
X
Tearmoon Empire
Nozomu Mochitsuki
Illustrator: Gilse


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Tearmoon Empire: Volume 10 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8
9. Part 9
10. Part 10
11. Part 11
12. Part 12
13. Part 13
14. Part 14


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Chapter 1: The Mushroom Knight

The Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, had her hands full. The future of the Empire rested on her shoulders, and these days, it felt as if the fate of the entire continent was resting on them too. Thus, Mia spent her days tirelessly (well, at least in Mia terms, that is). Despite these preoccupations, however, she was currently spending her time relaxing to the fullest in one of the guest rooms in Count Lampron's residence.

Her original objective had been to avoid Sion's assassination, and she had done just that. She had also somehow saved King Abram when a series of extraordinary circumstances led to him being faced with the same threat, and she even succeeded in freeing Sion's brother, Echard, from the fate of execution. Now, at last, it was time for a moment of respite.

"Even if it's just for some quality milk and butter, visiting the Equestrian Kingdom with Miss Rafina means that I can't afford to let my guard down," Mia noted. "I'll have to teach her how to ride horses too..."

Should a moment of negligence lead to injuring Rafina, the consequences would be disastrous. No matter what Rafina might have to say on the matter, one couldn't ignore the very real possibility of being chased down by a guillotine that had sprouted legs. In other words, it was of absolute priority that Mia keep her eyes open at all times.

"And that's exactly why I need to take the time to rest and recover now! A slice of cake while relaxing in bed is the perfect way to restore my spirits! Oho ho! I should get planning! I'll go on a tour of the sweets shops in Sunkland, and..."

Whether it be for better or for worse, this yet-nascent ploy of Mia's was not afforded the time to be fleshed out any further. The talks between Rafina and King Abram were worked out strangely and surprisingly quickly, and just two days later, Mia's party departed from Sunkland.

Rafina's attendants, as well as Ludwig, had taken care of preparations for the journey home. Three carriages from the Empire and one from Belluga were in

position, and in front of them stood Mia, who was currently hearing a report from Ludwig.

“There will be four carriages for our return trip with guards positioned around them. The Princess Guard will be the center of all protective operations.”

“Huh?” Mia tilted her head.

Belluga had restricted its military operations on its own volition. Thus, Rafina’s convoy consisted of as few members as possible. The soldiers of the country she was visiting—or nearby mercenaries hired by Belluga—were typically tasked with guarding the saint. This time, however, her protection was left to the Princess Guard.

Nothing’s the matter with there only being a few guards from Belluga, but...

“What about the convoy from Remno?”

A joint force consisting of knights from the Greenmoons’ personal army, the Princess Guard, and soldiers sent by Count Lampron of Sunkland had guarded them on their way here. The coordination of such had required a hefty amount of mental taxation from Ludwig. This time, he had Belluga to consider as well as Abel and the guards he’d brought from Remno. It was only natural to assume that Ludwig would appraise the situation with a grimace—and yet that was clearly not the case.

“Well, the Kingdom of Remno only brought one knight with them,” said Ludwig.

Mia’s eyes opened in shock. “Just one?”

“Indeed. Apparently, Prince Abel’s attendant would like to specifically greet you.”

“Very well. I’d be happy to meet with him.”

Despite her agreement, Mia was slightly worried, and that worry only grew once Abel’s sole protector was right in front of her.

“It brings me the deepest of pleasures that you would take the time out of your busy day to allow me an audience, Your Highness. My name is Grammateus, and I am the knight tasked with overseeing the protection of

Prince Abel.”

Kneeling before her, head deeply bowed in respect, was a single old man. Just him. That was it.

Of course, this worried Mia even more.

There’s only one guard with him...? And he’s so old! Abel, you’re not receiving the cold shoulder back home, are you?!

Despite her qualms, Mia slightly lifted her skirt from above the ground with a smile. The expression she wore was a perfect facade, so amicable and princess-like that it completely obscured the anxiety she felt.

“The pleasure is all mine, Sir Grammateus. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire.”

Her greeting was as flawless as her smile, but once she lifted her face, she found herself transfixed with the sight in front of her. *Oh, my... He’s...* She couldn’t stop the wonder from clouding her eyes, for the old soldier was decked in golden armor that covered his entire frame. The rounded metal was plastered with countless scratches, a testament to the many battles Grammateus had overcome. But even more worthy of note was the expression on the old man’s face; despite the dreadfully heavy armor he adorned, he wore a debonair grin. His movements were completely free of burden, and he had a brisk energy that defied his old age.

To the trained eye, one glance was enough to tell that this was no ordinary man. But of course, Mia’s eyes were far from sharp—they were pebbles. Or, to put it more nicely, they were marbles. To really flatter her, perhaps they could be called sapphires. In any case, they were pretty to look at, but not fit for judging the strength of an opponent in any way. And so, that was not what had caught Mia’s gaze.

“The helmet you have there is simply marvelous, Sir Grammateus. Would it be possible for you to put it on? I’d love to see what it looks like.” Mia, seeing the helmet Grammateus had been holding by his side, decided to ask him for a favor.

“It brings me the deepest of pleasures to hear such praise for my battle attire.

If that be your request...”

The sight of Grammateus decked out in his full suit of armor turned Mia’s prediction into conviction.

Oho ho! He looks like a mushroom!

That was the thought that had preoccupied Mia’s mind. Just one look at the round protrusion of the helmet and gentle curves of the armor was enough for the exacting eyes of Mia. She could find the mushroom hidden inside anything!

Mm-hmm! Only someone of my caliber would have been able to notice! Mia was perhaps a little too proud of herself. *I’ve heard of this before, though. Soldiers often dress like mythical beasts in order to intimidate their opponent or gain inhuman powers!* Mia took another glance at the man in front of her and the metallic mushroom armor he wore. *Sir Grammateus is dressed like a mushroom, which means he’s channeling their power! He’s a Mushroom Knight! I’m sure I can count on him!*

At times, mushrooms use their virulent toxins to slay their foes, and at others, they use their supple grace to evade enemy attacks. To Mia, mushrooms were a symbol of strength!

Mia nodded her head. “I see. That armor of yours really is magnificent. I’m sure we can count on you.”

Mia’s mumblings left Grammateus’s eyes open in shock.

Abel looked much the same, accompanied by a wry smile. “You really know everything, don’t you, Mia? Grammateus has trained our royal family in swordsmanship for quite a while now. He’s worked both my brother and I to the bone over the years.”

“I see.”

Oho ho, if he teaches swordsmanship, then he must *be strong! That’s a Mushroom Knight for you—his choice in armor exudes an aura of strength!*

While Mia was preoccupied with her thoughts, the Mushroom Knight (A.K.A. Grammateus) was bellowing out a warm welcome to the sight of Dion Alaia. “My, oh, my! You are Dion Alaia, are you not? I heard you even bested the

Adamantine Spear!” With that, he trampled his way over to Dion, stopping just a few feet in front of him. “Hah! I see that there was truth to the rumors! You seem to be quite the man.”

With a hand on his chin, Grammateus gave Dion a once-over.

“Not at all,” Dion replied. “If it isn’t Sir Grammateus of Remno, the Sword Saint. I’m surprised you’re still kicking.” The smile on Dion’s lips was warm, but his eyes were cold, busy with the task of appraising his opponent. “So? How do you suggest we position the troops, Sir Grammateus?”

“As if you needed to ask me! A man of peerless valor such as yourself should prove to have no trouble. I mean, you bested the Adamantine Spear! I think it would be wise to leave everything in your capable hands.”

After waving the old soldier goodbye, Mia turned to Dion.

“Do the two of you know each other?”

“Nope, but I’ve heard stories of him. He’s the one who invented the fundamentals of Remno swordsmanship. Whether it be ‘Master’ or the ‘Sword Saint,’ he’s got a bunch of fancy nicknames surrounding him.” Dion shrugged with a grimace. “Looks like even you managed to figure out how strong he is. Well, he lives up to his name. A pity that I couldn’t have met him in his glory days... Anyways, I don’t think we’ve got anything to worry about. I might even ask him to help train the Princess Guard.”

“My! He really is strong!”

As she watched the departing figure of her Mushroom Knight, Mia realized her intuition had proved true. *Mushrooms. Are. Strength!*

Chapter 2: Princess Mia Exhibits the Dignity of a Veteran!

Three days had passed since Mia and her party had left Sunkland's capital of Sol Saliente. With a sigh, Mia stepped out of her carriage, stretching her back and gazing at the clear, midday sky.

"Ah... What lovely weather! It feels amazing out here." The autumn breeze that swept along the plains left her invigorated. She couldn't help but smile. "It's perfect for some horseback riding!"

Immediately, she was greeted by a voice of resistance.

"U-Um... Mia?" Mia turned her head toward the voice. "Are we *really* doing that?"

It was Rafina, whose eyes were slightly upturned as she looked at Mia. Right now, the Holy Lady was not in a dress, but a horse-riding top and a pair of sleek, flexible pants. Seeing Rafina in such a getup was incredibly rare, and Mia watched as Rafina squirmed in embarrassment.

"Hm..."

She looked at the pants Rafina was wearing, then her own, especially the belt. Mia was overcome with anguish. She had to loosen it one more notch than usual!

What a strange and perplexing phenomenon! Why is my belt so tight? I don't understand it at all! Perhaps it has something to do with Sunkland's climate...

She was shielding her eyes from the truth, but at least it cheered her up.

Let's just...exercise! I simply need to get my body moving!

"Of course we're going horse riding, Miss Rafina. It's the perfect day for it!"

The reserve in Rafina's voice was a stark contrast to Mia's beaming smile.

"But...wouldn't you prefer to go on a ride with Prince Abel? I'd rather not interfere..."

A ride with Abel? Oho ho...

Quite the seductive offer indeed. A ride with Abel was music to Mia's ears, even more so if she could use the opportunity to get all lovey-dovey with him! Well, in Mia's case, it was probably more "dovey" than "lovey," but it was still true. If she could spend some quality time with Abel, she wanted to, but... Mia ousted such thoughts from her mind with a quiet shake of her head. The horse riding she was about to partake in was not for purposes of enjoyment. It was a time of abstinence! She needed to get her condition in check!

What condition, you ask? Well, the condition she needed to properly enjoy the tasty delights of the Equestrian Kingdom! The butter they made was out of this world, which made it safe to assume that there would be a mountainous number of other treats awaiting her. But with the current rotund state of her stomach, future remorse was certain to stop her from enjoying them to their fullest. This exercise was necessary both to cure the F.A.T. hangover left from her overindulgence in pastries and to enjoy the culinary delights with Abel himself.

I also need to consider that promise I made with Miss Rafina... She hadn't forgotten the vow she had made at the slumber party, nor the slight smile that had adorned Rafina's lips in response. *Now that I think about it, that might've been the first time I was able to lift Rafina's spirits with a present.* She had tried presenting Rafina with gifts numerous times in the previous timeline, but it had never succeeded at bringing them closer together. It was a miracle that a day had come where they could ride horses together, much less where something Mia did resulted in bringing joy to Rafina. Mia felt accomplished!

"I made a promise to you, didn't I? Besides, horse rides are only fun when everyone can enjoy them together! As things are now, I'd have to leave you behind, and that wouldn't be any fun!"

Rafina was at a loss for words. "I see..."

Despite the slight nod Rafina gave in response, she still appeared to be holding back somewhat. It was then that Mia had a moment of inspiration!

Oho ho! I see how it is! Miss Rafina, you're afraid of horses, aren't you? Well, I guess they are *intimidatingly tall...*

And with just that one thought, Mia's heart swelled with joy.

"This horse is quite docile. I'm sure you two ladies will find it fit for one's first experience on horseback. Though, it may be a little bit *too* compliant..." said one of the members of the Princess Guard, drawing a horse behind him.

The horse's eyes dropped with drowsiness, looking perfectly peaceful—or rather, it just looked spaced out. But for some reason, as soon as Mia set eyes on that horse, she felt a sense of kinship.

Have I really never met this horse before? It's excellent!

Mia turned to Rafina with a smile. "You have nothing to worry about! Unlike a certain more *restive* horse, this one won't blow any snot on you. It definitely doesn't seem like a troublemaker!"

"I-I see..." Rafina gave a nod of affirmation, but still, something appeared to be troubling her. "I'm sure you're right."

Oh ho! I didn't know Miss Rafina was such a scaredy-cat! Oho ho ho! I was so calm and collected the first time I rode. Who would've thought Miss Rafina would turn out to be so different!

Thinking it was her place to take the lead, Mia elegantly mounted the horse with a refined "hupty-doo!" Yes, this horse was so docile, Mia was able to "elegantly" jump atop its back.

"Well then, Miss Rafina! It's your turn. Come and sit in front of me."

With that, Mia tugged Rafina's hand toward her. Borrowing help from the Princess Guard, Rafina was somehow able to get herself straddled on the horse's back. Mia addressed her, pride filling her chest.

"Now, Miss Rafina, make sure you grab on firmly, okay? Even if you see an acquaintance of yours, or a trusty servant, you must not—under any circumstances—release both your hands from the reins. It would be terrible if you were to lose your balance and fall."

...Well, let's just set that piece of advice aside.

"Things will be fine. So long as you hold on tight, it will be very hard for you to fall off!"

Mia was sure that Rafina's silence was due to her fear of horse riding, so she offered her kind words of encouragement. Perhaps it was just a trick of her eye, but Mia could see the dignity of a veteran exuding from herself.

She would never realize that it was all just her imagination. What had really kept Rafina silent was the overwhelming nervousness that came with a sudden scenic horseback ride with a friend, but Mia, of course, was blind to that fact. Thus began her heart-pounding horse-riding adventure.

That's right. There was one more thing that went beyond Mia's realization. The resounding clomp of hooves from far beyond the hill, that menacing herd of cavalry that was approaching them... Unfortunately, Mia was not able to sense this danger. In more ways than one, this would certainly make hearts pound.

"Whoa!" Rafina let out a cry of joy from atop the horse's back. "I wasn't expecting us to be so far off the ground! The view from up here... It's similar to the view from Saint-Noel's Stargazing Tower, but there's something different about it. It's difficult to put my finger on it!"

Rafina turned back toward Mia with a grin, who tilted her head in response.

How strange... I wonder why she's so composed.

Mia wasn't expecting her to be nearly so calm. She was so stunned that all she could do was stare questioningly at Rafina. *But I used to get so panicked whenever I rode horses!* Mia, face plastered with a smug grin, was supposed to assuage the fearful Rafina with a lecture on the wonders of horseback riding, relentlessly beating Rafina into a capable rider! Her horseback ride of abstinence was already crumbling to pieces.

Hmph. I wonder what's gotten into her... I'll have to rework my plan. This calls for...

"Hey, you two. I see things are going smoothly."

Just then, Mia's thoughts were interrupted by a gallant voice. It was Abel, who was standing beside them in the horse-riding gear he had just changed

into. Seeing his charming figure, Mia couldn't help but let out an enamored sigh.

If he came all the way out here, does that mean he wants to enjoy some horse riding with me? A horseback ride with Abel, huh...?

Mia took one glance at Abel's sharp appearance and decided...she couldn't wait! Her horseback ride of abstinence was now nothing more than dust blown away with the wind.

"Were you planning on lending us a hand?"

"Well, yeah, I was. I thought you'd be fine by yourself, Mia, but I felt like I could use the exercise." Abel turned toward Rafina, his head held in question. "My apologies, but is this your first time riding a horse, Miss Rafina?"

"Yes. I've only ever traveled by carriage before."

"I see. In that case, would you allow me the honor of leading the horse carrying you two princesses?" Abel looked back at Mia. "How about it?"

"It almost feels presumptuous for me to ask that of you, Abel..."

"Ha ha ha! You needn't worry about that. I just wanted to spend some time with you."

Seeing Abel's dashing wink, another enamored sigh escaped Mia's lips.

Thus, their relaxing horseback ride began. The horse walked along, a tranquil "clomp, clomp" accompanying each step. It was just as docile as the guard had promised—incredibly steady and never showing any signs of going out of control.

My! This horse really is gentle! I hope Miss Rafina isn't afraid. I wonder how she's enjoying this...

Just as that thought went through Mia's mind, Rafina abruptly brought up a question.

"Hey, Mia? When you're usually riding, how do you make the horse gallop?"

Rafina's eyes sparkled with wonder. She seemed completely enchanted, as if

she was a child who had just received her first toy.

You see, at her core, Mia is someone who gets easily carried away. The sight of someone's pleasure at her actions is enough to drive her into high gear.

"Hm, well... Usually, I..." Mia turned toward the guard by her side who had the task of protecting the two of them. "Do you happen to know if these plains continue onward? We're not going to suddenly come to a cliff or anything, are we?"

"The land will stay flat for quite a while. There are no cliffs or any sort of other dangerous terrain."

"I see... Well then, Miss Rafina. How about I take you for a short gallop?"

"Huh? But..."

Mia addressed the hesitating Rafina with a smile. "The real pleasure of horse riding is when you're running at full speed! One with the horse, you become the wind. It's a sensation that can only be felt on a horse's back, and I'd like for you to experience it too!"

Mia cast her gaze to Abel, and once again, he shrugged his shoulders.

"Got it. I'll go get my own horse ready and follow after you two."

"Well then, I guess that's it! We'll be heading out."

"H-Hold on a second, Your Highness. You can't just..."

Mia flashed her panicked guard a mischievous grin. "It'll be perfectly fine! We won't be going too far." She turned to Rafina. "Shall we be on our way?"

Her words were spoken with incredible volume, as Mia...had gotten completely carried away! Her victory at the Horsemanship Tournament and her success at escaping the wolfmaster had inflated her ego. And so, Mia silently urged her horse forward, completely unaware of the pitfall that was lying right beneath her feet.

Following Mia's orders, the horse dashed forward, the wind that blew past them getting stronger and stronger.

“Waaah!”

Rafina’s silken hair danced behind her as she let out a cry of joy—music to Mia’s ears!

“Oho ho! Don’t get satisfied quite yet, Miss Rafina! We’re nowhere near top speed. Forward, Silvermoon!” yelped Mia, unable to stop her high spirits from leaving her mouth.

To clarify, their horse’s name was *not* “Silvermoon.”

Moving on, just like that, they continued to dash through the grassland plains. When they had finally returned to their senses, they realized that they had come quite aways from their carriages, which were now just specks in the distance.

Hm, maybe it’s about time I turned back...

Mia stopped her horse and turned it the other way, back toward the direction they had just come from.

Right then, Rafina piped up in a whisper. “Huh...? Mia, do you know what that could be?”

“Over there? I have no clue...”

Following Rafina’s pointed finger, Mia took a moment to think...before her face turned a ghastly pale white! Kicking through the weeds and letting out cries of war was a group headed straight for their carriages. Plus, Mia had seen them before!

“My! Could they be that group of bandits?!”

The horseback brigands they had bumped into on their way to Sol Saliente were back for vengeance!

“Mia...”

She could hear the trepidation in Rafina’s voice. Mia gave a slow nod, hoping to allay her fears.

“W-We have nothing to worry about! Dion’s stayed with the carriages, and the Princess Guard are some of the most capable soldiers out there! They’ll

have these thieves running for cover before you know it!”

For just a moment, Mia had been on the brink of panic after seeing the band of brigands herself. However, she quickly regained her composure; Dion Alaia was with the rest of the group, after all.

We were fine on the way here! I’m sure things will be the same this time too! Just as those comforting thoughts went through Mia’s head, she quickly realized her mistake. The brigands heading toward their party had suddenly stopped in their tracks...and were now heading straight toward Mia!

Ah! This is bad... They’ve found us!

Mia was certain that as long as they hadn’t done anything to provoke the group, she and Rafina would be fine. So, of course, this sent Mia into panic mode. Still half in her state of stupor, Mia turned her horse to face the opposite direction of the bandits...which was also the opposite direction of their carriages.

“Agh! Miss Rafina, make sure you hold on tight!”

Rafina was immediate with her reply. “Wait, Mia. Let’s trade places.”

As soon as the words had left her mouth, Rafina maneuvered herself to sit behind Mia.

“Huh? But, Miss Rafina...”

“Between us two, I’m taller, so it must be hard to see around me, right? The bandits are getting closer. We better hurry!”

“My... You have a point!”

Mia followed Rafina’s lead and sent their horse dashing forward.

We’ll be fine! We can outrun them!

Mia, you see, was confident. She had beaten Ruby at Saint-Noel’s Horsemanship Tournament and had even outrun the wolfmaster! This, of course, meant that she’d be able to shake the average bandit off their tail. But what really gave Mia comfort was...

I-If I keep on running, Dion will catch up to us eventually! A man like him will

be able to drive back these bandits single-handedly! I mean, even if they're chasing us down, they're still so far away! Outrunning them will be a piece of cake!

Mia had complete certainty in these musings, but there was one thing that had slipped her mind: Kuolan was a *much* better horse than Mia had thought!

"Onwards! Shake off these enemies and let's get back to our friends! Giddyup!"

Mia gallantly addressed her horse. When spoken to like that, her horse had never failed to meet her demands, turning her into the wind. Mia was certain that just as the violent tempest, they'd be able to shake off their enemies. However...

"Huh?" Mia found herself at a loss.

Why...haven't we become the wind yet? This horse isn't picking up speed at all! Th-This isn't right! Why the heck aren't we getting any faster?!

Mia watched as the brigands drew closer and closer. Masks covered each of their faces, hiding their expressions and making them ever more ominous.

Wh-Why is this horse so slow?!

Mia peered into the horse's eyes...and her jaw dropped to the ground!

This horse looks absolutely lifeless!

Not in its dazed eyes, nor in its drooping mouth, or even in its absentminded expression, could Mia find a single ounce of anxiety. It was the exact same face Mia would make when counting the leaves to kill the time!

That's right, Mia's ultimate riding technique of the Flotsam was reliant on having a first-rate horse. If the horse was going at one hundred, Mia would completely rid herself as not to add a minus fifty through her riding technique. That was the true nature of her method. However, this horse—this Mia ver. Horse—wasn't even strong in the first place. Just as two unmotivated Mias would result in nothing, her Flotsam technique was absolutely useless.

Before Mia even had the chance to notice, she had been forced into a position where she'd have to actually *try*!

“Urgh! Agh! It appears there’s nothing else we can do.” Mia looked over her shoulder. “Miss Rafina...”

Rafina’s shoulders jumped.

“Hold on tightly. Make sure you won’t be able to fall off.”

Her voice was soft, but full of conviction.

I can’t let Rafina fall off! That’d reflect on me terribly!

Just imagining it had Mia shivering in fear. If she was the only one to be saved in a situation like this one, one wrong step would have people doubting if Mia had shoved Rafina from the horse in an attempt to save herself. A cold sweat dripped down Mia’s back.

Plus, Mia couldn’t get that Rafina’s earlier grin out of her mind. Every time she remembered it, Mia’s chicken heart fluttered.

Hmph! If only she’d give me the same look of disgust she used to! Then I wouldn’t have to hurt my sensitive conscience!

You see, Mia was completely lacking when it came to the ability to cut down anyone and anything else to save oneself that was so characteristic of tyrants. Which meant... Mia had to do whatever it took in order to save Rafina as well. Mia was a veteran, and so, she needed to put all her effort into making sure Rafina didn’t fall, but...

I don’t have that luxury right now! My hands are completely full as it is!

She had to find an escape route while also finding a way to kick this horse into action. It was impossible for them to keep away from the bandits until help had arrived to save them. Now, she needed to get back to the carriages by herself. And so, she also needed Rafina to cling onto her for dear life. Mia softly placed one of her hands onto Rafina’s, which were wrapped around her very own waist.

“We’ll find our way back and ensure safety for the rest! I promise!”

“Mia...”

There was a slight tremor in Rafina’s voice.



Chapter 3: My... Oh, My...☰

“We’ll find our way back and ensure safety for the rest! I promise!”

“Mia...”

Rafina bit her lip, doing all she could to control her quivering voice.

Oh my... Oh my...

For a while now, those were the only words running through Rafina’s head. Mia was in front of her, desperately attempting to lead their horse toward their escape. As she watched Mia from behind, Rafina found herself truly and completely bewildered.

Oh my... This is so much... Fun!

Of course... There was no wine in the vicinity that could have gotten Rafina anything less than sober. That’s right. Despite the perilous circumstances, there was no holding back Rafina’s excitement!

I mean... I’ve never experienced something like this before!

During both the adventure to the Kingdom of Remno and the more recent events in the wilderness, Rafina was the only one who had been left behind. The night of the Holy Eve Festival stabbed especially sharp in Rafina’s chest. Abel, Sion, Keithwood—even Tiona, Liora, and Anne—they had all put their lives on the line, working together to save Mia. Just to rescue Rafina’s dear friend, they had all banded together, working alongside even Mia herself. But...among them, there had been no place for Rafina. She, alone, had been left out.

Of course, Rafina knew that she had her own role to play. She was the daughter of the Duke that ruled the Holy Principality of Belluga. Her life wasn’t one that could be so easily exposed to danger. But still...she found it ever so vexing.

She, alone, could do nothing to save her friend. She, alone, could not fight by

everyone's side. And she, alone, had been left behind. It all made her feel so forlorn. But was that really true? After coming to Sunkland, Mia saved Echard, and Rafina was right by her side, offering her advice throughout the way. It was together that they saved the boy's life. And right now, the two of them were running from bandits, once again, together. Her simple first foray into the art of horsemanship had received an upgrade; now, it was a foray on *them*, and Rafina was facing that danger together with a friend.

This abrupt change of circumstances had thrown Rafina for a loop...and had sent her heart aflutter!

Why am I...? Our lives are on the line, but I'm having so much fun!

Still confused, she shook the thoughts from her head.

No, I can't. I can't let a situation like this lift my spirits! In an attempt to save me, Mia had to lead our horse away from our guards. Which means it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this whole situation is all my fault.

Rafina was completely aware of the logic of their situation, but still...she couldn't stop the flutter of her heart. Having to escape from danger through risking your life with a trusted comrade and joining forces with a precious friend... It was a situation that Rafina had always longed for. Plus, that friend was of the utmost reliance and honor.

For just a moment, Rafina had doubted Mia. She thought it was possible that Mia would force her from the horse in order to make its load lighter...or that Mia would sacrifice herself to rescue Rafina. That's what she had thought. In fact, she really had considered the possibility—it was the reason she had decided to situate herself behind Mia. Positioned thus, Rafina would be able to protect Mia from any arrows that flew their way, and if the situation necessitated it, she could let go, sacrificing herself and raising the chances of Mia's successful escape through her lessened weight. But Mia had thought differently. The path she chose would save *both* of them. Together, they would return home alive.

Is there anyone else so trustworthy?

For Rafina, risking her life with such a friend made her rapturous beyond belief.

“Aaah...”

Right then, she heard Mia let out a sigh of despair. With a swift raise of her gaze, Rafina found herself face-to-face with Mia’s worries. Another group of horseback riders had appeared right in front of them.

This can’t be! We’re surrounded!

Rafina quickly swept their surroundings. Out of the corner of her vision, she saw a spot of deep green. Trees. A small forest, in fact.

“Mia! Over there! Into the woods!”

In answer, Mia gave a tug of the reins.

“I knew you would save us, Miss Rafina!”

The horse veered in a new direction, making a beeline for the forest. From what Rafina could surmise, this horse wouldn’t be able to outrun the brigands. Not only were their horses stronger, Mia and Rafina were riding double. It was clear that they were at the disadvantage. But what if they were making their escape through a dense forest? With Mia’s superb riding skills, couldn’t they make use of the obstacles and succeed in their escape?

Now, there was a vital misunderstanding in Rafina’s logic, but sadly, Rafina’s inexperience in horsemanship made Mia seem like a first-rate, unrivaled rider. It was quite the hapless misconception.

But are we really going to make it to the forest?

Full of doubts, Rafina looked back behind them. Immediately, she noticed that something was off.

“Huh? Why are they...?”

The brigands pursuing them were rapidly losing their fervor. It seems like they had bumped into the other group that had just appeared.

Is there an issue with their communications? Or perhaps they’re not from the same group?

Lost in her confusion, Rafina heard Mia curse from under her breath.

“Augh! This one is really persistent! Isn’t it about time they gave up already?!”

Rafina followed Mia's gaze, confirming her words—there was one bandit who was still right on their tail. She was a tad minuscule compared to the rest of the brigands, but thanks to that, her horse was much faster than Mia and Rafina's.

"We're about to enter the forest! Duck, Miss Rafina!" yelped Mia. As soon as the words left her mouth, Rafina heard the snaps of branches as the horse broke through the woods. Once on the other side of that curtain of leaves, they found themselves on a small game trail. Still in a swift gallop, Mia weaved the horse in between the trees.

Rafina glanced behind them in a crouch. Their enemy's horse was approaching them at breakneck speed.

"Augh! Uuurgh! I don't think I'll be able to shake them off! We'll have to try to find a way through the forest that will bring us back to the carriages," grumbled Mia. And then, suddenly, the horse that was chasing them disappeared.

"Huh...?"

Rafina focused her eyes deep into the forest's verdant depths. Still, she caught no sight of their assailant. Perhaps Mia had realized it too, as she slowed the horse and turned to look behind them.

"Did they stop chasing us...?" Mia was in disbelief. "I bet this means we were able to outrun them! We di— Aaaugh!"

"Mia?!"

Shocked, Rafina turned back toward Mia. And then, she bore witness to something terrible! Mia...had hit her head on a branch and was languidly falling off the horse's back. Panicking, Rafina grabbed a hold of Mia and with a good deal of effort, successfully placed her on the ground beneath them. But right as Rafina had let out a sigh of relief...a dreadful sound filled her ears. It was the sound of a horse—no, *multiple* horses—stomping toward them.

Ah, so this is the end... The bandits have caught up to us...

After pushing Mia into the underbrush, Rafina dauntlessly stood tall. She no longer had the time to hide. All she could do now was drag things out as long as she could.

I just hope they don't find Mia...

Finally, a single white horse showed its face, and atop it was...

"Huh? What brings you two ladies all the way out here?"

...Lin Malong, looking as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

Chapter 4: So, It Begins! Life Advice...Horse-style!

“It’s quite the coincidence meeting at a place like this.”

Malong dismounted his horse with a hearty grin. Of course, he did so gallantly. Not a single “hupty-doo” fell from his lips.

“Were you the ones those bandits were after?”

In response to Malong’s casual approach, Rafina went to put on her usual saintly smile and perfect manners, but...

“Huh?”

She failed. For a moment, all she could see was white, and Malong’s face completely fell from her vision. Then, she felt dizziness overtake her as she toppled, and...

“Whoa there.”

Immediately after, she heard a voice that sounded incredibly close. Moving her gaze up once again, she found Malong’s face still veiled in an ivory mist. And then, she came to realize her incredibly unique circumstances—Malong had caught her.

“...Huh?”

I’ve already escaped the clutches of death, so why is my heart still pounding? While Rafina was still preoccupied with her thoughts, Malong set her down, leaning her against one of the trees.

“You’ve gotta be more careful, all right? You’re one important lady, Miss Rafina.”

“Y-You’re right. Thank— Ah!”

Rushing to stand up, Rafina once again found herself planted on the ground.

“Hey, now. You can’t be moving around so much when you’re—”

“Before that, there’s Mia! She’s back there. In the shrubs.”

Malong nodded in response while Rafina was still in her state of fluster. “Oh, I see. So, you were with Miss Mia.” Malong pushed his way through the underbrush and pulled Mia out straight from beneath the overgrowth.

“She hit her head on a branch while we were running from those bandits.”

“Hm? Did she fall off?” Suddenly, it was as if a cold front had washed over Malong’s face.

“No, she hit her head on that branch over there, and then she lost consciousness, so I lowered her to the ground.”

“On a branch? Oh. This?” Malong looked up the tree, and with a short hop, grabbed onto the branch. Pulled down by Malong’s weight, the branch effortlessly...slumped, surprisingly elastic. Afterwards, Malong went over to Mia, still supine on the forest floor, and checked the shape of her head.

“Will Mia be all right? I don’t know what I’d do if she was badly injured...”

Rafina peered into Mia’s face, tears welling in her eyes. And then...

“Uuunnnngh... Mushrooms... Butter... So tasty...”

She heard Mia’s dreamland mumbles, watching as Mia’s mouth softly dropped open right along with them. Rafina and Malong looked at one another.

“Well, I guess she’s fine. She doesn’t seem to be hurt, and since she didn’t fall from the horse when that branch hit her, she must not have been going very fast...or maybe the branch just wasn’t that strong. In any case, I think it’s just the shock that took her out, but...” Malong’s expression suddenly grew grave. “I’ve told her time and time again not to be looking the other way when riding. Even with bandits on your tails, she didn’t bother to bring any guards with her. I bet she got carried away trying to make you smile. Jeez, I better give her a good talking-to later.”

“Ah! Wait! None of this is Mia’s fault. It’s all mine for asking her to take me riding in the first place.”

Malong narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “Really? Mia has a surprising habit of getting carried away with herself. If someone’s in need of a good scolding, it’s

better to just do it. It'll end up helping her in the long run."

"Not at all! Mia was just doing all she could to help me! There was absolutely nothing she did that deserves blame!" Rafina glared at Malong, as if she were Mia's protector.

"Hm... There's something a bit different about you today, isn't there?" Curiosity filled Malong's eyes as he gazed at Rafina.

"Eh?" Caught off guard, Rafina could do nothing but blink in response.

"Well, maybe it's not just today. Maybe you've been this way for a while now. But I always thought you were the calm and collected type, with that smile always stuck on your face."

Rafina only came to realize it herself once it had been pointed out to her.

He's right. I was *getting worked up. Losing my composure and getting caught up in my emotions really isn't like me.*

"In any case, you've gotta be careful when riding. Otherwise, it's dangerous. Let your guard down for a second, and you'll regret it. And so, if you don't want me scolding your good friend, you better do it for me, okay, miss?"

Remonstrated so harshly, Rafina gave an incredibly meek yet sharp nod.

I've got to warn Mia. For her own sake.

That resolute conviction stood firm in her heart. And just like that, Mia's reprimander was upgraded from Malong to Rafina.

"Uuungh... Nnh?"

With incredibly apt timing, Mia scrunched her brow together and let out a groan. Anyways...

"Well, I think you're better off like this anyways." Malong's expression grew softer.

Rafina responded to his gentle smile with an inquisitive look. "Just what does that mean?"

"It means exactly that. Getting angry trying to protect your friends, standing up for them even when it doesn't make much sense—it's natural. I've always

felt like you were holding too much of that back. There's no need to push yourself so far, is there?"

"I haven't been...pushing myself."

Rafina puffed out her cheeks. Why hadn't she ever gotten like this before? The answer was simple—before, she didn't have any such friends. There was no one who she could so easily protect as she had done moments earlier. Right then, fear abruptly blossomed in Rafina's heart. A twinge of guilt, yet it seemed so similar to the elation that had just filled her chest. After facing danger with a friend and set against an all-encompassing peril, she had felt content, and there was a part of her that felt that moment was for her a lapse in virtue.

As the Holy Lady of Belluga, shouldn't I avoid *acting like this? Shouldn't I approach these situations with more composure?*

"Y'know, when there's a horse in front of you, you've gotta ride it. It's just like that."

Rafina had momentarily been on the verge of falling into the abyss of despair, but Malong's words brought her back to her senses. She didn't really understand what was happening, but for some reason, he was talking about horses!

"Um?"

Unable to follow Malong's train of thought, Rafina held her head in question. But Malong hadn't noticed and continued onwards.

"Horses are great! They accept us humans just the way we are. Plus, with a horse carrying you across this vast earth, the tiny troubles and worries of us people feel like nothing at all. I'm sure that horses worry about us, and that's something Miss Mia has come to understand. She understands the way horses feel about things, and I bet that's why she invited you out riding, Miss Rafina."

"Right..." Rafina gave a vague nod in response before changing the subject. "By the way, Malong, did you come here to apprehend those bandits?"

"I did. The Forest Clan was already in the area, so once we heard about the gang, we thought it'd be a good chance to go and capture them, but...they're quite the group. We've been struggling." Malong laughed and looked back at

his horse. “Still, it’s not like we came out of it empty-handed.”

It was only then that Rafina noticed what—or *who*, rather—was riding on top.

Chapter 5: The Young Bandit and Mia's Hunch

"Nnh... Uuungh?" Thinking she could hear a far-off voice in the distance, Mia leisurely opened her eyes.

For some reason, I feel like I was having a nightmare... A nightmare where an extremely scary-looking Rafina was giving her a scolding. *How frightening! All I was doing was enjoying butter-fried mushrooms, yet Rafina got so angry at me just for eating too many. Well, at least it was just a dream.*

Mia shook her head, trying to rid herself of her nightmare. She tried to stand up, but...

"Huh? Where am I? Ow!"

She immediately grimaced in pain. She could feel the pain from, well, not her head. Instead, her entire body prickled as if it was being stabbed with thin needles. Looking down, Mia saw a myriad of twigs protruding out of her clothes, and she suddenly regained her missing memories.

Th-That's right. I hit my head on that tree branch, and then...and then...I fell from my—

It was close, but Mia had been able to hold back her voice. The brigands that had been pursuing them could be right beneath her nose. Mia couldn't carelessly let her voice alert them of her position. Holding her breath, Mia was careful to move only her eyes as she swept her surroundings. She was surprised to find herself in the forest, nestled into a small clearing.

It doesn't seem like I'm hiding, does it?

Mia had been certain that she and Rafina had been hiding somewhere after tumbling from their horse, but...

This doesn't really seem like a hiding place, and Rafina is nowhere to be seen.

Mia momentarily wondered if Rafina had abandoned her to flee herself, but she quickly tossed that idea from her mind.

Impossible! Miss Rafina would never abandon a friend! It's much more likely she hid me in the forest to call for help by herself, or that she offered herself up as a decoy. Hm... I'm not sure what to make of all this.

Should she get up to find help? Or should she stay hidden? Faced with these diametrically opposed options, Mia couldn't keep her head from spinning. Just then, she heard a man's voice.

"Hey. You awake?"

Moons! It's over. I can't pretend to be asleep any longer.

Accepting her fate, Mia went to sit up.

"Ah! Mia. You shouldn't be moving just yet."

"My! Is that you, Miss Rafina?"

Rafina approached Mia, removing the damp cloth that had been resting on Mia's forehead and replacing it with a new one. The thinking from earlier had left Mia's head on the verge of overheating, but the cool cloth slowly brought its temperature back down into a normal range.

"Ah, this feels excellent," mumbled Mia, still in a daze.

"Haven't I told you, miss? You can't be looking the other way while you're riding."

It was the same male voice from earlier, but now, Mia realized she recognized it after all.

"Huh? Is that you, Malong? What in the moons brings you here?"

"Ha ha ha! That should be my line," said Malong, a hearty grin on his lips. But to Mia, it looked completely unnatural, as if he was trying to hide something.

Oh, my! N-No way! Was Malong the one chasing after us?!

Great Detective Mia's erudite cranium had just hit upon quite the preposterous theory.

Th-That's out of the question! If it was Malong, he would have caught up to us before we could even enter the forest. I'm also pretty sure that bandit was quite a bit smaller than him.

Taking another look at Malong's grin, it now looked as it always had. Yup, there was nothing unusual about it.

Then, just what exactly is happening here? What brings Malong to a place like this?

Mia crossed her arms and let out a pensive groan. After contemplating for a few seconds, she turned to face Rafina.

It's not like Mia thought deducing it herself was too much work. No, she had simply surmised that asking someone who already knew the answer would be the fastest route to a solution. This act was completely based on the logical judgments of the Great Sage of the Empire.

Receiving a look from Mia, Rafina gave a slight nod of her head. "It seems that during our earlier escape, more bandits hadn't approached us from head-on. No, they were simply warriors from the Equestrian Kingdom, and it was Malong who had taken their helm."

"We'd gotten reports of a gang of horseback brigands attacking the villages around the outskirts of Sunkland's borders. A group of my clan's bravest men were patrolling the area, but thanks to you two ladies, we were finally able to capture one."

Malong cast his gaze to the tree beside him. Mia followed it to find a single girl sitting against it. Her hands had been bound behind her back, holding both her arms hostage behind her. She seemed to be about the same age as Mia, if maybe a tad older. A red scarf was wrapped around her head, beautiful black hair peeking out from beneath it. But it was her violet eyes that stood out the most distinct, which gleamed with a cutting light that resembled that of a Lulu hunter trained on its prey. That, and they were glaring right at Malong.

"Is she one of the bandits' conspirators?"

"Yup. She's the one who was chasing the two of you." Malong's facial features slightly stiffened. "And...she's a distant cousin of us Equestris."

"A cousin? What do you mean by that?"

"What a joke! Warrior of the Forest Clan, you call yourself our family? As if you have the right."

The captured bandit had remained silent, but now, she spoke. Her gaze was filled with enmity, still trained on Malong. She opened her mouth to continue, only...

“Grrrrrr...”

A heartrending sound interrupted her. Mia quickly brought her hands to her own stomach, only to discover that the sound hadn’t come from her. She turned to look at the girl in front of her, only to find her awkwardly averting her gaze.

Oh ho! For some reason, I get the feeling that this girl and I will get along.

Mia’s chest was filled with that conviction.



Mia and Rafina safely made it back to their carriages—with the accompaniment of Forest Clan guards led by Malong, that is. After her valiant return with over ten cavalry troops under her command... Mia felt extremely delighted!

I think I'm starting to understand the appeal of keeping good-looking guards in tow that Esmeralda is so fond of! Well, I'd personally prefer if it were a line of large men. Oh, and of course they'd have to have that *armor! I'll have them dress like that Mushroom Knight, and...*

Surreptitiously, a grand ambition had taken hold of Mia's heart!

"Milady!"

Anne, along with the others, was already waiting outside after hearing news of Mia's imminent return. As soon as Mia came into sight, Anne rushed over to her.

"Are you all right? You're not injured, are you?!"

Anne's fret was written all over her face as she stared directly at Mia. Trying to be considerate of the two noble girls, Anne had sat out of the horseback ride that Mia had embarked on. She still had Citrina and Bel with her, but perhaps it was weighing on her conscience that she couldn't be with Mia when she was faced with peril. At least, that's what Mia had assumed. Trying to calm her maid down, she gave a firm nod.

"Thank you, Anne. I'm quite all right. You have nothing to worry about."

Incidentally, not even a single scratch had been left on Mia's head from the branch encounter. Mia was a genius; her Diamond Head was not something that could be so easily scarred. That's right, just as her head was full of dried shiitake mushrooms, it boasted their characteristic rigidity—she wasn't just Diamond-Headed, she was Dried-Mushroom-Headed!

"It's not like I fell off a horse or anything of the like! Everything went without a hitch. Wouldn't you agree, Miss Rafina?" Mia glanced at her as she spoke.

"Y-Yes. You're absolutely right."

And was met with a panicked nod. *I see. So, this is how the false image of the*

Great Sage of the Empire has spread. The astonishment of that realization...was *not* what filled Rafina's chest! Instead, she had been preoccupied with feelings of pure respect. *She's taking such care to ease Anne's unnecessary worries! Mia really is quite amazing!*

And thus, the false image was born. Well, anyways...

"So? What damage did those bandits cause us?"

Mia turned toward Ludwig and Dion, who had been right behind Anne in greeting the returning Mia. Seeing her gaze, Dion gave a slight shrug in response. "The Princess Guard didn't engage in battle at all. It ended up as just a tiny skirmish between those bandits and the Equestri forces."

"I see. A skirmish..."

Mia gave a nod of satisfaction. Malong had referred to a member of the gang as a "cousin," which means that the Equestris were probably doing their best to keep damages to a minimum. Or maybe, Malong had given such an order himself.

Their gang seems to have been moving with the intent of looting. They probably didn't want to fight unless they had to.

Mia remembered the last time the bandits had attacked, and how they had retreated as soon as Sunkland troops had arrived. Had they not been so honorable, there would have undoubtedly been countless harm done—to the bandits, that is! Mia was sure of it!

I mean, we have Dion *with us! I don't really mind having assured victories, but for the sake of my own mental stability, I'll need to do at least a bit of keeping him in check.*

Mia simply did not have the mentality for screaming victory cries while standing in a river of the blood that flowed from the corpses of her slain enemies. In fact, just reading such words was enough to send a shiver down her spine.

"By the way, Your Highness, just who is that man and young woman behind you?" Ludwig had his eyes trained on Malong and the girl he had carried with him.

“The girl is one of the bandits. I don’t think I’ve had the chance to introduce him, but the man has taken very good care of me within the Horsemanship Club. His name’s—”

“It’s Lin Malong. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“I see. Well, the pleasure is all mine. I’m Ludwig Hewitt. Thank you for watching over Her Highness in times I myself cannot.” Ludwig gave a calm smile before continuing. “The horsemanship skills you have taught her have saved her in the past. There are no words that can properly express my deep gratitude.”

While Ludwig’s head was in a deep bow, Dion was preoccupied with something else. “Hmm... So, this girl’s with the bandits, huh?”

Noticing that Dion had her under his watch, the girl turned away.

“Please don’t frighten her too much, Dion,” Mia chimed in. “Your bloodlust can really do a number on people’s hearts.”

The girl jumped, startled. “Dion... You don’t mean Dion Alaia, do you?” Her eyes were wide open and glued on Dion. The blood drained from her cheeks.

“Oh? You’ve heard of me before?” Dion cocked his head as he grinned at the girl, causing her to let out a small “Eek!” and take cover behind Malong.

“Dion...” Mia grumbled.

“All I did was smile at her!”

“Far too aggressively!”

Not only had a smiling Dion removed Mia’s brain from her consciousness in the past, he had also removed her head from her neck. With this experience, Mia let out a sigh before continuing.

“In any case, I was thinking it best to get the details of our situation out of her.”

“I see... In that case, I would be obliged if you’d pass the responsibility over to me.” Ludwig offered himself up with an audacious grin which Mia met with a saccharine smile.

“Oho ho! There’s no need for you to go through the trouble. I’ll be asking her

myself.”

That answer had Dion’s eyes twinkling in amusement. “Ha! So, the princess is gonna be doing the torturing herself.”

He took another glance at the young bandit, and once again, she let out a small shriek, affirming Mia’s suspicion that she really would get along well with this girl!

“I already mentioned it earlier, but these guys are...”

Mia met Malong’s trepidation with a calming smile. “There’s nothing to worry about! There’s absolutely no need to do something as...*barbaric*...as torture!”

After giving a small self-affirming nod, Mia looked toward Anne. “Anne, could you prepare my secret weapons? The ones I obtained in Sunkland.”

“Oh, yes! Right away!”

For just a moment, hesitation shrouded Anne’s face, but almost immediately, she was rushing back toward the carriages. Mia once again looked toward the young bandit. “We’re about to have ourselves a wonderfully delightful tea party. I very much hope you’re looking forward to it!”

Mia’s face was adorned with a wide grin.

At the request of Imperial Princess Mia, a table and chairs were promptly erected in a field near the party’s carriages, and on top of it lay a variety of cookies Mia had obtained in Sunkland. Black tea filled the teacups which had been set out, and Mia let out a sigh of satisfaction at the luxury of being able to enjoy warm tea in a place as remote as this.

No matter where I am, I’m able to enjoy all the tea and tasty pastries I want... Is there any joy greater than this? No, I’m sure there isn’t!

It’s very easy to forget, but remember that Mia was in fact a princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire. Whether she was mounting a horse with a “hupty-doo” or chasing the grand delight of wolfing down tasty bread, Mia was a high-class woman with the right to luxury. That was exactly the reason she was able to hold a tea party like this mid-journey. Taking in this grand delight (grand in

terms of Mia, that is), Mia couldn't help but be moved to passion.

Besides herself, Malong, Rafina, Abel, Bel, and Citrina were sitting at the table, along with...

"Just what are your intentions with this?"

The young bandit who was glaring at Mia. Her hands were still bound behind her back, and Mia flashed her a smile.

"My, could someone untie her?"

The guard nearby raised his voice in bewilderment. "I don't think—"

"There's absolutely nothing to worry about! You won't run away, will you?"

Hearing that question, the young bandit couldn't help but give Mia a derisive grin. "Pft! You're as naive as the rumors say. To think that the Great Sage of the Empire would so much as *speak* of untying me."

"Ah, perhaps I should be more clear. It'd be best if you watched your actions. I'm not too savvy on the matter, but that man over there, Dion, is a bit of a danger. You may be skilled with a horse, but no matter where you run, Dion will follow and take your head in an instant!"

Hearing this, the bandit gave a glance at Dion and gulped. Afterwards, she quietly cleared her throat and began to speak. "Of course. I have no intentions of resisting. Our people are prideful—we are warriors of integrity. Even while captured, we'd never do something uncouth. That is also why I will not compromise. I would never tell you my own name, much less the names of my comrades."

There was a sharp clarity to her expression as those words left her lips.

Yep, just as I thought, I really can get along with her!

Mia had made an important observation!

"I'm sure you understand the situation, then. Just in case, Dion will stay nearby, so I'm sure there will prove to be no problems."

Dion, standing behind Mia, shook his head in exasperation.

"Well then," Mia continued, "why don't we get this tea party started?"

The young bandit turned her face at those words. “I refuse to accept charity from someone involved with the Equestrian Kingdom.”

“Oh? I don’t think you could call me ‘involved’ with the Equestris. Isn’t that right, Ludwig?”

“Indeed. At the very least, there are no direct relations between the Empire and the Equestrian Kingdom. We are neither allies in military affairs nor in trade,” Ludwig said matter-of-factly. Mia gave a satisfied nod in response before turning back toward the bandit.

“Malong is just an upperclassman of mine that I’ve come to know through the Horsemanship Club. There’s no relation between the Equestrian Kingdom and me as a princess of the Tearmoon Empire, and you’d be very much mistaken in thinking so.”

“I-Is that so? But you... Do you not plan to say something cowardly like, ‘If you want these tasty treats, then you better hand over some information’?”

The young bandit glanced at Mia’s cookies and ground her teeth together in frustration. This set Mia into a laughing fit. “My, why would I say something like that? Go ahead. Before we get into any serious discussions, why don’t we eat some yummy cookies together?”

“R-Really? But...” She was staring at Mia, but from the looks of it, even that much had clearly slipped her mind.

Mia nodded again with a grin. “Of course! Here, these cookies are *super* sweet and tasty!”

“Huh? Sweet? Super sweet...?” mumbled the bandit.

Mia pushed the tray of sweets toward her, all while absolutely gloating on the inside!

Oh ho! She’s so simple!

That’s right—Mia had it all figured out. Food grudges ran deep and heavy, but...food *debts* ran just the same! The blessing of food when battling an empty stomach was not a debt easy to forget. It becomes incredibly difficult to refuse a request from such a benefactor.

In Mia's case, if she were questioned and told, "If you want to eat these, then reveal your secrets now!" she'd show a bit of resistance. However, if she were told, "Here, eat these. They're tasty right? By the way, since I went through the trouble of giving you this feast, could you divulge just a few of your secrets to me?" Mia...would definitely offer her secrets right up on a silver platter! That's why food was not to threaten with; it was to make debts with.

Thus, Mia was not looking for her cookies to benefit her immediately. For now, she simply wanted to enjoy them together. If they got along...the rest would fall right into Mia's hands! Mia was certain that after sharing tea and cookies with someone, it would be simple to get a few secrets out of them. Though it was Mia's naive perception of reality that led her to such a conclusion.

Well, we all know that in reality, the world wasn't so simple. It wasn't, but...

"So, um... How should I refer to you?"

In response to Mia's question, the young bandit crunched and munched on her cookie. Then...

"Aima," she mumbled before immediately following up those words. "Ka Aima... That is my name. You may call me Aima. Now that I'm indebted to you...at the very least, I'll divulge that."

Seeing the sullen look on Aima's face as she muttered those words, Mia nodded in triumph.

Oh ho! She really is. So. Simple!

That's right. The world wasn't so simple, but it seems like this bandit was.

"'Ka,' is it? So, you really are a descendant of the lost Fire Clan."

Despite Malong's reaction at her name, Aima standoffishly turned her face from him.

"Um... Miss Aima? Are you really a member of the lost Fire Clan of the Kingdom of Equestria?" Not knowing what else she could do, Mia asked in his place.

“Correct. I am a descendant of Ka Suima, leader of the first clan of the Equestrian Kingdom, the Fire Clan.”

She responded with utmost smugness, her chest held out in triumph. She then took an equally smug bite of her cookie.

“So then, why are the prideful warriors of the Fire Clan resorting to banditry?” asked Malong.

For just a moment, Aima seemed as if she was about to answer. But she quickly swallowed her words and once again turned away. After giving a glance to Malong, Mia was lost in her own thoughts.

Hm... This is going to be annoying. This cookie, though, is terribly delicious...

Mia gobbled down her half-eaten cookie with a crunch. The rich creamy sweetness spread across her tongue, and the lush aroma of milk filled the air. Unable to resist these pleasures, Mia let out a sigh of satisfaction and...reached for another! *Munch! Munch! Munch!*

On the verge of falling into an infinite loop of cookie goodness...Mia realized that behind her, Dion was giving her a tepid look. She cleared her throat and once again moved the conversation forward. “Why has a proud warrior of integrity such as yourself taken up banditry?”

“Please do not confuse my people with shameless thieves. We were faced with no other options.”

From the way those words left Aima’s lips, it was clear that she had been eagerly waiting to say them. Mia wondered why she had gone through the trouble of trying to resist their questions when she had wanted to tell them this so badly. As those thoughts filled her brain, she reached for another cookie, but...

“You’ve eaten too many, milady. This would be your eleventh!” Anne took the plate away with a stern look.

“Aww...”

“In the first place, the reason for that horse ride that caused you so much trouble was your overindulgence in Sunkland! Please show a bit of restraint. It’s

for your own safety.”

“Ugh...”

Seeing Anne’s uncharacteristic relentlessness, Mia stopped herself, though it did take some considerable effort.

I did worry Anne quite a bit today... Hm, I guess I’ll have to hold back.

Weeping inside at her loyal subject’s passionate, *fiery*, consideration, Mia once again returned her gaze to Aima.

“Our harvest this year was unusually poor, so we found ourselves in want of food. Had we decided to let ourselves starve, our young and old would have perished. So, I led our warriors who could still participate in battle on a campaign to gain provisions. We are not lowly bandits.”

There was not even an iota of shame as she puffed out her chest.

“This is simply what I heard during my conversations with King Abram, but it seems like amongst these horseback brigands, there is a group who simply steals food, neither abusing the villagers nor setting fire to houses or fields.”

Rafina spoke those words with a scowl, and Aima nodded in response before continuing.

“We are warriors. Thus, we do no harm to those who have no wishes to fight. Neither would we ever burn their fields. If we did, they would bear no crops.” Aima let out a haughty laugh through her nose and crossed her arms. “Sitting on our laurels to wait for death is far from noble. Thus, we chose to risk our lives, fight, and take. That is all.”

“I really don’t know if a ‘that is all’ can fix this mess...” Malong’s expression was hard to read, but he scratched his head as if he was lost. No matter the reason, looting was looting. They may not have raised their hands at the villagers, but what they did was still contemptible. It was, but...

“Hmph... I see how it is.”

Mia gave a nod of satisfaction. The Princess of the Empire had surmised thus—faced with the threat of famine while still able to fight, Aima’s choice was a very reasonable one. In fact, in the previous timeline, the dying Empire had

considered invading their neighbors to steal provisions themselves, but various circumstances had prevented that from ever coming to fruition. When they had first considered dispatching their troops, they had set their sights on Perujin Agricultural Country. However, invading a country that lacked an army and could not defend itself would mean incurring the wrath of various other countries, no doubt Belluga heading that list. Thus, many Tearmoon officials doubted that the benefits of such a move would outweigh its costs.

But that was before Tearmoon had *really* been pushed to its edge. Back then, they had assumed that Ganudos Port Country was still an option for them, and as long as whoever they found to replace the Greenmoons as the contact between the Empire and Ganudos was competent enough, they would be able to resume the supply of foodstuffs from overseas. Then, they would be able to make their move once they had acquired a basic supply for military logistics. Or Perujin would repent somewhere down that road and resume the supply of rations to Tearmoon themselves. While Tearmoon officials were still bewitched by these naive fantasies, the civil war had exacerbated, and the army had lost their ability to make any sort of organized move.

Knowing that things had always worked out for them until now, they were certain that these circumstances would naturally reverse themselves. They believed that all they had to do was overcome this current hardship, convincing themselves that it was all temporary, dismissing their grave situation, and thus, neglecting to make any moves to solve the problem. As a result, they lost the option to use their military to overcome the famine.

Looking back on it, the Serpents really had us dancing in the palms of their hands! Well, not that serpents have hands...

Mia's comment may have been underhanded, but most importantly, it was not *serpent*handed!

In any case, if it were to lead to a deterioration of relations between Tearmoon and the countries of Sunkland and Belluga, they should have made their move while they still could, before their army had been exhausted from domestic skirmishes, but...

Oh, but I guess the Redmoons were against dispatching troops anyways. We

didn't have Ruby on our side, so I guess making a military move would have been difficult.

Once again, Mia was faced with the truly impossible circumstances the Empire had been faced with.

But...our current situation is terribly difficult as well.

Turning her sights back to the present and the troubles the Fire Clan faced, Mia looked from Rafina, to Abel, and finally, to Malong. Based on the stern looks on their faces, they were no doubt having the same thought as Mia.

This all depends on what country the Fire Clan belongs to. That changes who will have to take responsibility.

Originally, the Fire Clan had been an Equestri clan, but those ties were cut quite a long time ago. In fact, it would be more correct to say they were adversaries, so under these circumstances, it would be hard to place the onus of responsibility on the Equestris. Still, they couldn't be considered citizens of Sunkland, Remno, or Belluga either. They were an independent people that lived separated from other nations.

For argument's sake, had they belonged to a specific country, it would be clear who needed to take responsibility; the Fire Clan had to answer for their own crimes, but the rulers who let them starve would have proved culpable as well. Or, if they were deemed their own minor country, the Fire Clan would have to take full responsibility themselves. The only problem was that it would be hard to argue that the Fire Clan needed to take responsibility as a *country*.

Then, just how do we resolve this situation? Well, not that it's my problem to figure out.

Mia took a carefree sip of her tea. Indeed. This time, Mia was a complete and utter outsider. She was an absolute third party here, which meant she didn't need to spend her time racking her brain over these issues. All she had to do was tastily sip away at her tea.

Well, I'm sure Malong will take care of the rest. All I need to do is gather info about that sheep's butter as soon as possible and go home!

Mia had let her guard down.

After the tea party had ended, Malong quietly approached Mia.

“Do you have a second, miss?”

“Oh? What is it, Malong?” Mia tilted her head, surprised by the uncharacteristically serious look on his face.

“Sorry, I know this’ll be a bit of a trouble, but could I get you and Aima to come meet our clan’s chief?”

This put a slight scowl on Mia’s face. “You mean the head of the Forest Clan?”

“Yeah, judging by how Aima acted today, I doubt she’d *really* talk, but I don’t think this is an issue we can really ignore.”

Despite Malong’s request, Mia was truthfully...not excited by the prospect. To Mia, the only real merit of visiting the Equestrian Kingdom was getting her hands on some sheep’s butter, but just while she was considering how to turn him down...

“By the way, are you a fan of sweets?”

Something suddenly interrupted her thoughts, tickling at her ear. The whisper of a devil.

“I was thinking that if you came, I’d treat you to some special sweet and tasty milk. We also have fresh cheese and butter. *If* you were to come, of course.”

“I see... Could you tell me more?”

Well, I guess I’m curious to see why Abel was summoned as well. Mia was just making excuses, as always. *I really should go! The milk of the Equestrian Kingdom is calling me!* Deep inside her stomach, Mia’s gourmet delusions were growing in their grandeur.

Chapter 6: The Empire's Finest and the Mushroom Knight Sword Saint

After some short discussion with Malong, it was decided that Mia and co. would head for the Equestrian Kingdom. The sight of her dauntless resolve in making this decision deeply moved Ludwig, and he swiftly got preparations for the journey underway. They may have already decided to visit the country, but now, it seemed like the trip might prove longer.

"Wow, so now she's got us going to the Equestrian Kingdom. I wonder just how our little princess plans on finding a compromise here." Dion shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, putting a wry smile on Ludwig's face.



“Yes, I wonder that myself. Her Highness isn’t fond of revealing her thoughts, but...you have a point. A breakdown in the Equestrian Kingdom’s stability would not be good for the Empire—or rather, for the vision that the princess is after.”

Mia’s illustrious vision: the Mianet. In realizing this scheme, the Equestrian Kingdom played an essential role. Set between the countries of Belluga, Sunkland, and Remno, it formed a great buffer zone, and with their amorphous view of where their country’s borders ended, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that their rule over the plains brought peace and stability to the region. For those living near the Kingdoms of Sunkland and Remno as well as the Holy Principality of Belluga, the Equestris were close and intimate neighbors.

Additionally, their nomadic lifestyle made large-scale invasions impossible and smaller border encroachments incredibly minor. The animals they raised would sometimes wander into other countries too. Both sides were in the same boat, or rather, the plains were just the plains. No lines were drawn in the sand. Those of the Equestrian Kingdom didn’t find the careful demarcation of borders as much of a necessity.

Thus, had the kingdom not been there, there’s no doubt that Sunkland and Remno would have locked their swords in major combat over the territory. With Remno amassing military might right next to them, it would be hard to think that Sunkland would have left them alone. On the other hand, whittling away at Sunkland’s power was in Remno’s best interests. It’s not hard to imagine them making up an excuse to meddle in Sunkland’s affairs either.

However, thanks to the Equestrian Kingdom’s position, these sorts of issues were few and far between. It would be impossible to take up arms and go over the Equestris—their cavalry skills were nothing to make light of.

“Under certain circumstances, it’s possible that the destabilization of the Equestrian Kingdom could put the stability of the whole continent in jeopardy. A decline in their power would make the pilgrimage routes connecting Sunkland, Belluga, and Remno more dangerous, which would in turn put a damper on trade. I’m sure the Chaos Serpents would be delighted at such developments, aren’t you?”

“I guess if the princess really is trying to get a network of food provisions

running smoothly, this isn't something we can ignore. Well, at least I'm sure that's probably what she's thinking. What exactly she's planning is still..." A thought suddenly occurred to Dion that put a mischievous grin on his face. "Or maybe, all she's thinking is that she wants to try some tasty Equestri treats."

"Ha ha ha! Well, her original goal was sheep's butter. Though knowing her, she's most definitely hoping to solve these troubles while she's at it." Ludwig gave a flippant response to Dion's jests, and then, the two men shared a cheerful smile. One that would have never adorned their lips had they still been working under the central nobles of the Empire as they once had.

After parting with Ludwig, Dion headed to a carriage containing the young bandit, Aima, who was currently under the surveillance of two members of the Princess Guard.

"Anything to report?"

"Well...Captain Dion—I mean, *Sir* Dion."

"Ha ha ha! Either's fine with me. So? Any changes?"

"Nope. She's made no moves to run away. Rather, she's sleeping."

"Oh? She's got guts." After nodding in admiration, Dion suddenly looked away. He could hear the clinking of heavy metal approaching. What appeared before them was the single guard from Remno, Grammateus. He looked in Dion's direction and gave a slight wave in greeting. "I see you're working hard, Sir Dion Alaia."

"Sir Grammateus. What brings you here?"

Protection personnel had been divided up with a focus on Tearmoon's troops. Grammateus was a part of that, but due to his age, he was positioned with Abel as much as possible.

Grammateus patted his head while he spoke. "Why, just what brought the rest of you. No matter how unlikely the event, this bandit cannot be allowed to escape. Thinking I'd volunteer myself to guard her, I came here. I'm sure you are busy with the protection of Her Highness as well."

“You have nothing to worry about. The princess is surrounded by the Princess Guard, and she’s got your dear prince by her side too.”

At the moment, Mia was with her friends, including Rafina, Abel, and Citrina. In other words, the important people were all gathered in one place. Naturally, the might of the Princess Guard was also gathered around them, and the Equestris were probably prioritizing their protection as well. Which meant...Dion’s current position was actually the most dangerous. At least, that’s what Dion’s instincts were telling him. Right now, it was Aima, the young bandit, that was the easiest target.

“I’m sure you’re quite busy yourself, Sir Grammateus, what with protecting Prince Abel and all. Why don’t you leave this place to me and return to guarding your prince?”

“I see... In that case, I shall leave it in the hands of the Empire’s Finest.” He bowed his head. “However, that princess of yours—she really is quite the eccentric character! Who would have thought she would suddenly be sharing the table with a bandit...?”

“Ha ha! Yeah, there’s really no denying that.” Despite his answer, Dion kept his eyes fixed on Grammateus’s every move.

He sighed. *Damn, guess this is what you’d expect of Remno’s Sword Saint. I can’t imagine myself being able to take him out with a surprise attack. No matter where I strike from, I’m sure he’ll just deftly deflect my sword aside.*

Dion’s instincts were telling him that in a normal fight, it’d be a hard enough task trying to get his sword to meet that metal armor. If he ever had to fight Grammateus, Dion was sure...that it’d be fun!

Whether he was aware of Dion’s secret musings or not, Grammateus continued without a hint of any roused enthusiasm. “Very well, then. I’ll leave this area to you, Sir Dion.”

With another deep bow, he left.

Chapter 7: An Approaching Sense of “Dangà vu”

A day and a half had passed since the group had begun their journey into the plains guided by Malong and the warriors. Mia swayed with each bump and jump of the carriage as she watched the outside world in a somnolent daze. The sky was clear, the weather incredibly pleasant. It was the perfect day for horse riding, but Mia had been barred from stepping foot outside. Her hijinks from the other day had come back to bite her.

I’m sure it would feel exquisite to distract myself atop a horse right now. It’s really such a shame.

Mia had fallen into melancholy, but suddenly, the sight in front of her had her exclaiming in joy. “Oh, my... This is...quite the view!”

It was a fresh green carpet, spreading out as far as the eye could see. Each gust of wind that blew over the earth carried with it the sound of its blades rustling in the wind. A herd of animals sluggishly ate away at that grass. Sheep! White, fluffy sheep! Mia couldn’t help but smile at the serene and pastoral view in front of her.

“So, those are the sheep of the Equestrian Kingdom... They look ever so tasty —I mean, splendid!”

Their wool had the sheep puffed up into white balls, and Mia licked her lips at the sight. To her, they looked like giant dollops of whipped cream!

“They’re so cute, Miss Mia!” Bel chimed in. “Ah, look, Rina! There’s a lamb over there!”

“Yes, you’re right. This is the first time Rina’s seen a sheep before,” said Citrina with a grin.

“Really? Wow! You’re so smart, Rina! I’m surprised to hear that there are things even you don’t know about!”

The youngest of their group were in full-on vacation mode. Mia watched

them from the corner of her eye as she continued her zealous sheep survey. “Oh ho, there are simply so many of them! It would be splendid if I could take one or two home with me... Hm?” A sheep had entered Mia’s eye that demanded her full attention. “Why, this sheep is different in color. It appears to have a golden glow...”

In the gentle light of the sun, the sheep, which was a tad larger than the others, did indeed let off a faint golden glow. It was truly magnificent.

As if he had heard Mia’s exclamation, Malong pulled up his horse next to Mia’s carriage. “Ha ha ha! I knew you had a good eye on you, miss. That’s a sarpir sheep. Their milk is the best out there.”

“The best...?” Mia’s eyes widened as she gulped. “I see, so that isn’t a normal sheep... That must be the secret to why the Equestrian Kingdom has the best butter. Am I correct?”

Malong furrowed his brows at Mia’s question. “No, we only sell normal sheep’s milk to other countries. There aren’t many sarpir sheep out there, so we can’t get much milk from them.”

“What...did you say...?” Mia’s eyes were open in shock. “*That* was normal butter?”

The flavor of that incredibly delicious butter she had eaten at the inn with Rafina had been living rent-free in Mia’s mind. The richness of the sheep’s milk as it seeped into her tongue and the sweet scent of condensed milk added to the mellow aroma of that crunchy toast. And that exquisite scent, that magnificent butter... It was just *normal*?! Mia was beyond amazed, and for a second, it overtook her. Then, she glanced back at Malong. “By the way, there doesn’t happen to be a chance I could try sarpir sheep milk, is there?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ve got to thank you for coming all this way somehow. You can drink it to your heart’s content.” Malong’s words were both encouraging and reliable, and they caused Mia to break into a grin.

“Oho ho! Coming to the Equestrian Kingdom was the right decision indeed!”

And then, something unexpected happened; Mia caught sight of a group of cavalry approaching from the opposite direction. Had the band of brigands

come to save Aima? Mia was preparing for the worst, but Malong and the other Equestris showed no signs of perturbation. Instead, he had casually raised his hand in greeting. “Oh, no need to worry. They’re other Forest Clan warriors. It seems like they came to greet us.”

The group stopped a short way away from the carriage. Out of the corner of her eye, Mia watched as the man who stood at the head of the group—presumably their leader—greeted Malong, but what she really had her eyes on were the sheep. She wore a predatory gaze, one of a hunter trained on its prey.

“Hm, with their size, I think I could take at least one back in a carriage. No, it’s probably better to take a pair? I best ask Ludwig to start the negotiations...” As Mia was mumbling away, she stuck her head outside of the carriage...and suddenly felt a gust of air on her neck.

“Huh...?”

Turning in the direction of the gale, Mia found that a single horse had approached without her notice. Where it came from was a complete mystery, but it stared at Mia as if the sight of her had deeply aroused its curiosity. For some reason, the sight of the horse’s face gave her a slight sense of déjà vu.

“Hm? I wonder why. For some reason, I feel like I’ve seen this horse before...”

It wasn’t just déjà vu; it was danger—dangà vu! And watching the horse twitch its nostrils, Mia had finally realized its source.

“Oh, that’s it! That ill-tempered look in its eyes is just like Koula— Aaaaaaah!”

“*Ker-chooooo!”*

At the sound of the thunderous sneeze, Mia thought thus: *This is somehow quite nostalgic. How have you been lately, Kuolan?* Her eyes were trained far off into the distance.

Chapter 8: Girl and Wolf

Shortly after arriving at the Forest Clan's encampment, Mia and the others went off to bathe in a nearby river. After one of their horses sneezed on Mia, they had a need to show Mia some consideration!

"This way, Princess Mia."

Two female warriors from the Forest Clan, also tasked with their protection, acted as their guides. They were dignified, with scimitars adorning their waists, yet they were unable to hide their nervousness in front of the princess of the Tearmoon Empire, Mia.

"The women of our clan bathe here after a day's work."

Mia had been brought to a peaceful stream that flowed through the forest. It was quite wide, but also equally shallow. Scooping up its water in one's hands left a gentle chill. As long as the sun shone down on the river, it was quite pleasant.

"This is a rather wonderful spot. Oho ho! I really do thank you. I wouldn't have been able to calm myself covered in horse's snot."

"No, we are truly sorry for that. Though, I am sure that this is not enough for you to forgive that horse of ours..."

"I'm not bothered by that one bit! I've grown used to it. By the way, is this a normal occurrence within the Equestrian Kingdom?" The smile that accompanied Mia's question was truly magnanimous, but...

"Huh? Oh, um, yes. That's right. I often get sneezed on by horses myself."

The smile of the Equestri woman responding to her was slightly strained. It caught Mia's attention, but she shrugged it off with a "well, whatever." For you see, Mia had not forgotten the promise Malong had made her.

I'll be able to taste some first-rate milk later, and there's the butter too... A wonderful encounter is surely awaiting me!

With that in mind, Mia could do nothing but smile.

Incidentally, those accompanying Mia to her bath were Anne, Rafina, and one of Rafina's female attendants. As well as...

"This is a fine location. It's perfect for washing off the sweat of battle."

Aima, who for some reason had her arms crossed triumphantly.

"I will not content myself with the shame of being imprisoned by the Equestrian Kingdom. Instead, I shall content myself as a prisoner *after* being persuaded by the words of the Great Sage of the Empire and my friend, Princess Mia, and thus have come willingly. Which means, it is only natural that I would accompany her bathing as well..."

That's at least what she was mumbling, but it seemed like her real motivation was her fear of being alone with Dion without Mia there. During the carriage ride, Dion had been her guard, and that appeared to have deeply frightened her. As soon as she alighted from the carriage, she made a beeline toward Mia.

Well, Mia was also quite aware of how scary Dion could be, and so she had taken pity on Aima and brought her along. The only problem was...

"To think she could so casually treat Mia as a friend..."

Rafina, who had been mumbling the above to herself. Seeing her puffing out her cheeks in displeasure, Mia panickedly managed an invitation.

"Oh, um, Miss Rafina, why don't you come with us as well? It will be nice to share a bath as friends after so long."

Mia was magnanimous, and she deftly served her consideration for others. Her attentiveness—as well as her Heart-Grabbing Artes—as an empress continued to be refined. That's right, this was all simply training for her future of ruling an empire.

Anyways, with that all in mind, Mia quickly changed into her swimsuit and headed toward the riverbed. She sat her rump on an especially comfortable rock, and fearfully, an Equestri woman approached her. "My sincerest apologies, Your Highness. This is what we use for washing our hair here, but as you can see..."

What she presented to Mia was...the exact same shampoo Mia was always using! Seeing this, Mia couldn't help but smile. *Oh, my! To think that this has spread even to the Kingdom of Equestria... No surprises there, Abel! You really know how to pick your stuff!* Those were the thoughts running through Mia's head.

"You may find this a bit rude of us, but I promise it really is a fine item, so, um..."

And with those thoughts in her mind, Mia could only question those words. "Hm? There's nothing rude about it at all! It's a top-quality item. I actually love to use it myself."

"Huh?"

The Equestri woman's face was frozen in shock, but Mia smiled at her.

"Thank you. There's absolutely nothing I can find at fault as long as I have this."

Then, Mia turned toward Anne, who gave a deep nod in understanding. Rolling up her sleeves, she began washing Mia's hair with vigor.

"Milady, it seems as if there's a slight bit of damage to your hair."

"Yes, now that I think about it, I haven't had any time to have you properly care for it lately." Mia turned toward Anne and smiled. "Thank you for everything, Anne. I really do rely on you."

"There's no need to thank me."

After exchanging sweet nothings with Anne, Mia spoke once again. "Well then, I think I'll..."

Mia stood up. Despite the water's chill, she went to take a soak. But suddenly, the bushes behind her began to rustle! Was it a peeping tom who had come to watch them? Or was it some scoundrel after her head? As Mia prepared for the worst, what appeared completely circumvented her expectations. What she first saw break its way through the verdure was a black snout. It twitched as if to check its surroundings, and then...slowly...what stepped forward was...

"A wolf?! Here?!" The Equestri woman let out a small shriek. The group was

now face-to-face with a single black wolf. The warriors went to draw their scimitars, but then, their faces became shrouded in panic. A second wolf—and then a third—appeared from the brush.

“All of you, please run away. We shall...”

The women had put themselves between Mia’s group and the wolves. They prepared for battle, but...

“There is no need.” It had been one of the Equestri’s guests who had spoken—or rather, it was Aima. Her face was adorned with a brave grin. “Such wolves are no cause for concern.” She then put her fingers to her mouth and blew, letting out a shrill *screeeeeech*! “Forward!” Aima gave a cutting yell. Rustling could be heard from far off, as well as the approaching sound of something stamping down the earth, and then...*it* appeared.

As if a black gust of wind, what appeared behind the wolves was...another black wolf, but this one was giant!

“Wh-What in the...?” The Equestris were lost for words. So was Mia, who had seen a wolf like that before.

That wolf... Isn’t it the same kind that attacked me that one time?

It was identical to the breed that the wolfmaster had once led. A cold bead of sweat dripped down Mia’s back. As the giant wolf watched her from the corner of its eye, it first glared at the other three wolves. For a moment, they were frozen in fear, but immediately after, their tails drooped between their legs before they scattered into the woods. The giant wolf gave a hoarse howl from behind them, and then turned its gaze once again to Mia and the others.

“Hmph! I see that the Warrior Wolves of the Fire Clan prove too great a beast for mere feral wolves.” Aima began to happily pet the wolf’s neck.

“There’s no chance that you’re planning on using that wolf to run away, is there...?” asked one of the Equestri warriors, her voice quivering.

Aima gave a belligerent grin in response. “Had I had that intention, I would have done so long ago. It is a shame, but I doubt I could best Dion Alaia.” Aima puffed out her chest. “Above all, I am a warrior. Once captured, I would never fall to shameful struggle.”

Her expression as she spoke those words was completely composed and sincere.



Chapter 9: The Descendants of the Shepherds

“My, how intriguing...” Mia apprehensively stepped toward Aima. She wanted to get a closer look at the wolf, which seemed to be enjoying her scratches. That’s right, Mia decided to get *close* to the wolf! She only had another twenty steps to go! She was definitely close to the wolf...in Mia standards, at least.

Well, even from this distance, the wolf could gobble her up had the inclination arisen. But that was that, and this was this. Mia had mustered her courage to draw herself near the wolf, and so she once again surveyed it. You see, Mia’s eyesight was above average.

Hm... It’s really grown attached to Aima. The thought had occurred to me before, but can wolves really be tamed like this?

Mia stared at the wolf with an inquisitive look on her face. Perhaps she had noticed what Mia had her sights on, for Aima had softened her expression. “Hm? What is it? Has it piqued your interest?”

“It...won’t attack me, will it?”

“No. This wolf is my family. I have raised him since he was young. He is known as Hasuki.” She spoke her next words to the wolf—to Hasuki. “Those here fear you. Hide yourself.”

Hasuki howled in response before disappearing into the forest.

“I see. That’s really quite amazing. I had no clue wolves could listen to people so easily... Hm?” Mia had caught notice of something; the women from the Equestrian Kingdom still had their faces frozen in fear.

Huh? Why are their expressions so stiff? Are they still worried about that other group of wolves?

However, it wasn’t the direction the wolves had left that they were staring at. Instead, their gazes were trained on Aima. Mia, finding this strange, went to speak before she was promptly cut off.

“Why don’t you finish up your bath? There’s a chance those wolves might come back,” said one of the guards.

“Hm? Yes, I think I will.” Mia stepped out of the river and began to change, her confusion still completely evident on her countenance.

After the previous commotion, there was nothing of incident on their way back through the forest and to the village of the Forest Clan.

“My, now that I get another look at it, this really is quite the view.”

Countless tents were erected in the plains that stretched out in front of her. From the sides, they appeared as squares, but an aerial view instead revealed them to be white circles. There was one thought that arose in Mia’s mind at the sight.

“Those tents look just like cheese!”

Just as Perujin had their caked-shape castle, the Equestrian kingdom had their cheese-shaped tents... Inside Mia’s head—but probably nowhere else—foreign countries looked incredibly tasty!

Putting aside the Cheese Tents, their number was enough to account for a village, or even a large town. Of course, they could hold no flame to Lunatear, but the notion that so many people could live on the move like this deeply aroused Mia’s admiration. Even more surprising was the number of their livestock. Just a small ways away from the cluster of tents was a rustic wooden fence, and inside it, riders on horseback urging their sheep to enter. The sheep, fluffy balls of white, toddled into their pen looking awfully akin to clouds floating in the sky. Faced with such an innumerable swarm, Mia had one single thought!

These would be perfect for counting! Since they’re moving, it would take two or three days to count them all. I could keep busy for a while!

Mia’s propensity for wanting to count any large gathering of things to stave off boredom was truly a sorrowful fact of her nature.

However, there were more livestock than just sheep. Another pen contained daioh goats, their heads each adorned with a spectacular crown of horns. They,

too, were also incredibly great in number.

Questions such as “I wonder, can you get milk from goats?” or “Just what might that taste like?” filled Mia’s head. There was no stopping her heart-pounding, tantalizing excitement!

“Not only do they raise horses, but sheep and goats as well... Those of the Equestrian Kingdom really do live their lives among their animals.”

Of course, Tearmoon had its share of livestock, but it was incredibly rare to hear of someone who lived such a nomadic lifestyle, moving around with their herd. To think that a single clan, much less an entire country, could be living such a life was something that rose miles above Mia’s imagination. And it seemed that Rafina thought much the same. “So this is also a way of life... This view really makes such a thing evident. I hear that the Equestris are the descendants of the Shepherds from the Holy Book.”

“I see. That would explain things.”

The Shepherds of the Holy Book play quite the essential role. When the Holy Deity descended onto this world, they were the first to greet them, as well as to offer sacrifice and worship. From this fact, they were also prescribed to be the benefactors of great blessing.

In the Equestrian Kingdom, the myth continued further. In their legends, the Shepherd who served as their founder married the Holy Messenger, thus marking the birth of their kingdom and tying the foundation of their country to the Holy Book. Their tradition of prizing horses is also said to have begun from the fact that the Holy Messenger was a rider.

Suddenly, Rafina’s tone turned grim. “And...the mortal enemy of the Shepherds were wolves.”

“Huh...?” Mia had wanted to ask for clarification, but that chance escaped her.

“The chief of the Forest Clan is waiting for you, Your Highness,” said Ludwig with a bow.

“Understood. Then, let us go and meet him.” Mia gave a quick glance toward Aima, who, still in her sullen silence, simply nodded in response.

Chapter 10: Citrina and Bel Make a Promise

While Mia and the others were bathing, Bel and Citrina were going on a tour around the village. Rather than an *adven*-tour, this was much more of a *pas*-tour, which is to say...

“Whoa! They’re so cute!” Bel squeezed a fluffy lamb as she shouted in joy. The warmth that filled her arms was just right, and the delightful softness of it left her speechless.

“Wow! It’s so fluffy!” Bel petted the lamb with a smile. Its ears twitched in response as it let out a small mewl.

“Waaaah!” So enraptured by its cuteness, all Bel could do was grin.

“That one’s still just a lambkin. It was born only recently.”

“Tee-hee! I see! How cute!” She turned toward Citrina. “Look, Rina! It’s so adorable!”

“Yes... You’re right,” responded Citrina. For some reason, she was standing quite a bit aways.

“Rina?”

“I’m fine. Rina just wants to look...”

Citrina’s smile was as sweet as flower petals dancing in the wind. But for some reason, Bel couldn’t help but find it strange.

“Rina... You’re not afraid of the lamb, are you?”

“O-Of course I’m not. Nope. I’m completely fine. There’s no way I’d be afraid of a lamb! It’s just that...” The expression on Citrina’s face grew grim. “It’s just that...it’s so small... I worry that if I touch it, it will die...”

“Rina...” Those words had Bel’s face growing clouded as well.

Right after birth, most animals are completely powerless, and that applied to the lamb in Bel’s arms. It was tiny and fragile, and so the fear that a touch even just a tad too strong would break it was something Bel could understand as

well.

But it was worse for Citrina. Ever since she was young, she had been taught how to handle poisons. Had that poison not steeped into her hands? Would it not be transferred to the lamb, causing it to perish? Such apprehensions were perhaps not so strange given her circumstances.

Realizing this, Bel gave her a kind smile. “Don’t worry, Rina. You’ll never use poison again. Miss Mia will make sure of it!”

She stepped toward Citrina and outstretched her hand. Citrina’s had been floating in the air as if to embody the hesitation she felt, but Bel clasped it firm. “Rina, your hands are meant for kindness, so you can touch it.”

Bel looked directly into Rina’s eyes. Being faced with such a stern gaze, Citrina wavered for a moment, but then she bit her lip in resolve and fearfully outstretched her hands. Bel handed the lamb to her, and she held it deep into her chest and petted its soft fur. With each stroke of her hand, her stiffened face grew ever more relaxed.

“It’s...so soft. And so cute!”

Right then, the lamb extended its tongue...and licked Citrina’s cheek!

“Eek!”

Such an endearing squeal was impossible for Mia, but it left Citrina’s mouth so naturally. Bel doubled over in laughter.



“St-Stop it, Bel! Don’t laugh at me!” Citrina puffed out her cheeks in anger, but soon enough, fits of laughter overtook her as well.

“Hee hee. This is fun, isn’t it, Rina?” Those words were but a whisper as Bel looked about their surroundings. The sheep were lazily huddled around each other in their pens, and herds of horses calmly grazed about—something she never could have imagined during the dark days she spent hiding in the Newmoon District, hidden from even the light of the sun. But now, that world was stretching out right before her very eyes.

“I really like this place.” Bel smiled, and so did Citrina. There was nothing showy or lovely about their grins; instead, they were filled simply with pure joy.

“Yes, this place pleases Rina as well.” Citrina nodded. “Hey, Bel. When we grow up...let’s come back here someday. Let’s visit the Equestrian Kingdom again! C’mon, let’s promise!” Citrina’s words were ebullient.

“Promise...?”

For a moment, Bel hesitated. Promises—to visit together again, to meet each other again—were something Bel had made many times before, but also something she had come to fear. Over and over, those promises had to be broken. There were many who died after sending Bel off with a promise to meet again... So many times had Bel come once again to a place she had promised to visit with someone, only to be the sole person to arrive...

To Bel, this was a dream, and she never knew when it would end. So, she had resolved not to make those sorts of promises. And yet...

“Yeah, I promise.” Bel gave a curt nod. It took no small amount of courage for Bel to say those words, and she had mustered all she had. Perhaps that promise would be broken, but still... “I promise, Rina. We’ll definitely come back here again!” Hardening her resolve, Bel gave an innocent smile.

“Lady Citrina, Lady Bel. Princess Mia has made her return.”

Seeing that a member of the Princess Guard had come for them, Bel stood up to make her leave.

That promise was one the two would never forget.

Chapter 11: Princess Mia Finally Discovers the Truth of the Horse Shampoo!

“This way, Your Highness.”

The Equestri guide had led them to a tent slightly larger than the rest. It was draped in cloth charmingly embroidered with colored string, clearly marking it as special.

“My! How beautiful. This is quite the excellent work.” Impressed, Mia folded her arms. “Are these stitches supposed to resemble a white horse?” She turned to look at Malong, who was standing behind her, but he seemed to be lost in thought. “Huh? Malong?”

“Hm? Oh. They’re meant to represent the legend of our country’s founding.” His response was curt, revealing his pensiveness.

Hm, it’s rare to see Malong like this. Don’t tell me... Mia had hit upon a possible explanation. *Is his father...actually really scary?*

They were here to meet with the chief of the Forest Clan—the most influential clan of the Equestrian Kingdom—after all. Mia was certain that he would have the strength and dignity to match his title.

Hm, but now that I think about it, Malong doesn’t seem to be afraid of Dion at all!

There was no one alive who wouldn’t be left quaking in their boots at the sight of Dion Alaia. That much was common sense. Even Aima, a ruffian who could easily play the part of a bandit, was terrified of him!

I’d better prepare myself for the worst.

Despite her anxieties, Mia stood her ground. She didn’t run. After all the experiences she had overcome, Mia’s chicken heart...had definitely *not* grown at all. So of course, she had another reason to stay—right now, she was a simple observer! A complete outsider with no relation to the current trail of events! Even supposing that the person they were about to meet was the type

of crazy scoundrel who would point his fangs at the completely unrelated Mia...she had a friend with her just for the occasion. Rafina would never be able to stay silent when faced with such outrageous insolence!

Mia was calm as she stepped inside the tent, just as a kitten borrowing the might of a lion, but...

“Ah, so this is the princess of the Tearmoon Empire. It must have been quite the journey to come so far out of your way. And the Holy Lady has come as well... Thank you for making the visit just for the sake of the Equestrian Kingdom.” The man who calmly welcomed them looked nothing like what Mia had anticipated.

He seems like a really nice man! I don’t sense any enmity coming from him, and he’s not so huge you have to tilt your head back to look up at him either.

The man watched Mia—who was almost disappointed at the anticlimactic turn of events—out of the corner of his eye as he bowed with a gentle smile. As he did so, his long black hair, stretching down to the bottom of his back, swayed. Mia couldn’t help but be enamored at its beauty.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m the chief of the Forest Clan, Lin Mayun.” His clear voice was that of a first-rate singer, so refined it was almost bewitching.

“The pleasure is all mine. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire.”

“It’s been a long while, Chief Mayun.” Rafina was the next to give an amicable greeting. As the Holy Lady, Rafina would often travel to various lands across the continent, so it made sense that she had met Mayun before.

After exchanging a short greeting with Rafina, he turned back toward Mia. “I heard you came all this way just because my son requested it. You have my deepest gratitude.”

“I do not deserve such thanks. Your son has taken good care of me, and I already had become deeply interested in the butter—er, the *cuisine* of your kingdom. I had intended on visiting regardless.”

“Butter, is it...? Perhaps this is rude of me to ask, but I find it hard to believe

that the incredibly busy princess of the Tearmoon Empire would make such a journey over something so simple. Was it truly just for butter?”

The doubt was clear on Mayun’s face as he stared straight into Mia’s eyes. His own were obsidian, those of someone with a deep intellect. Faced with his stern gaze, Mia...

He’s...testing me.

Made a perceptive judgment! Perceptive Princess Mia was perceptive to other people’s perceptions. But just what was he testing her on?

That’s simple. The butter of the Equestrian Kingdom is no simple butter... It’s incredibly delicious! And special! He’s testing me on whether I know that. On whether I know that its value is enough to warrant a direct visit. He’s quite the man!

Faced with this hard to disdain opponent, Mia braced herself as she put on a gallant smile. “Yes... Your kingdom’s butter is incredibly scrumptious. Based on its ability to produce such a delicacy, I’m sure it can be said that the Equestrian Kingdom itself is equally as special and important. Is that not enough reason to make the trip myself?”

After taking a long look at Mia, Mayun gave a deep bow. “I see. Your intellect is as grand as the rumors say.” Once again, his hair swayed, and Mia found her eyes locked on his carefully kept locks.

“Beauty has the power to sway kingdoms” was a phrase that existed in the East, and Chief Mayun’s hair reflected this phrase aptly. However, that hair also engendered in Mia a sense of kinship!

“This question is perhaps unrelated to our discussion, but do you happen to use shampoo that has the mark of a horse on its bottle, Chief Mayun?”

“Oh! I’m impressed you noticed,” responded Mayun, his eyes open in shock. Mia, starting to look a bit full of herself opened her mouth as well. “Indeed I do. I also...”

But then, something was brought to Mia’s attention. It was Abel, who was standing behind her.

Wouldn't it be a bit too immodest to brag about the present I received from him while he's right next to me?

In order to avoid such a situation, Mia came up next to Mayun and spoke softly. "I actually use it myself. It's an excellent shampoo, isn't it?"

That's right, she *whispered* it to him! This caused Mayun to widen his eyes in shock once again. "I see... So, you have the power to look beyond the veil of appearances and see the hidden truth." He seemed incredibly impressed.

Huh? I can do what, now? For a moment, Mia held her head in question. *Oh, I get it. He might be right. I do have the power to see hidden truth.*

Inside her mind, Mia gave a deep nod of affirmation. She was not being humble, for her conversation with Mayun had revealed to her the truth of the horse shampoo! *Why is there a horse on the bottle? Isn't this unrelated to shampoo?* she had wondered, time and time again. But now, she had a vision of clarity. The satisfaction of such deep understanding had left Mia with a single thought.

In other words, well, the truth of the shampoo was...

Oh, I get it! The Equestrian people are fond of this shampoo, so... The maker put a picture on the bottle they knew the Equestris would like, right?

That! The picture was one their customers would find pleasing. Mia was incredibly impressed by their sense of strategic thinking!

This is probably an effective method in increasing sales even if the picture has nothing to do with what's inside the bottle... Hm? In that case, what if we sold shampoo with portraits of Rafina on them? Wouldn't her fans buy them all up? I should ask her permission for the sake of Tearmoon's finances...

Mia's mind had started to go down quite the frightful path, but it was promptly interrupted.

"Speaking of shampoo, o Holy Lady, I had heard your father planned on selling some that came with your portraits. Just what became of that?"

"Oh, I wonder? I, for one, have never heard of such a plan. Hee hee hee." The smile on Rafina's face was as clear and tranquil as a mountain stream—that of a

completely lifeless river. She turned toward Mia, that smile still adorning her face, and cutely titled her head. “My, whatever could be the matter, Mia? You’re looking a little pale.”

Faced with the smile of the magnificent lion, kitten Mia...

“Do. I? It’s. Nothing. To. Worry. About.”

Tucked her tail meekly between her legs and gave a stilted smile. Thus, the discussions began, the harmony between them all still in the air.

Chapter 12: The Veteran Runner and the Hot Milk

"So, you are from the Fire Clan."

Once Mayun had turned to look at her, Aima faced away.

"O-Oh, that's right," Mia said, turning to Aima. "Um, Miss Aima... Your full name is Ka Aima, and you have no intentions on speaking with those of the Equestrian Kingdom. Is that correct?"

Aima nodded at her words. "Even once I enter the land of the dead, I shall never speak with an Equestri." Immediately after, she checked her surroundings. It was just Mia, Rafina, Abel, Citrina, and Bel who had been invited inside the tent. The object of Aima's fears was standing guard outside. After taking a moment to think, she amended her words. "Well, mostly, I'm strongly against speaking with *one* of them."

That's quite the back track!

The deadly aura of the invisible Dion still had her fearful, apparently. It was usually enough to inspire a deep sigh and a *What a pain!* inside Mia's heart—but not this time! You see, Mia had remembered exactly who and what she was—a runner! A soldier entrusted with messages, and a skilled one at that! With her level of artifice, Mia had no need to run across terribly great distances in order to deliver messages of victory from the battlefield; all she had to do was send a quick glance right where she already was. That was all.

Did such an easy job truly exist? Could one really be allowed to gripe when such a simple task led them to delicious foods? Of course not.

I'll be able to drink that super tasty milk later, so right now I have to prove how hard I'm working! Oho ho! Let's give this our all!

Precious milk would be her reward. However, receiving it after doing an insufficient job was something Mia's chicken heart would not forgive. In order to taste this superb milk without any hard feelings, Mia was going to try her

best!

Well, anyways...

“I have no need to state my reasons. Giving it thought is enough for you lot to be aware of your crimes.” Aima turned toward Mia. “Don’t you think so, Princess Mia?”

Mia gave a pensive nod before speaking herself. “What she means is, she has a proper reason not to speak to the Equestris.”

There might not have been much reason for it, but Mia summarized Aima’s words regardless. In order to feel that she was properly doing some work, Mia was going through great efforts to direct this conversation!

“I see. However, that is simply a matter of differing opinions. To us, the decision to leave our country was one you made yourselves.”

“Hu—!” Aima looked desperate to speak herself, but she immediately closed her mouth and looked toward Mia, her teeth ground in frustration.

Hm. This really is annoying...

Mia had already begun to get discouraged. Her sense of motivation was but a flame before the wind! But right as that blaze began to die...

“Excuse me, Chief. I have brought some drinks for our guests.”

Multiple women stepped inside the tent, placing ceramic cups before Mia and the others.

“Oh, my...”

Steam bellowed from the porcelain vessel. Mia’s nose twitched as she sniffed its white liquid contents.

“It’s warm milk, freshly taken from one of our sheep. It may not be convincing coming from myself, but fresh milk is of the best quality. Please, try some.”

Following Mayun’s request, Mia took the cup into her hands. After giving it a good blow to cool it down, she took a small sip. Heat rushed through her mouth, but she endured it. Right after, a flower of flavor bloomed on her tongue.

“My! This is quite the stuff.”

It was truly of a pleasant sweetness. For a moment, it was thick as honey, but as soon as it passed down her throat, it melted away in an instant. The aftertaste it left was fresh and invigorating to an almost noble degree. Faced with this new delicious flavor, Mia couldn’t help but let out a deep sigh before taking another sip.

“I see... So, this is the milk of the Equestrian Kingdom. It’s so thick and rich in flavor. It leaves a subtle sweetness as it rolls about the tongue.” Mia put a hand on her chest. “Hah... To think a day would come where milk could move me like this. It’s truly wonderful...”

The deep emotion—or perhaps just the calories—set Mia’s brain in motion. As it slowly got into gear, it discerned the futility of letting the two of them continue fighting as they had.

“By the way, could I ask what exactly happened between the Equestrian Kingdom and the Fire clan?”

Mia had come up with a plan. She had surmised that by figuring out exactly what had caused Aima to despise the Equestrian Kingdom to such a degree, she might be able to absolve these obnoxious circumstances.

“Ah, fair enough. Even given these circumstances, it’s true that you have been dragged into the middle of it all. It would only be proper manners to divulge things to you. Oh, that reminds me.” Mayun smiled. “What say you to hearing the story to the sounds of the lute? How about it? It’s a rare opportunity.”

“Wait, father. I don’t think we need to be dragging any instruments out.” For some reason, Malong tried to stop him, his face scrunched into a wince.

“What are you saying? Would it not be boring to just get a simple explanation? We have a singer of the Forest Clan amongst us—wouldn’t it be a fine way of showing our hospitality as well?” Wearing a beaming grin, Mayun took the round lute placed nearby him into his hands.

“This is the story of the Equestrian Kingdom’s—as well as its Thirteen Clans’—beginnings.”

Thus, Mayun began to speak, the heartrending *pluck plucks* of the lute’s

strings accompanying his words.

Chapter 13: The Historic Hymn: *What Marketh Our Kingdom's Beginnings* (Gulp... Gulp...)

"*'Tis long ago, in days of yore, that marketh our kingdom's beginnings—Kuolong, young Shepherd of this land, taketh the Holy Mesenger his wife,*" sang Mayun as he plucked his lute.

"It's a historic hymn. Those of us from the Equestrian Kingdom in times past tended not to use written records, so instead we composed songs to pass down our clans' histories."

Malong's explanation had reminded Mia of a fact she had forgotten.

I've heard about this before! The woman mister Kuolong married—the Holy Messenger—brought horses with her, marking the beginning of the history of the Equestrian *Kingdom. Or I think it was something like that, at least.*

She had vague memories of being told by Malong sometime before that this was when the Shepherds became the Equestris. Mia sipped her milk and continued to reflect on her memories as the song continued.

"Thirteene children to Kuolong were borne, grand founders of our clans thirteene—*The childe first was Fulong, and he was the forest wynd—He hath wit the depths of forests and intellect undyin' as the wynd, thus he led his clan—The childe second..."*

"Wit the depths of 'forests'"... Mia surmised that Fulong must be the progenitor of the Forest Clan. Mayun continued.

"*The childe third was Suima, and he was the blazin' star—He useth his brilliant wisdom and wondrous flames to burneth fields and bringeth his clan prosp'rity.*"

"He useth 'flames' to burneth fields"... Aima said she was a descendant of Ka Suima, so this must be talking about the original ancestor of the Fire Clan. So he was the third child...

Each child was listed along with the traits that defined them, which must have also been the origins of each of the clans' names.

"*At the age o' three-hundreds and sixty, Kuolong left thys earth—Hath doth been buried with his beloved wife, a new beginning for the clans thirteen was marked.*"

Each of Kuolong's children had lived past the age of two hundred, ruling not just over their grandchildren and great-grandchildren's generations, but for generations further.

"They lived for hundreds of years, huh... People used to live such long lives," muttered Mia.

"According to the Holy Book, people during the beginnings of days used to live for as long as a thousand years. However, it seems that there is a debate about whether the people of old used to count years the same way as we do."

Mia nodded in response to Rafina's whisper and turned back toward Mayun. The song was beginning to reach its climax and was now retelling what had started the contentions with the Fire Clan.

"*The childe first, Fulong of the Forest clan, spoke thus—Brothers, let us taketh thy hands of each other unto thine own and remain in these blessed lands. 'Tis the lands of our fortunes—And his brothers did thus.*"

The people of the Equestrian Kingdom "lived in the plains in peace," and that image made sense. They were all descendants of blood-tied brothers, and while outsiders had certainly joined the mix, everyone could trace their lineage back to a single mother and father. So, even while skirmishes broke out between them, none developed into anything serious. At least, that's what Mia had thought.

Pluck! Mayun had pulled on another string. It reverberated, increasing the tension in the air. Mia remained completely silent...as she was gulping down the milk she had refilled in her cup! It was both sweet and incredibly delicious.

"*Except there be one, for Suima of the Fire Clan spoke to his brother Fulong thus—I seeke heights most wondrous. My blazin' flames yearn to riseth 'bove the wynd and reacheth the stars—He hath becometh prisoner to ivel, continuing*

thus—I shall learn to make our enemies, the wolves, thy servants. Risin' above them, their power our owne, this land shall our dominion becometh."

Hm... Learn to control wolves? There's something suspicious about this... Something... Something close to a certain idiot ancestor of mine...

Mia had a bad feeling about this.

Perhaps Rafina had thought the same, for she turned to Mia with a grim look on her face. "If *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth* had a chapter on Kingdombane, it wouldn't be strange for it to include instructions on how to control wolves... At least, that's what my intuition is saying."

"From what Rina read when I was with them," Citrina said, nodding in equal seriousness, "there wasn't anything about controlling wolves, but...I think it could be in there. Those wolves are very smart, and they would probably be useful in battle. Viewing them as gods would be natural."

The Central Orthodox Church had united the land under a shared order. The Chaos Serpents might be planning to upend that order by creating a new god for people to believe in. Normally, that would only result in a new system of beliefs, as even if it was based on warped views of malicious gods and malicious teachings, it would still be a new sort of order. However, if they were creating false gods in order to *destroy* order, the religion would lack a resolute theology. Created as a falsehood, all they would have to do is reveal their falsity once they had gathered enough believers. After leaving the Church, what would they do when they found out the new beliefs they clung to were worthless lies? Just what kind of chaos would they fall into? That was something far more abominable than just using those wolves for battle. And this theory happened to be quite plausible.

Someone gulped. It was Bel... Even *she* had grown nervous! And it wasn't just her. Everyone in the room had realized this danger, their faces stern.

Gulp... Gulp... Once again, that sound reverberated in the room. It was Mia—that's right, Mia! Wanting seconds, she was draining the rest of the hot milk from her cup.

Chapter 14: Princess Mia, Angry, Enters the Conversation!

“While I would like to have you listen to more, I think it best to leave it here. The rest is focused on the histories of each clan,” spoke Mayun, setting his lute beside himself. He then took a deep breath, and... “So... How was it? My singing, that is...”

Gleefully asked them to share their thoughts! However, he was simply met with silence. The group was faintly troubled by the suspicious lingering scent of the Serpents’ involvement. And then there was Mia, who was instead faintly *satisfied* by the lingering aroma of the top-quality milk she had just enjoyed. In any case, they were all hesitant to open their mouths.

“Well, I have to say, father, I was always troubled by your penchant to make guests listen to your singing, but I see it has its uses.”

“I was not asking you, my son...”

Mayun seemed rather dismayed by his son’s cold attitude, so Bel tried to cheer him up. “Learning about the history of the Equestrian Kingdom was fun! I really liked that it was a song, since studying history usually makes me sleepy. The sound of your lute mixed with your voice was really pretty!”

Well, those were the thoughts that Bel chose to *share*, but anyways...

“I see! I am glad. You are welcome to come to hear more whenever you find such time.” Mayun had a large grin on his face as he spoke, and he did so incredibly cheerfully. It seemed that the praise had pleased him.

Seeing Bel’s reaction, Citrina began muttering to herself. “Songs... I see... If I ask my father for songwriting lessons... Yup!”

“Thank you, Chief Mayun. Your song made it very easy to grasp the situation of your kingdom.”

After sharing her benign opinion, Mia turned her mind back to the song she had just heard. It was the story of an ambitious man who sought to gain

hegemony through manipulating his mortal enemy, the wolves. Unable to gain the approval of his brothers, Ka Suima had left the land of his forefathers in despair. Just what fate had awaited him and his descendants afterwards? Mia crossed her arms as she considered this. That's when Aima spoke up.

"What a convenient interpretation of events. How fitting for the cowardly Equestrian Kingdom," she spat.

"Hm. In that case, what is the story passed down amongst the Fire Clan?" With a tranquil smile on his face, Mayun turned to face Aima. He looked slightly troubled, as if she were his daughter going through a rebellious phase.

"That much is obvious. Our story is that of cowards caught up in the dregs of their present. All those who remained in the Equestrian Kingdom are loafers who fear change. That is what is passed down." Aima glared at Mayun before sending an equally sharp gaze at Malong. "The current state of your kingdom tells it all. Just look. You are completely occupied with protecting your current riches from the wolves, are you not? You have fallen not just behind Sunkland—but even *Remno*."

Hearing this, the prince of Remno, Abel, was unable to keep the grimace off his face.

"Back then, had you taken the power of wolves onto yourselves, you would now be reigning supreme over this land. You would not have become inferior to Sunkland. You labeled change as taboo and feared it, just as you fear war and power... Is that not what brought you into this current state?!" Aima turned toward Mia with a huff. "Do you not agree, Princess Mia?"

Aima had turned the conversation toward Mia, but Mayun was unable to wait for her to speak before he opened his mouth. "Do you mean to imply that we should have taken the wolves under our command to open hostilities with Remno and Sunkland?"

"We are the descendants of proud warriors. We have lived protecting our riches—our sheep—and our families through battle. When it is necessary, we use force. It is only natural to do so for the sake of our comrades, for the sake of our clan. Additionally, wolves are strong. You lot, who are accustomed to battle, should know as much. What reason is there to refuse if you are able to gain

their strength? You of the Equestrian Kingdom feared change, battle, and power. Those are the actions of fools."

"Change is not necessarily good. It is important to halt when things are heading in unfavorable directions." Mayun's voice was calm, but Aima deflected it with a laugh. "Hmph! Like the forest, you are immovable, stuck to sway at the wind's mercy. What fitting words for the descendant of the imbecile Fulong."

"Holding power is not necessarily right. You held power and used it to steal provisions, and now you have fallen into our hands. Even if you learn the ways of utilizing great power, you cannot anticipate what will become of it. Wielding power so foolishly invites disaster, o descendant of the imprudent Suima, man whose learned control over fire made him arrogant enough to reach his hands to the stars." Mayun gave Aima a sharp glare. She went to open her mouth, but then...

"By the moons... Just how long do you plan on debating something so fruitless?"

Someone spoke.

"What was that?!" Without thinking, Aima raised her voice. But then, she noticed something! It was Mia—the gentle Sage of the Empire who was willing to share her cookies with a mere bandit—trembling in anger.

"Just when will you be satisfied with such a pointless debate? I can't help but wonder." Mia took a long look at Aima, and then at Mayun, before once again opening her mouth. "It's already over. Those events happened ever so long ago. What is the point of arguing about them now?" She shook her head, her exasperation written all over her face. "Are we not already done and over with all that?"

Chapter 15: Princess Mia Curses

This conversation...is going in quite the unfavorable direction.

Mia had perceptively picked up on the danger of the conversation currently being hashed between Aima and Mayun. Yes, that's right. This little chat would prove incredibly inconvenient for Mia... Truly terrible.

They're letting a sibling quarrel between their ancestors affect even the present... I can't accept that!

Those of the present taking responsibility for the mistakes of their ancestors... It reminded her of something—of some*one*. Indeed, that would be Mia's ancestor, the first emperor of Tearmoon! Plus, the whole dubious situation with Aima's ancestor, Suima, falling for the wiles of the Chaos Serpents and accepting their idea of making use of wolves. It was incredibly similar to Tearmoon's first emperor, who had been beguiled by the Serpents into making the Empire of Tearmoon itself.

Of course, there was no way to know the truth of that assumption, but that wasn't really a problem.

It's the fact that it reminded me of the first emperor that's the real problem!

To Mia, the first emperor was a past she wanted to be erased. It was a history to be entombed in darkness—something Mia wanted to bury right this instant, never to see the light of day again.

Well, the incident with the Yellowmoons was supposed to have done just that, but...

He might be my ancestor, but he's such a pain...

Despite her complaints, Mia's head was seriously in motion. Right now, her brain was being fueled by milk. After turning her thoughts over, she quickly got them in order and nodded in agreement.

In any case, I just need to get them to focus on the here and now!

She needed to avert their eyes from issues past to focus on issues present.

Preferably *before* they could turn to Mia and ask, “So, what does Imperial Princess Mia, who already has a reputation for having ancestors who made mistakes, think about all this?”

And so, Mia quietly opened her mouth...and made her intervention!

“By the moons... Just how long do you plan on debating something so fruitless?”

Her tone of voice was completely derisive as to imply the following: “Looking back on the past is something only imbeciles would do! This conversation will accomplish nothing! It’s stupid!”

Mia stared back at Aima, who had looked toward her in anger.

“Just when will you be satisfied with such a pointless debate? I can’t help but wonder.”

The longer this debate carried on, the higher the danger that it would have a negative impact on Mia. She simply *had* to put an end to it! With that in her heart, she also filled her words with the rage she felt toward her idiot ancestor. “It’s already over. Those events happened ever so long ago. What is the point of arguing about them now?”

It was already over, so it was pointless to argue about. Mia stressed this point. And then, she stressed it again, stressing her stress! That’s right—she was changing topics. In other words...

“Miss Aima, you said that the Fire Clan has been facing food troubles, correct?”

Presently, this was the most pressing issue. With it being solved, Aima would stop her plundering, and the foreign relations of the Equestrian Kingdom would improve. Which meant that for now, it was best to leave the problem of their difficult past aside and focus on a makeshift solution to solve the *now*. Mia strived to appeal that *that* was what would prove meaningful!

Mia had no idea why Malong had brought Aima to meet with his father, but it didn’t matter. Averting their eyes from any touchy subjects was far more important. Mia balled her hands into fists and continued.

“At this very moment, there are children who suffer from hunger. Elders who are powerless. Can we really be wasting our time like this given these circumstances?” Mia felt this way from the bottom of her heart.

Hunger was a problem to be solved as quickly as possible. Mia was intensely aware of how trying an empty stomach was. There was almost assuredly no one who would disagree with the fact that this was what needed to be solved first. Plus, hunger led to agitation that would make even the simplest problems impossible to solve.

Discussions were only to be had after a filling meal. Scarfing down a hearty and delicious mushroom stew would leave the heart and stomach full, making people sleepy. At least, it did so for Mia. And when you’re sleepy, difficult talks and fetters of the past become inconsequential. Wanting to avoid using your head, you throw away your convictions to instead only consider what would be the most efficient. This was the basis of Mia’s diplomatic tactic, aka the “Fill Your Opponent’s Stomach So They Get Really Slow and Sleepy and Just Let You Do Whatever You Want” obstructionism (“Slow-Sleep” for short).

It only worked for a very small subset of people, but it was extremely effective when it *did* work! Specifically, it was effective against people like Mia, Bel, and Aima.

“Y’know, father... I’d listen to the miss. Can’t we just let this go?” After sitting silently through the proceedings, Malong finally spoke up.

“Let it go? What do you mean by that, Malong?”

“I simply mean that staying stuck in the past is for fools. Isn’t it about time we finally move forward?”

Malong had joined the Mia-train! She hadn’t expected Malong to agree with her—no, not in the slightest—but she wasn’t going to let a small mishap in foresight like this stop her. Instead, she was going to take a ride on the Malong-train as well! Mia’s flotsam thoughts would float on, free of impediment!

“Famines are terribly misfortunate. If there are citizens who are starving, it is our place—us, the people on top—to feel their grief. However, if it becomes an impetus for a broken people to once again help each other, then perhaps there is still some good to be found.”

In any case, they had to scrape together provisions for the Fire Clan. Mia knew that famine was a breeding ground for disease—disease that would spread regardless of borders.

Thus, saving the Fire Clan from famine would fall under the list of policies Mia was already implementing. Still, they had yet to learn the clan's whereabouts, so even if Tearmoon were to send food, they still had shipping costs and everything else to worry about. It would be ideal if the Equestrian Kingdom were to take care of them.

So, I need to get this conversation headed toward the Equestris helping out the Fire Clan!

Thus, Mia abruptly put her all into riding this wave!

"I've often thought that if the Fire Clan were still out there somewhere, we should make peace with them. Don't you think that time has come?"

Ooh! You get 'em, Malong! It seems like this'll go even better than I anticipated!

Mia was crying out in joy inside, but...

"I have no care as to what you say, but don't think that we will accept such a thing so easily."

Her voice was the rain on Mia's parade. Seeing the smug look on Aima's face, Mia couldn't help but curse under her breath! Then, she once again got to thinking, hoping to come up with a method to persuade Aima. Might she be able to sweet talk her, somehow? After a second of silent rumination, the Great Sage of the Empire had hit upon an answer!

"Miss Aima... Those cookies I gave you were tasty, weren't they?"

This was it. Mia had seen right through to her opponent's weakness.

Hmph! I'm sure Aima is the type who can't say anything once she's got cookies blocking her mouth! Oho ho! She's just like Bel. How childish. Ah... This milk is so tasty. Really, one cup is enough to inspire me to give it my all.

It seems like Mia was just as childish.

"Wouldn't you like to have them again? Those wonderful, delicious, mouth-

watering cookies with their crunchy texture and rich sweetness...”

Hearing that question, Aima’s throat jumped with a gulp. Seeing the bit of drool spilling from the corners of her mouth, Mia could tell her words were having an effect. She just needed one more push!

“Wouldn’t you like to enjoy them with everyone?” asked Mia, memories of her Birthday Festival filling her mind. Enjoying delicious food with everyone was incredibly fulfilling; the sense of elation such an experience would bring would prove enough to melt minor instances of stubbornness.

Mia continued to speak with confidence. “There’s a way where everyone can enjoy them together, and it’s stretching out right in front of us.”

“O-Our pillaging squad would be able to acquire such cookies on our own.”

“Really? Even if they can, how long do you plan on continuing with those ways? Miss Aima, I understand that you are a proud warrior, and your respect toward your ancestors is palpable. However, I don’t think it is smart to so easily rely on military might.”

Mia had conceded that using their strength for pillaging was one of their options. However, if there was a way to procure provisions more easily, wouldn’t it be best to choose that route? If there was a quicker way to fill their people’s stomachs, is that not the path they should choose? Mia had chosen to approach from that angle.

“Training troops only to lose them would be a loss for any country,” Abel added. “Is that not the case for your clan as well?”

Abel had sent in reinforcements from the sidelines. Hailing from Remno, home of the Diamond Legion, he was more than aware that whittling down your number of elite troops wasn’t something to be done so readily. Training them cost money; there were quite literally soldiers worth their weight in gold, and that stood true for the Fire Clan’s best warriors as well.

“There’s no guarantee that your looting will continue to go so well for you. Sunkland’s protective forces are incredibly skilled, and that goes for us in Remno too. Going after villages in Belluga would only turn countless foreign nations against you. I don’t really think that’s a wise plan.”

Abel’s words left Aima speechless.

“There is a peaceful way to solve this problem. You may be able to alleviate your hunger problems without exposing your clan to danger. Would that not be the best answer for you?” Mia closed her eyes as she spun her words into a finishing blow.

Tearmoon’s Princess Mia is quite impressive.

Watching Mia persuade the bandit from the Fire Clan left Mayun astonished. He had heard bits and pieces about her character from his son, Malong. He knew that she was learned in the ways of horses. He had heard that her eyes were privy to the truth, and that she had once stated that horses weren’t livestock or tools of war, but comrades that could lead you to freedom. Hearing that from his son had left him with a novel sense of surprise, as Mayun’s father had often spoken those words himself. Thus, Mayun had been looking forward to their meeting. But...there was also something *else*.

It is strange that the princess traveled all the way to the Equestrian Kingdom. Her supposed reasoning, too, is preposterous. That someone of her standing would make such a visit just for butter...

That assertion of hers was most likely out of consideration for the Equestrian Kingdom’s sovereignty. The issue of the Fire Clan was one for the Equestris to solve, and poking her nose too far into the matter would hurt their pride. Mayun was certain that these were the considerations that had led her to make such a claim.

Mia’s refusal to put on airs had also surprised him.

But to think that she makes frequent use of horse shampoo...

It was true that horsehair was more delicate than that of humans, and thus, higher quality soap was used to wash it. Those who were aware of this fact would sometimes use it on themselves. However, that was only in the Equestrian Kingdom, where horses were viewed to be as precious as humans. For a foreigner—and a princess, at that—to be making use of horse shampoo was simply astounding.

She looks beyond the veil of appearances to see the hidden truth. Free in her thinking, fettered by naught. So, that is the true nature of the Great Sage of the Empire.

And right now, that Great Sage was trying to entice the Fire Clan bandit with sweet treats. Swept away by her momentum, she asked Mayun a question. “Chief Mayun, how exactly does the Equestrian Kingdom plan on solving this issue?”

“‘How’? And what do you mean by that?”

He had turned the question back to her, but he was well aware of the answer. The Fire Clan was an issue that the Equestris had forever left unsolved. Had they had the inclination, the Tearmoon Empire would easily be able to accept the Fire Clan into their folds. A single word from Mia was enough to completely sweep this issue under the rug. However, that was something she couldn’t accept.

Can we truly turn a blind eye to brothers who share our ancestors? Can we truly repeat our past mistakes just because we are fettered by them?

Mia wore a troubled smile on her face, and Mayun couldn’t help but feel that those were the words her clear eyes were asking him.

“Y’know, father...”

Turning his eyes toward the voice, he found his son, Malong, staring at him. The light in those eyes held a similar strength to those of the Great Sage of the Empire. However, that, of course, was merely a delusion...

Chapter 16: Mia Sips Her XXX and Keeps Watch of the Situation!

“You meant that my village...could...urgh...but...aaugh...” Aima writhed, her hands holding her head. The sight was enough to convince Mia of her victory.

Oho ho! Her acquiescence is a simple matter of time!

Thinking she no longer had to focus her efforts on Aima, Mia turned back toward Malong, who was once again trying to persuade his father. It seemed like it wasn’t falling on deaf ears; Mayun had his eyes trained on his son as if he were judging his true intentions. It was reminiscent of a sight Mia had often seen before.

Didn’t that stupid four-eyes use to make that face all the time?

Despite having come to the optimal conclusion himself, he would stay silent, waiting for Mia to think it through. Then, after Mia had racked her brain to come to an answer, he would mercilessly lambast her. In other words, it was an old trick of Ludwig Hewitt.

I always hated that habit of his, but I’m sure he was doing it in the name of my own personal development. Even though it used to anger me, all I feel now is gratitude... Actually, no. I am *thankful, but it still makes me angry!*

In any case, the stupid four-eyes in Mia’s mind received a few novice-level kicks before she returned to the matter at hand.

Still, from the looks of it, it seems like Chief Mayun isn’t too opposed to lending aid to the Fire Clan.

Perhaps he was playing devil’s advocate to foster the growth of the younger generation, or voicing opposition to force them to gather their thoughts. He might also simply be trying to gauge Aima’s intentions. In any case, his actions spoke of such intentions, and his attitude suggested the mature composure of someone trying to teach a lesson. Mia surmised that even if she left him alone, things would work out in her favor.

Now, all that's left is the matter of Serpent conspirators. Aima most likely knows the wolfmaster, but I doubt she would divulge that information if I simply asked her for it... Mia took a hard look at Aima's countenance. *Actually, she might just tell me everything! I think ten cookies would be enough for that!* Thus, Mia had reached a decision. Her perceptive eyes were especially acute when it came to her own kin. *Still, if I* do *ask, now isn't the right time. Just how should I breach this subject...?* Still in her thoughts, the conversation continued onwards.

"I see. I have no qualms against lending aid to the Fire Clan." It seemed that he had finally accepted Malong's proposition. He gave an amicable nod. "However, fetters of the past are not something that can be resolved so simply. Would you not agree, Lady Aima?"

"Hm? Oh, uh, yes... That is correct. No, it is obvious. I will not allow cookies to lead me astray," spoke Aima with a completely blank face that brought a pleasant joy to Mia's chest.

Oho! You need to be more cognizant of yourself, Miss Aima. To think you were unaware of your weakness to food! I see you still have a long way to go. Well, people do tend to be soft when it comes to judging oneself. Perhaps this is just how things must be.

Mia's eyes were perceptive, especially when it came to her own kin!

"Still, we cannot overlook something as cursed as making use of wolves. I am sure we will be split in our opinions on how to handle your clan, but...given the dire situation, this is no time to be slow. Thus, I would like Lady Aima to lead us to her clan's chief. We of the Forest Clan will immediately send provisions to supply for the meantime. During that time, I will gather our chiefs to discuss this matter."

Aima's eyes were open in shock. "How foolish. Do you truly believe I would divulge the location of our hidden village? Such a thing would be preposterous."

Ah, so that's how it is. Aima would *be wary of the Equestrian Kingdom—they're her mortal enemies. Hm... I wonder how Chief Mayun plans on proceeding?*

Watching over the proceedings, Mia couldn't help but gulp—her hot milk,

that is!

“I understand. In that case, we shall bring provisions to an agreed meeting place between us and your—”

“Chief Mayun, could I be allowed a moment?”

Someone had interrupted Mayun’s proposition; it was Rafina Orca Belluga, who had silently raised her hand with a cool smile.

After sending a glance toward Mayun, she took a look around the room before continuing quietly. “No matter the past, it brings sorrow to my heart to see the innocent suffer. The Holy Principality of Belluga cannot ignore this situation either.” Her voice was clear, exhibiting flawless compassion that embodied the essence of the Holy Lady. “Would I be able to assist you in providing provisions?”

“Assist us? What exactly do you propose?”

“Well, to put it bluntly, I would like to accompany those making the journey,” proposed Rafina with a calm smile.

In reality, there was little Belluga could offer at this time. Coordinating with the country itself to send foodstuffs would take time. The two quickest options would be for the Forest Clan to bring provisions to the hidden village of the Fire Clan, or to follow Mayun’s suggestion by delivering them to a certain point and having the Fire Clan take them the rest of the way themselves. Given Aima’s attitude about revealing the location of her village, the latter was more plausible. However, Rafina had interrupted that proposition to give her own—she would assist in the operation by accompanying them herself. But that had other implications.

“Under my watch, your clan would never do something so sacrilegious as to harm the Fire Clan, correct?”

In other words, what Rafina was really proposing was the addition of a witness belonging not to the Equestrian Kingdom or the Fire Clan, but to Belluga. She was asserting that the addition of a third party would eliminate the possibility of the Equestrian Kingdom being unjust to the Fire Clan. However...

“What a joke. If the Equestrian Kingdom and Belluga—or rather, you and

Mayun—became conspirators, your actions would prove pointless."

Rafina returned Aima's laugh with a calm smile. "Doing so would ruin not only my name as the Holy Lady, but the whole of the Holy Principality of Belluga. However, I suspect you are aware of a way to make use of such a disgrace, are you not?" Rafina stared up at her, trying to gauge her reactions.

The look it put on Aima's face was far from pleasant. "I know not of such methods. But yes...I believe I may know someone who does," she mumbled as if she were pained before falling silent. Rafina watched her, clearly unsure what to make of it.

Perhaps Miss Aima really isn't a Serpent. However, she at least appears to be connected to them.

Of course, Rafina's proposition was not made purely from the good in her heart; it was to continue her investigations into the Chaos Serpents. She wasn't about to allow this snake to escape so easily after coming so close to snatching its tail.

"Additionally, I ask that the Forest Clan be placed under my jurisdiction to act as my guards."

This was the natural course of the conversation. The protection of the Holy Lady was not carried out by Belluga itself, but through guards commissioned from various countries. Following that tradition, the responsibility would fall to warriors from the Forest Clan. Rafina had surmised that it would be difficult to resolve the current problem without intervention from the Forest Clan. Eventually, it would prove necessary to have the two sides meet face-to-face for negotiation. However, Aima's actions made it clear that such talks would likely end in dissatisfaction. As a third party, Rafina's presence under such circumstances would allow her to perhaps put a stop to any disputes.

If there was someone who had simply gotten wrapped up in the dealings of the Chaos Serpents, they should be considered a victim. I hope to avoid causing any more harm to them through any additional quarrels. It's also necessary that someone accompanies them in case the Serpents try to cause any obstructions.

The thoughts in her head were suddenly interrupted by...

“Miss Rafina... Please, let me go as well.”

...Abel.

Chapter 17: The Choice of the Chicken-Hearted Selfish Princess

Huh? What?! Abel... Wh-What are you talking about?

Abel's sudden proclamation had left Mia confused. She had completely let her guard down, ready to say something like, "Well then, it seems like all is settled here. Now, all that's left is to try some of that superbly delicious sarpir sheep milk. If that goes well, I'll negotiate dairy trade with Chief Mayun and be on my way!" However, Abel's actions had subverted her expectations. For a moment, she was completely befuddled. But then, she realized something—judging by the look on Abel's face, there was something troubling him.

Now that I think about it, Abel has seemed down ever since I returned from my bath. I know he came to discuss something with Malong, but I wonder just what that was... Hm, I really would like to know.

"In that case, o Holy Lady, Prince Abel, let us make preparations. Malong, decide which of our clan will be accompanying us. We depart tomorrow."

"Hold! I have not yet agreed to..." fretted Aima. However, this would doubtfully interrupt this course of events.

Originally, Miss Aima had said she wouldn't talk directly with the Equestris, but she's doing just that right now as if nothing was amiss at all! She truly is naive. Yes, I'm sure I'll be able to coax her into this!

Thus, Mia was relieved from her post as mediator!

After being told she could relax until preparations for the welcoming banquet were ready, Mia left the tent along with Bel and Citrina.

Hm... It really is something I would like to know about, but it's not my place to involve myself in this matter either...

Abel's behavior had caught her attention, but she no longer had a role to play in the conversation. In fact, it was perhaps more apt to say that the place exuded an aura that told her staying any longer would drag her into unpleasant

territory. Thus, despite her reluctance, she departed.

“While it weighs on my mind, there is nothing I can do about it for now. Let’s put that aside and relax.”

Thus, led by her thought of, “Well then, for now, let’s count some sheep!” Mia had resolved to spend her time in a daze.

“One sheep, two sheep...” However, as she continued to languidly count away... “Twelve hundred and three sheep... Agh, I can’t do this anymore! I can’t focus at all with this whole Abel situation stuck in my mind!”

Was that really true? In any case, having fallen out of sheep-counting mode, Mia let out a large yawn. Then, she felt something warm blowing on the back of her neck.

“Hm?”

Finding it odd, Mia turned around to find a snout large enough to fill her field of vision! Its nostrils twitched, preparing to sneeze—it was the same horse from earlier that was oh so reminiscent of Kuolan.

Hah... Perhaps this horse really is one of Kuolan’s relatives. They really look simi— Aaaaaaugh!

Mia tried to make her escape, but then, a loud “Ker-chooo!” reverberated in the air. Mia braced herself, but strangely, the gust of air and gelatinous liquid that was supposed to accompany it was little to be found.

“...Huh?”

Mia nervously lifted her head to find a different horse in front of her! It was the horse she had ridden to escape(?) the previous bandits, the one that had a dazed look in its eyes that resembled a careless Mia.

“My! You belong to the Princess Guard. Did you protect me, perhaps?”

Gallantly and just as was expected from a well-trained guardian knight, the horse offered its body in protection of its princess. However, it still had the same spaced-out look on its face. It calmly turned to look toward the Kuolan-like horse, which let out a horsely sigh before walking away. Then, the dazed-out horse turned languidly back toward Mia.

“You’re quite relaxed, aren’t you?”

Hearing Mia’s voice, the horse stared back at Mia in a daze before letting out a puff of air from its nose. Then, it strolled off, heading toward the Forest Clan horses that were currently partaking in a meal. It probably planned on adding itself to the mix of horses chomping down on the grass.

“My... I assume our horses are tied up somewhere else, and yet, this one is mingling with those of the Forest Clan. Oho ho! How fascinating and free in spirit!” Mia laughed for a long while, staring at the lazy horse, until something suddenly came to her. “Ah, yes. That’s right. Just what was I so troubled over?” What she had remembered was her true nature! “Yes, I’m not the Great Sage of the Empire—I’m the selfish princess of the Empire, which means I have no need to think up any justifiable reasons. If I want to go, I shall! That’s all there is to it.”

Abel’s sullen face was still weighing on her mind, and she wanted to cheer him up. She had also become interested in seeing if it was really possible to save Aima’s clan; her chicken heart was telling her that it wouldn’t feel very good should that fail. In which case, if Mia wanted to go, she should! All she had to do was express that intent. No proper reasoning was necessary. At the end of the day, Mia’s true nature was to be selfish; her creed was Mia First. At the same time...

“Dion is here, so it will be quite difficult to convince him by only stating the intent to go. In which case, I’ll have to think up a suitable reason. Hm... Which means...”

Perhaps “chicken-hearted” was a small part of her nature as well.

Thus, Mia returned to the tent, all the while brooding over how to present her reasoning to Ludwig. In any case, she needed to declare her intentions.

“I really cannot think it possible for Forest Clan warriors to enter my village...”

“However, in that case, we will not be able to guard...”

It seemed as if they were still fighting. Suddenly, Mia stepped inside the tent, causing all eyes to turn toward her in shock. Drowned in their gaze, Mia nevertheless pompously made her declaration. “Everyone, I shall be

accompanying you to the Fire Clan’s village.”

At the words of Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Great Sage of the Empire, their course was decided. The Princess Guard would serve as Rafina’s protection, just as had been the case on the way here, while those of the Forest Clan would be limited to as few members as was needed to transport the provisions. There was no one who could find fault with the tacit compromise Mia had offered.

Chapter 18: Befitting of the Great Sage's Vassal

"So...you must be the wolf the princess was talking about."

Concurrent to Mia's gallant return to the chief's tent, Dion Alaia had left the Forest Clan's settlement to enter the woods alone. Hearing reports from Mia's entourage about the "warrior wolves," he had come to search for them but had found them rather easily. So easily, in fact, that it was disappointing.

The wolf was lying in a ball on the dim forest floor. Its ears pricked to attention at Dion's approach, and its eyes were filled with a dangerous glint as it stared at him, wrinkles appearing on its scrunched brow. Faced with the sharp fangs that appeared from the corners of its muzzle...Dion smiled wryly and shrugged.

"Wait a second—you don't plan on fighting me, do you? Your brothers were smart enough to know how bad of an idea that'd be," said Dion, his hand reaching for the sword at his waist. The two locked eyes, but after a while, the wolf relaxed. "Huh, so you do know better after all. I guess you *are* smarter than the average wolf. Still, there's something about you that's different from the other warrior wolves I've met. Seriously, who would've thought there'd be so many wolf geniuses out there?" He sighed and scratched his head. "But...it seems like our little bandit and the wolfmaster are connected somehow. I wonder how the princess plans on handling all this... Huh?" Dion suddenly reached for his sword.

That's strange. For a second there, I felt like I was being watched...

Dion surveyed his surroundings. Nothing was amiss, and the presence he had faintly sensed had vanished. Still on guard, he looked from his environment to the wolf before letting out a quiet sigh. "I swear... There's something fishy going on here."

Ludwig came to meet Dion upon his return. "Ah, Sir Dion. You've returned

with perfect timing.”

“So, what is it? Anything troubling happen?”

“Indeed. There’s been a change of plans. It will be a while longer until we can make our return to Tearmoon.”

Ludwig filled Dion in on the course of events. “The hidden village of the Fire Clan, huh?” He subconsciously glanced at the sky above. “I see. Definitely sounds like the kinda thing that our friendly princess wouldn’t be able to keep her head out of.”

“That’s hard to deny. However, it is difficult to attribute this all to mere friendliness. As I mentioned earlier, the Equestrian Kingdom plays a vital role in Her Highness’s grand vision.” After a quick smirk, Ludwig’s expression once again turned serious. “Additionally, improving our relations with the Equestrian Kingdom can only prove beneficial. Between making conciliations with a bowed head when your opponent is at its strongest and reaching out a helping hand when they’re at their weakest, it goes without saying which one would be more effective at deepening a bond.”

“Offering a hand when it’s useful, huh? Make enough sense, I guess.” Dion shrugged in exasperation. “Well, as long as it means getting to fight the wolfmaster, I don’t really have any complaints.”

Ludwig couldn’t help but question how evasive those words sounded to him. “Is there something troubling you?”

“Quite a few things, actually. Well, there’s really only two that are concrete at the moment. For one, just what are the Chaos Serpents after? That bandit, Aima, is almost definitely connected to them, right?”

“In all likelihood, yes. Her Highness seems to have qualms about making any judgments as of yet, but it is difficult to think the art of mastering wolves is widespread. It’s only natural to assume she’s related to that assassin.”

If that was the case, it was entirely possible that Aima’s existence itself was a trap. She seemed to be telling the truth, but the veracity of the information she’d shared was still up in the air.

“I assume the other thing on your mind is the Kingdom of Remno’s intentions,

correct?”

Dion grinned at Ludwig’s question; he had beaten him to the punch. “Nothing slips from your notice, does it? Remno has deep ties to the Equestrian Kingdom for training their own cavalry. I don’t imagine they’ll be happy about Tearmoon getting close to the Equestris. It’s best that we expect them to interfere somehow.” Dion crossed his arms. “Well, I’m not really worried about Prince Abel. He’s not gonna match swords with us, nor is he the type to play his cards close to his chest. In any case, I think we can leave him alone for now, since I doubt he’d do any harm to the princess. Still...” Dion cut off his words. He looked around before drawing his voice back into a whisper. “I’m worried about the Sword Saint, honestly.”

“Sir Grammateus, you say... Just what exactly is it that concerns you?”

“He’s a geezer, but I bet he’s crafty. And despite all that, he’s got quite the arm on him. If Remno ordered him to do anything that’d be bad for us...things could turn ugly quickly.”

Dion Alaia did not view himself as a “model knight.” In fact, it would be more correct to say he considered himself a “delinquent knight.” One with a penchant for complaining, at that.

Still, even he would carry out virtually any command dealt by his master, and it was the Sword Saint of Remno they were discussing here. The loyalest of retainers, this was an old man who had not only served the royal family for decades but had even created the basic fundamentals of their swordsmanship. It was almost certain that he would carry out the orders of his master with peerless devotion.

“Indeed. The Kingdom of Remno is not one we can place unconditional trust in.”

“Well, as long as you’ve got me with you, I’m sure it’ll all work itself out.”

Having undoubtedly picked up on the intention behind Dion’s words, Ludwig nodded. “I see. You mean to imply that things will only prove troubling should the wolfmaster make an appearance.”

The chaos that would ensue should those three virtuosos meet with different

aims would result in a future that was a mere question mark.

“Well, at any rate, I’m fairly certain no one will be making any direct passes on our princess’s life. Still, it’d be best to keep a lookout. It’s not really her style, but let’s stay on alert, and if nothing happens, we’ll call ourselves cowards and laugh about it. It’s much better than letting your guard down and regretting it.”

“Very true. Her Highness’s retainers are most befitting of those words. I understand. Let’s be watchful of not only Sir Grammateus, but the intentions of Remno and Prince Abel as well.” Ludwig very much agreed with Dion’s assessment.

Side Story: The Castle of Empress Prelate Rafina

After the woman who had once been the future Duchess of Belluga had become the “Empress Prelate,” the first thing she did was relocate the capital, moving her castle from the duchy capital of Belluga elsewhere—the island that had once prospered as the location of the continent’s only academy city, the island of Saint Noel. Devoid of both friends and family, even the flames of revenge had already simmered to ash inside her heart. Half broken, she barely held on to the last bits of her sanity by secluding herself inside her castle of nostalgic and bittersweet memories.

That day, she had been receiving a report in her office. During her time when she’d been called “president,” she spent more time in this room than any other. Back then, it had been the office of the student council, but now, the room had been remodeled.

“So? How are things carrying along? Have you been able to properly exterminate the Serpents?” asked the Empress Prelate, sipping her favorite princess rose tea.

“Yes. We have been making excellent progress in smoking out the Serpents within territory held by our Holy Aquarian Army. We have received numerous claims once we made the call to civilians to help us in our cause. We are currently examining their veracity.”

“Oh? Why, that would take a great amount of time, would it not? Why don’t we simply execute all who have been implicated?”

“Huh...? But, well...”

“They say there is no smoke without fire, don’t they? The Serpents are akin to pestilence—letting one go will increase their numbers by ten, or even twenty. Say, do you know what should be done to ensure no rotten apples make it to your lips?” Rafina suddenly gave an innocent smile. “The answer is simple. You throw both those that are rotten—and any that may be—away. You dispose of

them all. Amongst the ones you doubt, there may be ones that have yet to rot, but that's nothing to concern yourself with. What's necessary is not finding those that are inedible amongst the ones you doubt, it's simply making sure that rotten ones never make their way into your mouth. Do you understand?"

That was the exact methodology she prescribed in battling the Chaos Serpents—kill the ones you know of and eradicate anyone you doubt. The severity of her ways had earned her the rebuke of Sunkland's Libra King Sion, yet she paid it no attention.

"So, what has become of the Equestrian Kingdom?"

"The majority of the clans have submitted to the Holy Aquarian Army. However, it appears that the Forest Clan has turned to Sunkland's Prince Sion."

Currently, the number of the Equestrian Kingdom's clans had shrunk to half its size. After Chief Mayun of the Forest Clan, the strongest clan's head, had passed away, they dedicated themselves to Sunkland under the leadership of Mayun's son, Malong.

"I see... So, Malong and King Sion have..."

She had once known the two of them well. However, her nostalgic memories left her with a twinge of doubt—she felt no particularly strong emotions toward them. She had lost too much for such sentiments. The cavity that had opened in her heart easily consumed trivial emotions. And so, they escaped her notice.

"They make for quite troubling opponents..." Instead, she simply murmured those words and let out a pained sigh.

"I also have a report regarding the hidden village we found on the outskirts of the Equestrian Kingdom's borders. We were able to capture a survivor."

"A survivor...? Do you mean a prisoner? I believe I ordered the erasure of anyone who attempts to protect a Serpent."

Met with her cold gaze, a shiver traveled down the reporting soldier's body. "Y-Yes. Of course, we have eradicated both the Chaos Serpents and those who attempted to protect them. We also burned down the village, however...this woman was found trapped in the dungeon of an abandoned castle..."

“Is that so?”

“Yes. From what I hear, she appears to be a noble of high class. She had been a prisoner of the Serpents for quite a while, so I have brought her here to present to you.”

“I see. She must have gone through quite the ordeal. How pitiful...” In a complete reversal, the Empress Prelate distorted her face into one of sympathy. She, Empress Prelate Rafina, was still the Holy Lady, a benevolent saint capable of sympathizing with those who had met cruel circumstances and empathizing with their pain.

On the night of the Holy Eve Festival, after the mass poisoning that had taken place, her heart had cracked. Later, after Mia had perished, it completely shattered into pieces. Yet Rafina was still the Holy Lady. She was a selfless saint who would extend compassion to the pitiful fallen, ready to set her knees to the ground to pull them back up herself, all the while paying no notice to her own sullenness. She was kind.

She had both the face of a callous purger and that of a saint who pitied the weak. The broken unbalance that existed between them gave her a strange allure, pushing her charisma to heights strong enough to swallow the world.

“Please bring her here. And do treat her kindly.”

The messenger bowed before briskly departing the room. What filled his chest was a loyalty that resembled awe—or perhaps fear.

The woman who finally appeared before the Empress Prelate was thin. Her black hair revealed a glimpse of the beauty it must have held, but after the terror of living an imprisoned life, it was speckled with gray. She took a knee in front of the Empress Prelate as she kowtowed in front of her.

“There are no words that can express how grateful I am for your rescue, Your Majesty.”

“It is nothing so grand. Please, lift your head. So, who exactly might you be...?”

“This is the first time I have made your acquaintance, Your Majesty.” The

woman adorned her face with a slightly crestfallen smile. And then, once again, she spoke. “My name is Valentina Remno.”

For just a moment, Rafina strangely saw the guile of the Chaos Serpents in that smile. But it quickly faded. Instead, all that was left was the smile of a hurt woman, somewhat sweet and appearing as if it could disappear at any moment.

Chapter 19: Princess Mia Knows Her F.A.T.

In the end, it was decided that the rescue party would depart to meet the Fire Clan on the following day with both the Forest Clan in charge of delivering provisions and Mia's Princess Guard in charge of the Holy Lady's protection. This plan limited the party to one-third of what It would have been with the Forest Clan in charge of both objectives, convincing Aima to agree to their proposition.

That must be why she didn't announce her intent on accompanying us from the outset...

Rafina was deeply impressed after watching how Mia had ended the negotiations. However, there was something she had found strange—why had Mia stayed silent, leaving everything to the Equestris? Why had she shown no agreement with Rafina's plan, instead leaving the tent as if she had no involvement in the matter whatsoever? It was true that Mia had no direct relation to the incident, but Rafina doubted that Mia could really turn a cold shoulder to the suffering masses. She also doubted that Mia could abandon Aima, who, somehow or another, had come to adore Mia as a friend. Considering all this, Rafina reached a simple conclusion: Mia would never! Do something! Like that!

By temporarily taking her leave, Mia introduced the hard-to-accept condition that the Equestrian Kingdom would be in charge of my protection. Then, she lowered that condition by having Tearmoon troops take on that duty instead, presenting a simple compromise to Aima. Mia really is quite impressive...

There was no end to Rafina's admiration!

Lin Malong had similarly been struck by Mia's actions.

"Sorry, our talks dragged on, didn't they?" he said, bowing his head in apology.

Mia gave a friendly smile and waved her hand. "It is nothing to be concerned

about. I'm just pleased that these important discussions went by without a hitch."

"Yup, you really helped us out there. I'll get you a glass of our best sarpir sheep's milk as thanks."

Malong turned to run off, but Mia stopped him. "No, there's no need to go so far."

"Huh...?" Malong stopped in his tracks and turned an inquisitive look toward Mia.

True, most nobles held no interest toward milk. But he knew that Mia was *different*; he had seen how excited she had been on their journey here. She wished for that milk from the absolute bottom of her heart.

This may be a bit of a digression, but Malong was particularly fond of this trait of Mia's. She put on no airs as she proclaimed this and that as "tasty," her deep joy apparent. He found it charming how true she was to her natural self. So then, just why would Mia refuse his offer?

Seeing his confusion, Mia put on an amicable smile. "I'll definitely be able to enjoy it later, won't I? Yes, I'll do so once everything is over..." She paused for a moment. "Oh, and I wouldn't mind if the servings at the banquet tonight were on the lighter side. Of course, I would love to give a proper feast to my retainers and the guards who accompanied us..."

"Miss Mia..." A sigh escaped Malong's lips—he had been deeply moved by Mia's words! She must have sympathized with the regrettable circumstances the Fire Clan was facing, and thus, could not allow herself to take part in a grand feast. She knew that there were people who starved, and one among them was right in front of her eyes. Mia could not fill her stomach under such conditions, for she knew what would count as a Famine Amicability Transgression. In other words, she knew her state of F.A.T.

"So, Mia must mean to fast. She intends to pray that the ills that currently plague the Fire Clan come to pass," said Rafina.

The Central Orthodox Church had a tradition of "fasting," where those who wished to make particularly strong requests to the Holy Deity would refuse

meals in order to spend that time offering prayer. Thinking he had figured out Mia's aim, Malong turned to look at her. He was met with a *slightly* panicked shake of her head. "N-No! You needn't go so far! Truly. I will, of course, be partaking in dinner. I just meant to request that the portions be on the smaller side."

Malong almost laughed out loud at how panicked she looked. She must just be shy, he assumed. In truth, Mia was worried about Aima, ready to dedicate herself to Aima's clan. For that, she would go so far as to fast in order to renew her resolve...and Mia was embarrassed to show it! That was, in fact, why she was so flustered—and it appeared that Mia's "true" feelings had reached Aima as well.

"I am grateful that you would go so far for my clan... In that case, I shall reserve myself at dinner as well."

"No, that would be preposterous! Um, that's right! It is only through eating that we can acquire enough strength to fulfill our duties. Let us partake now so our journey tomorrow will go without hindrance. That is important as well."

With that, Aima had no words of opposition.

So that's *why she's saying she'll eat too. She's right; you shouldn't be fasting while you're traveling. Falling ill would make the journey pointless. Which means the little miss is watching her limits. Impressive.* Malong nodded in satisfaction. *I'm sure Abel will be fine too if Miss Mia is acting like this.*

However, there was something that escaped the notice of everyone who bore witness to this event. Mia...was rubbing her belly! This should make things clear; the reason that Mia had refused the sarpir sheep milk and had decided to abstain from overly partaking in dinner was that she had already partaken in too much milk! After gobbling it down all throughout their meetings, Mia's stomach had already reached its limits.

The epicurean princess of the Empire gave particular attention to her condition when partaking in tasty treats, especially when they were *incredibly* tasty ones that she had not gotten the chance to partake in before.

I shouldn't have any more of that excellently delicious milk today. My stomach

is quite full, anyhow. I don't think I'll be able to eat much at the feast tonight. By the moons, this was quite the miscalculation! I should have treasured the milk earlier... It was so tasty—it went right down!

That's right, to Epicurean Mia, tasty butter, pancakes, milk, anything—they were all drinks!

Well, to the average person, milk *was* a drink. But anyway...

It really is a shame that I won't be able to enjoy this meal, but with my belly as full as it is, I wouldn't be able to enjoy it much anyway.

Yes, that's right. Mia knew her own (stomach's) state of F.A.T.

"In that case, how about some yogurt? It's incredibly nourishing and is said to improve one's beauty as well. It tastes excellent when topped with honey," suggested a woman from the Forest Clan who had heard the conversation.

Mia responded with a smile. "Thank you. I'm grateful for your kindness." She paused for a moment. "Well then, we'll have to save the feasting for another time. Once everything is over, we'll all enjoy some Equestri food together."

Those words were a declaration of her deepest resolve. Next time, for sure, she would come face-to-face with Equestrian cuisine when she was at her best.

By the way, the yogurt Mia enjoyed that night was *incredibly* scrumptious. She finished off her meal with utmost satisfaction.

Chapter 20: Princess Mia Gets Things Going

The next day, Mia and co. left the village of the Forest Clan. The ladies—and Abel—split into separate carriages, the Princess Guard surrounding them. Warriors from the Forest Clan, led by Malong, followed behind. Just after noon, the party stopped to rest.

“Perhaps it’s about time...”

Judging the time was right, Mia made her move. She had a goal she needed to accomplish.

“Abel, do you have a moment?”

“Hm? Do you need something?” The sudden conversation left an inquisitive look on Abel’s face.

“Would you like to accompany me on a horseback ride?” Mia asked softly, her eyes trained on the sky above. There was not a single cloud in sight, and Mia smiled, squinting at the bright sun. “Isn’t the weather wonderful today? I’m certain it will feel amazing.”

Of course, Mia had other goals outside of a simple horse ride. Last night, Mia drank too much hot milk, but it’s not like she offered the idea in order to help her digestion. Definitely not.

Instead, Mia simply wanted to have a leisurely chat with Abel. She had some questions. Just what had he discussed with Malong? Why was his expression so glum?

“But we can’t...”

Abel was reluctant, but Mia cut him off by turning the discussion toward one of her guards.

“Dion, I’d like to go out for a ride. Would that be all right?”

“On a ride?” Dion looked exasperated. “Didn’t you get into some trouble on one of those just the other day?” He shrugged, stiffening his expression as he looked back toward Mia. “Well, is it important?”

“Yes. Incredibly so.” Mia looked back at him with resolve. She was not about to lose! When speaking with one “Dion Alaia,” eye contact was important. Averting your gaze was something to be avoided. There was a high chance that this would cause him to attack. Thus, if you encounter a wild Dion in the woods, it is important to maintain eye contact as you back away slowly... At least, those were the rules that Mia had decided.

“Fine, I understand. I’ll keep watch from just a small ways away...”

“That should not be an issue. My wolves are watching the perimeter,” said Aima, with a strangely proud look on her face. She had been treated as a bandit until they had arrived at the Forest Clan’s village, but now, acting as a guide to the location of the Fire Clan, her fetters had been released.

“That just makes me more worried.” Dion sent a sharp glance toward Aima.

In response, Aima...didn’t look. She couldn’t. Unlike Mia, Aima’s method of surviving a Dion encounter was to *avoid* eye contact. Mia couldn’t help but be impressed by the ingenuity of her method.

Aima took a deep breath to calm herself before returning her sights to Mia. “I am grateful, Princess Mia. I simply wished to return the favor...”

“My! In that case, I believe we can trust you.”

Given Aima’s attitude until now, it would probably be fine to trust her. She had nothing to gain from sending her wolves after Mia. Abel’s presence was also enough to inspire confidence in her safety.

“So, what do you say, Abel?”

Abel hesitated before responding. “Sure. If that is your wish, I will accompany you.”

Thus, Mia immediately got to searching for a horse to use for their adventure.

“Hm, I wonder. Oh, this one looks perfect!”

The horse she approached was one she had gotten to know already. It was the Mia ver. Horse, lazily munching away at some grass. Mia approached it with a smile.

“This horse is quite the gentleman. It protected me with its life when we were

attacked earlier. It's ever so deserving of praise!"

After spending a good time lauding the horse, Mia approached the guard who was brushing it, a man named Gorka.

"Could you inform me of this horse's name?"

Gorka was a senior member of the Princess Guard. Originally a member of the Imperial Guard, he was no virtuoso with a sword, but he sure was with horses. Ludwig saw his promise, and now, he was responsible for the care of all the horses in the Princess Guard.

"I am glad to hear your praises, Your Highness. This horse is named Dongfeng."

"Dongfeng? What a unique name. Where does it come from?"

"'Dongfeng' is a word that means 'Eastern Wind.' If I remember correctly, he was named in the hope it would make him as quick and nimble as the wind that blows from the East. However..."

"I see. How elegant." Deep in thought, Mia looked into Dongfeng's face.

He looks as spaced-out as he always does. He doesn't seem to be the type to understand what it means to be elegant at all.

"All right, I've decided. I've taken quite a liking to his relaxed nature. Might I take him out riding, Gorka?"

"He's perfect for the task. I'm sure he will provide a relaxing ride."

Gorka showed no signs of surprise at being called by name. Princess Mia had memorized the names of all her Princess Guard, and it was popular talk amongst the squad. But while he may not have been caught off guard, it still very much pleased him.

"Wait just a moment. I will equip his saddle."

Wanting to ensure Mia had as smooth a ride as possible, Gorka went through the movements of fitting the horse with natural thoroughness. After his work was finished, Gorka gave a deep bow.

"Please enjoy yourself."

“I will. Thank you.”

Thus, Mia set out with Abel into the plains.

It bears mentioning that afterwards, Dion and Aima accompanied them as guards, and Bel, Citrina, and Rafina accompanied them as curious onlookers, all five following close behind. Of course, however, they never caught Mia’s notice.

Chapter 21: This Was *Definitely* Mia

A clear field spread as far as the eye could see. The blades of grass appeared almost gold in color as a serene breeze blew through them, causing them to rustle. The plains spread so far into the distance that they resembled the surface of a lake, ripples running through it. The wind knew no limits as it left its mark on the fields, carrying with it the refreshing scent of greenery. A short wall could be seen in the distance, and it separated the foliage below from the blue sky above. Punctuated here and there with white clouds, it was so blue that it left one feeling worriless.

Strolling through these plains was a single horse. A young man and woman sat atop it. The latter was behind, and she squinted her sapphire eyes at the sun's gentle rays. She held down her hair with one hand as it danced in the wind, her mouth in a cheerful grin.

Just to be absolutely clear, this was *not* the view of an elusive noble woman. It was *Mia's* view, and her actions proved as much.

"Oho ho! The clouds above us look just like sheep! One sheep, two sheep..." she mumbled.

Yes, this was definitely *Mia*. It could be no one else! F.A.T.! (QED!)

Putting such inconsequential musings aside, Mia ver. Horse (A.K.A. Dongfeng) was lazily carrying Abel and Mia through the grass. It is worth mentioning Abel was sitting in front, while Mia was in the back, looking as though she were attempting to play the "heroine." It was incredibly difficult to believe that the very same young woman had been counting sheep-shaped clouds just a moment before.

You see, her ability to shift gears was one of Mia's strengths.

Oho! Still, this brings me back. I remember the first time I rode a horse...there was an absolutely exquisite atmosphere between us! I wasn't accustomed to riding horseback, and Abel kindly supported me. We looked into each other's eyes atop the horse's back, declaring our love for one another...

A small bit of falsification had been taken up within Mia's memories. Well, anyways...

Still, Abel...seems to have grown quite a bit.

Mia stared into Abel's back. The first time the two had ridden together, it still had the delicate lines of a young boy, but now, what Mia saw had been refined. It had the air of a brave knight set on protecting his princess.

I almost want to run away, just like this. Oho! We could run away together, in love!

It was unclear what exactly they would be running from, but Mia was certainly at the age where one dreams of such things. Yes, Mia was a young woman of fifteen. A pure young lady. Wait, a young lady...? Yes, a young lady!

Hmph. I felt quite comfortable the last time we rode together, but this is even more pleasing! He's riding as if to protect me. How satisfying!

With such thoughts leaving her desire for romance completely satisfied, Mia used that satisfaction to breech Abel a question.

"Hey, Abel... What exactly has been troubling you?"

"Hm?"

His voice slightly stiff, Abel didn't turn back to face her. Ever since he had spoken with Malong, Mia had noticed that Abel was acting a bit *off*. It was true even today; until Mia had spoken with him, he had been aloof and reticent.

Abel was a gentleman. Even on a horseback ride like this, he would make the effort to talk to her so she wouldn't fall to boredom. He was considerate. But today, even that part of him had fallen silent. This weighed greatly on Mia's mind.

"Please don't feign ignorance. You've been acting strange since yesterday."

"Have I? That wasn't my intention..." He gave a slight glance behind him, which Mia responded to with an enthusiastic nod.

"Just one glance was enough for me to tell that something was wrong."

Those words finally put a smile on Abel's face. "Really, now...? I can't hide

anything from you, can I?" He sighed. "In truth, I heard something from Malong. He said that the man who led the wolves had been spotted with my sister."

"The man who led the wolves? You don't mean..."

"It seems that Malong doesn't know the details either. He had heard it from someone else, and the person who saw them is from a different clan..."

"I see... How worrying. By your sister, you mean Princess Clarissa, correct?" asked Mia, various names of Remno's royal family floating in her mind.

Abel shook his head. "No... It wasn't her. Valentina is the one they saw him with."

"Huh? But Princess Valentina..."

Abel met Mia's inquisitive look with a nod. "Yes. Valentina's dead. She died five years ago, and yet..." Abel cut off his words. "They never found her body."

"Huh...?"

"She fell from a cliff. The remnants of her carriage were discovered days later, so they concluded that she and everyone else riding with her had passed away. They thought...that her body had probably been eaten by wild animals...since there were wolves wandering the vicinity..." After spitting out those words, he finally turned to look toward Mia. "My dead sister was seen with the wolfmaster. I came to the Equestrian Kingdom to determine the truth of that claim."

He appeared to be on the verge of tears, and for some reason, this caused Mia's heart to twinge. She needed to say something. She racked her brain, panicked, yet the words that finally left her lips were incredibly mundane.

"...How wonderful."

"Huh?" Abel looked shocked, as if he had been ambushed.

Mia spoke her next words slowly, wanting to make sure they reached him. "It's wonderful that your sister, who you believed to be dead, is actually alive."

Saying it out loud filled Mia with conviction. Yes, such a circumstance was certainly wonderful.

“That’s something to smile about,” she continued. “You should be happy, Abel.”

Even if Abel’s sister was with the Chaos Serpents, she was still alive, and as such, they could talk things out. They could *interact* with one another. Maybe, just maybe, they could bring her back to sanity. However, had she indeed perished, even that would be beyond them.

“You should smile, Abel,” repeated Mia.

After several moments of silence, Abel spoke. “I-I see... So it’s okay for me...to smile...”

“Yes, it is! So you need to cheer up!” affirmed Mia. “And I simply *must* greet your sister—even if I have to push people around to get there!”

I need to take this opportunity to gain a comrade in my sister-in-law! thought Mia, ready to take control!

Chapter 22: In the Kingdom of Remno...

For now, we turn the clock just a bit backwards in time.

While previously unmentioned, a corner of the royal castle in Remno was home to a training ground exclusive to the royal family. As a country devoted to military affairs, they sought suitable strength in their nobility. Thus, the men of the royal family polished their sword arms here both day and night. Currently, the kingdom's First Prince, Gain Remno, was single-mindedly swinging his sword. Holding it above his head, he forced it downwards with all his might. It was the first—and thus, the most basic—of stances within Remno's art of swordsmanship.

Raise. Stomp. Swing. These movements should be as fast as the wind, sharp enough to cut through water, and strong enough to crush stone. Through its repetition, Gain sought to polish that strike ever further to completion. In doing so, he was also putting in a similar effort as his younger brother, Abel, once had.

Someone spoke out to him. "Ha! I see Your Highness is working incredibly diligently."

"Grammateus." Gain stopped his movements to turn to face the elderly man standing near the ground's entrance. "I hear you're accompanying Abel as his guard."

"Yes, I will be taking my leave in two days' time, so I came to bid you farewell."

"Hmph." Gain tossed his sword aside and shrugged. "Seriously. All I wanted was to beat a lesson into my brat of a younger brother, but here I am, completely lost in this."

He wiped his face with a tug of his sleeve. Beads of sweat had formed on his forehead from the long time he had spent training.

"I see. Having a goal is vital to the process. I can find nothing wrong if the two of you are making use of this opportunity to better each other."

Some teachers might preach the need to first clean your heart, and then

swing your sword with resolve, yet such unrealistic ideals never found their way to Grammateus's lips. Swordsmanship was a skill of conquest. All that it required was to train your body and attack with the most apt movement. No matter how vile the reason that brought Gain to these grounds, Grammateus would not deny it. If it led to his strength, there was nothing to find fault with.

Though, at the moment, there were *other* reasons that brought Gain here...

Grammateus gazed at him calmly, as if he could see straight through him. Perhaps Gain took offense at this, for he picked up his fallen sword and threw it in Grammateus's direction.

"It's been a while. Could you spare a second to train me, Sir Grammateus, o great sword instructor?" spat out a very sarcastic Gain.

"Ha! It would bring me the deepest of pleasures to see the results of my instruction, Your Highness." Grammateus got into stance with a hearty grin. "I shall be your opponent."

Before those words had even left Grammateus's lips, Gain launched himself forward. His hands raised above his head, he swung downwards. It was the same strike that had become Abel's surefire technique. The swing came at Grammateus with a thunderous roar, but he calmly caught it with his own blade.

"Hmph. That was quite the excellent strike." He pushed it aside and retook his previous stance. "A surprise attack with such resolve would be enough to fell the average opponent with a single strike. Of that, I am certain."

Gain remained silent and stepped forwards once more. Another strike. However, just like the one before, it didn't reach Grammateus.

"...So this is easy for you."

"Ha ha ha! I am the 'great sword instructor,' after all."

Gain sneered at Grammateus's hearty laugh.



“You said my strike was ‘excellent’...but how does it compare to Abel’s? Well, I guess there’s not much use asking *you* that.”

“Oh? Do you mean to imply that I have misjudged Prince Abel’s skills?”

“You’re the kind of bastard who could easily lie about your judgments to try to get me to train, aren’t you?”

“How unexpected. My aim is simply to carry out my role as your swordsmanship instructor with the utmost of faith. Yet, there is frank simplicity in that swing, is there not?”

“Probably just because I never thought I’d lose to my little brother. It really! Pisses me! Off!”

This time, he swung his blade upward with force. Grammateus deflected it with a simple turn of his body and nodded in understanding.

“Ah, indubitably. While true that in terms of pure talent, it would be illogical for Your Highness to lose that battle, Prince Abel *did* make up for that gap with pure effort. Prince Abel’s sword has grown so refined it is hard to recognize it these days!” Grammateus laughed.

Gain gave a grumpy sneer. “I never thought I would live to hear you say those words, Grammateus.”

“Oh? What does Your Highness mean to imply?”

“Filling in the gap of talent with effort... What a farce,” spat Gain.

Grammateus furrowed his brow. “Oh? Have I upset your spirits?”

Gain gritted his teeth. “I was just remembering something unpleasant—a stupid woman, who worked harder than anyone else to stand up against the unjust only to end up dead.”

He swung his sword again. This time, it lacked its earlier simplicity. It was a cunning strike from the middle stance that would trick his opponent. This was the natural way of Gain’s swordsmanship.

“You taught my sister, so I’m sure you already know this, but she cut no corners with her training. She worked harder than anyone else to learn the

sword, and she gained enough skill that no one in the castle could even hold a candle to her. And it wasn't just that. Studies, proper manners—when it came to *anything*, my sister worked harder than anyone else. And yet, she died. Without accomplishing any of the tasks she set out for herself, she *died*! Way before her time should've been up. Her life was in vain. It was meaningless!"

He stepped forward, and struck. And then, he did it again—or, at least, he made his opponent *think* so. Right then, he retreated. He was attempting to use sporadic movements to get Grammateus to lower his guard. But this was the "Sword Saint," after all. To him, this was mere child's play. With all his attacks easily defended, Gain was left with a self-deprecating smile on his face.

"The idea that you can make up differences in talent with effort is stupid. It's idiotic! If that was the case...my sister would still be here." Gain threw his sword aside. "What a waste of time. Now I'm all sweaty."

He gave a snort of displeasure and left. Grammateus, stroking his chin, watched him go.

"Ah, indeed... It appears that Prince Gain is still bound by the ghost of his deceased sister."

Chapter 23: The Curious Onlookers

“By the way, Dion Alaia, I believe I stated that my wolf, Hasuki, would act as a guard. Why have you come with us?”

Dion met Aima’s glare with a grimace. “Hm... Well, I guess it’s since I’m Her Highness’s sword.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“The princess earned your trust by giving you hers, no questions asked. While praiseworthy, that’s just the way she handles things. It’s her job. And I’ve got my own job too. That’s all there is to it... Oh.” Dion grinned. “It’s just like that wolf of yours over there.”

His outstretched finger pointed toward a rustling spot in the grass. Looking carefully, she could see the black coat of one of her wolves. You know, the one that was supposed to be completely hidden from sight. Aima slowly turned toward Dion, who gave her an inquisitive look in response.

“How frightening!” Aima yelped, slightly put off. “Dion Alaia, there is one more thing I wish to ask you. Just how did you learn of my wolf’s position?”

She had yet to find him herself. With that fact left unspoken, Dion looked at her in confusion. “Huh? Wouldn’t anyone know that? I guess it would be most accurate to say I sniffed it out?”

“How frightening!” Now, Aima was *completely* put off. “Your nose is so sharp... Wait, could it be?! Are you one of those legendary ‘werewolves’ who transforms into a wolf come nightfall?”

“Miss Aima, I’d advise not thinking so thoroughly about Dion Alaia.” It was Citrina who called out to Aima, who had grown completely flustered. She pontificated further as if she were an “anti-Dion” specialist. “Dion Alaia’s military skills are above reasoning. Attempting to understand is futile. If you ever find yourself in a fight against him, your odds of survival are somewhat higher if you stop your struggle and instead surrender.”

“I see... I shall keep that in mind.”

At her docile response, Dion couldn't help but grimace. "You're quite scathing, Lady Yellowmoon."

This time, it was Bel who piped up. "That's right! General Dion is super impressive, so he can easily find something as easy as a hidden wolf! He can take on ten thousand enemy troops alone, so of course he'd be able to do that!"

She puffed out her chest in triumph, but Dion only scratched his check with a troubled look on his face. "I'm not a 'General'... Plus, I think ten thousand would be too many, even for me."

Still, Aima could only keep her next question to herself—if ten thousand would be too many, could he still take on *one* thousand? For a moment, that terrifying image crept into her mind, but she quickly chased it off, instead turning to face the three noble ladies.

"Let us put that aside. Why have the two of you followed? I believe Dion Alaia and I are enough for protection..."

Her line of sight shifted between them. First to Bel, whose reasoning was easy to guess, then to Citrina, who clearly just thought it would be fun to spend time with Bel, and then to Rafina, who nodded, put on a chaste smile, and opened her mouth to speak the words she had been long awaiting to say. Well, she *tried* to, but...

"That should be obvious. It's because we're curious! We get to see the love story of gra—Miss Mia, Great Sage of the Empire. Who wouldn't be interested in that?" Bel interrupted with her incredibly *frank* opinion! She gallantly admitted that pure curiosity had brought her here. And then... "Isn't that right, Miss Rafina?"

She stuck the question on Rafina! Her deflection had no restraint or forgiveness. This was pure brutality.

"Uh...mhm..."

Rafina was lost for words. It would be easy to explain it all away. An excuse would be easy to hit upon—should she try to look for it. However, Rafina could not speak in falsehoods. She was the Holy Lady, and thus, it was simply out of

the question. She could be extremely *roundabout* with her words, but they could never be complete lies. Thus, her answer required deliberation. As soon as Aima had breached the question, Rafina had surmised that the conversation would follow down this route. Thus, she had long been considering her answer.

Could she state that she knew it would be dangerous for her friend to go horse riding alone...? This was true, but even if Mia were to be attacked by an assassin, Rafina couldn't do anything about it herself. Perhaps she could say that she was worried about Mia being alone with Abel...? No, she knew that Abel was a gentleman. Implying otherwise was a slight on both of them. It was true that she had her qualms, but this wasn't an excuse she could use. Thus, she cast aside such faulty answers, even though they weren't necessarily untrue.

She racked her brain, which had the power to think up unfathomable plots. Should she wish for it, she could raise an army that could conquer the whole continent and beat any resisting forces to a pulp. And now, her brain was running at full gear trying to finagle an excuse as to why she was currently spying on her friend. It had finally brought her an answer, but it was as soon as she went to say it out loud that Bel had intruded with an answer of her own.

The form of the question Bel had forced on her was also troubling. Bel did not state her *own* reasoning to *then* ask what Rafina's was. No, instead she was asking if she had explicitly stated Rafina's reasoning. In other words, her options for an answer had been reduced to simply "yes" or "no."

There was no escape!

Bel stared at her with the glittering eyes of an angel.

There were no words that could save her!

Rafina so rarely faced such anguish, and ultimately, the words that escaped her mouth were, "Yes! Does that surprise you?" She had gone on the offensive! She stuck out her chest triumphantly. "I wish to see how my friend reacts to romance. Do you find that strange?" She looked completely serious. Making her resolve, she also screamed, "Oh, so be it!" inside her mind, but no one there sought to question her further.

"Yes, I am also interested in the romance of my dear friend. I understand your feelings well, Holy Lady," stated Aima.

“Just like I thought, Miss Rafina felt the same way!” exclaimed Bel.

Her friends voiced similar opinions, and while she found it unexpected, there was something that pleased her about it as well. As she froze, lost for words, someone else entered the conversation.

“My, what brings you all out here?”

It was Mia, who had been the subject of said conversation. Riding in front of her was Abel, and the two of them wore beaming smiles.

Chapter 24: Mia Takes the Lead!

After Mia and Abel's tryst, Mia and co. arrived at the edge of the forest that hid the village of the Fire Clan without incident (well, unless you count Rafina's extreme excitement for the pajama parties that took place in the carriages each night). The verdant forest was overgrown with foliage, the leaves of trees so dark in color they appeared almost black. The group stopped right at its entrance, and Aima alighted from her carriage to trot her way up to it.

"This way. It is hard to see, but there is a path."

Mia and her guards followed after her. Given her position, Mia had no need to do so, yet she couldn't stop herself. The forest was calling to her. No, it was the *mushrooms* that lurked within which were calling!

This is a new forest, after all! As a professional, it is only natural that I would want to inspect the mushrooms hiding within it! My mushroom meister blood is boiling...

Mia gave a boisterous nod before getting back on track. "Does the Fire Clan reside in the forest in order to hide from the Equestrian Kingdom?"

Aima assented. "Initially, I believe this was the case. However, to my knowledge, we have not been striving to completely hide ourselves. There are twelve clans in the Equestrian Kingdom. Thus, at times, we sneak into the plains to let our horses graze. Additionally, we sometimes claim to be from one of the twelve clans to conduct foreign trade."

"I see..."

This explanation made perfect sense to Mia. Quarrels between ancestors in the distant past were not a major concern of the people living now. Thus, even if the Fire Clan were found, it would not result in a large conflict. At least, that's what Mia had surmised.

The path she pointed out was well-hidden, but also quite wide, so much so that a carriage could probably traverse it, proving Aima's words. This meant that the road must be traveled on quite regularly. In other words, it proved that

the Fire Clan did not simply hermit themselves deep inside the forest.

Under Aima's guidance, the carriages took off once again. After around half an hour of traveling down a dim and windy road, the path suddenly opened, revealing the Fire Clan's rustic village. Huts made from trees dotted the landscape, and horses could be seen within an enclosure.

Hm... This is quite similar to the village of the Lulus I once visited. The only notable difference is the horses...

A variety of horses were looking at the group, perhaps curious about the unfamiliar carriages. Some stared with clear eyes, others twitched their ears in alarm, and more yet fluttered their nostrils as if to attempt to cover someone with a sneeze. Amazingly, relatives of Kuolan existed here too. Or, at least, it appeared that way.

"How odd. It's as if no one is here," stated Mia.

The village was completely silent. All that could be heard were the breaths of the horses. The sounds that accompanied people as they carried out their daily lives were nowhere to be found.

"I have returned! Where is everyone?" Worried, Aima raised her voice.

"Aima! You're not injured?" A young woman rushed over from the shadow of one of the huts. Others followed her.

"No, I am fine. I apologize for worrying you all," responded Aima with a grin.

Seeing Aima surrounded by comrades, Mia let out a sigh of admiration. "Hmph... I see you're quite popular, Miss Aima."

"Lady Aima, are you all right?"

"We were all worried some bad man had come and tricked you! Has anything been stolen from you?"

"I believe I told you this before, but not everyone who offers you tasty food is a good person. You're too naive—er, *innocent*!"

The conversation revealed the love everyone had for her. However, it was mostly young women that surrounded her, save for a few elders and children.

“How strange... Given the village’s population, there seems to be quite a dearth in young men,” muttered Ludwig, a puzzled look on his face.

Mia nodded. “Yes, good point. Perhaps the pillaging squad Aima led are still out.”

“I see. That is a possibility.” Ludwig gave his assent, but he folded his arms in thought. During the midst of the discussion, a particularly elderly woman appeared, and Aima rushed over to greet her. Then, she began to fill the others in as to what happened until now.

“What?! Those of the Forest Clan came to...”

“There’s no way.”

“Why would we rely on them after so long?”

The crowd fell into uproar. At the same time, Malong and the others of the Forest Clan were making their wariness apparent—one of Aima’s warrior wolves had just shown itself.

“One of the Fire Clan’s wolves...”

It circled those of the Fire Clan as if to act as their guard. Once Aima had entered the village, it had quietly revealed itself from the brush. Despite knowing it had been accompanying them, seeing it in person had even Malong on edge. The two groups locked glares, the trepidation they shared dominating the atmosphere. Meanwhile, Mia was...

My, I’ve grown quite famished. I think it’s about time we had dinner.

Rubbing her stomach! Fundamentally, Mia was nothing more than a collaborator. With the Forest Clan being the ones to provide these provisions, *they* were the ones who were offering their aid. Thus, Mia had no right to butt into the conversation between the two clans. Nor was she able to do anything to get their conversation started.

“Your Highness, why don’t you return to the carriages for some rest? I’m sure these talks will drag on, and it will take time to unload the supplies as well. You and your friends should go ahead and have your meal now.”

Despite her guard’s consideration, Mia shook her head. “No, that won’t do.”

Doing as such would be arrogant. Partaking in meals first while those before them starved would incur the people's enmity. It was true that with the current situation, the Princess Guard were the main military force. Thus, they could use their influence to control what they wanted, meaning a bit of selfishness would probably be overlooked. However, Mia thought differently.

I cannot allow myself to be arrogant here. The arrogance that comes from power is fated to be overthrown with power...

If the main forces of the Fire Clan were to return, there was a decent possibility that the current power dynamic would be turned on its head. While doubtful that they had anyone who could rival Dion, if the power balance were to change, there was a high risk that partaking in anything arrogant would come back to bite them.

Thus, Mia thought one—or even two!—steps ahead. She needed to be modest, to act with humility to prepare for any possible shift in the balance of power. Even if the main forces of the Fire Clan were to return and her own forces were still more powerful, acting modestly would have no repercussions.

People must reap the benefits of the seeds they've sown themselves. It would be ridiculous to think I'd be forgiven for ignoring the starving populace to partake in a feast myself! Plus, I don't think the food from such a feast would taste very good anyway... Thus, I should refrain from eating now. What I need to do is at least make it look *like I'm working!*

All the foodstuffs they brought were from the Forest Clan. Since Mia would be partaking in them, she couldn't skimp on the labor. She needed to work and *earn* the right to eat!

"Well, I am sure that there are discussions to be had between Malong and his soldiers and those of the Fire Clan. Why don't I and the others begin carrying over the supplies? Of course, I will be helping out as well." This was Mia's plan.

"No, Your Highness. Please, go and rest inside the carriages. Lady Rafina is there as well," requested one of her guards, panicked.

"I will not. I refuse to allow myself to do nothing here. I want to help for the sake of those who are starving in front of us."

Those faced with hunger are incredibly narrow-minded. Mia didn't want them to pick any fights with her later!

Modestly. Humbly... I need to make it look like I'm working!

Ready to give her all, Mia reached for a box. However, it was a tad heavy. She took another one instead.

In any case, Mia's actions put everyone else into action as well. With their master working, the Princess Guard couldn't sit around on their laurels. Rafina, Bel, Citrina, and Abel followed after Mia as well. With that, those of the Fire and Forest Clans could no longer complain. Watching the adults begin to work, the children began to help as well. This, after all, was an issue that faced the Fire Clan. It would be preposterous to watch a foreign princess put sweat on her brow while they simply sat about. Swallowing their unease, those of the two divided clans got into action.

Thus, the amicable atmosphere that accompanies group efforts began to take hold, no matter how awkward it may be. Together, they put their sweat and tears into the same goal. The goal to...

"Come, everyone! A tasty dinner is awaiting us. Let's give this our all!" declared Mia, taking the lead.

Eat some tasty food! To have a seat at the banquet! The time they spent working was incredibly delightful—they were preparing for a festival!

Chapter 25: Mia Declares That Food Shall Be Eaten Warm!

My, that was quite tiring. I'm starving...

Mia took a seat on the matting that had been laid in the center of the village and sighed.

"I'm sure you're exhausted, milady. I'll bring you something to eat right away!"

"Thank you, Anne. That would be wonderful." After sending Anne off, Mia sighed once again. She had grown so famished that her energy levels had completely depleted. Since she had begun her laborious efforts on a slightly empty stomach, her thickness had left her—she was faced with the danger of losing her F.A.T.

Oho ho! Still, facing hunger isn't all bad, especially when food is laid out before you.

That's right, hunger was the ultimate seasoning, leading Mia's anticipation of her meal to ever greater heights.

"Here you are, milady. This looked especially appetizing."

"Thank you. Oh, how right you are, Anne! It *does* look incredibly scrumptious!"

As soon as the words had left her mouth, Mia snatched the item, which resembled flatbread, from Anne's grasp. A combination of yogurt and wheat had been grilled, and it was wrapped in large, dried herbs. The dish was called "yonaan." It was baked crispy, and inside it were countless pieces of smoked meat and their seeping juices. Mia couldn't help but gulp at the sight.

Well then, time to dig in!

Mia opened her mouth to take a bite, but she was promptly interrupted.

"May I speak with you, Princess Mia?" Aima had appeared with incredibly

unfortunate timing. Plus, she had the old woman who appeared to be the village leader in tow!

“Your Highness, Princess of Tearmoon, there are no words to express my deep gratitude.”

The old woman bowed before her. Given these circumstances, it was only natural that they all introduce themselves, and the fact had Mia cursing under her breath. Remember, those faced with hunger are incredibly narrow-minded.

Hm... I’d like to keep any complicated discussions for after my meal.

Self-introductions were dangerous. Forgetting a name after hearing it once would be discourteous. And Mia’s intuition from past experiences was telling her that she would need to remember this woman’s name. But right now, Mia just wanted to eat! Her stomach had been letting out a forlorn cry ever since she had included herself in the earlier efforts. Thus, she wanted nothing more than to focus on her food in complete silence.

Of course, she did understand how the old woman must feel. And of course, Mia had some negative thoughts on the matter, such as, “Hey, can’t you see I’m trying to eat right now?! Why are you talking to me?!” But that was different. Being dilatory with introducing oneself was itself a breach of manners.

Plus, there was the sequence to consider. Who would introduce themselves first? It would only be natural that it be Mia or Rafina. However, given the commotion Mia made earlier, the responsibility would naturally fall on her. See, she really *did* understand the current situation, but she still couldn’t help but think, “Why now?!” And so...her dissatisfaction ended up falling right out of her mouth!

“Why don’t we put an end to this? It’s all so incredibly silly...”

That’s right, she called the conversation “silly”! Not wanting to use her head, her true thoughts very faithfully revealed themselves. For a moment, Mia’s brain attempted to revitalize itself. It combusted the last bit of sugar that could be found within her body, her thoughts turning at top speed. Under those conditions, the Great Sage of the Empire hit upon the following words...

“First, let us eat. We can save the discussions for later. I am sure you are

famished as well.” First, she made it sound as if she was saying these things for *their* sakes. “Not to mention, all this hard work has made me hungry as well. I feel as if I’m on the verge of passing out.” Then, she added a bit of how she truly felt!

They do say that the key to telling a good lie is to mix in a bit of truth. I believe this should be enough to fool them.

And then, she smiled. “So, let’s save any serious discussions for after we eat. It would be a waste for all this warm food to grow cold.”

That was also the truth. Mia wanted to eat her food while it was still piping hot!

The words had the old woman’s eyes widened in shock. “Ha! You have indeed pointed out a simple truth. Aima, let us both eat for now. Watching Her Highness eat should let the children eat in peace as well.”

With that, Aima glanced at Mia. “I am deeply thankful.”

“There is no need to be. I just want to enjoy my food while it’s at its most delicious. That is all.” With an amicable smile, Mia made sure to emphasize her previous words as well. “We all worked hard today. I believe we have all earned the right to fill our stomachs.” After once again emphasizing that she was only eating *after* doing labor and *not* displaying any arrogance, Mia once again opened her mouth wide, biting down on the edge of the yonaan in her hands.

Crunch! A thick cheese spread across her tongue. Having been cooked, it was incredibly aromatic, and it left a mild sourness on her palate. Then, the hot juices from the meat crescendoed on her tongue, creating a trio of flavors that made music in her mouth. Trying to expel the heat from her mouth, Mia puffed out some breaths. Still, her face was adorned with a smile. “Ah... How wonderful. This tastes absolutely amazing.”

Then, something caught her attention—everyone was staring at her.



“My, what is it? If you don’t eat quickly, the food will grow cold.”

Those words finally put her onlookers—enraptured by Mia’s hearty indulgence in her food—into motion. Thus began a banquet of pure delights, the warmth of which was enough to begin to melt the reserve that existed between the Forest and Fire clans.

That night, the great judgments of Princess Mia’s Banquet shone as brightly as the moon.

Chapter 26: Conspiracy

It was a place that had been lost to time, the castle ruins that the High Priestess of the Serpents had made her home. There, in a room that had once been used as the king's audience chamber, the priestess was reading her holy book: *The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*.

"So, you're reading *that* again," said the wolfmaster with an exasperated sigh as he entered the room. "You have read it so often. I am surprised you haven't grown sick of it."

"I'll never grow sick of it." She gave the book a loving caress. "Whoever wrote this knew people extremely well. With the eyes of malice, they've certainly recorded the true nature of humanity rather splendidly. I discover something new each time I read it. It's incredibly hard to stop." She kept her eyes trained on the book. "So, what is it that brings you here?"

"I have a report. The sparks set by Kunlou in Sunkland did not grow into a flame. Prince Sion is perfectly well, and while there are rumors that King Abram had fallen sick for a spell, he is currently fulfilling his duties as he always has. The second prince, Echard, has left Sunkland and is currently under the auspices of the Greenmoons, the daughter of which has become his betrothed."

"I see. So, there was a flame, but it did not grow into a conflagration. How unfortunate."

She spoke those words nonchalantly before flipping through her book. The wolfmaster furrowed his brow as he watched.

"Your attitude betrays such emotion..."

"Hm, I don't believe so, but I suppose you're right. This outcome doesn't change much, anyway. Had Prince Sion or Prince Echard perished, we would have ways to make use of the chaos that it sparked, but them surviving leaves other doors open for us as well." She paused. "This is simply coming to me now, but we could find a way to approach the kindhearted Prince Echard. He was ousted from his kingdom, and thus, he must have made some grave error. Can

we not use this as a chance to wedge ourselves into his heart?”

“I wonder...” said the wolfmaster, his face unflinching. “It appears that the Great Sage of the Empire was involved.”

At those words, the High Priestess finally removed her eyes from her book, her mouth agape.

“Impressive.” She began to clap. “Kunlou was an excellent shaman. And yet, she sniffed out his scheme... How truly admirable. I wonder how she accomplished that. Why did she visit Sunkland with such apt timing, and how did she interrupt his plan?”

Seeing the priestess had fallen into thought, the wolfmaster spoke. “I have another piece of bad news. Aid from the Forest Clan has reached the hidden village of the Fire Clan. It appears that Aima has fallen into the hands of our enemy.”

“Hah... I would expect nothing else of your little sister. Unlike you, her tongue slips easily.” She snickered before bowing her head. “Truly unfortunate. I was eagerly awaiting our next tea party, but it seems like such a chance has escaped me.” She shrugged.

“The boy you have long awaited for, Abel Remno, is with them.”

Those words had the High Priestess—Valentina Remno—smiling from the depths of her heart. “Hee hee! So we were able to lure him in, after all. He really was close with Lin Malong. I wasn’t expecting him to accompany the Forest Clan, but this shan’t prove to be a problem, shall it?”

The sighting of Valentina Remno was, of course, information she had leaked herself. This scheme had been set in place ever since the night they had planned to assassinate Mia—ever since they discovered that the relationship between Mia Luna Tearmoon and Abel Remno was not merely for show, but strong enough that they would risk their lives for one another. Valentina had hatched the plan herself after carefully examining the actions of Barbara, as well as Mia’s reaction *to* those actions.

“If he dies, we can warp the Great Sage of the Empire.”

The plan was to assassinate Abel Remno. Hearing those words put a slight

scowl on the wolfmaster's face.

"Does it not pain you to take the life of your younger brother?"

Valentina tilted her head. "Why, what do you mean? Of course it does. Did you think it didn't? I find it incredibly sorrowful. Abel is kind and unlike the rest of my old countrymen, respectable. In fact, I would like to ask Princess Mia just *why* she had to get so close to him. It's illogical that he would have to perish. There's nothing more heartrending than this." It was doubtful that she was joking. Instead, she probably *was* feeling genuine sorrow. "Yet...this is a trivial matter. On the stage of human history, human emotion is nothing of concern." Her eyes were trained far off into the distance. "Personal feelings, the life of a single person, the destruction of a town or village, even countries rising to power, within the torrent of history... It is all trivial. My feelings are of little consequence."

"'Serpents will control history by ruling people's hearts.' Is that not the saying?"

"It is. My grief is of little concern. As such, driving Princess Mia to despair will have a great effect on history. Barbara was incredibly discerning. Princess Mia stands in the center of those who will serve as the next rulers of this continent, so warping her heart will have drastic consequences."

"In that case, why not target Princess Mia instead?"

"What do you mean by that?" Valentina gave him a puzzled look.

"It seems that Princess Mia has accompanied the reinforcements sent by the Forest Clan, along with the Holy Lady Rafina and the daughter of the traitorous Yellowmoons. There is also a girl who claims to be the princess's younger sister. Why not take a simpler route and take the life of the princess herself? In that case, you would have no need to lay your hands on your younger brother."

The High Priestess met his solemnity with a winsome smile. "Pft! How kind of you. Still, that plan would require you to win against Dion Alaia." She paused for a moment. "Though...you have a point. Perhaps I should welcome such a change in situation. It would increase the scope of our available actions. Let's think on it."

She once again returned her eyes to her book.

Chapter 27: To Ask After His Older Sister

The next day, Mia sluggishly got herself out of bed with a yawn after spending the previous night in her carriage. Stretching her arms and then patting her stomach, she realized something. “How odd. Ever since I started partaking in yogurt, my health has been excellent.”

Hearing her inward mumblings, Anne rushed to consult with both Ludwig and Malong to make the arrangements to have fresh yogurt available in the Empire. However, that is a story for another time. Mia’s right hand relatively often gathered foods that would be beneficial to Mia’s health out of her own accord.

In any case, Mia woke up feeling awfully refreshed when Aima came to visit.

“Princess Mia, have you awoken?”

“My, good morning, Miss Aima.”

“Our elder would like to greet you. She asks if it would be okay to visit.”

“My, she plans on coming here?”

It would obviously be undiplomatic to demand that Mia be the one to make the visit. That was perhaps the reason that the elder wished to come.

“Hm... In that case, I will make my way to where she is,” said Mia, casually.

The carriage Mia rode in was made for a princess. Thus, it was incredibly comfortable and completely capable of welcoming guests without issue. However, it was a tad cramped. If this was just a meeting between Mia and the elder, it would prove to be more than large enough. However, adding Rafina, Malong, and Abel to the mix would make for quite the crowd.

I will most likely be the one to be greeted first, however...

In truth, Mia wanted to avoid such a situation, as there were many problems facing her. She would need to ask about not only the state of the Fire Clan’s food reserves, but also about the resumption of relations with the Equestrian Kingdom, as well as the Chaos Serpents. And that all seemed *incredibly* annoying.

I'd prefer for Abel to accompany me, so we could ask about his elder sister. Hmph...

Thus, Mia came up with a proposition.

"That's right! In that case, I'll call for Malong and Rafina as well. We'll make the journey to visit ourselves."

"Ugh... I understand the Holy Lady, but you wish to bring the scum from the Forest Clan as well? If you must, I suppose..." Aima assented, albeit disgruntled. After being blessed with provisions, she had lost her right to refuse. Unexpectedly, those of the Fire Clan had their chance to cause conflict stolen from them.

It had started with simple requests. Why not let the citizens of the Equestrian Kingdom, a country you have deep ties with, lend a hand? Why not let those of the Forest Clan into your village? Why not welcome Rafina and Mia, who are completely removed from the situation? By accepting them, they had been completely robbed of their place to worry. Mia had made her move, and thus, everything had fallen into place.

In addition, there were those who had become close with the Forest Clan, especially the children, who had no particularly hard feelings toward their guests. Thus, things fell like dominoes. By working together, sharing the same food, and being mutually rewarded for their efforts, smiles had been born. Nerves had dissipated, and the atmosphere had fermented into one where spurning statements such as "I will never speak with them!" were hard to make.

Well, it's not certain that talking things out will bear any fruits, but it's those of the Equestrian Kingdom that will have to strive for such an outcome. That's a job for Malong. Still, it would be foolish to let my guard down. I'm the brains of this operation, after all! It would be best if I accompany him.

With those thoughts in mind, Mia dragged Rafina, Malong, Abel—along with Ludwig and Anne—with her to the elder's cottage. For you see, Mia had determined that when faced with difficulty, the more people you could send glances to, the better! It is important to divide both risk and responsibility. That was Mia's motto.

The elder who came to greet Mia last night was inside the cottage along with

Aima and another young woman. She stared at Mia and her crew. The wrinkles formed from her furrowed brow were deep, and her gaze was sharp, her lips locked together. Seeing the stern expression on her face, Mia sighed.

She seems a bit crabby.

Then, memories of the previous night returned to her. During the banquet, she looked to be enjoying her food from the bottom of her heart! Munching on the same dish as Mia, she blew on it to cool it down, her deep *deep* satisfaction clear on her face! Additionally, the old woman had become incredibly jovial after seeing her people relieved from their starvation. Perhaps she had simply been drunk, but she was dancing! Dancing! In incredibly high spirits at that!

This recollection assured Mia of one thing: *Oh! I'm sure she is quite a playful one!*

Despite Mia's more frivolous thoughts, the old woman deeply bowed her head. "I am Ka Louhua, elder of the Fire Clan. Our chief is currently away, and thus, I and his little sister, Aima, are acting in his stead. Princess Mia, Holy Lady Rafina, you have our deep gratitude for your efforts." She then cast a sharp gaze toward Malong. "We have also been saved by the Forest Clan. You have our gratitude as well."

Elder Louhua bowed her head once more. Aima and the other young woman —who seemed to be Louhua's assistant—copied her example. After making their introductions, they jumped straight into the heart of the discussion.

"We are incredibly thankful. You have saved our clan. However, why have you gone through such efforts?" Louhua's tone of voice was grim.

"That should be obvious, no? The Fire Clan and Forest Clans are cousins, born from the same progenitors. It's only natural that we would help each other in times of need," responded Malong.

Louhua chuckled and shook her head. "Please do not make fools of us, youngster of the Forest Clan. You say you have helped us without expectations of recompense, but I do not believe in such naivety. Our clan is not so careless."

Her face was serious. The atmosphere was as heavy as a rock. But Mia...was not perturbed! No, not even a bit! Just last night, this woman had partaken in

her meal with a full-faced smile! Mia had watched as she blew on her food, eating right alongside her.

Had it not been for the feast last night, I would have a completely different image of her. First impressions really are important. Hm, I should do well to keep that in mind... Hm?

Right then, the events of the night before flashed through Mia's mind.

"Why don't we put an end to this? It's all so incredibly silly..."

She had been a bit flippant. *That might not have been good of me to say.* She believed she had covered herself well enough, and she was certain the old woman had laughed as well, but... *I have to keep in mind that I am dealing with an elder. She may possess the magnanimity to ignore the poor manners of the young. She may have laughed, but I cannot deny the possibility that I left a negative impression.*

Mia turned to look toward Ludwig, who stared back at her with a stern gaze. A shiver ran through Mia. If—just *if*—the stupid four-eyes had been watching her conversation the previous night, then...

I-I'm positive he would berate me with a stern lesson! Yes, even the current Ludwig would have given me a scolding for it!

Mia had been starving the night before, but now, she once again viscerally felt that she *might* have made a mistake. Presently, what she needed to do was win the trust of the Fire Clan. Then, she needed to ask about the Serpents. However, there was a high possibility that her actions last night already put her at a disadvantage. This may be what is known as a "fatal mistake."

I need to make up for this somehow! I have to try my best to leave a good impression!

Thus, Mia decided the stance she would take today—rather than "neutral," she was going to be *slightly* on the side of the Fire Clan. With that, she would win their trust. To Mia, a master dancer, such a delicate balance was a piece of cake!

"Aima has stated that friendship is the reason for this aid," the elder continued, "but I am not so wet behind the ears to believe such, and I find it

regrettable that you appear to think I am. I feel the same toward Princess Mia and the Holy Lady as well. You have offered a hand in an attempt to gain something from us... Is that not true?”

“My, that is not the case at all! It is true that Aima is a dear friend of mine, and it is only natural to help a friend who is in need!” First, she stressed —*passionately* stressed—her friendship with Aima. “The same is true for Malong. Is it not natural to offer a hand to brethren in need?”

She saw Malong nod in agreement. With that, she made a firm promise that the Fire Clan would be receiving aid without need for compensation. They would *prove* they would be useful to the Fire Clan.

Next, she glanced at Rafina. Cutting no corners when it came to helping a friend or your brethren would certainly fall under the umbrella of “benevolence,” and thus, it should be the perfect answer for Rafina as well. Mia wanted to affirm her judgment, but instead, it left her looking puzzled. For some reason, Rafina appeared slightly displeased.

My, how odd. I don’t believe I spoke any words she would find offensive...

Then, something else caught Mia’s attention. It was not just Rafina; Louhua seemed unconvinced as well.

J-Just why?! My words should be tempting them, so why do they look so upset? Just what have I done...?

Mia couldn’t stop herself from beginning to panic. She had not expected these reactions, and they were stimulating her sense of impending doom.

I don’t want to believe this may be the case, but...did I really make such a grave mistake yesterday?

She was aware that she had been rude, but did that mean she needed to be more apologetic from the start? Amidst her fluster, someone spoke to her.

“My apologies, Your Highness. Might I speak for a moment?”

The voice was both quiet and completely calm. However, it filled Mia with terror! Turning her head toward the voice, she found Ludwig, the light causing a glint in his glasses. Mia realized something.

Aaah... This was a common occurrence in the previous timeline. Th-This means I must have made such a grave mistake that Ludwig needs to cover for me...

Thoughts ran through Mia's mind. She wondered if it was certain that she would be getting a scolding after this. She begged for a different fate. Yet, this was out of her hands. Being stubborn could usher in circumstances that were even harder to escape from. She couldn't afford to do that either. When Ludwig asked that matters be left to him, it was best to throw *everything* out.

Thus, disheartened and standing on the precipice of resignation and enlightenment, Mia spoke. "In that case, please do, Ludwig."

Thus, she tossed the ball of responsibility over to him. He caught it with a nod and rearranged his glasses. "In that case, while it may be presumptuous of me, I shall speak for Her Highness."

Chapter 28: Ludwig's Rumination

"One must recognize when they should act."

Given the place, the group, and the relationships between those present, one should recognize when it is they should make a move, and then, use their full power to do so. Ludwig believed that those were the only times when one can relish more in the *accomplishment* than the efforts to get there, and he always felt that as a vassal to the Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, he was at quite a disadvantage when it came to discovering his role. Both mentally and morally, Mia was beyond reproach. As both a paragon of wisdom and character, she was a titan—absolute perfection. Thus, a wrong move would only result in making his own presence superfluous.

If she lacked wisdom, Ludwig would give proper advice. If she lapsed in her morals, he only need give her a bold remonstration. However, what kind of guidance could he give to one who was both completely virtuous and incredibly logical in her judgments? Ever since he had begun working for Mia, wondering what role it is she wished him to serve had become a habit of his. Thus, discovering the meaning hidden behind her earlier glance had been simple. Currently, he knew the exact role she wanted him to serve.

Indeed. Given those present, I am the one who should speak as Her Highness's intermediary.

Accepting his role, Ludwig adjusted his glasses, all the while reflecting on the bliss of being able to put his all into the task he was meant to do.

But what exactly was Mia asking of him? Put simply, that was an objective display of merits. In other words, he was to use logic to persuade Louhua, elder of the Fire Clan. When a helping hand is offered in terms of feelings and virtue, courage is required to clasp it. It was impossible to know whether that hand was offered on a whim, and there was no guarantee that it wouldn't later be withdrawn. It was also susceptible to malice; anyone with even the slightest wisdom knew that such things were often too good to be true. Nothing is more expensive than "free." Thus, being wary of such an advantageous offer would

only be natural

Thus, Her Highness is requesting that I present the logical advantages we gain from offering our aid.

Louhua needed to understand this, and even if she already did, it was vital to reveal that they were aware of the advantages to offering her their aid. Of course, Ludwig was also confident that Mia herself was aware of the pros of the situation. In fact, he was certain she may be even *more* aware than he was. Still, Mia couldn't put those into words herself, as it was not an alignment of merits that had tied her and Aima together, but "friendship."

Ludwig recalled the words she had spoken the previous night.

"Why don't we put an end to this? It's all so incredibly silly..."

Mia had definitely spoken those words. But what exactly was so "silly"? Was it the act of making introductions with the leaders of the Fire Clan? No, such slights were beyond Mia. And if they weren't, Ludwig would have to give her a good talking to! However, imagining such a scene left him with a strange feeling. Ludwig having to scold Mia was preposterous, yet somehow, it also felt nostalgic. A bitter smile appeared on his face as he again fell into thought.

Her Highness was not referring to the contents of the conversation Miss Louhua wished to have with her when she used the word "silly." Instead, she was referencing the "common sense" of having to make proper introductions. In other words, the perceived need for proper decorum.

What Mia had found silly was the overbearing propriety she had been showered with as the princess of a mighty empire! She had not come here to receive thanks; she had come here for her dear friend, Aima! And because it was friendship that had brought her here, she felt no need to be treated as a princess. Ludwig had discovered the words that were truly in Mia's heart!

Her Highness wishes to involve herself in the situation for the sake of a single friend.

Aware of the situation, Ludwig had also realized something else—given the circumstance, Mia was unable to speak of merits. It would muddy the bond between her and Aima, and she wished to keep it pure.

An alignment of interests may be easy to agree to, but it is also incredibly fragile—as soon as they begin to slip, a logical judgment could easily upturn the situation. However, judgments based on emotion go above reason. There may be no assurance, but even when there is nothing for the other party to gain, there would be times where they would still extend their hand. That was the bond of friendship, and thus, Mia must have wanted to leave that as the bond that existed between her and Aima.

No, such an explanation may still be leaning too heavily into logic. This could be a simple judgment based on her personal disposition.

Mia was good-natured at heart! Ludwig couldn't help but find this facet of her endearing, and with it currently in his mind, he once again gave a bitter smile.

Though, I wonder if the same could be said for Lord Malong and Lady Rafina?

Malong based his actions on love for his fellow countrymen and Rafina on her faith. They may have had their personal reasons for offering their aid, but an alignment of merit would muddy their intentions. Thus, someone who could objectively explain the merits of offering the Fire Clan their aid was needed.

That is the role Her Highness wishes of me.

Ludwig was completely aware of what he was to accomplish and gently raised his voice. "My apologies, Your Highness. Might I speak for a moment?"

Mia thought for a moment before answering. "In that case, please do, Ludwig."

She nodded as if to tell him that everything had been left in his hands. He couldn't help but feel pleased—it was as if Mia had placed her whole trust in him.

Perhaps I am being a little overzealous. Well...

Needing to get into the right mindset, he adjusted his glasses and let out a breath. Then, he turned his gaze once again to the others in the room.

"Let me once again express my apologies, Elder Louhua," Ludwig began. "I am a retainer to Her Highness. My name is Ludwig Hewitt, and I will be speaking on

behalf of Princess Mia.”

Eyeing him, Mia couldn’t help but let out a small sigh.

My... It seems like I won’t be escaping a scolding after this! I’ve grown quite careless. I would have never been so imprudent when I had just been guillotined! I’ve become quite soft. I need to be more careful... Ah, but scoldings from Ludwig really are the worst. Hm... I do wonder what will be served for lunch today...

After a *tad* of remorse, Mia gallantly turned to escaping from reality. All the while, Ludwig had continued his speech.

“Our extension of aid to your clan is not only based on emotion. The pillaging you turned to in order to relieve your provision issues led to a deterioration to the safety of the region. Cracking down on it was bound to be arduous, and it may have led to fissures in the relationship between Sunkland and the Equestrian Kingdom as well. Still, trying to convince the Fire Clan to stop would be meaningless, and even if such an attempt proved successful, the famine it would result in could have easily turned into a breeding ground for disease.” Calmly and carefully, Ludwig formed his explanation. “I have no sentiments when it comes to your clan, yet I think it is perfectly logical to support you with provisions and give you the skills needed to procure your own food.”

Following Ludwig, Malong spoke as well. “Can’t we be done with this, Elder Louhua? We’re born from the same founder, Kuolong. Are we not the same people? Past troubles drove us apart, but you can’t deny that we’re of the same blood. Once parted, things can still reunite. Isn’t this the perfect opportunity for that?”

His words had the passion needed to send the frozen time moving forward once again. At least, it had seemed that way.

“But...what of the wolves?” That question was so cold, the air between them froze over once again.

“Well...” Malong was lost for words. Ludwig’s face was equally bitter. The issue of the wolves was one that had no easy solution, and despite that, it was also the biggest issue the group currently faced.

“That’d be the very reason that we, the Fire Clan, cannot be together with the other twelve clans, youngster of the Forest Clan. The others of the Equestrian Kingdom have repudiated our taming of our wolves. They despised our ways and sought to have us deny it as well. That remains unchanged, does it not?”

“That is right!” piped in the servant sitting next to Louhua, her face clouded in undeniable anger. “It was *you* who first refused us. The Fire Clan did *not* make the first move. You know not the bounds of the suffering that has caused us. And now, you are requesting we compromise?”

However, there was one who remained silent—Aima. Quietly, she simply stared at the floor in front of her. The questions they asked Malong were ones he could not answer. While his clan was powerful, it was only one of twelve, and Malong merely the son of a single chief. He lacked authority, and thus, he could not be rash. Naturally, they had once again reached a state of deadlock. A heavy silence threatened to fill the air...until it was interrupted by a simple utterance.

“Ah, the horses are crying.” Those words were but a whisper from Mia’s lips. However, just like the ripples of a stone tossed in a pond, they caused a disturbance that drastically shook the room.

“The horses are...crying?”

It was unclear who those words had come from. However, it was the elder, Louhua, who was first able to escape their trance and speak.

“Do you mean to imply...that the discord between us...has left our horses regretful?”

“...Hu-yes?” The weight of Louhua’s question had left Mia nervous, so much so that the word she managed to let out was just a tad *strange*.

While undoubtedly obvious, Mia had continued her flight of fantasy throughout this tense conversation. Her faith in Ludwig was just that strong. With him entering the fray, it was only natural for Mia to conclude that she no longer had a role to play. Thus, she spent the utmost of her efforts running from reality, wondering about lunch or supper, thinking about how much she wanted to eat some mushrooms, and ruminating about the types of mushrooms she

would be able to find in the forest they were currently in.

My, I can't let myself slack! I best pay attention to this conversation...

However, she quickly rethought her actions. You see, Mia was a princess of established reputation when it came to her ability to reflect on her actions. Just before her flight of fantasy, she had just reflected that she needed to be more careful with things!

I need to get myself focused again. I should count something to gather my thoughts. Hm...

Looking to fend off the worldly desire of her appetite, Mia had resolved herself to counting. Unfortunately, there was nothing on hand to count. That is until she found—or rather *heard*—something!

"Ah, the horses are crying."

She had heard the far-off whinnies of a horse!

How perfect! I can count the cries of the horses to refocus myself!

Mia was impressed with herself—the cries of the horses were random, so they would be perfect for focusing her mental concentration! But right as that thought crossed her mind, she noticed something else. Louhua, her servant, Aima, Malong—everyone in the room was staring at her. Lost as to why, a certain question was asked of her.

"Do you mean to imply...that the discord between us...has left our horses regretful?"

A "huh?" was on the verge of escaping her lips, but she stood her ground! She couldn't fall off this precipice, and so, she quickly added a "yes" to her statement, making it a "hu-yes!" Such an impassioned change of trajectory would surely go down in history!

The tension suddenly dropped from Louhua's shoulders.

"Indeed... That may certainly be true," she stated with a strained smile.

Just a single word of Mia's had drastically changed the situation. Such a feat left such a big impact on Ludwig that all he could do was blink. After a moment

of enchantment, he realized that the situation had always been entirely in Mia's hands. He couldn't help but sigh in delight.

Absolutely magnificent! Her Highness had seen through things from the start. She knew exactly what the situation and place required of her...

What could reach the Fire Clan? When they left with their proud wolves, what was the single thing that could still sway them? The answer...was their horses. The Fire Clan was still connected to the Equestrian Kingdom, where horses are viewed as the ultimate fortune gifted by the Holy Deity, as family members deserving of love. Thus, the obvious thing to use was horses, and that was also why Mia had left Ludwig to explain the logical side of things. A phrase like "the horses are crying" is not one for the logical to speak. Had those words of emotion come from a pragmatist, the Fire Clan would assume that Mia and the others had been using horses as a tool to convince them. A logical thinker would never think that a horse would be weeping, but if it would aid their argument, they could easily speak such words. And it would have put off those of the Fire Clan.

Thus, "the horses are crying" was a line that should come from someone who was considered "emotional" or "sensitive." Someone who truly believed that an animal could shed tears needed to be the one to speak it.

That... That must *be why! That is why Her Highness was so steadfast in insisting she was extending her hand out of friendship! After offering the logical explanation of the advantages she had to gain from the situation, she once again needed to force the emotional wall to crumble. Such an exact deployment of words... How brilliant...*

It sent shivers down Ludwig's spine. He was utterly filled with awe!

This will be an excellent story to tell the others later. Hah! I can already feel their envy...

The faces of the empress faction, pulling their strings back in Tearmoon, filled his mind.

Chapter 29: The Circumstances of the Fire Clan

“Elder Louhua...”

Louhua’s sudden words left Aima flabbergasted and her assistant sitting halfway off her seat. However, Louhua addressed them calmly. “Stubbornness will get us nowhere. The situation has brought us to a place where we cannot help ourselves. This group has come for the sake of a friend, and I wish to ask for their aid. Princess Mia knew her actions were logical. Yet she did not speak of such herself. Instead, she waited for me to open my heart.”

Louhua glanced at Mia. Her gaze was kind; the serenity of which made Mia certain of one thing.

With how things worked out, I may be able to get out of my scolding!

She let out a *deep* sigh of relief! Ludwig was not the type to let bygones be bygones. However, good results would leave her with means for rebuttal. A light of hope had suddenly shined on Mia’s despair, and it left her feeling over the moon. However, she made sure to tune herself into the conversation. She couldn’t let her guard down now—only by listening carefully to Louhua and solving the issue at hand would Mia *truly* be able to say that all had ended well.

“There is a question I would like to ask of everyone here. How is it that we, the Fire Clan, fell to such distress?” Louhua began to speak. “Do you know how the Fire Clan parted from the other twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom?”

“Why, yes. I heard that through mastering the skill of wolf-taming, the other clans drove you out,” responded Mia.

Louhua nodded. “It is said that the chief of the Fire Clan, Suima, brought with him one who knew the tricks to master wolves. She was the High Priestess, and she carried with her a single book.”

“A single book...” muttered Rafina. The same book also popped into Mia’s mind. “*The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth*...”

“It was only much later that we learned that to be its proper name. Ever since even I can remember, we have simply called it ‘the Serpent’s Book.’ The serpent drawn on its front cover is quite impressionable.”

“Excuse me, Elder Louhua. Do you mean to say that you have read this book?” asked Rafina.

Louhua shook her head. “The High Priestess never relinquished it. Even if she had, I could not read it. We of the Equestrian Kingdom have no written language of our own.”

Mia remembered what she had been told earlier, that the Equestris indeed had no written culture. That is why they recorded the histories of their clans for future generations through historic hymns. The chief of the Forest Clan had told her such, but this fact had Mia hanging her head in question. “Hm? Do you mean that this history was also recorded through song?”

“Wh-Why, yes. That is correct. But...” Louhua seemed a bit awkward. Mia wondered if she was being shy. “Well, I need a good glass of liquor to really be able to sing it well.”

She really was just a good-spirited grandma! Louhua’s actions last night convinced her of such—she just wanted to sing when she was slightly drunk so she could enjoy it to the fullest! Well, anyway...

“The identity of the High Priestess has changed with the generations. Yet she has always had both the book and our chief by her side. Thus, she continues to teach us the art of domesticating wolves.”

“I see. So not everyone in the Fire Clan can use wolves, just the chief. Hm? My, then what about you, Miss Aima?” Mia glanced over at her.

“I...had a simple interest. No, I worried about what would transpire should something happen to my brother, and thus secretly learned the art for the sake of preservation. It has nothing to do with the cuteness of warrior wolf cubs. Not in the slightest.” Aima puffed out her chest in pride. Mia gave her a tepid look.

The High Priestess really was involved in all this, huh? If The Book of Those Who Crawl the Earth *is being brought up in all this, then perhaps we’re approaching our enemies...*

“There were times when the chief and High Priestess would journey together out of the village, accompanied by one or two youngsters. Sometimes, those of their retinue would not return for quite a while. When I was wetter behind the ears, I sometimes would wonder about the details. However, they would return with exciting stories. I believed they could be doing no harm.”

They were definitely up to something terrible! flashed through Mia’s mind. Luckily, Mia had the ability to read the room and kept it to herself.

“Five years ago it was when a change occurred in our clan. Our acting chief, Ka Maku, had left with the High Priestess and returned with a young woman. She had lost consciousness and bore wounds. When she awoke, she gave her name.” Louhua passed her eyes from each member in the room to the next before stopping at Abel. Her words were solemn. “Valentina Remno...the first princess of the Kingdom of Remno.”

Abel’s shoulders jumped at that name.

“Valentina Remno? You don’t mean...” Rafina seemed shocked as well. She turned toward Abel, who bit his lip in silence.

“I see. So it was true that they had been seen together.” Malong’s whisper was ignored by Louhua, whose next statement was even more jaw-dropping. “Shortly after, the High Priestess perished.”

“She perished...?”

“Yes. She was older than even me. I am sure she had also found peace...as she had gained a successor.”

“...A successor.”

An unpleasant prediction sent shivers up Mia’s spine. It took only moments for her to discover that it would prove true.

“The previous High Priestess entrusted all—including the Serpent’s Book—to Valentina Remno and perished.”

“You... You must be mistaken,” croaked out Abel.

Louhua slowly shook her head. “It may be unfortunate, but it is the truth. She was at first reluctant to take the book in her hands. Yet the High Priestess

gradually pulled her into its clutches. Eventually, she became engrossed in it, spending her days with it. Then, Princess Valentina announced she would be successor to the High Priestess." Those words were spoken coldly, devoid of emotion. It proved their unwavering infallibility. "We agreed to the plan. Generations of priestesses had come and gone forever. There was no reason to believe this time would prove any different, however..." Louhua closed her eyes. "Two years ago, Chief Maku took sudden leave of the village, the High Priestess in tow." Her next words shocked everyone. "The majority of our men left the village to follow after."

"My, so that's why there aren't many men here."

Mia had been under the impression that they had left to go pillaging, making this welcome news.

It appears that a main fighting force won't be returning to upset the current power relationships here. How excellent! Dion won't have to go on a massacre!

Aima watched as Mia nodded her head.

"It's because the chief is absent that his younger sister, Miss Aima, is commanding the pillaging squad, then," stated Mia.

"Naturally. I am our chief's sister. I can control our wolves. If not I, who else would be able to lead our clan?" Her tone of voice was tense.

"Hm? Then the squad from the other day was..."

"Created through the women in the village capable of battle and the few men who remained," stated Louhua's servant.

"I see. How reasonable. That must be why you retreated so easily. In that case, Miss Aima, it was your leadership that prevented the capture from being so disastrous. Hm...? Then, were you also the leader of the brigands who attacked us earlier?" Mia had remembered their trip to Sunkland and the bandits who had been involved in Sion's attempted assassination. If Aima had been their leader, Mia wondered if that meant there was a chance that no assassination would ever have actually been carried out.

"What are you referring to?" Aima seemed ignorant of the matter.

“Did you not attack us along one of the pilgrimage routes between Sunkland and Belluga? I heard that Dion had successfully threatened the group to retreat...”

Aima was completely put off by the question. “I ask that you use common sense, Princess Mia. Would I attack a party I knew contained Dion Alaia?”

Mia nodded enthusiastically at the weighty question. “You have a point. There is absolute truth in your answer, Miss Aima. That must mean it was your chief and those who left with him who we ran into.”

Indeed, Aima would never pick a fight with a group guarded by Dion. The explanation had pleased Mia...for a moment. Then, she was assaulted by the sense that something was off.

If Aima knows of Dion, does that mean she’s been in contact with her brother and the others who left the village?

Mia crossed her arms in pensive thought, but Aima’s pained voice brought her back to reality. “My brother has been deceived by the High Priestess. Cajoled by her words, he is leading our clan to ruin.”

“Deceived,” is it? The Serpents are *known for their abilities to lead people astray. Such a possibility is undeniable, and yet...*

Mia returned to her earlier point of question—just why had Chief Ka Maku left the village in the first place? She had grasped the relationship that had historically played out between the chief and the High Priestess: they would find a pawn within the Fire Clan, train them, and send them abroad. Whoever had handed the poison over to Prince Echard in Sunkland had been dressed as an Equestri. He fit the bill perfectly for such a pawn. However, if that had been their previous strategy, why had they not simply decided to continue with that plan diligently? Is that not the true way of the Chaos Serpents?

Just what could have prompted this...?

“Her Highness, Princess Mia. Holy Lady Rafina. Lord Malong of the Forest Clan...” Louhua kowtowed to them. “I have a request to make of you. Please, return to us our clansmen who have been stolen away.”

Things have grown quite serious...

Mia quietly groaned at the sight of Louhua's bowed head. The High Priestess of the Chaos Serpents was Valentina Remno, Abel's sister. Aima's older brother, Chief Maku, had left the village with the High Priestess, bringing with him the men of the Fire Clan. Reconciliations needed to be made between the Fire Clan and the other twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom, and improvements needed to be made with the food situation of the Fire Clan as well. There was a mountain of problems, and Mia couldn't throw out a single one of them. Aima considered herself a friend of Mia's, and that had its weight as well, but if Abel was involved, these were issues Mia couldn't ignore. Plus, there was one other thing weighing on Mia's mind.

"While it may have been a necessity that turned us toward pillaging, sin is still sin. It is logical to say that those with power have the right to take. But if we are to rely on *your* power, such logic does not stand. I offer my head as recompense of our clan's sins. I beg that our children are not given responsibility for our crimes..."

The request from Louhua had sent Mia into a panic.

The mistakes of their forefathers forced them into poverty, and they turned to pillaging to relieve it. Now, a nanny must lose her head to take proper responsibility... What a terrible system! It's like me! Well, not that I'm a nanny...

With those thoughts in mind, Mia spoke. "Elder Louhua, I understand your situation. You have asked me for help, and I intend on doing everything in my power to do so. I beg you, do not do anything so rash."

Mia glanced across the room. She needed someone to thrust responsibility on to, yet her prayers went unanswered!

First, she turned to Malong. He was a reliable upperclassman, but he knew nothing of the Serpents. Thus, he most likely understood little of Louhua's explanation. Next, she turned to Rafina. Rafina was the expert when it came to the Serpents! But during the whole conversation, she seemed somewhat glum. But now, it seemed she had upgraded from "somewhat glum" to "somewhat dejected"!

My, Rafina was always a bit of a strange one, but she really seems out of

sorts!

Thus, Mia turned her eyes once again. Aima, Louhua, and the servant girl were not in the position to make any proclamations. That left only two—her trusty vassals, Anne and Ludwig.

Anne is reliable, but it would be out of line for her to speak here. Which leaves Ludwig, but...

Ludwig was certainly trustworthy and would *definitely* present her with a good solution. However, Ludwig was one of Mia's subjects, which meant that his opinion was Mia's, and Mia's Tearmoon's. Should a plan of Ludwig's be put into action, Mia would be wholly unable to remove herself from responsibility. It appeared that it may be time for her to wave the white flag of defeat!

But that wouldn't do! In this situation, Mia would have to take full responsibility!

Moons! I would need to speak with him *first before I pass the responsibility to Ludwig.*

Thus, she thought. And thought. And thought, and thought, and thought, and thought, until...

Hm, for now, perhaps it would be best to solve the problem of how I can make it so I don't have to do anything! I'll solve that first and discuss it with Ludwig in the meantime. I would like to bring Miss Rafina into this as well...

Mia's first goal was to reduce the problems she needed to think about to as few as possible! Eating a big cake by yourself would lead to F.A.T. and thus, it should be split and divided! The same went for difficult problems too. Thus, Mia approached her problem-solving with a if-you-split-the-cake-with-everyone-you-won't-get-F.A.T. mentality.

"Elder Louhua, there is something I wish you to do for me first, even if it means setting aside the issue of how blame shall be taken."

"Which would be...?"

"Why, the obvious, of course! I would like you to make amends with Malong and the other twelve clans."

Mia had surmised that this was an issue she could have absolutely nothing to do with! That would be left with Aima and Louhua, along with Malong, Mayun, and the other Equestris. By extension, relations between Sunkland and the Fire Clan who caused trouble for them was something that could be hashed out between the Equestrian Kingdom and Sunkland should the Fire Clan become one with the other clans.

It's because the other twelve clans ousted the Fire Clan that they fell on hard times. Thus, it would be simple to consider the twelve clans as responsible for the Fire Clan's pillaging as well... I bet if I said that, Mayun would spring into action!

For now, Mia wanted to get rid of as many problems from her pile of issues as possible. That was simply her style!

While that is being handled, I can think about how to deal with the High Priestess with Ludwig and Rafina as well, since she is *an expert of the Chaos Serpents. But,* she wondered, *just why did Chief Maku leave the village? I wonder if he was threatened into it. He may have been told that the secrets of wolf-taming would be kept from him, or that he would lose his ability to do...so? By the moons, could it...?* Mia hit upon a game-changing discovery. *Haven't I met someone who could control wolves before...? Ah! The wolfmaster!*

The answer had finally come to her—her horseback assassin backed by wolves, the wolfmaster. Was his true identity not that of Ka Maku, chief of the Fire Clan? If the chief was the only one who could tame wolves, that was an incredibly likely proposition.

While Mia became a master of deduction in her mind, the conversation continued forward.

"You wish for us to...make amends?" mumbled Louhua as she glanced toward Malong.

"Indeed! If you would like us to return to you your clansmen who are with the High Priestess, I would like you all to be working your hardest as well!" Mia gave a haughty nod. Even if it means a turn for the worse, Mia was not going to let herself be the only one who was working! Her words were filled with that conviction.

“Thus, you say that our reconciliation is necessary for the return of our people, correct?”

Mia considered that question. Then, she sent a glance toward Rafina.

Hmph... This is a practical matter, and Rafina is the Serpent-specialist. Her knowledge will be necessary to bring those who are with the High Priestess back to the Fire Clan...

Additionally, if brainwashing had led them out of the village, Mia was powerless; she would *need* Rafina’s skills.

But for some reason, Rafina gets so sullen whenever Miss Aima is involved. She may not be willing to put the work in, which means...

Mia put together a plan to motivate Rafina! “Whether or not it is necessary for them to return is not the matter at hand! It is simply heartrending to see those of the same blood fighting like this. It goes against the teachings of the Holy Book. Isn’t that right, Miss Rafina?”

It should be noted that Mia had no idea whatsoever if such a teaching existed in the Holy Book. She just couldn’t imagine Rafina teaching that it was *okay* for siblings to fight, so she thought it was worth a shot.

“Huh? Oh, yes. That is right. The basis of the Holy Deity’s teachings is respect for one’s parents and love for one’s brothers and family.” Rafina seemed to be lost in thought, so she panicked as she raised her face to look back at Mia.

“Thus, we must make amends. Malong was exactly right. This is a chance to revitalize the bonds between the Fire Clan and the other twelve clans...so we can make a place for those who have left to return.”

Her words were reasonable. Through doing such, the Fire Clan would be proving that they were faithful to the Holy Book, making the case that their clansmen should return from the High Priestess. Through having them prove that they were making all the effort they could to make amends, Mia was inspiring Rafina into action!

I’m positive Miss Rafina would never turn a blind eye to those striving to live a righteous life!

“I see... You are correct. It would be a shame to hold no banquet for when they return, and it is logical to prepare a place they would wish to return.” Louhua turned her gaze to first Malong, and then Rafina. “If that be the case, I have a wish for the two of you. Please offer your power as mediators between us of the Fire Clan and the others of the Equestrian Kingdom.”

“You can count on me.” Malong gave a vigorous nod. Rafina followed his example in silence. Mia still did not know what to make of Rafina’s missing spirit.

Indeed. She is as brilliant as always.

Mia’s handling of the situation had once again left Ludwig in awe. From his view, it was clear that Mia was attempting to prepare the proper conditions needed to convince those who had left the Fire Clan.

Even should the Fire Clan and the other clans make amends, just what would that really solve? What were the warriors of the Fire Clan fighting for? What was the High Priestess using to incite them? It was the antagonism born from their opposition with the other twelve clans, along with the goal of relieving themselves from famine and their general poor conditions. And those were precisely the two things Mia was targeting.

Should Elder Louhua and those still in the village reconcile with the other twelve clans, their motivation to fight would abate. Should their poverty and unfavorable provision situation resolve itself, they may lose their will for battle. Her Highness has seen through to the root of the issue and is targeting it directly. Just as the High Priestess has, the princess has also set her sights on hearts.

Well, in reality Mia was just trying to inspire Rafina to act, but...there was perhaps some truth in his sentiments. With that slight gap in his thinking, Ludwig renewed his allegiance to Mia.

Chapter 30: Bel Adven-tours the Village

All the while, Bel and Citrina were touring the village of the Fire Clan. Yes, this time, there were no adventures to be had—this was a field trip of incredibly mundane proportions. Still, there was nothing worthy of much inspection, so the two found themselves naturally headed in the direction of the herd of horses.

“Tee hee! It was really fun when we got to ride horses together. Wasn’t it, Rina?” Bel giggled at the memory of their recent foray into the art of horsemanship.

Citrina smiled as well. “Yes, it really was. I hope we get to do it again one day.”

“Me too! Once all of this gets solved, let’s go riding together with everyone again!” Bel chimed, before her expression suddenly grew grim. “But I do wonder how Miss Mia and everyone else are doing. I hope their talks are going well.”

“Are you worried, Bel?”

She looked to be deep in thought. “Hm... Well, there’s Miss Mia, and Mr. Ludwig, and General Dion, and you, Citrina. And Grandfa— Prince Abel too. So, I think it will be all right, but...”

For some reason, Bel’s heart was in disarray. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen, but just then, a horse whinnied.

“Huh...?”

“That sounds like...”

“Let’s go.”

They found the crying horse easily. It was a foal covered in a beautiful ivory coat. Next to it, a woman from the Fire Clan was inspecting its leg.

“Ah... Its leg appears to be swollen.”

One of the foal’s front legs was slightly enlarged as though it were suffering

from infection.

“You’re right, but it doesn’t look like it’s broken...”

The woman caring for the horse stood up at the sound of their voices. “It seems like its wound has become infected. How troubling... I’d like to go get some medicinal herbs, but...” She sighed. “I’m short for hands. I can’t look after all the horses myself. This really isn’t good. I’m causing trouble for all the horses...”

She sounded so glum. Bel wanted to do something for her, and thus, she turned to Citrina, who nodded in response.

“Could I see it for a moment?” After checking with the woman in charge, Citrina approached the horse. She took out a white handkerchief and applied a paste from one of her medicine bottles.

“What is that?” asked the woman in shock.

“It’s a concoction of herbs that stop pain and purify toxins that have entered the body.” After her explanation, Citrina went to apply it to the foal’s foreleg.

Bel took a step toward the foal. “It’s okay. Rina will take care of it for you.”

She gave a gentle stroke to the foal’s neck. After looking from Citrina to Bel, it softly closed its eyes. Citrina took the handkerchief to the foal’s leg to apply the herbs. Despite its yelp, it remained calm. Citrina tied the handkerchief around the foal’s leg and looked toward the woman.

“There isn’t much, but this is medicine. The horse should heal if you continue to apply it for several days.” With that, Citrina passed her the vial.

The woman blinked in surprise. “Thank you. That really helps me out.”

Citrina looked somewhat awkward. After bowing her head, she left.

“Rina!” Bel cried, chasing after her. She laughed after she caught a glimpse of Citrina’s face. “Tee hee! You don’t have to be so embarrassed about doing something nice, Rina!”

“I-I’m not embarrassed...” She was *mumbling*! When it came down to it, it seemed like Citrina was still not used to receiving gratitude.

“You even gave up your handkerchief.”

Citrina met Bel’s troubled look with one of triumph. “Don’t worry! I still have a lot left. Look.” She pulled out a whole bundle of them.

“Wow, Rina! Why do you have so many?” Bel’s eyes sparkled in wonder.

“The reason is obvious! It’s so I can treat any injury you might get, Bel,” she said with a grin.

“Huh?”

“Rina knows her friend well. You like going on adventures, don’t you, Bel? Tee hee! Don’t worry. If you get hurt, I’ll save you from any pinch!” Her smile was as sweet as flowers.

“Hee hee! Thank you, Rina.” Bel tightened her lips to smile. But then, she felt a pang inside her chest—guilt.

There was a secret she was hiding from her friend—her one and only *best* friend. Perhaps it was because she thought of this world as a dream she would one day awaken from, but she couldn’t help but feel it was an unfaithful way to act toward Citrina, who smiled at her without a care in the world.

I’m not being respectful to Rina’s feelings.

She loathed that fact, and so, she raised her head. If—just *if*—she were to live in this world forever, perhaps revealing her secret would be the first step in doing so.

I need to take responsibility in this world too.

Until now, she was a simple guest, and this was a world she would one day leave—a dream she would someday wake up from. Thus, all she needed to do was enjoy herself. She made an effort not to form any bonds. At least she tried to. But now, she felt she could no longer live that way, and so, she made her decision. Just like the grandmother she so looked up to, she would hold fast. She wouldn’t give up easily. To Bel, forming bonds would mean taking responsibility in this world too. So...

“Hey, Rina?” She mustered all her courage and stepped forward.

“What is it, Bel?”

“There’s something I want to tell you,” she whispered. “Something really important. I want to tell you my secret. Once we get back to Tearmoon, will you let me?”

“Your secret?” Citrina furrowed her brow. “Yes. Once we return to Tearmoon, I will.”

But their conversation was promptly interrupted.

“Abel! Please, wait a moment!” Mia’s panicked voice reverberated in the air.

Chapter 31: Mia First, Explodeth!

Thus, discussions came to a close. For now, they would focus their efforts on reestablishing the relationship between the Fire Clan and twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom. A messenger of the Forest Clan left to restore contact with Chief Mayun, and thus, it appeared that Mia and co. would be with the Fire Clan for a few days longer.

“Hwaaaah...” Mia stepped outside and stretched her arms with a groan, her body crackling as she straightened her back. The long discussions had left her feeling stiff. This was definitely *not* a matter related to a lack of exercise in any way, shape, or form. She may have sighed, and it may have sounded a tad *off*, but she was *definitely* not growing weak. Most certainly not.

“Still, the issues we face are quite complicated. It’s hard to know what to do with them...”

This time, Ludwig had stood witness to events, so Mia had no need to go and explain things to him. Of course, Malong probably needed an explanation on the Chaos Serpents, but that was something that could be left to Rafina.

I’ll probably need to have a small chat with Rina as well. I’m sure she’s more knowledgeable about the situation the Serpents are in...

However, Mia’s ponderings were interrupted by the sight of Abel crossing through the corner of her eye.

“My, what is Abel up to?”

The sorrow was written all over his face. Not to mention, he was heading straight toward the horses. Alarm bells started to ring in Mia’s head.

After looking about his surroundings, Abel called out to his vassal. “Grammateus, come here.”

“Prince Abel. Whatever do you need me for?” Hearing his master, Grammateus approached.

“We will be leaving. Make the preparations immediately.”

“Abel! Please, wait a moment! Just where do you plan to head off to?”

Abel met Mia’s panicked words with a stern gaze. “I’m sorry, Mia, but this is where we part. Grammateus and I are off to see my sister.”

“Abel, I understand that you worry for her, but going off with just the two of you won’t—”

Suddenly, Abel laughed. It sounded as if it was directed toward himself, a strained smile plastered on his face. “Ha ha... I ‘worry’ for her? I’m sorry, Mia, but you’ve got that wrong.” Abel shook his head. “If my sister had been captured by the Chaos Serpents, I’d do as you’re suggesting and stay, because I do think that’d be the way we’d have the best chance at saving her. But...” He gritted his teeth and looked away. “But that’s not how it is. My sister...is the High Priestess. She didn’t just fall to their influence and join them. She’s their *leader*! Do you think I could forgive her for that? She tried to kill you!”

Suddenly, Mia also came to the realization Abel had already had—about the night of the Holy Eve Festival and the man after her life who attacked with wolves.

If that was Ka Maku, there really is a high possibility that Princess Valentina was involved. Well, I do believe that Barbara had made the call herself...

“I know that you want to prioritize reconciling the Fire Clan with the rest of the Equestrian Kingdom. I think that’s probably the best way to do things—a way that would result in zero bloodshed. But...I can’t just sit around and wait for that. I’ll take responsibility for the crimes of my sister myself. This time, we’ll know for sure that she’s...” He spat out those words, his teeth ground in anger. Despite the fury of his words, his expression was one of sorrow.

“Abel...”

Seeing him like this, Mia couldn’t help but feel...moved, for it was for *Mia’s* sake that Abel had felt such anger. Of course, there were other things that made him feel this way, such as those who became sacrifices at the hands of the High Priestess. Still, it may have been completely unscrupulous, but just a little, Mia couldn’t help but feel a sense of joy. But that was also exactly why...

“Abel, I won’t let you take your sister’s life!”

Those words naturally spilled from her lips. She couldn't stand to see Abel's face distorted in anguish. She didn't want to see him so despairingly furious. More than anything, she got the feeling that if she let him go, she would never see him again.

Those blurred words she had once seen written in that blood-covered journal popped into her mind. She now understood that she must have shed tears as she wrote them. Knowing that Abel had been shot down in an attempt to save her, there was no way she had not wept. She never wanted to feel the same way that other version of herself once had.

"If you go alone, solve everything alone, and get hurt alone...I will never forgive you!"

Then, with all her might, she hugged him close from behind, so that he couldn't run off. Recently, she had been awed by how grown-up and strong his figure had become...but right now, it seemed so childish and helpless, just as it had the first day they met.

"Please stop thinking about whether you could do better or worse, or about the foolish notion of 'taking responsibility'... Forget about all of that! And please, for my sake, don't go!"

Mia's philosophy as a princess had always been "Mia First." She knew there were few words that she could say to Abel as he was now. Words that were all talk would not reach him. And so, she threw her all at him. She pushed forward with her philosophy of "Mia First," as right now that was simply and truly the only thing she could do. Discarding all logic, she simply wished, "please, for *me*, don't go!"

"Princess Mia... I would like to request that you do not put my lord in such a difficult spot." It was Grammateus who spoke to her, who until then had simply been listening on the sidelines.

The Sword Saint of Remno was quiet and calm, and yet, had the overbearing force of a restless sea. But before Mia could be swallowed up by his waves, another voice reverberated in the air.

"Ha ha ha! Some might call you tactless for such words, Lord Grammateus." The Empire's Finest, Dion Alaia, stood between Mia and Grammateus as if to

defend her. Then, he turned his gaze to Abel. “Prince Abel, I think it would be best to admit defeat here. You’ve gotten all worked up for the sake of our princess and want to leave, but now that very same princess is begging you not to part. You can’t really go now, can you? Plus, you remember me telling you not to make her cry, right? I’m sure you know that if you went, she’s the type of girl who’d hop on a horse and chase after you. You can’t possibly still want to leave.”

“Well...” Abel was lost for words.

“I know it’ll be hard, but could you stay here?” Dion requested with a bitter smile.

“Lord Dion, but...”

“Perhaps it would be better to cool your head for a moment, no?” Another intruder had entered the conversation—none other than Citrina Etoile Yellowmoon, who looked to be completely composed. “Prince Abel seems to have lost his composure. Why don’t we take a break and have some tea? I have already set up a table.”

Mia suddenly felt the presence of *something* within the sweet smile of Citrina—and it was approaching at an alarming pace. “Rina, I do not mean to doubt you, but...you haven’t put anything in the tea, have you? You know, perhaps something to make us sleepy, or to numb our bodies...”

Citrina looked slightly hurt by the question. “What a terrible thing to say... Things seemed like they were going to turn out okay, so I switched it with something to simply calm everyone down. Thus, you can drink it too, Your Highness.”

“I see! You have my deepest apologies for doubting... Huh? Switched what?!”

“Tee hee hee!” Citrina simply laughed.

Deciding it was best not to dig too deep into the matter, Mia looked once again at Abel.

“...Well, in any case, it’ll all be fine! I promise, Abel. I’ll bring your sister back to you!”

Grammateus watched over the proceedings in silence. Having been interrupted by Dion, that was all he could do.

“I’ll bring your sister back to you,” she’d promised. It would still take some time for Mia to realize the true weight and meaning of that decision.

Chapter 32: The Historic Hymn: Cometh from a Lande Yonder Be the Princess of Thy Winged Horse.

"Cometh from a Lande Yonder Be the Princess of Thy Winged Horse" was a historic hymn known throughout all the Equestrian Kingdom, a joyful song of reconciliation and rebirth that told the tale of a great blessing.

'Tis when the thirteen children of our Father Kuolong becometh chiefs that a fissure be borne b'tween us.

History marcheth ev'r forward, 'til the Fire Clan be faced with ruyne.

'Tis then a visitor cometh to our Equestrian Kingdom—a princess of lande most renown.

Her silver hair be thy moon's lighte, her skin be silky white, and eyes gleameth with wysdom.

She knoweth the world's truths, for her eyes they seeth.

With thine lips, she speaketh with her horse beloved, and with thine ears, she heareth the cries of thy winged horse, thy empyrean ruler.

The Princess of Thy Winged Horse be shaketh when she saw the thirteene clans, and spoketh thus, "Thy horses weepe. What hath thou done that they so despair?"

Her body shaketh with ire, she straddled thy Winged Horse who be Ruler of Wynde to best a foe from our Kingdom be.

And thus, she swept away the discord that remained from times o' yore.

And thus, hearts once-parted be re-tied.

And thus, the flame rekindled be between the lost Clan o' Fire and us other Equestris.

And thus, the childs of Kuolong reunited to walketh t'gether in prosperity.

To those of later generations, it was a historic hymn that all thought was perhaps *too* exaggerated. While historians criticized its accuracy, it boasted popularity, and was more beloved than any other in the Equestrian Kingdom.

A few days after the end of the historic discussions with the Fire Clan, news was received from Mayun.

"A Meeting of Chieftains... I figured we were heading in this direction."

Malong let out a deep sigh after talking with the messenger. He decided to collect Mia, Rafina, and the others involved for a discussion.

"I heard from my father. He's asking that we bring a representative from the Fire Clan and head to a Meeting of Chieftains."

"I see. I thought that may be the case. Hm... Well then, I have a suggestion."

Mia (Ludwig, really) had predicted this development. She had been impeccably prepared, and thus, fully displayed her thinking (that was 90% Ludwig's). In other words, their plan was to bring the Fire Clan back together with the other twelve clans. This would bring the women of the Fire Clan under their protection and divide Maku's crew from the High Priestess. Thus, they planned to target their enemy's motive.

Malong nodded in awe. "You really are quite impressive, Mia. I can't believe you thought so far ahead."

"Oho ho! It's all thanks to my brilliant vassal," she replied with a slight grin. She would never admit that the plan had been hers, as there was a chance it would all fall apart. Mia's chicken heart needed no praise, for she didn't want to take on any risk.

"I don't think it would be wise to let the conversation stay just between the Fire Clan and the twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom either. It would be disastrous should a Serpent disguise themselves as a clan member," proclaimed Rafina. She had a point—should Louhua or Aima be killed by an assassin disguised as an Equestri, the bridge to reconciliation would be burned, and the

plan they had hatched would collapse all too soon.

“I’m sure there are people from the Forest Clan who aren’t thrilled to be hanging around those of the Fire Clan either. Our elders tend to view the skill of wolf-taming as a threat. I’d like to ask for an escort, but...”

“This time, I will be the one who fulfills that role for Miss Rafina and accompany her wherever she may head.” After promising Abel that she would bring his sister back to him, returning to Tearmoon was no longer an option. Given this, Mia thought that rather than staying here, it would be best to accompany Malong and the others.

“We should probably leave some of our forces here. From the sound of it, these Serpent guys sound like bad news,” stated Malong.

Thus, their next course of action was decided. Five elite members of the Princess Guard, along with ten or so warriors from the Forest Clan, would remain in the village of the Fire Clan. Those working for the High Priestess were men of the Fire Clan, and thus, it was hard to think that they would do anything to harm the women who had remained. Rather, it was Aima and Louhua who would attend the Meeting of Chieftains who were in the most danger. However...

“Well, I’m sure Dion and the rest of the Princess Guard shall be enough. It appears that Lord Grammateus is quite strong as well.”

It seemed that between Dion and the wolfmaster, the former would come out on top, and even if he were accompanied by Fire Clan warriors, he would...probably be able to handle things.

In any case, they did all they could to prepare. Though, of course, it was not Mia who came up with the plans. Rather, she simply gave her approval (slapped the like button) of anything Ludwig had thought up, and what more could they possibly need than that? Thus, no matter what the enemy planned, things shouldn’t go astray...and yet, Mia felt a sliver of worry she couldn’t shake.

“Well, I *am* quite worried about Abel and his sister. It is necessary that I resolve the issue of the Equestrian Kingdom as quickly as possible...”

With renewed resolve, the party set off for the Southern Capital of the

Kingdom of Equestria.

Chapter 33: Various Horse-ly Philosophies

The Southern Capital of the Equestrian Kingdom would be the site of the Meeting of Chieftains, located a relatively short two days away by horse from the village of the Fire Clan. Usually, Mia would spend the trip lazing about and dozing off in the back of her carriage. But this time—thanks to the suggestion of Malong—she had decided to make the journey on horseback herself.

"Us Equestris think that a foreign princess would never be found sitting atop a horse," he'd said. "I think their impression of you would get quite the upgrade if they knew how well you could ride one."

"Is that so?" *Well, perhaps it would be best to exercise now so that I'll be able to eat more later anyway.* With that thought on her mind, Mia had quickly agreed to the plan.

You see, this was a meeting between the twelve chiefs of the Equestrian Kingdom. Mia was certain that there would be tasty snacks to accompany such a meeting. She wanted to feast! And to do so, she thought there would be no better way than to garner some popularity.

It was Aima who had taken on the responsibility of Mia's protection. She claimed that she wished to repay the efforts that Mia had made for the Fire Clan. Though...

Hmph, Miss Aima seems to be a bit down.

Mia glanced over to Aima, who was riding her own horse beside her. Ever since they had departed from the Fire Clan's village, her spirits seemed to be dampened. Or really, she had seemed a bit despondent ever since the meeting with Louhua.

Rafina has been acting the same way as well! Did they eat something funny? In that case, I should be feeling it too. My intestines are so sensitive and delicate...

Thanks to the yogurt prepared by Anne, Mia's gut was in incredibly good shape today too!

Well anyway, seeing Aima so weary has been affecting my mood as well.

Thus, Mia decided to initiate a conversation that would cheer Aima up. And of course, there was only one topic of conversation that could do just that.

“By the way, Miss Aima, that’s a magnificent horse you’re riding,” stated Mia, her eyes set on the sable coat of Aima’s steed. Her words were not for show; she truly found the horse to be praiseworthy. Its frame was as well-built and refined as Kuolan’s, its legs kicked strongly against the earth, and its eyes were clear and trained on what lay ahead. Plus, its beautiful black fur proved just how well it was cared for. But what was most striking was the white spot on its nose —a single light against the dark of night. “Is it a moonhare?”

Aima grinned in response. “Princess Mia, you truly know your horses. This is the pride of the Fire Clan, kin to my own brother’s most beloved horse, Eilai. His name is Keilai, and he is a legendary pure-blooded Equestrian moonhare. His lineage can be traced back to the age of Kuolong. There is even a historic hymn that sings of his bloodline.”

Mia couldn’t help but grin at the liveliness of her words.

Oho! I am glad to see she’s feeling better. This attitude truly suits her best. When she’s down, it’s enough to bother even me.

Mia’s pleased musings were interrupted by a question. “You are not going to ask?”

“My, ask what?”

“Ask why we do not sell this horse for money, or why we do not exchange him for food.” She gently petted Keilai’s neck. “To us descendants of Kuolong, horses are friends. They are our family. But my clan is faced with destruction. Given those circumstances, I have been told that it is a selfish luxury to hold on to such a magnificent steed. Yet, I...” She scrunched her lips in anguish.

“Moons, I don’t think that to be the case at all.” She sounded completely taken aback. “Selling a horse would be completely out of the question!”

That much was obvious to even Mia. While true that selling a horse for food would temporarily extend the time that stood between themselves and ruin, that was only *temporary*. They would simply be buying time. The money they

gained from such a transaction would eventually dry up, and the food they procured would be stored in their stomachs. With a full gut, movement would grow tiresome. What should they do when beset by destruction? Without horses, how would they run?! Thus, Mia surmised that horses were a means of escape not to let go of until the end of the end.

"Horses can carry us farther than anywhere. Relinquishing them is simply out of the question! Should you die, it will be with a horse by your side. Is that not the best way to think of it?"

Even at the very end, Mia would never give up on escape! This was a deep-set belief of hers that would never waver. Aima's mouth was agape at Mia's words, but eventually, she laughed.

"Ha ha ha! The words you speak are true. You have surprised me, Princess Mia. Your understanding of horses bests even the Equestris." After a good fit of laughter, she shook her head. "You are truly worthy of being called my friend."

"My, I am delighted you would say so," she replied. Though she didn't know what exactly she was being praised for.

Well, all that really matters is that I cheered Miss Aima up, she thought.

Perhaps it was obvious to Dongfeng what lay in their hearts, or perhaps it wasn't. In any case, he—straddled by Mia—let out a *long* yawn. The sight of them was truly serene.

"Hah! Ha ha ha!" A man's deep voice reverberated through the cramped room. "Yes... How brilliant. This beautiful chestnut hair, this firm rump... I truly cannot get enough!" The man stroked the charming legs lined up in front of him, his grin so large it was practically falling off his face. "Yes... How precious. You are my true daughter. My dear, dear daughter."

He placed a kiss on the long nose of said "daughter." Her clear eyes, hidden behind long lashes, turned to face him, revealing her glossy jewel-like pupils. He let out a satisfied sigh. "How beautiful you are. Wait for me. I promise I'll bring you a new friend soon. Bah hah hah!"

"Father, that is so disgusting...I do say."

The man—San Fuma—had not been expecting this riposte, and quickly turned to look behind him. There, staring at him with eyes as cold as steel, was his *actual* daughter, standing at the entrance to the stable, shaking her head in annoyance.

“What are you saying?! Appraising horses is a pastime of elegance. Take a look at her—her perfect coat, her defined shape, her long legs—there is no other moonhare with beauty that rivals hers! It is only natural that I would grow so infatuated.” He raised his voice in protest, his “daughter” standing right in front of him as he pointed to her chestnut fur.

“Father, you are so disgusting...I do say.”

However, his daughter’s attitude remained the same. Or rather, she sounded even *more* fed up with him. Still, her feelings were perhaps unavoidable. His daughter had completely fallen under foreign influence; a dress from the Holy Principality of Belluga covered her form, and her hair that had grown to the bottom of her back was tied with a ribbon from the Kingdom of Miranada. She was a young woman in her mid-teens, and so her wish to appear fashionable was only natural.

When she was younger, she used to ride through the grasslands, yet now... Fuma could not help but be disheartened by her change. *For every ten days that pass, she only takes out a horse on seven of them. How truly wretched!*

...That’s still a whole lot of riding!

“Listen here, my dear daughter. We are Equestris. Our influence should be decided by the number of our horses. There are good things abroad, and choosing to adopt them is wise, but we must never mistake what is truly important. Horses are love! Horses are life!”

The Mountain Clan was unique amongst the twelve clans of the Equestrian Kingdom. Their power was bested only by the Forest Clan, and they served as the guardians of the Southern Capital. They were also known to be civilized, as they actively participated in trade and relations with foreign kingdoms. They were also closely tied with Remno’s military and would often send convoys to train Remno troops in the art of horsemanship. The Equestrian Kingdom was traditional and perhaps a bit conservative. Comparatively, the Mountain Clan

was enthusiastic to adopt foreign cultures. But there was one more thing the Mountain Clan was famous for—the genuine love for horses held by their chief, San Fuma. In truth, he was well known as a “horse maniac.”

“I believe you are mistaken, father. I do not hate horses...I do say.” His daughter looked puzzled, as if she had yet to grow accustomed to the foreign airs of her speech. Still, she was right. The Mountain Clan was tasked with protecting the city, and thus, the frequency in which she rode horses was not an issue...and if she was riding them seven days out of every ten, it really *did* seem like her love for horses was enough to match that of her horse maniac father. “I simply think differently than you, father. It is better to appreciate them when they are not locked away, I do say. Oh, that ‘I do say’ really worked...I do say.”

His daughter gave a pleased nod, but Fuma shook his head in exasperation. “How outrageous... You are the only one who can inherit my horses. So be it. If I continue to polish my treasures, I am certain a day will come where you can appreciate them as I do. Ha ha ha! Once I get my hands on the prized horse of the Fire Clan, my collection will be even greater! I truly cannot wait for the day. Bah hah hah!” His filthy sneer suddenly dissipated as he looked toward his daughter. “So, what is it that brought you here?”

“Oh, that’s—I mean, yes. That is right. A messenger has arrived from Chief Mayun of the Forest Clan.”

“From the simple-souled Mayun? What did he say?”

“He spoke of the Fire Clan which you have been so infatuated with of late...”

“What?!” Fuma’s shoulders jumped.

His daughter sighed. “Have you once again been up to something unfavorable...I do ask?”

“N-N-No! I have not! I simply believe that the best horses should belong to the best men!” A stare from his daughter got him opening his mouth again. “I have not been doing anything ‘unfavorable’! I simply suggested that I offer money and provisions in exchange for a horse.”

His daughter looked up to the sky with a sigh. “You wanted to buy horses from *another* clan? I am certain this will prove an issue at the Meeting of

Chieftains...I do say. But, I also do ask...is that why you previously bought sheep from the struggling Fire Clan at a high price?”

Sheep and goats were an important food source. They would naturally reproduce and expand their numbers—they were a fortune that would increase as long as they were kept. However, should temporary troubles inspire one to relinquish them, all that would be left is money. And once that was used, there would be nothing.

“Did you think that they would sell their horses if they lost their food source and fell on hard times...I do ask?”

Backed into a corner, Fuma’s eyes darted about his surroundings. “No, I mean...right? If you truly loved horses, you would understand.”

His daughter let out a *looong* sigh. “I am sure this will come back to bite you at the Meeting of Chieftains...I do say.” Exasperated, she shook her head.

Chapter 34: Mia’s View on Horses — Princess Mia Bestoweth Enlightenment on Fools Misguided—

The Southern Capital was a simple yet proper city with a rampart. The Equestrian Kingdom was noteworthy for its equality—there was no clan that reigned superior to the others. Thus, despite having the word “Kingdom” in its name, they refrained from using the term “Royal Capital.” Still, it was large enough to rival any “royal capital” of a small nation, and currently, Mia and co. were resting in the plains that stood right outside it. Of course, the long trip on horseback had left Mia exhausted and devoid of energy...

“Hmph... What an excellent workout. I think I may have gotten a bit thinner!”

...Except she wasn’t! Rather, she was checking the state of F.A.T. on her upper arms with a satisfied look. “My, how odd. Nothing appears to have changed at all.”

After a bout of worry, Mia decided to stop thinking. Her instincts were telling her that not worrying would be good for her health—her *heart*’s health, that is.

“By the moons, there really are quite a lot of horses here.”

In the plains before her, a large herd of horses were lazily munching away on the grass by their feet. Mia resisted the urge to count each and every one of them and instead folded her arms. “I guess that would be the Equestrian Kingdom for you! There really are so many horses. My, that herd in particular is splendid! I wonder if it’s a wild one...”

A voice interrupted her mumblings. “Ha ha ha! Those are the mixed breeds.”

Mia turned to face the sound of laughter to find a middle-aged man approaching the group. Malong was by his side, and thus, Mia concluded that the man must be of the Equestrian Kingdom.

Hm... His hair is black like Malong’s, and his characteristics are that of an Equestri, yet there is something unique about his clothing. He seems to be

dressed like we are!

This was their first meeting, but while Mia considered if it was better to introduce herself, the man suddenly began to speak. “Ha ha ha! The epithet of ‘The Great Sage of the Empire’ has made its way to even my clan, and yet, I see you are lacking in judgment. You do not know a good horse from a bad one.”

From the get-go, he was ready to start a fight!

“Chief Fuma, I don’t think...” Malong scowled as he went to rebuke the man. However, Mia cut him off before he could do so.

“My, I am very displeased to hear you say so. I’ve ridden moonhares at Saint-Noel, I’ll have you know.”

To Mia, the days she spent with Kuolan were unforgettable. The same went for Kayou and the Redmoon Hare. The man’s words spat in the face of all of them. There was no way Mia could stay silent! What horse would swoop in to rescue a rider who remained calm at such a comment? What horse would run from the guillotine with her? The problem she faced would have dire consequences on her horse’s motivation!

“You claim that you, a foreign princess, have ridden a moonhare at Saint-Noel? It is true that I have heard that one of our clans gifted a moonhare to the Holy Principality of Belluga, but...while it may be a moonhare, I’m certain it must’ve been a mutt, and therefore unworthy of comparison to my clan’s pure-blooded moonhares. What you rode was a mere packhorse.”

His tone of voice had Mia rather ticked off. However, she suddenly realized something and thus simply let out a small sigh.

By the moons, I cannot let myself get swept up in this. It’s no use getting worked up over something so trifling as an ignorant display of discourtesy.

Yes, the words of the man before her displayed his ignorance. He had no idea of the truth of horses, and thus, it was the place of the knowledgeable to explain to him his faults.

Mia looked at the man with a smile oozing with composure. “Oho ho! What a shallow thought. It is truly imprudence, the words of someone who lacks the ability to discern truth.”

“What?!” He hadn’t been expecting this response. His mouth was held agape in shock, yet Mia continued, her voice still calm.

“A horse is still a horse no matter which breed it may be. They are magnificent, capable of carrying us to the earth’s farthest ends.”

That’s right; Mia was fully aware of how really awesome horses were! Any horse was a fine choice for making an escape. And without one, her only choice would be to run away on her own two legs, and that would be tiring! To put her thinking in other words, Mia knew very well that any horse would at least be faster than her. And if—just *if*—there was a horse slower, that wasn’t a *real* horse. Rather, it was a piece of flotsam (or something of the like) simply disguised as one. Thus, there was no horse out there that could lose Mia’s respect.

To put things in perspective, if Mia had a guard who had peerless devotion to her, would that guard be able to pick her up and walk her over to a neighboring country? Certainly not! Even the Empire’s Finest, Dion Alaia, could accomplish no such feat.

Oh, but Dion did once carry me in his arms as we escaped from a forest... Perhaps he could take me under his arm and carry me across borders. I am quite light after all...

Leaving any jokes aside, at the end of the day, Mia was firmly under the belief that absolutely *any* horse was worthy of her respect. Despite the fact that it was completely her experience in the previous timeline that made her think such.

Thus, Mia chastised this ignorant man—the chief of the Mountain Clan, San Fuma. “A horse is a horse. They are not to be ranked against one another.”

“Oh ho! It seems you have been bested, Chief Fuma.” An intruder had joined the conversation. Turning to the voice, Mia found an old man approaching them. He wore a calm smile, and once he reached Mia, he bowed. “You have come a great distance, Princess Mia Luna Tearmoon. I am Feng Kuoma of the Wind Clan, and I will be leading this Meeting of Chieftains.”

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Yes, I am Mia Luna Tearmoon.” Mia lifted her riding shorts in a curtsey as she flashed the elder a full-faced grin.

“Ho! I see there is reason in you being called the Great Sage. You are truly of superior insight...I am quite impressed. Might that be your horse, princess?” The man pointed at Dongfeng, who had carried Mia all the way here.

“He is.”

“It is a suitable horse for proving the truth of your earlier words. Perhaps you would be willing to have this old man escort you to the Southern Capital? It would bring me the utmost joy to ride saddle-to-saddle with nostalgic comrades.”

“Why, I wouldn’t mind at all.” Mia was a bit confused, but she was faced with Kuoma’s amicable smile. So focused on the sight, she failed to notice Malong’s bitter frown.

Chapter 35: Mia's Entrance...Is Some Genius Preparation?

The Equestrian Kingdom's Southern Capital was filled with a quiet tension. Of course, that was only natural—Meetings of Chieftains were only an occasional affair, and this time, it would be attended by representatives from the lost Fire Clan. However, there was one more thing that contributed to the tension in the air.

"I hear the Holy Lady and the princess of the Tearmoon Empire will be in attendance."

"The princess of the Tearmoon Empire? What reasons could bring her here?"

"It seems she is friends with the young girl of the Fire Clan."

With such rumors spreading about, it was no wonder that the atmosphere enveloping the city was anything but normal. It is also worth mentioning that the one who spread such a rumor *may* have been Mayun. Or rather, it *was* Mayun.

All was part of their performance, including having Mia enter the town on horseback. Their goal was to create an atmosphere that would give them the advantage—one where people could believe that today was special, that something that would normally never happen could. Something like the lost Fire Clan returning to the Equestrian Kingdom.

Thus, the group entered with all eyes turned to them. Leading the crew was none other than the eldest chief of the twelve clans, Kuoma of the Wind Clan. His clan was known best for their strong emphasis on the traditions tracing back to the age of their founder, Kuolong. They were nomads amongst nomads, despising all sorts of temporary residences; their travels were free as can be. In times of peace, they were serene as the spring breeze, but they would meet anyone who dared look down on them with the force of a blizzard. In every way, they were truly a clan of the wind.

However, the crowd didn't quite know what to make of the young girl acting as Kuoma's escort. Her foreign dress was unfamiliar to their onlookers. Well, strictly speaking, it was not unfamiliar to all—most residents of the Southern Capital were used to the site of Remno subjects, including Remno royals. Thus, it was not that the sight of her was completely new to them, but that was also exactly why they could not hide their shock. They knew all too well how rare it was to see a foreign noble lady atop a horse. When it came to the Kingdom of Remno and the Holy Principality of Belluga which the Southern Capital had ties with, that assumption prevailed. It made sense that noblewomen would dislike the smell of horses, and that they would view riding as something uncouth.

So then, why? Why had this princess come not in a carriage, but on a horse? It was not hard to imagine how they felt affection for Mia just for this simple act. However, their excitement lessened as soon as they saw the horse she was sat upon.

It was not a moonhare, the most prized breed of horse. Its legs were not long and sleek like one. Rather, they were short, fat, and sturdy. Its unkempt fur was longer than a moonhare's. But more than anything, its eyes looked completely listless—rather than dashing through the wind, this horse looked like you'd most likely be able to find it taking a nap in the fields. To the people of the Equestrian Kingdom, the status of a chief was decided by the horse they rode. And by those standards, Mia was the opposite of someone deserving of respect.

Of course, Mia was not an Equestrian princess, and thus, her chosen horse should be irrelevant...except she had chosen to put on a show by entering the city on horseback, and thus, those gathered were falsely under the impression that she shared the same values as themselves.

However, their attention was quickly caught by someone else—Aima, younger sister of the Fire Clan's chief, who was riding just behind Mia. Or rather, it was her *horse* that caught their attention.

"What a magnificent steed..."

One glimpse of her horse was enough to convince the crowd that Aima was indeed of their same ancestry. *Thy swyft horse bequeathed by thy found'r Kuolong*. The lineage of that horse had been protected up until the present, and

the proof was Keilai, Aima's horse. Its fur glistened with a splendid shine, its body beautifully slender and its eyes perfectly clear. Together with its long snout, these traits gave off an air of perfect refinement, making it completely evident that the horse was carefully brought up and loved deeply by its rider. Aima was of no doubt a distant family member, sharing their same progenitor. Faced with their lost cousins, the crowd wondered what turn of events their return could bring. Meanwhile, Mia had something *else* on her mind.

I am so glad they stopped staring at me!

Yes, Mia had jumped at the suggestion of "Hey, why don't you ride a horse too?" But watching Chief Kuoma before her, she suddenly started to wonder if it was really such a good idea to display her lousy horsemanship skills.

Of course, Mia thought highly of her riding skills. There weren't many noblewomen in Saint-Noel or Tearmoon who could ride a horse as well as her. However, this was the Equestrian Kingdom. Young or old, man or woman, *everyone* rode horses here. And watching Kuoma, who had offered to escort her, Mia couldn't help but be very *deeply* aware of this fact.

Here, even an old man can easily ride a horse! My riding skills must seem like child's play. Urgh... How utterly embarrassing. I let myself get too carried away.

After realizing this, she couldn't get it out of her mind...which only made her grow even more stiff. It was a vicious cycle.

As concerned about showing off her embarrassing skills as she was, Mia couldn't be happier that she had escaped the crowd's notice.

Burdened with various thoughts, Mia thus made her way to the Southern Capital. This would prove to become genius preparation on the part of the Great Sage, yet of course, no one had yet to realize it.

Chapter 36: The Great Sage Poses a Question

A deep sigh reverberated throughout the room. This place had been prepared for the chief of the Forest Clan, but his heart felt slightly unsettled by the foreign carpet adorning the room. He sat down atop it with a thump while his son, Malong, filled him in on the earlier events.

“So Elder Kuoma is indeed opposed to the return of the Fire Clan to our kingdom.” Mayun looked slightly drained, and his son gritted his teeth at the shame he felt.

“We really lost that one. They completely turned our strategy against us.”

There were two goals they had for trying to turn their entrance to the Southern Capital into an epoch-making one. First, they wanted to create an atmosphere that made it seem like something special—like the Fire Clan returning to the kingdom—could happen. Second, they wanted to get Mia in a position where she would have the right to speak. Unlike Rafina, Mia was simply the princess of a foreign land. No matter how grand her empire was, there wasn’t a reason for her to speak at a Meeting of Chieftains. It would be an incredible blow not to be able to gain Mia’s sagely advice, and thus, they had schemed to prove her worth to the other chiefs. And yet...

“A horseback entrance. I had wished to demonstrate that she is no ordinary princess, but...it appears to have had the opposite effect.”

Feng Kuoma had seen through their plan and had come to nip it in the bud. Should Mia interfere in the Meeting of Chieftains, it was all too likely he would proclaim, “There is nothing to learn from one who rides a measly nag.” Thus, their plan was to have her switch to a different horse before making her entrance into the city, but the chance had been taken from them.

“Had Chief Fuma not interfered, things wouldn’t have turned out this way...”

“It was a simple fault in timing. No, Elder Kuoma is a tricky one. It is possible he appeared when he did with intention...”

Had a conversation been avoided with Fuma, they may still have been able to switch out Mia's horse—she had been meant to arrive riding a prized moonhare of the Forest Clan, and had she, she would have been able to attend and speak at the Meeting of Chieftains with pride. However, that plan never came to fruition, for she had used a completely sound argument to shut Fuma up.

"A horse is a horse. They are not to be ranked against one another. They are all deserving of respect."

Those words had shocked Malong. It was an important truth that those of the Equestrian Kingdom should never forget, and it was the exact reason why Malong could not stop Mia from entering the city on her own horse. Forcing her to ride a moonhare would negate her claim that no horse could be better than another.

"Still, the Great Sage of the Empire is purer than I had thought. With her sagacity, I believed she would be more accepting of even those who dabbled in the impure. No, perhaps that is too much to expect of such a young woman." Mayun's words were but a pained whisper. He shook his head, leaving his son with a sense of unease. "I was mistaken. My enthusiasm led to too much meddling. I am ashamed that I would let my feelings get the better of me as I did."

"I agree that the little miss is pure, but...y'know, father, I don't think I've ever met anyone who knows horses like she does."

From time to time, Malong still remembered the truth about horses that Mia had shared with him the first time she appeared at the stables. He was certain she had come to complain about getting sneezed on, and yet, she instead shared a simple truth with him—horses can take you somewhere far, as far as you want to go. Her voice was filled with confidence, and not a shred of doubt appeared on her face.

"I don't think we'd have the right to call ourselves 'Equestris' if we negated her words, no matter what the reason was."

Mia's words were true beyond comparison. What values could be gained from denying them? Judging one horse against another, deciding which excel and which do not... Was such an act not hubris?

“‘A horse is a horse. They are not to be ranked against one another’...”

The words she thrust forward were sharp. Anyone who heard them could not help but be troubled by them, asking themselves, “Just who am *I* to decide a horse’s value?”

“I am ashamed... For I cannot proudly proclaim that truth.” Malong saw pain in his father’s face as he spoke those words—a complicated expression that combined guilt with self-derision. Unable to get a hold of these emotions, he forced his face into a smile and shrugged. “The path of a chief is one ill-fated...”

Seeing the exhaustion on his father’s face, Malong’s grew grim as well. He felt the countless fetters that bound him and was overtaken by gloom. He couldn’t help but feel disgusted by it—on top of a horse’s back, he was free as free can be, but now, his hands and feet were tied by invisible chains.

Mayun collected himself with a shake of his head. “So, what task occupies Princess Mia?”

“Lord Kuoma invited her to dinner. Miss Rafina is with her too.”

“I see.”

At the time, the two had no way to predict the overwhelming talents that the Great Sage of the Empire would put on display, descending on the scene just like Mother Earth—or rather, Mother *Sea*—gobbling up the practices, fetters, and values of the Equestrian Kingdom with room in her belly to spare. Mia’s flotsam was crashing onto the shore of the Equestrian Kingdom, and her mouth was wide open.

Chapter 37: Life Advice...Horse-Style! Cont.

“Dammit... I feel disgusting.” Stepping outside, Malong spit out those words before taking the deepest breath his lungs could muster. Over and over, he breathed in, then out, then in, then out, as if he were trying to expel the miasma swirling in his chest. The night breeze carried with it a refreshing coolness, and for a while, Malong simply closed his eyes and stood still to relish in its comfort. And when he finally opened his eyes...he was suddenly faced with the sight of Rafina, who was standing still in a daze herself. “Hm? Isn’t that Miss Rafina?”

For some reason, he felt there was something vaguely off about her. Her head was turned to face the ground, and seeing her stupor, Malong felt that there was something ephemeral in the profile of her face, as if she would melt away should she be left alone.

“What’s wrong, miss?”

Her thin shoulders jumped at his words. However, as soon as she turned to face Malong, her expression melted from fear to relief. “Oh, Malong...”

Malong realized that she hadn’t brought any guards with her. They may be safe and sound inside the Southern Capital, but Rafina was perfectly aware of her position. This was out of character. No, now that he thought about it, Malong realized that Rafina had been acting quite out of character all the way here—she seemed dispirited, as if she were lost in her thoughts.

“I thought you went for supper with Miss Mia, no?”

“Yes, I did... But I wasn’t feeling quite well, so I stepped out for some fresh air.”

“Without any guards?”

“Well, I...” She muddled her words and once again looked down at the ground in front of her.

She’d usually be able to easily think up one or two proper reasons. She really hasn’t been acting like herself, which means I can’t just leave her alone. Good

grief... Malong scratched his head in exasperation before putting on a wry grin. *Well, I guess I'm not really acting like myself either.*

Normally, he wouldn't get annoyed at something like this, and he'd be trying to get the details out of her, even if he had to force it. The mere thought of leaving her alone wouldn't have occurred to him.

"Seriously, getting all worried like this...it really isn't like me. You either. All right!" After slapping his cheeks, Malong decided to do something that *was* like himself, which could really only mean one thing. "Let's go riding, miss! Come with me." With that, he shifted his expression to a cheerful smile.

"Huh?" Rafina looked at him, clearly confused.

"I've got something on my mind bothering me too, so let's go take one of the horses for a spin!" With that, Malong brought his fingers to his lips and whistled. As soon as he did, his horse dashed straight toward them.

"Oh, but...I don't..." Rafina seemed indecisive, so with a sigh, he scooped her right into his arms!

"Eeeeek!"

"Sorry, just a second."

He brought one arm to her back and slid the other one behind her knees... He was carrying her bridal-style!

"Ah! Huuuh?!"



Even more beside herself, Rafina stared at Malong, her mouth opening and closing as she searched for words. All the while, Malong lifted her onto the back of his horse, getting on behind her.

What about the guards, you ask? Why, they're inconsequential! *Completely* inconsequential! Atop a horse, Malong was free. No fetters could bind him!

"Hold on tight, okay?"

Rafina's legs hung over the side of the horse, and after checking to make sure she had grabbed on tight to his own clothes, Malong set the horse in motion. Thus began their secret horseback nighttime excursion.

The moon shone pale against a backdrop of glittering stars that filled the night sky. Below, a single horse waltzed through the town, the clip-clop of its hooves reverberating through the street.

"So, how is it? Horses are great, huh? I bet you've started to feel better."

"Uh... Y-Yes. I have." She still didn't sound too sure of herself.

Malong glanced at her and noticed she was as stiff as a rock. "Ha ha ha! You can relax a little, y'know? I'll catch you if it ever seems like you're about to fall."

Rafina pouted at him. "I-I'm not afraid..." She made to protest, but she quickly gave up and instead let out a deep sigh. Perhaps the silent twinkle of the stars above had opened her heart, or perhaps the unpredictable turn of events on part of Malong had instigated in her a sense that nothing really mattered. In any case, word by word, she let everything out. "I... I've lost faith in myself."

"Hm?"

"I came here to help solve the issues occurring within the Equestrian Kingdom as the Holy Lady of Belluga. And yet, hearing Mia call Aima her friend has left me trapped... I'm just so envious..." She cast her eyes downward. "As the daughter of Duke Belluga, I cannot let myself be so distracted by this. I absolutely can't... It is because I became friends with Mia that my emotions have gotten so muddled. Considering that, I cannot help but wonder if I need to end my friendship with her. Worrying like this is no way for the Holy Lady to act.

I know that, but I don’t want to stop being Mia’s friend. I loathe even thinking about it...”

Suddenly, she was lost for words. Tears pooled in her eyes. Her pupils wavered in confusion, far from the image of a despot who handed out her judgments with absolute resolve. Yet even this did not suit the image of the beloved Holy Lady either.

“I just... I don’t know what to do.” Those words were but a whisper. Conflicted, her voice wavered, and she was simply a young girl troubled by her relationship with a friend.

“Isn’t that fine? I think that makes you more human. It’s normal for people to think of their friends, or to want to be most important to them. Same goes for wanting to be together forever with the people you’re fond of.”

Rafina’s face was still turned downward. His words had no effect.

“Hm... Then what about...?” mumbled Malong as he turned his thoughts inward. Rather than try to cheer her up with words unlike him, he thought it would be best to use his *own* words. Thus, he reached a conclusion! “You see, there are bad people who ride horses too.”

“Huh?” Rafina was taken aback by the sudden talk of horses.

Malong didn’t mind, and instead continued his speech. “Sometimes, I think that horses are pitiful animals. I wonder if they would be happier if there weren’t any humans around. But I don’t think that’s actually true.”

“What...do you mean by that?”

“The Holy Deity made this land, along with all the people and animals that live on it. And it was the Holy Messenger who brought horses to the Equestrian Kingdom, which means that horses were made for people to ride them. Horses can only find their happiness through living with us people. Letting a horse free isn’t the way to make it happy. Instead, we need to think about what we can do to be good partners for our horses. What you’re going through is the same.”

“U-Um...? Hm?” Rafina was intelligent, but this left even her completely bewildered.

“What I mean is, the Holy Deity put a Holy Lady here to be a *human* who leads other humans. In that case, I think it’s best you stay one. Horses serve humans. It’s just like that—you should be the Holy Lady, but you should be that as a *human*. Just that. And I don’t think it’s very human to stop worrying about your friends or to throw them away just because they get in the way of your judgment.” He looked up to the sky. “That’s why I think you’re fine just the way you are, Miss Rafina. Isn’t that for the best? Whether you’re the Holy Lady or any old commoner, isn’t it enough to worry, despair, and laugh with your friends?” He put on a teasing smile. “At the very least, I like you better that way.”

“Huh? Oh...” For some reason, Rafina’s eyes were open in shock. Teardrops formed in the corner of her eyes, and Malong promptly wiped them away.

“Ha ha ha! I think you seem more your age when you’re worried to tears thinking about your friends. You’re cuter this way too.”

“I-I’m sorry?! P-Please don’t treat me like a child!” Rafina glared at Malong, rouge clearly dyeing her cheeks.

Did I really make her that angry? Jeez. This is difficult.

Malong gave a wry smile and shrugged. “Well anyways, I don’t think Miss Mia is the type to worry about such things. I’m sure she’d listen to your worries too.” He shook his head. “She understands horses well. Her heart is completely free—nothing chains her. It’s enough to make me jealous, y’know.”

As for what Mia was up to while the above conversation went down...

“Hmph... Banitsia is quite delicious. It looks like a bread, but its crunchy outer pastry has cheese kneaded into it! The vegetables on top made for a perfect combination... Oho! So, the traditional way of serving it is to dress it with salted meet? Hm, but I bet sweet yogurt would work well with it too. I have some things to try!”

...She was enjoying her freedom to her heart’s content! Completely free with no chains to bind her, she was a culinary pioneer discovering new foods through combining the traditional with the new. That was who Mia truly was.

Chapter 38: Mia’s Nightmare

Mia dreamt that night, but she saw no visions of past timelines or other forgotten histories. Instead, her dream was simply a genuine nightmare.

“Just where in the moons am I...?”

Mia found herself in the ruins of a castle, standing in a corridor she had never seen before. It was completely enveloped in darkness, so much so that the light in her hands did little to chase it off.

“My... What is happening? Why am I in a place like this?”

Still in her state of “wherefore art thou Mia,” she looked about the room when suddenly, a pleasant, incredibly intriguing aroma reached her nose.

“What a delicious scent! Yes, I think I should go find it.”

In any case, Mia needed to head *somewhere*, so of course, the best option was to head for that mouthwatering aroma! With that in mind, Mia followed the trail to find a large party hall. In the middle was a table piled high with mountains of steaming hot food. It looked awfully close to the banquet she had participated in the night before.

“Hm? Why, this is the feast I had yesterday. Just what is all this?”

“My, don’t you look awfully plain! How gluttonous of you, jumping on food as soon as you catch sight of it.” Suddenly, a piercing voice filled the room. Mia turned toward its source to find a single woman, who seemed to be in her early twenties. The corners of her eyes turned sharply upwards, and her lips were twisted into a wicked sneer. Her hair was black enough to melt into the darkness. But the most striking thing about her was the large snake coiled around her body. “Bad taste” sticks out as the best way to describe her attire. However, her distinctive appearance brought to Mia’s mind a single person—a woman wrapped in serpents, which meant she had to be...!

“The High Priestess of the Serpents... C-Could you be Miss Valentina?!”

The woman lifted the corners of her mouth into a heinous sneer. “How rude

of you to not recognize your own sister-in-law. I doubt you'll ever be ready to marry Abel at this rate." She glared at Mia, her face as wicked as wicked can be. "And what about that F.A.T. of yours? I see you had quite a bit to eat last night."

"Huh?! B-But I heard that Equestri cuisine is excellent for one's health! I've also been told that as long as you believe, F.A.T. will not come to you..."

"You are absolutely delusional! You call yourself the Great Sage of the Empire? How hysterical!"

Her words were sound. Mia could voice no rebuttal! In fact, Mia had been starting to realize herself that those words were too good to be true.

"Things have their limits, don't they? Even if one could avoid getting F.A.T. just by having faith...you've clearly eaten too much!"

Dreams often reflect the wishes deep in our hearts. Mia wanted to have complete faith. She wanted to have no doubts that as long as she believed from the bottom of her heart, she could eat all she wanted without getting F.A.T. Thus, her dream introduced a restriction. In other words, Mia couldn't eat a *whole* ton, but with faith, she could eat a ton and be just fine.

"With that body, I bet you've grown too heavy to dance your desired steps."

Suddenly, her body grew incredibly heavy. Valentina had been right—with this weight, it would be impossible for her to dance.

"B-But..."

"I really cannot think of you as a proper fit for Abel. You're a failure!"

She was once again hit with a sudden shock. Then, Mia screamed as she fell down, and down, and down...

"Wah!" Suddenly, she awoke. "Huh?! W-Was that just...a dream?"

She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and looked around. Somehow, Bel's head had found itself on her stomach. "Hmph. So, it was Bel that made my body feel so heavy."

With a sigh, Mia moved Bel's head aside. She slid a pillow under her, causing Bel to smile. "Miss Mia... Tee hee hee! I'm too full to eat anymore!"

Right now, Bel's gleeful sleeptalking only hurt Mia's ears. "I wonder if it was my guilt for eating too much that caused me to have such a dream." Or perhaps it was a divine premonition. Mia looked back on her more recent memories. "What happened in Sunkland was just so shocking, I can't deny that I feel I have been eating too much recently. Well, such is to be expected of the High Priestess! I see she knows how to hit where it hurts. How unpleasant..."

They were fighting against Serpents. Leaving their obvious weaknesses as they were would not prove to be a good plan. "It seems I need some exercise..."

Her confrontation with Abel's sister, Valentina Remno, was approaching. To hide her weaknesses—as well as to gain approval for her relationship with Abel—Mia needed to get fit.

"I have some things to consider... Hmph." She crossed her arms and pondered.

Chapter 39: This Is a Battle, and Mia's Only Option Is to Stand Her Ground!

Anne repeatedly passed a comb through Mia's hair. Through the mirror, Mia flashed her a smile. "You've grown quite skilled at this, Anne."

"Thank you, milady." She nodded back with the face of a true veteran maid. Suddenly, their eyes met in the mirror, and they both burst into giggles. "It's all thanks to your luscious hair. It is incredibly easy to brush."

"Yes, that shampoo with the horse on it is quite the quality product." She gave a hearty laugh before suddenly rubbing her stomach. "Hmph..."

Until just a moment ago Mia had been feeling some indigestion, but it seemed like it was all in her head. Her lively stomach was already demanding more food! She both ate well and slept well, meaning Mia was in perfectly good health (er, well, *pediatric* health, that is)!

My, I do hope breakfast is soon...

Mia rubbed and rubbed her stomach. Seeing this, Anne looked at her with concern. "Are you all right? I think you may have overdone it at the banquet last night."

"I'm fine. I believe I ate just the perfect amount, in fact. It is only polite to eat everything that is served to you, even if it means having to eat a tad too much... Oho ho! It's all just another part of the job."

"But if this continues, milady, I'm worried it will affect your health..."

"I just need to make it up with exercise! It may be a shame, but chances like this aren't always around—though sometimes they are! Ah, that would be perfect! Why don't you accompany me later for some exercise?"

Hearing Mia's brazen and dignified proclamation, Anne clenched her fists in admiration. "Of course I will, milady!" she exclaimed with vigor.

Mia and her crew sat down for breakfast with Lin Malong. They were served a traditional Equestri soup, which let out a sharp aroma of spices and was filled

with whitemoon dumplings—white balls of dough wrapped around a filling.

If I remember correctly, the filling is a combination of lamb, vegetables, and mushrooms. Oho! I wonder what type of delights the mushrooms of the Equestrian Kingdom will bring to me!

Mia was not cutting any corners in her background research into the Equestrian Kingdom!

“Hey, Miss Mia. How was last night?” asked Malong.

“Oh, good morning, Malong.” Mia looked back on her banquet with the Wind Clan and sighed. “I had done my research, but they completely got the better of me.”

Ever since she had first encountered Equestri ingredients in Sunkland, Mia thought she understood just how tasty they could be. However...

I may have underestimated Equestri cuisine! I let my guard down. I didn’t think I would eat so much! If the High Priestess ends up seeing this embarrassing side of me, I’ll never be able to show the world my face again!

“I see. So you did some research beforehand. I shouldn’t have expected anything less.”

“Of course. A working background knowledge is indispensable.”

Even for Mia, eating all the foods the Equestrian Kingdom had to offer would be impossible. Thus, it was important for her to research what foods she could combine together, and which dishes she absolutely couldn’t miss!

“I really did take a number. I need to consider what I can do to improve the situation...”

“You think you’ll be able to recover?”

Mia gave a vigorous nod in response. “Of course!”

Mia was filled with absolute resolve. She would soon be meeting Abel’s older sister—getting fit before then would be a piece of cake! That thought in mind, Mia shook her head. Whether it was easy or not wasn’t the issue at hand. She either would, or she wouldn’t. This was a battle, and her only option was to stand her ground!

Exercise really is the most important. When faced with the tasty foods of the Equestrian Kingdom, refusing to eat them is near impossible.

Mia knew herself well. It was true that limiting her food intake would help her slim up, but there was no way she could do that here in the Equestrian Kingdom—and knowing that it was impossible, there was no use in even considering the option. Thus, Mia was left with only one choice—to exercise.

I've already asked Anne, but I really need some effective exercise. The only question is just what *that could be... Hm, this really is quite difficult...*

"I see... You haven't given up yet. You're as much of a go-getter as I thought."

"I won't give up! There are times when retreat is not an option!"

It would be hard to avoid a meeting with Abel's sister. Thus, Mia had to exercise!

Malong looked straight into her eyes. Faced with their vigor, he nodded. "I got it. I'll do what I can to help you out too. And by the way, do whatever you think you need to. I think my dad will be able to keep up."

"Hm? My, what does that...? Well, I *would* be grateful for your help, but..." Mia's lips curled into a wry grin. "Just as always, you truly look out for everyone, Malong."

Mia was resolved to get fit before her first meeting with Abel's elder sister, and yet, here Malong was promising to offer a hand with the utmost sincerity. Mia couldn't help the bitter smile that creeped up on her face—this much looking out for her was maybe a bit *too* much! And to boot, Malong gave her a peculiar look after hearing her point the fact out.

"Maybe, but you're even friendlier than I am. It feels a bit strange to hear it coming from you," he mumbled, yet his words never found their way to Mia's ears.

But yes, that's right. First, I need to bring the Equestrian Kingdom back together with the Fire Clan at the Meeting of Chieftains. Exercise shall come after... I should just forget about it for now.

Thus began the fateful Meeting of Chieftains, a legendary meeting that would later be known as “the final gathering of the twelve clans.”

Chapter 40: Miabel's Revenge Begins...Maybe?

"That's the little miss for you..." After finishing his breakfast, Malong stepped outside to feed his horse. "Thanks to her background research, she might actually recover from all this. Really, she's definitely something to write home about."

The same could be said about his father, Mayun. But in any case, Malong respected those who were able to properly think things through and prepare for any situation.

But looking back on it, it does make sense. The "Chaos Serpents," huh?

Malong had learned of the mysterious group just the other day, and it seemed that somehow, they were connected to the Fire Clan. He also learned that Mia, Rafina, and the others had been battling against these disciples of evil. Back when he was still a student at Saint-Noel, it had all completely escaped his notice.

Miss Mia always looked like she was riding without a care in the world... No, now that I think about it, there were times she seemed to be at her wit's end. It's starting to all make sense...

After feeding his horse and giving it a good brushing, Malong suddenly tilted his head in confusion. "Hm?"

He felt a presence behind him, and when he turned around...he found Rafina, stuck in her tracks but looking like she had something she wanted to say.

"Oh, Miss Rafina. Morning. Did you sleep well?" He smiled at her, but the moment Rafina glanced at him, she once again averted her eyes. One of her hands played with her beautiful hair, fidgeting as if she had something on her mind.

"G-Good morning, Malong," she whispered. Something was *definitely* off about her.

Is she still worried? Or maybe...

Starting to grow concerned, Malong suddenly put his hand to Rafina's forehead.

"Eeek!" she screamed as she jumped in the air.

"Hm... I think you might have a slight fever. Did the cold from last night get to you?"

"No, that's not it... I don't have a fever, so there is nothing to worry about..." She took a few steps backward as she squeaked those words out. He gave her a confused look, but inwardly decided to just accept it.

"Well, I hope that last night was a good change of pace for you. But putting that aside, I'm really looking forward to your help today, Miss Rafina. I don't think Miss Mia will be able to do much during today's meeting."

"Huh...? Why would that be?" She cast him an inquisitive look.

Malong explained to her the details of the situation with Mia's entrance into the city.

"I see... I didn't know we managed to make such a mistake." Hearing his explanation, Rafina was finally able to return to her usual calm expression.

"Miss Mia thinks she can recover, but we've still got to do what we can. Still, I'm only the son of *one* of our chiefs, so I'm limited in what I can say and do."

A Meeting of Chieftains was fundamentally a discussion to be held between the chiefs of each of the twelve clans. However, thanks to the current circumstances, Malong had also been allowed to participate due to his deep involvement in the matter. However, how much weight his words would hold in such a meeting was something he was incredibly anxious about.

"In that respect, the words of the Holy Lady have a lot of weight to them. I doubt you'd be ignored. I'm sorry to have to leave so much up to you." He bowed his head deeply.

Rafina met this with an eloquent smile. "Um... About yesterday, might I request that you keep it between the two of us?"

"Hm? Oh, sure. Of course, but..." For a second, Rafina's face lit up at the

response, but her dreams were suddenly crushed. “I did already tell that one little miss.”

“Wh-What ‘little miss’?”

“Y’know, the girl who’s always with Miss Mia. I think her name was Bel...”

Rafina’s body suddenly lurched itself over, a silent scream escaping her lips. Crossing over an incredibly long distance in time, Miabel’s revenge against the Empress Prelate Rafina had begun to take form...maybe. But, well, that story is one of little consequence.

A relatively large building stood in the center of the Southern Capital. It was known as “Great Horse Castle,” and it was a residence of decent size built by the chief of the Mountain Clan, Fuma. Its architecture had heavily drawn on that of the Kingdom of Remno, and thus it also made for a good fortress. Still, there was something about its name...

“G-Great Horse Castle...”

Its rather...*unique*...name left Mia feeling dizzy. At the very least, they should have given it an Equestri-style name, yet instead, they forced a foreign-sounding name on it—a fact that was both incredibly palpable and incredibly vexing.

Of course, Mia also had a bit of a...*unique*...sense when it came to names, such as calling the horse she was riding “Silvermoon” or naming her granddaughter “Miabel.” However, Mia had conveniently thrown that fact over the horizon of her memories.

But once she entered the gates of the building, she was immediately faced with something else—a giant horse looking down at them. Rather, a *statue* of one.

“My, what an incredible form... This is truly some excellent work. It will be quite helpful in bringing my horse-shaped bread ever closer to perfection...”

Mia approached the statue to observe it more closely, eventually stumbling upon its title.

“‘Dedicated to my beloved daughter, Loklou.’ Why, the horse certainly has an Equestri name, but...’beloved daughter’?” Mia once again looked up to inspect it.

I wonder why those with power always want to make statues of their daughters. I mean, my father is the exact same... One would think there was a better way for them to spend their money.

While Mia was lamenting the foolishness of the powerful, a voice suddenly called out from behind. “Welcome...I do say.”

Looking behind her, she found a single young woman. She appeared to be around the same age, and while her hair was the characteristic black color of the Equestris, it was wrapped in an adorable ribbon from abroad. She lifted up her skirt and curtsied. “I am the daughter of Fuma, chief of the Mountain Clan. My name is Xiaolei...I do say.” She flashed an awkward smile.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Mia Luna Tearmoon, princess of the Tearmoon Empire.” In contrast, Mia responded with the flawless composure of a princess, which had Xiaolei asking the following question.

“Are you a real princess...I do ask?” She stared at Mia, mouth agape. However, she quickly shook her head and turned around. “Oh, um... My father has requested that I escort you...I do say. This way, please.”



Chapter 41: The Diplomacy of the Great Sage of the Empire

Following Xiaolei, Mia eventually found herself in the large room where the chiefs had gathered. Judging from the building's architecture, Mia was sure she would find a round table. Instead, all the chiefs were sitting on mats which had been laid out on the floor.

So these are the chiefs of the Equestrian Kingdom...

Seeing the group, Mia surmised that she probably needed to remember all their faces, but that's when she suddenly found the imposing figure of Feng Kuoma, sitting on the farthest side of the room.

Perhaps I should greet him...

From her various experiences, Mia had learned that manners and personal connections would save her in times of trouble. They were the one thing she could rely on. Of course, it would be foolish to *completely* rely on them, but in any case, it was better to have them than not. In order to direct this conversation toward the outcome she was after, being able to borrow the weighty words of Chief Kuoma was something she would much appreciate.

Hmph... It doesn't appear that anyone here has much interest in me. Thank the moons for it, but I wonder how I should approach this...

Calling out to Kuoma here would bring everyone's attention to her. For a moment, she wondered if she really should let go of her chance to laze about without anyone's eyes on her. But her indecision quickly turned into a decision.

It will mean I have to draw a bit of attention to myself, but I think a proper greeting really is called for here.

Thus, she quickly opened her mouth. "Greetings, Chief Kuoma. I was very much in your debt yesterday."

"Ho! Why, if it isn't the princess! I quite enjoyed my time yesterday as well. Your idea of putting sweet fruit atop the banitsia was rather ingenious."

“Oho ho! I was quite surprised the flavors matched so well myself. I hope to dine with you again soon, next time in Tearmoon. I will treat you to all the tasty delights we have to offer.”

“Ha ha! I see. In that case, I very much await the chance.” Suddenly, Kuoma rid himself of his grin and stared sternly at Mia. “However, it is regrettable you had to make the journey here. This is an issue between the Equestrian Kingdom and our brethren, one we must solve ourselves. Thus, there is little in which you can say...”

Faced with those words, Mia was...moved!

My, they’re treating me like a complete outsider! And it seems like Chief Kuoma is very fired up for this meeting. Even if I sit this one out, everyone will work toward our goal in my place... There is truly no pleasure greater than this...

Kuoma had proclaimed that the Equestrian Kingdom would solve the problem amongst themselves, and thus, Mia had no need to get involved. She was beyond grateful for his deep consideration! Mia’s plan had always been to solve the issues that she didn’t need to get involved in first so she could use that time to figure out what could be done about the High Priestess. Thus, if Mia didn’t need to get involved in this, things couldn’t be better!

Still, this issue at hand was related not only to Abel’s sister, but also to Aima, who for some reason started to call Mia a friend. If this could *truly* solely be solved by those of the Equestrian Kingdom, it would be a bother, and it would leave a nasty taste in Mia’s mouth.

There’s no guarantee that Chaos Serpent conspirators aren’t amongst the chiefs. I need to keep the situation under control! And the best way to do that would be...

Mia glanced at Aima. “No, if there is anything which I can do, I will give my all in doing it. This is for the sake of my friend, and thus, it will be no trouble at all.”

First, Mia gave a warning: “my friend is involved in all this, so if you do anything rash, I won’t sit quiet!” Then, she glanced toward Rafina.

“My other friend, Miss Rafina, also seems to be quite troubled by the situation. If she wishes to guide things toward an even better conclusion, then I

simply must offer my aid."

While making it incredibly clear that she was here only to *assist*, she also emphasized the fact that Rafina was intervening in the situation. Mia knew all too well what becomes of those who steep to depravity before the Holy Lady! And if there *did* happen to be a Serpent in the mix, Rafina's presence would make it difficult for them to interfere.

Mia had set a fire under Rafina's feet, demonstrating that this was something for *Rafina* to handle. And yet, hearing those words from Mia left an incredibly sweet smile lighting up her face...until she quickly returned to her usual stern look.

"Thank you, Mia. I plan to give my all in bringing this quarrel to a close." Rafina's vigor was palpable in her words, but there was not a single soul who noticed the deep emotion that swelled behind her eyes.

However, there was another who had similarly been moved—it was Mayun, who had watched the whole affair.

How incredibly brilliant, the might of the Great Sage of the Empire...

Their grand entrance into the city had ended in failure, and thus Mia's existence should have been made completely inconsequential. However, the eyes of every chief in the room were currently drawn to her.

When I had heard of her invite to a banquet with the Wind Clan, I believed it to be another example of Elder Kuoma's trickery. However...

Feng Kuoma was the eldest among the chiefs, and he was also the man who would lead this meeting. By attending a banquet at his invitation—and more importantly, by *emphasizing* that—Mia forced the chiefs to remember a simple fact: originally, Mia had entered the Southern Capital with him as an escort!

She has made use of what stole her words to once again regain them. How magnificent...

Mayun was faced with a strategic meeting both incredibly elaborate and remarkably fierce, but he was currently at a loss for words. He had always thought of himself as one who had a penchant for schemery, and yet bearing

witness to the conversation between Mia and Kuoma had made him painfully aware that in comparison, his machinations were mere child's play.

She is indeed worthy of the epithet "The Great Sage." It is because she knew that a recovery would soon be possible that she agreed to enter the city's gates with him.

Mia's talents knew no bounds. An unconcealable shiver made its way down Mayun's spine.

Chapter 42: Mia Be a Whirling Tide Descendeth on Thy Land

“I begin with an offer of my deep gratitude for granting us this opportunity. I be Ka Louhua, elder of the Fire Clan. The youngin’ beside me is sister to our chief. Her name is Aima.” Louhua slowly stood up as she spoke, carefully observing the chiefs before silently bowing her head.

The power of her words was enough to leave the crowd enraptured, but it was something—or rather *someone*—else who had completely captured their gazes, which was the girl introduced to be the sister of the Fire Clan’s chief, Aima. Upon their entrance to the Southern Capital, she had been in complete control of an excellent steed. Her expression was that of a seasoned warrior, and her dignified deportment was enough to elicit gasps of admiration. The crowd was certain that she was an opponent who could not be underestimated—an unparalleled genius! The anxiety this recognition had caused them was clearly written on each and every one of their faces.

One could say it was another repercussion both hidden and revealed by the disease of viewing one’s horse as the greatest basis to judge their character—a disease which ran rampant throughout the Equestrian Kingdom.

The whole group introduced themselves as well, with Rafina being the final one to quietly pipe up. “I am the daughter of the Duke of Belluga, Rafina Orga Belluga. I believe I may have met quite a few of you.” She gave a cute tilt of her head and put on a refreshing smile. Then, she closed her eyes and spoke a verse from the Holy Book:

“*When the ’oly Deity descendeth on th’ land, thy Shepherds greeteth him with joy unrivaled.*”

She paused before continuing. “You are the descendants of the Shepherds, those who first welcomed the Holy Deity and the greatest receivers of his blessing. I did not expect to attend such a meeting, but I am overjoyed to be included. I pray that the Holy Deity blesses this meeting with his guidance.”

Her grand prayer sent a refreshing breeze through the hearts of her audience. Thus, the Meeting of Chieftains began.

The first to open his mouth was Kuoma, who was tasked with directing the discussions. “Well then, I believe it was Chief Mayun of the Forest Clan who called for this meeting. Let us first have him explain why he gathered us here, and what it is he is after. Do you have any objections, Chief Mayun?”

“Ha ha ha! I am abashed to hear you refer to me by my proper title, Elder Kuoma.” The conversation now turned on him, Mayun began with a jest before leisurely rising to his feet. He fixed his long sleeves with a snap before silently matching the gaze of everyone in the room. “My dear fellow chiefs, I express my great thanks for heeding my call. I could not be more pleased than to spend this wonderful time with you.” He spoke eloquently, almost in song—the stirring tone of a performer.

“Oh? ‘Wonderful time,’ you say?”

Mayun bowed deeply at Kuoma’s question. “Yes, we have once again found our lost brethren. Now, cousins who parted after events long past have reunited. I am sure our founder is greatly pleased.”

Quite a few chiefs seemed to have been genuinely touched by Mayun’s appeal, for they nodded their heads in agreement. One was even moved to tears. At the end of the day, the people of the Equestrian Kingdom were of both good and honest heart.

“I see. Then, Chief Mayun, you intend to state that you have gathered us to share in these deep emotions. Is that correct?”

“There are, of course, other reasons as well. The Fire Clan has been made poor from bad harvests. I hear that they have members who have consequently turned to pillaging. Letting this be would be a disgrace on our kingdom. I am sure our great founder, Kuolong, would feel ashamed of us as well.”

“Hmph. Then, you are here to request support to save the suffering Fire Clan?” Kuoma clapped his hands and grinned. “If that be the case, then this will be simple. Brethren of our own blood are faced with hardship. Let us provide all the provisions they need. We must also negotiate with countries abroad. Let us send convoys to states that have fallen victim to their pillaging and provide

them with proper recompense.”

This time, *every* chief nodded in response to Kuoma. No matter the troubles that had previously divided them, it is only natural they send aid to their brethren. There was no need for debate. In the Equestrian Kingdom, this would simply mean exercising good sense. As stated above, those of the Equestrian Kingdom were of both good and honest heart.

However, Mayun took it another step further. “No, Elder Kuoma. My speech does not end there. The true reason I have called this gathering is to discuss the future of our Equestrian Kingdom.” Kuoma narrowed his gaze, but Mayun paid him no mind. “While unfortunate that the Fire Clan has been faced with such troubles, I believe this is a divine message. I want all of us chiefs to consider my next words very carefully: the Fire Clan are our cousins we once parted from. Is it not time for us to once again welcome them back?”

The air in the room suddenly grew cold.

“Do you mean to say that they should be welcomed into the Forest Clan? Or is it that you are implying that they are to be divided between all twelve of our clans?”

“I am certain you know I mean neither of those, Elder Kuoma...” Mayun looked between every chief in the room. “I cannot help but think that the time to once again return from twelve clans to thirteen has come. I ask my other chiefs this: if you were in my position—if you had been the first to find the Fire Clan—would you not think the same?”

“How would I know? I would need to be in that position to make such a judgment. I cannot help but think you have acquiesced too far to the Fire Clan. I thought you were a master of our historic hymns, but have you forgotten our past?!” It was the second eldest chief in the room who made the remark. The other chiefs looked at Mayun, clearly at a loss. Lending a hand was the natural thing to do, but welcoming back a clan which had once broken apart from the rest? There was not a single person in the room who didn’t feel apprehension at the thought of such a major change.

However, right then, Louhua silently raised her hand and spoke. “I be sorry to report such to Chief Mayun, but it is not the Forest Clan who truly found us

first. There is another chief we have relations with, for we have been under the auspices of Chief Fuma of the Mountain Clan for much longer."

With the conversation suddenly turned on him, Fuma flinched.

"Oh? Is that true?" Mayun appeared a bit surprised before shaking his head in disappointment. "You should have revealed this much sooner, Chief Fuma." After taking a glance at Fuma, who looked only a *tiny bit* pale, Mayun looked back at Louhua. "You mean to say that there are relations between the Fire and Mountain clans?"

"Well, no, you see..." In a panic, Fuma tried to stop the conversation, but he was interrupted by Louhua.

"Yes. When troubles faced us, Chief Fuma presented us with an offer to buy our livestock. First, it was sheep. Then, it was goats. Finally, he asked for our horses..."

That was the first big shift in the waters.

"What is that to mean, Chief Fuma?" asked a chief of large build and burly voice.

Though the aside was inconsequential, this man happened to nearly cry at Mayun's earlier words. He was well known as a sensitive and kindhearted man.

"W-Well, you see..." Other chiefs were now glaring at him, leaving Fuma at a loss for words.

Having lived separately from the other clans for many years, none of the Fire Clan knew of the tradition that followed in times like this. However, the practice of offering free aid to clans faced with hard times was a law that had been shared between the twelve clans from times of yore. It was not an act instigated by the benefits one could gain. Neither transaction nor trade, extending a hand to lift another clan back to its feet was an act of pure benevolence.

And yet after finding the suffering Fire Clan, Fuma had offered to *buy* their livestock, the only fortune they had, which was completely necessary for their livelihood. Without, they may have gained temporary wealth, but only further ruin inevitably awaited them. Fuma knew that perfectly well, yet that was the

offer he had given them. It was an inexcusable act that defied the code of the Equestrian Kingdom. In an instant, the emotion enveloping the crowd turned to censure at Fuma's actions and empathy for the Fire Clan.

It was just as Mayun had calculated. He did not wish to welcome the Fire Clan by showering them with one-sided kindness to force their loyalty. He needed a measure that would maintain a proper balance between the two parties. His wave was finally set in motion, but weighty words quickly brought it to a stop.

"But what are we to do with the young girl?" This was Kuoma, his eyes silently trained not only on Louhua but Aima who was sitting beside her. "Should you state you intend to rid yourselves of your wolves, I would understand. That once led us apart. In such a case, I shall gladly welcome the Fire Clan, however..." He paused as if deep in thought. "Should you merge with the Forest Clan, it would be necessary to follow their code. Similarly, there are codes of the Wind Clan and codes of the Mountain Clan that you would need to follow. Naturally, it would mean giving up your wolves. However, welcoming the Fire Clan as its own entity would mean we must also accept the code that guides your clan. In other words, we must accept your use of wolves. Is that not correct?"

"I-It is most definitely correct. As I expected, Elder Kuoma, you have rejected welcoming the Fire Clan as comrades. I thought you would, and that is why I offered to buy their sheep... Hm?" Fuma suddenly realized that no one was paying attention to him.

The conversation had reached a deadlock, born from the locked glare shared between Kuoma and Mayun. Everyone in the room was certain one of the two would move the situation forward, and the chiefs watched them with bated breath.

However, the new wave was getting ready to break shore in someone *completely different*. This was a whirling tide of epic proportions, ready to swallow all, and it would break force with an utterance of well...*calm* proportions.

Watching the discussion between the chiefs in complete silence, Mia was

perfectly composed.

My, you can tell they really are related. It seems things will be solved nicely.

From the way Mia saw it, they were simply arguing *how* to save the Fire Clan. As Mayun had stated, the best outcome would be for them to return to the Equestrian Kingdom, but at the very least, it seemed like they would be supported with provisions. It was incredibly fortunate that not a single soul had suggested simply abandoning them in their suffering.

They have to be the ones to find common ground. With how things currently appear, I don't think it'll be necessary for me to speak at all!

Mia folded her arms and silently closed her eyes. Today, she was *not* going to find something to count in order to kill time. That would be a waste, and today, Mia was *serious*! What was she serious about? Facing off against her F.A.T., of course.

Once this meeting is over, I will shortly be meeting with Abel's sister... I have even less time than I thought. I wonder what the most effective method would be... I need to consider this seriously.

The issue at hand was what would be the most fruitful method of exercise. Mia knew that she was not against the idea of moving her body, it was just very difficult for her to match it to the amount she eats.

It needs to be something I can stick to. Which means...

She silently nodded and opened her eyes. "Yes, how about riding horses?"

This was the Equestrian Kingdom after all. Thus, horse riding was only the obvious answer.

It would prove excellent exercise if I make sure I do it every day, and riding with Abel is great fun! I'm certain I'll be able to stick with it, which means it should be fine to overindulge a little.

Her plan was ingenious, and thus, she couldn't keep the grin off her face. But then she suddenly realized something—every chief in the room was glaring daggers at her.

"And what do you mean by that, Princess Mia?" Kuoma's usual composure

had crumbled away, his voice slightly quivering as he put that question to words.

“Huh?”

Mia was completely out of it, but she perceptively picked up the change in tide, and that it was *her* who had changed it. Still, there was something that even Mia didn’t pick up on—the fact that the wave she had caused would prove to be a whirling tide that would swallow all the chiefs whole.

“How about riding horses?” Those words hit Malong like a punch to the face. And it wasn’t just him. Each chief was expected to have the composure, bravery, and wisdom needed to properly lead each clan, but right now, each and every one of them was at a loss for words.

It was Kuoma who recovered first. “You don’t mean... Impossible.” He shook his head as if to reject the idea.

“No, mentioning riding horses in a setting like this could mean only one thing—a Matching of Steeds,” declared Malong.

A Matching of Steeds—an ancient method of reaching verdicts within the Equestrian Kingdom. Put simply, two competitors would ride horses, the first to reach their destination being declared as in the right. In doing so, they were asking that the Holy Deity indicate his divine will through the speed of each horse. A calm review of the rules makes it clear that this method greatly favored those skilled at riding or in possession of remarkable horses. However, it was *somewhat* more peaceful than trying to get one’s way by clashing swords, and more than anything, it was definitely in character for the Equestrian Kingdom.

Still, Matchings of Steeds had become quite rare in recent years. Thus, it would usually seem preposterous that a foreign princess would suggest such a thing, but Malong had heard something that made it seem possible.

“That’s right, Miss Mia. Didn’t you mention that you had done some background research on the Equestrian Kingdom?”

Yes, Mia had earlier stated that she had *carefully and thoroughly* looked into

the Equestrian Kingdom beforehand. Well, she didn't actually go *that* far, but her mentioning of the Matching of Steeds had fit Malong's narrative well enough that there was now nothing that could be done. In his eyes, Mia had painstakingly reviewed the entire history of the Equestrian Kingdom in order to find a method to resolve the current conflict.

"Indeed, a Matching of Steeds is a traditional method of closure. Should the results be that we must welcome back the Fire Clan, we must simply accept it. For us to have back the Fire Clan as they are, still in use of their wolves, this is perhaps the only way in which all will accept." Kuoma slowly rubbed his chin. "In other words, the princess is proposing that Chief Fuma of the Mountain Clan and Aima, sister to the chief of the Fire Clan, participate in a Matching of Steeds. Is that correct?"

"Huh? No, there is no reason for us to deign to..." The conversation suddenly directed at him, Fuma was completely panicked.

Kuoma gave him a cold stare before speaking himself. "The Fire Clan utilizes wolves, and thus, they are not Equestris. That is why you bought their sheep. Is that not what you just stated, you dullard?! The only conclusion to be had is that it is *you* who should be most against the return of the Fire Clan into the Equestrian Kingdom."

"W-Well... Urgh..."

Fuma's actions up until now were still a gray zone. But if reconciliations were to be made and the Fire Clan returned to the Equestrian Kingdom as a proper clan, Fuma's abuse toward them may stick out even further. In principle, the laws and codes of the present could not be applied to the past, but he couldn't deny that it would still be bad for his image.

Dissent quelled, Kuoma quietly turned back toward Mia. "Princess Mia, you have researched well into our kingdom. I am certain you know what becomes of one who loses a Matching of Steeds?"

Huh?

Her panic was about to slip from her mouth, but she held firm! She looked back at Kuoma, which prompted him to tell her the answer before he had the chance to hear it from her, as though he were seeking to confirm his

assumptions. “Should the winner seek it, the loser must hand over their horse. I am certain you proposed this plan knowing as much, yes?”

Huuuh?

For a moment, those words flew right over Mia’s head, and all she could do was stare back at him. Faced with this response, Kuoma mercilessly offered an explanation so exact there was absolutely no room for misunderstanding. “In other words...should the girl of the Fire Clan lose, her horse may end up in Fuma’s grasp. Or rather, I am certain it will. Her steed is splendid. However, knowing he will face the same risk, Fuma will present a horse of his own. I am sure all will agree that the reward should be worthy of the risk. You presented your plan knowing all this, yes?”

Ah! This is one of those times where it would be bad if I just okayed everything, isn’t it?!

Mia’s senses were quick. She would retreat! She still had time to do so, and she opened her mouth to state her intentions, but...

“Of course. Should victory decide things, there can be no excuses. I will gladly accept the challenge.” Aima beat her to the punch! She had her chest puffed out, looking incredibly proud and imposing...

Moons, I was too late! Miss Aima went and did something completely unnecessary!

Mia suddenly wanted to scream in frustration. A single glance at the situation made it clear that not all had been lost, and yet...

Even should she lose, it appears that they will be able to receive provisions, but Miss Aima will have to lose her beloved horse. The Fire Clan will also lose their only chance at being recognized as a part of the Equestrian Kingdom. They would still be able to join another clan should they agree to get rid of their wolves, but...the risk is just too big!

Mia also had earlier memories in her mind from when Aima had chased after her. It was true that Aima had been able to corner them, but would the same have happened had Mia been riding Kuolan instead? They may have been able to outrun her.

Under the right conditions, even I might have shaken her off our tails. At the very least, I believe Aima slightly pales in comparison to Malong and the wolfmaster.

If Aima's victory was all but decided, things would be different. However, Mia's chicken heart wasn't up to snuff for a plan reliant on an all-to-nothing gamble. Rather, it was more suited for...yes...she had a sudden spark of inspiration!

Relying solely on her intuition, she spoke. "No, Chief Kuoma. There is one thing you are mistaken about."

"Oh, is there? And what might that be?"

"Why, what else could there be besides the assumption that it will be Aima who participates in the Matching of Steeds?"

"What do you mean to state, Princess Mia?"

It wasn't Kuoma that seemed perplexed, but Aima. Mia gave her a silent smile before she placed a hand on her chest and proclaimed, "It will be *I* who participates!"

Those words had the meeting once again in uproar.

Chapter 43: Mia's Intentions —The Princes of Thy Winged Horse Joins the Fray—

The wager presented to them was all-or-nothing. Should they prove victorious, they would receive high returns, but failure would burden them with high losses...which wasn't a method Mia really favored. Still, as soon as Aima had accepted the challenge, there was no stopping things, which meant Mia needed to figure out the best way things could go *now*. And after a moment of pondering, Mia had decided what that would be—the participant in the Matching of Steeds being none other than *herself*.

Mia made her declaration with utmost confidence, certain of her success. For you see, the attitude of "Well, it doesn't really matter if I lose, does it?" had been the core of her plan. Even Mia wasn't rash enough to believe she could win a competition in horsemanship against an Equestri.

If I had been seriously trying my hand at riding for about a year or so it would be different, but right now, I think I might face a tiny bit of trouble.

Well, maybe she was a bit rash, but what's important is that she still didn't think she could win! But in that case, just what was she after?

Luckily, provisions are all but guaranteed based on how Kuoma was talking. I'll simply need to be satisfied with that. It is regrettable for Malong, but all we can do is let time decide when the Fire Clan will finally return.

The only other issue they would face in the event of Mia's defeat would be Fuma usurping the horse she rode, but she wasn't really worried about that. After all, Kuoma had said, "Should the winner *seek such*, the loser must hand over their horse."

Fuma made fun of Dongfeng. The only thing that would have Fuma demanding I hand him over is spite!

Let's hope no one ever overhears such scandalous thoughts.

Fuma was in a bad spot when it came to how he treated the Fire Clan. Thus,

should he win the Matching, he could simply use it to prove his innocence. It was fair compensation for his participation. But what about stealing his opponent's horse *in addition* to that? He wouldn't be stealing it because he wanted it; he would be doing it simply to be cruel to his opponent. Just how would *that* look to the other chiefs?

Plus, I'm not an Equestri but a foreign princess. I am certain I'll be able to use that to my advantage.

Mia could ride a horse, sure, but that could only be said *comparatively* for a foreigner to the Equestrian Kingdom and *comparatively* for a princess. Next to an Equestri who had ridden horses since birth, it was incredibly and painfully obvious that this could never be a real fight...which was also exactly what made things so great for Mia! Kuoma had stated that it was natural that there be a reward worthy of the *risk* of losing one's horse. However, with Mia as an opponent...there was no risk!

Oho ho! If Fuma thinks there's any risk with me as his opponent, he'll lose the face to ever call himself a member of the Equestrian Kingdom again!

So, what would become of Fuma should he win in a fight he couldn't lose and then steal his opponent's horse—which he thinks is worthless—out of spite? Why, it would be an undeniable disgrace! An absolutely deplorable act of shame!

And even if he does *steal Dongfeng, I can be certain that he won't be treated crudely.*

This was the Equestrian Kingdom, after all. Mia had absolute faith in the love for horses that the people of this country had. And this time, this would also be a horse "stolen out of spite in a Matching of Steeds" with the extra condition that it "used to belong to a princess." Would he be able to treat such a steed crudely? Of course not! Rather, it was much more likely that Fuma would have to make extra efforts in caring for Dongfeng to make sure he never was injured or sickly in front of any of the other chiefs.

If Dongfeng is passed to Fuma, he may get to live an even easier life than if he continued as a warhorse.

Just like that, Mia put together her thoughts with her loss as a premise...then,

she addressed the crowd.

“I wonder, is making use of wolves really so terrible?”

She was going to lose, but with all eyes on her, she felt she might as well make a proclamation of her own.

“Listening to this discussion, I cannot help but have that question. I am certain that long ago when the Fire Clan was banished, there were qualms to be had. Suddenly hearing that a group planned to domesticate wolves would be shocking. As leaders, I believe the chiefs in the past were right in their decision.”

Mia would probably have made the same choice herself, to be honest. With her little chicken heart, it was incredibly easy to understand the thought process. Still, Mia shook her head in silence.

“I understand it as a decision made in their time, but remaining fettered to that decision is not wise. The Fire Clan cared for their sheep well enough that they could sell them to Fuma, and Aima’s horse is magnificent. Is their way of life not an exemplary example of the lifestyle of the Equestrian Kingdom? I completely fail to understand what is so problematic about some domesticated wolves.”

The Fire Clan had already proven that raising wolves was not an issue! To Mia, their insistent dislike of the idea was exactly like the prejudices of picky eaters.

Having convinced myself that ambermoon tomatoes were disgusting, I never partook in the stew prepared by the chef. These chiefs are exactly the same!

Mia was taken back to that bitter memory. Having tasted such regret, Mia could not overlook this. She had to say something.

“If you are determined in this, then there is nothing I can do. I may not understand your feelings but... Still, I think that right now, you should consider whether or not this is really the hill you wish to die on. After all this time, you have been reunited with the Fire Clan. You can talk with them directly. I think it’s best that you take a proper look at Miss Aima and Elder Louhua and think. If you don’t, you may end up overlooking what is truly important.”

Had Mia still been fettered by her past beliefs, she would never have discovered one of her favorite dishes—ambermoon tomato stew! She didn’t

want them to follow in her mistaken path, and so, she made her appeal. Her speech was based in truth, and it struck a chord in the chiefs' hearts. They were all at a loss for words, and only one—Kuoma—opened his mouth to speak.

"...Indeed. A Matching of Steeds shall prove the truth of your words."

"Perhaps it will. Or perhaps it is simply a truth too obvious for the Holy Deity to need to prove." With the probability of her loss so undeniably high, Mia simply had to push that idea. "In any case, I pray from the bottom of my heart that this reunion will prove a good change for the Equestrian Kingdom."

"Yes... I absolutely wish the same." With a deep nod, Kuoma glanced at Chief Fuma of the Mountain Clan. "However, you cannot lose now, Chief Fuma. We cannot bring shame to the kingdom. The best horse will need to be prepared."

"Huh? No, but... Well, yes, but... I cannot stoop to means so childish. I am willing to accept the challenge, but should I prepare my best horse, Princess Mia has no hope of victory. She has stated that no horse is better than another, so I am certain she will be riding her own *certain* horse. In which case, I will offer a horse of similar caliber..."

Fuma seemed rather *unwilling*, which was only natural. The merits of victory for him were infinitesimal. He had no need to offer up his best horse! Still...

"What nonsense! The Matching of Steeds is a sacred ceremony. It is obvious that one would present their best horse. As a chief of one of our twelve clans, it is only right that you prepare a horse worthy of that title." The other chiefs agreed with Kuoma.

They might be dealing with a princess of the mighty Tearmoon Empire, and she might be able to somewhat ride a horse...but still, they couldn't let an Equestri lose this match! They needed to prepare the ultimate horse—one which had no chance at defeat!

This was also a punishment for Fuma. Faced with the suffering of his brethren, he offered no hand of help and instead decided to take advantage of them, buying up their sheep. He was misguided, and thus the other chiefs believed he deserved a worthy punishment.

Thus, Fuma couldn't cut any corners. This was a warning—he needed to

present a prized horse of his at the Matching. But it didn’t end there.

“Yet it is true that it would be immature to present one of our chiefs as the opponent to a princess not of the Equestrian Kingdom. I believe you have a daughter similar in age to the princess. I think it would be best that she be the rider we present.” Kuoma was suggesting that while they would present the best horse they had, they would add a handicap through its rider.

“You mean Xiaolei? No, I don’t think...” Fuma went to complain, but in the end, he had no choice but to accept. After abusing the Fire Clan, his paths were extremely limited.

Thus, it was decided that Mia Luna Tearmoon—who would later be known as the “Princess of Thy Winged Horse”—participate in the ceremony that was the Matching of Steeds.

Chapter 44: A Malicious Gaze

While Mia was making her rampage in the Meeting of Chieftains, Ludwig was traversing the Southern Capital. He was accompanied by Dion, Abel and his guard Grammateus, as well as Bel and Citrina.

“Are you truly satisfied with this outcome, Your Highness?”

Abel silently shook his head at Grammateus’s question. “I’m not sure. It’s true that I want to head there as soon as I can but...” he mumbled. Then, he shrugged. “I won’t be so rash as to run in alone and die on the battlefield. Though if Mia were captured, I might consider it.” He gave a joking smile before once again gathering his expression. “I don’t think this is the time I should lay my life on the line. The time to risk my life will come later.”

“I see. You mean that there are times one must fight. I see you have grown up quite well.”

“No, that’s not what I really mean either. I think, well, I just want to do what I can do now.” Saying that, Abel’s gaze once again began to wander. It wasn’t fun and games that had brought the group into the town—they were searching to see if any Serpents were hiding here.

Serpent shamans were dispatched by the High Priestess, and most likely, the Equestri-looking man who had approached Prince Echard in Sunkland was a part of that group. At least, Ludwig and the others thought as much and were thus on high alert.

The Southern Capital was frequented not only by subjects of the Equestrian Kingdom, but also merchants from Remno. While other clans were rather insular, the Mountain Clan had many interactions with the world outside their kingdom. Thus, it wouldn’t be strange for someone suspicious to be hiding out here, especially now when many attendants were present for the Meeting of Chieftains. No one could deny the possibility that someone after Mia’s life had hidden themselves in the crowd.

“Still, it will be hard finding anyone amongst all these people. Do you have

some sort of plan, Ludwig?" asked Abel.

Ludwig gave a slight push to the bridge of his glasses. "Well...I suppose so. I apologize that it is far from revolutionary, but I believe it would be best to focus our search on those who are likely to get close to Her Highness." He spoke his next lines slowly as if he were gathering his thoughts. "In truth, we are low on both hands and time. Thus, in principle, we have no option but to stay by the princess's side and protect her."

Whether this can really be called "lucky" is debatable, but unlike the White Crows of Sunkland, the shamans were not especially adept at gathering followers and putting them into action. Ludwig assumed that any direct attacks could be handled by the Princess Guard.

"What we need to be most cautious of is poison. It's necessary that we protect against such means by a food tester or something similar. However..."

That may have been possible had they been given ample time to prepare, but Mia's participation in the Meeting of Chieftains had only been decided recently. Even if there were an assassin plotting against Mia, there wasn't enough time to prepare accordingly.

"It will probably prove difficult to come up with any sort of protections for such."

He sounded like he was biting his words, making Abel's face grow dim as well. Despite Ludwig's assertions, their preparations were in truth far from flawless. The Serpents were incredibly hard to both find and protect against. Still, they needed to do what they could.

"Other ways a Serpent could approach Her Highness would include—"

"Dressing as a merchant, right?" Abel cut him off and looked out at what stood before him—the most bustling market in the Southern Capital.

"Her Highness has a keen interest in foreign foods, for she particularly despises letting her people starve. I am certain that she will try to build connections with the merchants here as well."

"And the Serpents have that all figured out, huh? In which case, you're saying that there's a high probability that the Serpents have disguised themselves

somewhere in this crowd.”

“It is merely a possibility. There may be no Serpents in the Southern Capital, and even if there are, they may be hiding themselves somewhere else. However, it may be a shame, but we are limited in what we can do.”

“We’ll just have to do what we can. I guess for now, that’s asking around to see if there are any new merchants about.”

Ludwig and Abel were in the midst of a serious discussion. On the other hand...

“Oh look, Rina! It’s a troya!”

Bel, incredibly delighted by the lively market atmosphere, ran toward a nearby shop.

“Wait, Bel!” Citrina went to chase after her, but suddenly...she stopped in her tracks. She looked around her.

“Huh? What is it, Rina?”

“No, it’s nothing. I just felt as if someone was watching us...” She rubbed her arms.

Bel seemed a bit confused. “Is it just because it’s rare to see noblewomen like us here?”

“Hm... Yes, Tearmoon has few ties with the Equestrian Kingdom, but...”

The gaze she felt was an enveloping one—one that felt just a bit repulsive. Thus, for a moment, it had weighed on her.

“Well... So be it.” Still not completely satisfied with the explanation, Citrina followed after Bel.

Then, The Monster Fell Away

Grasslands made up the majority of the Equestrian Kingdom, and right now, an unfamiliar party was making its way across it. The group consisted of both carriages and riders, and it probably goes without saying that it was the party of Mia Luna Tearmoon, the Great Sage of the Empire. Following Malong's suggestion, Mia and Aima rode on horseback, but of course, the other noble ladies of their crew stayed inside their carriages, one of which containing the young ladies Rafina, Citrina, Bel, and Anne. Inside, someone let out a painful sigh.

The culprit was Rafina Orca Belluga. Her chin resting on her hand and her eyes looking out the window, she forlornly watched Mia and Aima.

"How nice it must be..." she muttered before sighing once again. Then, she suddenly looked in front of her to find...Bel and Anne, who seemed rather shocked. Incidentally, Citrina was *instead* bobbing her head as if she were in complete agreement.

"Oh, ahem..." Rafina cleared her throat and closed her eyes. She needed to switch her mode of thinking.

I'm the Holy Lady of Belluga. I can't let myself think like this! It is far too selfish...

She quietly closed her eyes so she could once again wear her usual innocent smile, but...

"Miss Rafina, do you want to ride horses with Miss Mia again?"

Bel made a nimble attack! Rafina gave an awkward cough, completely bewildered. For you see, Rafina was well aware of the power behind her smile! Faced with an innocent grin from the Holy Lady, most people would step no further. It was the reason that Mia was never able to get close to her in the previous timeline, as it was a smile of *rejection*. The true essence of the Holy Lady—as well as her position as the daughter of Duke Belluga—was how hard it was to approach her. She was practically untouchable!

However, it seemed like that was no concern for Bel. Miabel Luna Tearmoon was the expert on *adven-tours*, blessed with both intellectual curiosity and a spirit for adventure. She would approach anything that caught her interest completely head-on!

Rafina let out a couple more cute coughs with her surprise written clearly on her face. She looked straight back at Bel, but her response was hesitant. “Um, uh... Well...” It was rare that Rafina’s eyes panically darted across the room, but that was exactly what was happening now. She once again cleared her throat and put on a pleasant smile. “No, not at all. Whatever made you think that?”

“Well, you’ve been staring outside looking really jealous for some time now.”

“Huh...?” Her eyes opened in shock. She then looked to Anne and Citrina. The first of the two looked a bit conflicted, averting her eyes! And the other, for some reason, nodded back at her with a considerate smile.

“H-Huh...?” Rafina was left feeling incredibly self-conscious. She pushed her hands against her face. For some reason, her cheeks felt hot enough to burst into flames.

J-Jealous?! Just what kind of expression was I wearing...?

She wanted to take a good look in the mirror, but unfortunately, that wasn’t possible. She once again gathered herself. She turned her consciousness to the most pressing issues they faced—the affairs of the Equestrian Kingdom and the Chaos Serpents—and slowly, very *slowly*, took a deep breath. She then calmly lifted her head.

“I didn’t look jealous at all...did I?” Then, she quietly mumbled to herself, “No, not at all” for good measure.

“Huh?” replied Bel, her straight face turned into one of confusion. “Really? But you looked just like Miss Mia whenever she sees people eating really delicious cake...”

Her words were a bit imprudent, but whether that was toward Mia or Rafina was up to interpretation. Well, anyway...

“That’s why I thought you must have had a lot of fun riding horses with Miss Mia. Was I wrong?” Bel stared at her, her curiosity coming from the depths of

her heart. Her question was viceless, the simple wonder of a child—and that was *exactly* what made it so wicked!

Rafina clutched her chest with a grumble. Memories of horse riding with Mia flashed in her brain. Bel was right, it *was* fun. Really, *really* fun. So fun it was impossible to hide...but that caused her heart to twinge, as it was the first time she and a close friend had ever had fun together like that. It was the first time in Rafina's whole life that she had laughed from the bottom of her heart completely carefree.

"O-Of course I enjoyed my ride with Mia, and I wish to learn more about horsemanship. But that can always wait until after we return to Saint-Noel." Rafina despaired.

In response...Bel held her ground! No, she cut her way into it!

"So, you really *were* jealous!"

Her cutting remark was a strike so excellent it felt *good*. It was clear she had inherited her grandfather's famous overhead strike.

As the attack's victim, Rafina's eyes darted about the room. "Uh... Well, I-I do hope I get the chance to ride with her again, but...that is just me being selfish. I'm... I'm the Holy Lady of Belluga, and I have responsibilities that come with the title. Thus, I'm not really in such a position to say..." she fumbled.

Strangely, Rafina's state had left a deep impression on Bel. There was an image Bel had always had when it came to Rafina, but now, she felt as if it had been completely shattered—as if the grand monster that was the Empress Prelate had fallen away.

Ever since Bel had come to this world, she'd had multiple conversations with Rafina, and after each one, Bel's fear of her would gradually dissipate and be continuously replaced with affection. But as this change took place, Bel also lost the ability to connect Rafina to the Empress Prelate. All she could do was wonder—could this person *really* become the despot she knew?

But in this very moment, that connection was completely severed.

Oh, I get it. Grandmother was a dear friend of Miss Rafina, and that's why the

pain of losing her turned Miss Rafina into the Empress Prelate. Suddenly —*shockingly* suddenly—it all made sense. But at the same time, she realized something else. *Just like us...the Empress Prelate felt worry, sadness, and jealousy. She was just a normal person.*

The Empress Prelate was nothing so grand. She thrust the other world into one of fear, yet she was no unknown monster; she was a proper human with proper feelings. And there was something else that Bel began to think—if that was the case, then there may be no reason to fear her so. The Empress Prelate had a heart the same as hers. Thus, they could talk. They could share in their sadness and anger, and maybe, their laughter as well. Bel had suddenly realized that there was a chance they could understand each other. The monster that was the Empress Prelate had long lorded over her heart, and in that moment, it was slain.

Bel also began to think something else. It was unlikely that she would ever meet the Empress Prelate. Without Mia's assassination, she would most likely never make her appearance, and that was exactly the way Bel wished it. *But if I ever do end up meeting her, I'd like to have a chat.*

Basically, if she ever came face-to-face with someone who had become a monster just like the Empress Prelate, she didn't want to senselessly fear them. They were human, just as she was. Thus, fear wasn't what she should be directing at them—words were.

"Uh... Bel? What is it?"

Bel suddenly came back to her senses to find Rafina staring at her, worried by her silence.

"It's nothing! I was just surprised since I didn't know you could be so cute!" She gave a mischievous smile, as if she were poking fun at her.

Thus, the shadow of the Empress Prelate that haunted the heart of Miabel Luna Tearmoon, descendant of the Great Sage of the Empire, faded away. New emotions burgeoned in their place, yet the effect they would have on her was still anyone's guess.

Riding Across the White Hill of Memories

The Great Sage of the Empire, Mia Luna Tearmoon, was known for her many friends. There was the daughter of the Duke of Belluga, Rafina, and the Etoiline Esmeralda. Then there were Chloe, official leader of the Mianet, and Tiona, daughter to Outcount Rudolvon—merely a few of the great names that could be counted amongst the long list.

However, she also had a friend of a more *peculiar* background—the title of "former bandit" was very conspicuous on Mia's list of friends. Of course, that was none other than Ka Aima—princess of the Equestrian Kingdom's lost Fire Clan. Riding atop her dear horse Keilai and commanding her loyal warrior wolf Hasuki, she was especially appealing even amongst Mia's many great friends. This was perhaps the reason she made frequent appearances in dramatizations of Mia's exploits and boasted particular popularity. And while there were many stories to be told about Empress Mia and this former bandit, they were, after all, *dramatizations*, which meant most were aggrandized to the point of fiction.

In the most reliable of sources, *The Princess Chronicles* by Elise Littstein, Aima's name makes its initial appearance after Princess Mia first visits the Equestrian Kingdom. It is recorded that after the two's chance encounter there, they formed a pact of friendship. Before that moment, Aima was nothing more than the average bandit. From this, it can be assumed that her meeting with the Great Sage drastically altered Aima's fate.

While there are no "ifs" in history, it is only human nature to wonder about the possibilities. What would have become of Aima had Princess Mia never visited the Equestrian Kingdom? If the two had never met, what life would have awaited her? Would she have become a legendary brigand whose name was known throughout the continent? Would her horsemanship skills inspire a country to employ her as a member of their cavalry? Would there be a noble out there to have fallen in love with her at first sight? Or would she...

Winters in the Equestrian Kingdom were beautiful. Should snow fall, it wasn't rare to see the plains that made up the majority of their land dyed pure white.

Above the white of the earth were gray clouds that filled the sky, and through them, the sun majestically shined its light.

Aima loved these times when the world was subdued of color. Ever since she was young, the view of the platinum fields that lay beyond the forest would leave her enraptured whenever she snuck out of the hidden village she called her home. Holding back her gasping breaths, she would step into this picturesque world of tranquility. The snow would crunch beneath her feet, and by her side, Hasuki would pant happily. The wind would woosh by her, coming from far off in the distance into the snowy plains. She couldn't wander too far from her village, and thus, the farthest she could go was the closest hill to the forest. But when she got there, she would lay there supine—her hands and feet thrown out beside her—and look up at the gray clouds above, watching as snowflakes once again fluttered their way to the earth. Sometimes, they would land on her cheeks, their chill pleasant against her skin that burned with her excitement. Hasuki would lay next to her, his body pressed against her own, and she would laugh whenever she saw him looking at her.

"Next time, I should come on horseback. I am sure galloping through here would be wonderful."

Horses were her most prized treasure, and she was certain that riding through the plains just as the wind would be euphoric—would make her feel as if she could go anywhere. Across the hill, the land stretched out for what seemed like forever. As such, she couldn't help but feel that as long as she had a horse, she could go far away to lands she had never even dreamed of.

If only she could ride across the hill and off to the ends of the earth. Then, she could forget about the fact she had nothing to eat today, or about the Fire Clan's friction with the Equestrian Kingdom, or about her brother. She could throw it all away.

Those were her juvenile dreams, as well as an urge that was always within her.

But ultimately, she never made her journey. She was the daughter of the Fire Clan's chief. Her sense of responsibility was too strong to abandon everything and run away. In the end, she grew up, unable to escape the shackles of her

clan.

The Fire Clan experienced its changes, but the world faced a drastic change as well. When the great famine ravaged the continent, its effects made their way to her village. They had always been short for food, but this was a scale they had never experienced. In order to save the helpless children and elders of her home, she led a group of warriors and resorted to banditry.

“In order to save your people, I think it is only natural to resort to using militaristic means to usurp it by force.” The sweet voice of a certain someone echoed in her mind. They quelled her guilt, and so, she surrendered herself to that voice and continued her plight.

No one stopped her. Had they, it would only mean letting their fellow clansmen starve. Plus, the Fire Clan were skilled riders, and Aima was a skilled commander. It wasn’t difficult to continue stealing provisions while making sure there were no sacrifices, neither within their own group nor the enemy’s.

No one came to save them either. No one extended their hand, telling them that there was another way.

There was no end in sight for the famine. Losing their foodstuffs to thieves meant starvation. That was the case in every country. No matter how hard they tried to avoid begetting death, there was no denying that their actions led many to starve.

It was only natural that countries who had become their victims would dispatch their army to preserve the peace. While true that Aima and her warriors were prolific riders, as time went on, their victims only grew.

And then came the end, all too sudden, and all too soon.

Aima and her crew had fallen into a trap. Bowmen assaulted them, and so they ran. But one by one, her warriors fell to their pursuers and perished. Somehow, Aima had escaped. Alone, she rode through the snow-fallen plains. Arrows jutted out from all over her body, and blood dyed her clothes a dark crimson. She tried to maintain her posture atop her horse, but she had fallen weak. She couldn’t move with haste.

“Urgh. To think I would have fallen for such a ploy...” she whispered, a small

trail of blood dripping from the corner of her mouth.

She coughed as she resisted the pain shooting through her whole body. But then came a sudden gust of wind from her side. Her body toppled. Next thing she knew, she was looking up to the sky above. Only then did she realize that she had fallen from her horse.

“Oh, it is...snowing. Had it not been for that...I would have died. What a disgrace to my clan...to have fallen from my horse.”

Pushing through the pain, she attempted to stand. But she immediately found herself planted right back on the ground.

She could move no farther.

Suddenly, she found her dear Keilai’s snout in front of her face, looking at her worried. She petted his nose with an awkward smile. “You have my...apologies, Keilai. It appears...that I will be able to keep up with your speed...no longer.” Grasping Keilai’s side, Aima pulled herself into a stand. She took the short sword from her hip. “Thank you...for staying with me...up until now. It was thanks to you...that I was able...to do my duties.” Her hands were weak, but she gathered her last bit of strength to cut off his reins and remove his stirrups. “You were...an excellent steed. You are a treasure...of our Fire Clan. No, of the whole...Equestrian Kingdom. I cannot force you...to stay here with me...”

She once again brought her trembling hands up to Keilai’s neck. She caressed it, and then, she slapped his rear and screamed. “Go, Keilai! I pray...that you will find...an excellent rider.”

With that, she collapsed. Keilai stared at her, concerned, but then, his ears twitched. A deep howl reverberated in the air. And then appeared a single wolf...Aima’s trusty vassal, Hasuki. He chased after Keilai, violently growling at him until the horse began to run forward. His gait was slow, and every so often, he would stop and look back, as if he could not bear to part from her.

“Yes...go. You are an excellent steed, Keilai... I am sure...you will find yourself...an excellent rider...” she muttered, the relief clear in her voice. Then, she turned to Hasuki. “Thank you, Hasuki...”

That wolf was like family to her, and she patted his forehead. He gave a

bellowing cry. But a careful look at his body revealed that he was covered in wounds as well. His ivory-colored fur was his pride and joy, but spots of it were now matted with his own blood. An arrow was deeply lodged into his stomach. Aima winced at the sight—she could tell that just like her, Hasuki's life would not last much longer. She brought her weak hands to his fur, brushing it over and over.

She laughed painfully and bitterly. "You have grown...quite filthy. You are too prideful to look...like this. Your brothers would laugh... We will have to wash you...in the river later..."

She ran her hand over the blood-dyed neck of his fur. His ears were normally held upright with dignity, but now they simply flopped by his side.

"Right...you despise baths. But do not complain...it would be a shame...since your fur is so beautiful..."

With each passing of her hand across Hasuki's fur, more and more blood became matted to it, sullied by the blood that continued to overflow from the wound on Aima's collar.

"The more I pet you...the dirtier you become..."

Aima softly lay back down. After taking a good look, she realized that the scenery before her resembled the hill she saw all those years ago, and she couldn't help but smile. The white hill near her home was dear in her memories, but as a child, she could never travel beyond it.

"This...brings me back..."

It was enough for her to think that maybe, this was not so bad a place for her to pass into the next life. The faces of her clansmen flashed in her brain before fading away. If she were to pass away, would they be all right? Would they live on? That was her only worry.

Her choice not to flee was not one she regretted. Thus, she was satisfied with the end that awaited her on the other side of that decision—satisfied with the way she would die. At least, she should have been.

"I am a warrior. To save my clan...I risked my life to fight...and then...I died. What is there to regret?"

Searching for affirmation, trying to convince herself, she muttered aloud.

This was a prideful death.

I have no regrets.

I can't *have regrets.*

She repeated those words to herself over and over...and then grimaced, her mouth covered with blood.

"I suppose...those who truly have no regrets...would not have a need to say so..." She coughed before glancing over at her faithful wolf. "Hasuki...you may go. Find your own...final place of rest... Hasuki?"

Her dear partner, Hasuki, had closed his eyes. She put her hand up to his nose, yet she could feel no breath.

"How odd...to pick my side..." she mumbled.

She buried her face in his fur. He was her best friend—her *family*. With all her might, she breathed in his scent, wanting it to fill her lungs. And then, she perished.

Her regrets—and a sense of futility—were still left in her heart.

That was the story from a world that lacked a Great Sage.

The death of Ka Aima was never recorded. Instead, the only record left behind was that in a corner of the continent, a nameless bandit had been subjugated. That record was lost in the age of chaos that descended on the continent, and thus, the proud girl of the Fire Clan, Ka Aima, became a name lost to history.

Her thoughts, her hopes, and her accomplishments were known to no one.

Then changed the flow of time...

The calm "clop clop" of horse hooves reverberated through the air as Mia and co. leisurely made their way for the Equestrian Kingdom's Southern Capital, located in the southeast. The sky had been clear just moments earlier, but now

clouds obfuscated the blue above. It looked like it would soon rain.

“My, the weather’s grown terrible...” Mia Luna Tearmoon, Great Sage of the Empire, said with a sigh as she looked to the sky above. “And I had just gotten the chance to go on a lovely horse ride...”

Aima responded to Mia’s disappointed countenance with pride. “That is quite the unthoughtful utterance for the ‘Great Sage,’ Princess Mia.”

“Unthoughtful? What do you mean?”

Mia’s confusion was clear, but Aima continued with a grin. “The weather is inconsequential when it comes to riding a horse. Whether it be sunny, rainy, or cloudy, each has their own enjoyments.”

“My... I see.” Mia was clearly impressed.

Aima gave an elated nod. “It is true that sunny days are excellent, but I recommend days of snow. The plains are beautiful on days when frost nips at your hands. When the world is dyed white, riding through it is just...just...”

She was lost for words. Suddenly, the clouds had given way and the light of the sun had made its way to the earth. The brilliant light was blinding, and so Aima turned her face away—but when she saw the scene now in front of her, she couldn’t help but gasp.

“Hah...!”

What she saw was the path they had just come from. The sun shined on the hill they had just crossed, causing it to glimmer white...

“It’s...”

Dyed the color of snow, to Aima, it looked just like the hill she would lie on when she was young, the one she never thought she could cross. Even when she would journey out as a bandit, she never felt as though she had *truly* crossed it, not at all. It was a place that existed only in her heart.

And yet at that moment, she suddenly felt as if she had. Though it wasn’t that she had thrown everything away to cross it alone. Instead, she had done so while bearing the full weight of her clan’s fate—while bearing *everything*. Mia had pulled her hand, and now, she was right beside her.

“Oho! The sky has let up. I really do prefer riding when the sky is clear above me. It seems like I may have some work to do if I plan to learn otherwise,” said Mia with an ebullient smile.

“I see... I managed to cross the hill feeling so calm and peaceful. In another future, I might have...” mumbled Aima, unable to keep the words from escaping.

Once, Aima had decided not to cross that hill alone. Instead, she had chosen to keep her hand grasped to that of her comrades, to stay right where she was with them. But the Great Sage had tugged Aima’s hand with all her might so that not just Aima, but *all* of them could cross that hill together.

“Miss Aima?” Mia was looking into Aima’s eyes, clearly perplexed.

In response, Aima grinned. “No, it is nothing. I am proud to call you a friend, Princess Mia.”

“My, what makes you say that so suddenly?” Aima’s words were unexpected, and all Mia could do was tilt her head in confusion.

That was the story from the world that was bathed in the light of the Great Sage of the Empire.

But what fate would await *this* Ka Aima? To find out would require researching the many plays and tales recording episodes of her life. However, that would be quite the task. Aima’s popularity was enough that removing the fiction from the fact of these stories would be near impossible.

Knowing Aima’s true feats would be difficult, but there are two things we know to be true—she was a dear friend to Empress Mia Luna Tearmoon, and she was loved by all who held Empress Mia dear.

Mia’s Diary of Thy Winged Horse

The Twenty-Fifth Day of the Ninth Month

I had some freshly baked bread with butter at the village of the Forest Clan. The foods I had in Sunkland were really tasty, but the foods I’ve tasted in the Equestrian Kingdom are on a whole other level. They are faultless perfection! I couldn’t help but scarf it all down, but I think that was a necessary procedure in being able to confirm how delicious the butter is. Freshly churned butter really is the best. I need to report this to the chef.

Highly Recommended ☆x5

The Twenty-Seventh Day of the Ninth Month

After getting to know Miss Aima, I had something called “baozi meatball dumpling soup” at her village. It’s a dish of ground meat and chopped vegetables wrapped in dough and then boiled. Maybe it’s because it’s wrapped, but the meat is really juicy, and the fragrance of the vegetables is quite sharp. It makes for quite the superb combination. The clear broth it’s served in is light and well-seasoned.

Overall, this dish works best as a single meal rather than a course. The only bad thing about it is how full it makes me! The Fire Clan went through the trouble to prepare this for me, so of course I had to eat every single bite.

Recommended ☆x4

The Twenty-Eighth Day of the Ninth Month

While traveling, I had a soup called tamator? Maybe? I need to research its proper name later. Anyways, it seems like it was made from yogurt. I always thought yogurt was more suited for dessert, but the soup was incredibly delicious. It is light and has some acidity to it, so it would make for a good breakfast as well.

Perhaps it’s best for when your stomach is all tired out. After eating too

much, it somehow made my tummy feel refreshed. It appears that I'll be able to eat some tasty foods from here on out too.

Recommended ☆x4

The Thirtieth Day of the Ninth Month

Oho! I was careful with my writing this time, so this still looks like a proper diary! But as always, there are so many entries about food. I wonder if this diary really is cursed after all. My old bloodstained diary definitely appeared that way, but the journal I'm writing in now should be completely normal... Now that I think about it, if someone cursed my other diary, it would have been me who did so after being guillotined. Which would mean that under my curse, *this* diary can only be used to review foods. What a mysterious phenomenon.

Well in any case, I experienced a lot in the Equestrian Kingdom. First, there was Aima, princess of the Fire Clan with a wolf vassal. What a shocking situation! There was also all that happened with the lost clan of the Equestrian Kingdom. I would never have supposed that Abel's sister, Miss Valentina, was involved either!

Malong also seems to be on edge, and Rafina seems to be down in the dumps. And Abel has been all out of sorts with worry for his sister. It's all terribly concerning. I wish there was something I could do for him...

At least Bel and Rina have apparently been enjoying the trip to their fullest. I doubt Bel had a chance to travel in her world, and I bet Rina didn't have much opportunity to travel without worry either. I do hope this proves a good experience for the two of them.

But I suppose that is all up to how things go from here on out. I need to give my all if I want to make sure this is a trip they look back on fondly rather than with regret!

Still, I think I may have been all out of sorts lately as well now that I consider it. Perhaps I've worked myself too hard. After arriving in the Equestrian

Kingdom, I feel that my body has grown a tad heavier. And my horse's steps have too, I think. Perhaps he's tired from such a long journey. After some exercise, it really is important to eat and sleep well.

Anyway, I wonder what meals I have in store for me today!

Afterword —The Love and Friendship of “Final Boss”(?) Rafina—

Hello everyone, I’m Mochitsuki. It’s been a while, but I hope everyone is well. Thank you for picking up the tenth volume of *Tearmoon Empire*, where Mia’s adventures continued into the Equestrian Kingdom. I hope you all enjoyed reading this arc. Just like Sunkland, the Equestrian Kingdom is a country whose name alone has been present since the first volume, but now, Mia has finally arrived. She really has come a long way.

When I first started *Tearmoon Empire* as a web novel, many readers were certain that Rafina would be the Final Boss. As the author, I tried writing her to be a rather adorable character, but I was never able to rid readers of this suspicion. However, after her troubles with love and friendship in the Equestrian Kingdom, I think I was finally able to clear her from doubts. However, how she grows from here is still a mystery...

Mia: “Cheese, milk, butter... The Equestrian Kingdom is truly overflowing with culinary delights! I can also go for a horse ride whenever the inclination arises to get some exercise. The Equestrian Kingdom is fantastic!”

Rafina: “I can go riding with Mia whenever I do so please! Tee hee hee! Mia’s right, the Equestrian Kingdom really is marvelous.”

Bel: “I think so too. It’s really great to be able to go for a long ride with a man whenever you want! Right, Miss Rafina?”

Rafina: “What did you just say, Bel?!”

Mia: “My, how odd. I suddenly feel a chill, as if Bel unknowingly grabbed the tail of a sleeping lion and shook it around... Perhaps I’ve just grown cold. Why don’t I drink some nice warm milk...?”

Now, some words of thanks.

Thank you, Gilse, whose illustrations are always so cute. Aima is a new type of character, but you have depicted her excellently!

I would also like to thank my editor, F, who is always saving me one way or another.

Also, my family—thank you for your continued support. Somehow, we've made it all the way to volume ten.

Finally, thank you to my readers for making the journey with me thus far. In the next volume, we reach the climax of the Equestrian Kingdom arc. I hope you enjoy the story that's left to come as well.

Well then, I'll see you again in the next volume.