

Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnation

# I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends

~THE FIGUREHEAD QUEEN IS STRONGEST AT HER OWN PACE~

4

YU

SAKURAI

illust. KASUMI NAGI



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Since I Was Abandoned After Reincarnating, I Will Cook With My Fluffy Friends: The Figurehead Queen Is Strongest At Her Own Pace Volume 4

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## Atialdo

Ellstorian king's  
younger brother. Has  
the deer ancestral  
reversion  
power.

## Claude

Laetitia's older  
brother. Loves  
alcohol, reading,  
and general  
laziness.

# Chapter 1: A Smile That's Hard to Resist

**FLUFFA** fluffa fluff.

I lowered my gaze to the delicate sensation against my palm. It was Lord Aroo. Somehow, my hand had ended up on his back.

*I can feel a bit of warmth from his fur. What a wonderful feeling.*

His outer coat was glossy and smooth, while the undercoat was soft and downy. Not only was he well protected against the cold, but his fur was a treat for my fingers to stroke. Such exemplary fluff to be enjoyed.

As I absentmindedly stroked the wolf's silver fur, I suddenly felt it stir slightly under my hand. A pair of green-blue eyes looked up at me.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" I asked.

His eyes seemed to be demanding something. Lord Aroo was a very expressive wolf. He looked so displeased—as if he was upset with me for some reason.

*Did I do something wrong?*

As I racked my brain, I unexpectedly felt a hand around my wrist.

"Huh?!"

Long, human fingers were grabbing me. I glanced up, realized who they belonged to, and jolted.

"King Glenreed...?"

Looking into his almond-shaped eyes as they met mine was like staring at a frozen winter lake. For some reason, they were the exact same color as Lord Aroo's eyes.

"Laetitia."

The sound of my name coming from his lips was all that registered in my confused mind.

“You sure seemed to be enjoying my coat.”

“Ah...”

Memories flooded my brain all too violently.

I had petted this wolf without any reserve, gave him a vigorous brushing with a slicker brush, and shared with him the deepest secrets I kept inside my heart. When I was feeling particularly cheery, I even hummed little songs in front of him.

But every last thing Lord Aroo had seen, so had King Glenreed.

*You've got to be kidding me...*

I was on the verge of cradling my head in my hands.

There would be no doubt in anyone's mind that these weren't appropriate things to do to a king.

In my panic, I began to bow my head...



**“I'M** terribly sorry for everything!!”

“Peep?!”

A shrill cry came in response to my apology.

*Wait, what was that?*

I looked around me, my ears still ringing.

“...Tweety?”

“Peep!”

Tweety was right at my side, blinking his eyes in surprise. His cream-yellow feathers puffed up in the gentle breeze.

Tweety was a Mythical Beast known as a Cuddle Bird. He resembled a giant baby chick, and because he had taken a liking to the magical energy in my body, he recently started to join me in my room whenever I slept.

“Oh, I see. I was just dreaming...”

I pressed my hand to my chest and felt my heart still racing from everything that happened in the dream. The true identity of Lord Aroo, the silver wolf who often came to my villa to play, was none other than King Glenreed himself.

I made this shocking discovery some time ago.

“Ngh... How am I ever going to face His Majesty now?”

Tomorrow evening, I was invited to visit the main palace where King Glenreed resided. We had been too busy to sit down and talk recently, so I knew this was finally our chance to discuss the issue of Lord Aroo. It was all I could think about, and now, I was even starting to dream about the king.

I, Laetitia, arrived in this kingdom called Wolfvarte a few months ago. My relationship with the king, as his placeholder queen, had been going rather well...or so I thought.

“...I was so astonished when I learned Lord Aroo was King Glenreed...”

It was probably the biggest surprise I’ve had since the day I regained the memories of my past life.

I was born into this world as the daughter of the Duke of Gramwell.

One day, when I still lived in my homeland, Prince Fritz suddenly called off our engagement to be married. The sheer shock of this development caused me to remember my past life as a Japanese woman. Though I didn’t understand how or why I reincarnated from Japan into this world, as of now, it hadn’t caused any major issues.

I simply lived a laid-back, enjoyable life, all while making use of my knowledge from my years in Japan.

Alongside Gilbert, my chef, I was able to cook meals that didn’t exist in this land and share them with the people around me. It was thanks to this that I managed to grow closer to Lady Natalie and Lady Kate—two candidates to become the next queen. One month earlier, I managed to smooth over an incident in preparation for the Rose Gathering by crafting candy in the shape of roses.

As I thought back to that day, a faint, sweet scent started to tickle my nose.

“Mraw!”

“Good morning, Berry,” I greeted Berry, the Gardener Cat.

Her light-green eyes sparkled like gems in the morning light.

She stood on her hind legs, resting her front paws on the edge of my bed to stare up at me. Berry’s fur was light gray with darker gray stripes in a tabby-cat pattern. Her body smelled faintly of strawberries.

“You smell as delicious as always, Berry...”

“Mraw-hah!!”

“*Of course I do!*” Berry nodded in what appeared to be agreement.

The Gardener Cat always gave off the aroma of strawberries, perhaps because they were a treat she enjoyed every single day.

“Meow meow!”

“I know, I know. Wait just a moment.”

I got out of bed at Berry’s urging.

It was a daily routine for her to come to my room to beg for breakfast.

I rang the bell at my bedside table, and after a moment, Lucian appeared.

“Good morning, my lady.”

His black hair was styled neatly. With blue eyes and handsome features, Lucian was my servant who had come here with me from our homeland. I was lucky to have someone so talented around, as he never failed to come to my aid.

Lucian carried in a tray of black tea and strawberry jam.

“Mmm, that smells lovely. You always make excellent tea, Lucian.”

“I’m honored to receive such praise.”

With a graceful bow, Lucian swiftly began to set up the utensils on my bedside table. Tweety seemed particularly taken with the polished silver teaspoon. He cocked his head, fascinated with the sight of himself in the reflection.

“Mraw!”

Berry, on the other hand, was moving in closer to the strawberry jam.

“Hehe! It’s finally breakfast time, Berry. ...Don’t you want to eat?”

Despite me filling Berry’s dish with jam, for some reason, she wasn’t digging in. I realized that she was actually staring up at my teacup instead.

“...You want a drink?”

Berry nodded.

I suddenly remembered how yesterday, I drank my morning tea with some strawberry jam in the cup. Now it seemed that Berry was eager to imitate me.

I asked Lucian to bring Berry a cup of tea as well.

Her whiskers twitched as she watched me stir in a scoop of strawberry jam.

“You have a cat’s tongue, Berry, so you’ll have to wait a bit,” I cautioned her.

As a creature who looked exactly like a cat, Berry did seem to share their sensitivity to heat. She needed to wait for freshly brewed tea to cool at least a little bit before drinking it.

Berry stared at the cup while keeping her paw pads pressed against the side to measure the temperature. After a bit of time, she carefully gripped the cup’s handle and brought it to her mouth.

“...Meow!”

*“This is a nice way of eating strawberries,”* Berry seemed to say with a nod.

As I smiled, watching her drink tea just like a human, I heard a soft knock at the door.

“It’s Lelena. May I come in?”

“Certainly.”

A young girl wearing a maid’s uniform entered the room.

“Are you planning on cooking for tomorrow, Your Majesty?” she asked.  
“Gilbert asked you to decide on a menu before today’s shopping trip.”

“Right. I was thinking... Oh? That’s a cute hairstyle.”

Lelena had soft black hair and a pair of cat ears on top of her head.

Unlike usual, the ends of her pigtails were braided together. The braids looked like little ribbons. It was an adorably stylish way of wearing her hair.

“Ehehe, thank you! I had a bit of extra time this morning, so I thought I would try something new.”

“It looks great on you. I can tell you’re good at styling hair.”

“Yes, I’ve always loved it...” Lelena smiled shyly. Her cat ears twitched and her tail swished happily.

I was so relieved to see her happy. She had to be in better spirits now, judging by how she was taking the time to try out new hairstyles.

Lelena was very mature. She was wise for her age too. Her parents passed away years ago, and Kona, her older sister, was serving a prison sentence. Lelena struggled on her own without any other family to rely on, and after she came here to work, she kept up a resilient exterior.

But she had grown more outgoing and now appeared to be comfortable in her life here at the villa. I was most glad to see it.

With her large golden eyes, she was now staring at Berry, who had finished her cup of tea. As a member of the Wildcat clan, Lelena seemed to take a liking to Berry—a perfect cat lookalike.

“I think now would be a good time to pet Berry,” I told her.

“Are you sure it’s all right?”

Lelena sounded hesitant. She was still upset that Melan, the black cat she brought to the house with her, didn’t get along with Berry at all.

“Melan is Melan, and you’re Lelena. Berry doesn’t have anything against you personally.”

“Mraw!”

Berry let out a cry of agreement. She seemed to be in a good mood, now that her belly was full of strawberry jam and tea.

Lelena slowly crouched down next to Berry.

“How cute... She smells good too.” The girl’s small lips pulled into a smile

when she caught the scent of strawberries.

While I took in the precious sight, Tweety was next to come up to me.

“Peep peep!”

“All right, all right. It’s your turn for breakfast next.” I stroked his yellow feathers.

Tweety’s diet consisted mostly of magical energy. I turned my mind’s focus to the flow of energy inside me. Concentrating the power in my fingertips, I channeled it down into Tweety’s feathers.

“Peeeeep peep peep!!”

He closed his eyes in a trance, shuddering all the way up to the beak.

My magic was the ultimate treat for him.

Stroking the satisfied Tweety, I went over my mental list of tasks for the day. Lelena had reminded me that I needed to plan a meal to bring His Majesty tomorrow as soon as possible.

“Is something wrong, Your Majesty?” Lelena asked, sounding concerned. She seemed to sense the problem weighing on my mind.

“I’m just trying to decide what I should cook for His Majesty tomorrow night.”

“So even the queen has things that weigh on her mind...”

“Absolutely. It’s not an easy decision to make.”

*Perhaps something simple would be best, so that the act of eating it doesn’t interrupt our conversation?*

But on the other hand, His Majesty might not be satisfied with such a light meal...

It was a real dilemma.

“A meal for King Glenreed... Everything you make is very delicious, Your Majesty, so I’m sure he’ll be happy with any of it.”

“I certainly hope that’s the case... Oh, yes.”

That was when it hit me.

*Of course.*

Despite everything on my mind, nothing was more important than serving the king a delicious meal. Even if our relationship did end up changing, that had no effect on my desire to have His Majesty enjoy the meals I made for him.

“Thank you, Lelena. I think you’ve helped me make up my mind.”

I came up with a list of ingredients and shared it with Lelena. I imagined we already had what I needed here at the villa, but I decided to have her verify just to be safe.

His Majesty was a busy man. I didn’t want to waste any of these precious opportunities to cook for him by trying to use something that we didn’t have on hand.

“All right! I understand. I’ll check with Gilbert and let you know.”

I heard Lelena’s response, but my mind was now full with thoughts of tomorrow’s dinner.



**THE** day of our dinner arrived.

Once the sun was beginning to set, a carriage arrived at my villa.

“Good evening, Your Majesty. I’m here to escort you to the palace.”

It was Lord Melvin, a trusted aide to the king. Lord Melvin had soft, golden hair, and light blue eyes. His handsome face was smiling in my direction as he offered me his hand.

I followed his graceful lead into the carriage, with Lucian still behind me.

“Thank you for coming all this way,” I said. “How unusual seeing you here, Lord Melvin. Isn’t this your first time escorting me to the castle?”

“Indeed, it is. There’s something I would like to discuss with you today.”

Once the carriage began to move, the noise made it difficult for anyone outside to be able to eavesdrop on our conversation. I knew the topic he wanted to discuss with me must be secretive.

“What do you wish to speak about?” I asked.

"I wanted to ask if you intend to speak to King Glenreed about Lord Aroo today."

If he was bringing up this subject now, it could only mean...

"Lord Melvin, should I assume that means you know about Lord Aroo's secret as well?"

"That's correct. Does this surprise you?"

"...No, it makes sense to me. If His Majesty didn't have someone close to him who could assist in keeping his secrets, I'm sure there would be quite a lot of fuss right about now."

I thought back to the strange attitude Lord Melvin always took with Lord Aroo.

I once said...

*"Lord Aroo can be a bit unfriendly at times, but he's still a cute, kindhearted creature."*

When he heard that...Lord Melvin looked at the wolf, trying to stifle a laugh, and repeated...

"...Cute..."

The revelation of Lord Aroo's secret came to me only recently, but there had been many hints along the way.

"You always knew, didn't you, Lord Melvin? That's why you watched over the two of us."

"I had a splendid time doing so too."

"Lord Melvin..."

He had always struck me as a shrewd fellow, but now I saw through to the kind person he was deep down. I forced a smile on my face to hide my bitterness over being bested.

"Oh dear. Don't tell me you're upset?" he asked.

"No, I simply felt that you're a good person to place one's trust in."

"I'm honored to hear that. I also see you as someone I can trust, Your Majesty."

Despite that statement, I wasn't sure if I could take his words at face value.

I snuck a peek at Lord Melvin, only to see him grin back at me in response.

"I truly do see you as a welcome addition to this country, Queen Laetitia. Learning King Glenreed's secret hasn't caused you to resent him, has it?"

"His Majesty only revealed it as a means of rescuing me. He has my gratitude, and certainly not my disfavor."

Although, the revelation did come as quite a shock and had caused me to remember all of my embarrassing behavior. But that was no reason to start resenting King Glenreed.

"Hehe! All the more reason to appreciate you," he said. "Most people would be unable to accept the reality of a human who can transform into a wolf. You're a very accepting person, Your Majesty."

"Thank you for saying so." I returned his compliment with a genuine smile.

...Even if it *was* impossible for a human to transform into a wolf or an animal in this world...

Thanks to the manga and novels I read in my past life, it was a trope I was quite familiar with. With the help of such media, I was able to keep a relatively cool head when I first learned His Majesty's secret.

Lord Melvin and I continued our pleasant chat, all the while trying to read each other's true intentions, until the carriage began to slow down.

We were on the verge of arriving at the king's palace.

"Thank you for speaking with me, Your Majesty. Now I can take you to King Glenreed free of worries."

"Worries...?"

Perhaps he meant that if I had reacted negatively to Lord Aroo's secret, he would have tried to turn me away before I could even see King Glenreed.

"Oh, it's nothing so extreme." Lord Melvin squinted his light-blue eyes as he

read my thoughts. "I'm in no position to do something like sending you away from a meeting with His Majesty. Why, I'm sure he would bite me with those horrible, razor-sharp wolf fangs of his."

Lord Melvin gave an exaggerated shudder. Despite his complaints of fear, he was merely teasing the man whom he had a friendly relationship with.

"You sure care about King Glenreed, don't you, Lord Melvin?" It was why he was so eager to ask for my thoughts about Lord Aroo. He must have been concerned that my reaction might wound the king's heart. "I envy him for having such a wonderful aide at his side."

"Hehe! I'm nothing compared to this loyal servant of yours, Queen Laetitia."

When he heard Lord Melvin's light jest...

"I appreciate your words."

Lucian simply accepted the compliment and thanked the man politely.



I exited the carriage, smoothed out my dress, and handed today's meal over to Lord Melvin to test it for poison.

My heart was racing as I stepped into King Glenreed's parlor.

"...Thank you for coming, Laetitia." His Majesty's deep voice was a pleasant sensation for my ears.

*Was I just imagining it, or did he hesitate before opening his mouth to speak? But the king kept his graceful face expressionless as he looked at me. Yeah, he's beautiful, all right.*

He was just as handsome—no, *more* handsome than the king I saw in my dream.

His silver hair fell in curls over a pair of perfectly shaped eyebrows, above those almond-shaped eyes and elegant nose. The king looked like a sublime ice sculpture crafted by the finest of artists. No matter how many times I met him, I still couldn't help but be taken aback for a brief moment.

"Thank you for inviting me here to dine with you," I greeted. "I know how

busy you are, so I appreciate you taking the time to see me.”

“Is that so?”

The response I received was a curt one.

I was much more used to his responses being delivered with a wag of the tail...

*No, stop that!*

I was already mixing them up.

King Glenreed was Lord Aroo, but he wasn’t Lord Aroo right now. What he gave me was a perfectly normal response. There was no reason for me to feel disappointed.

I drilled that thought into my mind as I sat down opposite of His Majesty.

“...I’m sure we both have subjects we’re eager to discuss,” he said.

The second I was in my seat, King Glenreed was ready to dive right into it. I gulped quietly.

“You’re right about that. Whatever you’re able to tell me about Lord Aroo, I would like to hear it.”

“Very well. ...Right, then I’ll start with the royal family’s history in Wolfvarte. I’m sure you already know the legend of our kingdom’s founding.”

Of course I did. Once I made the decision to become a placeholder queen, I memorized an overview of Wolfvarte’s history and its legends.

“The story goes that the first king of Wolfvarte was a sacred wolf with a silver coat. I always believed it to be merely a fable...but was it true after all?” I asked.

“It was,” he answered. “They say that legends are simply shadows of history itself. The true story isn’t exactly like the legend, but it’s not entirely fiction either.”

“If it *was* completely true, that would certainly be impressive.”

I felt my heart start to speed up at the introduction of such a fascinating tale. The wolf who took human form to found a country. I was so curious to learn more.

"This was hundreds of years ago now. Not even my own family has had the full story passed down to us...but it's true that the first king could transform into a silver wolf and possessed the power to control ice and snow, and that some of our kings have been born with the same abilities since then," he explained.

"So there were many others just like Your Majesty throughout history."

"The royal family calls it 'ancestral reversion.'"

*Ancestral reversion. I repeated the term inside my head. Is that like atavism, I wonder? But if that's true, then do the children inherit both wolf and human traits together?*

The questions poured into my mind...

But mysterious forces like beastfolk and magic existed in this world.

Before me sat a king who possessed the power to transform into both a man and a wolf. It was proof that the bloodline had continued this far.

"...Have you always been able to freely transform into Lord Aroo?" I asked.  
"You were sickly as a child, right?"

It was hard to believe it, staring at the majestic ruler who was in front of me now. It was said that when he was young, His Majesty was too physically weak to leave the castle very often. Perhaps that was also a result of his ancestral reversion.

"It's true. I was a frail child. Whenever I was sick, the slightest stimulus would send me into my wolf form, which was real trouble. How could I ever leave, unless I was extremely careful?"

"Seeing someone transform into a wolf would be quite a fright."

Unfamiliar things tend to be met with ostracization. Unfortunately, that's a common point this world shares with my past life.

King Glenreed would have had no choice but to hide his abilities.

"I was essentially living in my bed for long periods of time to get better. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I spent my childhood in that bedroom," he said.

The king had very little freedom in his youth.

Just as I was considering how sad that was, being a child unable to let loose... I realized that his blue-green eyes had softened with thoughts of the nostalgic past.

“Your Majesty’s childhood was filled with warm memories, wasn’t it?”

After a moment of silence, His Majesty agreed: “...It was.”

I was curious to hear more about his childhood. In truth, I wanted to get to know the king better. This desire had formed inside me sometime after meeting him.

“What kind of child were you back then?” I asked.

King Glenreed took a moment to think before replying. “I don’t think I was a typical, active kind of child. My life was full of limitations thanks to my illness... but even now, I can’t say that it was all bad.”

“You must have had someone who was very close to you.”

His Majesty had a stern personality and was hard to approach at first, but he also had a gentle side as well. I knew someone with a kind heart must have had an influence on him.

“...My older brother.” Fondness, along with a distinct sense of pain. A mixture of emotions formed a brief glint of light in the king’s eyes. “Big Brother Leonardo was five years older than me, but he always came to pay me visits. He was an incredible person who deeply cared about others.”

Prince Leonardo. He was the firstborn son of the previous king, though he had since passed away.

“Whenever I struggled with my studies, he knew just how to teach me so that I would understand. He told me amusing stories of things that happened around the castle too. Sometimes he even brought a wooden sword to my room to show me the fencing moves he was studying. I was so entranced by it when I was young.” As he recounted his memories, the smiling king exhaled in a chuckle.

I couldn’t help but imagine it too. I pictured a young Glenreed, no taller than

my waist, grinning with joy. The image was so charming, I had to smile too.

"Hehe! Prince Leonardo sounds like a wonderful brother. I can tell how proud you are of him."

"...Am I that easy to read?"

"I also have a brother five years older than me, Big Brother Claude, who always doted on me. I understand exactly how much that can mean to someone."

*Big Brother Claude. I sure do miss him.*

While his personality could be stubborn and lazy, he never failed to watch out for me and show me love. I felt a surge of newfound affinity with His Majesty, having learned how much we both adored our older brothers.

While I was enjoying this moment to myself, King Glenreed quietly watched me. "It sounds like you see nothing wrong with my deep affection for my brother. I'm sure you also know how he died."

"Yes, I've heard the story."

Prince Leonard and his mother, the first queen, along with King Glenreed's mother, the third queen, all perished in an untimely landslide.

...At least, that's the official story.

The first queen and Prince Leonard were plotting the third queen's assassination, only to end up perishing alongside her. That was how most people in the government saw it.

"I don't know if it's true, and I don't know what Prince Leonard might have been thinking at the time...but I can tell how much you still care about your brother, Your Majesty. I believe those feelings are very precious things regardless of extenuating circumstances."

Royal families tend to have the most strife between brothers. But if King Glenreed's childhood connection with his brother was the foundation for the kindness in his heart today, then I saw no reason to criticize his feelings.

"...You think nothing of the fact that I haven't grown to despise my own mother's foe?"

"I don't believe you should force yourself to despise him at all."

As King Glenreed tried to probe further into my mind, I simply replied with my honest thoughts. I knew, to a member of the royal family, this might be an unreasonable response. However, I didn't think he needed to revere his mother needlessly, so long as it didn't turn them into enemies.

I had heard that His Majesty's mother wasn't very involved in raising him, although that wasn't unusual for royalty. Even now, the king had nothing to say about her while recounting his childhood. This didn't mean that he was uncaring, just that his mother simply never interacted with him in ways that would forge a strong relationship.

It was only natural for him to prefer the brother who always took the time to visit him over his estranged mother.

"I understand that, as a public figure, you can't reveal such things without making trouble for yourself...but that's why you waited until the two of us were alone so you could tell me privately, right? I don't see any problem in that at all. Despite how I might look, I can keep a secret." I pressed my finger to my lips playfully.

King Glenreed and I were the only two people in the room.

Just as I was thinking that I hoped His Majesty could relax around me a bit more...

"I see. So I singled you out to talk about my brother..."

I managed to hear His Majesty muttering to himself.

When I met the gaze of his blue-green eyes, I felt my cheeks start to heat up.

*Aaaaah! How embarrassing...*

Was I acting overfamiliar with the king?

*"...But that's why you waited until the two of us were alone so you could tell me privately, right?"*

Now that I thought about it again, that was such an arrogant assumption. I had revealed many of my deepest feelings to Lord Aroo. Now it seemed that I couldn't help but wish King Glenreed, as Lord Aroo himself, would return that

gesture.

*Awkward. This is painfully awkward.*

I had completely lost sense of the balance of our relationship.

As I tried to stop my smile from faltering, His Majesty squinted at me.

“I’m not the only one who’s surprisingly easy to read.”

His words were somewhat arrogant, but also distinctly friendly.

*Just like Lord Aroo.*

The image of the wolf exhaling through his nose flashed in my mind.

“You’re exactly like Lord Aroo, Your Majesty...”

“Of course I am. We’re the same person.”

“...Right. Hehe. That’s right. Of course.” I chuckled.

My stiff body started to relax.

Ever since I learned that King Glenreed was Lord Aroo, I was struggling to comprehend the state of our relationship. But now I understood.

Maybe I didn’t have to overthink it after all.

Lord Aroo cared about me, despite acting so nonchalant about it. King Glenreed was no different. Even if he changed from a silver wolf into a human, his heart remained the same.

The handsome King Glenreed and the fuzzy Lord Aroo. I imagined their faces together and felt a flood of warmth in my heart.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“I’m simply happy that you’re Lord Aroo.”

The words I spoke surprised me a bit as well.

It made me realize something.

Once I learned who Lord Aroo really was, I’d grown so embarrassed and awkward after remembering how I acted in front of the wolf. But aside from those feelings, I was happy too. If Lord Aroo was King Glenreed, then I knew I

would be able to keep up a good relationship with him.

“...You really are a strange woman.”

When I looked at the exasperated king, I saw the squinting glare of Lord Aroo in my mind. I couldn’t help but chuckle over these newfound comparisons.

“Hehe! My apologies. I can’t seem to stop seeing you as Lord A—”

*Knock, knock.*

A soft tapping on the door interrupted my sentence.

The meal I brought had finished being tested for poison.

“Your Majesty, you haven’t had dinner yet, have you? Would you care to try the meal I brought with me today?”

King Glenreed agreed to eat with me.

A glint of light flashed in his blue-green eyes.

It felt exactly like the look Lord Aroo always gave me when he wanted food.



**A** bit before Laetitia arrived at the castle...

Glenreed was furrowing his brow, alone in the throne room.

*How am I supposed to act once Laetitia is here?*

“Hmph.”

The king pondered the problem on his mind. Until now, he had always been able to wait for her arrival with all the dignity that a king should have. But now, Laetitia knew that he was Lord Aroo.

As awkward as it was to see her, Glenreed was also looking forward to it at the same time.

*...I don’t want her to see me flustered.*

Glenreed decided to play the part of the king in her presence, just as he always did.

When he sat down in his throne, he watched the doors be opened up before

him.

“...!”

A certain scent drifted into the room.

He felt his heart skip a beat at the sight of those amethyst eyes staring back at him. Seeing Laetitia again after all this time stirred all sorts of emotions in him.

*...When I'm in wolf form, I can just go right up to her.*

It was irritating to think that he had to sit on his throne and wait for her now. Although, that sudden thought surprised him when it appeared.

It was almost as if...

*Was I looking forward to her visit even more than I thought...?*

Despite the feelings surging up in his heart, Glenreed kept his face from showing any emotions. It was thanks to years of training as a ruler that he knew how to control his body.

After responding to Laetitia's composed greeting, he ordered everyone else out of the room. Melvin, the guards, and Lucian, Laetitia's servant, all went outside to stand by and wait.

Ancestral reversion was a secret of the royal family not meant to be shared with outsiders. That was why he cleared the room, although he spotted Lucian's piercing gaze trained on him just before he left. The man kept up his flawless demeanor as a servant, but for just one second, Glenreed felt the glance cast his way.

*He really seems wary of me.*

Lucian had looked at Glenreed judgmentally when he learned the true identity of Lord Aroo. Though that wasn't a particularly strange reaction to such a long-kept secret.

*Right. Of course he's going to have his concerns about me now...*

Laetitia, on the other hand, didn't seem to feel that way at all. His nose could sense her own attempts to steel herself for this encounter. However, the more they conversed, the more he detected the anxiety fading away from her.

Laetitia even occasionally let the cheerful expression she saved only for Lord Aroo mix into her usual, tempered ladylike smiles.

Before he knew it, Glenreed found himself discussing his memories of Leonardo for that reason. It was an unusual subject for him to broach.

“I see. So I singled you out to talk about my brother...”

His conversation with Laetitia was an incredibly pleasant one. Her words were like rays of sunlight, beaming down without fear or hesitation. Laetitia made no attempts to dismiss Glenreed’s feelings for his brother, despite how wrong they were for him, a member of royalty, to express.

Glenreed’s special nose could tell that she wasn’t lying.

*No, that’s not it. I know what kind of person she is without any “scent” to read.*

During his times as Lord Aroo, Glenreed managed to see Laetitia in her natural state. She was an elegant woman who never once failed to follow etiquette, but she was also so different from other young ladies of high society.

For some reason, she was chuckling about how Glenreed still reminded her of Lord Aroo.

“Why are you smiling like that?”

“I’m simply happy that you’re Lord Aroo.”

As always, she didn’t appear to be lying. Her smile was so gentle, as if she welcomed the fact that Glenreed and Lord Aroo were one and the same.

For a moment, Glenreed was unable to look away from her smile and those sparkling amethyst eyes.

*But why...?*

Why did she look so happy right now?

Why did her smile have such a strong effect on his heart?

Unable to make sense of it, Glenreed felt his pulse quicken.

*I can’t believe she’s so accepting of the fact that I’m Lord Aroo...*

Humans tend to reject things they don't understand and anything that strays from the norm.

Glenreed was capable of transforming into a silver wolf in an act of ancestral reversion. When others learned of this, they either openly praised him while secretly fearing him, or showed their respect by avoiding him entirely.

His parents were no different in that regard. They treated Glenreed like something different from them, both fearing who he was while anticipating his future.

But when Glenreed learned Laetitia wasn't like that, his eyes wavered.

"...You really are a strange woman."

He muttered the words to himself in the hope of hiding his own bashfulness.

"Hehe! My apologies. I can't seem to stop seeing you as Lord A—"

A knock came at the door while Laetitia was still speaking, and a servant announced that the meal was ready to eat, as the poison testing was now finished.

"Your Majesty, you haven't had dinner yet, have you? Would you care to try the meal I brought with me today?"

"Sure. I'll have it."

What did she bring for him today?

All of Laetitia's cooking was so delicious. Over the past few months, these meals had caused Glenreed to regain pleasure in the act of eating.

"I see you're going to cook it here today," he observed.

Lucian brought a small frying pan and a tray of ingredients covered with a lid to keep them clean. When he removed the lid, Glenreed spotted a fluffy white loaf sitting on the tray.

"Is that for toast?"

"It's pizza toast. You like pizza, right, Your Majesty?"

"I do. I'm looking forward to this."

“Hehe! Then I’ll do my best to be sure it lives up to your expectations.”

Laetitia was quick to begin the preparations for the meal.

It appeared that she had already done some of the work in advance. Glenreed watched her coat the white bread with a layer of crushed tomatoes.

“I just want to be safe. Your Majesty, you can eat onions, yes? I know that dogs and wolves aren’t supposed to be fed onions...”

“I can eat them. I enjoy onions, actually.”

“All right, thank you for telling me. I’ll be sure to use a lot.”

Despite the joke about his eating habits as a human, Laetitia’s hands never slowed. She covered the sliced onions with a layer of grated cheese, thinly cut sausages, and finally, circular slices of bell peppers distributed evenly across the surface of the bread.

“All right. Time to cook it.”

Laetitia would cook the pizza toast with a fire spell of her own making. She coated the frying pan with oil and butter, covered it with a lid, and let the toast cook over a low flame.

“It smells very good.”

The aroma of cheese hung in the air. The more the frying pan crackled, the stronger Glenreed’s appetite grew.

“I think it’s just about ready.”

Laetitia removed the lid with a potholder and checked on the food inside. Once she saw that it was fully cooked, she lifted the toast out and placed it on a plate.

“I see now. It really is both pizza and toast in one.”

Glenreed quietly admired this new way of eating bread.

The cheese had browned on the grill and gave off an appetizing smell. The combination of red tomato sauce, golden cheese, and green bell peppers was a vivid display of colors.

He bit down. It was soft yet crunchy.

The flavors of melted cheese and white bread immediately hit his mouth upon first bite. While the rich tomato sauce was tangy, the taste paired well with the sliced sausages on top. The onions and bell peppers added to the entertaining array of flavors on his tongue.

“Mm.”

The cheese was delicious, but it was also stretchy. It snapped, sending a piece flying onto his lips.

Laetitia let out a chuckle as she watched him pick it off with his fingers.

“Hehe! When you ate pizza as Lord Aroo, you had some trouble with the cheese too.”

“.....”

Glenreed silently continued to eat his pizza toast. It was delicious but also embarrassing. As much as he wanted to keep staring at Laetitia’s charming smile, that would only add to his own humiliation.

“Would you like another slice?” Laetitia made the offer after he finished his slice in the blink of an eye.

“Sure. I’ll have another.”

“Very well. Would you care to customize your own slice with whatever toppings you prefer? I also have ham, bacon, and chicken with me, in addition to what you already ate. It’s very fun to build your own slice and find a combination you enjoy.”

“I see. So it’s like an activity too.”

It was just like Laetitia to present a meal with many hidden sides.

As Glenreed took his second slice of bread, he felt a certain idea pop into his head.



“**WHY** don’t you have my second slice instead?”

“Really? Me?” I felt my eyes light up at his suggestion.

“Sure. You haven’t had dinner yet either, right? You should eat first.”

“You’re quite sure?”

“I want you to try something I’ve made for once.” His Majesty was staring at the ingredients next to the frying pan. “You said that it’s fun to feed people with your own cooking.”

He was recalling a time he came to me in the form of Lord Aroo. I had stroked his silver fur while I thought up a menu and told the wolf all about my cooking.

Cooking could be a headache at times, but there was nothing like the sense of accomplishment I felt upon having a meal turn out delicious, and I always loved hearing that others had enjoyed my food too.

It seemed that even His Majesty had now been influenced by my passion for cooking.

“I don’t know anything about cooking, but even I can probably pick out toppings and cook a slice of toast.”

“This is the perfect meal to begin studying that sort of thing,” I said.

Picking out toppings was fun, and it was a great, simple first step to learn the basics too.

“Please allow me to wash your hands, so as not to get any dust or dirt on the food.”

Lucian quickly presented a bowl of water to His Majesty.

Washing your hands is always an important first step.

I used a spell to send the water up and douse King Glenreed’s hands until they were clean.

“All right. You can place the toppings of your choice on the bread just like I did earlier. Is there anything you would like me to explain first?”

“What toppings do you like?”

“Oh... I really enjoy onions too. I think I’m also in the mood for cheese today.”

“All right. I’ll use lots of cheese and onions, then.”

His Majesty sprang to work once my order was in. It was his first time cooking, but he managed to arrange a nice balance of toppings on the slice of bread.

"Well done. Now place some oil and butter on the surface of the frying pan and cook the bread on top."

"All right, let me see that."

He whisked the frying pan out of my hand. It was heavy, since the lid was still on, but the king's muscles were strong enough to lift it easily.

King Glenreed held the frying pan carefully over the flame I produced with a spell. He managed to cook the slice of pizza toast perfectly on his very first try.

"I can't wait to taste it."

I carried the toast up to my mouth with both hands.

It looked to be perfectly cooked—neither burned nor too soft.

The thick layer of melted cheese coated the surface, which was delicious on its own, but the toast tasted even better knowing that I was eating King Glenreed's very first culinary creation.

"Looks like you're enjoying it."

*Ah, he smiled.*

The corners of King Glenreed's lips pulled up into a gentle smile. His icy features suddenly filled with a warmth like the coming of spring.

"You were right. It's fun to cook."

"...It really is."

I was too distracted to respond in a timely manner. I couldn't resist staring at that smile. It was total foul play. What about it, exactly, was foul play, I couldn't say...but it was definitely impossible to handle.

As I sat there, my heart still racing...

"You have some cheese on your face."

King Glenreed was in the middle of yet more foxiness.

I felt his skin against my cheek. His long, slender fingers were stretched out to touch me.

"Wh-What was that for?!"

“Just showing you where the cheese is.”

“Thank you!”

I swiftly reached up and wiped the cheese off.

*Your Majesty, you’re killing me over here...*

Was it my imagination, or was he acting much more familiar with me than usual?

I glanced up at the king, feeling my heart still beating rapidly.

Maybe His Majesty was also unconsciously treating this like a meeting between me and Lord Aroo now. Though he could act as he pleased in the form of Lord Aroo, doing the same things in human form was far too much for me to handle.

This wasn’t good.

As I chewed on my own pizza toast, I offered another slice of white bread to His Majesty.

White bread was lighter and easier on the stomach than pizza dough.

The king finally appeared full after finishing three slices of pizza toast.

“That was great. I like how you can switch out ingredients to get a different combination of flavors.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I knew you would enjoy this meal, since you really enjoyed the pizza you had as Lord Aroo.”

Lord Aroo enjoyed some of my meals, while King Glenreed also enjoyed others.

I came up with the idea of pizza toast after searching for something I could combine that would overlap the two. His Majesty and Lord Aroo’s shared preferences for food was another reminder that they were one and the same.

“I know you’re a busy man, Your Majesty. Pizza takes quite a bit of time to make if you start with the dough, but pizza toast itself is quick and easy, so long as you have toppings on hand. I brought quite a bit of white bread with me tonight, which you can give to your chefs to make pizza with if you need a snack

at some point.”

“So you were thinking of me when you chose this dish.”

As he spoke...the king’s lips pulled into yet another irresistible smile.



**HIS** Majesty and I continued to chat for a bit after finishing our pizza toast. Once some more time had passed, I decided it was time to take my leave.

As soon as I arrived home, Fon, my griffin, came out to greet me.

“Kyuwah!”

“I’m home, Fon.”

Fon’s shadow stretched long and wide underneath the moonlight.

The griffin saw me as his master and had grown attached to me like a loyal dog. His vision wasn’t very good in the dark, so instead of flying, he walked over to me on his four legs.

“Pyu-wee...”

“There, there. You came out at night just to greet me, didn’t you? I really appreciate it.”

I stroked the white feathers around his neck. His plumage was silky smooth thanks to the regular brushings I gave him. It even seemed to glow slightly in the moonlight.

After a thorough petting, Fon returned to his hut to sleep, now satisfied. His house was a small building made of wood that I had built just for him. He walked through the open door and sat down on the straw floor. Even from far away, it was cute to see him sitting in his bed, his limbs neatly folded up underneath him.

Once I made it through the front yard and into the villa, it was Tweety who greeted me next.

“Peep peep!”

*“I want some magical energy!”* he seemed to be saying.

Tweety made a rush for me, but I had to stop him in place.

“I have to get changed first, Tweety. Wait just a moment.”

I was still in the fancy dress with lots of accessories that I wore to my dinner with King Glenreed. If Tweety decided that now was time for a cuddle, his feathers would probably get stuck on all the dress’s ornaments.

“Whoa!”

But Tweety paid no attention to my warning. He waddled right up to me.

Tweety was quite a glutton when it came to magical energy.

I kept him at arm’s length, refusing to let him come closer, only to watch the bird’s face take on a gloomy look. He stepped back with a small chirp and looked at his surroundings.

“Peep!”

“Mraw?”

Tweety started to approach Berry, who was walking down the hallway.

“Pi-pi, peep peep!” he tweeted to Berry.

“Meow. Mrar-mraw.”

Berry seemed to be making some sort of response.

I listened to the chorus of meows and peeps.

*Can they actually understand each other?*

I couldn’t be sure, but I watched as their conversation proceeded as a perfect back-and-forth.

“Peekyoo!”

Tweety suddenly crouched down, burying Berry in his cream-yellow feathers. But Berry didn’t seem to mind at all. She narrowed her light-green eyes, enjoying the sensation of Tweety’s fluffy feathers.

I enjoyed this adorable exchange for a moment before heading to my room to change.



AFTER changing out of my dress and receiving a cuddle from Tweety, I went to the kitchen to whip up a small snack.

I took out a loaf of white bread just like the one I had for dinner with King Glenreed. I spread a layer of whipped cream and strawberry jam onto a slice of bread, then rolled it up into a cylinder, starting at one edge.

With the completed strawberry-jam-roll sandwich in hand, I brought it over to offer to Berry.

“Meow meow!”

Her eyes lit up as she grasped the roll sandwich between her paws. The cat was clearly in heaven as she stuffed her cheeks with the snack.

“Mraw-hah...”

Berry could barely keep her eyes open once she finished eating. She drifted from side to side like a boat on the sea.

“Hehe! Are you tired from another day of gathering up Gardener Cats?”

Forty-eight Gardener Cats currently lived at my villa, including Berry.

Just recently, the Gardener Cats had come here to help repair the destroyed rose garden at the palace. As the first one to take up residence here, Berry was seen as a trustworthy leader to the others.

“She’s much more caring than you would think.”

Lucian lifted Berry up. He always had words of criticism for Berry, but at the same time, I could tell he found her endearing too.

A cat’s charms are simply hard to resist.

Berry seemed to trust Lucian too. She allowed him to carry her without trying to escape.

I reached out and stroked her fuzzy head. Berry started to purr.

*Fluffa fluff. Puuurr. Fluffa fluff.*

It was downright precious.

I wanted to pet Berry forever if she would just keep making that noise.

A cat's purrs are like medicine for a human's tired body. That was a saying I had heard before in my past life. Right now, I felt it to be ever so true.

The longer I petted her, the quieter her purring began to grow.

"Goodnight, Berry."

As Berry closed her eyes, drifting off into the world of slumber...I caught a whiff of a pleasant aroma. It was the same scent of strawberries she gave off earlier that morning.

## Chapter 2: The Gardener Cat Matchmaking Party

“**ALL** right. Is every participant here with us?”

I looked over the row of faces in front of my eyes.

Today, I was playing matchmaker. However, my participants weren’t humans —they were Gardener Cats.

“Meow meow!”

“Mraw?”

“Mew mew mew!”

The Gardener Cats cried out as they observed the crowd of humans. The purpose of this matchmaking session was to find owners for the many Gardener Cats.

As Mythical Beasts, Gardener Cats grow their favorite plants, harvest them, and present them as offerings to humans. This comes with the understanding that the human is expected to use that plant to cook a tasty meal for the cat.

The reason they came to this villa in the first place was out of a desire for a safe place where they could indulge in delicious foods. The Gardener Cats stuck to themselves for a while, but once they felt safe here, the urge to dine only grew stronger.

They had always trusted me alone to do their cooking for them, so they brought me their favorite ingredients to work with. However, with this many cats, I couldn’t keep up with the required cooking whatsoever. That was why I decided it was time to work out a new system for the Gardener Cats.

Once I was sure that everyone was here, it was time to begin the event, which I’d already explained to all attendees.

We were gathered in an open area of the garden. I had arranged several tables out here and lined them with things like bowls of water, cutting boards and knives, cooking utensils, and vegetables and meats that were commonly

used in cooking. Five humans stood in front of each table, while groups of seven or eight Gardener Cats drew closer.

There were already more Gardener Cats living at my villa than humans and animals combined. The same could be said for my matchmaking party—the cats outnumbered the humans by a factor of 1.5.

“Good afternoon. Thank you for meeting with me today.” Gilbert sounded a bit nervous as he spoke to the Gardener Cats standing on a chair across from him.

All the chefs who worked at my villa were joining today’s event. The men were extremely fascinated by the Gardener Cats, who could bring them ingredients that weren’t even in season or introduce them to foods that weren’t well-known in the area. The chefs were eager to see the creatures in action.

“Mraw!”

“Meow meow!”

The Gardener Cats didn’t hesitate to go straight up to the humans.

Tomatoes, wheat, pumpkins, oranges, spinach, and radishes.

They all held up harvests from their personal crops and eagerly offered them to the humans, who wasted no time getting started on simple dishes. The Gardener Cats appeared to be choosing their potential human masters based off their cooking preferences and personalities.

“All right, time’s just about up. Please move on to the next pair.” I called out instructions for everyone to switch places.

The Gardener Cats, still clutching their foods of choice, all relocated to the next table over. Some of them had already begun to stuff their little mouths with the finished culinary creations. The idea was to eat the hot meals before they’d cooled, then save the ones that could be eaten at room temperature to have together once a full rotation was complete.

“Yes, I think it’s going well.”

I watched over them all while nibbling on my own turnip-and-bacon stir-fry.

The balance of salt, pepper, and butter was just perfect, and chewing on the turnips was a pleasant sensation for my teeth. It was a simple dish that could be completed quickly, and the savory bacon really complemented the light flavor of the turnips.

I would expect nothing less than a wonderful dish from Gilbert. As the host of today's matchmaking event, I had the special privilege of sampling whatever dishes I wanted. It was the ultimate perk.

The matchmaking session would continue from morning all the way to the afternoon, since it took a lot of time to test each pairing of cat and human. After a full rotation was completed, we could eat the rest of the leftovers. Some were worried that we wouldn't be able to finish such a massive amount of food, but that fear turned out to be unfounded.

"Meow!"

"Mraw-hah!"

"Ooh! Look at them go!"

The cats cried out with joy while the humans expressed how impressed they were.

The Gardener Cats stretched out their paws, eager to get to the food first. I could hardly believe how much they could stuff into their tiny little bodies.

"...So I guess you weren't more of a glutton than the rest of them, huh, Berry?" I said to her.

"Mraw?"

Berry was seated in the chair next to me. I reached out to pet her.

As the pioneer cat who came to this villa, Berry had already grown attached to me and wouldn't be participating in the matchmaking event. She simply watched the process from my side and downed plate after plate of food. Despite her intense passion for strawberries, Berry appeared to enjoy other ingredients as well.

She leaned against the back of her chair, aiming her plump belly up toward the sky.

“I believe it’s time for the next step,” I announced.

With almost all the dishes now eaten, it was finally time for the grand finale.

The humans and beastfolk stood side by side. The Gardener Cats were supposed to walk up to the person they chose as their new master.

“Meow!”

“Mraw!”

Over forty Gardener Cats suddenly sprang into motion. They bolted straight to their chosen person.

“Wha?! Whoa, whoa, whoa!!”

It was Gilbert, the most popular potential master at the event, who let out a cry of shock. Somewhere around ten Gardener Cats rushed toward him. They circled the chef like a menacing gang of kitties.

“It figures that the better cook you are, the more popular you find yourself,” Lucian, the matchmaking supervisor, murmured.

“It looks that way,” I replied. “I’m sure all the chefs are pleased.”

They were all petting the Gardener Cats who’d approached them, taking in their newfound popularity. It was a heartwarming scene...aside from the commotion developing in front of Gilbert.

“Raaaaaw?”

“Urararaaawn?”

“*I’m the best for Gilbert!*”

“*No, I am!*”

“*No, me!*”

The Gardener Cats appeared to be on the verge of breaking out into a catfight in the truest sense. With their future meals on the line, none of them were ready to back down.

Gilbert didn’t know how to respond to the turmoil unfolding before him.

“Wait! Please don’t fight over me!”

“Oh my, I can’t believe I just heard such a legendary line!” I exclaimed.

I felt my heart speed up a bit.

*“Don’t fight over me!”*

It was the kind of thing you’d hear in plays and other works of fiction. I couldn’t believe I just heard it in real life.

...Although, he was currently being fought over by cats not ladies.

“Popularity isn’t always easy,” I said.

“...I couldn’t agree more. It’s especially nerve-racking to watch someone unaware of their own popularity.”

Lucian looked at me and nodded his head. He seemed unusually confident in what he was saying. Perhaps he had experience with this because of his own good looks.

Once the cats truly looked to be on the verge of clawing each other, it was time for me to step in and mediate.

“Rain down, drops of blue!”

“Mraw?!”

“Meow?!”

*Splash!*

My spell sent a burst of water into the warring Gardener Cats.

*Excellent. It didn’t hit the tables or Gilbert.*

As I silently praised my own magic control, I stared down at the soaking Gardener Cats.

“Calm down, all of you. The entire point of the matchmaking event was to prevent this sort of thing.” My tone was a bit harsh to prevent any more fighting.

When the Gardener Cats had first come here, they’d been seeking out masters of their own. All the conflict that arose from that is what led me to hold this matchmaking event to try to resolve the issue.

"No fighting. We're going to talk this out peacefully. Understood?"

The Gardener Cats quickly began nodding their heads.

It wasn't surprising that dousing them with water worked as a good wake-up call.

Ever since that day...

Some of the Gardener Cats began to see me as a terrifying person, deserving of fear and awe.

*How did it come to this?*

To my utter surprise, I became a final boss figure among the cats.



**AFTER** lots of thought, Gilbert decided on four Gardener Cats to adopt.

He wouldn't be able to care for all ten, so he ended up talking to the remaining six and persuading them to go with someone else. This seemed to be successful. Some cats went on to choose a new master, while others gave up for the time being.

*Now we need to wait and see how it goes.*

The matchmaking event successfully paired thirty-five Gardener Cats with masters. I planned to spend the next month observing whether the pairs were able to form trusting relationships.

During that time, I was going to be fairly busy.

A diplomatic envoy from the Winged Wildam Empire was scheduled to visit the castle soon. King Glenreed had been busy for some time now preparing for their reception.

*Things aren't very good between Wildam and Wolfvarte.*

For the past couple dozen years or so, though there was no official war between them, the two countries had suffered from a strained relationship. If the king failed in mending this rift, there was a definite possibility that war could break out.

That was why King Glenreed was so hard at work preparing for this visit. As

the queen of this land, be it only for a brief time, I wanted to support his efforts.

Once I received word that the matchmaking event had been cleaned up, I began to get ready for an outing.

My plan was to take a brief trip to the royal capital.

Once there, I would search for any remaining Gardener Cats lurking in the city and convince them to live with me. This was something the other Gardener Cats had asked of me. I had the king's permission as well.

I knew that nearly half of the capital city's Gardener Cats were now living at my villa. The rest were still there, avoiding the humans by living as alley cats...or rather, alley Gardener Cats.

"We want them to have a safe place to sleep and access to delicious food, don't we, Berry?"

"Mraw!!"

Berry nodded.

Some Gardener Cats were supposedly growing interested in my villa once they heard stories about it, but they were uneasy, as they didn't know anything about its human occupants, which made them hesitant to relocate. That was why Berry and I were going to visit the wild Gardener Cats together, hoping to ease their fears with a face-to-face meeting. I had His Majesty's permission to add more Gardener Cats to the existing clowder at my villa.

With the short period of time I had left before things got busy, I decided now was a good opportunity to work on scouting Gardener Cats in the capital.

I changed into a plain dress with few accessories and donned my brown wig, and with that, I was ready to go.

Lucian, my guards, and I set out for the capital.

When we arrived, we left our carriage and followed Berry's lead to start searching for Gardener Cats. She managed to find eleven stray Gardener Cats, six of which we successfully convinced to join us at the villa.

The capital city was fairly big, so I decided we'd reached a good stopping point for the day. We returned to the carriage and began to head down the main

street to return to the palace.

I was stroking Berry in my seat when I suddenly heard a commotion from outside

"What's the matter?" I called out to the coachman.

"Something's going on. The road up ahead looks blocked."

"Is it a carriage accident?"

"No, I don't think so. It looks like..." The driver's voice began to grow confused. "There's these big wings, like a bird...wait, no. It's a horse. There's a horse up ahead."

"...A Pegasus?" I questioned him curiously, only to be told that I was right.

Pegasi were a type of Mythical Beast that resembled horses with wings on their back. They looked exactly like the animals of legend from my past life. Pegasi tended to be around the same size as normal horses, if not slightly larger, and were capable of flying through the air with a human rider on their back.

As an incredibly rare kind of Mythical Beast, the only country in the entire continent with access to Pegasi they could ride was the Winged Wildam Empire. They were extremely proud of their Pegasi, going as far as adding the word *Winged* to their very name as a tribute.

Now one of those creatures was here in the capital city, and apparently in some sort of trouble.

Something didn't feel right. I exited my carriage and walked forward to see what was going on.

Lucian swiftly parted the crowd of onlookers to create a path for me. When I reached an open space in front of the Pegasus, I saw a man with orange hair holding onto the animal's reins.

The blue color of his military uniform told me that he was indeed a citizen of the Winged Wildam Empire. The soldier was standing opposite of a few beastfolk men.

"What's the meaning of this?! What do you think you're doing?!" The

shouting beastfolk man had a group of people with him, and they were blocking off the road.

With a scowl, the soldier opened his mouth to respond. “This is all your fault, not mine. You need to train that rat of yours.”

“What did you just say?!” The beastfolk man grew even more agitated.

Between their argument and the whispers from the rest of the onlookers, I began to get a sense of what had happened.

It appeared that the soldier had been walking his Pegasus along so that he could visit a shop on the main street, but a small dog the beastfolk man had with him began to bark at the Pegasus.

Pegasi are very rare Mythical Beasts that are never seen in these parts, so there’s little anyone can do to stop a dog from being frightened by them, but the soldier didn’t seem to accept this.

He had then made his Pegasus flap its wings and fly up to create a heavy wind from above, hoping to shut the yapping dog up. The dog fell quiet, all right, but unfortunately, the leash tying it down also broke under the force of the wind. The dog took off in the opposite direction of the Pegasus.

Once he was all alone, the beastfolk man took out his anger on the soldier.

“He ran because you did something completely idiotic!”

“If you’re upset, then blame that barking rat of yours. He’s the one who started this with all his yapping.”

“But you’re the one who couldn’t keep your hands to yourself!!”

“My hands? Oh, you mean these wings? I see your eyes are as challenged as your brain.”

“Not as bad as yours!!”

The onlooking beastfolk cried out in support for the angry man who lost his dog.

Most beastfolk residents of the capital city belong to the Dog-Fang clan. Given that they kept dogs as companion animals, they clearly blamed the foreigner

who looked down on dogs.

“It sounds like both sides are to blame.”

I agreed with Lucian’s quiet statement.

While the soldier hadn’t handled it well, the dog’s master should be the one in charge of keeping him secure. It was also entirely possible he was negligent in choosing a leash, seeing how easily it broke.

I could only watch them nervously from the crowd, unable to take a side.

If a fight between a soldier from the Winged Wildam Empire and the Wolfvartian people escalated, it could very potentially have diplomatic implications.

I was just about ready to reveal my identity and step in to mediate, when suddenly...

“Bad idea, Your Majesty,” a sultry voice whispered into my ear.

I turned around to see a tall man standing behind me.

His loosely wavy, reddish-brown hair reminded me of the color of a cup of fine tea. The man behind me—Leonard—squinted his sleepy green eyes at me.

Lucian’s eyes were a bit wider than before. It appeared he hadn’t noticed Leonard’s approach either.

“Leonard? Why are you here...?” I asked.

“Traveling bards are drawn to the voices of the masses, even if said voices are unbearable cries of rage.”

As poetically as he put it, to me, it sounded like he was just another rubbernecker. Leonard shot me a wink. The pompous action suited such a beautiful man.

“But thanks to this scene, I’ve been reunited with the beautiful queen. Would you care to stick around and let me play you a song?”

“No thank you. Not today.”

Leonard had previously rescued me from a group of thugs when I left the castle to search for Berry in the city. He had a sharp eye and was able to identify

me, even in my disguise. Since then, he had visited my villa many times to perform with his lute.

But there was no time for music right now.

Ahead of the bystanders, the argument appeared to be really heating up. It was on the verge of coming to blows.

I couldn't allow anyone to be injured. There would be no stopping what happened next. Someone could even end up killed.

Leonard was kind enough to stop me out of concern, but I couldn't ignore the situation any longer.

"Hey, little soldier! Are you even listenin' to me?!"

"There's no use arguing with an idiot. This is why I hate interacting with ground-crawlers. Talking with you people any longer is just a waste of my time."

I continued down the path that Lucian was clearing for me in the crowd.

The soldier tugged at the reins in his hands, causing his Pegasus to flap its wings.

The onlookers shouted when the sudden wind kicked up. Just as the beastfolk man was about to grab the soldier...

"AAAAH!!"

"NEIIIGH!!"

*Splash!* A great sound rang out.

When they saw the sudden shower of water emerge from the cloudless sky, the people cried out in shock, while the Pegasus let out a whinny.

I took two steps forward once my spell was complete.

The people in front of me immediately backed away.

I continued forward into the heart of the fight, my heels clacking on the cobblestone road.

"Please calm down, both of you. And please quiet your Pegasus."

My voice rang out on the silent street.

After stopping the catfight at the matchmaking event, I never believed that history would repeat itself so soon. I'd cast a water spell just like last time, hoping to startle the men and force them to listen to me. I didn't want to continue, but I had no other choice.

Once I felt ready, I began to speak to them.

"I understand why you're both so fired up, but there's something else that needs to come first. Doesn't this beastfolk man need to search for his lost dog before anything else?"

"Y-Yeah...but some people who saw him run away went to chase after him already." The beastfolk man mumbled his response.

"I see. But as his master, I believe you have a duty to search for the dog as well. I'm sure it will proceed faster with the help of someone who understands his personality and the places he might choose to hide."

"...R-Right. I'll do that."

He nodded awkwardly. Perhaps he saw that no good would come of continuing this fight for the time being.

The soldier sneered at the sight of the beastfolk man leaving to search for his pet.

"Hah. He runs off with his tail between his legs just because of some little girl's scolding."

"What did you say?!"

The soldier's taunts drew the beastfolk man right back into the argument.

*Ugh. Enough of this.*

How could they be so hotheaded?

Considering how fast the Gardener Cats were to put their differences aside, perhaps they were actually far more clever than the two men in front of me.

I resisted the urge to sigh and turned to the soldier instead.

"Please don't start back up again. Nothing good will come of dragging out this fight."

"Drag it out? I could take out a couple of those cowardly mutts in the blink of an eye."

"You shouldn't be calling them that."

*Mutt* was a derogatory term for beastfolk. Naturally, this caused the beastfolk in the crowd to clench their fists and glare at the soldier.

"Oho, how scary. You savage mutts just love jumping to violence. Don't you see? They're about to tear me apart. I've got no choice but to resort to self-defense!"

The soldier was clearly trying to agitate them. He pulled the Pegasus's reins and mounted the creature.

I assumed that, after that speech, he wasn't attempting to flee. He was probably heading for the sky to launch his attacks.

"...I'm sorry about this."

I started with an apology. It was directed at the Pegasus, who had no choice but to follow the soldier's orders. With those words, I quickly launched into a spell.

"Fly, formless arms!"

A gust of wind shot down from the sky. The force caused the panicked Pegasus to land back on the cobblestone.

"What the hell are you doing?!" the soldier cried out from on top of the Pegasus. He sounded like he was ready to attack me himself.

I stopped Lucian from stepping forward to defend me, and I looked up at the soldier to speak.

"I cast a spell in order to protect you."

"Don't be stupid!! You just prevented me from taking off!"

"Correct. I didn't want you to fly up."

"So you're just harassing me!"

"That's not true. I'm sure you understand, right?"

It would become obvious once he managed to calm his head. I began to recite the plain facts to him.

“It is forbidden by law to fly a winged Mythical Beast or employ other means of flight throughout a city without the permission of the governor in charge.”

This was established law in Wolfvarte, and similar laws existed in other countries as well.

There are very few humans or beastfolk capable of flight in this world. It would be just about impossible for anyone on the ground to reach someone flying in the air, which is why it’s important to enact laws that prevent those capable of flight from having too much power.

“It’s a fundamental rule that any Pegasus Knight would know. I have no doubt that you’re aware of the law, correct? Have you received approval to fly your Pegasus in this capital city?”

“...! I...”

The soldier couldn’t respond.

It was clear that he didn’t have permission to fly.

The envoy from the Winged Wildam Empire was due to arrive in the city soon. But I hadn’t heard word that he was actually here yet, nor that His Majesty had approved of any flight in the capital city.

*I’ll bet he’s a Pegasus Knight here to survey the city before the diplomatic mission arrives.*

Although, it seemed to defeat the purpose of sending a party in advance if they were just going to start trouble here.

“If you attempt to fly your Pegasus here again, you will be punished appropriately. That’s why I used a spell to stop you.”

“Ngh... You...!”

The man fell silent, seeming to understand that he was at a disadvantage. But just then, his lips pulled into a smirk as if he just thought of something.

“Ha! Little girls are so stupid! I guess you didn’t know that Pegasus Knights

won't be prosecuted if they fly to protect themselves!"

"I'm perfectly aware."

"Liar! You were convinced your dumb little plan would be enough to scare me!"

"All I did was recite the facts. How exactly were you about to protect yourself? You egged on these beastfolk, meaning you have no claim to self-defense. There are plenty of witnesses here to speak to that."

The onlookers nodded in response to my prompting. They glared at the soldier

"...! What's a bit of protest from these mutts and ground-crawlers supposed to do to me?" Despite the fierce tone in his voice, I could see panic on his face.

"Guards! The guards are on their way!"

When this cry rose from the crowd, the soldier flinched. He clearly seemed to realize that it would be a bad idea to stick around and be captured by the guards.

"Damn it...! I'll remember your face, little girl! You better be prepared for the consequences!!"

With those last words of sworn vengeance, the soldier mounted his Pegasus and took off running. The bystanders shouted insults at him as they moved out of the way.

"What shall you do, my lady? Should I apprehend the Pegasus Knight and hand him over to the guards?"

"No, I don't think so."

The knight's arrest could be enough to cause a major diplomatic incident. It wasn't as if he was the only one at fault in escalating the fight, so it felt like a smarter idea to leave the situation without a conclusion for now.

That soldier surely wouldn't think of repeating such disgraceful behavior again...or so I wanted to believe.

"I apologize for all the fuss."

With that last remark to the crowd, I quickly scurried away from the scene. I turned into an alleyway so that nobody would be able to follow me. After rounding a few corners, Berry jumped down from the roof of a nearby shop.

“Meow meow!”

“*Good job handling that fight,*” she seemed to be telling me.

I knew she must have been watching from the rooftop, not wanting to be mobbed by the crowd.

“That was much more exhausting than breaking up a Gardener Cat fight.” I smiled awkwardly, glancing at my surroundings. “Leonard seems to have disappeared.”

I didn’t spot his tea-colored hair anywhere. I knew that the people in the crowd had probably seen Leonard come up and talk to me. Perhaps he didn’t want to be associated with the person who’d appointed themselves mediator in that dispute.

“It sounds like he left right after you volunteered yourself to help work out the argument,” Lucian informed me after a man dressed in plain clothes whispered into his ear. He was one of the disguised guards accompanying me today and had kept his identity hidden as he watched over the scene.

My guards were incredibly capable. Even now, they were watching over me as they worked on getting my coachman to meet us at a more isolated place.

“...I see. Thank you. Let’s get back to the castle right away.”

The issues still weighed on my mind, but I had other priorities at the moment.

Berry and I met up with our carriage and set off for home.



**AS** soon as I returned to my villa, the first thing I did was send a report to His Majesty.

The soldier from the Winged Wildam Empire had managed to escape, but I imagined he would probably report his version of the events to his superiors in a way that made him look good. Those superiors could also raise their objections with the government of Wolfvarte as a result.

I hoped that my fears would go unfounded, but the best course of action was to be safe and share the information I learned with King Glenreed.

It was now the day after the unexpected incident in the capital city. The king summoned me to the castle for further discussion on the topic.

“Thank you for coming, Laetitia. I’ve already received word from the owner of the lost dog.”

King Glenreed wasted no time getting to the point after a brief greeting.

His words surprised me. I quickly racked my brain. It shouldn’t be possible for an ordinary citizen to contact the king in such a brief amount of time.

“The beastfolk man who lost the dog yesterday appeared to be a commoner, judging by his mannerisms and clothing... So does that mean he wasn’t the dog’s owner?” I asked.

Dog owners in this kingdom sometimes hired people to walk their dogs for them. Beastfolk doted on their own companion animals, but for some, it was too difficult to care for their every need. It was a common practice that was well accepted throughout the country.

Edgar and the other wolfkeepers of the castle grounds did this kind of work. The wolves’ true owner was the king himself, but wolfkeepers were hired to take care of the wolves in place of King Glenreed.

“Correct. The beastfolk man you met was a worker hired to walk the dog of Countess Needia.”

The Needia family was very influential. Their roots traced back to before the founding of Wolfvarte itself.

The Kingdom of Wolvarte was founded around one hundred years ago by the union of five smaller countries. The Needia family belonged to the middle-most country and was given the title of earl a few hundred years ago. The family had a long history and was even more influential than the families of certain dukes and marquises.

It would be perfectly possible for the Needia family to contact King Glenreed directly.

"Lady Needia is quite the dog lover, isn't she? I've heard rumors that she's utterly devoted to her companion animal," I said.

"That's true. Beastfolk see their companion animals as family, but even for beastfolk, the countess is very attached to her dog."

"I see. That could be troublesome, couldn't it?"

I knew that Lady Needia would be enraged with the people responsible for losing her beloved dog. As someone who had a beloved dog of her own in her past life—a Shiba Inu named Jiro—I understood exactly how she must feel.

"The countess sounds very angry. She said she'll never forgive the Pegasus Knight from the Winged Wildam Empire if her dog is dead or never found."

"...This is becoming a diplomatic issue, isn't it?"

His Majesty nodded silently.

This was turning into a real headache.

"Ten days. That's how long Lady Needia is prepared to wait. If she doesn't have her dog back safely by then, she's going to formally seek compensation from Wildam."

"Ten days? Then we'll have to be qui—"

Just then, a knock came from the throne room doors.

This was unusual. There weren't supposed to be interruptions in the throne room, with the exception of urgent circumstances.

"Enter," King Glenreed said in a booming voice. A government official came into the room as soon as he received permission. "What is it?"

"It's the Winged Wildam Empire. Their envoy has arrived to request an audience with Your Majesty."

"They're earlier than expected. I heard they were supposed to be here two days from now."

"They say they have urgent business with Your Majesty."

"...Very well. I'll see them."

When His Majesty glanced at me, I gave a small nod.

“Perfect timing. Laetitia is already here.”

“As you wish. I’m sure a welcoming from King Glenreed and Queen Laetitia will be most satisfactory.”

The official nodded and immediately commenced the work of preparing the throne room.



IT wasn’t long before the diplomatic mission from the Winged Wildam Empire entered our space. Their group was around ten people in total. Among them was, as I had expected, the arrogant soldier who tried to fly his Pegasus in town yesterday.

The man who took the spot at the very front was a beautiful black-haired young man. He appeared to be my age, or perhaps a year or two older.

With glossy black hair, copper-colored eyes, and a slender nose, the prince was a handsome man whose face had a sense of elegance. He reminded me of a graceful, well-polished sword that had come to life.

The prince wore a justaucorps embroidered with gold and silver thread underneath a long black cloak. Such fancy, eye-catching clothing was a clear indication that the man was a member of royalty and commanded the rest of this diplomatic mission.

“You must be Prince Ernest, the heir to the throne of Wildam. I see you’re in quite a hurry to meet with me,” King Glenreed said, starting the conversation.

I stood at King Glenreed’s side, studying Prince Ernest. His Majesty’s icy beauty wasn’t enough to disrupt the pointed smile on the prince’s face.

“Indeed. I am Ernest, the crown prince, and I’m in charge of this diplomatic mission. I came here today to formally complain about the treatment one of our knights suffered yesterday at the hands of a Wolfvartian citizen.”

“Did a Wolfvartian harm this man?”

The Pegasus Knight from yesterday stepped forward to respond.

“My name is Theodore Maximillus, and I was the victim in the incident. I was walking through the royal capital as part of an advance scouting mission, only to have a citizen unleash his dog on me, scream at me, and even resort to violence.”

The soldier, Theodore, was shameless in his retelling. He was hiding certain facts to appear as if he alone was the only victim.

“Violence?” King Glenreed questioned. “You don’t appear injured to me.”

“I train on a daily basis and was therefore able to dodge the blow. Unlike these incompetent ground-crawlers, I am a Pegasus Knight.”

Despite his playing the victim, Theodore was still perfectly able to get some bragging in. Even though he stood before the king of Wolvarte, his tone dripped with arrogance.

Apparently, Pegasus Knights looked down on others, both mentally and literally.

Theodore was a perfect example of this mindset.

“There was even a little girl who attacked me, a Pegasus Knight, with a water spell!”

*That little girl would be me.*

I had been disguised with a brown wig and veiled hat when we met, so he must not have recognized me.

“But the girl’s spell was hasty, so she failed to hit me directly, though that doesn’t change the fact that she aimed an attack at me. Your country has a duty to punish that little girl as well as the owner of the dog.”

“...You’re asking me to look for this girl?”

Theodore scoffed a bit at King Glenreed’s question.

“At the very least, she should face a hefty fine and a few years in prison. For the sake of Wolvarte’s dignity, I won’t ask you to pursue the death penalty.”

“That’s quite a convenient story you’ve come up with there.” I gave the most sarcastic smile I could muster without impeding my own dignity.

Theodore furrowed his brow, appearing irritated.

“You’re that placeholder qu—... Pardon me. You left the Sunset Kingdom to become this country’s queen, isn’t that right?”

Halfway through his sentence, his voice softened, but the words he finished with weren’t meant respectfully whatsoever.

The Sunset Kingdom.

More than one thousand years have passed since the golden age of my homeland, Elltoria, and our power and territory have only declined since then. Thus, we were given this disrespectful name to mock our country.

Theodore looked down on me as a placeholder queen and held no respect for my homeland either.

“Perhaps you don’t understand this concept, Your Majesty, but crimes must be punished appropriately in order to maintain public order,” he pressed on.

“Punished appropriately? Tell me, what punishment is appropriate for a person who simply drenched the cobblestones with a water spell as a means of stopping a fight?”

“It didn’t hit me just because of luck. The little girl cast a shoddy spell and messed up her aim.”

“...Is that so? A shoddy spell, you say?”

“?!”

I flashed the menacing smile I’d inherited from my father, causing Theodore to stiffen.

“This is a perfect opportunity. Please stay right there, okay?”

With this warning, I immediately started to chant my spell.

*Splash!*

A ball of water came crashing down on the ground next to Theodore.

“Wha?! What was that about?!”

I gave the flustered man a cold look.

“You doubted my skills, so I merely put them to the test before you.”

“What are you on about?! That was nothing more than...harassment...”

His lips trembled. He stared at my face.

“You’re the girl...from yesterday...?”

“Indeed. That little girl and I are one and the same.”

“Wha...?!”

Finally connecting the dots, Theodore repeatedly opened and closed his mouth.

“It can’t be...!”

“You still don’t believe me? Shall I demonstrate my wind spell again too?”

“...!”

Theodore had neglected to mention anything other than yesterday’s water spell.

Once I brought up the wind spell as well, it confirmed for him that I wasn’t lying about being there at the scene of the fight.

“You’ve bent the truth to flatter yourself, Theodore,” I said coldly. “I know that you violated the law by flying your Pegasus within city limits in order to intimidate that little dog, didn’t you?”

“That was...! Because the dog started barking at me first...!”

“The dog was tied up on a leash. You went much too far by resorting to law-breaking just to threaten a dog.”

“B-But...!”

“You then insulted the beastfolk by calling them ‘mutts’ in order to antagonize me after I stepped in to mediate, and on top of that, you tried to fly your Pegasus once more. There were many witnesses to the full series of events.”

“...!”

Theodore fell silent, unable to respond. But he merely glared at me coldly,

unwilling to acknowledge or apologize for his wrongs.

“Step back, Theodore.” It was Prince Ernest who ordered him frostily. He then flashed an empty smile at me. “You can’t blame him for being startled. No one would ever expect the queen to walk around the city disguised as a normal girl.”

“I appreciate the compliment.” I grinned back at the prince as I responded.

“Are you hard of hearing?”

“You mean to say that my disguise was most effective, right?”

“Or maybe you just lack the natural dignity of a queen?” he sneered.

“I fully comprehend what it means to possess ‘dignity.’ That’s exactly why I was able to hide it successfully in public,” I countered coolly.

Well, the truth was that my past-life memories of being a lower-middle-class commoner helped me blend in with the crowd. But I had no reason to reveal any of that, so I simply came up with a suitable excuse.

Theodore already underestimated me. I couldn’t lose a battle of words and have him think even less of me.

I stared back at Prince Ernest, unwavering. He narrowed his eyes at me.

“You sure don’t hold your tongue, do you? Very well. I’ll accept that you were involved in the disturbance yesterday, but I don’t trust the account of events from the witnesses. Theodore is a foreigner here and it would be perfectly possible for bystanders to cover for their fellow Wolfvartian, wouldn’t it?”

That point was hard to deny. Relying on witness testimony like that would result in a “he said, she said” situation.

“Yes, it’s possible, although I could say the very same for your side. It’s hard to trust Theodore’s account of things when he could very well be hiding the truth of his own misdeeds.”

In other words, we were at a standstill.

Prince Ernest, seeming to understand that fact, didn’t respond, although Theodore was still glaring at me just like before.

He had never predicted the true identity of the person he referred to as a “little girl.”

Theodore belonged to the Maximillus family of dukes—a famous family referred to as one of the “Three Wings” of the Winged Wildam Empire. There was his testimony, and the testimony of the Wolfvartians, who were all commoners. Theodore had almost certainly calculated that his account would be believed before the other parties’.

Of course, that all crumbled apart when he realized that the little girl from the scene was none other than me, the queen of Wolfvarte.

Now he held a grudge against me as a result.

I continued to ignore his glares while King Glenreed spoke again.

“Is there anything else you want to say, Theodore? Obviously, we can’t rely on your statements without any solid proof.”

“...No, Your Majesty.”

He looked back at the king with a sour expression. But King Glenreed turned toward Prince Ernest instead.

“As the crown prince and head of your diplomatic mission, I’m sure you’re not looking to worsen the relationship between our two countries.”

“I’m willing to drop this issue as long as you do so too.”

His response was as arrogant as ever, but at least he didn’t appear interested in dragging things out. After shooting one last warning glare at the still-pouting Theodore, he turned back toward King Glenreed.

“We’ve visited this kingdom in order to improve the relationship between our two countries. That’s why we brought along the pride of Wildam with our party. We have almost a dozen Pegasi and intend to show the people of Wolfvarte how incredible it is to look up and see us sailing gallantly through the sky. Look forward to seeing it too, Little Queen.”

It sounded quite like a declaration of war.

Prince Ernest’s voice was absolutely dripping with confidence as he spoke of this challenge...or whatever it was supposed to be.



**AFTER** Prince Ernest left the throne room...

I also relocated to a smaller room close by.

King Glenreed was busy adjusting his schedule now that Prince Ernest had arrived so early, so he left to deliver orders to the relevant parties.

My plan was to wait for him until he could return.

“I don’t care for that prince and his group.”

Once we were alone, Lucian shared his honest opinion with me.

“A servant is always a reflection of the master. That Pegasus Knight named Theodore looked down on you, my lady, going so far as to call you a little girl. Such mocking is unthinkable.”

Lucian sounded quite disgusted with the knight.

“He hardly deserves to be seen as a person, much less a knight. He’s as trivial as a speck of dust. I’ll bet the wind from those Pegasus wings knocks the brain cells right out of those knights’ heads.”

“I’m sure Theodore isn’t the norm for a Pegasus Knight...at least, I hope.” I smiled awkwardly at Lucian’s sharp tongue, which he had developed during a childhood spent in an impoverished part of town.

He was normally a calm, collected, outstanding servant, yet whenever I found myself on the receiving end of poor treatment, he was quick to become openly hostile toward the other party.

“Do you think so? Prince Ernest may be the heir to the throne, but he’s also one of those Pegasus-riding knights too. Looking at the two of them gave me the impression that the Pegasus Knights must be a group of prideful imbeciles,” he insisted.

“Well...Prince Ernest did seem to have an attitude the whole time, but I didn’t get the sense that he was terrible person. I felt like he was being harsh with me to cover for Theodore, his subordinate.”

It wasn’t fun to be on the receiving end of that, but I did understand where he

was coming from. In fact, I appreciated that he seemed reasonable, despite coming off as arrogant.

To be frank, I couldn't help but compare him with another prince—my former fiancé, Prince Fritz. Compared with Prince Fritz, who called off our engagement without any warning or debate, Prince Ernest seemed to have a much better head on his shoulders.

I wasn't fond of Prince Ernest and probably wouldn't ever be, but as long as we could converse with each other, then that was good enough for me.

Lucian and I chatted about this topic for a while until King Glenreed arrived. His Majesty wanted to continue our conversation that Prince Ernest had unexpectedly interrupted.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's all right. I know how busy Your Majesty must be."

I expressed my appreciation for all his work. He went on to tell me more about the issue with Lady Needia.

"As I said, the countess is willing to wait ten more days. We'll have to find her dog before then."

"Do you have any ideas where he might have run off to?"

"I hear they've already searched all the nearby homes and buildings in the vicinity."

The search radius would have to be expanded significantly.

King Glenreed looked somewhat upset as well.

"Fortunately, they haven't found a body yet, so the dog could still be alive and well...but I've heard the dog was small, white, and around the same size as a cat. It would be hard to find him if he's hiding someplace hard to get into."

"I see..." I placed my finger to my chin and began to think.

There was one way I might be able to help search for the dog, although there was no guarantee it would be successful.

"Your Majesty, there's something I would like to help with."

With that, I began to explain my new idea to King Glenreed.

## Chapter 3: The Prince and the Pegasus

**DESPITE** the incident with Lady Needia's dog, Prince Ernest and the other Wildamians were still honored guests. As the queen, I was in charge of entertaining Prince Ernest whenever King Glenreed was too busy with other work. Three days after our first meeting, he was scheduled to come to my villa for food and tea.

Wearing a bright-green dress that would reflect the summer sun, I waited for His Highness's arrival.

"There he is." Lucian was staring up at the sky as he spoke.

The flutter of Pegasus wings approached from outside the castle walls.

Today, Prince Ernest's party had permission to fly.

"How beautiful..."

I couldn't help but feel captivated by the sight.

The creatures' large wings cut through the sky, while their long manes sparkled in the sunlight. I spotted chestnut-colored Pegasi, as well as gray, black, and white ones too. With occasional kicks, the Pegasi sailed through the sky in perfect formation. Their synchrony stole the eyes of everyone who looked upward.

"That must be Prince Ernest on the white Pegasus up front."

The prince was gliding through the sky on his white horse. With his cape fluttering in the wind behind him, he navigated with ease. Prince Ernest tugged on the reins, sending his Pegasus in a rapid dive toward my villa's front yard.

The prince dismounted and approached me. "Quite a simple house for a queen."

I greeted him as the head of the villa.

"Welcome, Your Highness. It may not be much to look at, but this villa is perfectly suited to spend a comfortable, peaceful time. Everyone here at my home is eager to receive you."

"I hope it will be to my liking. I expect to leave satisfied."





Once the prince said this, his knights went off to tie up their Pegasi. The well-trained creatures were unlikely to fly or run away once housed inside a barn.

I led Prince Ernest to the largest room in the villa—the dining room—to treat him to a wonderful meal. Today's lunch was a display of all my chefs' best abilities. I hoped that, even though he came from a different country, the delicious flavors would still be enjoyable to him.

“...Not too bad.”

Prince Ernest let out a sigh after finishing the main course.

Despite the extremely brief compliment, he did appear to like the roast beef. He'd been going back for bite after bite with considerable speed.

I found it worth noting how he made no attempts to conceal just how eager he was to continue eating. Perhaps he simply had an honest sort of personality.

“Please enjoy this chiffon cake for dessert.”

“Oh, so this is the chiffon cake I've heard about.”

His Highness cut off a piece of cake from the slice in front of him.

Despite his arrogant way of speaking, he lacked nothing in the way of etiquette, as befitting a crown prince. Even his Pegasus Knights displayed perfect table manners throughout the lunch.

Very few people in the Winged Wildam Empire were able to ride the Pegasi. These knights were the top elites of their country. They all seemed like prideful people, but that was because they possessed the skills and conduct to justify the attitude.

Most of them seemed to be enjoying the chiffon cake too.

Just as I was quietly celebrating their reactions to my dish...

“I can't believe *this* is the dessert everyone spoke so highly of.”

I happened to hear a biting remark. The voice belonged to Theodore—the Pegasus Knight who'd referred to me as “little girl.”

“Everyone's probably just pretending to like this cake, since the queen's the one who invented it.”

“...!”

I sensed Gilbert recoil behind me. He was desperately trying not to butt into the conversation.

There was nothing anyone could do about Theodore not liking the dish, but it was still terrible manners for him to criticize it loudly enough to be overheard.

I had asked in advance if anyone coming to dine with us had certain foods that they didn’t care for. Theodore never mentioned anything about disliking cakes or sweets. His remarks were clearly intended to provoke me.

“Watch your mouth, Theodore. If you can’t eat it, then feed it to your Pegasus instead.” Prince Ernest shot him a warning, unable to let Theodore get away with his remarks.

Even though Prince Ernest had responded to Theodore’s insult with what sounded like one of his own, it actually meant he wasn’t displeased with the cake at all. If anything, it was in praise of the dish. People from the Winged Wildam Empire cared deeply for their Pegasi. Naturally, they were very careful about what they fed them as a result.

*“Feed it to your Pegasus.”*

This meant that the dish was adequate enough to feed to their precious creatures, and was, in fact, a compliment.

It was similar to the expression “Only a dog would eat this food,” though they had completely different meanings. It was a blunt reminder of the differences between our cultures.

“...Very well.”

Theodore seemed unhappy, but he couldn’t oppose the prince, of course.

Prince Ernest had covered for Theodore during our first meeting, but it was clear to me now that he was willing to scold the soldier at times too.

His Highness spoke once more to dispel the foul mood. “Your meal was satisfactory. Now it’s our turn to entertain you with a special treat.”



WE left the villa and the Wildamians headed back to the barn. They were going to perform a show in the air with their Pegasi as a thank-you gesture.

The men mounted the creatures and took off galloping into the sky.

“Wow...! How amazing...!”

It was Lelena who cried out in awe. She happened to be on a break from work.

The flock of Pegasi sailed through the air, flapping their wings against the blue sky. They shifted heights from low to high at times, flying with complete freedom in any direction they pleased.

Lelena’s pigtails bounced along with her cat ears as she jumped for joy. She chased after the creatures as they flew from left to right. I couldn’t help but smile, seeing her so unusually childlike.

“What a spectacle this is.”

Next to Lelena was Hayruth, an artist, who shared words of praise for the show. He had a sketchbook and charcoal in his hands. He quickly sketched out the flying Pegasi in a display of his skills as an artist.

“Oh, now they’re going clockwise.”

The Pegasi flew in circles through the air. Prince Ernest led them at the very front on his white horse.

I didn’t get the sense that he was given the title of captain just because he was the crown prince—he really did appear the most skilled of all of them when it came to maneuvering his animal. It was like he and his Pegasus were one and the same, given how nimbly they moved.

Just as my neck was starting to ache from looking up at the sky, the Pegasi finally came back down to the ground.

“Well? What did you think of your first Pegasus show?” Prince Ernest asked.

“It was wonderful. Thank you for the performance.” I relayed my praise to the prince.

Even having seen airplane exhibitions in my past life, the Pegasus show was

no less brilliant. But I knew Lelena, who had never seen anything like an airplane before, must be even more impressed than I was.

*Clap, clap, clap.*

We gave our heartfelt applause to the Pegasus Knights.

“Ha, of course it was! Wildam’s Pegasi are the best in the world.”

Prince Ernest puffed out his chest in response. His proud smile softened the look in his eyes. He reminded me of a young boy.

His Highness stroked the neck of his beloved Pegasus.

“Good, good. You’re welcome to share even more praise with u—”

“Hey! You over there!”

I suddenly heard a woman’s voice shouting in our direction. She was standing on the other side of my front yard behind the villa gates.

The woman was middle-aged with a plump build and had a pair of cream-colored, droopy dog ears on her head. She ignored the gatekeepers and dashed straight toward us. Judging by her clothes, I knew she must be a noblewoman from a particularly wealthy family. The guards had no choice but to let her pass without restraining her, as she wasn’t carrying any obvious weapons on her.

“You men!! You’re the ones who terrorized my poor José, aren’t you?!”

It appeared that the red-faced beastfolk woman was, in fact, Lady Needia. She was screaming about José, her lost dog from the other day.

“What are you doing here?! You have time to parade around in the sky?! Why aren’t you out looking for my José instead?!”

It sounded like the countess had spotted the Pegasus show and chased them down to my villa. Knowing that the culprit behind her lost dog was out there, she couldn’t just stay put any longer.

“I understand how you feel, Lady Needia, but please calm down,” I said gently.

“What did you say?! You’re siding with your fellow humans, aren’t you, Your Majesty?!”

“No, it’s not that.” I kept my tone quiet so as not to set her off any further.

Lady Needia belonged to the Dog-Fang clan of beastfolk, and the clan members generally liked humans more than other beastfolk did. However, the countess was currently too enraged to see me as anything other than an obstacle in her path.

As I tried to come up with a way to comfort her, I heard a chilling laugh from behind me.

“Ha! She sure is attached to her little rat, isn’t she?”

“What did you just say?!”

The countess’s brow grew even more furrowed.

As anyone could have predicted, the source of the laughter was none other than Theodore.

“Rat? You just called my José a rat?!”

“What’s the issue with calling a rat a rat? The thing howled at my Pegasus and ran off with its tail between its legs after the tiniest little scare.”

“You?! You’re the Pegasus Knight who terrified José!!”

*This is bad.*

At this rate, it might actually come to blows between them.

I ordered the flustered gatekeepers to separate Theodore and Lady Needia.

“Calm down, Lady Needia,” I entreated her. “Please, you have to have some restraint.”

“Stop it! Let me go! It’s his fault that José is gone...!”

“Ha! Let’s see you try me. Your stubby little arms can’t even reach me.”

“That’s enough, Theodore.”

It was Prince Ernest who spoke in warning. But Theodore continued to sneer at Lady Needia, refusing to back down.

“If you’re so upset, then what say we settle this with a duel?”

Theodore pointed up at the sky.

"We'll race to see which of us can fly to a set destination and back first... Ah, pardon me. I forgot you ground-crawling mutts have no means of flight, and I'm sure you won't find anyone to fly for—"

"I'll fly in place of the countess."

I cut Theodore off with a declaration of my own. Everyone fell silent when they heard it.

"And how, exactly, are you going to fly, Your Majesty? Don't tell me you've gone and lost your mind."

"Don't insult me. I'm perfectly sane," I replied to Theodore coldly.

*A duel? Bring it on.*

Theodore's actions were really starting to stress me out. I knew that now was the time to make a point.

"Fon!"

As soon as I called his name, my loyal griffin, Fon, came flying out of his hut.

Several of the Pegasi shuddered at the sight of Fon's intimidating hawklike beak and eyes.

I had told Fon to stay in his hut so as not to scare the Pegasi. Now that he was out, he gave his tremendous wings a nice stretch.

"I'll be riding my griffin."

"Don't be ridiculous. A griffin can't fly with a human on its back." Theodore sneered at me. His smile was extremely irritating.

"Don't worry about that. I've flown on Fon's back many times already."

I had already practiced, received flight permission, and prepared a special saddle, reins, and safety harness, all so that I could fly Fon as much as I wanted.

Lucian knew I was serious. He had already brought out the saddle to begin equipping Fon.

Theodore finally seemed to understand that I wasn't just making empty threats.

"Let me ask you again. Are you sure you're right in the head? I won't be taking responsibility if the queen falls off her griffin."

"Didn't I tell you not to worry? We'll fly to a certain point in the air, then return to our starting point. Are there any other rules to follow?"

I confirmed that the saddle and reins were properly equipped, then wrapped a belt around my waist as a safety harness.

"Very well. I'll be here to witness the duel." Prince Ernest volunteered himself to be a referee.

Lucian did the same, ensuring a party on my side as well for fairness.

"One Pegasus Knight will fly away from here to sit in place as a landmark. Whoever can fly around him and return here first will be the victor."

At Prince Ernest's order, the vice-captain of the Pegasus Knights took off in flight.

*"It's difficult for Pegasi to remain fixed in one place once they're off the ground. Whichever Pegasus is chosen as the landmark during races has to be extremely talented."*

I remembered the information Big Brother Claude had once read to me from a book when I was little.

*How have you been, Big Brother? Your little sister is currently in a shocking yet thrilling predicament.*

I never would have imagined that I would become a participant in a Pegasus race. It was yet another development in my life that could hardly be believed.

After a final check of the safety rope, I climbed up and mounted Fon.

Theodore confidently mounted his own gray Pegasus, unable to hide his feeling of superiority as he looked at me.

"When you hear the signal, you can immediately take off into the air. You will round the vice-captain and return here without ever touching the ground. To prevent injuries on either side, you're forbidden from using your Pegasus or griffin to ram the other party or block their path. The loser must apologize to the winner, who will also win the right to command the other in the search for

Lady Needia's missing dog. ...Are there any questions?"

"I'm ready to fly any time," I said to Prince Ernest, who was standing with one arm raised.

"Me too," Theodore said.

I gripped Fon's reins, staring up at the Pegasus Knight in the sky, and waited for the prince's signal a bit nervously.

"...Begin!"

He swung his arm down hard.

*Grit!*

Fon kicked off the dirt and rose up into the air. His body shook as he flapped his wings loudly. We gained more and more height with each passing second.

"So fast!!"

I heard Theodore cry out from behind me.

A sizable gap was forming between us already, by the sound of it. It appeared that my starting sprint had bested his.

The roar of wind filled my ears.

Fon and I raced forward in a straight line through the air.

The distance between Theodore and me appeared unchanged, but even if he *did* gain ground, it would only be a tiny bit at a time.

I reached the Pegasus Knight in the sky and made a U-turn.

But Theodore and his Pegasus were better at sharp turns than Fon was, causing him to close a lot of distance between us very quickly.

All I had to do was keep a constant pace, and surely I could—

"Kyah!!"

Fon suddenly veered to the right.

I clung to Fon for balance, turned around, and saw that Theodore and his Pegasus were exactly where the two of us had just been.

Fon had sensed that Theodore had sped his Pegasus up in an attempt to hit us, and Fon dodged the attack at the last second.

“We’re not allowed to ram each other!!”

But Theodore refused to turn around in response to my shout.

I felt my temper flare. If that was how he wanted to play it, then it was time to stop holding back.

“Let’s go, Fon!”

“Kyuh-ah!” Fon cried back in response.

I gathered the magical energy in my body, focused it into my fingertips, and sent a spell flying forward.

“What?!” Theodore cried out in confusion as Fon surged forward.

We caught up to Theodore in the blink of an eye and even reclaimed the lead with our intense speed.

The cause of the boost was a wind spell I cast to push us forward. I had tested this method while riding Fon before and found it to be highly effective. I was controlling the strength of the gust so as not to hurt Fon, but that didn’t make our sheer speed any less impressive.

“That’s the race!”

I sailed straight over Prince Ernest’s head as he called out from below.

Once I slowed down and turned around, I saw that Theodore was just now arriving back at the starting point.

“Hehe! I won pretty easily!”

I pumped my fist in victory.

*It’s hard not to get fired up.*

I could feel the adrenaline from the race still pumping through my veins.

Just when I took Fon to the ground and dismounted him...

“Hey! What *was* that just now?!” Prince Ernest rushed over to me. His voice sounded more astonished than upset. “I’ve never seen a person fly so fast

before. You must have used magic to increase your speed.”

“Indeed. I cast a wind spell to—”

“You cheated!” Theodore cried out with rage. “We never said anything about using magic, you coward!!”

“But I never said I wouldn’t use it either. You’re the one who attempted to violate the rules by ramming me, isn’t that right?”

I contorted my face into a threatening glare.

He cowered for a moment, but then attempted to lunge at me.

“Quit your nonsense! That race was— Urk! What?!”

Theodore froze, seeing that his neck was now just an inch away from the edge of a blade.

It was Prince Ernest’s long sword.

His copper eyes were filled with traces of anger.

“Theodore. As of today, I’m dismissing you from the Pegasus Knights.”

“What?! Why would you do that?!”

He gaped in shock.

But Prince Ernest simply held his sword in place.

“You’ve brought more than enough shame to our country already. We all saw you try to ram Laetitia and her griffin with your Pegasus.”

“Th-That was...an accident! It was just an accident! I only happened to fly in a way that I almost— EEEK!”

*Drip!*

Prince Ernest pressed his blade against Theodore’s neck hard enough to draw blood.

“An accident? A Pegasus Knight failing to control his animal and losing a race to an outsider? You’ve done nothing but bring dishonor to your title!”

His Highness then slid his sword back into the sheath in one swift motion.

"Please don't do this, Your Highness. I'll apologize. I really will! Just don't release me from the Pegasus Kni—"

"Do you really want me to cut you to bits? There's someone else who deserves an apology before me." The prince's voice was chilled through and through. "You still don't get it? You hurt your Pegasus by speeding up fast enough to hit Laetitia. Just take a look at him. See how he's holding his left wing at a strange angle?"

"Ah..."

A light that could only be described as a murderous rage flashed in Prince Ernest's eyes for a brief moment.

"You truly don't deserve to be a Pegasus Knight. Our Pegasi are our country's treasure and the trusted partner of any knight. But you treated yours like a toy and ended up harming him. You have no right to call yourself a Pegasus Knight."

It appeared that Prince Ernest was most upset about the wounded Pegasus.

Theodore's face grew pale. He shuddered with fear, suddenly realizing that he had enraged his superior.

"I'll send a formal notice of dismissal later on. Until then, Theodore is not to be allowed to set foot into Pegasus Knight headquarters."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

The knights all responded instantaneously to Prince Ernest's orders. Not one of them attempted to comfort the distraught Theodore. I wondered if maybe they all secretly hated him too.

Once Theodore was escorted from the villa, Prince Ernest turned back to me.

"You won the race. I'll be making Theodore apologize and take the blame for losing Lady Needia's dog. Does that sound appropriate, Lady Needia?"

"Y-Yes... Very well."

She nodded, seemingly having been too overcome by the whole series of events to speak until this moment. But she was back to her normal state now.

"But if we still don't find José, I'll really never forgive him. I can't put a price

tag on my dog's life, but still, I'll be requesting a severe punishment for—"

"Grah!"

Fon suddenly sat up, letting out a cry. He was staring at the front gates of the villa. As he stared, looking at something in particular...

I realized that an entire group of little creatures was racing straight for us.

"Are those...cats?" Prince Ernest looked on suspiciously.

The closer they got, the more I could make out their details. White, black, brown, gray, and striped. It was a party of Gardener Cats, their coats made up of many different colors and patterns. But when I got a closer look, I realized they were actually a group of Gardener Cats chasing after one little dog.

"José?!" Lady Needia let out a shriek. She scrambled straight for the dog.

When José caught sight of his master, he made a beeline right toward her too.

"José!"

"Arf arf arf!"

Dog and master were finally reunited.

As moving as this scene could have been, I couldn't ignore the constant Gardener Cat cries drowning them out. They circled around us, meowing and meowing.

José flinched and curled up every time they got too close.

"What's got you so frightened, my little José? Who are these cats...?"

"They're sort of like my pets," I said. "These cats are the ones who found José and brought him here. Isn't that right, Berry?"

"Meow!"

Berry had separated from the rest of the group.

Lady Needia seemed confused by Berry's response to my question.

"Cats can do such a thing...? No, you're right. They really did bring José here..."

"He isn't injured at all, is he?" I asked.

“L-Let me check.” She lifted José up and looked him over. “He’s lost a bit of weight, and his fur’s all messy...but I don’t see any broken bones or major injuries.”

“I’m glad he’s all right. ...Ah, but...”

“But? Don’t tell me there’s something else you’re worried about?”

I took a step back before answering the countess. “I was just thinking that he’s probably...developed a fear of cats.”

José was still trembling, surrounded by the clowder of Gardener Cats.

I understood why being chased down by a giant group of cats might be a traumatic experience for a dog.

It was a few days ago that I made my request to the Gardener Cats. I told them to come tell me if they happened to find the lost dog in the capital, and if possible, to bring him back to the villa with them. The reward I offered in return was to spend an entire day cooking all the dishes the Gardener Cats wanted from me. They agreed to these conditions and took off right away in the search for José.

Most of the cats at my villa had been living in secrecy throughout the capital city anyway. They were well versed in the quiet alleyways and side streets where a dog might want to hide. The Gardener Cats even had their own sort of network formed between themselves and the normal cats, which consisted of regular information-sharing meetups in the city.

It didn’t take long for the cats to spot something out of place like a single lost dog. The day after I asked for their help, the cats had already received word of the dog’s location. By today, they managed to chase José out of the city, past the flustered palace gatekeepers, and straight to my villa on the palace grounds.

Lady Needia cradled José and looked at all the Gardener Cats. “I don’t mind him being scared of cats, so long as he’s home safe. I’ll give him lots of love and affection to make up for all the trouble he went through.”

“Please do. I’m sure José is just as relieved and overjoyed to be back with you, Lady Needia.”

“I think you’re right. I’m so glad to be reunited with my boy. Thank you so very much, Queen Laetitia. I’d like to take José straight home today, but I’ll return at a later date to properly express my gratitude.”

“Of course. I look forward to seeing you.”

The case of the missing dog was resolved. It was quite a relief.

I saw Lady Needia off with a smile on my face, then praised the Gardener Cats for their help.

“Thank you, everyone. You really saved us. What a job well done!”

“Meow meow meow meow meeeeow!”

“Mraw mraw meow me-me-myah!”

“Mreee-mree-mree-mree!”

“*You’re most welcome,*” they all seemed to be crying in unison.

José’s search party was officially disbanded.

As I watched the Gardener Cats head off to check on their crops behind the villa or beg their owners inside for a nice meal...

“Heh... Hehehe...”

I heard someone chuckling quietly.

The source of the laughter was Prince Ernest.

“She uses an army of cats as her servants, defeats a Pegasus Knight in a race by flying a griffin, and even goes into the city disguised as a commoner girl at times...”

“Your Highness?”

He was chuckling as he muttered something to himself with closed eyes. I approached him, wondering what was so funny, only to end up staring straight into those copper eyes.

“How funny. I’ve never met such an amusing woman before. A thrilling series of events to witness.”

“Huh...?”

It appeared he'd been observing me like I was some kind of exotic wildlife. I didn't understand what, exactly, had him so tickled, but the prince was definitely enjoying himself.

"Now I get it. Theodore could never hope to defeat a woman as impressive as you."

"Theodore...?"

Now that the excitement of the duel was gone, I had some lingering questions on my mind.

"Prince Ernest, you dismissed Theodore from the Pegasus Knights and said you would make him apologize to Lady Needia. ...Perhaps this isn't my place to say as the victor, but are you able to handle Theodore entirely on your own?"

"Father won't oppose my decision. The old men... Theodore's family probably can't oppose either. Besides, it was Theodore who challenged you in the first place, and he even broke the rules too. He still couldn't defeat you, and he hurt his Pegasus trying to do so. It's impossible to respect him as a Pegasus Knight, as a man, or as a person. I don't see how anyone could come to his defense."

It sounded like I might not need to worry about Theodore anymore.

*But judging by the way he talks about him, maybe Prince Ernest hasn't been fond of Theodore for some time now?*

"Theodore has always been a problematic Pegasus Knight," Prince Ernest continued on as if he'd read my mind. "But the reason I could never dismiss him was because of his family. I'm sure you know about the special privileges that the Three Wings hold."

"Direct descendants of the families are able to join the ranks of the Pegasus Knights, correct?"

The role of Pegasus Knight was the most elite position a person in the Winged Wildam Empire could achieve. Naturally, the trial to enter their ranks was an incredibly taxing one where the vast majority of applicants were disqualified, but there were some exceptions to all the rules.

Only direct descendants of the royal family, like Prince Ernest, and

descendants of the Three Wings—the families who played a major role in the founding of the country—could join the Pegasus Knights without any requirements other than being in good physical health.

“Usually, the Pegasus Knights are tested not just for their physical and martial arts skills, but for their brains, education, and character too. A person like Theodore would never pass such an evaluation.”

“So the Three Wings really do have that much power?”

“For better or for worse, Theodore was a skilled Pegasus rider. In our unit, only the vice-captain and I could out-fly him. That was why I couldn’t let him go over a few misdeeds. I never liked him, but as his captain, I had to step in and save him when he needed it. But I sure couldn’t cover for him this time, not that I even wanted to.”

“...You had quite the troublesome subordinate thrust upon you.”

An underling of outstanding status and practical skills, but one with a bothersome personality who refused to follow orders. Just thinking about it almost gave me a stomachache.

“I have no need for sympathy. I just have to better myself and fulfill my duties so as not to be lumped in with people like Theodore who got their job from family status alone.”

“That’s a very mature way of thinking for someone so young.”

I really meant those words.

Prince Ernest was strong-willed and prideful, and he spoke with a sharp tongue. But that pride appeared to come from years of self-improvement and a refusal to grow complacent.

“So young? Aren’t you a year younger than me? What a strange woman.”

“...Perhaps you’re right.”

I had been thinking of myself not as the seventeen-year-old girl, but the woman in her twenties who died in my past life.

Prince Ernest was sharp.

“But you’ve done surprisingly well for yourself for a seventeen-year-old too. You have the right amount of education for a queen, you’re quick-witted, and your magical abilities are impressive. I think you have talent as a griffin flier too.”

“I appreciate your compliments.”

Just after I thanked him with a smile...

“That’s why I’m going to teach you how to really ride that griffin of yours.”

“...Excuse me?” I couldn’t make sense of his sudden suggestion. “Why would you want to teach me that?”

“What’s the problem? I’m one of the five best fliers in the world. There aren’t very many people who could teach you how to fly on a Mythical Beast better than I can.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. Why do you think you can teach me how to ride Fon in the first place?”

“Because you looked like you were having fun up there in the sky.” Prince Ernest answered bluntly, like this was the most natural response in the world. “Most people are terrified when they have a chance to fly. But not you. I could tell you were enjoying it during the race with Theodore.”

The prince wasn’t incorrect. Nothing on the ground compared to the sensation of sailing through the air. But there was no doubt in my mind—it could be even more fun if I had better control of Fon.

“It wasn’t just you. Your griffin was enjoying himself too.”

“Really? Fon was?”

“Kwah?”

Hearing his name, Fon came up to nuzzle me with his beak.

*So cute.*

I felt the cold sensation of his beak pressed against my cheek.

“I’ve always heard that griffins don’t care much for humans. The ones that do form bonds with humans usually stay on the ground if they ever let them on

their back at all. But yours is different. He truly sees you as his master, respects you, and seems to think of flying with you on his back as his reason for existence. The better you get at riding him, the happier and more energetic you'll see him."

"A happier and more energetic Fon..."

I looked the griffin in his golden-brown eyes. I didn't know what exactly was going on in his mind. All I could tell was that he trusted me and cared deeply for me.

If I could make him happier by becoming a better flier, then I was eager to do so.

"...Very well. I'd love to learn from you, Your Highness, whenever you're able to teach me."

Prince Ernest would become the ruler of the Winged Wildam Empire someday. Secretly, I saw this as a calculated opportunity to form a connection with the future leader of the neighboring country.

"Of course. I don't think I'll ever get bored of being around you."

Squinting his eyes at me, Prince Ernest sounded truly amused as he agreed to become my teacher.

## Chapter 4: A Chocolate Treat at the Ball

**“COOKING** can really come down to a matter of sheer muscle strength sometimes.”

I let out a groan from my bed, cursing my aching muscles.

Eight days had passed since my victory in the race against Theodore. After some adjustments to my schedule, I ended up clearing all of yesterday's plans in order to spend the day fulfilling my promise to the Gardener Cats.

*It was just one challenge after the next, from dawn till dusk...*

The deal was to spend the entire day cooking for all the Gardener Cats as compensation for finding José. Of course, I knew it would be draining to some extent...but the demands of the gluttonous Gardener Cats far surpassed what I had been prepared for.

*Although, I did know they loved to eat, and they regularly come up to ask me for food...*

As my muscles ached, the realization hit me.

*So the Gardener Cats have actually been holding back all this time...*

I couldn't believe how desperate the Gardener Cats were in their demands for meals yesterday. They crowded into the kitchen, clutching their favorite crops, and refused to back down or compromise with their requests. It was supposed to be *their* reward, after all.

Every single time I completed a dish, the next cat was right there to hand me another ingredient. The kitchen chefs helped me cook too, but the more I worked, the further away the finish line started to look.

I went straight to the kitchen first thing in the morning and finally extinguished the stove just before midnight. It was truly a full day of cooking.

My arms were sore from constantly carrying the various utensils and cookware. They were as heavy as lead. With each little motion, I felt parts of my

body cry out in agony.

Ever since I arrived at the villa, I had been working out with some dumbbells I transmuted to build muscle mass. The result was an increase in energy over the past month or two, although after yesterday, I slept like a log for the first time in quite a while.

*But thanks to all that work, the Gardener Cats are finally satisfied.*

They were certainly happy to be able to indulge in such a filling experience. Listening to their adorable little meows of pleasure was almost enough to do away with my muscle aches...*almost*, but definitely not enough.

But still, I was glad I put in all the effort that I did.

“How you are feeling, my lady?” Lucian called out to me from the other side of the door.

It was almost past noon already. I decided it was finally time to drag myself out of bed.

“Up we go. Ah, ow, ow, ow...”

I pulled myself up to my feet as I cursed my sore muscles.

It was plenty painful, but not to the extent that I couldn’t move.

After my maids helped me get dressed, I was walking down the hall when I ran into Gilbert.

“Good morning, Queen Laetitia. How are you feeling today?”

“I’m all right. I can move around, at least. What about you, Gilbert? Are you sore at all?”

“Oh, I’m used to that kind of work. I managed to sleep it off just fine.”

He didn’t appear to be bluffing either. That was just his natural state.

*He’s amazing.*

Gilbert had spent the same amount of time in the kitchen yesterday as I did. He knew it was important to meet every last request of the Gardener Cats. Despite this, he appeared to be in perfect shape today. He was very slender, almost to the point of appearing frail, but now I knew just how strong his duties

as head chef had made him.

Cooking is a battle between you and your own body. Yesterday's events had left me painfully aware of this fact.

"What are your plans for today, Your Majesty?"

"I think I'll stay outside until lunch is ready."

It was almost time for the wolves to come here on their walk.

Seeking a fluffy form of therapy, I stepped out into the front yard.

"Woof woof!"

It wasn't long before Edgar, the wolfkeeper, appeared with the entire pack.

The wolves sprinted in my direction once they spotted me and stuck their heads out for pats. I just loved seeing them flatten their ears so that it would be easier for me to pet them.

"There, there. You're as cute as ever, Jenna!" I cooed.

Jenna was the friendliest wolf out of any of them. I stroked the fur on the very top of her head with some intensity. She wagged her tail back and forth, enjoying the sensation. The longer I took, the more wolves came to line up behind her, eager to be next. I was impressed by their good manners.

Once I finished petting each one in the queue, I took a moment to look around.

"Are you looking for Lord Aroo?"

"Indeed, I am. You could tell, Edgar?"

"I always see how much you love Lord Aroo, after all."

"...I really do."

Edgar's casual statement caused me to hesitate before responding.

I did love Lord Aroo. But Lord Aroo's true identity was that of King Glenreed.

It was a little embarrassing to say "I love him" out loud, in all honesty.

"I actually haven't seen him around either lately," Edgar told me.

“I’m sure he must be busy.”

It was true that His Majesty was very busy at the moment. I had done a bit of entertaining for our guests myself, but there were many other tasks that only the king of Wolvarte could handle.

“Lord Aroo is busy? But he’s a wolf.”

Edgar looked taken aback by my response.

I smiled awkwardly, petting the wolf that came up to me in that moment.

“That’s just the feeling I get. Do you ever get busy with work, Edgar?” I asked to deflect the topic.

“Who, me? Well, the latest wolf pups are old enough now that they don’t need much care, so I don’t think there’s a whole lot to do until the next shedding season... Oh, that’s right. Starting tomorrow, I’ll be taking them on their walks earlier in the day.”

“That makes sense. Summer is really heating up.”

Wolvarte didn’t see extremely hot summer days like in Japan, but the temperature did rise slowly as the season progressed. Despite their summer coats, the wolves could tolerate less heat than humans or beastfolk. Their walks had to be moved to earlier in the morning and later in the evening to avoid the peak hours of sun.

After telling me what time he was going to start showing up on his walks, Edgar gathered the wolves and went on his way.

There was still a bit of time left before lunch, so I decided to go check on the Gardener Cats. Once I reached the backyard, I heard their cries coming at regular intervals.

“Meow!”

“Mraw!”

“Meow!”

“Mraw!”

“Meow!”

“Mraw!”

“Meow!”

“Mraw!”

A dozen Gardener Cats were swinging their hoes into the dirt, crying out to the rhythm of each strike. These were smaller versions of the same hoes human farmers used. I had transmuted them out of metal to fit perfectly in between a pair of paw pads.

Delicious crops start with the dirt they’re planted in.

Gardener Cats possessed the magic to make crops grow, but by physically using water and tilled soil, they could produce healthy crops with even less use of magical energy. This was why the Gardener Cats had taken to the daily act of farming as of late.

“It looks like the farming is going well today.”

I could tell how motivated the Gardener Cats had become after spending an entire day filling their bellies. Just like normal cats, Gardener Cats were only interested in things they enjoyed. Many had no desire to involve themselves with such labor.

Berry’s former strawberry patch had become a place for the Gardener Cats to grow any crop of their choosing. Despite their desire to do as they pleased, there was still one cat who assumed the position of leader to the rest.

The light-brown cat with a fixed spot in the center of the farm was talking and giving out orders to the others who approached him. He seemed to be in charge of the current group of Gardener Cats outside.

“Ah, there you are, Your Majesty.”

Gilbert appeared from the villa with a basket in his hand. Just then, the sharp-eyed leader cat rushed over to us. He stood up on his hind legs and offered Gilbert a bundle of wheat he had grown.

“Myah! Mraw mraw mraw!”

“Oh! Thank you. Today’s wheat looks wonderful.”

The Gardener Cat stuck his chest out proudly. Gilbert petted the light-brown cat's head and accepted the other wheat bundles the Gardener Cats came up to present him.

"I appreciate it. Now I can try out a new dish that uses wheat."

"Hehe, I look forward to it," I said. "All of your meals with Gardener Cat wheat are so delicious."

"It's all thanks to them. Gardener Cats are truly breathtaking creatures."

Gilbert's face and tone of voice were both deadly serious. He was staring down at the wheat in his hand.

"This wheat looks just like the usual kind that's grown in this area...but the quality is clearly much higher. It's incredible how much of a difference a Gardener Cat can make."

"It certainly is mysterious. Perhaps their magical energy is the extra touch?" I wondered.

I wasn't sure of the exact principle behind how it worked, but if Gardener Cats had the ability to grow all crops to the maximum quality, then I could see why they continually had only the finest of produce.

"We chefs are so grateful to have them around. These Gardener Cats can grow out-of-season crops in only a few short days as well."

"That sure helps boost the number of dishes you're able to cook."

Unlike in Japan, this world had no means of preserving food by refrigeration or any concept of greenhouse cultivation. This meant that most ingredients were only available when they were in season. It was quite difficult to ever cook a meal that used both summer tomatoes and fresh winter vegetables together.

It was only natural that Gilbert would deeply appreciate the creatures who freed him from such restraints.

"Gardener Cats are truly amazing. Just take a look at those tomatoes over there. They appear to be normal tomatoes, but upon closer inspection, the leaves are in a slightly different position. When you bite into the fruits, they're full of such incredibly sweet and rich juices. I've never eaten such a tomato

before. Perhaps Gardener Cats have been the ones keeping all these rare varieties of crops alive all these years. I could see them fostering a revolution in the cooking world with these new crops they wish to share.”

“The Gardener Cats still hold many secrets, don’t they?” I said in response to Gilbert’s eloquent statement.

He was right—a few of the Gardener Cats’ gifted crops were completely novel to the people of this area. One such crop, for example, was tangerines—something I regularly encountered in Japan. Cocoa beans, with which we could make chocolate, were another.

But the Gardener Cats could also grow things that were unfamiliar to me, even with my past-life memories, such as pear-like fruits with bright-red skin. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say they were capable of shaking up the cooking world with their powers.

Recently, Gilbert, the passionate chef, had become extremely fascinated by these powers.

“Meow!”

The light-brown Gardener Cat, now that he had delivered the wheat, returned to his observation post in the middle of the farm. The rest of the clowder swarmed him eagerly.

“The others seem to really trust little Wheatie,” I observed.

Gardener Cats apparently addressed each other by the name of the crop they grew. The rest of us decided to follow suit.

There were a few reasons why Wheatie had become the leader of the Gardener Cats. The first was that Wheatie had a serious, hardworking personality. The second was that Wheatie’s special crop was wheat.

Each Gardener Cat grew the plant that most appealed to them. To them, it was every man for himself...or rather, every cat.

The Gardener Cats saw their own favorite food as their only priority. Those that grew foods like wheat or tomatoes—ingredients easily paired with other ingredients—were popular with the other cats and held some amount of

influence over the rest.

This influence was how Wheatie ended up winning the much-sought-after Gilbert as his master during the matchmaking event. Gaining the role of Gilbert's pet only increased the respect the other cats showed him. This was how he took on the role of leader of the Gardener Cats.

"The Gardener Cat society they've developed is really making progress, isn't it?"

These creatures had lived in secret for so long to avoid being hunted. But once they received Berry's call, they relocated to my villa and began to form more interfeline relationships. They established fields, began to farm, and allowed for the creation of many new recipes thanks to their newfound connection with humans.

"...It's like the dawn of the Gardener Cat era." I whispered the name I just came up with for this new moment in history.

In my past life, I had studied how early humans formed settlements, lived off the land, and developed new ways of consuming food, exactly like what the Gardener Cats were doing now. It was fascinating.

I was eager to see how their society would progress from here.

"Mraw mraw?"

As I pondered the future of these creatures, Berry approached me with a strawberry in her paws. I accepted the gift and scratched the striped cat's head.

"Even if Gardener Cat society develops even more, I'm sure you'll remain the same as ever, Berry," I said with a giggle.

"Meow meow meow!"

"*I'll be fine as long as I have strawberries,*" she seemed to cry.

As the first Gardener Cat to take up residence at the villa and the reason the rest followed suit, Berry was also seen as someone with authority. However, with her do-as-she-pleased personality, Berry only spent her days growing strawberries and staying close to me, instead of landing the role of leader.

Eager to live up to the hope and trust that Berry placed in me, I decided to

ignore my aching muscles and head to the kitchen.

It was then that I ran into a visitor.

“Good afternoon, Liddeus.”

“Right. Sorry to bother you.”

The black-haired man, wearing a black cloak and the uniform of the Bureau of Magic, was Liddeus. Behind him stood the light-blue Cuddle Bird who was particularly fond of him.

Liddeus’s ponytail bobbed as he approached me, clutching a box in his hands. “The crest you asked for is finished. I brought it out here for you.”

“Thank you very much. Allow me to look it over.”

The crest inside the box was constructed in the shape of a three-tiered fountain.

Crests were types of equipment that allowed for the operation of magic stones. Liddeus was a specialist in the craft and one of the top crest-makers in the kingdom. Whenever he heard my ideas for new ones, which were based on things from my past life, he was always able to turn them into a reality.

“This crest’s modified off the chocolate fountain I made before. Go ahead and give it a try,” he said.

“Very well. I’ll test it out with some real cheese.”

I made my request to the chefs and began to prepare. The villa servants were busy getting lunch ready, so I decided to invite the Gardener Cats to join me instead.

“Gardener Caaaaats! Who wants some cheeeeese?”

I shouted in the direction of the farm behind the villa, and after a few seconds, the clowder of Gardener Cats was rushing toward me. Each one carried their respective crop and looked at me with sparkling eyes—true lovers of food, all of them.

They pushed and shoved to get up close to the crest, waiting for it to be activated.

"Ah, hold on just a minute. Would you like to go before the Gardener Cats, Liddeus?"

"...Sure."

"What food would you like to try?"

I pointed at the tray Lucian had brought out to us. There were lots of simple foods on it like bread, sausage, and bacon.

"I'll take that bread."

"Of course. It's a bit large. Shall I cut it up into smaller pieces?" I offered.

We still had a lunch to eat, and Liddeus had a small appetite anyway, so I figured I would ask him just to be safe.

He nodded his head.

"All right, then."

I aimed at the bread and launched a spell. The wind blade I produced sliced the bread into perfect pieces.

"Another impressive spell."

"Whoa!!" I cried.

When I looked up again, Liddeus's face was much closer to mine than before. His green eyes were completely lit up as he stared at the bread and me.

"Such speed and fluency in how you circulate your magical energy to produce a lightning-fast third-level spell, and one so clearly on a different scale than any other sorcerer I've ever seen, so would you please show me such a masterful spell one more time, or actually, if you can't, I would love to see any other third-level or fourth-level spells that you can—"

"Hang on. You're too close, Liddeus."

Liddeus's face, rattling on without so much as a breath, was right up against mine. Unable to just stand and watch, Lucian gave off a chilling aura as he pulled Liddeus away.

"Please calm yourself, Mr. Liddeus. Lady Laetitia is still the queen."

“...Ah. That’s right. You’re King Glenreed’s...wife.”

Liddeus slumped...as if he’d been doused with cold water. He was probably upset to have his discussion of magic cut off so suddenly.

“Let’s continue that chat some other time, Liddeus,” I said. With a forced smile on my face, I activated the completed cheese fountain crest. The gooey cheese flowed down from the very top like a waterfall.

“It’s very good. The crest works well,” he said.

“That’s great. Next up are the Gardener Cats.”

When I turned around, the Gardener Cats were offering up their produce to me.

First, I used a water spell to clean the fruits and vegetables. The Gardener Cats used their paw pads to hold things, which meant they transferred dirt that was necessary to wash away.

Once that was done, the produce needed to dry. I was able to create a warm wind with a fire-controlling spell. With their fruits and veggies all nice and dried now, the cats scrambled to dunk them into the cheese.

“Meow!”

“Meow meow meow!”

“Mraw mraw mraw mraw!”

To translate...

*“Cheese is awesome! Everyone needs to try this!”*

At least, that was what I made of it.

The foods they used included popular cheese pairings in my past life, like cherry tomatoes, but the variety was a wide one and spanned to things like raw carrots, cucumbers, potatoes, and spinach. Berry even dipped her strawberries into the cheese.

“You’ve made another very popular crest, Liddeus. Thank you for your hard work. I’m going to bring this to the upcoming ball as planned.”

“The one in five days?”

“Exactly. Will I see you there too?”

This ball was being put on by the royal family. Even Prince Ernest was going to attend. As Liddeus was the youngest member of the Bureau of Magic, I was sure he would be invited to such a ball.

“I’ll be attending,” he said. “I haven’t been to a ball since I first joined the bureau and the director dragged me to one. But if you’re going to be there, then—”

“Peep!”

Tweety interrupted Liddeus with a chirp. He made a beeline straight for the light-blue Cuddle Bird. Their two shades of feathers combined as they embraced. It appeared to be some sort of greeting between the two birds, who had been apart for some time, although...

“Liddeus?!”

Unfortunately, Liddeus happened to be caught in the middle. All I could see was the bobbing of his ponytail. It was like he couldn’t even speak in the sea of feathers.

“Tweety, wait! Liddeus might suffocate.”

“Peep?”

I yanked the two birds apart, but Tweety seemed to think I wanted to play. He began to nuzzle up against me instead. My vision became filled with nothing but fluffy yellow feathers.

“Remove yourself from Lady Laetitia. How many times have I told you, birdbrain?” I heard Lucian give Tweety a scolding.

In the end, both Liddeus and I ended up being buried in their plumage.



“**I’M** all done, Your Majesty. You can move now.”

When I heard my maid say that, I took a look at myself in the full-length mirror. I was much more dressed up than usual for tonight’s ball.

I was wearing a vivid blue dress for the occasion. The pearls, jewels, and

glossy embroidery adorning the fabric captured the light like constellations. At my shoulders and chest were decorative roses. The blue dress expanded outward at my waist, revealing a white inner skirt underneath. It was a beautiful combination of colors.

My décolleté was exposed, while my arms were covered with long gloves.

As for my hair, I left the side portions down with the rest tied up on the back of my head. I knew my hair would fly around theatrically with each twirl as I danced.

“Wow! You look so beautiful, Your Majesty...!” Lelena, who had been watching so she could learn how to dress a lady, was deeply impressed. “With your blue dress and sparkly jewels and gold hair, you look like a star in the sky!”

“Hehe. Thank you. I’ll see you after the ball.”

“Of course! Have a good time!”

I left the room that had been prepared for me at the palace and walked alongside Lucian. We proceeded down the hallway and stepped out into a spot that faced the courtyard.

“Ah...”

It was King Glenreed.

He stood there alone, illuminated by the moonlight from above.

The king’s silver hair sparkled faintly against his beautiful features. The black uniform he wore was eye-catching on his tall, well-proportioned body. Around his limbs was a dark yet glossy fabric, and the golden stitching and accessories really stood out as accents.

At some point, I realized I had ceased to breathe. I filled my lungs with air, stepped forward, and approached the king.

“Thank you for waiting, Your Majesty. You look very beautiful this evening. I couldn’t help but find myself staring at you.”

“I see.”

He averted his eyes from me. I started to worry that I had done something

rude without realizing it.

“...But you look much more beautiful.”

“Huh?”

If I really didn’t mishear him...that meant the king had just complimented me.

“It’s nothing. The ball is about to start. Let’s get going.”

King Glenreed held his hand out to me. I reached out and took it, feeling his fingers wrap about mine gently. He was treating my hand like delicate glass. My heart skipped a beat.





Trying to steady my pulse, I followed His Majesty's lead forward.

The ballroom was filled with brilliant light despite the sun having set long ago. The chandelier above glittered from the flames of the candles. The spacious room was filled all the way up to the high ceilings with the sounds of the orchestra and the chatter of guests.

First up on the schedule was the buffet, followed by a musical performance some time later. Against the windows was a row of tables with various dishes I had ordered to be prepared for the event. Most of the foods were light and could be eaten with one hand, such as chiffon cake and ham sandwiches. The cheese fountain crest was set up too, attracting the eyes of many guests who were curious about the strange device.

"Your Majesty, shall we head toward the crest over there? I'd like to check it over just to be safe," I said.

"Very well. Let's go."

King Glenreed and I approached the table with the cheese fountain. Liddeus, the creator of the device, just happened to already be there.

"Good evening, Liddeus. Are you here for a last-minute inspection as well?"

"....."

I greeted him, only to receive total silence in return.

*That's strange.*

Liddeus stiffened as soon as he turned toward me.

"Liddeus?"

"....."

I tried again but still received no response. The man had completely frozen.

*He's such a shut-in, maybe all the people around have got his mind in a fog?*

"Why are you staring at the queen?" His Majesty asked Liddeus.

Somehow, his voice sounded a bit grumpy to me.

Liddeus gasped and began to shake his head.

“No, it’s nothing. The ballroom air is just making me a little dizzy.”

I knew it. He really was getting nauseated in the crowd. I wondered if maybe he forced himself to come here in the first place to help me complete the final check on the cheese fountain crest.

“Please don’t push yourself too hard. I’m sure you’re not used to wearing something other than the Bureau of Magic uniform too. All those things can add up and be very draining.”

He was wearing a gray cravat and a black justaucorps for tonight’s event. Formal wear was appropriate for a ball, but I could tell he was well out of his comfort zone. Besides, I had a feeling that it was Orth—Liddeus’s colleague at the Bureau of Magic—who had picked out the outfit for him.

“...So I really do look strange in these clothes? Orth told me I had to wear them...”

“No, Orth has a good eye for fashion. I think the outfit suits you very well.”

“...I see.”

Once again, Liddeus froze.

I was worried about him, but the ball was just about to begin, so I said my goodbyes for now. Then King Glenreed and I headed for a rose-woven stage that stood opposite of the entrance to the ballroom. The fresh roses were fully bloomed and incredibly vibrant, partially thanks to the help of the Gardener Cats.

After a moment, the orchestra fell silent. The eyes of everyone in the room gathered on us.

I put on my best queen’s smile while His Majesty spoke.

“Thank you for gathering here today. Wolfvartian leaders, nobles, and esteemed guests from abroad. Please enjoy yourselves on this beautiful night.”

The king’s declaration rang throughout the room. Once the applause from the crowd died down, the music resumed.

King Glenreed and I planned to stay where we were to welcome our guest of honor. After a while, Prince Ernest approached us, his cape fluttering behind

him.

One goal of tonight's ball was to entertain the envoy from the Winged Wildam Empire. Prince Ernest's diplomatic mission consisted of an equal number of Pegasus Knights and government officials. They were with him tonight, standing some distance behind him.

"I appreciate the invitation, King Glenreed. Nice to see you again too, Queen Laetitia."

"I'm glad to see you here, Prince Ernest."

Despite his words of welcoming, His Majesty's voice was stiff and emotionless. Such delivery wasn't unnatural for the king, but he was usually a bit more friendly...or maybe not. I just felt like his voice typically contained more warmth in it. Perhaps he simply didn't get along with the prince.

"You and Queen Laetitia sure seem to be on good terms lately," King Glenreed said.

"We are," Prince Ernest said without missing a beat. "As a Pegasus Knight, I'm teaching her how to ride her griffin. She's very good. I look forward to seeing her improve."

"...Is that so?" King Glenreed suddenly turned to talk to me, "Sounds like you and Prince Ernest are getting on well."

"Hehe! Prince Ernest has also supplied the cheese being used at tonight's ball," I told him. "It seems to be quite well received."

I looked over at the cheese fountain crest on a nearby table. One of the maids from my villa had come with me to stand by the crest and explain how to use it. Once the guests had received the instructions, they didn't hesitate to try it out right away.

They stuck bite-size foods into the fountain, removed them, and popped them into their mouths enthusiastically. A crowd was already starting to form around the fountain. I knew they must be enjoying it.

"The cheese in the fountain is the kind Prince Ernest provided, and we prepared it in a way that best accentuates its natural flavor. The guests seem

quite taken with this famous cheese from the Winged Wildam Empire,” I explained.

The Winged Wildam Empire, a very mountainous land, was located on the other side of Wolfvarte’s southwest border. Due to the lack of flat terrain in the country, their agricultural development was limited, but they made up for it in the production of dairy products. Cheese was one of Wildam’s specialties, as it was a famous product with a long history.

“I’ve prepared some sweets for you as a token of my gratitude,” I said to Prince Ernest.

“Sweets? What kind? I’ll bet you’ve come up with something great,” he said.

“Here you are.” I signaled the nearby maids to bring over a few covered silver trays. “These are cookies, made with the finest Wolfvartian wheat, and a dessert called ‘chocolate.’”

“Chocolate? I’ve never heard that term before.”

“It’s not very popular among the general public just yet,” I explained. “Chocolate has a peculiar flavor, but to those with a taste for it, they can never get enough.”

I had asked the staff at my villa to do a taste testing of the Gardener Cats’ chocolate. Less than a third of the staff said they didn’t care for its unfamiliar taste. Less than half said they neither loved nor hated it, while the remaining 30 percent or so were crazy about it.

It was a brand-new kind of flavor to the people of Wolfvarte, and for some, it was an immediate hit.

As of now, only the Gardener Cats were capable of producing chocolate, which meant my villa’s chocolate lovers had come to worship the animals. I had created quite the chocolate fanatics.

“But some people really don’t care for the taste, which is why I tried to come up with a way that it will be enjoyable for everyone, regardless of your preferences.”

“Is that right?” Prince Ernest looked down at the trays with interest.

At my signal, the maids removed the lids from the trays.

“...! Are these...Pegasi...?”

*Well done!*

His Highness had been just as surprised as I'd hoped.

An assortment of cookies and Pegasus-shaped chocolates was arranged on top of the trays. The chocolate Pegasi were just as flat as the cookies, but their surfaces contained dips and bumps like wood carvings. The re-creations were extremely faithful to the real-life Pegasi—from their giant wings to their four long legs and their manes fluttering in the breeze.

“What...are these things? They look like intricate wood carvings. Are these really desserts?”

“You can eat them, I promise.”

“How are they made?”

“That much is a secret,” I said, holding a finger to my lips and smiling.

The chocolates were the work of a transmutation spell of mine. I was able to transmute a metal mold in the shape of a Pegasus, which I filled with liquid chocolate. It took some trial and error, but in the end, I was able to produce rather precise-looking Pegasus chocolates.

“A secret, huh? I see why you don’t want to reveal such craftsmanship.” Prince Ernest seemed to accept this answer. He was staring intently at the chocolate Pegasi. “Hmm? Is this one Vice-Captain Garls’s Pegasus?”

“Exactly. I tried to make it look like his.”

“Oh! Is that really mine?” From behind Prince Ernest, Vice-Captain Garls looked on in awe. I could tell he wanted to see it up close.

“Your Majesty, may I invite him to come forward?” Prince Ernest requested.

“Very well.”

With King Glenreed’s permission, Vice-Captain Garls raced up to us.

“Wow...! It really is my Pegasus! It looks just like her...!”

I had earned Vice-Captain Garls's seal of approval. This work was the result of many attempts until they were perfect lookalikes.

"They're well done. This is Biltz's Pegasus, and here's Asley's, and this one must be Grujie's, right?" The prince pointed at one chocolate Pegasus after the next.

"Exactly," I confirmed his answers. "Well done, Your Highness. I'm not surprised that you can identify each one with a single glance."

"Hmph. Of course I can. Their coats and bodies all match perfectly."

Pegasi come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colors. I tried to re-create those unique traits as much as I could with my chocolate Pegasi. By adjusting the amount of milk in the chocolate, I could make white, light brown, and a dark brown that was close to black.

Of course, I didn't make them all alone—I received assistance from a few helpers.

My first helper was Hayruth, the artist. He had been there the day Prince Ernest and his Pegasus Knights first arrived at the villa. With his skills, he was quickly able to produce sketches that captured each Pegasus from memory.

I then created my chocolate molds based on those sketches. The better my transmutation spell could replicate those details, the more accurate my chocolates would turn out.

My very first mold was barely recognizable as a horse at all.

I had to focus harder on my mental image of the Pegasi to produce any molds that started to look right. However, all of my failed attempts didn't go to waste—they ended up in the paws of the chocolate-loving Gardener Cats.

Despite the failed batches, Hayruth offered me enough advice to the point that I managed to produce a mold of acceptable quality.

While we worked on that, Gilbert and the chefs busied themselves with improving the chocolate itself. They were researching the correct ratios and cooking methods that would produce chocolate of various colors without sacrificing any of its taste.

These beautiful chocolate Pegasi were the result of a group effort.

“Wait a minute. Where’s my Pegasus?” After looking over the chocolates on display, the prince furrowed his brow. “I don’t see Sylpha in here.”

“I’ve prepared your Pegasus as well, Prince Ernest. Allow me to bring it over.”

I signaled a maid, who appeared with a large, covered box.

As the item was removed from the box, a sweet scent wafted through the air. Prince Ernest’s face lit up with astonishment. “He looks like he’s about to take off flying...!”

Prince Ernest was staring at a twelve-inch-tall chocolate Pegasus sculpture. It stood up proud, with wings spread and one leg bent at the front, and was made of white chocolate. My estimate was that it was somewhere around one-sixteenth of the original size. Each and every feather was chiseled into its wings, and the base of the statue contained rose-shaped candies for decoration to give the piece some color.

As a three-dimensional figure, this Pegasus took more than ten times longer to complete than the others. I was sure it had been twenty hours at least, not even including the time it took for the chocolate to set...

To be honest, I almost gave up a few times along the way.

It took ages just to make most of the parts before even standing it up. Then we had to adjust the shape of the right wing, but that ended up throwing off the balance of the rest of the parts. Just when I thought it was looking good, the legs ended up crumbling under the weight, taking my heart with them in the collapse.

As we encountered failure after failure, I saw Hayruth, who had been supervising the sculpture, start to look deeply depressed along the way. I ended up paying him more than usual for all his help.

“What do you think, Your Highness? Is it satisfactory?” I asked.

“Of course it is.” Prince Ernest was staring at the chocolate Pegasus. “You’re just full of surprises. ...I really do wish I could take you back to my country.”

The prince was muttering something to himself.

I didn't quite catch what he said after surprises, and as I wondered what it could've been...

"Laetitia. Let's go."

King Glenreed grabbed my left hand. He was so forceful in dragging me away, I just about fell right over.

"Kyah!"

But I ended up tumbling into His Majesty instead, landing squarely against his chest. When I felt his strong, sturdy muscles beneath my cheek, my heart skipped a beat.

*Maybe His Majesty only looks skinny because of his clothes?*

"Are you hurt? I'm sorry."

"I'm all right. But what was that about, all of a sudden?"

"...It's almost time for the dancing. We should get to the center before it starts."

With that, King Glenreed took my hand in his.

"You're ready, right?"

"Of course. I know this is my role."

I was called to this kingdom to play the part of King Glenreed's partner in situations like these. Given that I was a figurehead queen, it was all the more important that I handle public events smoothly so as not to cause any headaches for the king.

Unfortunately, His Majesty was too busy for us to ever practice dancing with each other. All we were able to do was put a few basic moves together and listen to the kind of song we would typically be dancing to.

I practiced with my villa servants in place of King Glenreed instead. Considering how I was much more graceful here than in my past life, I managed to avoid tripping and falling during practice.

"It's about to begin."

The orchestra changed to a song for dancing.

It was customary in Wolfvarde for the first dance of a ball to be shared between the event's hosts.

His Majesty took my hand in his. We headed toward the center of the ballroom.

With my ears focusing on the music, I stared into King Glenreed's eyes. It was like gazing into a frozen winter lake. For just a moment, I felt those eyes steal my heart away.

"Let's go."

The two of us smoothly transitioned into a waltz. When the timing was right, His Majesty even twirled me along to the beat.

*This is fun.*

King Glenreed's lead successfully navigated us into a smooth, pleasant dance.

My dress twirled through the air, sending my hair fluttering as it sparkled under the light of the chandelier. His Majesty's hair sparkled too. It was as brilliant as real silver.

The two of us danced together in a world of glittering light.

I felt my body naturally following his steady, reassuring lead.

While I was practically in a trance out there on the ballroom floor, before I knew it, the first song was already over.

Applause rang out once the last note from the orchestra was finished.

I could hear murmurs from throughout the audience praising our waltz. I waved back, thanking them, when I heard King Glenreed muttering something at my side.

"I've never thought dancing was any fun. Not until tonight."

"Hehe! I had fun too."

As I stood there, my heart still racing from the thrill of the dance...I smiled back at King Glenreed with delight.



AFTER the ball started, Ernest paid a visit to Glenreed to greet him.

"I appreciate the invitation, King Glenreed. Nice to see you again too, Queen Laetitia."

"I'm glad to see you here, Prince Ernest."

Despite the words of welcome, Glenreed felt very different on the inside.

*I really don't like this man.*

He was the perfect crown prince to the Winged Wildam Empire and a talented Pegasus Knight. The man was arrogant but also knew when not to step over the line. Glenreed's sense of smell that he'd gained from ancestral reversion identified Ernest as a prideful man who was able to control himself.

But...still...

Glenreed just couldn't bring himself to care for the man.

*He really likes Laetitia. I can tell.*

As he watched the two of them having a friendly chat right in front of him, he felt a fire smoldering deep in his chest. It was the same irritation he experienced earlier when he noticed Liddeus staring at Laetitia.

Laetitia, all dressed up for the ball, stole the eyes of many men in the room.

Glenreed was one such man.

*Laetitia has very good looks. Of course people's eyes are drawn to her.*

Glenreed knew this much very well. It made perfect sense to him. But when he saw her being stared at by a man she was friendly with, it was nearly impossible for him to control his emotions as well as the expression on his face.

Ernest was right there in front of him, and he clearly had feelings for Laetitia. Those feelings only grew as he gazed in excitement at the giant chocolate Pegasus she'd made as a gift.

Ernest looked at Laetitia and muttered something quietly. "You're just full of surprises. ...I really do wish I could take you back to my country."

Glenreed, with the ears of a wolf, was able to make out the hushed words from the prince. He looked Ernest's way and saw that the corners of the

prince's mouth were turned upward into a provoking smirk directed at Glenreed.

"Laetitia. Let's go."

"Kyah!"

Glenreed didn't even realize he had pulled Laetitia's hand toward him. He caught her as she lost her balance, only to be hit with her scent as she fell against his body.

*I want her.*

His heart skipped a beat. A heat unlike anything he'd ever felt before surged through his body. The desire he felt for Laetitia was like an intense hunger.

If the two of them had been alone in that moment, who knows what he might have done to her.

Glenreed did everything he could to control himself, trying not to let the expression on his face falter.

"Are you hurt? I'm sorry."

"I'm all right. But what was that about, all of a sudden?"

"...It's almost time for the dancing. We should get to the center before it starts."

The timing was perfect. The first dance was just about to begin.

Glenreed scooped up Laetitia's hand, feeling his heart speed up at the sensation of her delicate, feminine fingers in his.

"You're ready, right?"

"Of course. I know this is my role."

Her answer immediately returned Glenreed to his senses.

*What's gotten into me?*

Laetitia was only trying to fulfill her role as a figurehead queen. Glenreed had a duty to seal his emotions away and conduct himself as a proper king, so as not to ruin Laetitia's efforts.

Together, they proceeded to the center of the ballroom.

“Let’s go.”

With that, they began to dance.

Glenreed knew he couldn’t miss a single step. He didn’t want to put any stress on Laetitia’s body or end up hurting her.

As he danced step after careful step, somewhere along the way, Glenreed found himself unable to take his eyes off Laetitia. Her blue dress fluttered with each move, causing the embroidered jewels to sparkle in the light like stars. He could tell she was enjoying herself. She looked so happy.

Laetitia and Glenreed danced together with perfect rhythm.

When he stared into her amethyst eyes, it was as if time had stopped altogether.

As much as he wished the music would continue on forever, the song, all so cruelly, eventually came to a close.

Saddened that they now had to part, Glenreed murmured to himself. “I’ve never thought dancing was any fun. Not until tonight.”

“Hehe! I had fun too.”

Her cheeks had developed a slight rose-colored hue, and those lips, pulled into a gentle smile, looked so soft.

*I wish I could touch them...*

Glenreed bit his tongue to be sure he didn’t let those urges slip from his mouth.



**KING** Glenreed had fallen silent after we finished our waltz.

Curious about what was on his mind, I decided to ask him directly. “Your Majesty? Did I make a mistake during the dance?”

“...No, it’s not that. You were perfect.”

“Thank you for saying so. I was impressed by your skills as well.”

“I’m the king. I have to be able to dance to some extent.”

“Because you’re...the king...?”

I felt the dreamy state of my mind begin to return to reality. I had really enjoyed dancing with King Glenreed... But to His Majesty, our dance was probably nothing more than part of his job. This wasn’t a revelation to me, although I felt a bit saddened by the thought.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let’s continue. The second song is about to begin.” I forced a smile on my face to try to improve my mood.

At balls in this kingdom, engaged couples dance the first song together, while married couples dance to both the first and second songs.

King Glenreed and I danced through the second song without any missteps.

At this point in the evening, guests were free to do as they pleased, so I separated from King Glenreed temporarily to chat with the other guests.

Tonight’s event was the largest to be held throughout the country, with a guest count easily surpassing a hundred people. Planning it was part of why King Glenreed had been so busy as of late.

His Majesty greeted the men, while I greeted the women.

We divided up the work we shared as hosts that way.

I started by chatting with Lady Natalie—the candidate for queen who lived in a villa to the west. We kept our conversation brief, as we both had many other people we needed to exchange words with.

Next up was Lady Fillia, the candidate for queen who lived to the south. We spoke for a short time too, and then it was on to the next guest, and then the next. I really had my hands full.

I exchanged greeting after greeting with various attendees, until Lady Kate, the candidate from the eastern villa, finally approached me.

“Good evening, Your Majesty. Your dance with King Glenreed was so lovely.”

Her kinked tail twirled as she stepped toward me. That tail had been a source

of insecurity for Lady Kate until recently, but she seemed much more accepting of it these days.

I enjoyed the faster pacing of my conversation with the outgoing, energetic woman. Lady Kate's personality was unusual for a woman of high society. It was hard not to appreciate it, to some extent.

We eagerly discussed the latest fashion trends and popular desserts for a while, but I had other guests to entertain too, so we had to wrap up eventually.

"I'll keep my schedule open, so why don't you come visit my villa in three weeks or so?" I invited. "We can do some baking together again, if you'd like."

"Of course. I'm looking forward to it. What are your plans for the rest of the evening?"

"I was going to look for Lady I-Liena so that we could chat for a bit."

She was the last of the candidates for queen that I hadn't greeted yet today. As the current queen, I would only be making trouble for myself by talking with all but one. People would definitely interpret it as a sign that I looked down on Lady I-Liena somehow.

*Ahhh, this is so annoying.*

I knew it was important to maintain a stable political balance, but it was still a pain to do so.

"I'm sure you've got a lot on your hands tonight." Lady Kate smiled awkwardly. "I think I saw Lady I-Liena heading for the courtyard. It's been a warm night, so I would imagine she wanted to step out and get some air."

"Thank you for telling me. I'll go have a look."

I appreciated this lead. I had been getting a bit anxious since I hadn't seen Lady I-Liena around in the ballroom until now.

With Lady Kate's helpful tip, I set out for the courtyard.

Due to the scale of tonight's ball, a few other areas outside of the ballroom had been opened up for guests, including the courtyard.

I exited the ballroom through the glass door that had been left open and led

straight to the courtyard. After making a full circle through the area, I failed to spot the fox-eared Lady I-Liena. Perhaps she had already moved on to another part of the castle.

“Oh my. If it isn’t Queen Laetitia.”

The voice belonged to the plump Lady Needia. The two of us had become acquainted during the search for José.

“Good evening. Have you happened to see Lady I-Liena? I’ve been trying to locate her.”

“Lady I-Liena? I just saw her heading in that direction.”

*I knew it. I just missed her.*

Lady Needia pointed at a room set aside for tired ball guests to rest in if they needed it. I thanked the countess and raced off in that direction, determined not to miss Lady I-Liena again, but this time...

“Oh, Your Majesty. I’m glad to run into you here.”

Someone called out to stop me again.

It was Duke Kernell—a duke with dark-brown dog ears.

“Your dance was most excellent back there. King Glenreed and you waltzed in perfect harmony.”

“I’m honored to hear you enjoyed it.”

I smiled back politely.

The duke’s family had been supporting King Glenreed’s ancestors ever since Wolfvarte existed as five smaller kingdoms. They were a very reputable family. In terms of status, they would be comparable to the four families who had submitted their daughters as candidates for queen.

I had heard that, as the current head of his family, Duke Kernell was a very prominent man. His predecessors had served tirelessly as government officials under previous kings and were seen as incredibly loyal beastfolk.

Not wanting to offend the duke, I was forced to stay and chat with him instead of cutting off our conversation midway.

*At this rate, I might not be able to catch up to Lady I-Liena yet again.*

As I smiled at the man, secretly trying to figure out what to do...

“Oh my! If it isn’t Duke Kernell?”

It was Lady Needia—the woman I had just run into in the courtyard. With a smile on her face, she dove right into the middle of our conversation.

“Did you hear what the Malchise boy did the other day?”

Lady Needia immediately launched into recent gossip. Despite the fact that they were both beastfolk, I was under the impression their families didn’t get along too well.

I was confused by this development, but just then, I made eye contact with Lady Needia.

*Wink!*

With one gesture, I instantly understood her intentions: she was offering me a way out. Lady Needia was distracting the duke so that I could continue on my search for Lady I-Liena.

Grateful for her help, I bid farewell to Duke Kernell.

“I don’t want to interrupt you two, so I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh, Your Majesty, you aren’t interr—”

“Duke Kernell! Are you even listening to my story?”

I heard Lady Needia drawing him back in as I hurried off in the opposite direction.

There didn’t seem to be many people in this area of the castle. I imagined most preferred to stay outside in the courtyard due to the pleasant weather. When I looked inside each of the small rooms set aside for guests to rest in, they were generally empty.

I was worried that I had missed her once again, but eventually, I heard the faint sound of voices. I peered into the room where the voices were coming from.

“Good evening, Lady I-Liena. What are you doing in here?”

“Oh? Your Majesty?”

There were three beastfolk inside the room, including Lady I-Liena. They all had a pair of triangular ears on their heads and similar tail shapes, so I imagined they belonged to the same Snow-Fox clan. Each of them also had a two-tailed fox with them—their companion animals.

Lady I-Liena, who sat in the center of the couch, smiled mildly when she saw me. She was tugging down the collar of her dress with her finger. I caught a glimpse of the pale skin of her chest. It was hard not to notice her shapeliness beneath her clothes.

Whenever I’d met her before, I’d always thought she was a captivating woman, but her sensuality was even more intense today. Even as a woman, I couldn’t help but feel my heart skip a beat at the sight of her leaning against the back of the couch, her cheeks faintly flushed.

Lady I-Liena kept that same vague smile on her face. It was hard to read what might be going on in her mind.

“Pardon me, Queen Laetitia.”

One of the people in the room—a white-haired young girl from the Snow-Fox clan—spoke up. She appeared younger than me, and her facial features were still adorable and innocent.

“I-Liena has become overheated. She felt unwell after being in the ballroom where the temperature had risen from all the dancing.”

*So she has something like heatstroke.*

I suddenly felt bad for thinking her look was a sensual one. Her skin was only sweaty and warm from all the heat. She was even remaining silent due to how physically uncomfortable she felt.

“Burn, petals of winter.”

I conjured up a spell to produce some ice. I then handed the flower-shaped ice to Lady I-Liena.

“This should help alleviate your discomfort. You can place it on your brow or neck.”

“I so appreciate this.”

Her face softened a bit as if she was already feeling relief from the ice.

*When you get heatstroke, you’re supposed to cool your body and drink lots of fluids. I think salt water is best for that?*

But I didn’t have any salt on hand, so instead, I filled the cup of ice with water by using another spell.

“That feels much better.”

She breathed a sigh of relief after gulping down the water. I could tell just how uncomfortable she must have been.

It was summer, although it was still nighttime, so the heat didn’t affect me very much. But Lady I-Liena was a member of the Snow-Fox clan. Just as the name implied, many of their members possessed white or silver hair. This came from their history of living in particularly snowy areas. While they could handle the cold better than anyone, compared with humans, heat really took a toll on them.

“I love how lively the capital city can be, but come summertime, it’s quite the headache. I’m particularly intolerant to heat, even for a member of the Snow-Fox clan.” Lady I-Liena seemed to have recovered well. She was casually pulling the neckline of her dress back up. “Snow-Fox women never forget a favor. Tell me what I can do for you, Your Majesty.”

“No, that’s quite all right. I just hope you’ll go to bed early and rest up tonight, if you’re able to.”

The summer heat wasn’t going away anytime soon. I made a mental note to serve things like ice cream and frozen treats the next time Lady I-Liena visited my villa.

“How unselfish of you.”

“You’re quite the kindhearted queen, Your Majesty.”

The young Snow-Fox girl was staring at me with admiration in her eyes.

Their words felt like an exaggeration for the small act of help I’d provided, but it wasn’t as if I disliked praise, so I decided not to dismiss their gratitude.

“I’m Mi-Milsha of the Snow-Fox clan. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Hehe! Thank you. You’re a relative of Lady I-Liena’s, aren’t you? I believe your mother’s mother was the younger sister of Lady I-Liena’s grandfather.”

“That’s exactly right. I’m surprised someone who isn’t a Snow-Fox even remembers that.”

“You’re part of her family. I studied up on such matters.”

Not knowing the bloodlines of all the noble families could lead to nasty blunders. My oldest brother, Big Brother Yurius, had made sure to drill that into my head. That’s why it was relatively easy for me to memorize the noble families of Wolfvarte once I decided to become its figurehead queen.

Big Brother Yurius was, to put it bluntly, a teacher from hell. I still had trauma from his lessons to this day, but I was also grateful for them too.

“I’m so glad you’re the one who married into this kingdom. You’re friends with I-Liena too, right?”

“Of course. We’ve dined and even cooked together on some occasions.”

Although, despite the smiles we shared, neither of us had ever particularly opened up to the other. It wasn’t a tense relationship, but it was hard to call us “friends” either.

But there was no point in speaking any of that out loud.

I chatted with Lady Mi-Milsha a bit more before asking Lady I-Liena how she was feeling.

“Are you feeling any better? I can call for someone if you don’t think you can stand.”

“I appreciate it, but I’m just fine. I’ll be on my way once I’ve cooled off a little more.”

“See? No need to worry, Your Majesty. I-Liena has Gai-Gurut here with her too.”

Lady Mi-Milsha was staring at the Snow-Fox man standing in a corner of the room. He was a tall man with a toned body. His silver hair, a few shades darker

than Lady I-Liena's, was pulled into a ponytail at the back of his head. His unique style of clothing reminded me of the traditional garments of the Ainu people. Above those, he was dressed in armor.





“I’m Gai-Gurut. I serve as a military officer at the Snow-Fox clan residence. I came to tonight’s ball as Mi-Milsha’s chaperone.”

He introduced himself with a blunt tone of voice.

Summer in Wolfvarte was the social season. The nobles who usually resided in their local territories all descended on the capital city at this time of year. Lady Mi-Milsha and Lord Gai-Gurut were long-time friends with Lady I-Liena and had taken her to this room to recover after witnessing her come down with heatstroke.

That was the simple explanation they gave me, but something still struck me as odd.

Just before I entered this side room...

The faint voices I’d overheard hadn’t sounded very peaceful. I wondered if the three of them had been arguing.

I was curious about the situation but decided to depart without an answer.

The ball was going to come to an end soon. I had fulfilled my initial goal of greeting Lady I-Liena, so I decided it was time to go find King Glenreed again.

I returned to the main ballroom and delivered the closing remarks with His Majesty. After seeing the guests off, I decided it was time to leave too, and headed to the carriage that would be waiting for me to take me back to the villa.

Just as Lucian placed his hand on the carriage door...

It was flung open from the inside with considerable force.

“Tweety?!”

“Peep!”

Lucian immediately grabbed Tweety before he could charge out at me.

“Why is Tweety in the carriage?”

“My sincerest apologies, Queen Laetitia.”

The driver bowed his head to me.

"This Cuddle Bird simply forced his way into the carriage and refused to budge. It was approaching the time Your Majesty was supposed to return home, so I had no choice but to take him along with me."

"Peekee!"

Tweety nodded his beak as if to agree with the driver.

"Goodness, Tweety. You couldn't wait for me to come home?"

I smiled awkwardly, feeling like I had failed as his owner somehow.

I had left home in the afternoon to help set up the ballroom, and even yesterday, I was too busy preparing for the event to give Tweety much attention.

"I'm sorry, Tweety. I'll give you lots of magical energy once we're home, so please just wait until I'm changed, all right?"

"...Peep!"

After a bit of thought, Tweety reluctantly agreed to my terms.

"My lady is far too nice to this featherbrain. You're not the only one who feels lonely whenever she's busy... Why don't you have some self-control, featherbrain?"

Lucian was whispering something to Tweety with a furrowed brow. Tweety cocked his head, although I couldn't tell if he understood any of what he was being told. Lucian let out a sigh.

"...I oughta give this featherbrain a good strangling... No, I should simply help show him some reason."

As he shoved Tweety back into the carriage, Lucian was muttering something under his breath all the while.

## Chapter 5: The Oil Temperature Makes All the Difference

“**GOOD** day, Your Majesty! It’s nice to see you again. Thank you so much for inviting me to your tea party!”

Lady Mi-Milsha had arrived at my villa. Her voice was cheerful and her fox ears were perked up.

I had been holding regular tea parties at my villa for some time now. The first guests had been Lady Kate and Lady Natalie, but now, I found myself hearing from many eager participants who sought a place to drink tea and engage in conversation between humans and beastfolk.

Lady Mi-Milsha had taken a liking to me after the palace ball two weeks earlier. Since she was so excited to attend one of my get-togethers, I was sure to invite her today.

My tea parties were starting to see many new participants now that the social season was beginning too. Today’s event was attended by over a dozen young ladies.

As a member of the Snow-Fox clan, Lady Mi-Milsha didn’t care for hot weather, though she tolerated it more than Lady I-Liena did. I had assigned her a place at one of the five tables in the garden that would get the most breeze.

Once I confirmed that Lady Mi-Milsha and her two-tailed fox had taken their seats, I began to explain today’s tea party to all the women.

“I’ve prepared a frozen sweet called a ‘parfait’ for you all to enjoy today. I’m sure very few of you have tried this before, so please start by taking a look at the papers on each of your tables.”

“This paper, right? Wow! All these fruit drawings look so delicious.”

Lady Mi-Milsha leaned in, along with the human girl next to her, to get a look at the papers on the table.

Each table contained a bundle of illustrated menus for the guests.

Both my homeland and Wolfvarte suffered from low literacy rates among commoners. Restaurants that mainly served commoners didn't use written menus, but instead relied on illustrated signs or verbal communication of the menu from staff.

Nobles generally ate meals prepared by their private chefs or whatever was served at events they were invited to, meaning they rarely relied on menus either.

With all the new guests at my tea parties these days, I often relied on my past-life knowledge to serve sweets that were unfamiliar to people of this world. It was difficult to explain some of these new concepts for each and every party, so I decided to start making menus instead.

I came up with the text and layout of the menus, while Hayruth did the illustrations for me. Hayruth was a talented, fast-working artist who charged fair prices. I didn't hesitate to commission him. He accepted this second request from me after completing the Pegasus sketches for my chocolates.

"Pages five and six show images of the parfaits you can order today, as well as brief descriptions of them. Please choose whichever one strikes your fancy."

The women were already stirring over the menu illustrations.

*Parfaits are very cute desserts. I understand why they're so excited.*

Hayruth's portrayal of the parfaits captured the vivid colors of the fruit toppings well. They were stunning enough to bring both delight and hunger to anyone who viewed them.

Lady Mi-Milsha was also looking at her menu with excitement, as were the two young ladies seated to her left and right.

*She seems to be getting along well with her tablemates. What about everyone else?*

The menus seemed to be a great starting point for conversation.

As I chatted with the women at my own table, I eventually found the right moment to signal Lucian. The villa servants began to circle the tables, taking

orders from each of the guests in turn.

The chefs inside would be receiving those orders to get started on their parfaits. Since the ingredients were prepared in advance and the parfaits didn't require any cooking, the chefs were able to serve them with a quick turnaround time.

The parfaits were made with things like sherbet, fruit, and crushed cookies layered inside a bowl, then topped with whipped cream and ice cream. I had even transmuted special glass bowls that would make the parfait layers even more visible and picturesque.

The glass bowls sparkled in the sunlight once they were carried out of the kitchen.

"How lovely...! What an extravagant dessert for something frozen!" Lady Mi-Milsha exclaimed.

The treats were charming on the outside and nice and chilly once you took your first bite.

Lady Mi-Milsha already seemed taken with the parfaits. Each bite was an explosion of invigorating flavors—thick layers of oranges and other citrus fruits. It melted on the tongue, leaving behind the cold sweetness of orange ice cream. Lady Mi-Milsha couldn't seem to get enough.

"Another delicious treat today."

"All of the sweets at this villa are superb."

The other young ladies also looked to be enjoying their parfaits. Some of the guests were regulars at my tea parties now and had been starting to form relationships that defied the usual distance between humans and beastfolk.

As the peaceful atmosphere died down, I sent the women off with more ice cream as souvenirs. I urged them to enjoy it as a treat at home too.

The boxes were modified so that the ice cream wouldn't melt right away. When you opened a box, a lump of ice would be revealed. This was ice I made with a spell, and I left an indent in the surface where a bowl of ice cream could be placed.

Judging by today's weather, I imagined the ice cream would remain frozen until tomorrow at least. It would surely be a nice treat to wake up to the next morning. After eating the ice cream, the lump of ice could also be used to cool off in the summer heat as well.

"All right. Now to give instructions for clean-up," I said to Lucian.

I had my servants check for any items left behind by the guests, just to be safe, then directed them to take down the tables across the yard.

As I watched over the garden while petting Tweety, I noticed that Leonard was approaching the villa.

Leonard, the traveling bard, was supposedly on friendly terms with a number of nobles. This was why he had permission to enter palace grounds as he pleased. He even showed up at my villa from time to time too.

"If only I'd come earlier," he said longingly. "I missed the gathering of beautiful maidens, didn't I?"

"Hehe! It was just a simple tea party," I said with a smile.

Leonard often spoke in theatrical, roundabout ways, perhaps because of his occupation. It also made him a person who was hard to read on any deeper level.

Even now, he suddenly began to play his lute for Tweety on a whim. Tweety seemed to think that the strumming of the lute was the cry of a strange animal. He stared at the vibrating strings in fascination.

"Leonard, might I ask you to perform for the villa staff once again?" I asked him as I stroked Tweety.

The servants really loved to hear Leonard sing along with his lute. The man possessed a bright, beautiful voice, and handsome, sleepy eyes. Some of the women in particular were always eager to see him again.

"By all means. Can I expect another delicious meal too?"

Leonard really enjoyed what my chefs and I cooked. We had started to supply him with food in addition to the fee we paid for his music.

"Of course. I have sandwiches as well as some fresh celery that's just come in."

How does a summer celery soup sound?"

This celery was the product of the Gardener Cats' farm in the villa yard. The fresh harvest had provided us high-quality, perfectly crispy celery.

I thought he would jump at the recommendation, but instead, his face took on a look of sorrow.

"Celery. It is a bitter foe of mine, who I am fated to eliminate whenever our paths may cross."

"...I'm guessing you mean to say you don't like it?"

I couldn't help but smile at the grim look on his face and his dramatic way of putting it.

Many people disliked celery, seeing as how it was a very fragrant vegetable. Children in particular seemed to hate it.

"Very well. I'll make you something without any celery."

"I'm most grateful for your mercy."

After his thanks, he entered the villa.

"Peep? Peepa peep?!"

Tweety followed Leonard from behind in pursuit of that lute.



**WE** ended up serving Leonard a ham and cheese sandwich, herb-roasted chicken, and summer vegetable ratatouille.

His performances usually lasted about forty minutes or so.

During this time, Gilbert and the chefs would work on Leonard's meal so that it was nice and fresh for him.

I was in charge of the ratatouille. It was going to be made from glossy eggplants, tomatoes, garlic, and zucchini from the Gardener Cats. I also diced some onions I had stored in a jar with bacon.

In my past life, whenever summer vegetables were in season and selling for cheap, ratatouille was a meal I often prepared to store away and eat as I

needed it. I sliced up the ingredients with ease, poured some olive oil into a pan, and began to cook the minced garlic.

Once the aroma began to reach me, I increased the heat a bit and added the bacon and onions. I watched as the onions softened in the pan, then added the rest of the vegetables and let them fry together.

“All that’s left is to let it simmer on a lower heat.”

I set the lid on top of the pan. The water inside the vegetables would likely seep out enough to make a nice, moist mixture. The savory vegetable juices were going to circulate throughout the pan, intensifying the flavor of everything.

After it simmered for a while on a low flame, I seasoned the veggies with salt and pepper.

“Good, good. I think it’s ready.”

I gave the ratatouille a taste. A piece of tomato practically melted in my mouth, and I could taste the rich yet sweet flavors of the vegetable juices. It was a symphony of summer abundance and joy for my taste buds.

“We’re finished over here too, Your Majesty.” Gilbert brought over the sandwich and herb-roasted chicken.

Leonard was just about finished with his performance for the servants.

We filled a tray with our creations and set it in front of Leonard once he was finished. Singing while playing the lute burned lots of calories, so Leonard wasted no time in filling his belly with our cooking.

Once he was finished, I decided to escort him outside to see him off.

As we walked down the hallway, the front door opened before we could reach it.

“Oh, hello there, Hayruth,” I greeted my new guest.

“...Who is this?” Hayruth stood in the front entrance, blinking his eyes at us. He seemed confused by Leonard’s presence.

“This is Leonard,” I introduced. “He’s a traveling bard who comes here to

perform for us sometimes.”

“Oh, a traveling bard? Is that right?” Hayruth stared at Leonard, appearing interested.

“Mm-hm. And you must be an artist?”

“Correct. I’m surprised you could tell.”

“I have a good nose. Did you know that art supplies have a very unique scent that permeates the body?”

Leonard patted Hayruth on the shoulder as they passed. Hayruth seemed surprised by the friendly gesture, but then he smiled and patted him right back.

“...Is that right? Thanks for the advice.”

“It was nothing.” Leonard passed by with a wave of his hand. “Until next time, Your Majesty. May our next meeting take place in a world devoid of celery.”

“Hehe! I’m not so sure about that.” I bid Leonard farewell and turned to Hayruth. “What brings you here today, Hayruth?”

“I brought the paintings we discussed before.”

“Ah, of course. You wanted to hang some of your art in my villa.”

Hayruth had been the one to propose the suggestion.

He had already done me a few favors, and he was also a friend of Claude, one of my older brothers. When I asked him if there was anything I could do to support his work, he said he would like to have me hang his art in a room in my villa. King Glenreed gave me permission for this, as there were already empty rooms here anyway.

I hoped to have guests enjoy looking at Hayruth’s art. If any of them were real art lovers, I could introduce them to Hayruth in case they wanted to commission him.

“Where are the paintings you brought?” I asked.

“Nimur carried them for me. Right, Nimur?”

“Gyah gyah!”

Nimur, Hayruth's scaled horse, poked his head through the door when called for. He was well trained and seemed to know not to enter the building without permission. His beady black eyes surveyed the room.

"Did you paint all of those pieces he's carrying?"

There was a small mountain of luggage tied to the creature's back.

*Can Nimur really handle all that weight?*

"Don't worry about Nimur. He's not as burly as a horse, but he's stronger than he looks. Most of those boxes are filled with cloth to keep the art safe, so they're not so heavy, really." Hayruth untied and opened one of the crates. "Here's what the art looks like."

"Wow, what a beautiful forest painting."

A lovely landscape of oil paints was peeking out from the gaps in the cloth.

Hayruth dabbled in a little bit of everything—landscapes, portraits, and the paintings of dogs and cats that were highly desirable in Wolfvarte. He was a talented, thorough, and fast worker.

As skilled with people as Hayruth seemed, I could easily see him becoming the employee of some nobleman out there, but as he explained it to me, that wasn't something that interested him. He worked enough to make a living, but outside of that, he preferred to do as he pleased with his art.

"Please hang up the works in this room over here." I instructed the servants to carry the luggage on Nimur's back to one of the rooms. "Would you prefer to open the boxes yourself, Hayruth?"

"Sure thing. Some of them are packed a little strangely."

"All right, I'll leave you in charge of that. I would like to see the paintings once they're unboxed, so please come call for me when you're finished."

"Of course. I'll be done as soon as I can."

With that, Hayruth wasted no time in beginning to unbox the paintings he'd brought me.



“WOW, how lovely!”

Two hours had passed.

The once-empty room was now a gallery for Hayruth’s paintings.

Not only were the walls jam-packed with them, but a few easels were set up to display his paintings too.

“What do you think? Does it look all right?”

“Yes, it’s perfectly...” Before I could finish, I spotted a few paintings in the corner of the room that were covered with fabric. “You don’t want to hang those up?”

“...Ah... Those ones...” Hayruth scratched his head and chuckled. “I wasn’t sure about those, so I brought them just in case...but I just feel like they’re not something that should really be hung at the castle, even just in a far-off royal villa. I don’t want to harm your reputation either, Your Majesty, since you’re letting me display my art here.”

“...What kind of paintings are they?”

Now I was curious.

*Maybe they’re some of those really violent or sexual paintings that can offend certain people?*

Hayruth was an artist, but his actual job was more like a craftsman who took on the requests from paying clients, or so it seemed in my eyes. I really wanted to know what kind of art he’d created that he was hesitant to show others.

“May I take a look?”

“Of course. Just don’t be too harsh, please.”

Hayruth smiled awkwardly as he brought over the paintings from the corner of the room. He lifted the cloth to reveal...

“...Those are quite the eye-catching colors,” I said.

The people were red and yellow while the backgrounds were nothing but solid shades of blue. Every line was uneven across the canvasses filled with vivid colors. I could just barely tell that the shapes were supposed to be human. It

was certainly art that was hard to ignore.

This was nothing like the works of art that were considered valuable in Wolfvarte—like lifelike portraits and accurate depictions of things with only slightly brighter colors.

“Hmm... I think people will take to these in another two hundred years or so,” I stated.

“You mean no one’s ever gonna like them while I’m still alive?”

“I just think you’re a bit too ahead of your time...”

*They might find praise in the avant-garde category from my past life? ...No, maybe not. The world of art is a harsh place.*

At the very least, I knew this art wouldn’t be worth a penny in the current world I lived in. The more I stared at the paintings, the stranger I started to feel. I had a sense of *déjà vu*. I felt as if I had seen these pictures before somewhere.

“But where...?” I wondered aloud. “It wasn’t in Wolfvarte. Back in Elltoria...?”

*No, not there either. It was before that. Before I was even born.*

They resembled something from Japan. It had to be a video or picture I had seen somewh—

“Ah...!”

It finally hit me.

The red skin. The yellow clothes. The dark-blue backgrounds. It was all like...

“Thermography!”

“Huh?!”

I couldn’t help but shout out the source of my funny feeling. Hayruth was taken aback by the sudden outburst.

“Thermo—...? Where did that come from? What is it?”

“It’s heat. These paintings are visual depictions of temperature, aren’t they?”

“?!”

Hayruth’s eyes shot open.

*I was right, wasn't I?*

Red was generally seen as a color of heat and warmth in this world too. Similarly, shades of blue were associated with the cold. That would explain why Hayruth portrayed different temperatures the way he did in these paintings.

"Perhaps you can see the heat within people and objects with your eyes?" I hypothesized.

It was possible that Hayruth saw the world differently from the rest of us. That was why these paintings looked the way they did.

Supposedly, humans all perceive things with their eyes in very different ways.

I remembered hearing in my past life about the irregularities in how the brain processes vision.

"Seeing heat...? Are you seriously asking me that?" He gave me a dubious look.

"Am I wrong? It would explain why these paintings look the way they do."

Eyes that could distinguish heat. It was a crazy idea, but I couldn't fully dismiss it either.

Magical energy existed in this world as the source of all kinds of strange phenomena. Even in my past life, where there was no such thing as magic, there were some people who could see colors from numbers and experience smells from certain sounds.

When you threw magic into the mix with something like that...

It didn't seem strange to think that people with temperature-perceiving eyes might exist in this world.

It was a hypothesis that was hard to prove, but right now, I was staring at art that looked exactly like thermography. There was no reason to think that Hayruth, the creator of the works, didn't possess eyes that could see temperatures.

"Can't you see the difference in temperature between my skin and my hair right now?" I attempted to question him once more.

But this time, Hayruth only let out a very long sigh.

“...You’re correct. I can’t believe I’ve run into another person who figured out my ability like that.”

My theory had proved true. Hayruth began to applaud me.

“That’s really impressive, Your Majesty. I’m surprised that you could tell just by looking at my paintings. How did you know, exactly?”

“...It was just a hunch.”

I couldn’t tell him that it all came from my past-life memories, so I decided to write it off as intuition. However, Hayruth wasn’t so easily fooled.

“There’s no way it was just a hunch. I don’t think a simple hunch could ever see right through me like that.”

“I don’t know what to say... It really was just intuition. I made a guess and happened to be correct.”

“A guess...? You really mean that?”

“Of course I do. Didn’t you just say I wasn’t the first person to figure it out? That means there has to be at least one other person who has guessed correctly, right? So it’s not strange at all that I could make that exact same guess.”

“Uh, that doesn’t sound quite right to me...”

Hayruth still wasn’t convinced. I decided to change the subject so that I wouldn’t have to keep bending the truth.

“By the way, who was this other person who figured out that you see things differently?”

“...Lord Claude.”

“What?!”

I couldn’t hide my shock.

Hayruth had just named my older brother who was closest to me in age. I had tried to change the subject but lost control of the situation once more.

"I befriended Lord Claude once I arrived in this country. He was also able to guess that my eyes were different from everyone else's."

"...You don't say."

I accepted what Hayruth was telling me. He didn't appear to be lying, and it wasn't unthinkable to me either.

Big Brother Claude, who was five years older than me, was very intuitive. Without past-life memories like what I possessed, he shouldn't have any idea what thermography was, but perhaps he was the one person who could figure it out anyway.

"As his younger sister, I also saw him as unbelievably smart sometimes."

"That's a lot of praise for Lord Claude. Not that I disagree." Hayruth smiled awkwardly. He glanced my way when he heard me sigh. "So, what are you going to do, Your Majesty?"

"About what?"

"About my eyes. Are you going to ask for a bribe so that you won't tell anyone else about them?"

"Of course not."

I didn't understand what Hayruth was suggesting.

It was true that I had spotted his hidden ability, but it didn't mean anything of significance to me. I couldn't profit off it in the first place, nor did I have any intention of asking for a bribe to keep it a secret.

But Hayruth continued to stare at me, unconvinced.

"Are you sure about that? Maybe you want to order me to stay away from you with my creepy eyes? Or use them for your own benefit?"

"I don't find them creepy...and as for using them..." Something did come to mind. I decided to ask him, prepared to have him reject the proposal. "Would you be willing to help out with my cooking at all?"

"...Cooking?" Hayruth looked confused. He probably hadn't expected such a request at all.

“Right. Cooking. How would you feel about lending a hand when I make deep-fried foods?”

“Deep-fried? What does that mean...?”

Hayruth still didn’t seem to understand what I was talking about.

*Oh, of course. I should have started with an explanation first.*

Cooking oil existed in this world, but it was only used for stir-fries. Deep-fried foods that used a large amount of expensive cooking oil didn’t appear to be popular at all in this area.

“It would probably be easier to show you rather than try to explain it. Would you follow me to the kitchen, Hayruth?”



“**SO** this is deep-frying...?”

Hayruth was currently experiencing confusion in the kitchen. He was staring at the remains of a charred piece of pork on a plate.

“To be more precise, it’s a failed attempt at deep-frying. I ended up cooking it for too long and burning it.”

Meat could be dangerous to eat when undercooked. Because of that, I tended to overcook the meat by accident while trying to ensure it didn’t remain raw.

“The most important part of deep-frying is the temperature of the oil. Most of us can’t simply look at something and know what temperature it is.”

“So that’s where I come in?”

I nodded back at him. I knew of some ways to measure oil temperature, but all of them proved to be inconsistent, making them difficult to rely on.

I failed when I tried to estimate the temperature based on how much of the breadcrumbs had fallen off the meat. I tried to wet a piece of wood in place of chopsticks to see how it reacted with the oil, but this failed too.

I wasn’t sure if I was bad at this or if it was simply because this kind of cooking oil was different from the ones I used in my past life. I didn’t have an answer to that question. Perhaps the real reason was something else entirely.

But without a way to tell what temperature the oil was reaching, I could only rely on luck when timing my deep-frying attempts. I had only succeeded once out of multiple tries, wasting lots of oil in the process.

"I had to stop practicing because I was wasting too much expensive cooking oil without any hope of solving the problem. ...But with your help, I think I'll be able to fry my foods just perfectly."

The process was simple enough. I would start by having Hayruth observe the temperature of hot oil over and over again, then test it by frying some foods, and have him memorize the temperature each time. Whichever foods came out perfectly would be the temperature we aimed for in the future. I could adjust the strength of the flame based on how Hayruth was observing the temperature.

As long as I stuck to his instructions, I was certain my failure rate would decrease significantly. After observing this process many times, hopefully, with my own five senses, I would be able to judge the correct temperature for myself as well.

...After explaining all of this to him, it was time to put my method to the test.

"It's in your hands, Hayruth. Let's get started."

I looked up at Hayruth—my last ray of hope. I had given up on deep-frying once already, but thanks to Hayruth, I had a newfound motivation.

*Tonkatsu*, tempura, fried shrimp, and fried chicken. Even donuts were a fried food. There were so many things I hoped to eat again. I was eager to get going.

Excitedly, I stared at the pot of oil in front of me.

"All right, I think I've got it now. If we manage to do this correctly, you'll let me have a taste too, right?"

"Of course! I want you to fall in love with fried foods too!"

With that declaration and promise, it was time to begin heating up the oil.

From the bottom of my heart, I believed that these attempts would lead me to a life full of delicious fried foods.

Hayruth and I dove headfirst into the world of deep-frying.



**HAYRUTH** couldn't get the sound of the sizzling oil out of his head.

"It's done...!"

Laetitia let out a cheer. She had plucked a fried piece of meat out of the oil with two wooden sticks that she called "replica chopsticks."

"Look at this beautiful golden-brown color...! This is the absolute picture-perfect *tonkatsu*!!"

Laetitia was extremely pleased. She stared at the end of her replica chopsticks, her eyes watering as if this *tonkatsu* contained dear memories for her. Ignoring the fact that she was enthralled by the sight of oily pork, it was a very beautiful sight.

*She's a girl of flawless beauty...*

His impression of Laetitia had changed immensely after getting to know her. The woman he saw in front of him in that moment was like a small-town girl, grinning without a care in the world.

She cut into the *tonkatsu* to observe what it looked like on the inside.

"It's cooked all the way through. This is the perfect level of doneness. Now I know how to tell when the oil is at the correct temperature! It's all thanks to you, Hayruth!"

She looked up at him, her amethyst eyes full of gratitude. Even Hayruth, who felt no romantic feelings for Laetitia, couldn't help but be taken by the sight.

*Ah... I sure see why she won King Glenreed over with those eyes. They're a force to be reckoned with.*

Although, he knew Laetitia probably wasn't acting that way intentionally. But Hayruth could tell that, with her supreme beauty and ability to let loose when she wasn't acting like a perfect queen, she was certainly capable of stealing the heart of anyone.

Hayruth thought back to the words Claude had shared with him.

*"My parents had four children. The most superior nobleman of any of them is*

*Yurius, the oldest, while Bernard is the strongest. Laetitia's the youngest, but we all pale in comparison to her."*

When he first heard that, he thought Claude was simply doting on his beloved little sister. But the more time Hayruth spent with Laetitia, the more he came to understand.

Within her was the power to charm just about anyone.

*She really is a big deal. She wasn't even slightly shocked to learn the secret about my eyes.*

Long ago, Hayruth had revealed his ability to others in an effort to find people who shared the same power. The result was nothing but painful memories that still haunted him to this day. Most people called him creepy and fled, but those who didn't were only interested in using his eyes for their own profit.

*But I never expected Her Majesty would want to borrow my eyes to help with her cooking.*

She was a hardcore lover of cooking. When it came to food, Laetitia was always eager and motivated. Even before, when she'd taken on the challenge of creating the chocolate Pegasi, Hayruth found her passion to be almost too much to handle.

*But thanks to that effort, it sounded like Prince Ernest was pleased.*

Those chocolate Pegasi even helped mend the relationship between the two countries that had grown strained thanks to Theodore's antics. Laetitia had already contributed more than enough to Wolfvarte for a placeholder queen.

Her villa servants seemed to love her too. The chefs were eager to join her in trying the *tonkatsu*.

"It's finished! Give it a try, Hayruth!" she urged with a big smile.

Hayruth took a seat at the table and had a plate of *tonkatsu* and shredded cabbage set down in front of him. He had never tried such a dish before, but the appearance and aroma alone were plenty appetizing.

"I would suggest trying it with this sauce. It's a sauce I invented to serve with deep-fried foods, hoping that this day would come."

“Wow, it’s just for fried foods? I’ll give it a try.”

The sauce was dark brown and had a thick consistency. Hayruth poured it over his *tonkatsu* and took his first bite.

“...!”

His teeth cut through the outer surface, producing an appetizing sound as he chewed.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.*

Past the crispy outer layer was the soft pork. He could taste its juices with each bite. The sauce was sweet, salty, and very rich, but it left a refreshing taste in the mouth too, perhaps because it contained fruit.

“This flavor...! I can’t get enough...!”

Hayruth hadn’t even realized those words were coming out of his mouth.

It was delicious.

He gulped down slice after slice until he finished the entire dish. It was incredibly tasty—the result of Laetitia’s intense passion for the food.

“I’m glad you like it. I have another piece that came out well. Would you like seconds?”

“You don’t mind if I have it?”

“Of course not. I owe you for all the fried foods I’ll be able to make now.”

She brought out another *tonkatsu*.

Hayruth was just about to stuff his stomach with the second offering of food, when suddenly...

*Someone’s here...*

It was a familiar but unwelcome presence.

A few seconds later, Leonard entered the kitchen.

“Hi there. I see the artist is here with you today.”

“Nice to see you again.”

They greeted each other casually. Hayruth and Leonard exchanged the quickest of glances, unnoticed by anyone else.

*He's as phony as ever today.*

Hayruth's special eyes could also detect people's ulterior motives with a single look.

Leonard could also simply sense that Hayruth wasn't who he said he was.

Leonard had patted Hayruth's shoulder when they were first introduced. Observers probably saw this as a simple friendly gesture between the men, but its true meaning was a warning.

What looked like a light pat was actually a forceful squeeze.

When returning the gesture, Hayruth had put some force into his pat too. But Leonard had predicted this, steadying himself so he didn't even slightly flinch.

Leonard was clearly more than just a traveling bard.

*We can both tell that we're hiding something. But if I tell anyone about him, he can just draw attention to me in retaliation.*

Hayruth had no choice but to sit back and observe Leonard for the time being.

He had to keep gathering information...

Until Laetitia would decide what to do with Leonard.

## Chapter 6: Everyone Has a Food or Two They Dislike

“IT’S gotten so much cooler already.”

I was sitting against the trunk of a tree we had planted in my backyard.

Summers in Wolfvarte were very short. Both today and yesterday, it was almost chilly in the afternoon, enough that I had to wear a moss-green cardigan over my light summer dress. Lucian had brought it to me, worried I would get cold.

“It feels like fall will be here in the blink of an eye.”

“This summer was particularly hectic, what with Prince Ernest’s visit.”

Just as Lucian had predicted, the short summer truly passed in what felt like no time at all. The wolfkeepers had also returned to walking the wolves at the same time of day as in the spring. They should be arriving in my backyard any minute now.

Just then, I heard a rustling from the bushes surrounding the villa.

The wolves had finally come.

“Woof!”

The first wolf who raced toward me was Tera, who was born just this spring. She had grown significantly in less than half a year, and within the past month or so in particular, her facial features were becoming much more defined. Her muzzle was longer and her entire face had the sharper look of an adult wolf.

“But she’s still just a pup on the inside, isn’t that right?”

“Gruff!”

I stroked Tera’s head and received an affirmative tail wag. She was also letting out little huffy cries. As big as her body had grown, she still had the personality of a youngster.

As I scratched her head, I noticed that something strange was going on.

Usually, Jenna and the other friendly wolves would be approaching me at this point, but they were all standing some distance away today, unwilling to come any closer.

Just as I was wondering what was the matter, Edgar appeared from the animal trail.

“Edgar, are the wolves acting strange today?”

The wolfkeeper looked around at the wolves. “Ah, that’s probably because—”  
“Gruh!”

A low growl came from the forest. The rest of the wolves all bowed their heads as if to receive their king.

“Lord Aroo...” the name slipped from my lips.

It had been so long since I had seen King Glenreed in his silver wolf form. The last time was during the incident at the Bureau of Magic earlier in the summer.

Ever since I learned that Lord Aroo was really King Glenreed, I was sure he would never come visit me as a wolf again.

The other wolves hadn’t seemed to have forgotten to pay their respects to him, even though so much time had passed since his last visit. They slowly backed away to make a path for him, careful not to get in his way.

“Aroo! Aroo!”

*“It’s been a while since I came here in this form,”* he seemed to say.

Lord Aroo came up to my side.

“May I ask what brings you to my villa today?”

I couldn’t help but speak formally to him. I knew who Lord Aroo was now. I couldn’t treat him like the other wolves anymore.

*“I own this entire kingdom. Why can’t I walk around it as I please?”* he said with a snort of his nose.

I didn’t understand why, but it appeared that he had wanted to visit me specifically while in wolf form.

“You’re so strange, Lord Aroo.” I let out a chuckle. I was happy to receive a visit from His Majesty, no matter what form he took.

“*Why are you laughing like that again?*”

I couldn’t help but laugh even more at the suspicious look on his face.

“It feels like you’re even more expressive as a wolf than as a human!”

“Arooo...!”

“See? Now you look so grumpy, like— Ow, ow, ow!!”

“Aroo! Gruff!!”

Unable to vocalize his thoughts, Lord Aroo could only object by slamming his head into mine.

*That’s right. Lord Aroo often uses force to get his point across.*

He once told me that it was more difficult to control his emotions while in wolf form.

*Maybe King Glenreed actually gets angrier than he lets on?*

Lord Aroo appeared to act on whims at times, but perhaps that was actually a form of stress relief.

“Aroooo...”

“*You’re thinking something rude again, aren’t you?*” Lord Aroo appeared to say, squinting his eyes at me. With a sigh, he sat down at my side.

“...Aroo?”

Lord Aroo cocked his head, looking up at me. Those blue-green eyes seemed upset about something.

“Um, what’s the matter? Is something bothering you?”

“...Ruff.”

He looked away in response to my question. I didn’t understand why he refused to leave my side, despite whatever was bothering him. As I pondered this, Edgar spoke.

“I think Lord Aroo might be pouting.”

“Pouting? But why?”

“Because you haven’t even pet him once yet, Your Majesty.”

“Ah...”

Lord Aroo’s tail completely froze when he heard Edgar’s observation. I realized he was probably correct.

“Graaaaah?”

“Eek!!”

Edgar recoiled at the sudden outburst from the wolf.

“...You shouldn’t take your anger out on others, Lord Aroo.” I smiled awkwardly, reaching my hand out toward the wolf. “Here I go.”

With that, I began to gently pet the wolf’s back. Since he didn’t experience a shedding season, Lord Aroo was still nice and fluffy in the summer. My fingers sunk deep into his silver fur. Lord Aroo squinted his eyes.

I had only touched King Glenreed briefly a small number of times. But while he was Lord Aroo, he always allowed me to touch him, even seeming to enjoy it.

...Although I was starting to feel a bit embarrassed by the act of petting him. Persuading myself that this was simply a way of soothing the busy, tired king, I continued to stroke his fluffy coat.

“Achoo!”

A breeze passed by, chilling my body. I realized that the temperature was finally starting to drop for real. As I shuddered, I suddenly felt something soft against my neck.

Lord Aroo was draping his silver tail around my neck like a scarf.

“Lord Aroo...”

*How kind of him.*

His bushy tail was perfect for protecting my neck from the wind.

“Aruff!”

“Hehe! Thank you. Of course you don’t want the queen to catch a cold.”

Lord Aroo let out a little snort, as if to say it was nothing worth thanking him for.

Despite refusing to make eye contact with me, Lord Aroo still wanted to keep his tail safely on my neck. I stroked him to say thanks, only to feel his tail pull away as he suddenly stood up.

“Lord Aroo?”

“Aroooooo!”

He was glaring as he howled up at the sky.

Prince Ernest was in the process of descending through the air on his Pegasus, sending wind blowing in all directions.

“Good afternoon, Prince Ernest,” I greeted the unexpected guest. “What brings you here?”

He wasn’t supposed to visit for a flying lesson today. Once the prince landed his Pegasus, his cape fluttered behind him as he dismounted the animal.

“I came to say goodbye. We’ll be leaving this kingdom five days from now. I’ll be busy preparing until then.”

“How sudden. I thought you still had nearly twenty days before you were scheduled to leave.”

“Fall is coming faster this year. If we wait too long, we won’t be able to cross the Jilberia Mountains.”

“I see. It certainly has been chilly today.”

So it wasn’t just my imagination. Fall really was coming earlier than usual this year.

The Pegasi could fly freely through the sky, but it was reckless to try to send them through a storm.

The Jilberia Mountains were the border between the Winged Wildam Empire and the kingdom of Wolfvarte. From the middle of fall to the beginning of winter, they were said to be hit by very strong winds. Traveling through them

from the capital city could easily result in a delayed arrival of over a month.

“I’ll have to say goodbye to Sylpha too.”

Sylpha, Prince Ernest’s Pegasus, had a beautiful white coat. I stroked his neck gently, sad that we would have to part ways. Sylpha kept his long eyelashes pointed toward the ground. He seemed to understand that this was goodbye.

“He’s really taken to you over your few brief meetings—a feat none have accomplished before you.”

“Hehe! Thank you. I appreciated the permission to touch him.”

Pegasus Knights rarely ever allowed others to touch their beloved animals. But since Prince Ernest so adored the chocolate Sylpha I built for him, he granted me the right to do so. Sylpha and I shared many interactions whenever Prince Ernest came to my villa, and over time, we were able to form a bond.

“I’ll really miss Sylpha.”

“You like him that much? Then why don’t you come visit me in Wil—?!”

“Grah!!”

Lord Aroo shoved his way in between His Highness and me. He let out a growl from deep in his throat, swishing his tail around in irritation.

King Glenreed didn’t seem to care for Prince Ernest for some reason. As a human, he always managed to avoid behaving disrespectfully, but I wondered if it was more difficult for him to control himself as Lord Aroo.

“What’s with this mutt? Is he a stray who wandered into the castle?”

“Grrrrrah?!”

Lord Aroo howled back, refusing to be bested.

The two were at a stalemate.

This was the last way I ever expected to witness a confrontation between the king and the crown prince. I was starting to get a headache already.

“Calm down, Lord Aroo. Calm down,” I urged. “Please collect yourself too, Your Highness.”

"He's the one who growled at me first. Mutts like these need to be trained."

"Aroooo!"

"Who're you calling a mutt?!" Lord Aroo howled back at him.

Prince Ernest continued to challenge the gigantic snarling wolf, not appearing to be afraid at all. He was strong. He was also very thoughtless. But I did feel bad for Sylpha and the other wolves, who were all trembling in fear as bystanders to the whole incident.

As I tried to come up with a way to put a stop to all this...

"...Woof...?"

Lord Aroo suddenly stiffened. The sound he made wasn't even a growl. His eyes and nose were turned away from Prince Ernest and back toward the villa gates.

"What's the matter, Lord Aroo?"

Instead of answering me, he took off running. In the blink of an eye, he had disappeared into the tall grass.

"...?"

*Maybe he remembered some kind of urgent business he has to attend to?*

I cocked my head in confusion. Eventually, Leonard walked up to us from the villa gates.

"Good afternoon, Leonard," I greeted him with a smile. "Did you happen to see a silver wolf on your way here?"

"A wolf? Haven't seen him. Or maybe you're referring to a man trying to win your heart? In that case, this black-haired prince certainly looks like a wolf to me."

Leonard was still his unfiltered self, even in front of a foreign prince. It was hard not to be a little impressed.

"Don't be silly. I'm no mutt. How would you like to experience how deadly those words can be?"

Prince Ernest seemed truly offended to be called a wolf. I wondered if, after

his spat with Lord Aroo, he hated the entire species now as a result.

“Lord Aroo is a bit strange, but most of the wolves are very kind.”

I plastered a smile on my face as I put in a good word for wolves as a whole.



IT was the day after my visits from Lord Aroo, Prince Ernest, and Leonard.

I ended up being awoken with an unexpected announcement.

“Theodore, the former Pegasus Knight, has fled on his Pegasus...?”

The source of the disturbance was the man I beat in the Pegasus race. By the sound of it, he had managed to sneak out and run away with his beloved Pegasus, even though his former colleagues were supposed to keep him away from the creatures.

“Talk about reckless...”

“You’re not wrong. I don’t think he could handle the idea of being taken back to Wildam in such a state. He’d become a source of ridicule, both as a man and as a Pegasus Knight.”

This response came from Prince Ernest, who had returned to my villa.

It was clear that Theodore, who was now on the run, would have a grudge against me. His Highness was here to warn me, in case of an attack, as well as to explain the situation so far.

“Do you have any idea where he might have gone?” I asked.

“A few, but I’ve already had my people search there, and there’s no trace of him yet. I don’t think Theodore could have done this on his own. I’m certain he’s being helped by someone in this kingdom.”

“...I agree with that. Theodore doesn’t know this area and shouldn’t have any connections here. He should have been found by now,” I said.

This was a difficult situation.

It was possible that the Wolfvartian who’d aided Theodore could be prosecuted, leaving this kingdom with the blame in the incident. Pegasi are the treasure of Wildam. As a Pegasus Knight, Theodore would have access to many

of their military secrets involving the flight methods and uses for Pegasi in their operations. If he managed to escape, then Wildam would be left in a troubling position.

"We Pegasus Knights know more about the Pegasi than anyone. We're currently searching the skies in order to track him down. Send for me if you learn anything about the situation yourself."

"Of course. Please look after yourself, Prince Ernest."

I watched him mount Sylpha and fly off into the sky.

The first thing I needed to do was gather information.

As I was considering how I could possibly lure out the shady figures throughout Wolfvarte...

It was then that I received word that Lady Mi-Milsha had been caught as the accomplice in Theodore's escape.



**DUKE** Kernal was the one who arrested Lady Mi-Milsha.

The man of many connections had learned of Theodore's disappearance early and immediately dispatched his subordinates to look for him. After searching a place believed to be Theodore's hideout, they spotted Lady Mi-Milsha wandering nearby. According to the duke, she confessed to aiding in Theodore's escape after some questioning.

*...Arresting her with no evidence other than a confession seems a bit too rushed.*

But still, the people of Wolfvarte accepted it because of Duke Kernal's long history of serving the country. They had faith that a duke such as he would never make the wrong decision in a matter like this.

Lady Mi-Milsha had confessed to her crimes too, meaning it was difficult for anyone to openly express support of her. They had received more information from Lady Mi-Milsha and were supposedly using that to track down Theodore's location now.

"But this still doesn't make any sense to me at all," I murmured to myself

inside the carriage car. It rattled and shook with each bump in the road.

My destination was the jailhouse where Lady Mi-Milsha was currently being held. As the queen, I would be able to request a meeting with her, although we would still be monitored by guards. It was just my intuition, but I didn't believe Lady Mi-Milsha to be capable of such an outrageous crime.

Perhaps I was wrong, but if I wasn't, then this was a very big deal. Theodore could easily flee without detection if Lady Mi-Milsha was unable to provide any useful information during questioning.

When I arrived at the jail, there was Lady Mi-Milsha, sitting in one of the cells.

The entrance was well guarded by scowling guards, as this was the area one would have to pass through to escape. Lady Mi-Milsha's cell was only ten yards away or so, and the guards were listening to everything closely. I wouldn't even be able to get a whisper in without being overheard.

"Lady Mi-Milsha. It's Laetitia. May I speak to you?"

"...Queen Laetitia?"

She lifted her head slowly. But as soon as she spotted the nearby guard, she immediately let her head sink back down.

...Something wasn't right.

Lady Mi-Milsha wasn't acting like someone who had confessed voluntarily.

I glanced at the guard behind me, then quietly cast a spell. The light of the spell's ignition was right in his blind spot. He didn't appear to notice.

Wolfvarte wasn't populated by very many sorcerers, which meant they had no protections against magic whatsoever. In my homeland of Elltoria, where there were a great number of sorcerers, such a spell would immediately be detected.

I would have to bring up the topic of spell safeguards the next time I met with His Majesty.

"It's all right, Lady Mi-Milsha. The guard won't hear you speak right now."

"...What? How could that be...?"

“It’s true. I used a spell to control the air in this room so that it won’t carry your voice away. See how the guard isn’t chastising you for talking?”

“Ah...”

She seemed to have grasped the situation. Her body trembled, and she looked like she was about to start crying.

“Only the sound is being hidden right now, so try not to move too much. That guard thinks we’re simply staring at each other silently, so let’s talk quickly, before he gets suspicious.”

“O-Okay...”

Lady Mi-Milsha stopped herself from nodding, then began to desperately get her thoughts in order.

“...They took my companion animal hostage and forced me to make a false confession.”

“How did they get your two-tailed fox?”

“I don’t know. They made me faint somehow, and while I was unconscious, they put me in this cell.”

She had been forcefully abducted and threatened into confessing. I hadn’t expected the circumstances to be that serious... However, I wondered why she would go along with her abductors by giving a false confession so easily.

“As cruel as it sounds, we don’t know if they’ll return the two-tailed fox, even after your confession. So why did you agree to go through with it?”

“...For I-Liena.”

“Lady I-Liena? What do you—”

I sealed my lips, unable to continue. The guard was staring at us suspiciously. We were out of time. We spoke for too long.

“I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“Ah, wait!!”

I cast a spell to undo the noise prevention and casually walked away from the

cell as if nothing had happened.

Lady Mi-Milsha and I hadn't exchanged a single word. That was the act I put on as I left the jailhouse.

I met up with Lucian, boarded my carriage, and gave a destination to the driver.

"Please take me to the northern villa where Lady I-Liena resides."

Just before the noise-blocking spell was undone, Lady Mi-Milsha got in one last remark.

*"Have I-Liena lend her two-tailed fox to help you."*

I was out of time and couldn't ask her for any more details, but I knew I had to hurry to Lady I-Liena's villa.

"...Why did Lady Mi-Milsha mention the two-tailed fox? Considering how little time we had, it must be important, right...?"

We arrived at the northern villa while I was still deep in thought.

As soon as I announced my presence, I was quickly led straight to a parlor, giving me the impression that Lady I-Liena was also eager to learn more information. She took a seat on the sofa alongside her two-tailed fox, which, in fact, possessed five tails.

Avoiding the detail of my noise-blocking spell, I explained my conversation with Lady Mi-Milsha. I made up a part about a servant of mine coincidentally overhearing Lady Mi-Milsha's claims just before she was arrested by Duke Kernell.

"...I see. So that's what she told you." Lady I-Liena fluttered her long eyelashes in thought. "...Get my two-tailed fox to help you, right? That does sound like something she would say."

"...So you believe my story?"

Even I felt that the whole thing sounded fishy. I was almost let down to hear that she immediately believed me.

As I sat there in shock, Lady I-Liena's red lips curved into a smile.

"People wouldn't normally think of asking a two-tailed fox for help, no? That's convincing enough for me. I'm also a good judge of character." She slowly brought her finger up as she spoke, using it to point at her two-tailed fox. "Would you please pet him for me?"

"Huh...?"

I didn't understand what she was doing, but I couldn't say no either, so I decided to comply with the request. I buried my fingers into the golden-brown fur of the two-tailed fox's back, sliding them through his soft coat with glee.

...Despite the urgency of the situation, I couldn't help but feel relaxed. His well-groomed fur felt wonderful on my skin. I murmured about how I felt like I could lie down and fall asleep on that fur right here and now.

*"Ugh! I'm not your pillow, got it?"*

"...Huh?"

*What was that voice?!*

A strange voice, sounding like it belonged to a young boy, seemed to be speaking directly into my mind.

I looked around, but only Lady I-Liena, Lucian, and I were inside this room.

*"It's me. Down here! The thing you're petting right now!"*

The voice echoed in my head yet again.

Speechless, I looked down at the fluffy fox, who was swishing its five tails around.

"...The fox spoke...?"

*"I'm not a fox. I'm a two-tailed fox! Don't tell me you don't know the difference."*

Once again, I heard that high-pitched voice in my mind. That was three times in a row. There was no mistaking it now. The mysterious voice belonged to the two-tailed fox.

"Hehe! Startling, isn't it?" Lady I-Liena chuckled at my state of utter shock. "A very small number of two-tailed foxes, particularly those with the most tails,

possess the power to speak directly to the human heart.”

When I heard that, I turned to stare at the fox’s tails. “Could you please speak one more time?”

“Sure thing. That’s no problem. How’s this?”

“It’s perfect. Thank you very much.”

Whenever the fox spoke, his tails glowed faintly. The source of the light was magical energy.

The people of this world referred to animals with magical energy as Mythical Beasts. I had always thought that two-tailed foxes were simply foxlike creatures with multiple tails...

“So two-tailed foxes are actually Mythical Beasts...”

“Correct. It’s one of the best-kept secrets that not even many Snow-Fox clan members know about.”

“...I would imagine.”

If everyone in the Snow-Fox clan had known about it, it would have surely been leaked by at least one of them, ruining the secret altogether.

Lady I-Liena had said that few two-tailed foxes possessed this strange power. I imagined those foxes had been gathered by the highest-ranking members of the Snow-Fox clan so that their secret would remain well guarded.

“Lady Mi-Milsha must also know about this power, I assume.”

“Oh yes, she does. That’s why she told you to go to my two-tailed fox for help.”

“...But what did she mean by that?”

“Do you remember how many tails Mi-Milsha’s fox had?”

Lady Mi-Milsha had brought her fox with her when she visited my villa. I thought back to its fluffy, golden-brown tails.

“I believe it had three.”

“Correct. Well remembered. A fox with three tails can’t communicate with

people...but it can communicate with fellow foxes."

"Oh!"

This was a very important lead. If we managed to find Lady Mi-Milsha's fox, we could have it explain the true circumstances of the kidnapping to Lady I-Liena's fox.

"I believe you're on the right track. I very much doubt they have Mi-Milsha's fox in their custody. Those creatures are quite clever and nimble, so it probably sensed danger and took shelter somewhere nearby."

"That can't..."

*That can't be possible.* But I didn't finish my sentence.

If anything, it was actually very possible.

Lady Mi-Milsha would probably be confused and terrified by her sudden arrest. Once they told her they'd also captured her companion animal, she would be overwhelmed enough to believe them. It would be too late if she figured out the trick only after giving her confession. Since she couldn't know for sure if they really had her fox, she'd likely be too nervous to try to oppose her captors in any way.

...To summarize...

Lady Mi-Milsha was imprisoned by Duke Kernal and believed he had her two-tailed fox as a hostage.

He'd also probably threatened her by telling her that if she recanted her confession, Lady I-Liena, who belonged to the same clan, would take a hit to her reputation too. ...That still didn't feel like enough of a reason to make a false confession, but she had probably panicked and bought the lies.

"...We'll just have to find proof of the true culprit if we want to save Lady Mi-Milsha," I concluded.

It would be hard to overturn a confession, even if it *was* a forced one. There was simply no way to prove it was coerced. The only way to exonerate her was to find solid evidence that someone else had aided Theodore.

The key was Lady Mi-Milsha's two-tailed fox. We had to find her before Duke

Kernell's men did.

"I'm prepared to search for the missing two-tailed fox. Can I count on your help?"



**LADY** Mi-Milsha had been captured in a corner of the capital city.

I was, once again, successful in gaining the assistance of the Gardener Cats. They agreed to use their network to search for Lady Mi-Milsha's two-tailed fox.

"It's a race against time...!"

We had to be faster than Duke Kernell. Soon it would be impossible to overturn Lady Mi-Milsha's conviction at trial.

It was vital that we find her two-tailed fox first.

"If Theodore and his accomplice escape, our relationship with the Winged Wildam Empire will be in a bad state..." I murmured to myself as I quickly changed into my disguise. My destination was the capital city.

It was almost certain that Duke Kernell would try to interfere with our search. I wanted to stay nearby, in case the Gardener Cats were attacked or something during their attempts to find the fox.

As soon as I received His Majesty's response to my rushed letter, granting me permission, I hurried out to the city.

Lucian and I left the carriage to walk around the sleeping town with the Gardener Cats. After some time...

Under the light of the moon, a figure was approaching us.

"What a coincidence seeing you here, Your Majesty."

"Leonard..."

Leonard's greeting was a friendly one, but I couldn't let my guard down. Mentally making a note of the locations of my guards, I turned to face Leonard.

"You called this a coincidence, but it's not, is it? And this isn't the first time either. We ran into each other the day Theodore caused a fuss in the city. The first time we met, you saved me from criminals while I was in disguise too. This

is too many times now for me to write them off as coincidences.”

When something happened three times in a row, it was hard not to think of it as intentional. It couldn’t be natural for us to run into each other every single time I came to the city.

“They say that traveling bards are drawn to beautiful women like bees to nectar.”

Leonard tried to distract from my accusations with a cliched line. I had never pressed him much before, but today, I refused to back down.

“You first approached me, the queen, so that you could spy on me and the people in my life, didn’t you?”

I had always gotten the feeling that Leonard was more than just a traveling bard. When we first met, he was capable of beating up multiple thugs, and he was always coming and going from the capital city.

For him to appear again at a time like this could mean only one thing.

“Your true employer is none other than Duke Kernell, isn’t that right?”

“...Who’s that? ...Ah, if only I could say that and really mean it.”

He clutched his beloved lute with one hand. In the other was a sharp blade he’d produced at some point. With that same sweet smile on his face, he clutched his dagger as if it were no different from a musical instrument.

“It sure is strange how keen your instincts are. Now that you’ve said all that, I simply can’t let you go free. It pains me to know I’ll never be able to see such a beautiful woman again.”

“This way, my lady.”

Lucian and my guards stepped forward to surround me.

As the air around us became tense, I continued to question Leonard.

“You’ve been following Duke Kernell’s orders for some time now, haven’t you? I believe you came to the city to observe when Theodore got into that fight. I knew something wasn’t right about that. How could the man walking the companion animal of Lady Needia, an important political figure, bump into a

foreign Pegasus Knight of all people? Then the leash just happens to break, freeing José to run? It was almost as if someone else was pulling the strings the whole time.”

The person who was walking José was now missing. It seemed like he had run away to avoid taking responsibility for the accident, but it was also possible this was no accident at all, and he had planned to go into hiding from the very beginning.

All he had to do was weaken the leash with a cut beforehand and wait for the right timing to give it a firm tug, causing the leash to snap. There was no proof of tampering left behind, but His Majesty and I both had our suspicions of the dog walker.

Now it all made sense. The dog walker must have been working for Duke Kernell.

“I’m sure the duke knew from his own sources that Theodore would be coming to the city as part of a diplomatic mission. By instigating a fight with Theodore, Duke Kernell was aiming to hurt the reputations of Lady Needia and the Needia family as a whole.”

The countess was holding a grudge against Theodore and his homeland for all the time that her companion animal was gone.

If José had remained missing forever...

Lady Needia would have been seen as a troublesome instigator who merely refused to stop antagonizing the Winged Wildam Empire.

Duke Kernell and the Needia family were on bad terms. He wanted to damage the power of his political foe... By secretly ordering others to act out the entire dispute. All the dots were connecting now.

“The duke didn’t just have orders for the dog walker that day. He was commanding your movements too, wasn’t he?”

Leonard had been at the scene of the fight. He was there to be sure Duke Kernell’s plan played out correctly and to step in if anything unexpected came up.

"You stopped me before I could intervene in the dispute between Theodore and the dog walker. You didn't want me to stop that fight at all, did you?"

"Haha. So you figured it out." Leonard smiled sweetly as he scratched his reddish-brown hair with one hand. "I definitely can't let you go now, can I?"

"Argh!!"

His dagger was sticking out of a guard's shoulder.

*So fast!*

Leonard had sent his dagger flying. The rest of the guards rushed toward him. But he easily avoided their spear attacks, and in another moment, one of the guards was knocked unconscious.

Then there was another, and yet another.

Even my strongest beastfolk guards were being taken out like it was nothing.

"He's too strong. My lady, we have to retreat."

Lucian had retrieved his hidden weapon and was standing in front of me protectively. I appreciated his intentions, but it wouldn't be possible to run from someone like Leonard.

"...I don't want to do this..."

But I simply had to. I had to use a spell to hurt another person—Leonard.

There was no time. I couldn't even calculate a spell that would do less damage.

Determined, I instantly began to chant—

"Urgh!"

Leonard suddenly let out a cry. He was sent flying backward.

"Your Majesty?!"

Leonard and his daggers had been knocked clean by a slash from King Glenreed's long sword. The king appeared to be entirely alone, without any guards.

I imagined he had slipped out of the castle in wolf form, then transformed

back into a human when no one else was looking. Maybe he even chased after me because he feared for my safety.

King Glenreed was glaring at Leonard with eyes filled with rage.

"Explain yourself. What is my dead brother doing here, and why is he attacking Laetitia?!"

"...Brother?"

I had just heard the last word I ever expected come from the lips of the king.

His Majesty's older brother was Prince Leonardo, who had passed away over ten years ago. But he spoke as if he and Leonard were one and the same.

I stared at Leonard as I processed this shocking revelation.

His face looked nothing like the stiff, beautiful features of the king. Perhaps that was normal for half-brothers. Leonard was also in his late twenties, but that alone didn't serve as proof that he was the king's brother.

"You've got the wrong man."

"Impossible. I know it's you. Your hair, speech, and personality are all different, but my nose tells me you're my brother."

As King Glenreed stared at him with fixed eyes, still clutching his long sword, Leonard shrugged.

"That's impossible. Sadly, I don't have any little brothers who are blood relatives."

As he spoke, Leonard was taking step after step. He was retreating in the opposite direction.

"Lady Laetitia!"

Something flew toward me.

As soon as Lucian smacked it out of the air, the bundle exploded, sending smoke in all directions.

"This smell..."

It was wheat. The grain was mixed with a few other powders to form an

effective smoke bomb.

“He’s gone...”

Once the smoke finally cleared, Leonard was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you hurt, Laetitia?” King Glenreed asked with concern.

“What about you? Are you all right?”

I had to be sure of it before anything else.

Fortunately, King Glenreed didn’t appear to be injured. He simply shot a glare in the direction that Leonard had run off in.

“Aren’t you going to transform into Lord Aroo and chase after Leonard?” I asked.

“I can’t. That smoke bomb contained spices that are blocking my sense of smell. ...Besides, I can’t leave you here alone.”

With that, King Glenreed fell silent to think. He furrowed his brow as anguish filled his eyes. I couldn’t imagine how upset he must be to learn that his brother was still alive but was attempting to hurt me.

“...You said that Leonard was your older brother, Prince Leonardo. May I ask how you knew?”

“...His smell.”

“Smell? Not his looks or his manner of speaking?”

The king just nodded.

“It’s his scent. My nose has special features as part of my ancestral reversion. I can distinguish the unique natural scent that everyone carries. Yesterday, when Leonard came to the villa, I could make out the same smell my brother had. It’s definitely his scent.”

I thought back to that moment.

Lord Aroo had suddenly jumped up and had run in Leonard’s direction. Now I knew he was attempting to confirm that the scent truly belonged to Leonardo, his brother.

"I'm not doubting the power of your nose, but is it always correct, one hundred percent of the time?"

"It is. Or at least it's supposed to be..." His eyes became slightly darkened. "But something isn't right. My nose is supposed to be able to identify lies."

"...Lies?"

"Right. Remember when I told you that I-Liena was lying? That was because my nose detected falsehoods in her words. Just now, when Leonard said he had no younger brothers by blood, I didn't sense any lies. ...But for some reason, he shares Big Brother Leonardo's exact scent."

"....."

His Majesty's words caused me to rack my brain. He truly believed Leonard to be his older brother, but Leonard insisted he had no younger brothers.

"He's your older brother, but he's also not your older brother... Ah!"

*What if...?*

I began to share my theory with His Majesty.



**KING** Glenreed and I spent some time discussing and planning what to do next. We decided that, the next day, I would pay a visit to Duke Kernell—the man pulling the strings in this affair.

I arrived at his home and announced that the queen had come to see him. He would be unable to stop me by force this time, unlike Leonard's attack in the city, nor would I allow myself to be put in that position again.

"Welcome, Your Majesty. I believe this is your first visit to my home."

"It is. It will also be my last, in all likelihood."

Duke Kernell was seated across from me, smiling peacefully. Despite his gentle, sincere appearance, I knew what was lurking underneath.

"Let me get right to the point. Do you currently have any intention of confessing to your crimes?"

"My crimes? What are you talking about?"

"You framed Lady Mi-Milsha for the help you gave Theodore in escaping, then attempted to gain access to Theodore's secrets as well as his Pegasus."

Once I finished the list, the duke looked taken aback.

"Do you have any proof for such claims? You must have something to present, right?"

"But of course. I've been able to locate Lady Mi-Milsha's companion animal, her two-tailed fox."

The Gardener Cats had done another outstanding job.

We quickly captured the two-tailed fox and took it to Lady I-Liena for her help. Lady Mi-Milsha's fox then informed us of Lady Mi-Milsha's true kidnapper, who was promptly arrested.

Once we found that first thread, the investigation made steady progress.

During Lady Mi-Milsha's abduction, someone else was helping Theodore escape. When King Glenreed was informed of this, he sent out his soldiers in pursuit of Theodore, while I sent out my Gardener Cats as well.

The search was nearly over now. The reason I came here in the first place was to be sure Duke Kernell couldn't act until King Glenreed was done securing Theodore.

"Sorry I'm late."

There His Majesty was, standing in front of the open door to the parlor. Now that he was here, I knew it meant that Theodore was in custody. The duke had no more cards left to play.

"I'm disappointed, Kernell. You've been a faithful aide ever since my father was in power. I wouldn't have expected you to put Wolfvarte in jeopardy so foolishly."

"Put Wolfvarte in jeopardy, you say?"

The duke cocked his head. He was smart enough to realize he was backed into a corner. Yet his expression remained perfectly calm, with no trace of fear.

"What exactly does that mean? Queen Laetitia is right in saying that I helped

secure Theodore and his Pegasus. Can you explain how that was foolish of me?"

"What else is there to call it? You started a pointless fight between countries and even framed a Wolfvartian citizen of a crime. Don't tell me you're proud of what you've done."

His Majesty was completely correct. Yet Duke Kernell appeared entirely unaffected.

"We have something to gain from all of this, of course. Those Pegasus Knights hold a lot of military power. If we could claim even one of them for Wolfvarte's army, it would be the greatest of developments for us, would it not? Considering Theodore's blunders here, Wildam can't exactly criticize us in return for what we've done. I simply had the humble desire to make this land stronger and more prosperous."

"...I see."

King Glenreed slowly closed his eyes.

"What's the matter, Your Majesty? Don't tell me you agree with him," I said.

"I don't." He shook his head slightly. "I don't think he's right. But the duke does. I can tell he believes that every decision he made was the right one and, from the bottom of his heart, sees himself as devoted to serving Wolfvarte. My nose doesn't sense any lies."

"....."

I couldn't help but sympathize with the exhausted look on the king's face.

Duke Kernell wasn't just some villain. He was acting in the best interest of the country, not for personal gain. This meant that even setting up Lady Needia was only to rid himself of an obstacle in bettering Wolfvarte. He didn't want to simply be rid of a pest. Because he truly believed he acted properly until the end, he felt no remorse for his actions either.

In a way, he was much nastier than someone like Theodore, who acted only in pursuit of his own desires. The duke's pure-hearted belief in helping the country allowed him to gain power and supporters, even if his methods were incredibly reckless.

“I’m disappointed too,” the duke said. “It doesn’t appear Your Majesty shares my concern for this country.”

“I do feel concern. I just think you’re going about it all wrong.”

“How naive.” Duke Kernal’s face was clouded with pity for the king. “Your Majesty, you fail to grasp the position this kingdom is in. We have five smaller regions within us that are constantly fighting, and our magical research is far behind the rest of the world. If we continue to clash with other empires, all that awaits us is our own destruction. I only wanted to prevent such a future, even if it meant dirtying my own hands.”

Even when confronted with his crimes, the duke made no attempts to change his reasoning. He truly believed he was doing what was necessary for Wolfvarte.

“...Duke Kernal.”

His Majesty opened his mouth.

It was time for his last announcement.

“That’s enough. I have proof that you helped aid Theodore in his escape. Even Leonard, your last hope, isn’t on your side anymore.”

“...What’s this about Leonard?”

It was very faint...

But I could tell that Duke Kernal was unnerved by this development.

“You used Leonard as your right-hand man...but that was a big mistake. Leonard is currently in the process of destroying you.”

“Your Majesty, I don’t know what you—”

“All right. This should be all of it.”

The voice that interrupted the duke was a casual-sounding one. It belonged to Leonard, who was holding a bundle of documents in his hand.

“This one, this one, and, oh yes, this one. I think I’ll hand them all over to His Majesty.”

“Urgh! Those are...”

The duke let out a small groan when he realized what the documents contained.

Leonard was clutching papers that revealed the shady deals the duke undertook under the pretense of helping the country. The duke would never want these details to be brought to light.

Duke Kernal clearly couldn't believe that Leonard was biting the hand that had fed him.

"Why would you do this, Leonard? I'm the one who saved you from death and put you to work for the good of the country! That was all my doing!"

"So I...owe you?" Leonard smiled bitterly. "I owe you! I owe you? Sure, I used to feel that way. That's why I spent years doing all your dirty work! Now that I've paid you back, I can do whatever I want. I'm sick of letting you order me around. After this, I'm heading whatever way the wind blows. I can be free to live as a real bard with a beautiful voice and a handsome face."

"You can be...free...?!" Duke Kernal squeezed his fists. "Quit your nonsense! You can never do anything more than resent this country! As long as you are who you are, you'll never be allowed to live freely!"

It was a furious declaration from the duke.

"Or have you forgotten?! You're a person who can never live in this kingdom as long as you're—"

"Silence."

The king's icy-cold command caused the duke to freeze.

"Your Majesty?! Why are you helping him?!"

"He can't live in this kingdom? Are you implying that Leonard, or rather, Prince Leonardo, is something other than the true son of my father?"

"?!"

Duke Kernal stiffened, unable to breathe.

"How could you know that, Your Majesty...?"

"Because Leonard told me that he had no younger brother as a blood relative."

In other words, Leonard and I aren't even half-brothers. We're not related at all."

Leonard was the product of an affair. His mother was still the former queen, but his father was not her husband, the king.

"That's why my father tried to kill both Leonardo and his mother together, to prevent the royal bloodline from being hijacked."

I listened to His Majesty's hypothesis about what had happened with the Wolfvartian royal family. It was likely King Glenreed's mother who first figured out that Leonardo was illegitimate. She tried to threaten Leonardo's mother, only to end up being killed by her herself.

But King Glenreed's mother didn't go quietly. She left a letter for the king that revealed the truth about Leonardo's identity. The former king flew into a rage and tried to bury both Leonardo and his mother.

"My brother is officially listed as deceased. But you saved him just before his execution, made sure he felt indebted to you, and used him as a pawn until you got your way, didn't you?"

"He's an illegitimate son who almost usurped the throne! You should appreciate that I didn't kill him!"

The king simply stared at Duke Kernal coldly as the man screamed his retort.

"He may be illegitimate, but he was an innocent child who didn't choose his parents. He's still my older brother. I'm sure he betrayed you exactly *because* you've always looked down on him and treated him like a tool for your own use."

"I wouldn't say I gave it that much thought. Well, you're not that far off either."

While King Glenreed was busy condemning the actions of Duke Kernal, Leonard had no real response but a casual shrug of his shoulders.



"I still can't believe you used to be a prince," I said. "You're the Big Brother Leonardo whom His Majesty has cared about for all these years."

“Surprised, are you? Well, life needs a bit of stimulus sometimes.”

“Yes, I was surprised. More so than I like to be.”

I looked up at Leonard. I had lots of questions for the man after Duke Kernal was taken into custody.

“The older brother His Majesty spoke of was a gentle, prideful, refined, wonderful person, based on everything he told me.”

“Are you disappointed I don’t live up to that description?”

“I’m just shocked. I didn’t know the king’s brother well enough to be disappointed, and I never had such fantasies about who you were either, Leonard.”

“What? Really? I’m pretty confident in my face, voice, and sensuality.”

“It’s hard to feel that strongly about someone who uses their beautiful voice to express their hatred for celery.”

“Haha. You’re a strict judge.”

Leonard didn’t seem particularly disappointed either, though. As always, he was simply hard to get a read on.

“Big Brother... You’ve changed so much.” I heard King Glenreed make this quiet remark.

Between the joy and confusion the king must have felt being reunited with the brother he thought was dead, I could tell his icy features were unusually softened at the moment.

“I used to think you were the absolute perfect prince. Are you like this now because of how hard a life you’ve had to live, always on the run from the castle?”

“Sorry to refuse the compliment, but I’m not actually that sensitive of a guy.”

“But you’re just so different now.”

His Majesty was staring at Leonard...as if searching for traces of the brother he once knew.

“It’s the same with food. You never used to be a picky eater, but if you hate

celery so much now, you must have eaten rotten celery while you were starving on the streets, ended up with food poisoning, and developed a distaste for it, isn't that right?"

"Nah, it's not like that. You're overthinking it, Your Majesty." Leonard waved off the conjecture with a chuckle. "I've always hated celery. It's not like anything happened that caused it."

"Always...?" The king furrowed his brow, still unconvinced. "I don't believe it. You used to eat celery without any hesitation at all."

"Haha, that's only because I was raised as a prince. I was perfectly capable of eating gross food without letting it show on my face back then. Who wouldn't want to put on a brave face when their adorable little brother's watching them?"

Everyone has a food or two they dislike. But when you're young, it can be embarrassing to have others know how much you hate certain things.

Just as King Glenreed adored Leonard as a child, Leonard surely cared about his adorable younger brother just as strongly. Perhaps Leonard had hidden his dislike of celery, dedicated himself to his studies and martial arts, and acted like the perfect prince all to be impressive as an older brother.

Even King Glenreed seemed to realize just how much effort Leonard had been putting in for his sake.

Sadly, yet fondly and full of memories...King Glenreed's eyes softened slightly as he looked at Leonard.





“...What are your plans now, Big Brother? I’ll do whatever I can to be sure you don’t end up as a pawn for someone like Kernell again. Shall I assign someone to protect you in secret?”

The prince who was supposed to be dead still lived. Yet he was not the true son of the former king. The country would erupt into scandal if this were ever revealed. His Majesty had no choice but to cover up the entire affair.

Leonard didn’t appear to have any interest in returning to royal life either.

“Haha, don’t be so protective. I’ll be fine on my own. If I’ve got guards around, the ladies will never want to approach me, and I can’t go having that.”

“But...”

King Glenreed couldn’t seem to dispel his own fears.

I understood how concerned he must be over the attempts on Leonard’s life due to his true identity as the king’s illegitimate son.

“I’m not just acting tough, really. You might pride yourself on your strength, but I’m much stronger, smarter, more handsome, and a better singer. I’m the perfect traveling bard, wouldn’t you say?”

“He’s so good at praising himself...”

When he heard me mumble that, Leonard pointed at his eye.

“Haha, but it’s all true! If you don’t believe me, then take a look at my eyes.”

“Look at your eyes? What a silly attempt at...flirting...”

I suddenly fell speechless.

Leonard’s bright-green eyes, staring back at me... The pupils had transformed into long, sharp slits—the same as beastfolk eyes.

“Beastfolk... No, half beastfolk...?”

“You’ve got it. I’ve never met my real father before, but it sure seems like he was beastfolk.”

It was an unusual occurrence in this country, but humans and beastfolk were capable of producing half-beastfolk children together. Half beastfolk possessed

unique traits from both parents in those cases.

"I may look human, with no animal ears or tail, but I do have the strength of any other beastfolk. Remember how well I fought off your beastfolk guards?"

He was right. I had wondered how he managed that.

With Leonard's physical strength as half beastfolk, the combat abilities he learned as a prince, and his natural talents for it, Leonard was unbelievably powerful.

"That's another reason why people haven't figured out that I'm not really part of the royal family. The previous king and my mother both had mostly human blood in their veins, so the two of them would never produce a kid who's half beastfolk. My mother was even stupid enough to take a beastfolk man as a lover, making it easy to identify that I was the product of an affair."

The moment he mentioned his mother, Leonard's eyes suddenly became icy cold. They were nothing like the gaze he used to look at His Majesty—the brother with whom he shared no blood at all.

"I kept the fact that I was half beastfolk a secret. But my eyes would turn to beastfolk eyes whenever I got upset or I overworked my body. It was just bad luck that someone happened to spot me in that state. I was careless too."

After saying that, Leonard stood up while clutching his lute.

"I think it's about time I get going. You two have still got to clean up after Duke Kernell, don't you? As a carefree traveling bard, I think it best to leave that sort of thing up to you."

Leonard was the kind of person to do as he pleased. Like a cloud passing through the sky, he departed from our company.

"...Your Majesty, you're sure you're okay with letting him go?" I asked.

"...Yes." King Glenreed sighed quietly. "Big Brother used to take great care of me. It's not right of me to hold him back anymore. He said he betrayed Kernell so that he could finally be free, but I don't think that's the only reason at all."

"...Yes, I agree."

Leonard's explanation was simple—he wanted to be out from under Duke

Kernell's control and indulge in more enjoyable things. But until just yesterday, he'd continued to follow every order given to him.

I knew he had to have a reason for gathering up the documents that proved the duke's misdeeds and for coming to us to propose an alliance just before I stepped into the duke's home myself.

"I think Leonard wanted to eliminate the self-righteous Duke Kernell from interfering with Your Majesty's reign. He was waiting for exactly the right moment to take out someone whom everyone saw as trustworthy, since now that you know the duke was involved in Theodore's escape, there can be no covering up of his crimes."

"...You're probably right. Big Brother is always coming to my rescue, and I never get to return the favor."

His Majesty smirked, as if mocking himself.

But I shook my head and explained my own theory about Leonard.

"That's not true. I believe you rescued him too, in a way. Leonard is half beastfolk. He spent every day hiding that secret, and it surely weighed on his mind terribly. But to have Your Majesty adore him for who he was must have been his greatest treasure."

As icy as His Majesty's features were, his heart was undeniably warm. King Glenreed was an honest, straightforward man. The unknowing kindness he showed his brother clearly led to Leonard pretending to follow Duke Kernell's orders as a way of protecting His Majesty's rule over Wolfvarte.

"...I see. So I helped support Big Brother too."

His Majesty spoke slowly and quietly.

For some time, he stared off in the direction Leonard had gone—toward whatever his next destination may be.

## Chapter 7: Visits from a Brother and a Deer

“THANK you so much, Your Majesty! You’re my savior!”

Lady Mi-Milsha rushed out to greet me when I arrived at the northern villa.

Once Duke Kernal was exposed as the true culprit in helping Theodore go on the run, Lady Mi-Milsha was released after questioning.

Duke Kernal supposedly chose Lady Mi-Milsha as the person to frame because of her two-tailed fox. The duke happened to know of the Mythical Beast’s strange power and was eager to procure one for his own uses. If he managed to capture the fox, then he would have what he wanted. If he failed, he could use Lady Mi-Milsha to extort a two-tailed fox from the Snow-Fox clan.

“It all seems to be sorted out now. Both Mi-Milsha and I are so very grateful,” Lady I-Liena said.

Three days had passed since the resolution of the incident, and I was visiting Lady Mi-Milsha today. Lady I-Liena and her two-tailed fox were also in attendance, as was Lord Gai-Gurut, who was standing to the side.

“Hehe! Thank you both. May I pet the two-tailed fox and speak to him?” I asked for permission first.

“Of course. Please go ahead and pet him.”

“*Go for it!*” her fox said.

With Lady I-Liena’s permission, I engaged in a fluffy conversation with her five-tailed fox. Once we were all caught up and I had gotten my fill of that wonderful fur, I saw that Lady I-Liena was staring in my direction.

“You’ve really helped us, so I’ll do whatever it takes to return the favor for saving Mi-Milsha and her two-tailed fox.”

“Return the favor, you say...?”

“Oh? Is there something you already want from me?”

“...May I ask you a question?”

“What could that be? I’ll answer anything I’m able to.”

With her go-ahead, I decided to get clarity on a point that had been weighing on my mind.

“Why was Lady Mi-Milsha so quick to give a false confession?”

It didn’t quite make sense to me.

Lady Mi-Milsha had been threatened into confessing to protect Lady I-Liena from any fallout. But the very act of taking responsibility for the crime seemingly did much more harm to Lady I-Liena’s reputation than anything else could. Lady Mi-Milsha adored Lady I-Liena like an older sister, so why would she choose to do something to hurt her?

I had a theory I wanted to confirm.

“I-I was just...scared because he threatened me...and before I knew it, I had confessed...” Lady Mi-Milsha’s eyes darted every which way as she spoke. She wasn’t one to put up a convincing act of calmness.

“Hehe! I think it’s time you throw in the towel. I know exactly what you were up to, Mi-Milsha,” Lady I-Liena said archly.

“Huh...?” Lady Mi-Milsha’s fox ears twitched. She looked just like a child who had been scolded by her mother.

“You were trying to assist me...or rather, assist my lovestruck heart, weren’t you?”

“...!” Lady Mi-Milsha’s tail went as stiff as a wire.

“...So you really *were* trying to help Lady I-Liena in matters of the heart,” I said, my hypothesis proving true.

“Hehe! You figured it out, Your Majesty?” Lady I-Liena inquired with a laugh.

“There were a few clues along the way.”

The first came on the day of the ball. The quiet voice I heard from Lady I-Liena’s room, sounding distressed, had said... *“Why do you try to ignore your own heart, I-Liena?”*

The second clue was how quickly Lady Mi-Milsha had jumped to lying for Lady I-Liena's sake.

Finally, the third clue were some of the things His Majesty once said to me: "*I-Liena lies*" and "*I won't condemn her for it.*"

These three clues came together to reveal the lie from the northern candidate for queen. Despite striving to become King Glenreed's wife, she was in love with someone else.

"Lady I-Liena and Lord Gai-Gurut are in love with each other," I stated. "Is my theory correct?"

Lady I-Liena had feelings for another person. When I worked backward from this conclusion, I remembered how she had acted in the past and was able to identify the lover in question.

Lord Gai-Gurut had been close at her side when Lady I-Liena fell ill at the ball. It was hard to believe she would allow a simple male acquaintance to see her in such a weakened state.

"Correct. That was impressive."

Lady I-Liena began to applaud. On the other hand, Lady Mi-Milsha was turning pale.

"Lady Mi-Milsha, you tried to get in Lady I-Liena's way so that she wouldn't be chosen as the next queen and could therefore be with the one she loves, right?" I questioned her.

That was why she'd allowed herself to do harm to Lady I-Liena's reputation with a false confession.

"N-No! I didn't get in her way! I just want I-Liena to be ha—"

"You did get in her way." I cut Lady Mi-Milsha off before she could finish her excuse. "Lady I-Liena is the one who made the choice to set aside her feelings for Lord Gai-Gurut and aim to be the next queen. That's not a decision anyone else has a right to second-guess."

"...!"

Lady Mi-Milsha fell silent. Distantly, it seemed, she understood that what she

had done was wrong.

Lady I-Liena and Lord Gai-Gurut had kept a distance between them so that observers wouldn't identify their mutual feelings for each other. Whatever she may have truly thought of it, Lady I-Liena abandoned her love and came to the castle as a candidate for queen, for the sake of her clan and the kingdom.

“I... But I...!”

“Don’t be so hard on Mi-Milsha, Your Majesty.” As Lady Mi-Milsha fell silent, Lady I-Liena gave her a few pats on the head. “She did what she did because I failed to hide my feelings for Gai-Gurut in the first place.”

“You did a good job of hiding them to everyone else, save for the people you were truly closest to,” I said.

“Still, this is my responsibility. I came to this castle with the weight of the Snow-Fox clan’s future on my shoulders, so as their representative, I should take the blame for Lady Mi-Milsha’s actions.”

“Lady I-Lienna...”

It was an admirable way of thinking. She put her clan and her country before her own heart, and she was also capable of atoning for the mistakes made by someone who cared deeply for her.

Lady I-Liena possessed a captivating aura. She was hard to read at first, but actually she was quite respectable as both a high-ranking noblewoman and a candidate for queen.

“Hehe! But, Your Majesty, you were another reason Mi-Milsha took her drastic actions,” Lady I-Liena suddenly said.

“Me?”

I froze, having no idea what she was talking about.

Lady I-Liena’s delicate white finger was pointing at me. “Yes, you, Your Majesty. Mi-Milsha really took a liking to you as the Wolfvartian queen. She thinks this country will be safe in your hands, so if you retain the title and have no need for a replacement, it means I don’t have to give up my love.”

“.....”

I fell silent, unable to come up with an immediate response.

“But you know, I feel the exact same way, Your Majesty. Lady Natalie and the rest of the candidates aren’t fit for the role, so I thought the next queen had to be me...but now we have you, Queen Laetitia.”

She then gave me a calm smile that appeared to be full of unreadable implications.



**THE** entire case surrounding Theodore’s disappearance came to a conclusion just before the arrival of fall.

As the man who framed Lady Mi-Milsha and was responsible for the situation, Duke Kernal was sentenced to life in prison. Theodore was caught and would be transferred back to his homeland while under strict supervision.

Theft of a Pegasus was a very serious crime in the Winged Wildam Empire. Prince Ernest said that, while Theodore hadn’t been officially convicted yet, he would certainly be sentenced to several dozen years in prison.

The diplomatic mission from Wildam had returned home now, and my villa was back to a state of peace. Outside of the few tea parties I held each week, I had nothing to do but relax.

But that smile Lady I-Liena had given me. The question she had asked me without any words. Both of these lingered in my mind as I poured all my energy into cooking.

“...Yes! All done!”

In front of me was a pear roll cake I had completed in the kitchen. As I confirmed its perfect execution, I heard a chorus of meows from nearby.

“Mraw!”

“Meooow?”

“Mraw-hah!”

The Gardener Cats had gathered just outside the kitchen door.

I made sure to prepare a snack for the gluttonous creatures every single day

in addition to the three meals they already ate. The number of Gardener Cats living at my villa was now over sixty, and when all gathered in one place, they were an impressive force. I always loved to see that.

“Although, we’re about to be apart for a little while.”

Fall was fully upon us now, and the trees of the forest were turning beautiful shades of red and orange. His Majesty and I were going to spend ten days in a lakeside villa near the forest of broad-leaved trees. This villa was built generations ago by a former king for each future king and queen to spend the autumn season together. With every visit, the local village saw an economic boom as they welcomed the royal couple, which was why the tradition was kept up faithfully every year.

This also meant King Glenreed and I would both be sleeping in the same home. His Majesty and I usually didn’t see each other for days at a time. This would probably be our very first time doing anything like an actual couple.

As I thought about how much I was looking forward to it, a maid arrived to hand me a letter sealed with wax.

“A letter from the prince of Elltoria...?”

It was from Prince Atialdo. He was the much younger brother of the current Elltorian king, and he engaged in diplomatic relations with other countries in place of the king. I wondered if he was planning to visit Wolfvarte too.

I opened the letter and began to read.

Prince Atialdo really was coming here soon. He had wanted to send correspondence in advance, as I was a fellow Elltorian.

After contacting His Majesty to inform him of this news, we decided to greet Prince Atialdo at the villa in the woods. As a former citizen of his homeland, I agreed to prepare a welcoming party for His Highness.



**WHEN** the day arrived, the autumn leaves were beautifully vivid. King Glenreed and I headed for the forest villa in a convoy of a dozen carriages. It would take us about a full day to reach our destination. I enjoyed the feeling of

being on something like a vacation.

Prince Atialdo was to arrive in three days.

As the mistress of the villa, I began to prepare immediately. Unlike the grand events held at the palace, my party was going to be much cozier. I wanted Prince Atialdo to feel comfortable and relaxed in the nature-rich environment.

“This is one of the cakes I plan to serve to Prince Atialdo.”

I brought out a plate to show off the cake I’d baked in the kitchen and carried it to the living room, where King Glenreed was sitting.

The cake was a yule log...but without the Christmas influence, meaning it simply looked like a tree stump. I had wrapped sponge cake around a mixture of melted chocolate and whipped cream, then added some alcohol for an extra hint of flavoring. On the outer cream coating, I carved lines to resemble bark on a tree trunk. It looked quite realistic from a distance, in my opinion.

“That’s an interesting shape. Is the brown part chocolate?”

“Exactly. I thought I might decorate it with leaves too.”

“Leaves?”

“The weather’s going to be bad tomorrow, and it will probably be raining when Prince Atialdo arrives, so we won’t be able to go outside. So I was hoping to bring some autumn scenery into the house instead.”

I could collect leaves with minimal damage and dry them out nicely. Scattering them around the stump cake would surely give it a nice forest feel.

“Hmm. That sounds interesting. You should serve this cake when he arrives too.”

“I will! Would you like to give it a taste?”

“Very well.”

I cut off a slice of the cake for King Glenreed. The two of us ate our stump cake along with cups of the black tea Lucian had made for us.

“I like the textures and chocolate flavors in this.”

The outside was covered in cocoa powder, while the inside was made of a

light sponge and smooth cream. For an accent, I even added some strawberries to the cream to give it a tart kick. The dessert was lighter than how it looked on the outside. We were eager to go back for slice after slice, though we also sampled the other cakes and sweets I planned to serve Prince Atialdo.

“Mm! I’m so full after eating that much,” I said.

“Yes, it was quite delicious.”

His Majesty and I basked in the feeling as we drank our tea.

The glow of the fireplace cast both of our shadows on the carpet below. Flames flickered, reflected in the blue-green eyes of the king. It was a breathtaking sight.

“...Are you ready, Laetitia?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The two of us were alone in a closed room—husband and wife. As much as it probably seemed like we were on the verge of doing something romantic...

“Guuuurah!”

It was time for some fluff.

King Glenreed, in the form of Lord Aroo, approached the couch where I was sitting. It was the perfect height to pet him from. His silver neck and back were right up next to me.

“Here I go.”

“Woof.”

*“Go ahead and pet me.”*

With His Majesty’s permission, I began to stroke his back.

Supposedly, with the ability of ancestral reversion came a necessity to transform into Lord Aroo from time to time. King Glenreed explained that he felt suffocated whenever he spent too much time in human form and would end up transforming into Lord Aroo by accident at the slightest stimulus. The reason he came to my villa as Lord Aroo in the first place was to avoid the trouble caused by that limitation.

He had to become Lord Aroo from time to time, but Lord Aroo couldn't speak, nor could he hold a quill or turn pages with his paw pads. His Majesty was very busy as the Wolfvartian king, so it was a waste of time for him to just take it easy in the form of Lord Aroo. That was why he decided to visit my villa and see if I, as the queen, was doing all right or getting in any trouble.

After petting Lord Aroo for a little while, I spread out some documents on top of the coffee table.

"Grah!"

"All right, let's go to the next page."

He signaled me to turn the page for him. Lord Aroo stared diligently at each sentence. His black nose twitched from time to time.

...I would never tell King Glenreed this, but it was kind of entertaining.

I continued to turn the pages as instructed while I observed the unusual sight of a wolf perusing government documents. Lord Melvin was supposedly the one who usually read for His Majesty when he had the time to do so, but he had to stay behind at the castle for this trip to serve as the king's proxy, meaning I received the role of page turner instead.

Once the documents he'd finished reading had become a sizable stack, King Glenreed transformed back into human form.

"Thanks for the help. I can probably spend the next few days without transforming now."

"That's certainly good. I'll be taking my leave, then."

The king still had more papers to look over.

I bid him farewell, then left with Lucian, who was waiting outside, to return to my own living room, which was just next door.

Just to ensure that the unthinkable didn't happen...His Majesty and I slept in separate rooms.

As soon as I opened the door, Berry and Tweety raced up to me.

"Mraw! Mraw mraw mraw!"

“Peep peepa peep!”

Both of them were after food. Despite belonging to different species, they had a love for it that was very much on the same level.

I gave Berry the special yule log I made for her. I had mixed some of the strawberries she grew into the cream.

“Meow meow!”

She excitedly stacked more strawberries on top, though I had no idea where she'd gotten them in the first place. Once she was satisfied with the strawberry yule cake, she began to dig in.

“Peep peep!”

“There, there, Tweety. I'll feed you too.”

I pressed my hand to his soft feathers and began to pour in my magical energy.

Fon and the other Gardener Cats had stayed home for this trip. Berry and Tweety were the only two of my fluffy creatures that I brought along from the villa.

“Meow...”

“Peep peepa peep...”

Berry and Tweety now cozied up to me, completely satisfied.

The two animals, who spent their days at my side, had overcome the species barrier to become the closest of friends.



“I just knew it would rain.”

It was the day of Prince Atialdo's arrival. I was wearing a yellow dress—the same color as an autumn gingko tree—as I stood on the front porch of the villa.

Unfortunately, rain was pouring down outside. I doubted I would be able to hear the approaching carriage under the sound of the downpour. The roads appeared quite muddy, so Prince Atialdo was running later than scheduled.

I waited for some time until a single carriage finally appeared.

It pulled to a stop. The doors opened to reveal...

“Hey there, Laetie. Long time no see.”

“...What?”

I was first struck by shock, then joy, then by a sense of nostalgia.

The man who exited the carriage, calling me by the pet name “Laetie,” was my brother Claude. He had dark-brown hair and green eyes like an evergreen tree. My youngest brother, who always doted on me, was now standing right before me, smiling as if this were perfectly normal.

“Big Brother Claude? What are you doing here?”

He was five years older than me. He completed his military service after graduating from the royal academy and now moved around from country to country for work. His job wasn’t a particularly demanding one, though—certainly not one so important as to involve diplomatic work. He was often criticized in comparison to our other brothers and was called boring and mediocre.

But Big Brother Claude didn’t seem to mind such insults, so it wasn’t much of a problem for him. He wasn’t sensitive enough to be upset by things others said about him. He simply spent his days reading from his mountain of books, completely carefree.

“I just happened to be in Wolfvarte on work, and then I heard you would be here, Laetie. I ran into His Highness’s party on the way here. Since we were headed the same way, he let me tag along.”

“I see... Where is Prince Atialdo?”

I didn’t see any other carriages following behind Big Brother Claude’s. The pouring rain simply continued to pound the road and trees surrounding us.

“What a storm, huh? Sadly, His Highness’s carriage got stuck in the mud.” After this brief explanation, Big Brother Claude turned to King Glenreed. “I’m Claude, Laetitia’s older brother. You’re in charge of this villa, right, Your Majesty? Might I borrow some tools and men to help get the other carriage out

of the mud?"

Even while addressing the king of Wolfvarte, Big Brother Claude was still strangely cavalier in the way he smiled. He was even more dedicated to living a leisurely life than I was.

"Very well. I'll send some men out."

His Majesty instructed his servants to quickly take their horses out in Prince Atialdo's direction.

After some time, the carriage finally rounded the corner to our villa. The man who exited it was the light-haired and dark-eyed Prince Atialdo. I noticed that his face looked rather pale—perhaps from the cold rain or a bumpy trip in the carriage.

"...Your Majesty?"

I looked up at King Glenreed from my spot at his side. He was simply staring at Prince Atialdo without offering any words of welcome at all.

Something was clearly on his mind. After a long silence, he finally opened his mouth.

"...Thank you for coming in such a storm, Prince Atialdo. Would you like to rest now after your long journey?"

"I appreciate it. I'll take you up on that offer."

Prince Atialdo nodded. He did appear to be unwell, what with such a pallid face.

He was shown to a room with a couch where he could lie down and rest. His Majesty, Big Brother Claude, and Prince Atialdo's servants joined him there.

Once the doors were closed and the cold air no longer reached us, Prince Atialdo took a deep breath.

"I apologize for what you're about to see. I can't hold it back any longer."

"What's the matter? Are you feeling nauseated or... Ah?!"

The sudden shock caused me to cry out and stiffen in place.

*What's going on?!*

Light had begun to shoot out of the prince's body without the slightest warning.

Once it died down, Prince Atialdo had completely disappeared.

"...A deer?"

"That's a deer, all right."

Big Brother Claude smiled peacefully while I stood there, completely confused.

Before us was an animal with a dark-brown body and a pair of curved antlers.

A deer was standing right before us on its four legs.

"Are you...Prince Atialdo...?" I slowly called out to him.

King Glenreed was capable of transforming into Lord Aroo. Perhaps it was just as conceivable that Prince Atialdo could transform into a deer. Flustered, I was considering this possibility, when I heard His Majesty whisper something quiet enough that only I could hear.

"So...he has the same ancestral reversion that I do."

*Ancestral reversion... I thought so.*

King Glenreed took a step forward, causing Prince Atialdo to shudder slightly.

*Is he scared?*

His Majesty could transform into a Mythical Beast—the silver wolf. It was possible that, as a deer, Prince Atialdo had a natural fear of wolves.

"My sincerest apologies. His Highness should return to his usual form very shortly."

The prince's servant apologized to us. He seemed to understand his master's situation, to some extent.

"Ah, very well. I'll tell the others that Atialdo isn't feeling well and had to lie down."

Fortunately, we were the only ones to witness the moment of his transformation. King Glenreed turned to one of the witnesses—Big Brother

Claude.

“Did you know Atialdo could do this?”

“No, this is my first time seeing it.”

“You sure don’t seem very surprised to see a man transform into a deer.”

“There’s all sorts of folks in this world. I don’t see why some men can’t do something like this too.”

“...I think transforming into a deer is a lot more than just ‘something some men can do’...”

His Majesty was right to be suspicious, but this was Big Brother Claude he was dealing with. To put it nicely, my brother was open-minded. He didn’t care what others thought about him. This was just who he was as a person.

“...All right. I’m sure we all know not to speak a word of this to anyone outside this room.”

“Of course. What should we do now, Your Majesty?”

“Well...” The king looked at me. “I probably shouldn’t get too close to Atialdo. While I’m out creating a cover story for his absence, you need to stay here and keep an eye on him.”

“Very well.”

Once King Glenreed left the room, I approached Prince Atialdo. He really did look exactly like a normal deer...as far as I could tell. I hadn’t seen a living one up close in many, many years. The last time was in my past life, when I fed the deer crackers in Nara Prefecture.

His round black eyes and twitching ears were very cute. I crouched down a bit to make eye contact while I asked him some questions.

“Prince Atialdo, do you still understand words in this form? If so, please nod your head twice.”

Once I asked him that, the prince nodded his head. It appeared that he could understand me perfectly fine, just like Lord Aroo.

“Is there anything you need? Perhaps something I can do for you?”

I stared right into those black eyes. He started to shake his head, then turned to stare at my dress.

“...Oh, I wonder...”

The pockets of my dress were still full of leaves I was going to use to decorate the yule log. I removed them and held them out to Prince Atialdo, who began to eat from my hand. He looked exactly like the deer I once fed crackers to long ago.

One after another, he crunched away on the leaves until they were gone.

“You must be hungry from the long trip.”

I spoke sympathetically. Just then, he suddenly froze.

“Whoa!!”

With another bright flash of light, Prince Atialdo turned back into human form. He put his hand to his brow, a gloomy expression on his face.

“...I apologize for appearing in such a dreadful state.”

Prince Atialdo let out a deep sigh. His brown hair, the exact same color as the deer’s fur, was disheveled and cast a shadow over his face.

Prince Atialdo was the younger brother of the king, but the two were very far apart in age. The prince was turning twenty-four this year—the same age as King Glenreed.

He possessed both a calm demeanor and a graceful beauty. The prince’s black eyes told of a deep intelligence, at least according to the many young ladies who fancied him, but right now, he was simply furrowing his brow.

“I always do this... I always make a grave mistake at the most essential moments.”

Prince Atialdo sounded terribly troubled as he spoke. Flustered by his low spirits, I quickly tried to cheer him up.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Your Highness. I was surprised to see such a sudden transformation, but it’s not something deserving of blame.”

“...I failed to control myself, exposed my deer form, and humiliated myself by

eating leaves in front of others.”

“But deer always eat leaves.”

“I don’t deserve to call myself a human.”

The prince hung his head.

...*What do I do?*

If I failed to console him, he was probably just going to get even more upset...

“It’s all right, Prince Atialdo. Laetie doesn’t make fun of people for things like that. She’s just happy she got to stare at a cute deer up close.”





“Big Brother Claude...”

He was right about most of it, except being particularly happy about the whole thing...

I smiled awkwardly while Prince Atialdo chuckled a bit. Big Brother Claude’s comment had killed the mood in a good way.

“Right. I’m sure it’s hard to be around me if I’m so depressed. Sorry.”

The prince apologized with an honest, gentle smile. It was a beautiful expression. I now understood why the ladies had so much to say about him.

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

King Glenreed’s voice came from outside the door. As the king entered, Big Brother Claude made to leave.

“I don’t want to get in the way as an outsider. See you later, Laetie.”

“Right, Big Brother. I’ll see you later.” I waved at him before turning back to the prince. “May I ask you to explain the deer form we just witnessed?”

“Of course. You have a right to know, now that I’ve involved you two.”

We sat on another couch opposite Prince Atialdo with a coffee table in between us. His Majesty was seated beside me.

“That was ancestral reversion, wasn’t it, Atialdo?” King Glenreed asked.

“Correct. So you have it too, Your Majesty?”

“...What?”

I accidentally let out a little cry at this unexpectedly fast development.

As far as I knew, these two weren’t friends or anything of the sort before this. It was their very first time meeting face-to-face.

*So how did he know that His Majesty has the power of ancestral reversion?*

“It’s easy for us to tell when we meet another like us,” Prince Atialdo said, seeming to sense the question in my head. “I knew it as soon as I met him. I sensed it and immediately experienced an extreme reaction. I can feel that his power is extremely pure and strong. The power inside me to transform was

affected by his own, and I lost control of myself.”

“Lost control...? Are you all right now?” I asked.

“Yes, and thank you for your concern. It was also partially because I was unable to transform at all over the long journey here. If I don’t transform into my deer form for some time, I lose control and activate the power at the slightest stimulus.”

*I see.*

That was exactly the same condition His Majesty experienced.

“So now that you’ve transformed, you’ll be all right for a while?” I guessed.

“Most likely, yes. I’m so sorry for my sudden transformation.”

“Don’t worry about it. I understand exactly what it’s like.” King Glenreed had no intention of chastising Prince Ataldo, and I knew that it wasn’t my right to cause any uproar over the issue either.

“My apologies to you as well, Queen Laetitia.”

“Please don’t mind it. I was quite moved to witness it with my own eyes. Your deer form is tied to the Elltorian legend of the deer who restored the kingdom, isn’t it?”

Within the lengthy history of my homeland were many periods of near collapse.

One such period was the most dangerous time of them all—a time when Elltoria was the closest to its ruin. But that was before the appearance of a certain sacred deer. The sacred deer, possessing mysterious powers, saved Elltoria from peril, transformed into a human, and married the daughter of a noblewoman, or so the story went.

However, it was now believed that the sacred deer never really existed, and that it was the pet deer of the woman’s husband whom the Elltorians began worshipping, becoming more and more revered as the rumors about it were misconstrued.

“Yes, it’s part of that legend. I can’t share the details with you, as they’re royal family secrets, but the story wasn’t entirely fiction. The sacred deer did exist,

and I have inherited its power.” Prince Atialdo placed his hand over his chest as he spoke. “There are many others throughout this continent capable of ancestral reversion as well. Revealing such a power to the masses would cause unneeded chaos, which is why it must remain a secret.”

He was correct in his thinking. Even King Glenreed was estranged from his parents due to his power of ancestral reversion. It was only natural that people like him would want to keep such strange knowledge away from the rest of society.

“I understand. I won’t tell another soul about any of this,” I vowed.

“I appreciate it.” The prince let out a sigh of relief.

I looked up at King Glenreed and saw that he was nodding.

“If you’ll keep my power a secret, then I will do the same for you,” he said to the prince. “I can provide arrangements for you during your stay here in the country, since I understand exactly what you’ll be going through. Inform me when you need to transform away from the eyes of others and I can create such an opportunity for you.”

“I appreciate your kindness. I intend to be in Wolfvarte for two months, so I’ll certainly need to take you up on that offer.”

“What are your plans for your stay here?” King Glenreed asked.

“I would like to reside at this villa with you, then return to the capital city when Your Majesty does so. I’m then planning to meet the dukes who control the four regions of Wolfvarte once there.”

“I see. You should have Laetitia assist you as a fellow Elltorian with that. She’s been here for less than a year, but she’s talented and friendly enough to have made lots of connections already.”

“That would be a great help. I’ve heard rumors of her brilliance, even back in our homeland.”

“Hehe! Thank you for saying so. I would be honored to assist you.”

I would have to work hard to live up to his expectations.

Prince Atialdo was part of the royal family in my homeland, but he had

nothing to do with Prince Fritz calling off our engagement. The actual rumors I'd heard about Prince Atialdo were that he was sympathetic to my situation and even felt that canceling the wedding was uncalled for.

I was eager to help the wise prince form friendly relationships with the people throughout Wolfvarte.



**AFTER** I finished speaking with Prince Atialdo and had treated him to the special yule log I'd prepared, I headed for my brother's assigned room.

"May I come in, Big Brother Claude?"

"Sure thing."

Once I went inside, my brother was, as expected, in the middle of reading a book. He had always been a bookworm. He even used to read me stories when I was a little girl. Those experiences caused me to grow to love books too. It also improved our sibling relationship.

"It's been so long. How have you been, Laetie?"

"I've been having lots of fun here. What about you?"

"I'm taking it easy. Whenever I go home, our brothers always have some wisecracks at my expense."

"Haha! It sounds like nothing's changed."

I chuckled as memories of my hometown flooded my mind.

The four of us siblings really got along well. My oldest two brothers were teachers from hell, but they still doted on Big Brother Claude and me. Father also had a frightening face, but he cared deeply for his children, and our family generally had a good dynamic overall.

As I dwelled in nostalgia, I realized the smile had disappeared from my brother's face. He was staring at me with an unusually serious expression.

"After Prince Fritz canceled the wedding, your life really got turned upside down...but I'm relieved to see you're still the same old Laetie."

"Big Brother Claude..."

It was a bit of a surprise to hear him say that.

It happened right after Prince Fritz called off our engagement out of nowhere—the mental shock of the whole ordeal seemed to have shaken loose the memories of my past life. However, I didn't feel as if it had turned me into a different person. It was like both versions of me were indistinguishable from each other.

But what about my personality?

It wasn't as if I hadn't changed at all, but to me, it seemed to be within the scope of personal growth experienced by someone of my age.

It was Big Brother Claude who helped raise me after we lost our mother at an early age. Aside from Lucian, he was the person I'd spent the most time with throughout my entire life. He was still a laid-back, carefree person, and his sense of values were unlike those of most noblemen.

His influence on me had also made me a bit different from most. But I was acutely aware of this, so I always tried my best to behave as a perfect young lady should. I'd particularly been frantic to model the perfect future queen during the years of my engagement to Prince Fritz. It really took a mental toll on me.

But I felt that regaining my past-life memories didn't change me very much, aside from perhaps the ratio of time performing as the ideal noblewoman to time spent living a carefree life. It wasn't unthinkable that Big Brother Claude had noticed this subtle change in me, considering how many years we'd spent together.

Despite how he looked, my brother could be scarily intuitive at times.

"I'm still me, Big Brother Claude. Is something on your mind?"

"No, it's nothing. I'm happy as long as you're having a good time, Laetie. You'll always be my adorable little sister." Big Brother Claude smiled softly. "Has King Glenreed been treating you well?"

He changed the subject quickly. I had been expecting more from that topic, but I continued on with the conversation.

"Yes, he treats me very well. He doesn't look down on me as a placeholder queen, and he's very honest whenever we speak."

"Wow, so he really likes you, huh?"

Big Brother Claude smiled at me with those evergreen eyes, while I simply forced a pained smile on my lips.

"Um, I wouldn't go that far. Oh, but he really likes my cooking. I took up the hobby after I had my engagement canceled. Would you like to try any of my cooking sometime, Big Brother?"

"Do you have anything that goes well with alcohol?"

"I do, but please don't drink too much. I hate when you smell like booze in the middle of the day."

I made sure to give him that warning. Big Brother Claude loved drinking as much as he loved reading. He could handle his liquor well too, meaning he would down drink after drink without realizing how much he was consuming.

"Booze is still booze, no matter when you drink it. It's not the alcohol's fault for being so good."

"Still, it's the alcohol's fault for getting people so hopelessly drunk."

"Getting drunk isn't a crime. You would have a lot of people to lock up if it was."

Big Brother Claude shrugged as he explained the logic of drinking.

"I don't know what to do with you, Big Brother!"

He was the same as ever. I couldn't help but laugh.

After the two of us chatted for a while longer, I asked Big Brother Claude about his plans in Wolfvarte.

"I'll be leaving tomorrow. I only came here to see you, Laetie."

"So soon? You must be in quite a hurry."

"There's no books here for me, and I've almost finished all the ones I brought along. I'm going to find a nice spot to stay in the city and get my reading done while I work."

Big Brother Claude belonged to the Elltorian Library Department. His job was to travel to different countries, read through their public and private libraries, and record any information he could find about Elltoria's history.

It sounded like a serious job, but it was a surprisingly leisurely one, and unpopular too, given all the travel the position required. The noble families of Elltoria had extensive histories, and many of them looked down on foreign countries. The job provided no real diplomatic power or glory—it was simply about traveling the world. Most noblemen weren't interested in such a post.

"I'll be in the city for a while, so I hope you'll come entertain me."

"Of course! Lucian and I will check in on you and be sure you're not buried in all those books."

That was the promise Big Brother Claude and I made, now that we were finally reunited.



**OUR** stay at the forest villa went smoothly after the discovery of Prince Atialdo's transformation.

The prince and I began to regularly have tea together after we returned to the capital city. Prince Atialdo had little prejudice toward beastfolk. Since he didn't look down on foreigners and possessed a kind heart, he was warmly welcomed by the Wolfvartian people as well.

"I hope Big Brother Claude is getting along well here too."

I was seated in a carriage heading into the city. I stared out the window in the direction of the lodge my brother was staying at.

Big Brother Claude had visited my villa, taken a liking to the Gardener Cats, and even adopted one for himself. Since the cat he adopted was one who hated the cold, I decided to send him off with a present. I was visiting his lodge today to check on the aforementioned present.

"I'm here, Big Brother Claude. May I come in?"

"Sure, come on in. It's unlocked."

The floor where Big Brother Claude was staying was reserved for unmarried

guests. It wasn't very convenient to access, but the rent was cheap, and that meant he had more money to purchase his books. The inside of his room was already covered in mountains of books.

"Oh, I didn't know you were here too, Hayruth."

"I stopped by for a visit today. Gosh, I really love this crest here."

Hayruth, the artist, was a friend of Big Brother Claude too. He was sitting in a relaxed position with his legs under a blanket.

That blanket belonged to a *kotatsu*.

Well, in reality, it was actually a crest that resembled a *kotatsu*. Underneath the table was a crest that gave off heat, while the outside was covered with a cotton blanket to prevent that heat from escaping.

Both Big Brother Claude and Hayruth were lounging around with their legs in the *kotatsu*. On the opposite side of the table was a tuxedo-patterned black-and-white cat, curled up on top of the blanket.

"Clementine sure seems to like this *kotatsu*."

Clementine, the Gardener Cat, loved clementine oranges. Since clementines were a popular food to eat while relaxing in a *kotatsu*, I put the two together to give this *kotatsu* (or more accurately, a *kotatsu*-like crest I made with Liddeus) to Clementine.

Eager to share in the blessings of the *kotatsu*, I rushed over, sat down, and stuck my legs underneath. A gentle heat warmed my body. Even my heart started to feel lighter.

"*Kotatsu* are so perfect..."

"Agreed."

"Totally!"

"Mraw mraw!"

The three humans and one cat soaked in the warmth of the *kotatsu* together.

It was a very welcome device now that the chill of winter was growing stronger and stronger.

“May I take this clementine?”

“Mraw!”

With Clementine’s permission, I began to peel the orange. Once I removed the strings, I split the fruit in half and gave one part to Clementine. It was a thank-you gift for her act of growing it.

Big Brother Claude, sitting opposite me, was also peeling an orange for Clementine. He was a very affable person, but just as he used to read to me all those years ago, he never failed to look after those who needed looking after.

“How are you enjoying your life with Big Brother Claude, Clementine?”

“Mraw mraw mraw!!!”

“*He peels my oranges for me, so he’s perfect,*” she seemed to reply.

It was hard for a Gardener Cat to peel an orange with paw pads alone. Claude wouldn’t have to cook for her as long as he just kept on peeling her oranges. I was truly relieved to see that the two easygoing souls were getting along just fine.



**IT** was the day after I visited Big Brother’s lodge to check on Clementine and the *kotatsu*.

I was enjoying tea and treats with Prince Atialdo, who had come to visit my villa.

“You sure seem to be popular around here, Your Highness,” I remarked.

He had already been in the capital city for a month now. The prince was eagerly forming friendly relationships with Wolfvartian people and connecting with some of the powerful nobles as well.

Prince Atialdo set his teacup down and gave a small smile.

“That’s all thanks to your help, Your Majesty. Everyone you’ve introduced me to has nothing but praise for you. You’ve sure made the Wolfvartian people fall in love with you.”

“Haha! That might have more to do with my cooking. Yummy food always

helps forge bonds between people.”

“You are correct. I’m sure enjoying this delicious tart.”

The tart I’d served the prince was covered in chocolate. His Highness was a definite chocolate fan, stemming from when he first tried my chocolate yule log cake at the forest villa.

The two of us engaged in a pleasant chat as we filled our bellies with tea and sweets.

Prince Atialdo continued on, eager to learn more about my life here. “Your days in this country are truly peaceful, aren’t they?”

“Indeed. The people of Wolfvarte treat me very well. It almost feels like a second homeland already.”

“A homeland...? ...Do you often find yourself thinking about your former engagement?”

“No, not often at all.”

At this point, it only felt like a hazy memory that popped into my head from time to time. I did still receive updates about the state of Elltoria after my engagement was canceled, but as for the engagement itself, I hardly ever thought about Prince Fritz, or the girl who replaced me as his fiancée, Sumia. I simply saw them as a part of my past that wasn’t worth thinking about anymore.

“I do my cooking, have conversations with His Majesty, and spend time with the Wolfvartian people. When I’m having as much fun as I am, there’s no point in dredging up all those painful memories of the past.”

“...You’re a very strong person, Queen Laetitia.” His smile grew. He shut his eyes for a moment. “There’s another reason I came here to Wolfvarte, aside from improving the relations between our two countries.”

“You’re here to invite King Glenreed and me to next spring’s ceremony, aren’t you? To celebrate the Elltorian king’s ten years of reign.”

“That’s correct. But there’s another event as well. Prince Fritz’s wedding will also be held alongside the king’s celebration.”

“Prince Fritz’s wedding...” The words dried out my tongue.

I would be attending the wedding of my ex-fiancé.

While I felt no attachment to Prince Fritz, I also felt that with a single misstep, he was likely to turn the occasion into a disaster.

“Are you sure it’s all right for me to attend?”

“Both the bride and groom would like you to come. ...Apparently, they wish for you to witness the happiness they’ve found together.”

“I see...”

That made it hard to refuse.

The guest list at a wedding was one way of measuring the status of the marrying couple. Given that I was the queen of an entire country, be it only as a placeholder, the pair probably saw my attendance as a way of raising their own status.

To attend the king’s celebration and be absent for Prince Fritz’s wedding would be the source of much offense. But to miss a celebration of the king’s reign would be seen as a diplomatic slight as well.

If Prince Fritz was demanding that I attend his wedding, there was no real way for me to turn him down.

“Personally, I opposed the idea of inviting you to the wedding. He was the one who called off your engagement, forced you out of Elltoria, and selfishly expects you to wish him well at his wedding. He’s done nothing but trample all over your heart. ...However, now that I’ve come to this country and spoken with you, I understand your situation better now. You’ve persevered despite the dissolution of your engagement and have now established yourself as a capable queen. Since you’re in a better state, I’ve changed my mind, and believe it will be all right inviting you to the wedding now.”

“...I see.”

I thought about it for a moment. Then I made my decision.

“Very well. I’ll suggest to His Majesty that we attend both the king’s celebration and Prince Fritz’s wedding.”

Elltoria—the kingdom where I spent the first seventeen years of my life.

I was now determined to set foot in my homeland once more.



**AFTER** discussing it with His Majesty, we officially scheduled a visit to Elltoria.

I would be leaving next year at the arrival of spring. There was still quite a bit of time left, but there was much to prepare along the way.

“Mraw?”

As I sat at my desk, pondering my future plans, Berry came over to be near me. She jumped up on the desk and stared at me with those light-green eyes.

“Guess what, Berry? I’m going to return to the homeland I was banished from.”

I reached out to stroke her tiny head. Berry closed her eyes, her whiskers twitching with pleasure.

“I’ll be gone from the villa for a while. What do you want to do during that time?”

I waited for her response. She opened her eyes and looked up at me.

“Meow meow!”

“Whoa!”

Berry was grinding her fuzzy little head right into me. Perhaps it was her way of saying she wanted to stay beside me.

“You’ll come with me, Berry?”

“Mraw!”

She nodded vigorously. It was almost as if she was saying...

*“I’ll follow you anywhere, as long as you’ll serve me strawberry treats.”*

“Hehe! Thank you, Berry.”

I smiled and gave her head a pat.

Deciding on what pets I would bring was the very first step in my preparations

to return to my homeland.

## Side Story 1: The True Desire of the Prince in the Sky

**“NOTHING** beats flying on the back of an animal.”

The black hair of Prince Ernest, heir to the Winged Wildam Empire’s throne, fluttered in the breeze as he muttered to himself. He raised his copper-colored eyes to look at the griffin sailing through the sky.

*Good. He’s having fun. I can tell he’s enjoying each flap of his wings, carrying him higher and higher up into the air.*

Even the prince felt at ease, just by watching from below.

Laetitia, sitting on the griffin’s back, appeared to be enjoying herself just as much. Her blonde hair trailed behind her like a comet and her dress fluttered in the breeze.

*She still has a ways to go...*

From the perspective of someone who had spent years training as a Pegasus Knight, he could tell that the flier wasn’t controlling her mount as well as she could be.

But still, that didn’t change how appealing it was to watch her. There were many people drawn to the sight of the human and animal flying through the sky with total faith in each other.

A few of Ernest’s Pegasus Knights followed Laetitia from behind.

When the prince looked up at the villa, he noticed a few servants pressed to the windows, cheering for Laetitia as she flew on her griffin.

Ernest often found himself unable to look away from the pair too. He was supposed to be observing her so that he could offer advice, but instead, he was caught up in the desire to simply watch Laetitia more than anything else.

*It would be a waste to look away. She’s always full of wonderful surprises.*

Laetitia had easily surpassed everyone’s wildest expectations. She had

accepted the challenge from Theodore, a Pegasus Knight, and easily beaten him in a race. Just the other day, she'd gifted Ernest an incredibly lifelike chocolate Pegasus. It was the most unexpected of offerings. And she didn't fear flying either. Ernest loved that about her.

*The sky is wonderful. So are people who love the sky.*

He was deeply fond of people who could ignore the inescapable threat of falling to the ground from one single mistake.

As Ernest watched, Laetitia slowed her griffin until she landed on the ground below.

“How was my flying, Your Highness?”

Laetitia’s cheeks were slightly pink as she dismounted and approached the prince. Her amethyst eyes were still lit up from the thrill of her flight.

Ernest couldn’t look away for a moment, but he quickly pulled his lips up into a sarcastic smile to distract her.

“I would give you sixty percent. Your center of gravity was way off during the fifth rotation.”

“Urk... Only sixty? Isn’t that a bit low?”

“You were also late in bringing the griffin to a stop, while simultaneously too quick in ordering him to speed up.”

“How strict... But that means there’s still plenty of areas I can improve in. Thank you for pointing that out to me.”

Laetitia was both a positive and a talented person. Ernest was glad to be teaching her. He always felt a sense of satisfaction when she memorized one of his lessons, which was his motivation for sharing more of them with her.

“How do I know when to tug on the reins when I want to decelerate?”

“It’s when the animal’s wings are in their lowest position. If you start to pull on the reins right then, it will be easier for your griffin to decelerate more gently.”

“When the wings are in their lowest position...”

Laetitia stopped to think about it, perhaps because she couldn't picture this image.

"It's not hard once you're used to it. Let me show you an example of acceleration and deceleration."

Ernest mounted Sylpha, his Pegasus, to give Laetitia a demonstration. When his and the Pegasus's breaths were in perfect sync, he made the animal flap its wings and kick up off the ground.

It was a wonderful sensation.

This moment was always enough to make Ernest's heart dance with joy, but that feeling was only intensified today.

Laetitia was watching him.

The sky was all the more inviting when he had Laetitia's eyes and expectations on him.

He demonstrated how to speed up and slow down a few times, soaring freely through the sky on the back of his Pegasus. But as he enjoyed himself, Ernest suddenly felt an intense pair of eyes on him.

*...A wolf?*

Ernest's excellent vision was able to spot a silver wolf staring up at him from among the forest trees. The wolf's blue-green eyes were absolutely fixed on Ernest, no matter which way he moved.

*What a strange wolf. ...I don't like him.*

The prince knew this must be one of the wolves being kept at the palace.

Wolves had stared up at him many times before now. But they had never left him with such an unpleasant feeling. When he thought about why that might be, he felt his lips curl into a smile.

*It's because those eyes are the same color as His Majesty's.*

Glenreed—the king of this country, Wolfvarte.

The wolf was forcing Ernest to think about Laetitia's husband.

*Even Laetitia just thinks of herself as a placeholder queen like everyone else.*

But Ernest was certain this wasn't the full truth.

On the night of the ball at the castle...

Ernest had quietly stated that he wanted to take Laetitia back to his homeland. It was the smallest of mutterings, practically forced out of his lips by Laetitia's hold on his heart. Yet Glenreed had refused to ignore those words. He'd snatched Laetitia's hand and tried to put distance between her and Ernest.

*How could she possibly be a placeholder queen if he treats her like that?*

Glenreed clearly wanted to keep Ernest away from her.

*"I won't let you have her."*

Ernest chose to ignore this open hostility.

Laetitia was still the queen, be it in name only, and Ernest had no intention of seeking an adulterous relationship with her. He wanted to win her over justly and purely, in such a way that everyone would acknowledge her as his empress.

*Laetitia's arrangement is a "white marriage." After two years, he won't need her as his queen anymore.*

So long as they never consummated their marriage over those two years, Wolfvarte would rule the marriage as invalid. It would be exactly as if it never even happened. Whoever was next to win her heart after that would be the man to become her lifelong husband.

*I'm not going to lose. I won't let anyone else steal her either.*

Ernest stared down at the silver wolf as if to offer him this challenge. He imagined the wolf to be Glenreed, and realized the creature was glaring back at him just as intensely.

After they mutually glared at each other for some time...

*"Prince Ernest? What's the matter? Is something wrong?"*

The prince heard Laetitia shouting up at him from the ground.

He didn't want to worry her.

While Ernest was distracted by her cries, the silver wolf disappeared again into the forest.

Ernest chuckled and pulled on the reins of his Pegasus.

*Time to return to the ground. Laetitia's waiting for me.*

The trip back down wasn't so bad if it meant getting to see her again.

*I'll be sure to win Laetitia, no matter what.*

With this newfound determination, Ernest raced back for the ground on the back of his Pegasus.

## Side Story 2: Please Don't Drink So Much

“YES! That’s perfect!”

I was grinning as I stood in front of the bubbling pot. This dish was a stew made with pork, white wine, and wine vinegar. The longer I let it simmer, the more concentrated the umami flavor of the pork ribs would be.

The meat turned out tender with the help of the wine vinegar I used to give it flavor. Thanks to the rosemary, bay leaves, and celery I added for a nice aroma, the stew wasn’t too fatty from the pork ribs either.

All that was left was to shake in a bit of salt and pepper, and with that, the stew was done.

“Big Brother Claude just loves white wine,” I said to Lucian.

I was also working on some snacks I could make in addition to the pork-and-wine stew. My plan was to bring them as a gift when I went to visit Big Brother Claude’s lodging.

“It’s probably a good idea to go check on him about now...”

“He’ll be buried in books if you take your eye off him too long. Lord Claude is blessed with a talent for creating clutter.” Lucian, who had been helping with the dish, smiled through the snide remark.

Lucian had served me for years. He knew Big Brother Claude all too well. While my brother could be the diligent, hardworking type, he had a completely different side of him that was lazy and unmotivated. But considering how close we were in age, we still got along plenty well.

I carried my completed dishes into my carriage and headed for the lodge where Big Brother Claude was staying.

“It reeks of booze...” I griped, holding a hand over my mouth and nose.

“Oh, if it isn’t Queen Laetitia?”

Once I'd made it through the entryway, I found a guest on the other side of the door to the second room.

Hayruth was sitting under the *kotatsu* with a wooden cup for alcohol in one hand. He appeared to have spent the night drinking with Big Brother Claude, judging by the number of empty bottles sitting on top of the *kotatsu*.

I imagined the fun time they must have had, surrounded by liquor and all of Big Brother's bookshelves that were absolutely bursting at the seams.

"Wanna drink too, Laetie?" my brother asked.

"No thank you. I just know I'll end up sick tomorrow if I try to follow your lead."

I could handle alcohol pretty well, but I was nothing like Big Brother Claude. Besides, I was still the queen of this kingdom, even if in name only. I couldn't go getting drunk outside of the castle, so I decided to pass on the opportunity for the time being.

"You two should take it easy on the drinking too, okay? I made you some snacks, so please eat these and don't just drink on an empty stomach."

"Queen Laetitia's cooking?! We're so lucky, Lord Claude!"

"Right, lucky us! I'm practically ready to get a move on again!"

*Get a move on and go where, exactly?*

I tried to smile at the excited, drunken pair as I laid out the snacks I'd brought. Lucian was already working on cleaning up the room. I knew he couldn't bear to see so much clutter.

"What are these little round things?" Hayruth was pointing at some fried foods covered in a light golden coating.

"They're fried-cheese-and-chicken wraps. Would you care to try one?"

"Absolutely. I sure love fried foods."

He had become a fan ever since he lent me his eyes during my deep-frying experiments.

*Fried foods pair well with alcohol. I hope he comes to love them even more*

*because of that.*

I handed Hayruth a metal pick, which he quickly pierced one of the cheese balls with. I had made sure to pack the food well to keep them warm, so I knew each bite would still be nice and hot.

“Whoa! The cheese just melts out from inside! I love how it mixes together with the chicken and the outer crust!”

“I know exactly what you mean. It’s hard to stop at just one.”

I reached for a cheese ball next. I could hardly resist the urge to go back for more. Now that the weather was so cold out, the thick, rich flavor of cheese tasted even more delicious than usual.

The two drunks also seemed to be slowing their drinking now that they had food to eat as well.

The three of us engaged in a pleasant chat as we feasted on snacks.

“Muhraw!”

“Oh, Clementine.”

The black-and-white Gardener Cat, Clementine, crawled out of the *kotatsu*.

She patted my dress with one paw, using the other to point at the shelf on the opposite side of the room. The low shelf had a basket full of clementine oranges on it.

“You want me to get you a clementine, don’t you?”

“Mee!”

She was nodding her head. She wanted a clementine, but she also didn’t want to leave the *kotatsu*. Of course, the only solution could be to make someone else get it for her.

“Unbelievable. Laziness is no virtue.” Lucian brought us the basket as he muttered to himself.

I gratefully accepted it and began to peel an orange for Clementine. I removed the strings, held it out to her, and watched as she clutched it between both paws like I was offering her a treasure. She gleefully began to dig in.

“Clementine sure does love those oranges.” My tipsy brother was grinning in her direction.

“You love them too, Big Brother. Perhaps just not as much as alcohol.”

“Yeah, I like how they taste. It’s just really annoying how you have to peel and clean them bef— Whoa!!”

“Mrrgraw!”

*“Those who speak ill of oranges are to be punished!”* she seemed to say as she batted at him with her paw.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“Ahaha! Lord Claude, you’re being beaten by a cat!”

I listened to the sound of paw pad slaps, Big Brother Claude’s apologies, and the laughter from Hayruth. The pleasant chaos was familiar to anyone who drank at home.

*“Humans are such foolish creatures...”*

Clementine had calmed down first, but she was still glaring in the direction of the two drunks.

By the time I’d split about five oranges with Clementine, all the while keeping an eye on the two troublemakers, Lucian had finished tidying the room.

“Well done, Lucian. Would you like a clementine?”

I started to hold out half of the orange I’d just cleaned, when...

“Meow!”

“Ah...!”

*“I haven’t had enough yet!”* Clementine insisted, swiping the orange away from me.

“Hahahaha! Black kites steal your fried tofu, and Gardener Cats steal your oranges!”

The drunkard, or rather, Big Brother Claude, had burst into laughter for some reason. Despite this, he continued to diligently peel oranges for Clementine—

perhaps feeling a duty as her owner.

“Black kites steal your fried tofu...? What’s that mean? Or are you so far gone, you’re just rambling now?” Hayruth cocked his head at Big Brother Claude’s comment.

“Hahaha! I’m not in that bad of shape. Fried tofu is supposedly this really good food. So just when you’re trying to eat it, a black kite swoops in and steals it away. It’s an expression for when something’s a letdown.”

“Huh, I never knew that. This world has some strange expressions, doesn’t it?”

It was only natural that Hayruth would be confused.

Fried tofu didn’t exist in this world whatsoever.

It appeared that, even before I regained the memories of my past life, knowledge from those more than twenty years would slip into my head sometimes. At the time, I never knew where it came from, so I simply assumed I must have read it in a book at some point.

Since Big Brother Claude always spent so much time with me, he would occasionally use words and phrases that didn’t actually exist in this world.

“Too bad about your black kite and fried tofu. Would you like to distract yourself with a drink instead?”

“I’ll have to decli—”

Just then, a knock came at the door, interrupting Lucian.

I looked at Big Brother Claude, silently asking if he was expecting a guest, only to see him shake his head.

“Allow me to confirm their identity.” Lucian headed to the door, cracked it open, and there stood...

“King Glenreed?!”

The most unexpected visitor was there at our door.

I approached him, eager to find out what was going on, and listened to him whisper an explanation to me.

“You’ve been visiting your brother a lot lately, right? I wanted to see what his place was like. I just happened to be free today, so I transformed into the silver wolf and escaped the castle.”

“You were Lord Aroo...? Didn’t that scare people?”

“No one noticed. The silver wolf can run right in people’s blind spots. You also told me about this place before.”

I always sent in my location to His Majesty whenever I left the castle. Now I understood why he was able to get here so easily.

Satisfied with this explanation, I then heard Hayruth call out to the king.



“**OH**, well, if it isn’t His Majesty, all the way out here in the city. Care to drink with us?”

Glenreed glared slightly at Hayruth’s remark.

*If only Laetitia had been here alone with her brother...*

The problem was Hayruth. Hayruth was a spy for the kingdom of Raiolbern. It was concerning to know he was interacting with Laetitia in private like this.

*I’m sure Laetitia isn’t someone who could be easily outwitted and manipulated by him...*

As much as Glenreed understood this, he remained anxious all the same. He had transformed into his wolf form, lost control of his grasp on logic and reason, and suddenly found his legs taking him right to this door.

Sure enough, Hayruth was there as Claude’s friend and was spending the afternoon with him and Laetitia.

Glenreed couldn’t allow this to go on, which made Hayruth’s invitation something of a godsend.

“Very well. I’ll join you all. Let’s drink up and have a merry time together.”

Despite his words, Glenreed showed absolutely no signs of merriment as he dragged the cup of liquor up to his lips.



“URGH... This isn’t fair...”

His Majesty had joined the drinking party just one hour ago.

The empty shells of Hayruth and Big Brother Claude were sprawled out under the *kotatsu*. Clementine was completely silent, except for the groan she would give if you poked at her. Everyone had completely ceased to function.

“What? Is it over already?”

And then there was King Glenreed’s peaceful face. Not only had he out-drunk them, but he seemed entirely unaffected by the alcohol himself. The stack of bottles at his side proved that King Glenreed had been victorious.

Big Brother Claude could handle booze very well, and I understood that Hayruth’s tolerance was even higher. This could only mean that His Majesty’s tolerance was on a completely different level altogether.

“He could practically be a professional...” As I murmured this, the king stood up. He looked steady on his feet—not affected by the liquor whatsoever.

“The party is over. These two probably can’t drink anymore, so let’s go home.”

“Right... Are you sure you’re okay, Your Majesty? You really did drink quite a lot...”

“It’s part of my ancestral reversion. That amount of alcohol is no different from water to me. It shouldn’t even be enough to make me blush.”

“Blush...?”

I looked up at him. It was true. His face looked completely normal and sober.

“Ah...”

I glanced down and noticed the color of his skin. His shirt was open enough to reveal his throat, neck, and even his collarbones. I had never seen the king wearing a partially unbuttoned shirt without a cravat around his neck. He had said that alcohol was like water to him, but maybe he really *was* a bit warm from getting tipsy.

“What’s wrong, Laetitia? You’re turning red. Is it the smell of the alcohol?”

“...It’s nothing.”

I wrote it off and began to pick up my dishes with Lucian’s help.

*“I just couldn’t help but stare at your manly chest, Your Majesty. I’ve never seen it before.”*

I was far too embarrassed to say that, so I simply averted my eyes instead.

Watching the king’s bare chest as he drank liquor like water was a lot more than my heart could handle.

*He really needs to be sure not to drink so much next time.*

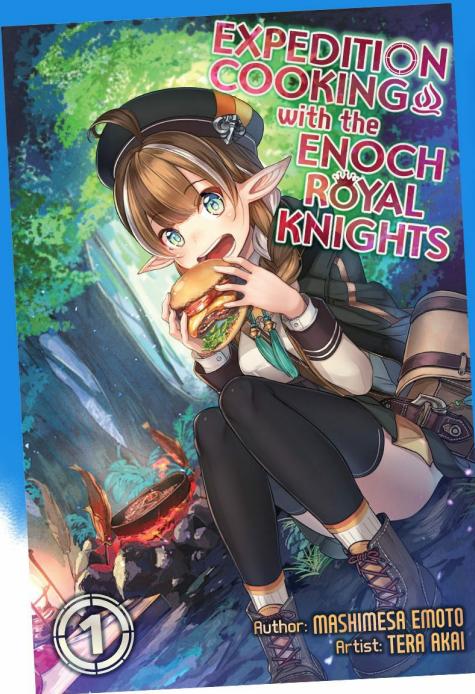
That was my final thought on the matter.





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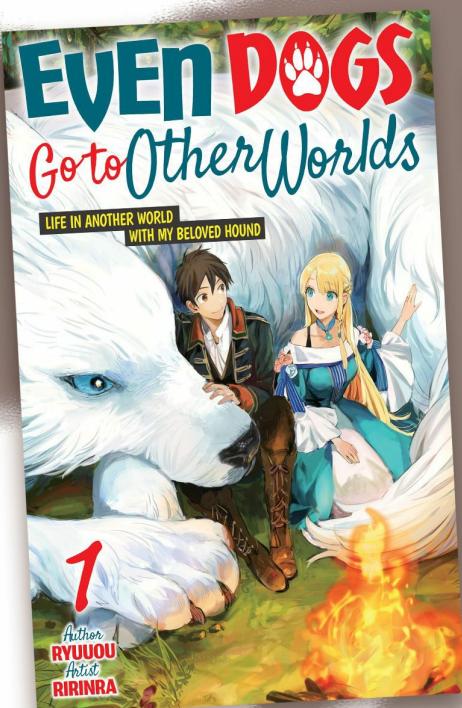
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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

