until one week ago. Now it was already rearing its ugly head in my life.

I returned my focus to King Glenreed and looked at him carefully. “You’re absolutely certain you smelled a curse on her?”

“Yes. ...Part of it was the same scent that you have. How could I ever mistake it?”

It seemed a bit hard for him to say, but King Glenreed was resolute.

Some part of my soul carried the lingering scent from a curse, though I didn’t know where it had come from. As dreadful as it was to think about, it proved useful in this instance.

“Do you believe you can identify the culprit?” I asked. “Anyone with the scent of a curse on their soul would be suspicious.”

I didn’t want to think that anyone in this country was practicing black magic. But optimism wasn’t going to help me now that I’d been dragged into this.

“I can’t find anyone in the castle with that scent right now,” he said. “I went through the room where Princess Ileze was staying too, but there was nothing helpful there.”

“Not even poison, or something like it?”

“Unfortunately not. All I found were her personal items, dresses, accessories, some sweets, and a jar of honey Fillia must have given her. I had the sweets and honey tested for poison to be safe, but they were completely normal, as they looked and tasted.”

“I see...”

There was no evidence and no leads on a culprit. I didn't know how curses worked in the first place, so there was little I could do about that, but it was irritating to know that we were so powerless.

I thought of Silverio, who probably knew more about curses, but I dismissed the idea of calling on him. His attitude when I previously met him made me think he wasn't eager to help me. Not to mention, I was scared of the likely outcome that he'd take over King Glenreed's body again.

"Silverio is still slumbering inside me. I asked him about curses, but he appears to be ignoring me. I'm sure he knows things, he just refuses to help." The king had a sour look on his face.

It sounded like Silverio wasn't someone we could rely on after all.

"Could we ask for Lord Featherio's help?" I asked.

"Probably not. He might know something about curses, but the Heaven-Wing clan doesn't interfere with the government. They only observe the royal family, nobles, and the overall political state of affairs until they determine it's time to play the Wing Chord. Their role is to neither antagonize nor to back any party. Maybe they can eat food at your villa without issue, but they won't give you outright support. I doubt they *can*."

"You're right..."

Unfortunately, it seemed we couldn't go to Lord Featherio for help either. He already saved me from death once, so it was logical that he might not be able to interfere any further than that.

We knew a curse was involved in this incident. But still, we were at a dead end.

All I could do was watch King Glenreed leave as he returned to his work.



BAD things always happen all at once. A few days after Princess Ileze collapsed, a shocking report arrived at my villa.

"The Maldion Empire has fallen...?"

My eyes went wide. I could barely believe my ears.

It was so soon. Far too soon.

They were defeated in hardly any time at all.

I'd heard the top officials in the Maldion Empire were the unreliable types, but still, even with corruption, it was the biggest country on the continent. Based on power alone, they should have been stronger and more advanced than even the Ringrard Empire.

How could they be overthrown in less than a month since the start of the war? It was completely unthinkable.

"The information came straight here by horse, but it's from a reliable source." King Glenreed was grimacing.

Wolfvarte certainly wasn't on good terms with the Maldion Empire, but with a country of their size collapsing, it made the Ringrard Empire a much greater threat.

We put our heads together to decide what to do next. Just then, a shadow fell over my head. I looked up at the overcast sky to see Lord Featherio gliding through the air.

"Lord Featherio? Why are you here?" I asked.

He had an unusually grim look on his face.

He's not supposed to interfere with political matters. I wonder what's wrong?

He landed on the ground, folded his wings, and allowed the eloquent speaker to take over. "The Maldion Empire fell because of a curse."

"A curse?" I repeated.

There it was again. I was startled by the mention of that unexpected word. But I waited for what else he had to say.

"Yes. Their Heaven-Wing clan members have contacted us. It seems that someone abused the Wing Chord."

Abused the Wing Chord?

Those words gave me a very bad feeling.

"As the Maldion Empire's royal family began trying to charge the front lines,

the Heaven-Wing clan chased after them to use the Wing Chord. They must have thought that renewing the royal family would be a better outcome than letting the country die out.”

“That’s...”

I understood why they felt that way.

The Maldion Empire’s government had been festering with corruption for years. There was talk about how not a single person with power or influence in their country was an upstanding person. This state of affairs would make the Wing Chord a logical outcome at any given time.

Then they went to war with the powerful Ringrard Empire.

Where there is life, there is hope. Where there is a country, there are royals and nobles.

Perhaps, in desperation, they’d sought salvation in the form of the Wing Chord.

“My fellow Heaven-Wing clan members saw it as an acceptable time to play the Wing Chord...but that was the trap. Playing the Wing Chord and performing the Renewal creates a mental connection between the renewed souls and that resurrected, first-generation king. The renewed don’t perceive it, but their souls become tied to the others deep inside of them, just like how the Heaven-Wing clan are connected.”

They connected to others through their subconscious and used it to their benefit.

This was considered a fiction of the occult in my past life, but it appeared to genuinely exist in this world.

“I see... So that’s why all renewed souls suddenly see service to their king and their country as their highest priority,” I said. If they wanted to brainwash...or rather, renew people, they would first need to form a mental connection. This part seemed logical to me. “...But why was that a trap? If the renewed souls become much more loyal and willing to obey commands, wouldn’t the tide of the war turn in their favor?”

The now-selfless nobles would do anything for their country's victory, even if it meant obeying orders to become sacrificial pawns. It was a cruel arrangement, but incredibly useful to the military.

Playing the Wing Chord in their country, where no one had the power of ancestral reversion, meant the most direct ancestor of the original king would have his soul—the god—take over that body and begin to reign over the country wisely.

Then the loyal nobles would be led by this reincarnated king. Even though the war had been going poorly, as the most powerful country on the continent, there was still no way they should have been defeated so quickly...

But once I got that far in my analysis, a chill ran down my spine.

There was a danger in this system of leadership after the Renewal. I understood how, when operating strictly at the orders of one single leader, a large group could actually be very weak.

"...Connecting the renewed royals and nobles backfired?" I deduced.

"Correct. Curses work on both the souls and the minds. Normally, only one person is cursed. But what do you think happens to that cursed person when their Renewal connects their mind to those of many other humans?"

"...Total destruction."

Lord Featherio nodded at my response.

...I couldn't help but think of it like a computer virus. The virus was sent through a device's connections to other devices, allowing it to cause harm wherever it ended up. The curse must have used the connections forged by the Renewal to infect a great number of people.

"It seems that the more influence the reborn person holds, or in other words, the people in the Maldion Empire with the most royal blood, are suffering the most damage from this curse. Direct members of the royal family have fallen unconscious. High-ranking nobles either fell unconscious or became ill. From what I've heard, none of them are functioning at all."

"So if fighting broke out in that state, they'd be easily defeated, with no one

left to lead them,” I concluded.

That was the cause of their country’s ruin.

There was little doubt in my mind—someone within the Ringrard Empire, probably a high-ranking person in their government, had cast this curse. They were already a troublesome country, but this was beyond the pale. It was very possible I’d already been roped into this curse too, after all.

“...Does that mean Princess Ileze’s collapse was because of the same curse?” I guessed.

“Most likely, yes,” Lord Featherio said. “She’s a direct descendent of the royal family, after all. Physical distance means nothing when souls are connected, so there was no escaping the curse’s effects. She won’t wake from her slumber for a few months at the very least. That is, if she wakes up at all.”

It’s not like I ever cared for Princess Ileze in the slightest... But that didn’t mean I relished the idea of her spending her life in a vegetative state either. Sympathizing with the princess, I looked up at Lord Featherio.

“...I appreciate how much you’ve shared with us, but I’m told members of the Heaven-Wing clan aren’t meant to meddle in politics. Will you get in trouble for this?” I asked.

“It’s a different story when the Wing Chord is being abused. This sort of thing could affect our entire clan’s role in this world. If we meddle in politics, it’s you statesmen we must rely on to take any direct actions.” Lord Featherio furrowed his brow.

The Heaven-Wing clan seemed so detached from this world, but it appeared this was their line in the sand.

“That’s all I have to say. Now I return.” Lord Featherio’s demeanor instantly shifted. The talkative soul had left us with the usual, poor speaker. The original Lord Featherio started to tug on his cheeks. “I talked so much. I’ll be sore tomorrow.”

“How intense...”

He was back, all right.

Heaven-Wing clan members born in the same country communicated through their consciousness, meaning they had far fewer opportunities to speak out loud like humans did. It was why they tended to be so untalkative.

According to King Glenreed, all Heaven-Wing clan members' souls smelled the same, and perhaps that was due to their subconscious link. It was also possible that the boundary line between members of their same clan was much less defined than it was for other races.

"Thank you for speaking so much and providing such valuable information," I said. "To return the favor, would you care to eat something here?"

"Yes. I want the sandwich with all the meat like last time."

He answered me instantly. Though he wore no readable expression, I could sense his happiness. It brought a bit of relief to my wound-up heart.

The Heaven-Wing clan members strongly resembled humans, yet their mental structures were so different... However, when it came to delicious food, none of us could resist a nice meal with good company.



"PEEP PEEP!"

A few days after we received word of the Maldion Empire's collapse, I was having a particularly busy day. I went out to the garden and had a seat on the bench, hoping to lighten my mood and get a little rest. As I gazed at my servants washing bedsheets outside, I noticed Tweety approaching them.

"Peep? Peep? Peep peep peep?" He cocked his head, observing the sheets hanging out to dry. The white cloths flapped with each gust of wind.

Perhaps Tweety believed them to be animals, seeing as they were constantly in motion. He chased after them, pecked them with his beak, chirped at them, and frolicked about like it was a game.

I enjoyed watching the innocent creature have his fun. Somewhere along the way, Tweety spotted me.

"Peep!"

He ran over and engulfed me in his soft feathers, living up to the Cuddle Bird

name. His fluffy, lemon yellow plumage tickled my cheeks.

“Hehe! There’s no need to rush. I’m not going anywhere.” I smiled a bit sadly as I let Tweety do as he pleased.

The Gardener Cats were on full alert as always, and Tweety was missing them. That was why I let him cuddle me as much as pleased. At the very least, I could give him all the love he was missing out on.

“Peep! Peep! Peep peep peep!” He chirped me a satisfied tune.

Cuddle Birds feed off magical energy. Each individual bird prefers a different kind of energy.

Tweety was a particularly picky eater and never showed any interest in magical energy if it wasn’t mine. My magical energy was a strange thing. For one, it had developed a bit of an “air” attribute—perhaps it had something to do with regaining my past life memories. Still... Well, as long as Tweety was happy, I was more than happy to spend time with him.

As I enjoyed the heartwarming snuggles from Tweety...

“What’s that...?” I looked up and spotted something flying in our direction in the distance.

They were too big to be birds. Suddenly, I was terribly uneasy.

“Dragons...”

They grew closer, slicing through the air with their wings.

The soaring, crimson, Flying Dragons were an emblem of the Ringrard Empire.



I was informed that the Flying Dragons and their party flew to the outskirts of the royal capital and landed near the palace wall. I hurried to the palace to greet the party as the Wolfvartian queen at His Majesty’s side.

At the center of the group, with flowing red hair the color of fire, stood the emperor of Ringrard—Emperor Ishnad. Our eyes met. For some reason, I felt like he shot me a harsh look with those silver eyes like steel.

“Why have you come here without any word? You’ve upset the townsfolk,

sending Flying Dragons over the capital with no warning.” King Glenreed challenged the emperor. He was a daring presence, refusing to back down even with the ruler of a great nation before him. With his imperial soldiers behind him, Emperor Ishnad met King Glenreed where he stood. His cape fluttered around his body.

“I know it’s a disturbance. Forgive me. I’ll be gone as soon as my business is finished.”

“And what business do you have here?”

“I’m taking a criminal into custody.” His deep, clear voice sounded strangely amused. When he strode toward me, his combat boots clacking against the ground, I became certain. He was looking at me like I was prey. “Laetitia. I’ve received word that you inflicted harm on Ileze, the fourth-born princess of the Maldion Empire. Our country will be making sure you pay for your crimes.”

“What did you just say...?” King Glenreed glared at him even more menacingly.

Despite the chill running down my spine, I tried to calculate Emperor Ishnad’s true intentions.

“I know it was a long journey, but have you fallen asleep standing up?” King Glenreed retorted. “You’re babbling nonsense. Laetitia didn’t harm Ileze. There’s absolutely no reason to turn her over to you.”

“It’s a lawful demand. The Maldion Empire has abdicated their throne and turned control over to me.” Emperor Ishnad held up the emperor’s golden seal. It was a carving of a fox—the Maldion Empire’s Sacred Beast. It was something that belonged only to the ruler of the country. “Now that I control the Maldion Empire as well, I have a right to demand the punishment and transfer of anyone who harms their royal family. I’m told that Laetitia here poisoned Ileze and caused her to collapse.”

“You’re wrong.” I was absolutely firm. I addressed the imposingly tall emperor, making sure not to reveal any fear or weakness. “It was only a coincidence that Princess Ileze collapsed at my villa.”

“A coincidence that also claimed two of Ileze’s maids on the same day?”

Emperor Ishnad laughed mockingly.

Princess Ileze's maids were both noblewomen from Maldion, which meant they'd inherited at least some of their blood from the royal family. It seemed they'd fallen victim to the same curse that came through the Wing Chord.

I truly hadn't done anything wrong, but could admit that, to an onlooker, I came out of this appearing guilty. Not that I had any intention of sitting back and letting him falsely accuse me either.

Quietly, like a challenge, I gazed up at Emperor Ishnad, his crimson hair dancing in the breeze.

"Putting on an act won't save you. Drop it already so we can take you back to our homeland as the criminal you are. It will be of benefit to this country as well."

He reached his hand out toward me.

I nearly stumbled backwards out of reflex. But I remained standing and struck his hand away.

"...I see." Perhaps startled by my counterattack, Emperor Ishnad squinted his eyes slightly before letting out a sigh. "How cold. I may treat you like a criminal, but I'm not going to be cruel to you."

"I refuse to be called a criminal over something I had no part in."

When he heard me emphasize my innocence again, Emperor Ishnad chuckled.

"How amusing. In that case, you'll have to find a way to clear your name, Laetitia. If you can't do that, I'll be taking you home with me for real this time."

"I couldn't ask for anything better."

"What a courageous thing you are. I'll be back in one month to hear what you come up with."

After those final words...

Emperor Ishnad turned, mounted his dragon, and disappeared into the sky.



"I have absolutely no intention of handing you over to him."

Even though he was still reeling from our run-in with the emperor, King Glenreed's voice was absent of any hesitancy.

We immediately formed a strategy meeting once Emperor Ishnad left, though we were coming up empty-handed. I didn't want to be treated like a criminal either, but the Ringrard Empire currently held much more power than Wolfvarte. We didn't even have the means to put up a fight if I couldn't prove my innocence with enough evidence.

"The poison..." I desperately racked my brain.

I believed Princess Ileze had come to my villa that day to fake an assassination attempt by poisoning. It was the only reason she would come to apologize of her own will.

She'd probably only intended to drink a weak poison and get a bit dizzy. However, the culprit behind all of this definitely knew that Princess Ileze was going to collapse from the curse at that exact date and time. That's how they were able to turn Princess Ileze's halfhearted poisoning into something that looked like a much more serious assassination attempt.

At least one of the masterminds *had* to be Emperor Ishnad. That was how he managed to come to this country in the less than a month that had passed since Princess Ileze fell into her slumber.

I'm sure King Glenreed and the palace officials here in Wolfvarte have figured that out as well...

But that alone wouldn't prove my innocence. At this rate, I didn't know how we might reject Emperor Ishnad's demands.

There was no actual proof that Princess Ileze's slumber was caused by a curse, and that would require convincing everyone that curses existed in the first place. It was utterly impossible with the limited time we'd been given.

That left one remaining path—finding the poison Princess Ileze drank, or was about to drink, that day at the villa. Realistically, accusing her of accidentally overdosing on the poison she meant to entrap me with was the only way I could clear my name within the next month.

And yet, I wasn't going to get anywhere if I couldn't find that poison.

Princess Ileze hadn't been carrying anything that seemed like it could cause this, nor had His Majesty found any clues in her room.

My mood was turning more and more sour. We were at a dead end.

"I'm going back to the castle. Don't overwork yourself on this, got it?"

Those were King Glenreed's parting words to me before returning to the castle. Emperor Ishnad's visit had only put further strain on the king's busy schedule.

I didn't dare complain about his dedication to his work. I didn't want to be a burden to him.

As I put my mind back to coming up with a breakthrough, a tiny paw appeared on my knee.

"Berry..."

"Meow!"

It seemed she'd come to cheer me up, seeing how I was so lost in thought.

She's so nice. So kind. Those toe beans just kill me. I massaged her tiny paw, watching her claws poke out and then retract again, when I remembered something.

"Could it be...?"

"Mraw?"

I grabbed that paw and stared at it closely. Nestled underneath her soft fur were her toes—and more importantly, the sharp claws attached to them.

...I think I know what that poison really was.



"**OH** my, if it isn't Queen Laetitia? What brings you here all of a sudden?" Lady Fillia greeted me with her usual charming smile.

Against the colorful flowers of the southern villa, she looked like a young girl who'd been completely sheltered from the impurities of the world.

"Lady Fillia, you gave Princess Ileze poison, didn't you?"

There was no need to press her subtly for clues anymore, so I got right to the point. Normally, I would have started with small talk so as not to harm her mentally, but a surface-level conversation wasn't going to do anything for us now.

"Poison...? How unsettling. What are you talking about?" she asked, feigning innocence.

"I'm saying this villa was the source of the poison Princess Ileze received," I stated.

"Poison? The only thing I make here is honey."

"And that honey was the poison."

The wind shook the many varieties of flowers behind her. Flute Bees were able to harvest nectar exclusively from one kind of flower. I remembered how Lady Fillia was growing rhododendrons in her garden before Princess Ileze's collapse. As beautiful of an addition as they made to the garden, rhododendrons were similar to lily-of-the-valley in a very specific way—their poisonous nature.

"A person could fall into a coma if they consume too much honey made from rhododendron nectar alone," I said.

I'd completely forgotten about rhododendrons' toxic effects.

It was all thanks to Berry's claws. Seeing them reminded me of how the Gardener Cats in the second field had coated their claws with a poison that induced slumber.

Gardener Cats knew all there was to know about plants, so I went to them and asked about poisonous vegetation. That was how I learned rhododendrons were poisonous in this world as well. I confirmed with others that it wasn't common knowledge in this world—that the Gardener Cats were part of a very small group that utilized its poisonous nature.

Lady Fillia's honey was made with rhododendron nectar alone. Even though the poison was very weak, that made it possible to take a bite or two without noticing it tasted any different than normal honey.

“This isn’t just about Princess Ileze’s slumber,” I continued. “Thinking back, she was here when we first met at your villa, and then there was the incident with the Gardener Cats while I was here visiting. Her Highness was able to cause that disturbance because you informed her that I was away from the Gardener Cats at that exact time. Am I mistaken?”

The princess and her servants wouldn’t have been able to start an incident at the Gardener Cats’ second field while I was around. Lady Fillia had to have leaked the date and time of my guaranteed absence for her plan to work.

“I’m sure Princess Ileze saw you as a convenient pawn to supply her with information and materials...but it was actually the opposite. You were the one manipulating Princess Ileze, weren’t you?”

Lady Fillia was never working with Princess Ileze at all. Her partner was, in fact, Emperor Ishnad. She lured in Princess Ileze by pretending to help her, then sent her to my villa on the day the curse was planned to take effect. It was all to frame me for poisoning Her Highness. That way, Lady Fillia could remove me from consideration and become the next queen with Emperor Ishnad’s support.

“Why did you take it this far, Lady Fillia? Conspiring with Emperor Ishnad could lead to your total ruin if you made even the slightest mistake. You could never know for sure that he wouldn’t just abandon you at some point either.”

There were many safer methods of obtaining power in this country if that was what she was after. Yet she chose to take the most perilous path, and I could only think of one reason why that would be.

“Why were you so desperate to become the next queen?”

“...Because I wanted to see him again.” Lady Fillia smiled sweetly, like a lovestruck little girl. “King Glenreed acted like he didn’t remember me when we were reunited at the castle. But I didn’t think he could have possibly forgotten me. I searched everywhere out of desperation, trying to come up with how the king I met all those years ago could be someone else. ...And then I found it. Queen Laetitia, do you know the truth behind the royal family’s ancestral reversion?”

“...The person you met when you were a child was actually Silverio, wasn’t it?”

It seemed Lady Fillia had stumbled across the royal family's secret. Lady Fillia came from a dukedom with a very long history. Perhaps it made sense that, tucked away somewhere in her family's library, she found records detailing ancestral reversion.

The person who conversed with the young Lady Fillia was actually Silverio controlling King Glenreed's body.

King Glenreed was a sickly child. He said that, while spending so much time in bed, there were periods of his life he didn't remember well. It was possible those were other instances of Silverio taking over his body without his knowledge.

"I know that King Silverio, the man I met, rarely ever shows himself through King Glenreed. But I thought I might get to see him again one day if I spent the rest of my life by his side as the queen."

Something so simple drove you to go to these lengths? It wasn't something I could easily say to her out loud.

Lady Fillia had put in so much effort all these years. Not only did she manage to track down the secret of ancestral reversion, but she was wise enough to master the perfect smile and conduct for a young lady—all in an effort to be selected as the next queen.

Even now, she was readily confessing to her misdeeds because she *knew* she could feign innocence when she really needed to.

At a lower dose, the honey Lady Fillia gave Princess Ileze could have been used as a medicine to combat insomnia. Perhaps Princess Ileze wasn't sleeping well as she adjusted to life in this new country, so she merely gave the rhododendron honey as a friendly gesture to help her sleep. It was an excuse Lady Fillia could rely on to get out of trouble, as there was no proof linking her to the incident with the Gardener Cats either.

She was brilliant if she truly planned that far ahead all along. She would certainly be a dependable person to have as an ally. I couldn't forgive her for involving the Gardener Cats and framing me for a crime, but right now, I needed every means at my disposal to put up a fight against Emperor Ishnad.

“What do you say we strike a deal, Lady Fillia?”

In order to take the first step toward my exoneration, it was time to enter negotiations with Lady Fillia.



“**LOOK** at all those dragons. They practically fill the sky...”

My month came and went in the blink of an eye. It was time for me to respond to Emperor Ishnad’s accusations.

The grand party of Flying Dragons soared over the royal capital, even more overpowering of a presence than before.

Last time, they’d come with their advance scouting party to reach Wolfvarte quickly. Now they were demonstrating the might of the Ringrard Empire should they decide to utilize it. I kept my guard up as I entered their tent with King Glenreed and Emperor Ishnad.

“All right. I’ve come to hear your response,” Emperor Ishnad said. “Since you requested to meet in a tent, I assume you have something you don’t want seen or overheard by anyone else.” A sharp, yet enchanting smile appeared on his face.

I was seated on one of the chairs inside the tent. Lucian had provided me with a bundle of documents, which I now offered to the emperor.

“This is the truth behind Princess Ileze’s slumber,” I said. “It appears Lady Fillia supplied her with honey that was supposed to combat insomnia, but the princess overdosed by mistake. You can find all the details here.”

Well, Princess Ileze was actually knocked unconscious by the curse...

But I had no way of objectively proving that curses even existed. My only option was to take a different route. In this new story, Princess Ileze collapsed from eating too much of the special honey—honey she’d shared with her maids as well.

“...So this is what it comes to.” The corners of Emperor Ishnad’s lips curled up when he finished skimming the documents. “It was an interesting read...but it’s nothing more than conjecture about what Ileze *could* have done.”

“Perhaps so. But in that sense, can you really say your accusations against me are anything more than conjecture?” I took his phrasing and used it against him. My forceful response made Emperor Ishnad narrow his eyes threateningly.

“You have much to say, Laetitia. It’s a nice suggestion, but it only works if both sides are perfectly equal.” He crossed his legs arrogantly before leaning in toward me. “Negotiations happen when both parties are in relatively equal situations, where there’s room for agreement. That’s why this is an official directive, not a negotiation. If you admit to poisoning Ileze and turn yourself over, we’ll leave this place with you in custody, but only because I’ve chosen to show mercy. If you refuse to confess your crimes, it will mean the start of a new war to take revenge for Ileze.”

The proud emperor presented me with his two choices.

“It’s your decision, Laetitia. I’m offering you this choice because I’m a generous man.”

“I refuse.” I was taking the third option. I sat up straight and made my voice heard. “You underestimate this country, Emperor Ishnad. We are more than qualified to sit down for negotiations as equals.”

“What foolishness is this?” The emperor was chuckling. “I’ve already conquered many lands. I can deploy my army at a moment’s notice. Not even a child would believe that you, a country barely fending off monsters outside your borders, are on equal terms with us.”

“I’ll admit that you’ve fought many successful battles. However, wouldn’t you agree that the factor responsible for your steady advance can be found in our country as well?”

Then I turned to look at Lucian, who was standing behind me. He removed the cloth from the item he’d been holding in both hands.

When Emperor Ishnad laid eyes on it, his face stiffened ever so slightly.

“Oh, could it be...?”

“This is the new crest tool that’s been allowing your empire to advance. Or, more accurately, it’s your new weapon that’s laid waste to the battlefields.”

Underneath the cloth was a long, slender object made of metal and wood. This was a ground-breaking weapon to the rest of this world. But to me, I saw something very familiar.

“A long-range weapon that ejects metal projectiles,” I said. “You gave it the name ‘firebolt cannon’ for how it roars like a thunderbolt and spits flames from its mouth, isn’t that right?”

The firebolt cannon. In my past life, we simply called it a gun. It was an entirely scientific invention that didn’t use magical energy, so much like a matchlock from my past life.

“I see... But it’s the inside that matters most,” he said. “Are you sure this isn’t just a model?”

“We’ve managed to recreate its firing mechanism as well.” I drove the point home with a smile.

King Glenreed had obtained the schematics for this new form of crest tool.

At least, that was what we thought at first. But we were mistaken.

The schematics showed that the crest tool needed a magic stone inserted into it, but that wasn’t actually the case. The whole thing was a bluff—a fake schematic that couldn’t be easily analyzed or recreated if it fell into enemy hands. They wanted it to look like a new kind of crest tool, even though it used none of those parts whatsoever.

That was how they managed to fool even the Bureau of Magic. The members there tried their hardest to analyze the schematics, but in the end, it turned out to be a simple long-range weapon that functioned with gunpowder, not magic.

Once we figured that much out, it was only a matter of trial and error to get it right. The Bureau of Magic was already well-versed in advanced metallurgy. Though my ability to transmute the metal parts felt a bit like cheating, we managed to reconstruct the weapon together.

“Shall I hold it up for you to see?” I gently took the gun from Lucian’s hands. The metal weapon was heavy, but not so much that a woman like myself couldn’t lift it. “What do you say, Emperor Ishnad? Would you care to see for yourself if it can fire?”

I pointed the gun straight at the emperor.

He remained completely unmoved, even as he stared down the barrel.

“What about the gunpowder?” he asked. “Without it, the bullet won’t fire with any real power.”

“Don’t worry about that part,” I said. “I received some gunpowder from one of my connections.”

That connection was none other than Lady Fillia.

Once I realized she was working with Princess Ileze, I reached the conclusion that Lady Fillia could be in possession of a gun.

The Gardener Cats had claimed that someone shot a rock at them faster than they could even see.

At first, I assumed this to be the work of a crest tool as well. But once I laid eyes on the weapon schematics, everything fell into place. It was a bullet, not a pebble, that they found in their field. I always thought of bullets as long, skinny things, but then I remembered how humans in my past life used round bullets that looked like pebbles long ago.

Lady Fillia told me she’d been given a gun when she first agreed to help the Ringrard Empire. She engaged in fierce negotiations with them, demanding collateral as proof that they weren’t going to betray her. She emerged victorious in the end when they gave her one of their guns—a brand new technology and military secret

Lady Fillia then lent her gun out to be fired at the Gardener Cats’ field and send them into a panic.

It was impossible to forgive her for that, but I was in a situation that demanded I use every advantage I could get my hands on.

The gun itself was completed relatively quickly thanks to the Bureau of Magic’s hard work, but progress halted when we found we had no gunpowder. With no way of obtaining firepower for this weapon, I ended up borrowing gunpowder from Lady Fillia’s gun and submitting it for research.

The bureau’s new honey-harvesting crest tool turned out to be a useful

bargaining chip in my negotiations. All she needed to do was cut ties with Emperor Ishnad and provide me with her gunpowder.

However, if she still insisted on plotting with Emperor Ishnad to take me down, I threatened to reveal her involvement with the Gardener Cats' shooting and her secret communication with Emperor Ishnad. I didn't exactly have physical proof of these things, but when combined with her rhododendron honey plot, these accusations were more than enough to destroy Lady Fillia's reputation within Wolfvarte. I could also weaken her family's power by providing the honey-harvesting crest tool to competing beekeepers. Lady Fillia would be backed into a corner—losing even her home in the palace grounds and consideration to become the next queen.

This was something she couldn't allow. Lady Fillia still wanted to see Silverio again.

After careful negotiations, I managed to walk away with gunpowder in the end.

With the gun in my hand and the ability to fire it at any moment, it was time for the next round of negotiations with Emperor Ishnad.

"The Ringrard Empire has overrun other countries thanks to these firebolt cannons," I continued. "Your people understand their might better than anyone, don't they?"

"If you try to attack this country, your empire is going to be the one on the other ends of these guns."

I laid that threat upon the emperor before me.

It was hard not to feel a bit upset by how these weapons would influence this world in the future, but before anything else, I needed Emperor Ishnad and his country to retreat.

Gun in hand, I glared back at the emperor until he let out a chuckle.

"Yes, the firebolt cannons are incredibly powerful. That's why we're accompanied by our Flying Dragon Knights. Firebolt cannons have no way of taking out enemies in the sky, do they?"

“That may be so.”

“Oh? You admit it?”

“But just as you have your Flying Dragon Knights, Wolfvarte has a lot more than firebolt cannons at its disposal.” With that, I stood up and headed outside the tent. “Take a look. This is the true power that keeps this country safe.”

I signaled to the castle wall and began to chant a spell.

A gun’s true strength was its ability to be mass produced. Sorcerers were still the ones capable of the most firepower and destruction, and no one had more magical energy than myself.

I cast my spell and constructed gigantic arms made of wind.

With the Flying Dragons watching, the long, transparent arms extended up into the sky.

When the timing was right...

“Grrrah?!”

The dragons began to cry out, startled and fascinated.

They were watching as an incalculable number of flower petals started to dance in the wind. I’d had the petals placed around the castle wall in advance, which my arms of wind scooped up and released into the sky.

Red, blue, yellow, purple, pink, and white.

The colorful petals rained down from above like something from a dream.

“Beautiful. ...It’s beautiful, but...” The emperor squinted. It seemed the clever ruler had picked up on my intention.

“What if these weren’t flowers, but stones or arrows or bullets?”

My arms of wind could rain down anything from above.

Emperor Ishnad understood that not even his Flying Dragon Knights would be able to avoid a painful battle should our countries go to war.

“This power is what our country is presently capable of. Once you’ve burned this image into your memory, what do you say we begin our negotiations?” I

smiled at the man. Something in the way he looked at me was like he wanted to avert his eyes but couldn't.



BY the time my negotiations with Emperor Ishnad were finished, he agreed to let me stay in Wolfvarte.

We agreed that Princess Ileze's slumber was either an unfortunate accident or some sort of sudden illness. It was the dozing princess they would take back with them to Ringrard instead of me.

She was still a princess, even in her comatose state. We didn't know what to do with her, but it seemed she had value to Ringrard. Though I felt bad about how Princess Ileze ended up, she was the one who decided to resort to wrongdoing first, so I felt comfortable using her as a factor in our negotiations.

Both countries drew up and signed a new agreement.

We decided to announce that the Ringrard Empire had flown their Flying Dragon Knights up to the castle as a mere military exercise. In exchange for our forgiveness over how they'd stormed the royal capital without permission, we had them agree to abstain from invading or antagonizing our country for the next five years.

Fortunately, their military was mostly comprised of Flying Dragon Knights, so they barely butted heads with the Wolfvartian military at all on their way to the royal capital—there were only a few minor injuries and nothing more. Thanks to that, we were able to end things peacefully and on common ground.

With that, I finished up the formalities. Then I joined King Glenreed, where the two of us stood face-to-face with Emperor Ishnad. Once we'd ordered everyone else to leave, the inside of that tent was dominated by total silence.

What came next was not a discussion between two countries or two rulers.

It was something I, and most likely, Emperor Ishnad, wanted to discuss.

"...We know that someone within the Ringrard Empire is able to cast curses." I took a deep breath before getting to the heart of the matter. "That person is you, Emperor Ishnad. ...Am I mistaken?"

I looked up at the handsome emperor across from me. He had fiery hair and a light in his eyes—so piercing, it was like a knife. Despite the intensity he gave off, something about him seemed mysterious and mature all at once.

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

“...Because you’ve shown an attachment to me,” I said.

It wasn’t vanity. Emperor Ishnad should never have come all this way just for me. I thought he was using me as an excuse to declare war on Wolfvarte at first, but after seeing him give in so readily, it suddenly seemed unlikely.

“Emperor Ishnad, you are the leader of an empire strong enough to make the ground quake. With any number of duties or requests you could attend to, you chose to come all this way...” I gulped.

Curses were a system of magic that affected the soul. If Emperor Ishnad was *actually* able to cast curses...

“Your past life wasn’t one of this world, was it?” I asked. “You came from another world, where somehow, you crossed over and found life in this one just like I did.”

I felt a faint sense of anticipation and nostalgia. That familiar blue planet was in my head as I questioned Emperor Ishnad.

“That’s why you came to feel an attachment to me, who had past life memories from the same world as you. Am I mistaken?”

If my theory was true...

It explained how Emperor Ishnad was able to invent and mass produce functional firearms. He possessed advanced knowledge that had yet to develop in this world.

“Attachment, you say...?” Emperor Ishnad murmured quietly. “You’re half right. I feel an attachment to you, and I remember the circumstances of my past life, but have no memories of living in another world. In the beginning, I was just like any other human born here.”

“Just like any other...?”

Becoming an emperor in one lifetime, defeating great nations, and leading his

country until it was the strongest land on the entire continent. This was an impossible feat for an average person, no matter how many past life memories they held. I certainly couldn't accomplish it—of this much I was absolutely certain.

"It's the truth. I was exactly like everyone else, just a young man with a bit of a specialty in curses. That was who I started out as."

"...Does that mean you lived before the Great Darkness?" I asked.

I remembered Silverio's words. Curses had been a normal part of this world at least six hundred years ago, in the age before the Great Darkness.

"That's right. It was about six hundred and fifty years ago that I studied the art of curses and fell in love with a woman." Emperor Ishnad's eyes squinted, like they were trying to chase after a distant, fading light. "When I was young, I swore to protect her even if it meant losing my life. Silly, isn't it? It wasn't as if I had any way of helping her once she fell ill."

He pressed his lips together.

"All I could do was muster up my pitiful knowledge of curses and reach out to her soul. I wanted to make her remember me even once she was reborn. I thought I'd succeeded in cursing her to preserve her memories in the next life without destroying her ego..."

"You thought...?"

Something deep in my chest stirred. I wanted to hear what happened next, but couldn't bear to know.

"I cursed my own soul too, reincarnating time after time with my memories intact as I waited for her. But with each life, I began to realize my mistake, as we were never reunited. It was a side effect of my curse. Her soul was cast out of this world and swept away to another."

The soul that was swept away to a different world. It could only mean...

That soul was...

"It's you. That was your past life, Laetitia."

"My past life..."

Overcome, I repeated those words.

...But it was no use, of course. I couldn't remember any tiny piece of it.

I was still *me* all the way through.

My only memories were of this life, where I was the daughter of a duke, and the life I lived in Japan. I tried and tried, but couldn't recall anything earlier than that.

Half doubtful, half convinced, I listened to the rest of Emperor Ishnad's story.

"My curse was incomplete. As soon as your soul departed this world, the curse probably malfunctioned. After my curse informed me you'd died in your past life, I managed to intervene and draw your soul back to this world, cursing it to be reborn from some mother's womb. But it seems the original memories of hers were missing."

He smiled—one full of an exhaustion that didn't match his youthful appearance.

"I expected that, but never gave up hope. I decided to take the throne and expand my country so that it would be easier to find her. I used the blacksmithing knowledge I gained two lives ago, developed the firebolt cannon, and increased the territory of my empire. Finally, I found you at last, and that was when I felt a new hope."

"A new hope?"

"Yes. I was willing to give up on your old memories, but hoped that we could start over and build new ones together."

"...And that's why you did all this?"

He framed me for Princess Ileze's poisoning and tried to take me back to his homeland as a prisoner. It was such a cruel plan to ever be born from "hope."

I glared at him with resentment. But Emperor Ishnad didn't seem to waver.

"I did. She was a strong woman, but she was also weak. I thought that if I put her under such stress, she would break and come back to me in the end...but it seems you're not like that, are you?"

“...I don’t think so.”

I was an audacious person who never knew when to quit—things I had full awareness of. I didn’t know what kind of woman I was in the past life he spoke of, but I felt absolutely certain that she wasn’t me. Maybe sharing a soul was the only thing we had in common.

“I thought, even without your memories and with a different appearance, I could still think of you as *her* if you’d just come and be with me. ...But it’s not true. I think she’s gone from this world for good.” He breathed that final sentence like a quiet sigh full of resignation and despair.

While I felt pity for the emperor, I came up empty-handed when I searched my heart for any love or desire for him. He still made me nervous after he tried to frame me for a crime.

“My plan was to make her reincarnate with her memories and personality intact... It must have failed because the curse was incomplete. It seems you managed to live this life with memories of the one before it, instead of the memories you carried when you were the woman I loved.”

“I see... I was told that humans normally experience a destruction of the ego when they regain memories of their past life. Since that hasn’t happened to either of us, should we assume we’ll remain unaffected from here out as well?”

I felt bad for Emperor Ishnad, but I had my own life to live now. I couldn’t let this important issue weigh on my mind any longer.

“...Most likely, but it’s best to avoid strong shocks or emotions that could affect the soul. I can’t speak definitively about what might lead to trouble.”

“Strong shocks...”

I didn’t have to think about it for more than a second. Prince Fritz ending our engagement and pushing me into a fountain was what restored most of my past life memories in the first place.

Emperor Ishnad was right—intense shocks to the body or mind were definitely related to past life memories.

What if I receive another strong shock like that someday? I fell silent as my

mind raced. That was when I heard the emperor mutter something.

“...You know, when you become uneasy like that, you *do* remind me a little of —”

“Don’t touch her.”

“Ah!”

My body was pulled backwards. That was when I realized King Glenreed had his arm around my shoulders.



Emperor Ishnad's hand was outstretched like he'd failed to grasp something. King Glenreed spoke to him firmly.

"Laetitia is *my* queen. I don't care if you shared some connection in a past life, or if you're the leader of a powerful empire. You don't touch her hands. I'm the only one who can touch Laetitia."

"King Glenreed..."

Was it that gallant face I saw when I looked up? Or was it his firm grasp on my shoulders?

Something was suddenly making my heart race.



WE bid farewell to Emperor Ishnad and returned to the castle in our carriage.

"We might be mutual enemies when we next meet, huh...?" I repeated his words to me.

From the window, I watched the Flying Dragons departing in formation. Emperor Ishnad had taken off on his dragon as soon as we left. He was no bigger than a sesame seed in the sky now

"It seems he's actually taking the role of emperor seriously."

He told me he became the emperor and expanded his country to search for me after my reincarnation. But I knew. Emperor Ishnad still cherished the comrades and status he'd gathered in this life. If he didn't, his people wouldn't follow him—no matter how brilliant of a leader he may be.

Emperor Ishnad had warned me that, if we next met as enemies, he wouldn't go easy on me again. It was proof that he'd come to see me as a stranger who merely shared a soul with his loved one.

"How long are you going to watch those dragons?" Something in King Glenreed's voice sounded sullen. "And why are you sitting so far away from me?"

I was seated diagonally from His Majesty in a corner of the carriage, trying to put as much space between us as possible.

“There’s no reason in particular,” I said.

“Then why not get a bit closer? You look uncomfortable there.”

“Please don’t mind me.”

I felt bad, but I wanted him to leave me alone for a little while. Emperor Ishnad had just told me to avoid shocks to my body and mind. Then King Glenreed hugged my shoulders and made my heart race.

I’d decided that it was safest to play it slow when it came to approaching King Glenreed.

...Well, I’m probably just being overly cautious.

King Glenreed had startled me and done things to my heart many times since I came to Wolfvarte. It wasn’t just him either—I’d had so many fun and surprising experiences since I came to this country.

Maybe it means my soul is safe if I haven’t run into any trouble yet.

Relieved, I leaned my body against the carriage wall, where I felt a flood of exhaustion. It wasn’t surprising. I’d been incredibly tense since Princess Ileze’s collapse all that time ago.

“Now that I think of it...”

I felt a strange sensation that day too. Was it because my soul was cursed?

My homeland of Elltoria bordered the Maldion Empire. Though we were currently on bad terms, our countries’ nobles and royals used to marry each other long ago. Therefore, even I had the blood of the Maldion’s imperial family in my veins, if only the tiniest amount.

Supposedly, the curse that came during the Renewal was meant to affect anyone with royal Maldion blood, making it possible that I’d felt the influence of the curse too, if only very subtly.

That sensation...

It was like a gust of wind blew through my body for a brief second...

“Huh...?”

Suddenly, my vision sloped downward in one big jump.

What...? But why? What's going on?

All I did was remember the sensation!

"Curses are a kind of spell that work on the soul."

"It's best to avoid strong shocks or emotions that could affect the soul."

Wait, just remembering it counts as the curse affecting my soul?

"Laetitia?!"

King Glenreed's voice...reached my ears...as my soul...shook violently inside me...

Chapter 5: A Name Not of This World

“LAETITIA still hasn’t awoken?”

A melancholic voice echoed off the walls of the dreary room.

Five days had passed since Laetitia suddenly lost consciousness and fell into a deep slumber.

Glenreed stared down at her bed, his face scrunched up in pain.

“She just keeps losing weight.”

Laetitia loved to eat, so seeing her body change this way was all the more heartbreaking. She truly looked like she was sleeping and nothing more. But no amount of jostling would rouse her from that slumber. She was breathing and her heart continued to beat, while she merely failed to regain consciousness.

“Laetitia...” Glenreed’s voice came out choked.

He’d been right there beside her. But there was nothing he could do.

The king merely panicked. That panic spiraled into terror. He managed to carry her to a room in the castle, but the situation had yet to improve even slightly.

“King Glenreed, you ought to return for today.”

The hoarse suggestion came from Lucian, who stood over Laetitia’s bedside like a shadow. Her face was as white as candle wax. Under her beautiful eyes were dark circles the color of mud.

“Lady Laetitia wouldn’t want you clinging to her bedside to the point that you neglect your official duties.”

Don’t you dare order me around. What could you possibly know about Laetitia? Glenreed bit down hard on his lip to stop himself from shouting that. The cold despair in his mind told him that no amount of yelling would awaken Laetitia either way.

“Wake up and come back to me already...” Pathetic as it was, his voice came out trembling. As he muttered those prayers to himself... “It’s you...?”

Glenreed couldn’t hide his shock at the next person to enter the room.



“WHERE...am I...?”

Above me was a sky full of stars. I was standing in tepid water. Waves tickled the bottoms of my feet as they rose and fell. There was a gentle wind caressing my cheeks. Overhead, the glittering stars looked like they could rain from the sky at any moment.

“I’m at the ocean? At night...?”

But that didn’t fully explain what I was seeing either.

The stars twinkled in the deep indigo sky, yet the beach was a dazzling, bright white color like the midday sun.

I lifted my foot and splashed some of the glistening seawater.

The starry sky and the shore stretched on forever.

What was I doing at a place like this? How did I even get there?

As I stood there in a daze, unable to recall those answers, I heard a voice from behind me.

“A living human, is it? What an unusual visitor we have here.”

“...Who are you?”

I turned around to see a young man with black hair and blue eyes. He had gentle, but handsome features and wore an earring on his left ear, made of what looked like a red braid.

Amused, he began to walk toward me from the beach.

“I’m an inhabitant...no, more like a freeloader here in this place.”

“A freeloader...? What is this place? Where are we?” I asked.

“It’s the Shore of the Stars.”

He pointed up at the sky, almost singing his words to me.

I thought the name must have come from what this place looked like, but the young man chuckled calmly.

“The Shore of Stars, the Place Between Worlds, the Inverted Space. It has many names, so call it whatever you please.”

“The Place Between Worlds...?”

The place between. In other words, I was nowhere. But where was I supposed to go?

I looked around some more, seeing only the white sands, the lukewarm sea, and the sky full of silver stars.

“Maybe you’re lost. Do you remember your name?” he asked.

“My name...? ...Ah...”

Once I started speaking, it came back to me. I once had a very, very dear name to me.

“I’m Laetitia...!!”

I grit my teeth. All of my memories started violently flooding into me.

“Ah, I...”

I fell unconscious in the carriage with King Glenreed...

“Is that when I died?” I asked aloud.

“No, you’re alive. Didn’t I just say that?” The black-haired man shrugged in response to my confusion. “I would guess that you lost sight of the world you were in, and now you don’t know where to go.”

“Lost...? Um, don’t you mean my ego dissolved?” Frightened, I’d let the worst possible outcome slip out of my mouth.

“If you still remember who you are here, you must have a really strong ego.”

I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard that. I didn’t understand, but it seemed I was neither dead nor incapacitated...according to this person.

Now that I knew this much, I took another look around at my surroundings. The two of us seemed to be the only living beings in this space. It was a

peaceful, yet lonely beach bathed in starlight.

“I want to go back to where I came from. What should I do now?” I asked.

“I’d suggest finding that world. That should do the trick.”

“...Find the world?”

“See all the sand scattered at your feet? Your world might be in there somewhere. Take a look and see if it jumps out at you.”

I didn’t understand what the man was saying, but I scooped up a handful of sand and looked it over.

As I stared, suddenly, I could see horses running in the white sand—more than I could count.

“What?!”

“Oh, could you see it?”

“W-Wait! What just happened?!”

“They’re worlds. Each grain of sand is one single world. Now that you know what to do, check out some different sand too.”

At his suggestion, I nervously looked back at the sand.

There was a world of infinite grasslands. Caves where bipedal, furry beings dwelled. Buildings that looked like ones I knew from my past life, golden sand, worlds full of great ambition and adventures. I saw a scene of a fox nuzzling against a girl with pink hair, a raging wizard in a shop, a hound hunting corpses with a blade, a young healer woman running around madly, a land ruled by a blue dragon king, a contract with a wicked dragon, a drama starring a thief with raven wings, a world where cats grew flowers from their heads...

After looking at nearly two hundred grains of sand, I raised my eyes to the sky.

It was endless. I didn’t know how I could ever find it.

The beach stretched on forever. I felt like I would go mad trying to count so many grains of sand.

It was a hopeless situation, and all I could do was stand there in complete

bewilderment.



“YOU think you can save Laetitia...?”

Laetitia’s older brother, Claude, nodded in response to the desperate Glenreed.

Claude had arrived without any warning, showing neither surprise nor grief at the state of his sister. He joined the king in the room as if nothing was out of the ordinary at all.

“Laetitia’s soul has escaped her body, where it now wanders lost outside of this world. If we can find her soul and bring it back, she should regain consciousness.”

There was no hint of hesitation in Claude’s words. Glenreed found that calm demeanor to be suspicious.

“How can you say that for sure? How do you know all this?”

“Because I’ve been researching this outcome for years now.”

“What do you mean...?”

“Here.” Claude placed a few books he’d been carrying on the desk. Many were scrolls made of parchment and wood, but every last book showed considerable age. “These are books detailing curses. I’ve gathered these texts from around the continent, and they all date back to before the Great Darkness.”

“...These are real?” Glenreed took one and opened it, noting the incredibly outdated words being used inside. They were old enough to require a specialist to understand.

“The existence of curses was thoroughly erased, both by the gods who took the forms of beasts and the people who underwent the Renewal. But it was the curious connoisseurs who collected books detailing curses, now that the topic had become taboo. Some still carry those books to this day.” Claude spoke about the Renewal as if it was common knowledge.

It was at that point that Glenreed could no longer go without questioning this

mysterious figure.

“You study and collect taboo knowledge? Just who are you, really?”

“It was all for Letty.” Claude’s eyes, as green as evergreen trees, lowered to look at Laetitia in her bed. “Ever since she was a child, Laetitia would always use strange words or speak about things no one else understood. It made me curious, so I spent some time researching the things she said, and eventually, I discovered information about reincarnations and curses.”

These weren’t just topics one should stumble upon with a bit of research, but there was something about Claude that made it seem like he, of all people, would be able to find a way.

“I read and deciphered ancient books, followed the pieces of evidence that had been left behind, and began to research Emperor Ishnad, who I determined was able to cast curses in present times. That was when I finally uncovered how curses actually work. Letty’s soul was likely to have been unstable ever since she remembered her past life, and with even a little stimulation, she could easily fall into a coma at any moment. First, the curse that came through the Wing Chord disturbed her soul, and it was only intensified when she discussed her reincarnation with Emperor Ishnad, learning that the two were connected many lives ago. It pushed her to her limit, and that’s why she fell into this coma now.”

“...What are you talking about?”

Claude’s words made sense on a logical level. But that only made Glenreed all the more dubious. He couldn’t contain his anger any longer.

“If you knew all that, why didn’t you do anything?” he asked. “Instead of getting Laetitia away from Ishnad or warning her of the dangers, you kept your mouth shut and ran around in the shadows?”

“There was no point in going to all that effort.”

“No point?”

“The soul has a direct relationship with the body. The more her body grew, the more stimulation her soul received, which made it easier for her to recall her past life memories... Once she regained all of them clearly, her soul was

knocked out of balance, which would make her fall into a coma within one to two years. It seems Emperor Ishnad's curse prevented her ego from self-destructing in a way that created outward damage, but I knew there was no way to stop an unstable soul from leaving its body. That's why I searched for a way to call the soul back..."

Claude removed his gloves and gently brushed Laetitia's cheek with his knuckles. He stared at her silently, as if trying to memorize those features before they were lost for good.

"...You didn't find one?" Glenreed asked.

"I did find a method of restoring Letty's soul, but it's dangerous, and it also requires Letty's past life name, or at least a nickname close to her real one. Her unstable soul was pulled backwards toward her previous world by that name, and now, she's probably lost between this world and that one."

"Her past life name caused all of this...?"

"Names are very important in the art of curses. They're a label to distinguish souls, even if they're not one's true nature. Someone here must call her past life name to strengthen her connection to this world. That should be enough to draw her soul back to us, but..."

A dark shadow fell over Claude's eyes.

"It sounds like even Letty couldn't remember her past life name. She left that memory in the previous world when she reincarnated into ours, and now the memory is pulling her back."

"To bring her back, someone in this world has to call the name even Laetitia doesn't remember..."

It was impossible. Utter nonsense.

Before he could shout that, Glenreed realized something. Claude had known those truths better than anyone for years now. But despite the pain he would have felt, he still came to the castle instead of giving in.

"I looked everywhere I possibly could, but it was all useless. I know almost everything there is to know in this world, yet I couldn't find the one, single

name that would save my dear Letty...!" Claude's voice shook.

He said he knew everything, just not the one piece of information vital to save the life of his beloved sister. How guilty, how powerless must he be feeling in that moment?

Glenreed cast his eyes down to avoid the pain, while Claude bowed his head in what looked like repentance.

Inside that silent bedroom, Lucian bit his lip.

Though he was a man of many mysteries, Claude was an intelligent person who loved Laetitia very deeply. Lucian had held onto hope that he would be able to fix this. But now, reality was crashing down around him.

"...Lady Laetitia..."

He called the name of his mistress—the girl more precious to him than anyone.



Laetitia was continuing to weaken in her slumber. With each moment, they drew closer to the inescapable end. If it was possible, Lucian wouldn't hesitate for a second to trade places with her, even if it meant losing his own life.

But reality wouldn't allow Lucian to exchange his life for hers. Slowly, it was leading Laetitia down the path to her death.

"I'm...so sorry...!"

All he could do was desperately apologize. He did it knowing his pleas, his words, none of it would ever reach her ears.

Unable to find the words to say to Claude and Lucian, Glenreed remained silent. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, clenched his fists, and reflected on the situation. Then he raised his head.

"I'm going to call Laetitia back."

It was a declaration to the two men, and to himself.

"I won't allow it." Claude immediately answered Glenreed, the king, with an outright rejection. "Letty's soul is wandering outside of this world right now. It's a mysterious place ruled by different laws than ours, too dangerous for you to set foot in."

"What's your point?"

"What if you're unable to make it back to this world either, King Glenreed? That's the last thing Letty would ever want."

"Well I want it."

That was Glenreed's desire. He lashed out at Claude with all of his feelings—pride, selfishness, and sincerity.

"Laetitia doesn't want it? I'm well aware. She's a kind person who wouldn't want me getting hurt for her sake. I know she'd never forgive me..."

This desire was an ugly one.

It was pure, unredeemable foolishness.

He felt too much passion to stop himself from shouting this time.

“But what the hell do I care about any of that?! I want Laetitia! Whatever it takes, I *have* to bring her back!!”

I want to see Laetitia again. I want to hear her voice. I want to stare at her smile. I want to eat with her for the rest of my life and tell her how delicious the food is.

His unyielding emotions poured out into his voice.

I’m in love with Laetitia.

Glenreed suddenly felt it deep in his bones. This was a messy, passionate, ugly sort of feeling. It wasn’t what Claude felt for her.

Just as Claude’s heart was full of love for Laetitia, Glenreed felt a powerful love for her too. But Glenreed’s was difficult. These were romantic feelings, so strong they drove him to sheer foolishness.

Maybe Claude had given up out of respect for her wishes, but Glenreed was never willing to abandon hope.

“Spit it out. Tell me already. You know the curse that will send me to Laetitia to bring her back.” He approached the still-slumping Claude and grabbed him by the shoulders. “You’re desperate to go and save her too, aren’t you?!”

“...! Of course I am!” Claude grabbed Glenreed back by his shirt collar. “But I can’t! I can’t do it! Curses aren’t just little miracles when you need them! You can’t overcome everything just because of how strong your feelings are! If something’s over, it’s over! There isn’t going to be a miracle! I can love Letty all I want, and it’s not going to do anything!”

“So you’re going to give up without even trying?!”

When the king challenged him, Claude’s voice rose to a scream.

“Yeah, that’s right! What other choice do I have?! I couldn’t find Letty’s other name! If I ended up creating another victim just because I wanted to pretend there was hope, I’d never be able to face Letty aga—”

“Liar!”

“Ngh!”

Glenreed slammed Claude against the wall. He wasn't going to let him escape. Wasn't going to let himself be deceived.

"If that's true, why come to this place and start babbling on about curses? You wouldn't have done that if you'd truly given up!!"

"...!"

It seemed Glenreed had gotten to the heart of the matter.

"I know you can't give up yet either. So let me do it. Teach me. How do I get to her?! Tell me, damn it!" He howled with all the might of his passion and his love for Laetitia.

".....!"

"....."

The two men glared silently at each other. But then...

"Meow!"

Both of them dropped their gazes when they heard a charming cry at their feet—something entirely unfitting in that situation.

"Laetitia's Gardener Cat..."

The Gardener Cat with the gray tabby-like fur, Berry, looked up at the humans.

"Why...are you holding out a strawberry...?"

Balanced on Berry's right paw was a glossy, bright red strawberry at the perfect ripeness.

Does she actually think this will break up a fight between humans?

Glenreed was confused. Lucian was the one to interpret the cat's actions.

"If you're going to call Lady Laetitia back to us, then take this strawberry with you. It will definitely be of use...at least, I believe that's what she's saying."

"Meow meow!"

"What a wise man you are!" she seemed to say as she nodded.

She tugged on Glenreed's pant leg and held out the strawberry.

“Right, very well. I’ll take this strawberry and call Laetitia back to our world.”

Glenreed took the strawberry, carefully bundled it up in a cloth, put it in his breast pocket, and turned to look at Claude.

“Now tell me that curse already. I’ll reach out to her not just for me, but for you and the Gardener Cats too. Fortunately, my soul is supposedly a special variety since I have ancestral reversion powers. Chances are better that I’ll last longer than you would in a world outside of our logic. I’m certain I can bring Laetitia back too. ...So take a risk and send me away while you wait here for Letty’s return.”

“...Thank you. I’m counting on you to bring Letty back.”

With the look of a man who’d been overpowered, like this was his last hope to cling to, Claude let out a deep breath.



“HMM?”

I turned my head when I noticed a glint of light in the corner of my eye. Refusing to give in to my near hopelessness, I was on all fours, observing every last world that appeared as a grain of sand.

When I turned around, I saw that the beach was giving off a faint glow. I rushed to the shore, fell to my knees, and scooped up the twinkling grain of sand. I stared at the grain, smaller than even a sesame seed, until I heard a voice cutting in and out.

“Laetitia?!”

“King Glenreed?!”

As soon as I shouted his name...

My vision felt like it had spun upside down, and then I was staring at King Glenreed.

“Your Majesty?! How did you get here?!”

His body seemed to flicker like it was experiencing static interference.

“I’m here to call you home! Come, take my hand!!”

“Your Majesty...!”

I reached out to him reflexively.

But he was too far. I couldn’t reach him. No matter how much I stretched my hand out or stepped toward him, I felt myself forcefully yanked backwards.

“Laeti-... Ngh!”

King Glenreed let out a pained groan. He was flickering even more violently now. I realized that, whatever was happening to him, it wasn’t good.

“...!”

I wanted to take his hand.

But I couldn’t reach. His Majesty looked like he was in so much pain.

“Please...”

Please give up. Go home without me.

Just before I could say that, King Glenreed stuck his hand into his breast pocket.

“Look at this!”

He pulled out a strawberry. He was desperately trying to hold the strawberry out so I could reach it.

“The Gardener Cat, Lucian, Claude, and I are all praying that you’ll come back to us!”

“...!”

I want to go back.

I want to go home.

Those feelings exploded in my chest as my eyes filled with tears.

“It’s a strawberry! Come back so we can eat strawberries together every single day!”

King Glenreed was screaming. His voice moved my heart so dearly, I reached my hand out again.

“What?!”

I could move. My body went forward.

The force pulling me backwards faded away, allowing me to keep going towards him.

I couldn't let this chance escape me. Desperately, I stretched my arms out.

King Glenreed was reaching out to me as far as he could.

As soon as our fingernails brushed against each other's, my vision was filled by a blinding light.

Remembering everything at last, I was swallowed up by the grain of sand that held the people I loved.



“LAETITIA!”

I awoke to find myself in King Glenreed's firm embrace.

His strong arms enveloped me, pulling me as close as they could. His Majesty buried his face in my shoulder, his voice quiet as he uttered words to me.

“Thank god...! I thought I would never get to hold you like this again...!”

“Your Majesty...” I reached up and wrapped my arms around his back as he clung to me. “Thank you, Your Majesty. I got to come back because of you...!”

I embraced King Glenreed, hugging him tight with all of the love and gratitude I felt in my heart.

Thump, thump. Ba-dump, ba-dump. Our two heartbeats overlapped against the other.

“Meow meow meow!”

“Whoa!”

“*It's my turn now!*” she insisted. Berry squeezed in between King Glenreed and me to nuzzle her body against mine.

“...I'm home, Berry.”

“Meow meow!”

I placed my palm against her paw pads like a high five. That was when King Glenreed let out a big sigh.

“You truly came back to this world... I never believed in miracles, but maybe I shouldn’t have been so naive.”

“Miracles...?”

“We needed your name or nickname from your past life to call you back... But sadly, I didn’t know either one. The fact that you’ve returned proves the strawberry was the right choice after all. I think your love for food defied all logic and brought about a miracle.”

“...No, that’s not it.” As I spoke, I glanced at Lucian and Big Brother Claude at my bedside.

“It’s hardest to see...what’s right under your nose...” The clever Big Brother Claude seemed to have figured it out already. He covered his face to hide the expression on it.

“I was able to return because you called my name, Your Majesty.”

“...What does that mean?”

He looked at me suspiciously. I decided it was time to reveal the true nature of this miracle.

“My nickname in my past life was ‘Strawberry.’ My real name was Ichiko, but strawberries in the language I spoke were called ‘ichigo.’ Since they sounded so similar, people liked to call me ‘Strawberry.’”

Inside the light shining from that grain of sand, I’d remembered everything about my past life name.

My full name was Yamase Ichiko. The nickname “Strawberry” came from its similarity to “ichigo.”

Now I understood why I couldn’t recall what sparked my love of strawberries.

It started in kindergarten, when I took a liking to the fruit that resembled my name. I was overwhelmed by their delicious flavor and began to eat strawberries all the time. The boys even teased me, calling me a “cannibal” for that.

Forgetting everything relating to my name meant I couldn't recall that beginning to my love of strawberries.

"Once I remembered that, so many other things came back to me too..."

Remembering the name "Ichiko" was the first step in remembering where Jiro's name came from.

I was the first-born child of the Yamase family, and "ichi" meant "first" in Japanese. This simple naming system was my dad's own creation. My mom would go on to give birth to Shou, my little brother. Once we took in our beloved male shiba inu, Dad named him "Jiro" which meant "second son."

"...I see. So that's what happened." King Glenreed nodded firmly as I explained my past life name to him. "Then it really *was* a kind of miracle that your love for food brought you back to this world. You grew a fruit that wasn't even eaten in this country, and turned its long, unpleasant name into the simple word 'strawberry.' All of that history led me to bring you back how I did. I've never been more grateful that you love food as much as you do."

"Hehe! Thank you. ...But I think there was more to it than that." I stroked Berry and smiled shyly up at King Glenreed. "You set out to rescue me in the face of danger, Berry entrusted you with a strawberry, and Lucian and Big Brother Claude watched over me protectively... Thank you, everyone. All of your efforts are why I'm able to be here now."

I felt a bit bashful saying it out loud.

But if being back in their world was a miracle...

I simply had to convey my gratitude to the group of people who brought that miracle into existence.

Chapter 6: A Wedding with You

“IT’S almost hot enough outside to break a sweat.”

I squinted in the light of the sun. It had been steadily getting hotter and hotter over the past few days. I finally had a bit of time to relax after resolving things with Emperor Ishnad and traveling back to this world.

Most of the trouble from the past few months was already resolved, but there was one thing still weighing on my mind.

“I wonder if the Gardener Cats are still guarding their mystery crop today?”

I traveled to their second field in my carriage.

The buds of the strange plants had been growing for a long time now. The Gardener Cats were still on high alert around them.

After some time passed, they managed to calm down slightly in the wake of the incident with Princess Ileze, but not being able to interact with them like before left me feeling a bit sad.

“Peep peep peep...”

Tweety, seated next to me in the carriage, seemed to feel the same. He looked a bit gloomier than usual. I comforted Tweety until we felt the carriage slow to a stop. We’d arrived at the second field.

When he saw me exit the carriage, Wheat, the Gardener Cat, rushed up to me.

“Meow meow!”

“Oh? What is it?”

I was surprised to find Wheat tugging on my dress. I wouldn’t have expected something like this from him—not while he was on such high alert. I followed Wheat until we arrived at part of the field with the mystery plant. The other Gardener Cats were gathered around it too.

I sensed everyone was abuzz with nerves and excitement.

Looking at the plant again, I saw that the tops of the tulip-like buds, about the size of a human head, were starting to open up.

It seemed the Gardener Cats were waiting eagerly for the mystery plant to bloom. Tweety, Lucian, Berry, and I joined them in watching over the plant.

“Woof?”

I heard a bark from behind me. Lord Aroo approached and looked up at me as if to ask what was going on. Then he sat down beside me.

“Aroo...”

I stroked Lord Aroo’s back slowly and gently. His coat was as lovely as ever. Just petting him felt like all I needed to be happy.

I spent about ten minutes enjoying his fluffy fur.

But that was when the Gardener Cats froze. They were staring at the buds, just now beginning to bloom.

The petals slowly unfolded, making way to reveal...

“Mee-meeee!!”

A tiny pair of triangular ears emerged from the petals. The creature called out with a high-pitched, charming little cry. Its soft fur swayed in the open air.

“A kitten...?”

I could hardly believe my eyes.

So...so cute...! It’s absolutely adorable...! There’s a kitten sitting inside each of the flowers...!

“Mew!”

“Mee-mee!”

“Mew mew!”

Overjoyed, the Gardener Cats raced up to the kittens as they started to cry out. They licked the kittens, groomed their fur, and watched over them with love in their eyes.

“...So those buds were actually Gardener Cat eggs. Or maybe they were more like cradles.”

I would expect nothing less from Mythical Beasts. Even their methods of childrearing were astonishing. It seemed the Gardener Cats had been worked up all this time because they feared the idea of something happening to their babies.

“Mew!”

One of the kittens trotted up to my feet. I scooped it up and nuzzled its soft fur. It stared up at me with innocent eyes, tilting its head and letting out little mews.

I grinned at the kitten, who was so much like the perfect embodiment of happiness. Suddenly, I felt a tug on my dress.

“Aroo...”

“I know the baby Gardener Cats are cute, but my fur’s pretty great too,” Lord Aroo seemed to be telling me.

“Hehe! Of course. I love both Lord Aroo and the Gardener Cats soooo much!” With that declaration and a heart full of joy, I gave Lord Aroo the petting he so desired.



AFTER witnessing the birth of the Gardener Cat kittens, I spent my days making many more happy memories.

Before long, came a day that would become a major milestone in my life.

“I’m excited, but a little nervous too.”

I was wearing a lavish white gown—my wedding dress.

King Glenreed and I were going to have a wedding ceremony to make me his official queen.

I was never able to respond to his proposal once the fears surrounding my reincarnation came up, but now that I’d properly accepted the offer, it was already time for the big day.

I'd chosen to spend my future in Wolfvarte with King Glenreed. It was a decision I made with steady resolve and a heart full of joy.

The preparations for the ceremony were just about finished. With nothing left to do but wait, it was impossible not to feel the nerves setting in.

"Letty, can I come in?"

As I was trying to relax my body and mind, I heard Big Brother Claude's voice from the other side of the door. I told him to come in and saw my brother dressed in his best formalwear. It was a very unusual sight.



I hadn't seen Big Brother Claude since the day I returned to this world. I'd been occupied with the wedding preparations, and as always, my brother seemed to be busy with something or other.

I decided now was the time to ask him the question that had been weighing on my mind all this time.

"I heard that everything you'd been up to was to find a way to save me. Breaking up my engagement was part of that plan, wasn't it?"

"Yep. That's right." He confirmed it so casually, it was almost a little anticlimactic. "If you kept being Prince Fritz's fiancée, Emperor Ishnad would have found you and captured you sooner or later, and then there'd be nothing I could do."

"I see... Thank you, Big Brother Claude. I love you."

I wanted him to hear my heartfelt gratitude.

Big Brother Claude spoke like it was a trivial matter, but I could only imagine the dangerous lengths he'd gone to all these years for my sake. I could feel his deep love for me when I pictured everything he'd done.

...Why does Big Brother Claude take such good care of me? Is it because I'm his only little sister? Is that the only thing driving him to show me this amount of love?

Big Brother Claude, seeming to sense these questions in my head, smiled at me. "It's because of something you said to me long ago. 'It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. You should do the things you love, Big Brother Claude.' Remember that?"

"...Maybe a bit...?"

I tried to recall that moment, but didn't land on anything in particular. Big Brother Claude chuckled as I racked my brain.

"I understand why you wouldn't remember. From your perspective, it was just a normal thing to say, not special in the least. But that's exactly what made me realize how badly I wanted you to be happy too. You'll be happy with King Glenreed, won't you? That's my greatest hope of all."

“Big Brother...”

“All right, I’m going to be on my way. Everyone’s out there waiting for the star of today’s show. I’m excited to see what kind of alcohol they serve at this wedding too.”

With that little joke, Big Brother Claude left my room. Perhaps I was imagining it, but I sensed a hint of loneliness in his steps as he departed.



“**QUEEN** Laetitia! Congratulations on your marriage!”

As soon as I stepped into the venue, I was showered with flower petals from above. The surprisingly loud cheers came from Lady Kate and Lady Natalie. They were wearing beautiful dresses and waving their hands at me.

I walked through the center of the grand hall to be with King Glenreed as the guests congratulated me when I passed them.

Sunlight poured in through the stained-glass windows. The walls and tables were decorated with large roses. Some were white, which represented the Gramwell family on my side. Others were the pink roses that the Wolfvartian royal family kept with pride. Each color had been carefully grown by the Gardener Cats to bring beauty and life to our wedding venue.

There was another table with a white tablecloth displaying not only roses, but a variety of treats I’d suggested for the occasion. I looked at the cookies, macarons, and other desserts on that table, each one designed to be white in color.

The main course consisted of a meat dish made with salt from Lady Kate’s home territory, seasonings imported from the harbor in Lady Natalie’s territory, fruit from Lady I-Liena’s territory, and sweets made with honey from Lady Fillia’s territory. The various foods being served in the venue indicated a future where all four regions could exist in harmony.

I glanced at the impressive assortment of food while I headed to King Glenreed, who stood dressed in his formalwear.

“.....”

His Majesty is even more handsome than usual.

His dark blue clothes with gold accents only emphasized his masculine good looks. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him.

"...So beautiful."

I heard the words slip out of King Glenreed's mouth. It was enough to make my heart race. I nearly tripped on the hem of my dress.

But King Glenreed grabbed me and pulled me close before I could stumble.

The powerful, but gentlemanly act made the room swoon. My heart sped up even more.

"....."

"....."

The two of us stared at each other in silence.

"...I love you, Laetitia."

"I love you too, Your Majesty."

He lifted my veil. I stared into those greenish-blue eyes as we nodded at each other.

With our breath and our emotions in perfect harmony, our faces drew closer and closer. When the warmth of his lips touched mine, I could feel an endless love in my heart start to overflow.

I was once nothing more than a figurehead. But on this day, I've officially become King Glenreed's true queen.

Side Story 1: The End of the Fairy Tales and the Leaders of History

IT was just before Laetitia's wedding was set to start.

Claude left the room after congratulating his sister, the bride. He was reflecting on that cheerful, yet lonely feeling inside of him.

Letty's always been so cute, ever since she was little.

He nodded as he thought of his dear sister. Claude was used to getting exasperated looks from Clementine, the Gardener Cat on his shoulder. It didn't matter to him, as Laetitia had always been adorable, and there was simply no changing that.

Laetitia was five years younger than Claude. Ever since she was little, she adored her big brother, always looking at him with those purple eyes so full of light.

Claude could still remember all those times when he read her picture books on rainy days or the two pretended to be explorers inside the mansion. They were similar people who both marched to the beat of their own drums. It was why they got along so well and were always together.

Unsurprisingly, Claude was therefore the first one to witness Laetitia's unique trait—the way she revealed occasional knowledge from her past life.

I was surprised at first, but Letty is who she is because of that past life.

She was still Claude's little sister, even with those unique experiences. He felt grateful for and fascinated by the past life that created the Laetitia he knew and loved so much. It never once made him uneasy.

Fortunately, King Glenreed seems to feel the same way.

Laetitia had been trying to hide her past life memories ever since she recovered the majority of them. She was probably afraid of being rejected by others, but her fears proved unfounded when it came to Glenreed. That was

why Claude was able to happily attend his little sister's wedding with pleasant feelings in his heart.

How many years has it been since I felt so at peace?

Claude was born with an intelligent mind and an insatiable curiosity. That was how, at a young age, he came to learn many things.

When he was ten years old, he finished reading all the books in their library and sought new material to absorb. He then discovered secret records from the dukes of previous generations—records that taught him about the Wing Chord and the Renewal.

These records made Claude develop a distaste for his country and the royal family.

Though Claude seemed to be a mature child, he despised the idea of obeying those he didn't like, even more than his older brothers did. His rebellious nature meant he lost all feelings of loyalty after learning about the Renewal.

I was so wound up about it, I ended up frightening Letty when we watched the honeybees together.

Claude spent his early teen years trying to come up with his own, unique way of living.

He respected his father and brothers, proud nobles who dedicated themselves to their country, but Claude was never able to develop the desire to imitate them. However, people expected great things from the brilliant boy, and he understood that both the encouragement and the scoldings from his father and brothers were proof of how much they cared about him. It was a painful thing to think about, so he spent his days absorbed in his books as an escape.

It was something that deeply troubled Claude, even if it was a common dilemma for teenage boys. But all of that faded away thanks to a simple, offhand comment from Laetitia.

"It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. You should do the things you love, Big Brother Claude. I like that side of you more."

It came so nonchalantly in the middle of their chitchat—even Laetitia herself had forgotten she ever said it. But those words had a dramatic effect on Claude's life.

Someone had told him to live for his own desires, not to spend his life using his talents for the good of the country.

It was like she'd lifted a burden from his shoulders.

The things Claude loved the most were reading for hours and being lazy. While they weren't desirable traits to anyone else, Laetitia said she loved her brother for it anyway.

That was how Claude decided he was going to live life at his own pace. His father and brothers complained he was wasting his talents, but as he continued to carve out his own path of shamelessness, they began to accept that Claude was just that kind of person—though it was a reluctant acceptance.

By the time he was in his late teens, he'd learned to keep his abilities hidden, made a few friends and reading buddies he actually got along with, and had the same, adorable little sister as always. He planned to end up with a leisurely job someday and live a lazy, yet fulfilling life. But then...

I was seventeen, and it was autumn when I learned Letty was going to die in less than ten years...

Wondering if there could be other people out there with past life memories like Laetitia, Claude began to research the subject more thoroughly.

He let his curiosity take him to ancient texts. There he learned about the existence of curses and how they'd been wiped from public records many years ago.

He also learned the devastating fate of anyone who regained their past life memories.

The likelihood of recalling more memories increased as a person's body grew. Almost every reincarnated person would regain their full memories by the age of twenty, experience a collapse of the ego, and pass away.

Horried by the fate that awaited Laetitia, Claude recalled the pain he felt

when their mother passed away.

I won't lose someone else I love. Claude made the choice to give up on that leisurely life and devote himself to saving her. But he made sure to act like nothing about him had changed.

He couldn't let anyone, not even Laetitia, figure out what was actually going on.

Claude had learned how the cruel fate awaiting Laetitia could harm the people around her too. He was certain that his kind-hearted sister would choose death over hurting the father and brothers she so adored.

The longer I tried to find a solution, the more problems and opponents showed up to get in my way...

Ishnad, the powerful and mighty emperor, was casting curses. He too held memories of his past lives, and the lover he was searching for had been reborn as Laetitia.

Kings who ruled with the Wing Chord were reincarnations of the first-generation kings. They killed anyone they came across bearing past life memories.

Regardless of who gained power on the continent, be it Ishnad or the kings with their Wing Chords, Laetitia's future was already doomed.

That was why Claude began to pay close attention to the power structures across the continent. He engaged in various areas of secret work to guarantee neither side overpowered the other. For example, Claude arranged for the empire's schematics for their new crest tool weapon, something Laetitia called a "gun," to make their way into Wolfvartian hands. He had other plots up his sleeve as well, desperate to craft a situation where no one could reach Laetitia.

He believed the mind he'd been blessed with must have been for this purpose. Claude found himself in mortal danger many times, but was willing to keep searching and searching for a way to save Laetitia.

I made sure Letty's engagement failed because I wanted her to marry King Glenreed.

He'd managed to infer that Glenreed likely possessed the power of ancestral reversion. If he brought him and Laetitia closer together, Glenreed would probably be able to stop the slumbering first-generation king inside himself from killing her. Once Claude calculated this plan, he determined Laetitia and Glenreed wouldn't be a bad match, so he ended up guiding his sister onto the path to becoming the figurehead queen.

But it went even better than I expected. King Glenreed was the one who saved her in the end.

His deep love for Laetitia was why they were now able to gather for their wedding.

Claude's secret maneuvers had been saved thanks to good fortune, and now, they were at a place where Ishnad and the other Wing Chord rulers wouldn't be able to lay a hand on Laetitia without a fight.

But that was where he hit a dead end. He was able to suppress outside factors from harming Laetitia, but he was never able to find a method of stopping her soul from destabilizing by the time she was twenty, at the very latest. Not only that, but he failed to find Laetitia's past life name that could recall her soul once it was expelled from this world.

Claude gave up. He *almost* gave up.

By using his gift of intelligence to take on many countries and opponents, having already calculated the outcomes of everything in his head, Claude was ready to give up on recalling Laetitia's soul without ever trying. He simply didn't see how it could be done.

But King Glenreed ignored my resignation and called Letty's soul back to us. His emotions pulled on that delicate, invisible thread and managed to pull off what felt like a miracle.

Thanks to that, Glenreed now held Claude's deep gratitude and respect. He felt sad that his sister would be leaving their homeland to become the official queen of Wolfvarte, but he believed Glenreed would be able to grant Laetitia a happy life.

Claude silently took a sip of alcohol from his glass. He gazed at his sister and

Glenreed as they conversed with guests.

Hayruth, the painter from a foreign country, was congratulating the smiling Laetitia. Hayruth was Claude's friend, but right now, he thought back to that day he conversed with something different lurking inside of Hayruth.

Hayruth possessed the power of ancestral reversion belonging to the sacred snake. Claude could trace his bloodline back to the royal family of a desert country that no longer existed. This country had murdered their own Heaven-Wing clan members hundreds of years ago, and without the Wing Chord at their disposal, the nation soon collapsed. However, the royal family's bloodline lived on, resulting in people with ancestral reversion powers and no country to rule over. Just once, the first-generation king slumbering inside Hayruth took over during a moment of Hayruth's drunkenness to exchange words with Claude.

"Sometimes monsters, no, forgive me, human outliers like you show up from time to time. It's most fascinating."

The thing with Hayruth's face—someone else entirely—sounded amused as he spoke.

"It seems your efforts behind the scenes are going to eliminate the Wing Chord in many countries soon. No one's accomplished such a feat in six hundred years. Was that another one of your goals?"

"No, I only want to solve the problems surrounding Letty's soul. Destroying the Wing Chord in the process isn't enough to make me slow down. That's all it is."

Claude hated the Wing Chord and the Renewal, but he had no interest in taking proactive measures to get rid of them either. He'd come to see the merits of the Renewal, even if he disagreed with it, and he wasn't motivated enough to put in the hard work of destroying it for good.

"Hmm, I see. But many countries on this continent are going to undergo tremendous changes thanks to your actions. The Wing Chord allowed citizens of these countries to live in peace under the rule of their kings, the reborn gods. Of course, it was still a peace they never chose. But that's going to be lost soon. It's the end of those fairy tales with their happily ever afters, and they're going to be replaced by an era of history where the future is completely undetermined."

Those words came from the person inside Hayruth. He practically sung them, or maybe it was more like a drunken ramble. But Claude remembered the mysterious emperor, Ishnad, speaking of very similar things.

A few months earlier, after a week or two had passed since Laetitia's soul returned to their world, Claude paid a visit to Ishnad himself. He snuck past the emperor's heavy security to confirm if Ishnad really felt less attachment to the distant past life he lived alongside Laetitia—alongside *her*. He also wanted to ask him something that weighed on his mind.

"Emperor Ishnad, did you regret losing your loved one to illness in your first life, and was that part of your motivation for building up this empire and changing the power structure of this continent?"

"...I'm surprised you've figured that out. If you want to take control of the things the gods put in their fairy tales, you have to put an end to the fairy tales first. What else can you do but walk the blood-soaked path of history to move forward?"

Ishnad had laughed quietly, showing no fear toward the man who snuck into his room in the middle of the night. Claude wasn't surprised that the emperor of such a great land would have guts.

So long as governments are run through Wing Chords and Renewals, education and technology will remain at a standstill. It will be difficult for royalty and nobles, the people with the most magical energy, to continue their control in a world where technology other than magic dominates the battlefield. Kings awoken by the Wing Chord can crush any new technology, even medical ones. I don't think Emperor Ishnad could allow that as someone who lost the woman he loved to illness.

Claude had lost his mother to illness as well. He felt a connection to Ishnad in that sense. The emperor was a nuisance of a man who tried to take Laetitia away, but Claude still sympathized with his hatred of things like the Wing Chord.

I still can't tell how technology and power are going to change across this continent...but I suppose history starts once the fairy tales end. I bet Letty is going to be one of the very important stars of history once it's written.

He watched over Laetitia, clad in her white dress as the guests congratulated her marriage. Now that the problems around Laetitia's soul had been solved, meddling in her life any further would be illogical—nothing more than an insult to his sister.

...That's why all I can do is pray for Letty's happiness as her big brother.

"May the rest of my sister's life be full of blessings."

Claude stared at Laetitia, smiling in her bridal gown, until that image was burned into his mind forever. Then he finished off the last of the alcohol in his cup.

Side Story 2: The Night of the Wedding

IT happened before our wedding, ten days after I awoke from my slumber.

“You wish to speak to the man who almost killed you? You’re a strange one, aren’t you?” Silverio spoke with an elegant, yet mocking tone of voice.

I was very nervous, but I still sat face-to-face with Silverio, who’d taken his form outside of the sacred sword. King Glenreed was asleep on a sofa next to the table with this sword on it. That made me feel even more helpless, but it seemed he needed to sleep temporarily due to how exhausting it was to maintain two consciousnesses at once.

“There’s something I desperately need to discuss with you.”

That was why I consulted King Glenreed on this beforehand. He agreed to let me temporarily transfer Silverio’s consciousness into the sacred sword so that we could talk. Lord Featherio was watching closely from the sidelines, ready to step in if Silverio took over King Glenreed’s body again.

“Getting a Heaven-Wing clan member to help you too? They’re not supposed to intervene in politics. He must really like you, huh?”

“No. Well, I do like Queen Laetitia. But you’re wrong. That’s not all.” Lord Featherio spoke in a faltering manner, refusing to leave his words in the hands of someone else this time. “Emperor Ishnad is going to change the world in a big way. The Heaven-Wing clan might not be able to fulfill the role we always have. That’s why I wanted to talk to you too.”

For the past hundreds of years, the existence of the Wing Chord and the Renewal were kept in strict secrecy. But Emperor Ishnad was now trying to change all of that. When we went through our negotiations, he’d hinted that he wanted to publicize the existence of the Wing Chord and the Renewal someday.

He’d only just gained control of the Maldion Empire and was too busy ruling the massive new territory he had acquired. While he wasn’t going to go public with his knowledge yet, it seemed he would find the right timing a few years

from now, once he was able to focus on matters outside of his own country again.

Emperor Ishnad had immobilized the Maldion Empire's royal family and nobles by abusing the Wing Chord. If he revealed the nature of that achievement to the world, other countries wouldn't be able to just ignore it.

Wolfvarte was no exception, of course.

I explained what King Glenreed, Lord Featherio, and I had already discussed about that.

"Once the Wing Chord becomes widely known, nobles will probably rebel, since they're the ones targeted by the Renewal. Countries will also have to face the threat of Emperor Ishnad abusing other Wing Chords to invade their lands. Even average citizens are likely to distance themselves from the Wing Chord and the Heaven-Wing clan."

"Probably. Humans and beastfolk are all so ungrateful. They forget their homelands have been protected by the Heaven-Wing clan's Wing Chord for hundreds of years, turning to persecution when it suits them. Well, the Heaven-Wing clan won't be the only victims. Blood will probably be shed between those who approve of the Wing Chord and those who don't. Would you call that reaping what you sow?" Silverio spoke quietly, seeming to both mock and pity the narrow-minded mortals.

"We won't let that happen," I asserted. "We're going to explain the Wing Chord to nobles before Emperor Ishnad reveals it to the world and causes chaos. Our goal is to aim for a softer landing."

It was still a difficult path that could fracture nations if things went wrong. This problem was one that couldn't be avoided, so our only option was to put our heads together and try to guide the world to a more peaceful future, even if it did little good.

"Perhaps mortals all seem foolish to you, Silverio, but there are many wise people in this country. They'll realize that Emperor Ishnad is using the Wing Chord to disrupt and fracture countries. Little by little, humans and beastfolk are coming together to understand each other these days, so that's why I'm confident the Heaven-Wing clan won't merely be persecuted until their

extinction either.”

“Brilliant. Such brilliant, delusional, wishful thinking you’ve come up with.”

“Isn’t it our job as statesmen to bring wishes into reality?” I steeled my resolve. I was sharing the future I desired with this god, the first-generation king, who’d kept Wolfvarte alive for hundreds of years.

“...I see. Then do what you’re able to. I won’t return unless someone plays the Wing Chord.”

Silverio smiled.

It was a detached expression, yet I felt like some part of him was giving me his blessing. The light in those greenish-blue eyes reminded me of a parent watching their child become independent.

“Of course, I’m going to work as hard as I can for this country’s sake. But before that, I have a favor to ask of you, Silverio,” I said.

“You want a favor? After that whole speech you just gave?”

“I thought you have to sort out the past if you want to look to the future, isn’t that right? This is something only you can do.” I thought of the adorable young lady with the black hair—someone I still held contempt for, but knew was a reliable person. “I’m speaking of Lady Fillia. She only became a candidate for queen because she met you in the royal capital. Am I mistaken? I want you to speak to her one more time.”

I didn’t know why Silverio chose to take over King Glenreed’s body on that day. Perhaps it was a mere whim, or maybe he noticed the sickly King Glenreed had transformed into the silver wolf and was wandering the city in a daze, with Silverio leading him somewhere he knew he’d be safe...

All I knew for sure was that Silverio had chosen to engage with the young Lady Fillia and offer her words of encouragement. Maybe he pitied the poor child, or maybe it was a calculated decision to form a connection with her family. It could even have been both. But regardless, it was a memory Lady Fillia would never forget for the rest of her life.

“Lady Fillia managed to track down the secret of ancestral reversion all on her

own. This is another seed you planted, Silverio. Won't you see her, settle things between the two of you, and go back inside King Glenreed?"

"...You're a tough cookie, aren't you? I don't hate that. But I sure don't like it either."

With that, Silverio shrugged his shoulders and agreed to see Lady Fillia.



I called for Lady Fillia, who'd been waiting in a nearby room, allowed her to meet with Silverio, and sent her home.

I asked Silverio a few questions of my own after that before making him return to King Glenreed's body. As he disappeared, the king's eyelids opened again.

"Mm, Laetitia... Did Silverio do anything to you?" His Majesty stared at me with such concern as he awoke.

"No, I'm all right. It seems my soul really *has* stabilized."

Silverio had only tried to kill me in the past because he found out I possessed past life memories. He feared my soul becoming unstable, my ego collapsing, and that I would cause a disaster with the fallout.

After everything that happened, I was sent to the Shore of the Stars—a place not of this world—but my soul came back stable...at least, that was what I was told. Big Brother Claude explained that King Glenreed connected my soul to this world and stabilized it when he called my past life nickname.

"I asked Silverio just to be safe, but he said my soul isn't going to be a problem now," I said.

"I see..." He let out a sigh of relief. My chest tightened, both with happiness and guilt. He was just so worried about me. "I'm so relieved. I don't know what I might have done if I thought I was going to lose you."

"Your Majesty..."

He placed his hand on my cheek, touching me gently like I was made of glass. The king's fingers stroked my skin lovingly, like he wanted to make sure I was really there. The warmth of his body ran through me, landing in my heart and

making it feel so hot.

“...I love you.” I took King Glenreed’s hand and confessed my feelings.

Was it my cheek or hand that was so warm? Or was it His Majesty’s fingertips?

I didn’t know—I was losing my grip on things—but I opened my mouth in a desperate attempt to have my feelings conveyed.

“I love you, Your Majesty. As a king, as a person...and as a man. I’ve fallen in love with you completely.” My voice trembled and my eyes lowered to the floor.

I said it.

I really said it.

I knew my face must be bright red. Embarrassed, I let my head hang so I wouldn’t have to look him in the eyes. My feelings for King Glenreed, my love for him, it was like I couldn’t contain any of it inside me anymore.

I’d never even noticed this great love inside of me.

I was such a coward to feign ignorance like that, telling myself I was nothing more than a temporary, figurehead queen all this time.

But the love I felt never faded, and now, I’d put it into words.

“...!”

With my eyes fixed solely on the ground, I saw King Glenreed’s shoes take a step toward me.

Suddenly, I felt his arms around me. I was pulled into his embrace.

“I love you too.”

Those sweet words of love grazed my ear.

Our hearts and bodies became one. I was so warm and red, I thought I might melt there on the spot

“I love you too. Laetitia, I love you so much...it’s like I can’t even imagine losing you. I don’t want anyone else to have you.”

“Your Majesty...”

I was so happy, I felt like I might faint.

Every cell in my body was practically coming to a boil.

This wasn't like His Majesty. I'd never heard him speak this way before. But in a different way, his blunt confession of love *did* remind me of the sincere king I knew.

I leaned my weightless body against King Glenreed's chest, feeling embarrassed.

“I won't have any other queen but you. I promise that you'll be the only one I love for the rest of my life.”

Then he took my right hand in his and lifted it up.

I watched as King Glenreed placed a soft kiss on the back of my hand.

His silky, silver hair tickled my skin. I could feel his warm breath.

“So Laetitia, I ask of you, won't you be my one and only queen?”

“...Of course.” I nodded, barely able to comprehend the joy I felt.

King Glenreed had both confessed his love and proposed to me.

This decision would dictate the remainder of my life.

I put my feelings into words without an ounce of hesitation, surrendering myself to the happiness that permeated everything inside of me.

“I'm happy. I'm so happy, I can't even imagine what I must look like right now.”

“Ah, you have the most adorable look on your face. It's hard not to kiss you.”

“.....”

I felt my cheeks grow hot and I fell silent again.

His Majesty is so amazing. Where did that icy face from when I first met him go?

Perhaps, when he discovered we felt the same way about each other, he was the kind of person who wanted to shower me with his love in every possible

way, both through words and actions.

Was my heart really going to survive from here on out...?

I battled my racing heart as I stepped away from King Glenreed.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately, since my heart wasn't ready for it—customs in this country dictated that kisses on the lips weren't allowed until our wedding, when I'd become the official queen.

"...How utterly disappointing." King Glenreed grimaced, seeming to remember the custom for himself.

That face. It's just like...

He looked like Lord Aroo did when someone took his favorite foods away from him. I felt a smile spread across my face.



EVERYTHING went smoothly after His Majesty's proposal, and that positive momentum carried through to the wedding.

It was all thanks to my soul's stability. I'd been unable to think about becoming the official queen because I was so worried about what might happen with my soul.

Opinions of me throughout Wolfvarte were favorable, and none of the four candidates for queen openly opposed our marriage either.

Lady Kate and Late Natalie came to congratulate me, presenting me with gifts of delicious sweets for our tea parties. Lady I-Liena sent me a congratulatory gift too. Then there was Fifu and Fos, the two-tailed foxes.

"Congratulations! Now that you're staying in this country, it means we can play together forever!"

Then they jumped on me in a fluffy attack. I didn't know if their words or their cuddles made me happier.

"...Even Lady Fillia accepted me as the official queen."

Night had fallen after our wedding ceremony was over.

I was relaxing in my bedroom, exhausted in a way that wasn't particularly

uncomfortable.

Lady Fillia's goal in becoming the queen was to see Silverio one more time.

That day that they reunited and exchanged words, Lady Fillia kept a beautiful smile on her face from beginning to end, never letting her composure falter.

I knew that could only be because of Lady Fillia's stubbornness—her pride.

She was showing how she'd grown up to be an educated, polite young lady who never let her elegant smile drop for a second. She wanted Silverio to see her that way.

I pretended not to see her face falling just before she left the room.

Lady Fillia had reunited with the man she thought she'd never meet again. He was, in all likelihood, her first love. It seemed to have changed the feelings in her heart, as she gave up on becoming the next queen and began to fully support me instead.

...Although, it's possible that was just an act, and she's still vigilantly waiting for an opportunity to become the official queen.

There was value in Lady Fillia's adept, yet audacious conduct. The two of us were also connected through the honey-harvesting crest tool I was providing to her family. I still hadn't forgiven her for setting me up and for disturbing the Gardener Cats, but she was someone I would still have to be around, forgiveness or not.

"I'm going to be the official queen, after all. These sorts of relationships are only going to become more common..."

Saying it out loud reminded me of the weight and responsibility my title carried.

Becoming the official queen was not the goal, but the starting line. I still had a long road to walk over the course of my life.

We were going to reveal the existence of the Wing Chord to the people, work out countermeasures against Emperor Ishnad, grow our industries throughout the country, and develop laws and financial matters that would make it easier for humans and beastfolk to coexist...

There was still a mountain of difficult issues to resolve. Not only that, but I didn't want to neglect the fun things either—cooking, playing with my fluffy friends, and spending time with King Glenreed.

“...I wonder if King Glenreed will be here soon.” I yawned, battling my intense drowsiness, and leaned back against the sofa.

Now that the wedding was finished and I was the official queen, King Glenreed and I planned to share a bedroom. I'd been waiting for him in anticipation and suspense, but he never arrived. Perhaps directing the wedding's cleanup had taken a lot longer than I thought it would.

“...I'm sleepy...”

I'd been so busy recently with preparations for the wedding.

All of the fatigue I'd accumulated weighed on my eyelids, and before long, I'd sunken into the world of slumber.



“...**NOW** how did I end up here again...?”

I looked up at a sky full of stars. Lukewarm seawater hit my feet in waves. I'd been waiting for King Glenreed, only to find myself back at the Shore of the Stars somewhere along the way.

“What's going on...? I thought my soul was supposed to be stable.”

So why am I at this place in between worlds?

I was starting to fear I'd lost sight of my world again and wouldn't be able to find my way back, when suddenly...

“Hey there. Long time no see...actually, it hasn't been very long, huh? When did we last meet, according to your time?”

“You're...”

It was the young man with the black hair I met the previous time I was there. He still wore the red braid on his left ear, approaching me without any sign of fear.

“Good evening,” I greeted him. “I met you here a few months ago. I was able

to make it back to my body, and assumed I would never arrive in this place again...”

Just explaining it caused that uneasy feeling to creep back inside of me. Seeming to sense my fears, the young man smiled at me reassuringly.

“There’s no need to worry. Your soul is incredibly stable. It’s almost *too* stable.”

“Too stable...?”

“That’s how you’re able to maintain consciousness here. This is the Shore of the Stars, the Place Between Worlds, the Inverted Space, *Higan*. There are many names, but some people call it the Dream Landing. When humans dream, their soul lifts out of their body just slightly enough to make it here. Although, living people can’t gain any knowledge or speak in this place, so they just drift around until morning comes and they awaken. ...You’re only able to look around and speak with me because your soul is so stable and strong, far beyond the limits of anything human.”

“What...?” I never expected to be called inhuman. “How did such a thing happen...?”

“It’s only a guess, but I’d say Emperor Ishnad’s curse on your soul made it really strong. Your soul would have only transformed even more when you came to the Shore of the Stars with your consciousness intact, returned to your home world, and crossed over while still alive. I think your soul’s quality must have skyrocketed.”

“My soul’s quality skyrocketed...?” I repeated his words, finding them all too suspicious.

“That’s right. You should be able to see more things now. There, take a look at your feet.”

“Whoa! A rat?!”

A rat was crawling around at my feet...no, this was something else. I recognized it as a kind of flying squirrel. I’d only ever seen this species in books in my past life. This Siberian flying squirrel, an animal that was supposed to dwell in Hokkaido, started to run around me.

“How rude! Who’re you calling a rat?! I’m the world tree with my own righteous history!”

...It speaks.

That was surprising enough on its own, but when I squinted, the creature’s fluffy body seemed to have a secondary image appearing over the top of it—a silver tree trunk with green leaves. It certainly looked like the world tree, all right.

“...I’m sorry, I was mistaken. Please forgive me,” I apologized to the flying squirrel, or rather, the world tree, and nervously looked around.

There were colorful fish swimming in the waves, some sort of square creatures heading for the horizon, and red dragons that danced in the distant, starry sky. I’d now seen the strange creatures coming and going at the peaceful shore—the place I once thought was completely empty.

“What are those things...?”

“They’re *things* that cross the oceans of dimensions, high-ranking divinity that are worshiped as gods, but they reject all interactions and understanding of intelligent creatures, merely flying around from place to place. They come from many sources, but right now, you’ve reached the same status as them. You might even outrank them...”

“Th-That can’t...”

That can’t be. Instead of finishing the thought, I looked up at the stars in the sky. That was when I realized something.

Those stars, appearing smaller than sesame seeds, held grains of sand of their own. I could see every last one, and they all contained different worlds. One of those grains held a planet whose inhabitants each had two heads, and I realized if I felt like it, I had the ability to interfere with their lives at will with invisible arms from my soul. On top of that, I was able to process this enormous overload of information as if it was natural.

Without even trying, my consciousness had surpassed a normal human’s intelligence. All of the stars above me held their own deserts and shores with grains of sand, and if each of those grains had a different world in them...

Endless. Infinite.

My head was spinning. My consciousness was clear, but the unease I was now experiencing felt like being drunk.

“...I have to go back.”

The longer I stayed there, the less human I would become.

With my expanded intelligence, it was easy for me to find the method of returning. I wasn't going to waste any more time in that place.

“Leaving already? But you're practically a god right now. If you wanted, you could change the world you came from, remove anyone who was giving you trouble, or even create a brand new world to start over with.”

“...I don't need any of those powers.”

I would be lying if I said the idea of a god's power didn't interest me, but I was certain it could only do more harm than good. I had people in my original world waiting for me—people who made the power of a god worthless in comparison.

I was going to make sure I never returned to the Shore of the Stars with this consciousness intact again. I would restore my soul to that of a normal human, erase my memories from this place, and return to my world. My expanded intelligence already knew how to do these things, so I bid farewell to the young man there with me. But before I could begin...

“Arf!”

“Ah...!”

I recognized that bark.

It belonged to someone who filled my memories with both love and pain. I was sure I'd never hear that voice again.

“Jiro...”

There he was, with his white and brown fur, perky ears, and those black eyes that were slightly tilted upwards.

Jiro, the shiba inu, was sitting on the ground and watching me.

“Jiro, what are you doing here...?”

But once I asked that, it hit me.

Just before I could return to my original world, that instant was prolonged and turned into an impossible reunion.

The intelligence I'd been granted, stronger than that of a god, provided me the answer.

"You came to say goodbye..."

The young man with the black hair had called this place "Higan" earlier.

Higan was the afterlife, like Heaven, Hell, or even Hades.

Jiro was already very old when I died in my past life. As lonely as he probably felt, Jiro went on to live out the rest of his years until his body withered, leaving him as nothing more than a soul. Then he'd come here to wait for me.

I was able to see Jiro because the quality of my soul had increased so greatly.

"Arf arf! Aroooo!"

"Have another good life in your new world, master!"

I could sense those words in Jiro's encouraging howl. He wagged his curled tail, and then he began to walk.

I watched Jiro head toward the light of reincarnation.

"Thank you, Jiro! I love you!" I raised my voice as loud as I could. "Bye-bye! I was so happy to have you in my life!"

It was the goodbye I never got to give in my past life.



I didn't know what it could be, but I felt like I'd awoken from a very sentimental dream.

All I remembered was that Jiro had been a part of it somehow. But the rest of the details escaped me.

"Jiro..." I murmured his name and felt a single tear escape my eye.

It was so painful, but so warm. I wiped my tear away, processing those contradictory feelings of loss and fulfillment.

“...You’re awake?”

“Your Majesty...”

I sat up off the pillow and saw King Glenreed sitting on the edge of the bed. I realized I must have dozed off while I waited for him, only to have His Majesty carry me to bed.

“...You kept calling Jiro’s name in your sleep.” King Glenreed sounded like he was pouting a little.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I still love Jiro, but only as a dog. My heart belongs to you and you alone.”

My voice trailed off as I started to feel shy along the way. I was fully aware of my romantic feelings for King Glenreed now, yet it was still embarrassing to say out loud.

The king answered my clumsy love confession with his embrace.

“Neither you nor Jiro have done anything wrong. ...I understand that Jiro was a special dog that can never be replaced. ...I was only scowling at my own pettiness and possessiveness, getting jealous over a dog like that.”

“Your Majesty...”

He tightened his arms around me as if to say he would never let anyone else steal me away. I wrapped my arms around his back too. Through his shirt, I felt the warmth of his body and the sensation of his bones and muscles.

“It’s all right. I used to get upset thinking that you and Lady Fillia had fallen for each other when you were children. Even thinking of it now made me jealous again. Besides...”

“Besides?”

“I think Jiro would want the two of us to have a good life together.”

I was never going to see Jiro again, but strangely, I felt convinced that Jiro was cheering on King Glenreed and me as husband and wife.

I looked up at him, and His Majesty shifted his body to face me better, looking down at me too.

Without another word, we stared at each other for a moment. Then we began to draw closer.

We'd kissed each other's lips during the wedding ceremony, but this was a bedroom, and the two of us were alone together at night.

My heart was absolutely racing. Just as our lips were about to touch...

"What?! Wolf?!"

I froze. A pair of fluffy, triangular ears had appeared on top of King Glenreed's head. They were the exact same ears as Lord Aroo's.

"What...?" King Glenreed let out a groan, those furry ears twitching above his head.

"What's wrong?"

"...Silverio started talking to me from the inside. He woke up because I was feeling strong emotions. He says that's what made my wolf ears come out..."

"Silverio...?"

I never expected an intruder to be watching the two of us get so cozy...

I blushed. That was when King Glenreed used his ancestral reversion powers to create a dagger made of ice.

"All right, I'm putting a stop to this. I'm the only one who gets to see you when you make that face, Laetitia."

"Your Majesty?!"

Without a change in expression, King Glenreed brought his ice dagger up to the base of his wolf ears.

"I might be able to carve out Silverio's consciousness if I cut off these wolf ears."

"Your Majesty! Stop! Please just calm down and wait a moment!"

I desperately tried to find the words that would stop the king's sudden madness. Just then...

"Meow meow?!"

I didn't know where she'd come from, but Berry burst into the bedroom when she heard my screams.

The two of us spent our wedding night with more furry intruders than we ever could have imagined.

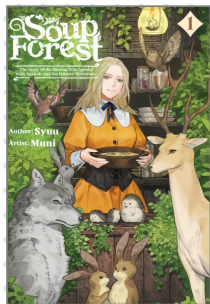


Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By **Hiironoame**

Illust **Misumi**

Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?



Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

By **Syuu**

Illust **Muni**

Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By **Satsuki Otonashi** Illust **MiRea**

High Society Is Rough For Assassins!

A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!



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