Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

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Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Kei



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Waiting to Meet Again

A small, snow-white magic crystal rested upon the young woman's hand. Tiny flecks of ice rose from it, glittering as they drifted through the air. These perfectly formed frozen hexagons showered onto the workshop floor, melting and vanishing the moment they touched down.

Her test of the ice crystal complete, Dahlia readjusted the barrette in her shoulder-length red hair and wiped the sweat from her brow. Summer had barely begun, yet the air in the workshop had already grown stuffy. Summers in the kingdom of Ordine were relatively hot. They weren't as humid as Japan's, but the average temperatures definitely crept higher.

The reason Dahlia could make such a comparison was that she had been reincarnated. Following her untimely death in her previous home country of Japan, she had been reborn into this world filled with magic and monsters—things she had always known to be the stuff of fairy tales. Here, she was the daughter of a renowned magical toolmaker, and she had never considered any other path than following in her father's footsteps.

Magical toolmakers were craftspeople who used magic crystals and materials from monsters to create tools useful for daily life. Many of these tools resembled household appliances, such as washing machines and dryers, while others came in the form of accessories that protected the wearer from poison, paralysis, and so on.

Dahlia did her crafting in an old stone tower that served as both her home and workplace. Locals called it "the Green Tower" because of the profusion of leafy vines that spiraled around it.

"Looks like it's going to rain," Dahlia mused as she peered out of the window yet again. She let out a sigh as she stared up at the leaden clouds.

Originally, she was supposed to meet a friend today, and she'd been looking forward to it all week. However, just yesterday, a letter had arrived informing her that he'd had to suddenly leave on an expedition. He apologized for being

unable to visit her as they'd planned and said he'd write again as soon as he returned. The letter was blotted with dark-blue smudges, having obviously been folded before the ink had even had time to dry.

Dahlia's friend, Volf, was one of the kingdom of Ordine's royal knights. He served in the Order of Beast Hunters as part of an exceptional group of warriors known as the Scarlet Armors. In this world, people's lives were often threatened by monsters that were particularly ferocious or that had banded together in large numbers. It was the job of the Order of Beast Hunters to see that those monsters were kept in check. They could appear at any time, so, as Volf had told her, it was always with little notice that the knights were sent out on their missions. Thus, his letter had not come as much of a shock.

Still, she was disappointed to not be able to try enchanting the shortswords Volf had bought for her as they'd planned to do today. With the weather growing nastier by the minute, she also couldn't help being a little concerned for him. Was he dressed for the rain? Was he eating properly? While these small worries troubled her, the possibility of him being wounded or worse hardly crossed her mind. She knew Volf was a formidable warrior, as a Scarlet Armor needed to be. They were the ones at the front lines of every battle, drawing their foes' attention from their comrades.

Dahlia stood up and pressed the switch on the cooling fan she kept against the wall, and soon, a cool, refreshing breeze was gently wafting toward her. At this time of year, this cooling fan was the kingdom's best-selling magical tool. It looked much like a four-bladed electric fan inside a square white box.

The cooling fan's creator was a magical toolmaker named Oswald. He'd developed two types: the cooling fan, which used water crystals, and the chilling fan, which used ice crystals. The chilling fan's high price tag meant it wasn't yet a common sight, but Dahlia had no doubt that it would take off sooner or later. The refreshingly cold air it produced reminded her very much of an air conditioner. Once she discovered a magical tool that made everyday life a little more comfortable, Dahlia could never forget it; she'd felt just the same way about home appliances in her past life, and she loved the idea of crafting a chilling fan of her own.

Standing in the center of Dahlia's workshop was a large silver box for her

latest project. She hoped to create a prototype for a combined refrigerator and freezer. The tests she'd been conducting with the ice crystal earlier were for this project. Magical refrigerators had already been invented, but none of the ones currently on the market came with freezers, and their storage capacity was also quite limited.

Dahlia wanted to come up with a new model that addressed these issues, so she had commissioned a large box from a workshop she'd long been doing business with. Inside this box were three compartments, each with its own door. Going from top to bottom, the refrigerator Dahlia had used in her previous life had had a general storage compartment, a vegetable compartment, an ice maker and chiller compartment, and then a freezer. This world's refrigerators, however, were coldest at the top, so she planned to have the freezer in the highest compartment, general storage in the middle, and a vegetable compartment at the bottom.

She opened up the doors to check inside. It seemed the fixing spell she'd applied had finally settled. She'd used a substance derived from blue slimes on the inner surfaces of the compartments. Unfortunately, the bluish tinge it left somewhat reminded her of mold, but without any alternative at hand, she'd settled for this for the time being.

As she moved around the back of the box, she was delighted to find a lattice of silver cooling pipes for the ice magic to pass through. They crisscrossed the back of the box and looped around the interior. She'd only given the craftsman some general notes on the shape she wanted, so this was a pleasant surprise. There were even pockets on the side of the refrigerator to hold the magic crystals.

The workshop this box had come from had been providing Dahlia and her father with housings and such for their larger magical tools for many years. It was so well-made, it was almost as though they had already known exactly what Dahlia planned to create.

Dahlia put on a pair of gloves that would protect her hands from any extreme cold. She placed the ice crystal into the pocket on the side of the refrigerator and began to send its cooling magic through the network of tubes. While carefully regulating the flow of magic, she calculated the strength each

compartment would require. She set it to be strongest in the top compartment—enough to freeze its contents—and weaker in the middle compartment, while the bottom compartment would be chilled by the air descending from the middle one.

She found that when she closed the doors, the cold leaked out quite badly, so she used magic to apply some kraken tape. Kraken tape had similar properties to rubber and made for a good sealant. The only trouble was the funny *skwap!* sound it made whenever the door opened or closed—it made Dahlia imagine a tiny kraken inhabiting the refrigerator. It wasn't a very endearing creature either. She told herself to work on imagining something a little cuter.

Once she was satisfied that the ice magic was circulating properly through the pipes, she placed a wooden cup of water on the first shelf, a cup of wine on the middle shelf, and a cup of orange juice on the bottom. Now she only had to wait and see how the temperature would affect them.

If this prototype turned out well, she had a mind to try adding an automatic ice maker to it too. With some ice and air crystals installed in just the right way, she might be able to create a cordless refrigerator with an automatic ice maker—something she'd never even heard of in her past life. The sky was the limit. The most difficult part, she imagined, would be controlling the air magic needed to move the ice. Another problem was the costliness of the ice crystals needed to maintain it. Perhaps with enough sealant and some experimenting to improve efficiency, she'd be able to overcome the latter issue. Turning these thoughts over and over in her mind, she jotted down a series of notes.

As she gazed at the gleaming silver refrigerator, an idea came to her. If she doubled the number of ice crystals, she might be able to add another handy feature—fast freezing. It was often the case that crystals worked more powerfully in pairs. One would certainly be enough to chill the refrigerator's contents, but if it was feasible, there was no harm in adding more features like fast freezing. She hadn't planned on this, but it was a prototype, after all—this was precisely the time to test out her ideas. She knew it was a long shot that it'd work out, but her curiosity urged her to try.

Taking care not to damage the box in any way, Dahlia used her magic to enlarge the magic crystal pocket and popped a second one inside. Then, to

control the flow of the ice magic, she began channeling her own magic through her fingertips. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashed outside the window, followed a few seconds later by a long, rolling rumble of thunder. Dahlia was reminded of Volf, out in the wilds on his expedition. For just half a second, her concentration lapsed.

"Oh!"

There was a loud and awful cracking noise, a moment of silence, then an odd snap from inside the silver box. Dahlia hastily removed the ice crystals from the pocket, only to find the one farther inside had split cleanly in half. It seemed she'd released all of its power in one go in that moment of distraction. She'd never made such a stupid mistake before.

Dahlia very gingerly opened the door of the freezer compartment to check that nothing had broken inside, but she found it would only open a few centimeters.

"Whoa... It's completely iced up."

Through the narrow gap, Dahlia could see a flawless wall of clear ice. She'd achieved the fast freezing all right, but what good was this? The entire compartment was one big ice block. Dahlia's shoulders slumped in disappointment at this unforeseen setback. Since she couldn't open the door, there was nothing to do but wait until the ice melted.

She decided to give up on the fast-freezing feature for now. Later on, she'd remake her refrigerator with *one* crystal, as she'd planned to begin with.

She placed a bottle of wine for tonight in one of the lower compartments. It was a dry white—Volf's favorite. She had a feeling her evening tipple would have a touch of bitterness tonight.



Somewhere east of the royal capital, a statuesque young man with jet-black hair and golden eyes was staring grimly into the dusk-lit forest. This was Volfred Scalfarotto, a knight of Ordine's Order of Beast Hunters. More specifically, he was one of a select group known as the Scarlet Armors, who had the dubious honor of leading the charge in all the Beast Hunters' battles.

Word had arrived from some traveling merchants that a mob of goblins had been seen along the highway leading east from the capital. The Beast Hunters had been dispatched at once. Since joining the order, Volf had gone on missions to exterminate goblins dozens of times. Once they knew the goblins' numbers and position, they could eradicate the things and then go home—simple as that.

However simple it was, though, the fact remained that Volf should have been enjoying a day off today. He would have bought drinks, something for lunch, and a pair of new wine glasses, then headed to the Green Tower where Dahlia would be waiting. They had planned to try enchanting a shortsword after they had lunch. Volf had been anticipating it all week—after all, if the experiment succeeded, the result would be a man-made magical sword with multiple enchantments. He'd been in such good spirits, he'd hardly been able to stop smiling during training over the last three days.

However, those plans had been put on hold the moment reports of these goblins reached the knights. The location they'd been sighted at was half a day's journey away on horseback. Simply getting there and back would take a full day. Volf had just had time to pen a brief letter to Dahlia, apologizing and promising to contact her as soon as he was back in town. The ride here had felt much the same as always, but his mood had completely soured the moment they'd arrived.

The goblins weren't terribly shy, showing themselves now and then along the tree line. Slightly deeper inside the forest, the knights found evidence of a small colony in the midst of construction. It appeared the little beasts were intent on making a village here, right on the edge of the highway. There was no other option but to exterminate them.

Even if things progressed smoothly, reconnaissance would take a full day, extermination another, with yet another for the cleanup. The process was painfully slow. Volf had been through these procedures plenty of times before, but everything about them was irritating him today.

"We can't use fire on them in there. Wind won't get through either."

The Order of Beast Hunters' cohort of mages were looking despondently into

the forest. Their faces were bathed in orange light by the setting sun.

“Normally, I’d say we just flood them out with a blast of water, but we won’t be able to wash away those huts they’ve built.”

A blue-haired man carrying a pike let out a small sigh. He was the vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, Griswald Lanza. Captain Grato had remained in the capital to await orders, leaving Griswald to lead this mission. He was tall like Volf but more muscular in his build. His face, however, held a gentle, quiet expression—in the right attire, he could have passed for a civil servant.

The goblins’ settlement, visible from the forest’s edge, was still not very far developed. At the moment, it consisted only of a few small hut-like structures made from intertwined tree branches. Burning it with fire magic ran the risk of starting a forest fire, while air magic would be impeded by the trees. Using water magic to wash it all away was also a nonstarter. The standard approach would be to encircle the whole colony and then exterminate the monsters.

“Vice-Captain, may I have a word?”

Griswald’s eyes widened slightly in surprise as Volf approached him. It was rare for the young knight to speak up.

“What is it, Volfred?”

“Once the goblins all return to their nests, I propose we create a large noise to draw them out. The vanguard can then perform a hit-and-run attack on the colony to lure the soldier goblins into the open so they can be eliminated first. Any remaining targets can then be surrounded and destroyed.”

“That would get things over with quickly, I grant you, but that colony’s in a bad position. It’s confined and in tricky terrain. It’ll be dangerous for the vanguard.”

“Not a problem, sir.”

The vice-captain met Volf’s gaze squarely, but he found not a sliver of doubt in the young man’s golden eyes. He clearly had absolute confidence in the plan.

“It’s rare for you to propose a battle plan.”

“I’d just like to conclude the mission as soon as possible, sir,” Volf replied,

glancing in the direction of the capital.

“You’ve got a point,” one of the other knights chimed in with a firm nod. “It’s clouding over fast.”

The skies over the royal capital were beginning to turn dark and heavy. Rain would be no fun to camp in overnight, and if the battle were planned for tomorrow, the condition of the ground had to be factored in. Goblins weighed less than humans. The last thing they wanted to do was grapple with a swarm of goblins with their feet stuck in the mud. Volf, it seemed, had even considered this possibility.

“Well, Volfred, I think it’s a very good idea. But who’s going to make up the vanguard?”

“I shall, of course. It was my proposal, after all,” he replied matter-of-factly. There was no particular eagerness in his voice, nor any reluctance.

Griswald acknowledged him with a nod and instructed him to convey the plan to the rest of the Scarlet Armors. Watching the young man stride away, one of the older knights narrowed his eyes.

“He’s come a long way, our Volfred. He was never one to suggest his own plans before.”

“Yes, and it’s a fine thing to see,” Griswald agreed wholeheartedly. “I do hope he’ll come out of the Scarlet Armors and take up a command position one of these days.”

When Volf had been a fresh recruit, the other knights had thought he’d had a death wish. After a while, their opinions changed, and he was simply known as a reckless daredevil. In any case, the reputation of the young noble had not been good. It was nothing more or less than Volf’s unwavering dedication to his work and his achievements in battle that had finally reversed the other men’s opinions.

At first, he’d only thought about vanquishing monsters, but nowadays, he had a broader view of the order. He wanted to have a place among these men and be valued for his abilities. That said, at this moment, there was only a single thought in Volf’s mind—he wanted to get home as soon as possible.

After a brief meeting, it was decided that the Scarlet Armors would launch a surprise attack on the goblin colony just after sundown. In the reddish glow of the evening sun, the dark-haired young knight thoroughly stretched his body, taking the time to ensure all his muscles were ready for the battle ahead. He knew that if he applied his strengthening spell without properly preparing himself first, he would suffer for it the next day. After that, he carried out a thorough inspection of his armor, even taking care to fix any slippage in the insoles of his boots and wrinkles in his socks. Anything not properly fitted could cause slipping or come loose once it was dampened with sweat. Finally, he checked twice that his bootlaces were tied neatly and firmly. A few of the men whispered among themselves as they watched Volf's preparations.

"He's been smiling to himself a lot these past few days. Must have a lot of pent-up energy."

"The captain made him take some time off after that battle with the wyvern. That must be why. Looks like he'll be blowing off all that steam on those goblins today."

"Almost makes me feel sorry for the little bastards."

Having finally finished his inspections, Volf drew his longsword. He left the scabbard behind. It wasn't considered good conduct for a knight, but a scabbard at his hip felt like a hindrance when he ran. On his first mission with the order, a monster had ripped his scabbard in two. Ever since then, he'd made a point of leaving it. The longsword Volf gripped in his hand was one of the order's standard-issue weapons, but the blade was colored black to prevent it from reflecting the sunlight.

The vanguard of this battle would be formed by three members of the Scarlet Armors, with Volf leading. Volf took up his position and concentrated on steadying his breathing as he waited for the sun to set.

Beneath the red-tinged sky, the clanging of several gongs suddenly shattered the quiet. The colony, quiet until then, erupted in commotion, and green goblins began swarming out of the trees. The moment they were sighted, the commander barked a brief order.

Volf led the charge, the other two a few paces behind, as they stormed

toward the colony. Sprinting with unnatural speed, Volf seemed almost possessed by a demon. A goblin appeared in front of him, and he cut it down. A goblin appeared to his right, and he cleaved it in two. A goblin appeared to his left, and he sliced through it without hesitation. His black sword cut through the monsters' bodies as though they were made of paper. Each slash was followed by a spray of blood, but Volf was already gone before it could touch him. He had already left the other two Scarlet Armors well behind. The uneven ground seemed no hindrance as he sped onward at an inhuman pace. Every goblin that tried to leap at him was sliced apart in midair. One could only pity the little beasts as they emerged from the trees one after another, only to be cut down in an instant.

"I'm not sure which one's the monster anymore..."

"He'll go down in goblin history. They'll tell their spawn how a hopeful tribe set out to settle new lands and was slaughtered by the Dark Lord Volf."

"Cut it out. That's way too easy to imagine."

Even as the friends casually spoke, they drew their swords and checked that their arm guards were strapped on firmly. None of the knights were brimming over with zeal. It was just another battle that required the same practiced movements. Even if a comrade fell dead at their side, each of them knew they had no option but to continue the fight with a cool head, or else they might be next. As the waiting knights watched the vanguard, they suddenly saw a goblin appear in front of Volf that was markedly different from the others. It had red skin, wore clothing, and carried a magic staff in one hand.

"Volf, look out! That's a goblin mage!"

It was impossible to tell whether the knight's shout reached Volf's ears. The goblin mage had already performed its chant, bringing a shower of flaming arrows raining down upon Volf. However, rather than slowing down, Volf only ran faster as the fiery missiles cascaded down upon him. He sped fearlessly through the fire until he reached the goblin mage. Without a moment's hesitation, he swung his sword sideways and took its head clean off its shoulders. Then, at last, Volf came to a standstill. In his wake was a path of ruthless destruction. With a swift motion, he flicked the blood from his sword

as the goblin mage's body tumbled to the ground. The splatter of green blood upon the earth was the cue for the rest of the knights.

"Charge!"

At the vice-captain's command, the men rushed forward. Within minutes, every last goblin had been exterminated. As soon as the battle was over, an air of calm settled over the woods. The knights chatted animatedly as they set to cleaning up the battlefield.

"I'll help. Let's get this wrapped up quickly."

"You were the first one in, Volf. Go take a breather."

"I'm fine. Besides, the sooner we finish, the sooner we can go home."

Not even pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow, Volf helped the other men carry the goblin carcasses. His friends tried to stop him, but he refused to sit still. Once the carcasses had all been gathered, a mage used earth magic to dig a pit, then the dead goblins were tossed in, burned with magic, and buried. Finally, the earth was sprinkled with a little red wine and the knights each said a prayer. They all understood that monsters were living things just like them. But they had not found a way to coexist, making battles like this inevitable. It was the Beast Hunters' custom to mark the end of each battle with a prayer.

In order to avoid traveling by night, the knights ended up making camp in a somewhat remote spot near the battlefield.

"Now, we've only got our provisions to eat, but there's plenty of wine! Anyone who wants extra can come and get it!"

They'd completed their mission several days earlier than expected, meaning there was several days' worth of wine to be drunk.

"I'll go get us some. White for you, right, Volf?"

"Sorry, I'll have red tonight."

"Huh, that's rare. The dark lord thirsts for blood, does he?"

"What're you talking about?"

"Oh, nothin'. One glass of red, comin' right up."

“Thanks. I’ll sort out the food, then.”

Volf sat before the campfire and stretched as he chatted and joked with the other knights. It looked like they’d all be back safe and sound in the royal capital sometime tomorrow. Everyone was given at least two days off after returning from a mission.

Almost immediately, Volf’s thoughts strayed to the Green Tower. He hoped he’d make it there during his break. At another fire, Vice-Captain Griswald was drinking wine with some of the more senior knights. He was gazing over at Volf and his party.

“That battle went without a hitch. I’d never have thought a man could move so fast over rough ground like that. Puts the rest of us to shame.”

“Yes, he’s matured, inside and out. Not only was the plan sound and effective, he even thought of how to achieve it in the shortest possible time. He’s one to watch, that’s for sure.”

As the men spoke like proud parents watching their children grow, the vice-captain nodded in agreement.

“Quite so. I believe he has a very bright future indeed.”

The Man-Made Magical Sword—Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion

Yesterday, Volf's servant had once again arrived at Dahlia's home. She had expected to simply be handed an envelope like last time, but the cheerful servant lingered.

"If you please, ma'am, my master hoped you would read his letter and allow me to return with your reply."

Dahlia quickly unsealed the envelope and scanned the note inside.

I have returned from my mission and have two days off starting tomorrow, it read. *If it is convenient, I would very much like to visit you one morning. I am happy to call upon you some other time if you are busy.*

The servant was content to take her reply either verbally or written. Since he'd brought stationery with him, Dahlia decided to pen a brief letter. Leaning on the wooden writing board, she wrote:

I am very pleased to hear you have returned safely. I will be free tomorrow.

She couldn't help thinking how scruffy her handwriting looked upon the expensive paper. The servant thanked her politely as he took the letter and left.

The very next day, Volf arrived by carriage at the Green Tower. As she came out to greet him, Dahlia could only stare in astonishment as crate after crate was unloaded from the carriage. One was filled with meat and fish, another with fruit and vegetables, and yet a third contained a variety of cheeses and wine. It was far more than two people, let alone one, could possibly hope to eat.

"Er... Volf, what is all this?"

"I ate you out of house and home last time I came. This is to repay you. There are ice crystals in the boxes, so it'll keep for a few days."

"Well, that's extremely kind of you. Thank you. But please, you don't need to

bring anything next time.”

Evidently, he’d been feeling guilty about indulging in so much fondue the last time he’d visited. The crates were too heavy for her to haul up the stairs, so Volf carried them up to the tower’s second floor for her.

He took off his enchanted glasses as soon as he stepped over the tower’s threshold and placed them ever so delicately into a black leather case. Dahlia could barely keep from grinning as she watched him. She’d made those glasses especially for him; it warmed her heart to see them treasured like that.

“Is this a fridge?”

“Yes. Still in development, though. The upper compartment is a freezer.”

“A fridge and freezer in one? Wow!”

Volf’s eyes shone with wonder as he peered at her in-progress creation. It had taken nearly two days, but the ice inside it had finally melted, making it usable again. She now intended to test it in her kitchen for a while, though she’d need to call on Marcello to have it carried there.

“Do you already have a buyer for it?”

“Oh, no, I want to test it out for myself first, in the kitchen. I’d never get it up the stairs on my own, but luckily I have a friend in the Couriers’ Guild who’ll manage it.”

“I could do that for you. You could use it to store all that food I brought.”

“Are you sure? It’s awfully heavy.”

Volf was currently carrying three large wooden crates of food in his arms with ease, so her concern was perhaps unwarranted, but the fridge had to be considerably heavier. It was pretty much solid metal, after all. When the casing had been delivered, it had taken two men to carry it into her workshop.

“Pardon me.”

Volf put down the crates, rolled up his sleeves, and grasped the refrigerator. He tilted it a couple of times, searching for its center of gravity and where best to grip it, before turning it on its side and lifting it without any obvious strain at all.

“Huh, lighter than I expected. It’s bulky, though, so I’ll need to watch out not to bump into things.”

“Whoa.”

Dahlia couldn’t conceal her astonishment as Volf carried the refrigerator as easily as if it were cardboard. He’d be welcome at the Couriers’ Guild anytime.

“It’s...really not too heavy?”

“Not at all. A red bear’s way heavier.”

“You’ve carried a red bear?”

For one moment, she pictured the young knight carrying a gigantic red bear in his arms, bridal style. She quickly shook her head.

“No, no. It came charging toward me, but my sword got stuck in its scabbard, so I grabbed it and threw it away. I was enhanced by a strengthening spell at the time, but my wrists still hurt for a good while after that.”

The image that floated into Dahlia’s mind this time was of Volf grappling with the bear in a sumo ring. Once again, she quickly dismissed her wild imaginings.

Dahlia had been concerned that the refrigerator might not fit through the stairway or doors, but as it turned out, her fears were unfounded. Once he’d set it gently down where she wanted it, Volf went back down to the first floor and brought up all of the wooden crates. It still amazed her how light on his feet he was under all that weight.

After that, Dahlia began storing the food away inside the refrigerator—getting it all to fit was like solving a 3D jigsaw puzzle. In the box that had contained the wine and cheeses, Dahlia discovered four prettily decorated silver boxes.

“Those are the wine glasses I promised you. There are two each for red wine and white wine.”

“Volf, may I ask why every single one is in a magically sealed box?”

“Er, well, I suppose it looks nice and, um...keeps them from breaking...”

There was something decidedly fishy about his reply. These little boxes were clearly meant for magical tools. She noticed their surfaces were engraved with

images of a beautiful goddess—perhaps they'd been purchased at the Goddess's Right Eye. She opened one of the boxes and gently lifted out the clear glass inside. As she held it up and looked through it, she noticed that it gave an occasional prismatic glimmer when the light hit it just right. Just as she was admiring how comfortably it rested in her hand, she detected the subtle tremor of magic.

"Volf, when most people talk about wine glasses, they mean ones made of *glass*. This is fine crystal, isn't it? Enchanted, at that. Can you tell me how much you paid for these?"

"They weren't all that expensive. Anyway, they're very pretty, and I thought the hardening enchantment would come in handy."

"So? How much?"

As she inquired a second time, Volf dropped his gaze to the floor.

"Four gold."

"I'll pay half."

What had he been *thinking*? Certainly, it was good to know that they wouldn't easily shatter, but she could hardly use such valuable glasses on a daily basis. Each glass was worth around a hundred thousand yen, bringing the set to a total of four hundred thousand. That sort of money was way outside of her comfort zone.

"No, there's no need for that. I just bought them 'cause I wanted them."

There was a proper place for such extravagant glasses, but that place was *not* in her tower. She knew if she got a single scratch on one of these glasses, she'd be depressed about it for days.

"Look, Volf, I understand that we come from rather different worlds, and our perception of money isn't always going to agree. However, I still don't see how I can accept such expensive glasses."

"But Dahlia, you *did* give me a pair of enchanted glasses made with fairy glass for free the other day just because they were a prototype."

She couldn't deny that, but that fairy glass had been something just lying

around in the workshop that she hadn't had a use for. That was quite different from Volf going out and buying these wine glasses.

"I needed you to test those for me so I could make improvements."

"Well, I *have* tested them, and there aren't any improvements needed. They're a finished product."

"All right; you win. But I'm only bringing out these glasses when you come to visit."

"I'd be happier if you'd use them every day. Besides, if one breaks, I can just get you a new one. I can afford it, so don't worry," Volf said with a nonchalant smile.

That was when Dahlia understood something—giving was simply in Volf's nature. He wasn't trying to put her in his debt or butter her up for some future gains. However, he seemed unaware of the effect this behavior might have on their future relationship. They were supposed to be friends, but friendship couldn't be built on one-sided giving. At least, that wasn't what Dahlia wanted.

"I appreciate the thought, honestly. But I don't want to be in a position where I'm just taking from you all the time, you see. Um... Imagine you had a friend who was much wealthier than you, and they were always buying you expensive things. Eventually, you'd start feeling uncomfortable and inferior, don't you think?"

She tried to choose the right words so as not to hurt the knight's feelings. His golden eyes widened slightly, then he slowly cast them down.

"I'm sorry, Dahlia. I see what you mean now."

"Please don't feel bad. I know you were only trying to do the right thing, and I'm grateful. To you, these wine glasses probably don't seem all that special. I'll do what you said and consider that prototype I gave you a finished article. That'll cover half the cost of the wine glasses. That leaves us all square, since you've given me the funds for the next pair of glasses already."

"Make sure you include technical fees too. I want to buy those at the same price anyone else would."

“Understood. I’ll do that.”

The pair nodded in agreement and then returned to the task of storing away the food. Once they had finished, Dahlia looked out the window to see the sun blazing down from high in the sky.

“What shall we do for lunch? With all this food here, I feel I ought to make something, but...well, I can’t claim to be a great cook. You may not like it.”

“I loved that cheese fondue you made last time. I’m sure whatever you make will be great. I can help too if it’s just cooking up some meat or something.”

“Oh? You cook too?”

She couldn’t help feeling his confidence in her abilities was a little misplaced if he was basing it on her fondue, but more than that, she was taken aback to hear that a young noble like him could cook. Then again, he *had* washed the dishes for her last time. It seemed what he’d said about everyone in the Order of Beast Hunters being equals had been true.

“I can prepare and cook meat; that’s about it. We’re allowed to eat any wild game or monsters we hunt while we’re out on missions, so I learned the basics from the cooks. Even when it’s perfectly fresh, it’s not exactly pleasant eating meat that’s burned or not properly prepared. You really feel it in your stomach afterward.”

Dahlia could scarcely think of anything more miserable than setting out on a life-or-death mission and having to eat gristly, blackened meat. It was needless for the knights to go making themselves ill like that.

“Why don’t we cook on the magical stove?” she suggested.

“Good idea. It shouldn’t burn on that.”

“Perfect; that’s lunch decided, then. We’ll try cooking some of the meat.”

“Great!”

Internally, Dahlia breathed a little sigh of relief. That wouldn’t test her culinary skills too much. They stood side by side in the kitchen, Volf slicing up the meat, Dahlia chopping vegetables to make a simple salad.

“We’ve got beef, pork, salted kraken... I’ll slice up a bit of everything,” said

Volf.

The meat looked extraordinarily lustrous and succulent, almost unnaturally so. Perhaps it was just her imagination. She had difficulty seeing the salted kraken as anything other than octopus, but she was sure it would cook very nicely. She'd never seen a whole kraken, but smaller cuts of it were a common sight around town. It was good salted and grilled or stewed, and it made a tasty addition to soups and stir-fries.

People enjoyed kraken in a wide variety of ways. Dried kraken wasn't particularly popular, but her father had often lightly grilled it on the stove and enjoyed it as a snack with his drinks. It could be a bit of a nuisance when he'd stand around drinking in the kitchen. *If only he were here now, he could grill it at the table on the magical stove...*

While her thoughts turned to her father as she washed the vegetables, Dahlia caught sight of Volf from the corner of her eye. He was slicing the meat into pieces over two centimeters thick.

"I think that might be a little thick, Volf."

"Oh, right. I guess it's not the same as cooking over a campfire."

"I think about a quarter of that thickness would be fine."

"Really? You're sure that's not too thin?"

They ended with a mixture of thick, medium, and thinly sliced meat. Dahlia went out and picked two kinds of greens, washing them before plating them up along with some bread and cheese. It was a very simple arrangement, but all the food Volf had brought with him seemed to be of very fine quality and would be delicious even without any special preparation. In the living room, Dahlia placed two small magical stoves upon the table. In place of hotplates, she put a shallow pot on one and a frying pan on the other. It didn't make for an ideal presentation, but it was the best she could manage on the spot.

With the enchanting of the shortsword planned for the afternoon, the pair decided to avoid alcohol and drink just fruit juice with their lunch. Dahlia added a little oil to the pot and began cooking the meat. Volf followed suit, glancing over often to observe what she was doing.

“We’ve got salt, pepper, and lemon for seasoning. I’ve also whipped up a sauce with fish sauce, garlic, sesame and such, with some grated apple. Try a little drizzle once your meat’s cooked.”

The beef was done first. Dahlia seasoned hers with a simple sprinkle of salt before popping it in her mouth. It was so different from the meat she usually ate. It melted on her tongue, and the fat had a delightful sweetness to it. As she slowly chewed and swallowed, she was filled with a renewed appreciation for fine quality meat.

Once the pork was thoroughly cooked, she seasoned it with some salt and pepper. It was a little firmer in texture than the beef, and the fat, while also deliciously sweet, had a gentler taste. She imagined it would go very well in a stew.

On the other side of the table, Volf seemed lost in sheer rapture, chewing every little bite for far longer than necessary. He smiled blissfully, and his eyes were closed.

“This is unbelievably good...*and* you can cook it just how you like and eat it while it’s hot.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it.”

Even once he came back to earth, Volf’s passionate gaze remained fixed on the sizzling meat. “These stoves are a sin.”

“A what?!”

“If only we’d had these on all our missions until now, we’d have lost a lot less of our comrades.”

All of a sudden, the conversation had turned unexpectedly dark. Dahlia hadn’t made these stoves with the intention of saving anyone’s life. She couldn’t fathom Volf’s meaning at all. Surely the knights hadn’t burnt their meat so badly that it had actually *killed* someone.

“Um, was there some sort of incident, or...?”

“No, that’s not it. The fact is, a lot of men left the Order of Beast Hunters because they couldn’t stand the food. Some of them even got sick from it and

quit. I was just thinking that, if only we'd had some of these little stoves, a lot of them might've stayed."

Food was a fundamental need, after all. People would only put up with poor meals for so long. Dahlia wondered if the order had room in their budget for a few stoves to take on expeditions. She wouldn't even mind offering them at a discount. In a bid to clear the rather heavy air, Dahlia began frying some of the salted kraken. It squeaked and hissed in the hot pan, shrinking quickly.

"It's half the size it was. Seems so sad somehow."

She wished Volf wouldn't stare into the pot with such melancholy while she tried to cook. That was a look that ought to be reserved for roses and love letters, not slices of salted kraken.

"Octopus and squid do the same thing when you cook them. We'll cut it a bit bigger next time."

The kraken turned out to be a tad salty for Dahlia's liking, but quite tasty all the same. It would go well with a bowl of rice. Most rice sold in the capital was the long-grain variety. Perhaps she would try cooking some to pair with the kraken next time.

In the midst of her reverie, she suddenly noticed that Volf hadn't so much as touched his vegetables. "Aren't you having any green peppers, Volf?"

"Peppers don't seem to like me very much..." he mumbled, glancing away.

She'd once heard exactly the same excuse from a relative's child in her past life.

"I'd tell you that you won't grow up big and strong if you don't eat your vegetables, but I'm not sure you need to get any bigger."

"I know a couple of knights even taller than me, and they're always complaining about bumping their heads on doorways. If those things'll make me grow taller, I'd rather avoid them."

"Fair point. It's funny how lots of children hate green peppers."

She realized too late that "people" might have been a more tactful choice of words. Volf's face darkened. He stared at the peppers for a few moments

before silently beginning to place them into the pot.

“Look, Volf, I know how that sounded, but I understand everyone has preferences! You don’t have to force yourself if you don’t like them.”

“No, I have to overcome this. I need to defeat my demons!”

Volf was glaring into the pot with frightening intensity, like he was staring down a monster instead of a few sliced peppers. For the sake of her heart, she wished he’d stop.

“Make sure to cook them thoroughly. Try eating them with the meat and a bit of sauce,” Dahlia said, feeling oddly tense as she offered her advice.

Volf raised a well-cooked piece of pepper and a morsel of meat to his mouth, closing his eyes before putting the whole forkful inside. For a moment, he chewed silently.

“Mm? That’s...not bad.”

“Your taste buds change a lot when you become an adult. Sometimes, you find you enjoy things you hated when you were little.”

“It’s really good. I guess I’ve been missing out.”

She had a feeling Volf would love pepper steak and made a mental note to cook it for him sometime. They followed the peppers with some extra meat before finally finishing up their lunch. Despite the windows being open, the unique aroma of cooking meat lingered in the room.

“I’d love to take this stove with me on missions, but there’d be a riot if I were the only one who had one.”

“There’s nothing like the smell of meat cooking to gather people around, huh?”

“Dahlia, what would you say to coming to the castle and showing everyone how to use one of these stoves?”

“I think that’s a great idea. If it’ll get you all some better meals while you’re out in the wilds, I’m happy to help.”

Dahlia couldn’t help having a little chuckle to herself. Only a select few traders

were permitted within the castle. Without a letter of recommendation and a guarantor, the guards wouldn't give you the time of day. The castle and its grounds were no place for ordinary citizens. It seemed Dahlia, as a commoner, had a stronger sense of that boundary than Volf did.

"Right then, let's tidy up so we can have a look at this sword."

"Got it. Leave this to me."

Dahlia managed to stop Volf before he tried to gather the stoves, the plates, and everything else into his arms in one precarious pile. Working together, they soon had it all cleared away. With that done, they descended the stairs to the workshop and began preparations to enchant the shortsword.

"Okay, shall we start?"

"I've waited so long for this..."

He spoke as though they were on the brink of some life-changing event. Dahlia hoped he realized that with her magic, any enchantments she produced would only be weak. If she managed to successfully endow the sword with multiple enchantments, she intended to give Volf instructions on the method that he could take to a more powerful mage or alchemist. She handed Volf some dark blue overalls.

"You'd better put these on—your clothes may get dirty."

"Were these your father's?"

"No. If they'd been his, the sleeves would be too short on you."

"I'll pay you for them later."

"You can pay me by lending me your strength, like you did with the refrigerator earlier."

"Y'know, it feels like *I'm* the one who's taking from you all the time."

"Don't be silly. Once you've put that on, I'd like you to disassemble this for me, please."

Volf looked a little dissatisfied at being brushed off, but his expression softened when she handed him the shortsword. He had it in pieces within

moments, leaving her with the blade, the guard, the handle, and the scabbard.

“Would you rather have the blade reinforced or be self-sharpening like those kitchen knives I told you about?”

“Well, it looks fairly sturdy, so I think self-sharpening would probably be best.”

As she listened, Dahlia placed her fingers on the blade and began to apply the self-sharpening enchantment. The sensation was very similar to enchanting a kitchen knife, but Dahlia found she needed to pour in a little more power than usual. This was likely due to the blade’s thickness and the difference in its composition.

“Now, I was thinking of using a water crystal to put a cleaning enchantment on the guard, an air crystal to enchant the handle with haste, and a weight-reducing enchantment on the scabbard. Does that sound okay?”

“Yeah, perfect.”

“Okay, let’s see what I can do.”

Dahlia remolded the guard so she could set it with a small water crystal specially made for toolmaking. Then, she made a cut in the bottom of the sword’s red handle and inserted a small air crystal. After that, she had only to let her magic flow into the objects and ensure the enchantments were fixed. The process went fairly smoothly with these first three parts of the sword, but she was tripped up when she came to the scabbard. She had never been especially good at weight-reducing spells, which was probably part of the reason. Her magic seemed to simply bounce off the scabbard’s surface.

“This is a bit trickier.”

“You could leave the scabbard as it is. You’ve already enchanted the other parts.”

“I could, but I’d like to keep at it a little longer.”

She turned the scabbard around and tried directing the magic into the inner surface, where the blade would be sheathed. This time, despite her pouring in a steady stream of magic, it felt as though her power were being swallowed into a

bottomless pit.

“It looks like you’re putting a whole lot more magic into there than you did for the other parts,” Volf commented.

“That’s because I’m extracting all the power from the air crystal for this enchantment. I don’t want to set the crystal into the scabbard; it’ll just get in the way. Unfortunately, the magic becomes a little weaker this way, and it takes a while to get it in. Also...weight-reducing spells aren’t my specialty.”

Her father had been much more proficient than her at weight-reducing enchantments. He used to turn the objects around and around in his hands while scintillating rainbow-colored magic glowed at his fingertips.

“Oh. Hold on a minute.”

She began to copy her father’s motions, turning the scabbard over repeatedly while spreading her magic over its surface. The magic snaked around it like a ribbon, glowing as it enveloped the dark-brown scabbard.

“Looks like I needed to wrap it rather than try to pour the magic in.”

“This is fascinating to watch, but aren’t you getting tired?” Volf asked, looking a little concerned.

“I’m fine. I’ll need your strength to put it all back together, though.”

She carefully readjusted the flow of her magic as she continued enchanting the scabbard, and soon the process was complete.

“The crystals in the guard and handle will make them a little heavier. I’m afraid I didn’t manage to lighten the scabbard very much.”

“You’ve done more than enough. The blade feels fine; I wouldn’t mind it even heavier,” Volf said as he made to push the blade into the handle.

He cocked his head in puzzlement.

“Enchanting doesn’t change the size of anything, does it?”

“It shouldn’t, no.”

“Right, just need to put my back into it then.”

As he tried to push it in harder, the blade suddenly leaped from his hands,

skidding across the table and clattering loudly onto the workshop floor.

“Volf, are you all right?!”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Didn’t expect it to be quite so lively.”

He picked the blade up and tried once again, but both parts stubbornly repelled each other, refusing to fit together. Volf even tried putting a strengthening spell on himself, but a worrying creaking sound from the handle as it was forced toward the blade stopped him.

“I never imagined it wouldn’t go back together again,” Dahlia said.

“I guess there’s a good reason no one’s made one before. If it were that simple, they’d have done it a long time ago.”

Volf looked disappointed, but when it came to magical toolmaking, failures like this were par for the course. Sometimes, it took hundreds of attempts before you finally hit upon the right design.

“It’s just like crafting any other magical tool. The enchantments might be incompatible, or the problem might lie with my magic or the materials. There are lots of possibilities. All we can do is be patient and keep experimenting.”

“Whether it’s tools or swords, this crafting thing’s not straightforward, huh? We’ve just taken the first step on a long journey...”

He made it sound like some epic tale, but he wasn’t far off the mark.

“There are plenty of swords out there with enchantments on them, so the item itself’s probably not the problem,” he continued. “If the magic is incompatible, though... Ah, I wonder if it’s magical interference. I remember the vice-captain telling me it was difficult to use water magic and strengthening spells at the same time.”

“Magical interference, you say?”

If that was the case, then she only had to insert some material between the parts that would act as a barrier to the magic, preventing them from affecting each other.

“Volf, didn’t you mention that black slimes are very tough and resistant to fire, water, and air magic?”

“I...suppose I did.”

“Well, it’s possible that it’ll act as a barrier to magic! We should try coating the inside of the scabbard with black slime powder.”

“Dahlia, no, it’s too dangerous!” said Volf, leaping up from his chair.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure I wear proper protective gloves this time. Besides, you’ll be with me.”

“All right. If anything happens, I’ll get you to the temple right away.”

Why was he assuming they’d need to go to the temple? She’d just told him she’d wear gloves. He worried far too much, she decided.

After putting on a pair of enchanting gloves, Dahlia began mixing some black slime powder into a liquid with a glass stirrer. It was slightly disconcerting having Volf watching her every move like a hawk, but she ignored him and concentrated on the task. She transferred the black mixture into a silver bucket and dipped in the blade, guard, handle, and scabbard in turn. After that, she applied a strong fixing spell to each part.

“Right, the slime’s adhered. Try putting it together again. If it still resists, then stop.”

She handed Volf her father’s work gloves and watched as he picked up the parts again.

“This feels more promising.”

This time, the shortsword came together without issue. The blade was black, the scabbard was black, the guard was black, and the handle had come out a dark red. Its appearance certainly befitted a magical sword.

“Well, it certainly *looks* magical...though I’m not sure if it’s in a good way,” Dahlia observed.

“I think it looks cool! It’s almost like, er, something the minion of a powerful demon might wield.”

Was it really proper for a royal knight to call such a sword “cool”? Besides, it wasn’t some demon’s minion who would be wielding it, but Volf. Dahlia’s vivid imagination kicked into gear; she saw Volf clad in black armor, the black sword

in hand, laughing villainously as he stood at the side of a legendary demon. He fit into the scene disconcertingly well.

“The blade looks keen enough, and the water crystal rinses it. You can definitely feel the extra speed when you swing it. Scabbard’s nice and light too! All of the enchantments are working.”

As Dahlia watched him skillfully handle the small sword, something caught her eye. A tiny wisp of smoke was rising from his hand.

“Volf, could you put it down on this silver plate, please? And show me your glove.”

“Hm? It looks a bit furry.”

“The material’s corroding. One false step and that could’ve eaten right through to your hand. Hold on, let me get a bit of that leftover meat.”

Dahlia fetched a thin, two-centimeter long piece of meat from the fridge and placed it on top of the black blade. Almost instantly, it began to fizzle and slowly melt away. Dahlia and Volf stood for a full two minutes, silently watching it. In the end, all that was left of the piece of raw meat was a little puddle of sticky, blackish liquid. They’d created something truly demonic.



“Well, no one’s going to be wielding *that*. I think we need to give up on this one, Volf. We’ll try again with a new sword.”

“I’d be all right as long as I had some strong enchanting gloves, wouldn’t I? I could transport it in a magically sealed box.”

“It’s not safe. What would you even use it for?”

What good was a magical sword that would burn even its owner?

“I’d find a monster and try it out!” Volf answered with a bright smile.

“You know, I think this is the first time in my life I’ve felt sorry for monsters.”

It was bad enough being cut down by a knight’s sword *without* being melted. It was too horrifying to think about. Although, perhaps she wasn’t one to talk, given how many slimes she’d powdered for her toolmaking over the years.

“This thing’s far too dangerous to transport. I’ll put it in a magically sealed box and call a mage to remove the magic from it, then I’ll take it away to be melted down.”

“Why don’t I take it to the castle? I bet one of the mages there could handle it.”

“Volf, do you want to be known as the knight who brought a cursed sword into the castle? Besides, you’d never get past the inspector at the gates, would you?”

“Oh, that’s a fair point. I doubt they’d let it inside.”

While he spoke, his eyes never left the sinister blade. Perhaps he still longed to take it and see what it would do to a monster.

“Um, Dahlia... I know it’s a little dangerous, but do you think you could put it away in a box and just, you know, keep it for a while?”

“Keep it?”

“Yeah. It’s our first successfully enchanted sword, after all. I’d like us to hold on to it just a little longer.”

“Well, I’m not sure how successful it was, but all right. I will.”

While they'd certainly achieved their goal of creating a single sword with multiple enchantments, it wasn't exactly the result they'd been hoping for. While Dahlia was lost in thought, Volf smiled like an excited young boy.

"Our very first magical sword... I dub thee 'Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion.'"



"I think we're still a ways off from our man-made magical sword, but at least we figured out a method of layering multiple enchantments, so let's drink to that!"

Back on the second floor, Dahlia smiled cheerfully as she brought out two glasses. Volf's attention, however, was on the two large plates on the living room table.

"Where did these come from? They look amazing."

"You're the one who bought them."

What had the young knight so impressed was the grilled mackerel steaming in front of him. It looked very plump and satisfying. Dahlia had prepared the fish simply, splitting it open, seasoning it with a sprinkle of wine and salt, and grilling it whole over her magical stove. It was a little early for dinner, after all, and they'd eaten a hearty lunch of grilled meat. Better to choose something light, she'd thought; mackerel was also one of the ingredients that would spoil soonest.

Dahlia had served them each half of the fish and placed a fork and chopsticks beside the plates. Side dishes included a halved cucumber served with salt and mayonnaise (there was no miso to be found in the city), some cheese left over from lunch, and ham and crackers Volf had brought.

Ordinarily, Dahlia might have prepared some cute, stylish little dishes to accompany the main course, but a discovery in one of the crates Volf had brought in had swept all thoughts of complicated cooking from her mind. It was a bottle of estervino. This cloudy rice wine was imported from the Eastern Kingdom, better known as Esterland. Though the aroma was slightly different, it reminded Dahlia very much of the nigorizake she'd known in Japan. She'd only noticed it at the last minute, tucked away in a corner, but from the moment

she'd laid eyes on it, she hadn't considered serving anything else with the grilled fish. There could scarcely be a finer pairing.

"I've never seen magueral prepared this way," said Volf, staring down at the fish. Dahlia had never heard it called that before.

"How do you usually have it?"

"Mostly as fillets in meunière, I think. It's often served with white sauce too."

Those dishes sounded very fine and elegant, but for pairing with estervino, there was no better way to enjoy it than grilled whole.

"I think this'll go very well with the estervino."

"You like it too, huh? That's a relief. Some of the knights aren't keen on it."

Dahlia half-filled two small glasses with the cloudy white liquid. It poured a little thicker than a typical wine.

"Here's to our first step toward our man-made magical sword!"

"Here's to better success next time."

They clinked their glasses gently so as to avoid another accident. Dahlia slowly raised the estervino to her lips. The aroma of the rice filled her nose, while the drink's gentle flavor and distinctive texture delighted her tongue. A few moments later, her throat was softly warmed by the alcohol. These sensations were intensely nostalgic to Dahlia. She loved this drink.

"Would it be all right if I bought us some special glasses for this? We could do with something a little smaller."

"Why don't we shop for them together? We can get each other's opinions that way and make a joint decision."

"Good idea. We'll look around a few different places."

As they spoke, the two of them began removing the bones from their mackerel. However, Volf seemed to be struggling. Now that Dahlia thought about it, nobles must've always had their fish deboned for them.

"Can you pass me your plate for a moment? I'll get the bones out for you."

"You're so good with those chopsticks. Where did you learn to cook like this?"

“My father taught me. He often asked me to cook these sorts of dishes.”

It wasn’t a lie. However, the man who’d taught her to use chopsticks was her father in her previous life. In this life, her father had often requested seasonal dishes and those that would pair well with alcoholic beverages. She’d experimented with all sorts of ingredients and had a few failures, but she had learned along the way and emerged as a competent cook.

“And all you did was grill it? How can it be this good?” the young knight murmured reverently as he savored forkfuls of the now-boneless mackerel.

It was indeed very succulent, soft, and flaky. Most importantly, it paired beautifully with the estervino.

“I’m sure meunière is great too, but if you’ve got a bottle of estervino in the house, it’s just *got* to be this way.”

“That so? I’ll have to remember this pairing.”

When he wasn’t out on missions, Dahlia imagined Volf ate fairly high-class meals most of the time. Simple home-cooked food like this must have been novel to him.

Once they’d polished off the fish, Dahlia taught Volf how to eat his cucumber *very* impolitely. They held them in their hands, munching away as they discussed their next steps in developing their magical sword. Delicious as the cucumber was, the pair made a solemn promise to each other never to eat like this in public.

“I’m leaving on another mission the day after tomorrow. It’s the titan frog hunt; happens every year around this time. Thankfully, it’s only for three days.”

After the meal, they swapped the estervino for wine, and the topic of conversation turned to Volf’s upcoming mission.

“How big are titan frogs exactly? Are they difficult to deal with?”

“These ones aren’t adults, so they’re only about as big as a mid-sized dog. The terrain’s pretty treacherous in the marshlands, so the mages do most of the work. They burn them or slice them apart with air magic. Guys like me mostly help with the cleanup and taking care of any frogs that come up onto dry land.

The main problem is their numbers, so every knight and mage who's available gets called up to help."

"How many of them are there, roughly?"

"Last year we killed about five hundred."

"Thank you for your service."

A plague of giant frogs being slaughtered en masse by the knights was the last thing Dahlia wanted to witness. In her past life, even the occasional sighting of a regular Japanese toad took her by surprise. She could barely even imagine a dog-sized frog. Just how far could those things jump?

"Is it dangerous hunting titan frogs?"

"Not really. It's not as if they have claws or teeth or anything. Even their poison is pretty weak. It's just the sheer numbers that are the trouble. The heat out there's the worst part, actually. There's no wind in the marshes, and we've got mages blasting flames all over the place. We can change our underclothes, but our boots get soaked with sweat. Pretty soon you don't know whether the swamp's inside or out; it's awful."

"Can't you have your boots enchanted with a drying spell?"

"There's only one enchantment they get—strengthening. We never know what we're going to step on or kick. It's not safe if they aren't reinforced."

"Hmm. How about changing your socks or using insoles?"

"We change our socks every day, but it hardly makes a difference. Same with insoles—there's barely any point."

"Gosh, it's that hot? Oh, hold on a moment. I might just have something that could help a little bit."

Dahlia hurried up to her father's room on the fourth floor. Her father had hated wearing socks during the hot summers. She'd come up with an idea to make him more comfortable and ordered a set of prototypes, but sadly, they had only arrived two weeks after his death. She'd been unable to look at them without thinking of him, so she'd stored them away and never brought them out since. It wasn't as if she would ever use them herself, so she had no qualms

about giving them away to Volf. She returned to the living room and handed them over.

“Here we are. These are called toe socks. They absorb the sweat in between each of your toes, so they might make you a little more comfortable,” she explained.

“Those are, um...a very interesting shape! I’ve never seen socks with toes before.”

Volf gawked in utter astonishment as he investigated the unusual socks. She hadn’t imagined he’d be *this* surprised. It was a little embarrassing.

“You want your socks and the inside of your boots to be as dry as possible, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then I’ll enchant those socks with a drying spell. I happen to have some insoles in stock, so I can have a go at enchanting those as well. Mind if I do some experimenting?”

“I’d be grateful, but you only just enchanted that sword; aren’t you tired?”

“I’m fine.”

Once an idea for a new prototype had begun to form in Dahlia’s head, any fatigue she felt quickly evaporated.

“Did someone order these socks from you?”

“No, I bought them for my father, actually. He often complained that his feet got too hot in summer and went without socks, but then he’d get blisters from wearing leather shoes with bare feet. I tried making these to help him.”

“He must’ve been delighted.”

“He died before I had a chance to show them to him, I’m afraid. I’m just glad they’re going to be of use to somebody. They might even help prevent athlete’s foot,” she said, deliberately putting on a cheerful tone.

If only her father had lived a little longer, she would have been able to present them to him with a smile. Now she would happily hand them to Volf

instead. They descended to the workshop once more, where Dahlia spread a silver sheet atop the workbench and laid the socks on it.

“I’ll enchant these socks with a weak drying spell,” Dahlia said as she picked up a fire crystal. “Your skin will get chapped if it’s too strong, you see.”

Slowly, she glided her index and middle finger over the fabric. Shimmering red and rainbow light began to snake in little curls and spirals, encircling the sock. She imagined herself weaving shining strands of magic in between each and every thread. Dahlia was silent and focused while she enchanted both the right and left socks. Only once she had finished the first pair did she finally look up. She noticed that Volf was watching her intently from the other side of the workbench.

“Have you not seen this kind of enchanting before?”

“No. It’s a lot of fun to watch. Most of the magic I see is from the mages fighting monsters and healing us.”

That made sense. He was a consumer of magical tools and weapons, after all, not an inventor. He wouldn’t have had many chances to observe the production process.

“Now here’s one of the insoles I mentioned. I’ll enchant this with air magic.”

“Er, Dahlia, what’s that green powder?”

“This? It’s powdered green slime.”

The powder, unfortunately reminiscent of mold, was actually made from dried slime.

“If I fix some of this to the sole, it should give it a little breathability and enhance the drying effect. I’m afraid it’ll only be good for one use; once it gets wet, you should just throw it away. I think it should work well in combination with the toe socks, though.”

Green slimes possessed a small degree of air magic. There was always the option of setting an air crystal into the boot itself, but that would undoubtedly be a hindrance. While they weren’t as powerful as a crystal, green slimes’ properties made them a useful material for enchanting fabrics.

“Here I go, then.”

Dahlia placed some green slime powder in a dish and poured on a bluish liquid. While stirring the mixture with a glass rod, Dahlia let her magic flow in through her fingertip. After a minute or two of her quietly stirring, the mixture at last combined, taking on a gluey consistency. She transferred a small amount to the surface of the insoles and once again gently guided her magic through her fingertips as she carefully spread the mixture around to form a uniform coating. Volf knitted his brows as he watched the green mixture creep across the fabric, but contrary to appearances, this green goo was not alive; it was only Dahlia’s magic that was moving it. She did think its movements were slightly reminiscent of a little slime at times, though.

Once the green mixture had evenly coated one surface of the insoles, the process was complete. The appearance left a little to be desired, but the magical effect ought to be worth it.

“Care to try these out for me, Volf?”

“Sure.”

Volf pulled off the socks he was wearing and changed into the enchanted toe socks. The sight of such a beautiful young man wearing toe socks was a rare gem indeed, she thought, only to promptly question her sanity.

“Wow! I can feel them absorbing the moisture already. The insoles feel good too.”

“That’s great. Since I’ve got them here, I think I’ll enchant the rest as well.”

Without sparing Volf a second glance, Dahlia immediately set to enchanting the remaining pairs of socks and insoles. As she grew accustomed to the process, she could even manage a little conversation as she worked. They sat in the workshop until dark, chatting about magical tools, swords, and monsters while Dahlia enchanted.

“How much for these? You have to let me pay this time.”

“Well... Rather than money, could I ask you to test them out and write up a report for me?”

She knew Volf would find a way to repay her if she gave them to him for free, hence her suggestion. She'd made similar arrangements with her friend Irma many times.

"A report?"

"Yes. Try them out when you go to the marshlands and let me know whether they really do anything about the moisture, how long they last, whether they absorb sweat properly, or anything else you notice. When it comes to wearable items, I really need feedback from the people who use them."

"How many should I use?"

"Take them all. They don't fit me, and I've no reason to wear them anyway. The workshop I ordered these from had a minimum order of ten pairs; that's why I have this many. Feel free to give the spares away."

"Got it. I'll make sure to write you a thorough report."

Dahlia couldn't help wondering if it was really proper for her to be making a royal knight write her a report on some toe socks and insoles. However, she was very curious to hear how the items would perform in the damp and humidity of the marshes. If they worked well, she could order from the workshop again and keep Volf supplied.

"My next day off is six days from now. If you aren't busy then, shall we go shopping for those estervino glasses?" he proposed.

"Definitely. As long as I'm not busy with deliveries, that should be fine."

"I'll send a messenger as soon as I get back, then."

The pair returned to the second floor and settled their plans over a glass of wine. Each tilt of the beautiful glasses Volf had bought made glimmering rainbows dance on the surface and in the bottom. It was so pretty that Dahlia could have watched it all night long.

The Gastoni Witch

“Volfred, it must be three weeks since I saw you last,” a soft, dulcet voice purred from behind a black folding fan.

That voice belonged to Altea Gastoni. There were just four families in the kingdom of Ordine that held a dukedom, and of those, the Gastonis were known to be the most powerful of all. Altea was the mother of the current Duke Gastoni. She had lost her husband to illness when she was in her forties, upon which the family title had passed down to her son. He was still young, however, so Altea and her brother-in-law busied themselves supporting him in his many official and social duties. The passing years dared not touch this woman, it seemed. Her age was impossible to guess. Her unwithering beauty and considerable influence had led some to call her “the Gastoni Witch.”

Altea and Volf’s close relationship was well known and oft-discussed among the nobility of Ordine. The rumors were not unfounded—Volf visited Altea frequently at her home. Today was yet another such visit. Volf, wearing an outfit of black silk, sat before the dowager duchess.

“Tell me, how have you been? Up to anything exciting?” she asked languidly.

The timbre of her voice was slightly low for a woman. Her gleaming, golden hair lay in gentle waves, her flawless, pale skin appearing even whiter in contrast to her black dress. Her deep-jade eyes, framed by long, thick lashes, had a slightly languorous expression.

“I took a brief vacation on account of a wyvern.”

“Oh, I heard all about that. I’m sure it was terribly exciting, but do look after yourself, won’t you?”

Altea lowered her fan, revealing a beguiling smile. Her lips were a vermillion shade lightly tinted with orange.

“Have you been well, Lady Altea?”

“As always. However...I would like to borrow you for a dinner party rather

soon, if you wouldn't mind."

"Are the vermin gathering again?"

"Indeed."

Volf's only role in these proceedings was to take Altea's carriage to whichever house she'd been dining at and collect her. After that, they would travel to her home, perhaps enjoy a glass of wine together, and then go off to their separate rooms. The next morning, Altea's carriage would drive Volf back to the castle. This was all that was needed to stir up rumors that worked very favorably for the both of them.

"And you? Any beautiful roses trying to snare you in their thorns?"

"Not lately, as it happens. I'll spare you the details, but I'm able to walk the streets alone at last."

"Goodness. I shall let you keep your secrets, but this is cause for celebration indeed. I am very happy for you."

At a mere look from Altea, the servant at her side fetched two glasses and a bottle of white wine, placing them upon the table.

"I'd adore a chance to walk alone through the city. Even just once."

That was one wish that could never be granted. But Altea knew that well, smiling genially as she raised her glass. "Here's to your safe return from your little vacation."

"Here's to good fortune."

Their glasses touched with a high-pitched ring, and the pair sipped their wine in unison. After they had silently savored it for a few moments, Volf was the first to speak.

"On my way back to the city, I met a very interesting woman."

"Now there's something I don't hear from you very often. Have you spent the night with her already?"

"Yes, but only to enjoy good conversation. We've become friends."

"That's wonderful. I'm so pleased you've made another friend."

“So am I. I’m lucky to have met her.”

There was just a hint of bittersweetness in the woman’s eyes as she gazed at the young man’s sunny smile.



Volf had first met Altea the month after he’d joined the Order of Beast Hunters. Completely out of the blue, a white envelope bearing the duke’s seal had arrived, inviting him for afternoon tea. Volf had never accepted any such invitation before, but a single line in that letter had made his heart skip. Written in an elegant hand, it read:

I believe we both share fond memories of Vanessa. Let us speak of her.

Vanessa was the name of Volf’s mother. Altea was the person she had worked for as a personal bodyguard, and by all accounts, they had known each other for many years. Though Volf was wary, he found himself too intrigued to refuse the invitation. Soon thereafter, the duchess’s carriage arrived, and he was driven to her estate. He recalled being astonished by her ageless beauty the first time he’d laid eyes on her. Oddly, he was also reminded of his mother, though she and the woman before him were not alike by any means. Altea had been the first to speak.

“You look so very like her.”

They had sat down for tea, Volf only pretending to sip from his cup as the duchess began to reminisce.

“Your mother and I had been friends since elementary school, you know. I wished for her to stay by my side as a knight, and she indulged me. Even after we left high school, I continued to insist on employing her. She had no time even to learn the domestic arts. In the end, though, she caught your father’s eye. He was smitten.”

“I see.”

“We were very close, she and I. From the moment we met, we were always together. I thought we always would be, regardless of our social standing or gender.”

Altea spoke of his mother almost as though they had been lovers. Volf

couldn’t find the words to reply, merely gazing at her silently.

“Vanessa was...extremely dear to me.”

Altea unclasped a gold locket that had been hanging hidden around her neck and placed it on the table. She opened it to reveal a picture of three adorable children. They appeared to be Altea’s sons. They had the same blonde hair, their eyes in shades of green and blue. With a scarlet nail, Altea rotated the locket’s lid to reveal another image on the other side. It was a portrait of Volf’s mother as a young woman. Though she was dressed in a high school uniform, Volf felt a rush of nostalgia as he looked at the portrait. At first glance, her expression appeared blank, but in fact, she was smiling just slightly. It was a smile only those close to her would recognize.

“I...understand now.”

He didn’t know whether their bond had been friendship or passion. What he had to acknowledge was that the woman in front of him had genuinely treasured his mother and still did even now.

“I wish to ask something of you. I would like you to tell me about the years you spent with her, and...if you would, about her end.”

Haltingly, Volf began to relate his memories of his mother and, finally, how she had died. Altea never interrupted, listening in respectful silence with only an occasional nod. He didn’t speak in detail of their home life, but he imagined Altea had a reasonable grasp of the situation. She didn’t press him on it.

By the time they had finished talking, it was nearly evening and well past the time for afternoon tea. Somewhere along the way, he had dropped his guard and drunk three full cups of tea.

“I’m very grateful for all you’ve told me. I’ve kept you rather late, so please, stay for dinner. Do you drink?”

“Now and then.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Volf hadn’t bargained on an intimate dinner alone with the duchess, but any misgivings he might have had were soon assuaged as Altea began to tell him

stories of her and Vanessa's childhood. She told him how they'd first struck up a conversation after sighing with dismay during their math class. She told him that his mother's close friends had nicknamed her "Vivi." She told him of how she'd taught Vanessa to do braids to hide her messy bed hair. As a child, it seemed his mother had dreamed of becoming an adventurer. She and Altea would stay up late reading thrilling tales of bold adventurers and end up late for their classes the next morning. Despite having been a skilled swordswoman from a young age, Vanessa had once screamed at a little insect during class. The anecdotes revealed a side of Volf's mother that he had never known.

"Vanessa was so beautiful, she couldn't help but turn heads. She even wished she could change her face at times. Before she became my guard, she received many proposals from eligible young noblemen. You are so like her; I fear you may suffer the same troubles."

He was sure he'd scowled terribly at that moment. To know he shared that experience with his mother, and not a drop of her remarkable magical power, was simply wretched.

"In all honesty, it's extremely troublesome."

"I could arrange a favorable marriage for you."

"I...intend to quit the family one day. I have no ability in the five magic schools, and my family isn't interested in arranging a marriage for me or involving me in events."

He was quick to explain that his ties to the family were tenuous and his magical power almost nonexistent. It had crossed his mind that the duchess may have invited him here to coax him into a marriage interview. She seemed to see right through his thinking, her red lips curving into a captivating smile.

"In that case, I have a very fine, very *improper* solution to offer you, Volfred."

Though they had only just met, it felt perfectly natural for her to address him by his first name. He felt no surprise or discomfort at all.

"Come and stay with me once in a while. I shall have a room prepared for you. I shall also ask you to collect me from a soiree now and then. You and I are both fairly conspicuous in our own ways, so people cannot fail to notice. They will

talk and, I daresay, conjure up some very convenient rumors for us."

"Milady, would such rumors not be a burden upon you?"

In a nutshell, Altea was asking him to act the part of her young lover. If word got out that he was in a relationship with a dowager duchess, he would certainly be spared a great deal of unwelcome advances. However, it would surely be considered scandalous behavior on Altea's part. The last thing he wanted was to injure her reputation.

"Don't misunderstand; this isn't only for your benefit. Since my husband died, I've had young men pestering me day and night. If something isn't done, I know my sons intend to find a nice, boring man to keep me company and keep the peace. No, you won't be burdening me in the least. If anything, it would be a favor."

"You're quite sure about this?"

"You know, Volfred, it strikes me that you don't *think* like a noble. I promise you, it would be very much to my benefit if you were to accept my proposal, and I shall be delighted to compensate you. There must be something I can give you."

"In that case...if I may, I would like to ask you for instruction. I wish to learn how a nobleman is supposed to think, and also how to dance."

Volf was almost clueless about the noble mentality, but he felt he ought to learn, especially considering he would be living and working at the castle from now on. He had spent years avoiding any dance instruction since it inevitably involved close contact with women. However, at one of his older brothers' weddings, he had only made himself more conspicuous by not standing up for a single dance. There could be further embarrassments in the future if he continued to avoid it.

"I shall be glad to teach you. Now that I think of it, Vivi learned her dancing from me as well. That takes me back."

"My mother...never danced with me. Not once."

The only thing his mother had ever trained him in was the sword. Perhaps she had never expected him to involve himself much with the nobility, he reasoned.

The duchess, however, quickly set him right.

“Of course she didn’t. The only reason she learned was to partner with me, so she only knew how to dance as a man. I’m probably the only person she ever danced with.”

“That certainly explains it.”

“She had excellent reflexes, Vivi, but a rather unique sense of rhythm. My poor toes...”

Seeing Altea frown for the first time, Volf couldn’t contain a laugh.

For several years after that, Altea was his teacher in noble thinking, etiquette, and dance. He was grateful for everything she taught him about the nobility. Without this knowledge, even the simplest of gestures would have been beyond his understanding. The opportunity to attend a dance never presented itself, but he nonetheless enjoyed his lessons from Altea and the two dance teachers she employed to instruct him. Volf and Altea met once or twice every month, their relationship becoming like that of aunt and nephew as well as student and teacher. While his visits to her were always pleasant, there was something Volf became gradually aware of as time went by. Altea had never really been looking at him. Her gaze, passing through him as though he were glass, belonged only to her dear Vanessa.



“I’ll be leaving for the titan frog hunt tomorrow.”

“Ah, it’s that time of year already, is it?”

The titan frog hunt had been held at this time last year and the year before that. Visually, it wasn’t the ideal event to mark the season with, but it was working its way into the calendar regardless.

“That being the case, may I ask you to collect me one evening once you return?”

“Of course.”

After a few more minutes’ chat, Volf took his leave a little earlier than usual. Altea did not hold him back.

“Take this, and raise a toast with your new friend once you’re back from the hunt.”

“Thank you very much.”

A servant showed Volf a red crate before neatly wrapping it in white cloth. He knew it would be alcohol of some variety and accepted the gift with a gracious smile. Altea often attempted to give Volf spending money and travel expenses, but he almost never accepted. On the rare occasions he did, he was sure to bring a gift of equal value upon his next visit. What he *would* gladly accept were drinks, meals, and modest birthday presents such as tie pins. Altea was well aware that Volf had drawn a line between them and that, even now, she remained outside of it.

“Look after yourself, Volfred.”

The young knight bowed, and she watched his retreating back until he disappeared from the room. Then, Altea closed her eyes. Today was the first time Volf had ever spoken to her of a woman who was not troubling him in some way. It was the first time he had ever called a woman a friend. He had spoken of her with such a guileless, unguarded smile.

It was clear how happy he was to have met her, and he was firm in his conviction that they had built a strong friendship. However, a friendship between a young man and a young woman could easily transform into something more. If one happened to become attached to the other, everything could be turned on its head so quickly. Ah, but he was so young. He couldn’t see the way his eyes shone with happiness as he spoke of that woman he called a friend. It warmed Altea’s heart to see such a change in this young man who had always held people at arm’s length. She only regretted that she didn’t have such a friend of her own.

“Oh, when will you realize what it is that ails you? Will it pass quickly? Will it all come to naught? Or do you mean to take these feelings to your grave?” Altea smiled down at the portrait inside her locket. “I look forward to finding out. Don’t you, Vivi?”

Just for a moment, a wry smile appeared to flash across the face of the young woman in the picture.

Friends for Dinner

Just as the sun's red glow was beginning to fade from the evening sky, Dahlia's friends Irma and Marcello arrived at the Green Tower. At long last, their schedules had aligned, so Dahlia had invited them over to enjoy a few drinks together.

"Oh, Dahlia, look at you! You're looking gorgeous!" As soon as she stepped through the door, Irma threw her arms around her childhood friend. She herself was pulling off a chic red dress with style.

Once again, Dahlia found herself in quiet awe of the power of makeup. It was extraordinary how much a little color dabbed in the right places could enhance one's appearance.

"Thanks, Irma. It's just because I'm made up, though. You look lovely too! That dress is great on you."

"Hee hee, thanks. Marcello bought it for me. Didn't you, darling?"

The man standing behind Irma was silent, however, his reddish-brown eyes glued on Dahlia.

"Well don't just stand there, silly! Say something!" Irma demanded.

"Oh, sorry... I was just a little shocked. It's *scary* what makeup can do. I mean, you're cute as a button even without it, but that's a stunning look you've got goin' on."

His deadly serious expression left Dahlia at a loss for words. Of course, this praise was all the effect of her makeup, and he'd only spoken after Irma had prodded him. Not knowing what to say, Dahlia turned to Irma for aid.

"Stop him, Irma. He's going overboard!"

"Marcello, I promise I shan't get jealous, so you make sure to tell Dahlia exactly how gorgeous she is."

"Will do! Ah, I'm a lucky man, getting to drink with such beauties!"

With Irma's intervention, the air was cleared, and the three of them laughed as they climbed the tower's stairs.

"Marcello, Irma, I can't thank you enough for all your help with my engagement, the new trading company, and everything."

Once they'd all sat down around the table, Dahlia bowed her head deeply. Though a great deal had happened since she'd broken off her engagement with Tobias, in truth, not very much time had passed. Irma had listened to her troubles; Marcello had helped her move and even signed up as a guarantor for her trading company. Dahlia was indebted to them both.

"Don't be silly, Dahlia; I didn't do anything!"

"Right! People were falling over themselves to be your guarantors; you don't need to thank me."

"I'm truly grateful, though. I couldn't have managed without you. I want you both to eat and drink as much as you like tonight—no holding back, all right?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Don't mind if I do!"

Dahlia poured a dark ale for Marcello and pale ales for Irma and herself. The three raised their glasses for the first toast of the evening, with Marcello taking the lead.

"Here's to the founding of the Rossetti Trading Company, the success of Irma's salon, and a blessed tomorrow for the three of us. Cheers!"

"Cheers!" Irma and Dahlia both followed.

With that, Marcello drained his glass in one gulp, with Irma half-emptying hers. They both enjoyed a drink as much as Dahlia did. The chilled ale was a balm to her throat; it had been a hot afternoon.

"Ah, that's good stuff... Nothing better than an ice-cold one, huh?"

"Right," Irma agreed. "It's at times like these I can't help longing for a bigger fridge."

The two of them wore the same wistful expression. Large refrigerators were

still much too expensive for most commoners to dream of owning. Even mid-sized models only really had room for a few perishables like meat and fish. Finding a spare corner to squeeze some bottles into wasn't always easy. Most people either cooled their drinks in water or in a crate with some ice crystals. For now, Dahlia could only hope that the cost of refrigerators and ice crystals would fall someday soon. With such thoughts lingering in her mind, Dahlia stood up from her chair.

"Okay then, let's eat!"

From the kitchen, Dahlia brought in two magical stoves, two pots, and several large plates.

"Ah, these must be your compact magical stoves, right?"

"We're gonna cook right here at the table?"

"Yep, I thought some freshly fried skewers would be just the thing. We'll fry the vegetables in this pot and everything else in this one. I've got salt, lemon, pepper, and mayonnaise, so season them however you like."

Having mulled over what to cook for tonight, Dahlia had settled on something she knew would go perfectly with ale—deep-fried skewers. She'd prepared diced beef and pork, shrimp, scallops, kraken, small fish, green peppers, and shiitake mushrooms, along with some partially cooked small onions, carrot, and taro. With magical stoves, there was no need to worry about gas canisters or the like, as had been the case in Dahlia's previous world. However, disposing of the cooking oil and cleaning up was still quite a task. Some things never changed.

"Be sure to keep your glass away from the pot. The oil will spit if any water drips into it," Dahlia cautioned.

"Got it. All right, let's get cooking!"

"Irma, you mustn't put in too much at once; it'll bring down the temperature of the oil."

"Oh, of course. It's not like making fried chicken, is it? You eat it right away."

Irma nodded and submerged some skewered shrimp and scallops into the oil.

There were few sounds that roused Dahlia's appetite like the sizzle of bubbling oil. Beside Irma, Marcello very cautiously dipped a skewer of green peppers into the pot and sat there holding onto it tightly.

"It's okay to let it go, Marcello."

"Doesn't it make you a little nervous cooking like this?"

"I suppose it's not every day you get to cook at the table. It's too dangerous if you've got small children, so you either have to do it with just adults or keep a close eye on the kids... Ah, I need to add that to the instructions."

"Oh, Dahlia, just make a note and then forget about it. Mustn't keep the skewers waiting," Irma said quickly, already placing her second skewer into the pot.

"Will do."

Dahlia pulled her notebook from her pocket and quickly jotted down a note before putting it away and turning her attention to the skewers.

"Ta-da!" Irma cried happily as her shrimp skewer finished cooking.

She sprinkled the crisply fried shrimp with salt and suddenly took an enthusiastic bite.

"Hot...!"

"Irma, are you okay?!"

"Fine! I'm fine; just gotta wash it down with ale!"

Was she *really* all right? Dahlia was a little concerned, but Irma drank up with a cheerful smile, so she decided to leave her be. Beside her, Marcello was tucking into the vegetables. She knew that he preferred meat and fish—perhaps he thought that there wasn't enough to go around.



“There’s plenty more meat and fish, Marcello, so don’t feel like you need to hold back.”

“Oh, I’m not, don’t you worry. I’m just makin’ sure I don’t miss out on a single thing.”

He sounded quite serious, so she didn’t pursue the matter any further. When Dahlia looked down at the ingredients on the table, she herself wasn’t sure where to start. The scallops were closest to her, so she decided to start with them, frying them on a skewer and lightly seasoning them with salt when they were done. They were surprisingly succulent for their small size. Next, she fried some shrimp until it was crisp and crunchy. *These would make a great snack,* she thought.

The beef turned out very tasty as well, but what surprised Dahlia most were the little onions. She had never imagined they would be so sweet. She added no seasoning at all to her second skewer, relishing the natural flavor. As she ate some taro, seasoned with salt and pepper, she found herself reminded of the first time she and Volf had gone for a drink together. The salt and pepper fries she’d eaten then had been a bit tastier. Perhaps next time, she’d slowly fry some potato chunks instead.

“Dahlia...these are dangerous.”

Hearing Marcello’s low murmur, Dahlia immediately looked up. He held his dark ale in one hand and a skewer of fried shiitake mushrooms in the other, his brow furrowed in a frown.

“You haven’t burned yourself, have you?”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just...you take a bite of this, right, then you need some ale, then you want another bite, and that makes the ale taste even better. There’s no end to it.”

“Have as much as you want. There’s plenty to fry, and I’ve got a dozen bottles of dark ale.”

“Good to know. Just tell me if I overdo it, all right? I’ll pay you back with some sweet red wine next time.”

For two people who enjoyed a tipple, it was indeed a favorable exchange.

“Marcello’s right, y’know, this *is* dangerous. Especially down here,” said Irma, clutching her stomach.

It *was* looking slightly rounder than when she’d arrived, just slightly. Or was it? No, it was surely Dahlia’s imagination.

“Never mind that, Irma. There’s good ale and fresh skewers to be enjoyed; let’s not worry about such silly things.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll just work a little bit harder tomorrow.”

Despite what she’d said to Irma, Dahlia couldn’t help becoming a little more conscious of her own waistline.

Once the meal was over, the three of them moved to the living room sofas to relax.

“That was almost as good as what you’d get in a restaurant! I never knew how tasty those skewers could be freshly fried.”

“Same here. They make you drink too much ale, though; that’s the only trouble.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed them. Actually, I’ve got two magical stoves to give you to thank you for becoming a guarantor, so you can try making them at home. I’ve included some recipes—there’s a sort of cheese hot pot in there that I definitely recommend.”

Dahlia had decided to send a gift of a magical stove to everyone who had put their name down as a guarantor for her company.

“Thanks, Dahlia. That’d be wonderful,” Irma replied happily. “I’ll be sure to recommend them to my customers.”

“Much appreciated. The profits will come back to the guarantors, after all, so it’s a win-win.”

“Yeah, can’t wait to see where we’re at two years from now,” Marcello added.

As they chatted away, Dahlia prepared their after-dinner drinks. Looking to

keep things simple, she placed a bottle of rum, soda water, a pot of sugar, and a bowl containing several limes on the table.

“Marcello!” Irma called. “It’s your time to shine!”

“Yep, I see those limes.”

Marcello smiled wryly at his wife and left briefly to wash his hands.

“Come on, show us those muscles!”

“Uh-huh, I know.” He picked up a lime, pulling it apart a little before he squeezed the whole fruit, peel and all, between his hands. Juice trickled and dripped into the waiting glass; it was barely any less than what you’d get from a purpose-made magical squeezer.

“It amazes me every time,” said Dahlia.

“This is nothin’. Most of the boys at the Couriers’ Guild can manage a strengthening spell of this level.”

As he spoke, he added rum and a generous amount of sugar to the glass before giving it a thorough stir with a stick. Ideally, it should have been shaken, but stirring was perfectly satisfactory. Marcello had made this cocktail for them before. It reminded Dahlia of a daiquiri. He squeezed the lime into another glass and added rum and soda water. This was his preferred combination.

“All right, our second toast. Your turn, Irma.”

“Me? Oh, er, right... May we work hard and be blessed with good health and good fortune. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

After a merry clink of glasses, they all took a sip. The sweet sugar and tart lime flavors, perfectly balanced, were followed by a warm kick of alcohol. Nothing could be better for washing down all that fried food.

“I always say we’ve got a different stomach for drinks,” Irma sighed.

“It gets fat just the same, though.”

“Marcello! A little tact wouldn’t go amiss!”

“Heh, sorry.”

Dahlia couldn't help but smile at the couple's lively conversation. Their happy relationship had remained the same after marriage as it had before. It was heartwarming just to watch them. *If I'd married Tobias, would I be laughing like that now?* The intrusive thought turned her drink a little bitter.

"Just to put it out there, Dahlia...if or when you do feel like dating again, give me a shout. There's a couple of fine young lads at the Couriers' Guild I'd be happy to introduce you to."

He seemed to have read her mind. She offered him a small smile.

"I appreciate the thought, Marcello. I've thought about it, though, and I'm not sure romance and marriage and all that are really for me."

"In that case, maybe it'd be good just to make some new male friends," Irma suggested.

"Actually...I have made one."

Dahlia had been unsure whether to mention him, but with his recent visits to the Merchants' Guild and his having become her guarantor, word of her and Volf's acquaintance was sure to get around. She would rather Irma and Marcello heard about it from her first.

"That's great news. What sort of guy is he?"

"He's a knight. One of the Beast Hunters."

"Oh, wow. A knight?"

"Did he come to the Merchants' Guild lookin' for equipment or somethin'?"

"No, we just ran into each other by coincidence a couple of times. We got talking, and it turned out we had some shared interests, so we became friends."

"Er...Dahlia, I'm sure *you* have the right intentions, but..."

Glass in hand, Irma slightly narrowed her brown eyes. They were colored with a mixture of suspicion and worry.

"I know how it looks. I'm well aware some people will think he's toying with me, or I'm toying with him. I know there'll be gossip, and it won't all be nice. But I promise you, we're friends and nothing more. He's even invested in my

company.”

“Invested? Don’t tell me he’s a noble.”

“He is.”

Dahlia became aware that the more she said, the more there was to be misunderstood. She fell silent for a moment as she grasped for a way to properly explain herself.

“What kind of a man is he, Dahlia? What’s he like?”

“Well, I suppose he’s...someone who *really* loves magical swords.”

Dahlia could find no better words to sum up the young knight.

“Magical swords, eh? Ah, they’re not so different from magical tools, I guess.”

“Now I get it. He’s one of those people who’d bite like a hungry fish if you dangled a rare sword in front of him, right? No wonder you hit it off; he sounds just like you.”

What sort of comparison was *that*? Dahlia wasn’t sure how to feel about her friend’s reasoning. That said, Irma had a point. If you wished to catch that young knight, a rare magical sword would make the perfect bait. She had exactly the same weakness for unusual magical tools.

“I’d happily have a drink with any friend of yours, but I don’t know how he’d feel about it, being a noble and all.”

“I’ll ask next time I see him.”

Dahlia was never strongly aware of Volf’s noble status when they spent time together. Still, even she couldn’t be sure how he would feel about being introduced to her friends, especially with one of them being a woman.

“He’s probably comfortable around you because your father was a baron,” said Irma. “The etiquette and everything must come naturally to you, but we don’t know much about all that. Are you sure it won’t be awkward?”

“I think it’ll be all right. I expect word will get around soon anyway, so I’ll tell you who he is. He’s one of the Scalfarottos; the earl’s youngest son.”

“Scalfarotto...? You mean the ones who do the water?”

“Yes, the very same.”

Irma’s instant recognition of the name reminded Dahlia what a preeminent family the Scalfarottos were. Perhaps it shouldn’t have come as a surprise—that family alone controlled the supply of water crystals for the entire capital.

“Dahlia, I really think—I’m not sayin’ I don’t trust *you* or anythin’, but...”

“I understand. I think that’s a perfectly normal reaction, under the circumstances.”

She found herself wanting to defend Volf’s character, but she understood Irma’s and Marcello’s feelings. She too would have been worried in their position. Volf was a nobleman and she a commoner, after all—what were people supposed to think? It was only natural to assume his interest in her was only casual, or that he was her patron, her lover or some such. However, Dahlia was prepared to face these misconceptions. She had been since the day she’d decided to become Volf’s friend.

“If it’s possible, I’d like to meet him and talk to him,” Irma said. “You’re one false step away from getting involved with another good-for-nothing man.”

“Hey, cut her some slack, Irma.”

“I mean, look at how you put up with Tobias. You should never have put yourself through that.”

“I wasn’t the one for him. I see that now.”

Dahlia had barely finished her sentence before Irma cut in. “That wasn’t it! You should never have changed yourself for him... You listened to his every stupid little demand! You were suffering all that time, yet every time I asked you, you just told me you were fine and not to worry! We’re supposed to be friends, Dahlia.”

“Irma, that’s enough,” Marcello said, giving his wife a firm pat on the head. He gently pulled her back toward him, sitting forward to place himself between Dahlia and his sullen wife. “Sorry, Dahlia. She’s had a little too much to drink.”

“It’s all right. I’m sorry, both of you.”

“You’ve nothin’ to apologize for.”

“No, I do. I should have faced up to reality sooner; that much is certainly true. You said the same things too. You told me I should never hold back on Tobias’s account...that a married couple should be able to tell each other what they think.”

“Well, yeah, I guess I did.”

There was no getting around it; she was the one who had refused to listen to her friends’ advice. She’d gotten so wrapped up in trying to fit into her image of the ideal wife that she’d ignored everything else.

“I know now that I was in the wrong back then. So from now on, just like always, I want you to tell me plainly if you think I’m making a mistake. I promise I’ll speak my mind as well.”

“You got it. Right, Irma?”

Irma, hugging close against his shoulder, composed herself. Her eyes were a little reddened.

“Sure, but I won’t hold back, you hear? No sugarcoating.”

“Yeah. That’s what I want, Irma.”

“I reckon this calls for another toast.”

With the little that was left in their glasses, the three friends raised the third toast of the night. After that, Marcello stood and began juicing the remaining limes.

“Sorry to bring it up again, but d’you mind if we talk about that friend of yours a little more?” he asked.

“Not at all.”

“You...mentioned he’s a Beast Hunter, right?”

“That’s right. You wouldn’t know it from just talking to him, though. He’s quite normal.”

“Yeah, yeah, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just, that’s pretty dangerous work, y’know?”

Having said that, Marcello fell silent. The Beast Hunters risked life and limb

with every mission—that was what he must have been getting at, but he stopped short of saying it aloud.

“His name’s Volfred. He’s one of the Scarlet Armors.”

Though she deliberately injected a cheerful note into her voice, Dahlia felt a slight pang in her chest as she spoke. Perhaps her image of Volf was still entwined with that of her father.

“He’s been doing it for years, though, and he says he’s never been badly injured.”

“That so? Must be a heck of a tough one.”

“Yes, I’m sure he is.”

Dahlia had never seen Volf fight with her own eyes before. However, he could hardly have spent years at the vanguard of the Beast Hunters without being a formidable warrior. She had to have faith in his strength.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Irma, would you try this out for me? I’d like to get your opinion on it.”

Dahlia fetched a small bundle from the shelf and brought it to the woman who’d been sitting there drinking in silence.

“What is it?”

“It’s a foaming soap dispenser. It turns liquid soap into foam.”

Since creating her first prototypes, Dahlia had made further improvements to the dispenser; the pump was now easier to push down, and the mechanism was simpler. The bundle she gave to Irma contained two of them. She had about another ten in the workshop; she’d take some samples along to the Merchants’ Guild someday soon.

“Oh, that sounds interesting. Should make shampooing easier. I’ll start using it right away; I can put one by the washstand.”

“Let me know if it’s difficult to use in any way.”

“Will do. Okay if I just jot down some notes like usual?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

Irma had been testing Dahlia's prototypes since they were students. Back when she'd been developing her waterproof cloth, Irma had given her plenty of frank feedback: "This type smells bad when it gets wet." "The color's off-putting." "Too much slime. Clings to your hands and feels gross." She had been extremely helpful. Dahlia had compensated her for her trouble with magical tools, crystals and such—whatever Irma had happened to want at the time. Perhaps she'd ask her to test out the new refrigerator next.

"Sounds handy for washing your face in the morning," Marcello commented.

"Good point," Irma agreed. "You're always half-asleep, so you never do it properly."

"I'm pretty sleepy first thing too..."

Dahlia had a bad habit of getting absorbed in her work and staying up late into the night. The day after was always a struggle.

"Both of you have too many late nights and too much to drink. You should cut down on the drinks, for starters!"

Even as he listened to his wife's admonition, Marcello picked up a fresh lime and squeezed it into his glass. He followed that up with a generous measure of rum and a good-humored grin.

"Remind me of that tomorrow, eh? Tonight's a lost cause."

The Black Reaper and the Monster Husks

Within the royal Order of Beast Hunters, there were a special few who were known as “sorcerers.” They were warriors with such terrific power that even monsters knew to fear them, or so the rest of the knights and soldiers often joked over a mug of ale. The most famous of all was the “Sorcerer of Ash.” This was the name given to Grato Bartolone, captain of the Beast Hunters. Wielding Ash-Hand, a magical sword passed down through the Bartolone family for generations, this imposing man with red eyes and dark-gray hair slew even gargantuan monsters with ease. After Grato, the next most renowned warrior in the order was the “Sorcerer of Water,” Vice-Captain Griswald Lanza. Blue-eyed and blue-haired, Griswald was built like a bear and fought with a lance and water magic. He was a celebrated mystic knight. The sight of him valiantly battling swarms of monsters with his lance and magic never failed to inspire.

The third-place spot was always contested and had changed hands a number of times over the years. Occasionally, the top three became the top four or five. In recent years, the name spoken most often after that of the captain and vice-captain belonged to one of the Scarlet Armors, Volfred Scalfarotto. However, this young knight was no sorcerer. He had earned a more unique title—the “Black Reaper.” He possessed no magical ability whatsoever besides spells to strengthen his body. He did not wield a magical weapon passed down from his ancestors. He simply put on that blood-red armor and led the battle charge with a standard-issue sword in hand, doing whatever was needed to draw the foe’s attention from his comrades. Killing, sprinting, leaping, evading, striking, activating his strengthening magic—these motions seemed to come as naturally to him as breathing. In his first year, he had requested to join the Scarlet Armors. Six months later, his wish was granted.

“Kid must have a death wish,” some had whispered behind his back.

In his second and third years, they all thought his behavior reckless and foolhardy.

“He won’t last much longer,” they said.

But the next year, and the year after that, Volf was still alive. What’s more, he hadn’t even sustained any serious injuries. He was now deadlier than ever before, having developed a knack for striking with pinpoint precision at monsters’ weak points, and he had established himself as a cornerstone of the Beast Hunters’ vanguard.

One by one, the voices around him had changed their tunes. He was not reckless, but supremely talented—his golden eyes saw the specter of death itself, they said. Volf, with his raven hair, soon found himself nicknamed the “Black Reaper.” Certainly, from the perspective of the monsters he slew, it was a fitting moniker. However, according to the female knights, soldiers, and maids of the royal castle, the unflattering name of “reaper” only reflected the other men’s sense of inferiority.

With his tall, lean figure, hair as black and lustrous as polished obsidian, and a countenance whose likeness could grace the walls of the temple, he was surely more fallen angel than reaper. His eyes gleamed more brilliantly than a newly minted coin; many women who’d met that golden gaze said it had almost stopped their hearts. Despite turning heads everywhere he went, he ignored all love letters, rebuffed all attempts at seduction, and refused all invitations for marriage interviews, no matter how favorable the match. As far as the world at large knew, Volf’s sole romantic liaison was with a certain dowager duchess, but no one could be certain how true this rumor was. That ambiguity only seemed to stoke the gossip further.

“What the heck have you got there, Volf?”

“These? They’re called toe socks.”

At that moment, the young man known as the “Black Reaper” and “fallen angel” was deep in a forest in the middle of the marshlands. The knights had stopped for a break, and he was taking the opportunity to change his socks. For the past five kilometers, they had been traveling through a patchwork landscape of marshes and dense forest. Their boots, made from waterproof cloth and leather, were sturdy and kept the water out well. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of any breathability. This was why many knights took the time

to change their socks and insoles at the final stop before they reached the battlefield.

“Toe socks? They look like some kind of husk shed by a monster.”

“Don’t look at me like that, Dorino...”

Dorino Barti, a fellow knight and friend of Volf’s, was peering dubiously at the socks in Volf’s hand.

With a slightly sheepish smile, Volf began to explain. “Look, they’re just like normal socks, except all the toes are separate. These here are insoles that help keep your feet dry. I was telling a friend of mine what trouble we have with the damp out here, and she gave me these. I’m testing them out for her.”

“I guess the insoles look all right, but those socks give me the creeps. They look like a real hassle to get on too.”

“They took me by surprise when I first saw them too, and yeah, they do take a little more time to put on, but they’re doing a good job so far. I’ve worn them all the way here, and my feet and boots are both still dry.”

He reached down and touched the foot he hadn’t yet changed. It wasn’t damp in the slightest. Normally, his toes would have been clinging together with sweat by now. His feet had rarely known such comfort.

“You’re kidding. Mine are so sweaty already that it’s like a swamp in there.”

“Why don’t you give these a try?”

“Well...it’d be a godsend if they worked, even if they do look like monster husks. All right, gimme a pair. I’ll pay you for ’em after.”

“No need. I’ll be writing a report on them for my friend, so just let me know how they work for you.”

“Sure. Hey, uh, is there some kinda technique for getting these things on?” Dorino asked, having tried and failed to tug the socks on in one go.

Volf came to his aid, instructing him to pull his toes through one at a time.

“Oh, wow! My toes aren’t sticking together anymore. They feel really nice and cool. I think I’ve even stopped sweating.”

“Glad they’re such a good fit. My friend even thinks these socks and insoles might help prevent athlete’s foot.”

“What did you say?!”

One of the senior knights, having been quietly sharpening his sword until that moment, suddenly interjected.

“Volf, tell me more! Those will really prevent athlete’s foot?”

“Y-Yes. At least, I think so. I can’t guarantee it, but they’ll probably help,” Volf answered hurriedly. The older knight was looking at Volf with the same fervor a man showed during a heated battle. “I’m not sure about athlete’s foot specifically, but these socks and insoles are made to keep your feet dry, so they should definitely make things more comfortable.”

“I see... Tell me, where did you buy these?”

“Actually, they’re only a prototype...”

“A prototype? You mean I can’t buy them?!”

The rising volume of the man’s voice was drawing glances.

“I have plenty of spares. Would you like to try them?”

“Yes! By all means, yes!”

Volf was taken aback as the other man suddenly clasped his hands tight. This older knight must have had a serious hatred of sweaty feet. Perhaps it had been a problem for him during battle. Firm footing was especially important for knights who wielded heavy weapons like greatswords, as this man did. The ground here in the marshlands was treacherous enough without boots full of sweat making it worse. Convinced by this reasoning, Volf handed over a pair of toe socks and insoles.

“Please let me know what you think of them later on.”

“Gods bless you! I shall! I’ll report to you with all my might.”

Leaving Volf pondering the meaning of that promise, the knight sat down and began solemnly pulling on the new socks.

“Now you’ve got me curious,” came a familiar voice from behind them. “I’ll

buy a pair too.”

Volf made to jump to his feet but was quickly pushed down by a firm hand on his shoulder. It belonged to Captain Grato. He must have quietly approached while Volf was watching the other man. Beside Grato was another knight of around the same age. Volf couldn’t help noticing a steely glint in that man’s eye.

“If they’re effective against athlete’s foot, I’ll gladly try them.”

“Me too. I’ll pay the full price.”

“Oh, no, sir. They’re only prototypes, and I can’t guarantee they’ll really help with athlete’s foot. I’ve never suffered from it myself. Is that really that serious a condition?”

“The itching can be a dangerous distraction. In more serious cases, it can even affect your footing.”

“I see. Not so different from heat rash, then.”

The explanation made good sense. The socks and insoles were likely to have a positive effect on those distracting symptoms. Volf was in no position to turn his commanding officer down, so he meekly handed over a pair of each item.

“You know, Volf...that’s not all. If you go home with athlete’s foot, your wife and kids don’t treat you the same. They practically run the other way.”

“Can’t you have it cured at the temple?”

“Sure, but it just comes back again after a while. When it does, it’s even harder to treat,” the older knight beside Grato said gravely as Volf passed him a pair of socks and insoles too.

“I never knew it was such a serious problem.”

“Ah, Volfred! You can say that now with that young, fresh skin of yours!” the captain exclaimed. “Just wait till you turn thirty-five—that’s when it comes for you!”

“That can’t be right, Captain! We young men sweat more; I thought that was the cause!”

“No, no. Your skin rejuvenates more slowly as you get older and takes longer

and longer to heal. Believe me, boy, we've got it worse!"

All Volf knew was that the atmosphere in the camp had suddenly become decidedly tense. Unable to properly empathize with either side, he simply smiled bemusedly as he looked on. He glanced over at Dorino only to see that the man had made a swift escape. Volf could see him a little distance away, pretending not to know what was going on, obviously trying not to draw any more attention to his friend. Volf swore he would thank Dorino for his consideration with a strong drink filled to the brim the next time they drank together.

"Volf."

The young knight heard his name and turned to see another of his friends approaching. His name was Randolph Goodwin. He was the son of a noble known as the "Earl of the Frontier." He had reddish-copper hair and was around the same age as Volf. Perhaps he meant to mediate the heated discussion, unlike Dorino.

Once he stood right beside Volf, he leaned over and whispered with a solemn expression, "If you have any left, might I have a pair of those socks as well?"

Volf silently handed them over along with a pair of insoles.



The Apology and the Unicorn's Horn

Noon had yet to arrive, and it was already uncomfortably hot. By the time Dahlia reached the Merchants' Guild, she was already a little worn out from braving the fierce sun. She was here to present Gabriella and Ivano with their complimentary magical stoves. Marcello had promised to deliver the one for Mezzena Grieve, his colleague at the Couriers' Guild, so Dahlia had simply written a greeting card to accompany it and left it with Marcello.

"Good morning, Dahlia. Can I get you an iced tea?"

"Yes, please. That would be lovely."

Seated at her desk, Gabriella sipped delicately on a cup of iced tea. Today, she wore a dress in a deep shade of sky-blue with a white collar. It was an eminently cool and summery look. A faint, fresh breeze flowed gently around the room; it seemed the heat had prompted Gabriella to switch on her cooling fan. Relieved to have escaped the sun's enervating glare, Dahlia took a seat on the sofa.

"I'd like to thank you once again for becoming one of my guarantors. This is a gift to express my appreciation. Feel free to give them away if you have no use for them, of course."

Dahlia placed the two small stoves, wrapped in a scarlet cloth, upon the pure-white surface of the table. She had enclosed recipes and a list of precautions in the bundle so that just about anyone would manage to use them without difficulty.

"Thank you, Dahlia. That's very sweet of you. Perhaps I'll warm up some wine in my room once the cold weather comes in."

"Don't your servants do that sort of thing for you?"

"I've never quite felt comfortable asking servants to come to my room at night. I suppose it's because I wasn't born to nobility. I wouldn't really want them seeing me in my nightclothes, without any makeup."

“When you put it that way, I think I understand.”

Dahlia had a feeling she’d be self-conscious in that situation too. Evenings were best spent quietly, either alone or with family.

“I’ve made a new product—this foaming soap bottle. I’d be delighted if you’d try it. It dispenses liquid soap as foam.”

“Oh, how interesting.”

“Once I’ve ironed out the final kinks, I think I’d like to register it with the guild. Not as a magical tool, but as a small article.”

“It isn’t magical? I was sure it must have an air crystal inside.”

Gabriella took a look at the two bottles Dahlia had brought out and picked up the empty one, removing the lid and peering curiously inside.

“I used magic when creating the parts, but otherwise it’s completely mechanical. It isn’t enchanted in any way. I’d like to have them made in a workshop that specializes in small articles. If you could put me in touch with one, I’d be very grateful.”

“Certainly. We’ll reach out to as many as we can, and you can order from whomever suits you best.”

“Do you happen to know of any workshops registered with the guild that make liquid-dispensing bottles with a hand pump like these?”

If she were making them all on her own, Dahlia knew that these bottles would eat up a lot of her time and that she would struggle to maintain uniformity among them. She would much prefer to let an experienced professional take over the manufacturing.

“I believe there are two, actually, though they’re only small affairs.”

“If they’ll agree to it, I’d like to enter into a joint development contract with them.”

“But Dahlia, all your proceeds will be cut in half. You *are* aware of that, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m aware. I’ve designed the basic mechanism, but I believe a specialized

artisan will probably be able to make some improvements, so I'd like to consult with them and see what we can do. Besides, if there's a similar product already in production, I'd like to talk to the maker and hopefully convince them to work with me. That's what my father taught me and Mr. Orlando to do if we ever found ourselves in this position. He said joining forces would result in a better end product, as well as nipping any disputes in the bud."

"You've thought this through, I see."

Gabriella poured a glass of iced tea and offered it to Dahlia. She took it gratefully, raising it to her lips. It was cool and soothing.

"I suppose, basically, you want to avoid doing anything that'll obstruct your existing revenue streams."

"Yes, there is that too. I'd be in trouble if I invested too heavily into this product and it suddenly stopped selling. Still, it'd be good to make some experienced contacts I can get advice from. It's always interesting to learn from someone with a different perspective."

Gabriella held back a sigh. She couldn't help thinking it must have been Carlo who'd taught his daughter to collaborate like this so she would never draw the ire of other toolmakers or become too conspicuous. It made some sense. Once profits began to roll in, whomever Dahlia decided to partner with would have no reason to undermine her. If anything, they would become a supportive ally. Ordinarily, Gabriella would have advised her to prioritize profits, but Dahlia looked so pleased with her plan. For the time being, at least, she judged that she had better let Carlo have his way.

Just as the conversation lulled, there came a knock at the door. Once Gabriella had bid them to enter, a clerk stepped into the office.

"Please pardon the interruption. Chairman Ireneo Orlando of Orlando & Co. wishes to request a meeting with Chairwoman Rossetti."

"I expect he's come to apologize, Dahlia. Are you up to meeting him?"

"Ireneo has nothing to apologize to me for...but actually, I would like to speak to him. I'll see him."

"Turn down the soundproofing in the second-floor meeting room, would

you?” Gabriella asked the clerk. “Then show Ireneo in and serve him some tea.”

“Very well, madam.”

Once she and Dahlia were alone again, Gabriella refilled her teacup.

“I’m sorry, Dahlia, but I can’t keep from worrying about you. Would you permit me to accompany you? You’ll have to forgive me if I interrupt at any point.”

“I’d appreciate that very much. Thank you.”

After bowing her head in thanks, Dahlia emptied her cup of iced tea and rose to her feet.



“I deeply regret the recent conduct of my younger brother and my mother. On behalf of the Orlando family, allow me to offer my most sincere apologies.”

Dahlia stared dumbfounded at the man bowing deeply to her on the side of the meeting room table.

“Please, Ireneo, raise your head!”

It felt as though people had been bowing to her constantly lately. She wasn’t getting any more used to it.

“There’s nothing you need to apologize for, Ireneo. Everything is settled between Tobias and me.”

“Thank you. I am very grateful for your kind words.”

“Er, Ireneo...do you think we could speak as we did before?”

She’d spoken with Ireneo often when procuring supplies and visiting Orlando & Co. They’d been on fairly friendly terms with each other, so it didn’t feel right to suddenly be addressed with such deference. Put plainly, it was downright uncomfortable.

“You’re very kind. First of all, I’d like you to accept this.”

Ireneo gave another bow and placed a bundle wrapped in blue cloth upon the table.

“You’ll find twelve gold inside.”

“I’ve already received my compensation.”

“This is on behalf of the whole family. I heard my fool of a brother went so far as to demand your engagement bracelet back. Think of it as recompense for that. Ah, well, no. To be frank, I’d like you to take this as official proof of my company’s apology to you. I’m afraid my motivations are entirely self-serving.”

“I’d indulge him if I were you, Dahlia. The score won’t be settled otherwise. That said, if you’d like to leave Orlando & Co. at a disadvantage, I shan’t stop you.”

“Right... In that case, I’ll gladly accept.”

She hadn’t thought about Tobias or the affair with the engagement bracelet at all lately. While not entirely happy with the situation, she accepted Ireneo’s offer.

“I realize I’m in no position to be bargaining, but I have some requests to make of you. I’ll not blame you if you dismiss them all, of course.”

Ireneo clasped his hands upon the table. His dark, almond-shaped eyes, so like his father’s, fixed squarely upon Dahlia as he spoke.

“First, I’d like to ask that you refrain from pursuing legal action against Tobias over the registration of your magical stove. Second, that you give us your permission to spread word that your breakup with Tobias was amicable. Third, that you cease any intimidation of Orlando & Co. from the Scalfarotto family. And fourth, that you continue doing business with my company. That is all.”

Dahlia had no interest in pursuing action against Tobias at this point, and while it was hardly accurate to call their split amicable, she realized it might also be advantageous for her for that version of events to be circulated. The pressure from the Scalfarottos Ireneo spoke of didn’t exist to begin with, and she was sure Volf had no interest in that sort of thing. Dahlia had no particular problem even with the final request, so long as it was purely a business relationship between their two companies. She listened in silence as Ireneo continued.

“In return, I have four proposals to offer you. First, a payment of a further twenty gold. Second, for the next three years, orders from you will have top

priority when our shipments arrive, making scarce materials more readily available to you. Third, for those three years, we will offer our goods to you at cost price—we will take no profits from them. Fourth...we will be at your disposal should you wish to consult us on any business-related matters. However, with the guildmaster as a guarantor for your company, I realize this fourth proposal is somewhat empty."

With Dahlia absorbed in thought, Gabriella was the first to speak.

"About this rumor of an amicable breakup—I'd like to hear precisely what information you intend to circulate."

"The breakup occurred according to the mutual agreement of both parties. Miss Dahlia is on friendly terms with the youngest son of Lord Scalfarotto. She wished to avoid marriage in order to continue her toolmaking career. That will be the gist of it."

"You make it sound as though your younger brother had no hand in it."

"I recognize that. I am treading a fine line in order to protect Tobias's career as a magical toolmaker. However, it would put an end to any foolish talk of Miss Dahlia being dumped by Tobias, while dropping the Scalfarotto name will afford her a degree of protection. If you wish it, Miss Dahlia, I will even have Tobias and his new fiancée leave the city. You have my word as chairman," Ireneo said firmly, his hands remaining neatly clasped upon the table.

"Fairly agreeable terms, I'd say, but what do you think, Dahlia?"

"The money is unnecessary, and the matter of the stove registration has already been settled. I don't mind word being spread that Tobias and I separated on good terms, but please leave out the Scalfarottos' name. Simply say that I wished to prioritize my career. I can assure you there's no intimidation or anything else coming from the Scalfarottos. I'd like to maintain our business relationship as well. While I certainly don't want anything more to do with Tobias, I wouldn't ask you to send him away."

In truth, Dahlia would have preferred *not* to have any further dealings with Orlando & Co., but they had something she wanted: access to a certain material that none of Dahlia's other trading contacts did. For this reason, Dahlia decided to accommodate as many of Ireneo's requests and conditions for future trade

as she could. She folded her hands in her lap and looked the man straight in the eye.

“I have a request of my own to make.”

“By all means, make it. I’ll be happy to grant it if it’s within my power.”

“I would like you to procure me some fairy glass.”

“Fairy glass? I see. In what quantity?”

“Four pieces, ideally. Even one will do if you’re able to deliver it to me quickly. I’ll pay with this,” she said, returning the bundle of gold coins Ireneo had presented her with earlier. “If that will cover it, then please, take the whole sum. If not, I’ll make up the cost.”

The fairy glass was for crafting Volf another pair of glasses. She wanted it as soon as possible, and enough of it that she could quickly make him a replacement should he happen to break his glasses.

“Four pieces of fairy glass... Very well. I’ll send word to all our suppliers and procure it as soon as we find some. Are you happy to conduct the paperwork and communication through the guild?”

“Yes. That would be ideal.”

His brow furrowed, the man rubbed at his chin with his right hand. “Fairy glass, though... Hm. I see. So that’s the path you’ve chosen.”

“What path is that?”

“Oh, it’s just that I’ve heard it’s a particularly tricky material to work with. I was surprised.”

It seemed that that was all he intended to say on the topic. After that, they took some time to work out the particulars of the agreement. Gabriella quickly drew up the necessary documents. Just as the meeting seemed about to wrap up, Ireneo spoke.

“Pardon me, Gabriella, but might I have some time to speak with Miss Dahlia alone?”

Dahlia’s eyes widened at the unexpected request. Gabriella flashed him a

charming smile.

“My, Ireneo, don’t tell me you plan to woo her.”

“Nothing of the sort.”

“Is that all right with you, Dahlia?”

Dahlia hesitated a moment before replying, but she was feeling grateful to him for agreeing to search for the fairy glass, so she decided to accept. “Yes, fine.”

Once Gabriella had left the room, Ireneo’s expression softened somewhat.

“I wasn’t sure whether I ought to give you this.” He undid a wrapping of white cloth and took out a magically sealed silver box. “I’d intended it as a wedding present, but we can forget about that. Think of it simply as a material for your work and an apology for all the trouble we’ve put you through.”

“A material?”

“Take a look. I must be honest, though—I can’t be sure whether it’s genuine.”

Dahlia lifted the lid to reveal what appeared to be a slender, pure-white rod. A moment later, she felt a potent wave of magical energy spill out from the box.

“It’s rather small, but I was told that this is the horn of a unicorn mare. Its properties are supposed to include detoxification, water purification, and pain relief.”

The horns of unicorn mares were much rarer than those of stallions and thus considerably more expensive. Dahlia didn’t understand. Their negotiations were supposed to have been concluded. They were meant to be nothing more than business partners to each other now. Why would he present her with such a rare and expensive item? If he’d produced it earlier, he could surely have used it as a valuable bargaining chip. Why had he waited?

“I...don’t understand. Why would you give me this?”

“Perhaps you don’t remember. Shortly after you and Tobias were engaged, I put in an urgent order of your waterproof cloth. I asked you then what you’d like for a wedding present, and you said, ‘a material that cures stiff shoulders.’”

“Now you mention it...”

It had been a little over a year ago. Carlo, Tobias, and Dahlia had all worked frantically together to fill the large order. It had been an urgent request from Ireneo, and none of them had been quite prepared for what a mammoth task it would be. For a full two days, they’d worked almost nonstop, grumbling to one another all the while.

“‘You can do it if you put your mind to it...’ Easy for him to say! This is a ridiculous amount!”

“I keep finishing them, but the pile won’t get any smaller...”

“He’s paying extra for this, mark my words.”

In the dead of night, when the last sheet was finally done, Ireneo had arrived with stacks of refreshments, apologizing profusely. The four of them had gone up to the second floor to eat, drink, and complain at him bitterly.

“What would you like for a wedding present?” he’d asked her.

Half-disgruntled and half-joking, she’d replied, “A material that cures stiff shoulders!”

“I’ll start searching.”

His expression had been terribly contrite. Beside her, Tobias had been smiling, in good spirits despite the late hour.

“Find something that’ll make me younger while you’re at it!” her father had chimed in.

Ireneo had pretended not to have heard. Yes, she remembered that day when the four of them had all laughed together. Even now, it was a happy memory. She didn’t look back on it with bitterness or sadness.

“It was shortly after that that Carlo came to me. ‘For pain relief,’ he said, ‘what you want is the horn of a unicorn mare.’ I promised him I’d look for one. It took far longer than I’d expected, but...please, take it and allow me to keep my promise to your father. Use it however you see fit. You can even sell it if you like.”

“Do you...”

She was about to ask if Ireneo too was somehow indebted to her father, but she stopped herself. Even if it were true, she had a feeling it wasn't really her business.

"Thank you very much, Ireneo. I'll accept it with gratitude."

"Please do. It's a shame that I cannot call you my sister. However, I think it's far better for you this way."

Ireneo smiled faintly. That gentle expression made him the spitting image of his father. For a moment, it almost felt as though that was who she was speaking with, instead of his eldest son.

"This will be the last time I call you 'Miss Dahlia.' From now on, our relationship shall be purely one of business. Is that not so, Chairwoman Rossetti?"

"Indeed, Ireneo—I mean, Chairman Orlando."

Ireneo bowed deeply, and Dahlia followed suit. Then, without another word, they took their leave from the meeting room.



"Are you all right, Dahlia?" Gabriella asked.

"Do I look that bad?"

"I'd say you look three-tenths exhausted, four-tenths bewildered, with the last three-tenths trying to put on a brave face. You need to weather a few more battles, I think."

Dahlia couldn't help but smile. The elegant woman was probably absolutely right.

"Mind if I take a little more of your time? There's something I'd like to confirm with you."

Dahlia assented and followed Gabriella back into her office. No sooner had she sat down than she was served another cup of tea—hot this time.

"I was surprised you went along with Ireneo's proposals. I thought you wanted nothing more to do with Orlando & Co."

“It was because of the material I need—fairy glass. As far as I know, Orlando & Co. is the only trading company that deals in it. At least, I’ve never seen it anywhere else. Perhaps some of the larger trading companies with noble connections might have it, but I don’t have those sorts of contacts yet, and I’d like to obtain at least one piece as soon as I can.”

She became aware that she may have let her desire for the fairy glass cloud her judgment somewhat. As she fell quiet, reflecting on her actions, Gabriella spoke.

“So that’s what it was. You know, if I were you, I’d have taken the money, forbidden him from spreading any rumors, and told him to have Tobias out of town by the end of the week. But no, you accepted his terms very graciously. I’d say you’ve done him a generous favor. I thought things might be more interesting that way, so I didn’t stop you.”

“Interesting?”

“Well, for the next three years, you can order all the rare and exotic materials you like. You’ll get priority *and* a discount. Ireneo didn’t specify any quantities, so I believe he’s well prepared for that.”

“Oh!”

In her eagerness to request the fairy glass, she hadn’t even considered that. She realized she would need to switch off her toolmaker brain sometimes and begin thinking like the chairwoman of a trading company.

“I suppose there’s no harm in him putting out that rumor, but I do wonder which will take root first, his or my guild members’.”

“Gabriella...”

“It isn’t for your benefit. When one of our members has been ill-treated, it’s only natural that we’d make sure the truth of the matter is known. It’s Tobias who’ll suffer for it, not Ireneo, and he’ll only have himself to blame.”

It wasn’t her place to tell the other guild members what they could and couldn’t say about the affair, Dahlia had to admit.

“For these next three years, you’ll have Orlando & Co. at your beck and call.

Milk it for all it's worth."

"Be serious, Gabriella," Dahlia answered ruefully.

Gabriella merely gave her a wicked, catlike smile.

"The breakup had completely gone out of my mind," Dahlia continued. "I wouldn't have thought of it at all if Ireneo hadn't reminded me today."

"That's good to hear. I must say, I was impressed by how levelheaded you were throughout that business."

"Was I? Oh, I suppose I didn't slap him or shout at him or anything like that. I'm not really sure how you're *supposed* to handle a normal breakup like that where one party's been unfaithful."

Dahlia wasn't sure there was such a thing as a normal breakup in the first place. Then again, she'd never heard of an exceptional one either.

"In your shoes, I think the first thing I'd do is go to a mutual friend and cry for an hour."

"Understandable."

Though she hadn't cried, the first thing Dahlia had done was visit Irma to vent her frustration, so she understood Gabriella's feelings on the matter. It would have been hard to bear alone. She was grateful to have friends she could share her troubles with.

"After that, I'd go and visit the local gossip. I'd hold back my tears and ask her for her advice, and only then begin weeping again. I wouldn't say a single word against my ex-fiancé or his new lover—that's important. No, I'd blame everything on my own imperfections and lament how I couldn't satisfy the one I loved. The story would spread like wildfire."

"I see..."

That strategy would definitely accelerate the rumors—triple their speed, perhaps. It would invite a great deal of sympathy as well.

"After that, I'd hole up in my house for a while and start dieting. I'd skip a few meals, do plenty of exercise, and make sure not to show my face outside. Only once I'd lost five or six kilos would I go outside, making sure to draw dark circles

under my eyes with makeup. When I ran into an acquaintance, I'd tell them I was fine, completely fine, while letting tears well up in my eyes. That would get the rumor mill churning even faster."

"I...suppose it would, yes." Dahlia had to agree. If that was the desired effect, those tactics would almost certainly do the job. At that point, people wouldn't merely sympathize with her; they would begin reproaching the one who had wronged her. Still, the dieting sounded like a rather extreme measure to Dahlia.

"Next, I'd let things just stew for a little while, and in the meantime, I'd conduct a thorough investigation of my ex-fiancé's family, business associates, clients, and those of his lover as well. I would make sure the news reached them of how cruelly I'd been treated. It wouldn't come from my mouth, of course. People sympathetic to my plight would just *happen* to show up in these places and start talking about what a sad business it was. They could be anywhere—in cafés, cafeterias, salons, doctors' offices, shopping streets, schools... Any place gossip's likely to spread."

"Whoa..." Dahlia murmured unwittingly.

It would take time, effort, and the cooperation of a fair number of people, but the one on the sharp end of this campaign would soon be driven into a very uncomfortable spot. On the one hand, they would merely be reaping what they'd sown, but at the same time, she couldn't help feeling a shred of sympathy for them.

"By that time, I'd have dished out some considerable damage, assuming the ex wasn't a *complete* simpleton."

"Er, and what if he *was* a simpleton?"

"Well, when he found himself unable to stay in the area any longer, then he'd elope, I suppose, or throw himself off a cliff or something with his lover. In any case, knowing I'd never have to set eyes on him again would be very comforting."

"I wonder..."

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Dahlia. Once betrayed by someone she truly loves, even the frailest young woman can achieve such sweet revenge

as this.”

Gabriella’s smile wasn’t its usual, elegant self. Though still beautiful, it harbored a hint of darkness. Something in her dark-blue eyes spoke to a deep, lingering pain. Just for a moment, Dahlia couldn’t help wondering if all Gabriella had said had, in fact, been a retelling of something in her past, but she held her peace and raised her cup of tea to her lips.

“Will you look for love again, Dahlia?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve made a good friend whose company I enjoy very much.”

“Yes...I’ve heard about him. I realize it may not mean much coming from me, but I’ll say this anyway: if you want a quiet life, don’t marry a nobleman. Have him as a lover or a patron, if you must. That shouldn’t invite too much trouble.”

“I realize people will talk, but I’ve made my choice. I want us to be friends, nothing more.”

“Very well. If that’s what you’ve decided, then I’ve no grounds to object. I just want you to understand how serious a situation you may find yourself in if your friend’s feelings happen to change. Some noblemen will pursue you with every means at their disposal, whether it’s their power, their money, or...like this.”

Upon her left wrist, Gabriella always wore her engagement bracelet, a simple gold band set with blue stones. She drew back her sleeve to reveal a second bangle. This one was gold as well, but set instead with a circle of aquamarines, inside which glittered a large, spectacular diamond. As she looked at it closely, Dahlia felt the energy of an extremely powerful enchantment emanating from the bangle.

“What an incredible object!”

“It means he’s always watching. As long as I wear it, he can tell more or less where I am. Couldn’t escape if I wanted to.” She laughed, but it came off hollow.

Dahlia’s initial amazement quickly turned into alarm. Her husband was practically stalking her. Even so, she couldn’t suppress a little curiosity about the nature of the bangle’s enchantment. What sort of magic was it? What materials had been used to create it?

“It must be extremely valuable.”

“About the same value as my house, according to the appraiser I showed it to.”

Dahlia quickly regretted having said something so indelicate, but Gabriella didn’t seem to mind. Questions crossed her mind—why had Gabriella taken it to be appraised? What exactly *was* the value of her house? However, she couldn’t bring herself to ask them. Even if she had, she’d have been afraid to hear the answers.

“Did this...all come about because of my father introducing you both?”

“Oh, I don’t want you to have the wrong impression. I’ve always loved my husband, but we did have words about him wanting to know where I am every minute of the day. I thought he didn’t trust me. Now, though, I’ve come to find it rather sweet that he’s so attached to me.”

“Sweet...?”

Dahlia pictured Viscount Jedda, impeccably dressed as always, with his cool expression and neat white beard. That was the only side of him she had ever seen, so no matter how hard she tried, she found it nigh impossible to imagine anything sweet about him. Seeming to see right through her, Gabriella grinned.

“When you’ve weathered as many battles as I have, I think you’ll understand.”

The Titan Frog Hunt and Volf's Report

This year's titan frog hunt had surpassed all expectations. The vast marsh was alive with, at a guess, five hundred and fifty hopping frogs, at least ten percent more than last year. Every other year, the frogs had grown to about the size of a medium dog, but perhaps down to the heat or an abundance of prey, they were markedly larger than usual. This plague would cause devastation if it headed toward the fields and villages near the royal capital. The decision had been made immediately to exterminate the entire population.

The assault was led by the mages who specialized in fire magic. It went without saying that powerful fire magic was too dangerous to use within the city or the surrounding forest. They took full advantage of the opportunity to put their skills to use, enveloping the marshlands in flames. Naturally, the frogs scrambled for their lives. The great green beasts that escaped the flames leaped up onto dry land, where the rest of the knights waited to hack them down and toss them into a pit. Every so often, a fire mage would burn the carcasses to prevent the pit from becoming an incubator for disease, and an earth mage would cover them with soil.

The frogs let out screeching croaks, the sky filling with light-green and dark-green shapes as they hopped in every direction. Flashes of air magic sliced among them, along with swords and spears. Now and then, a frog would fall on top of one of the mages or the knights on land. The yell they'd let out bore an uncanny resemblance to that of a squashed frog.

Once the numbers had been reduced to some extent, the knights began gathering up the dead frogs, getting covered head to toe in mud as they waded through scenes that would make their wives feel faint. They piled them into several gruesome heaps along the edge of the marsh. By the time the last lot were buried, the sun was sinking, and the knights were too tired to even chat and joke with one another. Because of the unanticipated numbers, all of them had gone without lunch, fighting nonstop until the hunt was finished. Even the smell of burned frogs that hung thickly in the air was faintly appetizing.

As evening drew in, they trudged wearily back to camp, where they were at last able to quench their thirst with a cup of wine. They sat in groups around the campfires, preparing their meager suppers.

“We’d better get here earlier next year.”

“You said it. There weren’t just more of ’em; they were bigger too. The reconnaissance squad’s report said it’d be just like last year.”

“I don’t see why we can’t take them out in the spring.”

“Would that we could, but it seems the insect populations would run out of control then.”

The order’s vice-captain, Griswald, sighed deeply, his face slightly pallid. All he wanted was to be out of his armor as soon as possible—it stank of frog’s blood. As he sat before the fire, about to take a bite of his hard rye bread and dried meat, the clang of a gong suddenly shattered the evening’s quiet. A few seconds later, one of the sentries cried out.

“There’s a monster!”

Everyone rose to their feet at once, clutching their weapons. The snapping of branches from the nearby forest announced the arrival of an unwelcome visitor. It was a forest serpent—a gigantic green reptile, easily as tall as a tree when it reared its head. Perhaps the smell of the hunt or the knights’ voices had attracted it. It flicked its dark-green tongue as it regarded them, seeming pleased to have found an apparent glut of prey.

“Damn it, if you’d’ve gotten here yesterday, you could’ve stuffed your face with titan frogs!”

“Could’ve saved us a whole lot of trouble...”

“You’re *late*, ya scaly bastard! Frogs are all dead ’n’ buried, thanks to us!”

Unfortunately for the serpent, nearly all of the knights had been thirstily gulping down wine on an empty stomach. Ordinarily, forest serpents were feared; encounters were rare, and of those who did run across one, few lived to tell the tale. However, this serpent had just come between a mob of ravenous Beast Hunters and their long-awaited dinner. Disconcerted by the fearlessness

of its would-be prey, the giant reptile began slapping its tail on the ground—an intimidation tactic. While everyone managed to dodge out of its way, some of their bread and dried meat was not so lucky, tumbling onto the ground.

“All right, that thing’s getting roasted.”

“Not before I cut it to ribbons.”

“Say, are forest serpents edible?”

“I’m fairly sure it’s not poisonous. Let’s give it a try, shall we?”

Some smiled coolly, some couldn’t hide their annoyance, and some looked on with interest, while others were inscrutable. *All* had a weapon in their hands and were ready to fight. As the mages and knights advanced, the forest serpent appeared to realize its life was in danger. It stopped its threatening behavior and turned to slither back the way it had come, only to meet the cold, hard stare of a stony-faced man.

“What do you think you’re doing here? I really hate frogs, but I hate snakes even more... Water Lance!”

Griswald hurled his lance with all his might. It pierced deep into the serpent’s body, pinning it to the ground. With the lone serpent hopelessly outnumbered, the result of the ensuing battle was not hard to guess.

“Heard a bit of a ruckus outside,” came a knight’s voice. “What happened?”

“It appears a forest serpent came out of the trees,” said another.

“Oh, right. Guess they must have it under control.”

The man who’d inquired went outside to check the situation, watched for a few moments as the mob of knights in the distance pummeled the unfortunate serpent, then quickly came back inside.

“Wait, Volf, are you on your second page already?” he asked once he returned.

“Yeah. I need to include as much detail as I can.”

Volf had a wooden board lying across his lap, a sheet of paper resting on top of it. He was writing with intense focus. Beside him, chewing on a piece of dried

meat, Randolph was also absorbed in writing.

“Hand me another sheet too, Volfred,” said Captain Grato, sitting opposite.

Volf did so.

“I’m afraid I might not have enough,” he said. “There are only ten sheets between the seven of us.”

“Dorino, go to the record keeper and bring us their parchment—all of it.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be right back.”

Currently gathered in this tent were the seven knights who’d agreed to test Dahlia’s enchanted toe socks and insoles. They hemmed and hawed, frequently examining their boots and feet as they penned their reports. The original plan had been for Volf to listen to everyone’s feedback and note it down himself, but it had soon become apparent that that was a nonstarter.

“I can hardly believe how effective these things are! I’m not sweaty, I’m not sticky, and I’m not itchy either!”

“My athlete’s foot didn’t bother me at all; it was like it wasn’t there. All I was thinking about was the battle.”

“I’m dry as a bone too. It’s great not having to worry about the sweat. You couldn’t find anything better for preventing athlete’s foot!”

“The toe socks are brilliant. Even after crossing the marshes, I didn’t feel any slipping at all while I was fighting.”

“I’d like some longer ones; knee-high, ideally. Less likely to slip down.”

“These need to go into mass production right away.”

The six men had begun talking all at once; though he scribbled furiously, Volf couldn’t hope to keep up. Instead, he’d asked the men to write their own individual reports.

“What’re you writing, Volf?”

“The first page is all about how good they felt to wear. The second page is suggestions for improvements. I think the heels could be reinforced a little; the toes too. I often end up with holes in my socks when I use my strengthening

spells.”

“But if they reinforce them with magic, they won’t be able to add a drying enchantment as well, right?”

“Right. It’d need to be done manually, either with another layer of weaving in those areas or using a stronger type of thread for the whole sock.”

Even while he spoke with Randolph, Volf’s hand never rested. Opposite them, the captain and one of the senior knights swigged from wineskins as they regarded their reports.

“Those socks were a little tight on me, so I’ve suggested making them in a range of sizes.”

“I took them off and found that the insoles do a pretty bang-up job on their own. People might prefer just wearing one or the other, so I think it’d be good if they were sold separately, rather than as a set.”

“Good point. Now we just have to work out how many we’ll be needing...”

A moment ago, they’d merely been discussing their initial impressions of the items; now the commander was contemplating furnishing the entire order with them. Nobody raised any objection.

“Yes... We’ll come up with a figure and settle on which improvements should take the highest priority. Then we can discuss the prices and delivery dates with the maker.”

The eldest knight among them took a piece of parchment and began drawing up an official document. It was titled, “Plan for the Introduction of Toe Socks and Drying Insoles to the Order of Beast Hunters.” The captain leaned over to look at it and gave a firm nod.

“So, this friend of yours who made these, Volf—are they a merchant?”

“A magical toolmaker. Chairwoman of her own trading company too.”

“Wow, good for her. She’s gonna have a big order comin’ in.”

“Yeah, she’s been a huge help to me lately, so I’m glad I can repay her like this.”

The image of the red-haired, green-eyed young woman drifted into Volf's mind. It looked as though her toe socks and insoles were going to net her a major deal with the knights—a very profitable one, no doubt. He was sure she'd be pleased. However, he was just as sure that it wasn't the money that would make her happiest. What would truly delight her would be knowing her inventions had made the Beast Hunters' mission so much more comfortable—that they'd made people smile. Her creations had freed the knights from the misery of traveling in hot, sweaty boots, made them safer in battle, and brought unimaginable comfort to their feet. He was sure that would mean more to her than any amount of money, and so he was determined to write all of it down for her.

"Er, Volf, that's your fifth page, isn't it? That's gonna take a while to read..."

The young knight didn't so much as look up, deaf to his friend's concerns.



The very same afternoon that Volf returned from the titan frog hunt, he found himself standing at the gates of the Green Tower, ringing the bell. Earlier that day, upon reaching the castle, he'd been immediately summoned to Grato's office. Despite Volf telling the captain that the toe socks and drying insoles were both mere prototypes and not planned for mass production, the man had insisted that Volf go immediately to deliver their reports to the maker and convey their wish to purchase more as soon as possible. Volf had taken a quick bath, hurriedly changed, and taken the first carriage he found to the Green Tower.

"Volf?! Is everything all right?"

Dahlia's face was etched with worry as she emerged and trotted up to the gates.

"Sorry to turn up unannounced like this. I needed to come talk to you about those socks and insoles you gave me."

"That's okay. As long as you're not hurt—that's the main thing. I thought something had happened to you."

"Thanks for the concern. But I'm hale and hearty, as you can see. I've seen

enough mobs of big, fat frogs flying through the air to last me a lifetime, though. Or until next year, at least."

"Mobs of big, fat frogs..."

Dahlia repeated his words with such a stiff smile that he couldn't help laughing.

"Here—the reports you asked for. Everyone who used the items wrote one."

"Thank you. That's a lot more than I was expecting."

Dahlia's eyes were round with astonishment as Volf handed her ten sheets of paper and twenty sheets of parchment. It was a hefty bundle. About four-tenths of it was his own personal commentary.

"Everyone loved both the socks and insoles. They'd like you to make some more as soon as possible; can you do that?"

"Yes, that won't be too difficult. I still have the specification document for the socks, so I can easily put in another order. I can have an artisan cut out the insoles for me, so all I need to do is enchant them."

"It's looking like it'll be a biggish order, so we'll need to talk it over and work out the details. But I'll come back tomorrow, if that's all right; I'm guessing you're busy at the moment."

"Now's fine. I'm just at a good stopping point."

Volf found himself slightly perturbed by the unusual air of innocence the young woman had today.

"Are you sure? I don't want you to interrupt your work for my sake."

"Totally sure. The workshop's full up with a batch of items I've just enchanted. I need to wait until the magic's settled, so I was just cleaning up a little."

Her *voice* sounded just the same as always, but as he gazed at her face, he couldn't help thinking she looked younger somehow. Her eyes were shaped in gentle curves; the green of her irises looked so delicate somehow.

"Um, is something wrong?" Dahlia asked.

"It's just...you're not wearing makeup today, so I thought you must be very

busy with your work.”

“Ah, right. I’m sorry; I’ve let my mask slip, haven’t I?” she replied nonchalantly.

This must have been how Dahlia had looked when she and Volf had first met. Considering that his vision had been blurred with dragon blood at the time, it was curious how he found the sight so nostalgic now.

“It’s because I’ve been cleaning. I knew it’d make me sweat a bit, so I didn’t put any on.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to say it bothers me at all! Actually, it reminds me of when I first met you as Dali. Sort of nostalgic in a way, if you know what I mean. Um...”

“Volf, it’s quite hot out here. Let’s talk inside, hm?”

As Volf stood there trying to work out whether she’d just saved him from embarrassing himself, Dahlia beckoned him inside the tower. Every corner of the workshop was occupied with a plethora of fabrics in various colors and patterns. They carpeted the workbench, and there were even sheets spread out on the floor to accommodate the yards and yards of colorful cloth.

“Quite a range of patterns you’ve got.”

“I’m making some raincoats for women and children. I can only apply a thin coating to the surface, so they aren’t quite as water-resistant as my waterproof cloth, unfortunately. This was a commission from a tailor who makes things like raincoats, gloves, and such. Some of these fabrics are very cute, aren’t they?”

She pointed out some pastel-green cloth decorated with a lily of the valley design. Volf had only ever seen raincoats in black and shades of dark blue, but he could definitely see there being a market for these more colorful and decorative designs.

They ascended to the second floor, where Dahlia made them some iced tea. As they quenched their thirst, Dahlia laid out the knights’ reports upon the table.

“So, roughly how many pairs of socks and insoles would they like to order?”

“Eighty sets, as quickly as possible.”

Dahlia blinked and didn’t speak for a full ten seconds.

“Volf, please don’t think I’m ungrateful, but I asked you for a report, not to go drumming up sales for me. What in the world did you have to do to get this many?”

“I didn’t really have to do anything. I’m afraid it’s you who’ll be hard at work soon...”

Realizing she couldn’t know what he meant from those words alone, Volf pulled out the final sheet of parchment from the bundle.

“Here. This is the official request from the captain.”

“‘Plan for the Introduction of Toe Socks and Drying Insoles to the Order of Beast Hunters’... ‘Eighty sets shall be requested for the initial introduction stage, following which we hope to make further purchases of a minimum of three hundred sets every six months.’ Volf...how did this happen?”

“If you take a look at the reports, I think you’ll see.”

Dahlia picked up the bundle of reports and began leafing through them, sometimes tilting her head perplexedly, sometimes breaking into a smile. However, as she read further, her expression gradually filled with consternation and her cheeks reddened.

“Volf, what I asked for were usage reports.”

“Yeah, I got everyone to write what they liked about them and put down any suggestions for improvements.”

“Yes, that’s all very helpful, but some of these are just like letters of gratitude.”

“Oh, those’ll be from the captain and one of my friends. They’ve both had a lot of trouble with athlete’s foot.”

“There’s a whole page here just praising my ingenuity and skill as a magical toolmaker... Hold on, isn’t this *your* handwriting?!”

“I wrote that on behalf of everyone. These are our honest opinions, from the

bottom of our hearts."

"What do you mean, the bottom of your hearts?!"

Dahlia's honest, unguarded reactions were always so much fun to watch; Volf couldn't keep himself from laughing out loud. She sat staring at him while he took a few moments to compose himself.

"*Anyway*," Dahlia continued once the young knight was calm again, "Aside from everything else, the asking price here is quite unreasonable."

"I'm sorry; is it too little?"

"No, the opposite. Even if I put a big markup on the socks, this is much too high, and the insoles should cost about a third as much. Green slime is very cheap, you know. People much prefer using air crystals to apply enchantments."

"You're sure you're not undervaluing them?"

"I don't think so, but I can't be absolutely sure. I've only just started my trading company, so I have a lot to learn. What's more, my company's not of the caliber that'd be permitted to deal with the castle directly. We'll need to arrange this deal through the Merchants' Guild or a larger trading company. There's the issue of guarantors too..."

"Is there anywhere you can go to for advice? Any business partners?"

"The guild would be the best place. There...*is* a trading company I do business with, but I've no inclination to consult them."

Noticing Dahlia's eyes darken slightly, Volf couldn't conceal his concern.

"Have you had some problems with them?"

"It's my ex-fiancé's family."

"Well, you can't go to them. I couldn't stand to see you hurt over this."

"It's not that serious. He's already moved on, after all, and it's his elder brother who's the company chairman. We've agreed that our relationship will be purely business from now on."

She spoke quite casually, but Volf could detect a hint of discomfort in her

face. Her fingers were clasped together on the table, and she seemed to draw back from him slightly.

“Wouldn’t it be easier on you to cut ties with them?”

“It probably would. However, there are certain materials I can only acquire through them, and they’re giving me priority over their other customers as well as discounted prices.”

“I’ll ask around and find out if there’s someone else you can buy from. Oswald might know, or someone at home, or at the castle...”

“I appreciate the thought, Volf, but there’s no need. This is business.”

“Even so, I’d much prefer you avoided them if you can.”

“Um... Volf, when you go on your missions, I’m sure you must have to work with people you don’t see eye to eye with sometimes. Say there’s another knight you don’t really like—you’re still civil and cooperative with them, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Well, this is just the same.”

Her explanation was logical; he couldn’t dispute it. Besides, this was her field of expertise. It wasn’t his place to go sticking his nose in. He understood that in theory, but even so, the idea of doing nothing left a bitter taste in his mouth.

“I’ll go to the Merchants’ Guild tomorrow and figure out the best plan of action. There’s nothing we can do about it today, so let’s not worry,” said Dahlia, moving the conversation on as she neatened the stack of reports in her hands. She must have noticed how quiet he’d gone.

“I’m sorry to have dropped this on you so suddenly,” Volf said.

“Don’t be. I’m very grateful for the sales. By the way, I thought you always went drinking with your friends on the days you come back from expeditions.”

“Ah, yeah. They let me off today. I’ll grab a drink somewhere on the way back to the castle.”

“In that case, I know it’s a little early, but why not stay for dinner? I’ve still got

some of the food you brought me last time."

Volf felt a pang in his chest. She invited him to eat with her as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Though he knew it must be a hassle for her to prepare a meal for them both, he'd never once been able to refuse these offers. The table was always loaded with such delicious dishes, and there were always second helpings. The drinks were always just the perfect temperature. The conversations were so fascinating and so *fun* that the hours simply flew by. If Dahlia ever decided to turn the Green Tower into a restaurant, he'd be there for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

"I can't keep imposing on you like this. You must let me pay this time. You're doing all the cooking, and I eat much more than you."

"You already bought me the food, and it's not as though I'm making anything very complicated, but...even if I tell you not to worry about it, you're going to, aren't you?"

"I am. I suppose I feel the same as you did about the wine glasses."

"All right, then how about we go shopping together when we can? If you're going to bring something when you come to visit, bring a few things *you* want to eat, and your favorite drinks too. How about that?"

"You'll still be cooking for me, though."

"You've been out there winning sales for me, so I'd say we're even."

Actually, as far as Dahlia was concerned, they were far from even. She felt very much indebted to him. However, she had no idea how to begin repaying him.

"Dahlia, is there anything you want right now?"

"I wanted to ask you the same thing. Don't you have something *you* want?"

"A magical sword," came his immediate reply.

Dahlia nodded deeply with a look of understanding.

"I asked a silly question, didn't I? In my case, I suppose it would have to be materials for my toolmaking."

“Specifically?”

“Oh, well, things like bicorn horns or a griffin’s tail... Or maybe sea serpent skin or fire dragon scales... I could even wish for things like leaves from the World Tree or phoenix feathers, but that’s getting into the realm of fantasy.”

None of these materials were things Volf could see himself obtaining easily. He knew the latter two, especially, were hopelessly out of reach. It was hard to imagine them even coming up for sale around here. Even supposing they did, what sort of prices would they command? He had a reasonable amount of coin put away in savings, but even with that, he couldn’t be sure he’d be able to afford such fabulous materials. As he thought these things over, Volf became aware of a pair of brilliant green eyes peering at him.

“There’s something I forgot to say, Volf. I’ll buy these things for myself as soon as I have the skills to work with them.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t even think about going and getting them for me. I mean it. If you do, I won’t so much as open the gates for you.”

Having made herself absolutely clear, she smiled. They both knew she’d read him like a book.



“I’m afraid it’ll just be something simple again,” said Dahlia as she readied some ingredients. “Will a hot pot on the magical stove be okay?”

“Of course. I’m so sorry to trouble you. Tell me if there’s anything I can help with.”

Just like before, the two of them stood side by side in Dahlia’s kitchen as they prepared their supper. Dahlia had no qualms anymore about asking Volf to help out.

“I’ll get the pot ready, so if you don’t mind, could you take this and grate the radish for me?”

“Grate...the radish?”

Dahlia handed Volf a large radish and a grater, only for the items to be met

with a look of mixed curiosity and uncertainty from the young knight. She had put aside the niggling question of whether it was *really* proper for her to have the son of an earl helping her make dinner. Past the threshold of the tower was her territory—she had to think of it that way, or else she'd be yanked back to reality and her stomach would begin to hurt again.

"This here is a grater. You hold the radish against it and scrape it like this. Just be sure to watch your fingers."

"Right. I'll give it a shot," Volf replied as he rolled up his sleeves.

Dahlia failed to anticipate the strength and enthusiasm with which he'd approach the task. Within seconds, Volf's fingertips were a hair's breadth from the grater's surface. He stopped in the nick of time, though his nails didn't escape unscratched.

"There's no need to do it so hard!"

"Dahlia, I can't let you do this. These graters are dangerous. I should use my strengthening spell."

"You don't need a strengthening spell to grate a radish! Please don't dig your fingers into it like that!"

This ostensibly simple task ended up taking far longer than Dahlia had anticipated. While Volf's attention was elsewhere, she surreptitiously took out another little grater she had and grated the ginger herself. Once the radish had at last been taken care of, Dahlia grilled some eggplants over the stove until they were well charred on the surface, then she transferred them to a plate to cool a little. She then began using skewers to peel the skin, rolling them over as she went. Volf asked to help, so she explained the technique. Though they were still quite hot, Volf managed to peel them with ease. Noticing her surprise, he explained the somewhat tragic reason for his skill.

"I've had a lot of practice while out on expeditions. When your meat's been burned black, stripping off the outside like this is the only way to make it edible."

Dahlia grew even more determined to furnish the knights with some of her magical stoves—ideally, a lighter version. Once the eggplants were ready,

Dahlia sliced some more vegetables and placed two glasses on the living room table along with the stove.

“Erm, I’m afraid there’s not much of it, but I have some estervino. A different one this time. We can switch to wine once it’s finished,” she said as she produced a small white bottle.

Though it had much the same cloudy appearance as the one Volf had brought last time, this one had a drier flavor.

“I’ll bring some more next time I come,” the knight promised.

“That’d be great.”

“I’m not sure we’ll have time to go shopping for the glasses tomorrow.”

“Yes, I should go and work things out with the guild before I do anything else. I’m honestly very thankful for the work, though, so let’s drink to that.”

As she said that, a thought struck her. How many toasts had she raised with Volf before today? How many would she raise with him from here on out? These questions that drifted into her mind made her tighten her grip around the stem of her glass.

“So...here’s to my gratitude for receiving new work, and to the prosperity of the Beast Hunters and my new company. Cheers!”

“Here’s to *my* gratitude for always receiving such delicious meals from you, and to the prosperity of the Beast Hunters and your new company. Cheers!”

After a somewhat lengthy toast, they at last touched their glasses. Dahlia had a feeling she might have chilled the estervino just a tad too long, but it still had its pleasing aroma and dryness. The initial impression was of the clean, refreshing flavor. This was gradually followed by a complex bouquet of aromas, along with a warming glow. The moment that warmth faded, she felt ready for another sip.

“Almost goes down *too* well, doesn’t it?” Volf commented.

“Yes. We really must get some smaller glasses for it. Do you suppose it’s called ‘Élan’ because of these aromas you get after each sip?”

“Makes sense. I never knew you could get dry estervinos that are so fragrant.”

While trying out all sorts of new drinks was immensely enjoyable, Dahlia was aware that she was in danger of falling into her father's habits. She resolved to be careful. For starters, she would make sure that she stayed sober for at least one out of every four days. Having made this promise to herself, she took another sip of her estervino.

While they waited for the water in the pot to heat up, they nibbled at a platter of horned rabbit ham and peppered cheese. Horned rabbits were ferocious and highly territorial creatures. Should you accidentally stray into one's territory while traveling the plains, it would aggressively threaten you with the single horn on its head. They were a pest in the fields of the villages outside the capital.

"This is made from horned rabbit. Have you ever seen one while out on your hunts?"

"I've seen them, but they're not something we concern ourselves with. It's usually villagers or adventurers who catch them in casting nets."

Dahlia had assumed they'd be slain with bows or swords, not simply netted. A memory surfaced from her previous life—one of fishermen casting their nets into the water.

"Do you mean they just throw a net on top of them?"

"Yeah. Some use nets made of chain mail; others fire arrows with nets attached to them. All they need to do is hold the beast down long enough to dispatch it."

Horned rabbits were not only fierce, but fast. However, they had nothing in the way of magical attacks, so once you had one pinned down, there really wasn't much to worry about—as long as you steered clear of its horn. The light-pink ham Dahlia popped into her mouth was quite similar in flavor to salt-cured chicken breast—or "chicken ham," as she'd known it in her past life—but a little more intense. It also had a firmer texture. It paired deliciously with the peppered cheese on top.

As they continued their conversation on the topic of monsters, clouds of white steam began to rise from the pot.

“Ah, the water’s bubbling. By the way, we’re doing quick-boiled pork today. You take a slice of pork and just lightly boil it in the water.”

Dahlia picked up one of the wafer-thin slices of pork and dipped it into the pot.

“Once it’s completely changed color, lift it out and eat it with some of the grated radish and fish sauce or salt. If you don’t like the radish, there’s tomato sauce too. You can even try it with a little lemon juice or salt and pepper if you like.”

Tomato sauce had been her father’s favorite. He’d enjoyed grated radish too but, given the choice, he’d always go for the sauce. Dahlia’s homemade tomato sauce was very simple—just chopped tomatoes, salt, black pepper, and a little olive oil. Nevertheless, Carlo had loved it so much that he often seemed to be garnishing his tomato sauce with meat instead of the other way around. Irma also loved tomato sauce, but with an addition of a little chopped onion. Marcello took his meat with lemon, salt and pepper, and a brimming mug of dark ale. Tobias, as she remembered, preferred grated radish and salt. Everyone had their own particular preference. As for Dahlia, she enjoyed a bit of everything.

Volf hesitated, his gaze flitting back and forth between the several small dishes in front of him.

“Sample everything until you find out what you like best,” Dahlia suggested.

“Right.”

“Ah, but for your first piece, season it just with some fish sauce or salt, and then have a sip of your drink.”

For a few moments, she watched Volf out of the corner of her eye as he boiled a slice of pork with intense focus. Then she began to eat her own. It was good-quality meat with deliciously sweet fat. It could almost have been too fatty, but the brief dip in the boiling water melted off the excess. It was far more tender than it looked and went down beautifully. Following it with a sip of estervino gave the drink’s dry flavor a different character and its aromas greater vibrancy. Dahlia found it such a delight when her drinks and meals harmonized like this.

She glanced over the table at Volf, expecting to again find him chewing slowly and thoroughly just to make each bite last, but he wasn't. He ate his first bite of pork with a sprinkle of salt, then brought his estervino to his lips. Next, he garnished it with some grated radish and once again took a drink. He continued in this manner, sampling the different condiments until he came to a stop.

"Er, is something wrong?"

"No, it's absolutely delicious. Drinking this estervino at the same time makes the pork taste so sweet. And the pork makes the estervino go down so smoothly—*too* smoothly. I had to stop for a minute or my drink would have been gone in no time."

"It's a tasty combination; that's for sure. I've got plenty of dry white wine if we run out of estervino, though. That'll pair just as nicely."

"Why have I never seen this in a restaurant before?"

His golden eyes regarded her almost reproachfully. The explanation was simple—she had only just invented these compact magical stoves. There were many restaurants in the city that served thin slices of boiled pork, like Japanese shabu-shabu, but it was served cold with vegetables as a summer dish. Eating it hot and fresh from the pot like this was a completely different experience.

"Dahlia, I think you might be in the wrong line of work... Well, no, not the *wrong* line, but I think you could easily open a restaurant if you wanted to."

"Well, if this is what I'd be serving, it'd be very easy. I could just put the stoves on the tables and let people choose their own ingredients and condiments."

"You could have lots of different ales, spirits, and estervinos, all kept at the perfect temperature, and serve them by the glass."

"You've got me wanting to go to this place myself! Although it's turning into more of a bar than a restaurant... You know, if I'm going to serve all those drinks, I should offer some snacks for people to choose from as well. Pickles, fried food, and the like."

"If people want to eat fried food, you could give them a pot of oil on a stove and let them cook it themselves."

“It’d be nice to have mini pots on the counter for people who’re on their own too.”

They continued painting a picture of this ideal restaurant as they enjoyed the rest of their pork. They discussed the range of drinks it would offer in particular detail, the conversation becoming sillier and sillier the more they fantasized. After a little while, the estervino ran out, and they filled their glasses with white wine instead. Then it was time to add some new ingredients to the pot.

“I’ll add some salt and put in the vegetables here. After they’ve cooked for a little while, I’ll add these wheat dumplings. I thought we’d have dumplings instead of bread.”

“You boil the dumplings?”

“Are you not fond of them that way?”

“It’s not that; I’ve just never had them boiled before. I thought you only ate them deep-fried.”

“Ah, you mean like those sweet ones you get from the stalls. They’re great like this too—I promise. Anyway, while that’s cooking, have some grilled eggplant.”

“I know I peeled these myself, but it’s kind of hard to see them as eggplant now.”

Volf peered down at the dish with his head tilted quizzically. He must have been a little put off by the slightly greenish, off-white color of the eggplants’ flesh. Dahlia had prepared dishes of grated ginger and fish sauce, so she had him try some of the eggplant with those. Soy sauce would have been a more conventional accompaniment, but there was none to be found in this world. Instead, she’d improvised with fish sauce, adding some extra ingredients to it to create a serviceable soy substitute.

The eggplant had a unique sweetness, aroma, and creamy texture, the ginger bringing a spicy warmth to the aftertaste. In her previous world, her life had ended just as she’d begun to enjoy the flavor of eggplant. Here, she’d cooked with it from an early age. It had been a favorite dish of both her father in her past life and in this one.

“I think I might like this.”

You think? she wanted to ask, but she saw how long and deliberately Volf was chewing and decided to let him off the hook. Her father in her past life had had a pet theory: “People who like grilled eggplant usually love to drink.” Perhaps he’d been right after all.

They continued their meal, picking out vegetables and juicy, broth-soaked dumplings from the pot. Volf seemed to enjoy these too, soon clearing his plate. Now that Dahlia thought of it, this was their fourth time eating together at this table. The young man in front of her might not have been keeping count, but three of those meals had been cooked in the pot on her stove, while the other had been grilled fish. She would have to start putting a little more effort in, she thought. As she began puzzling over what to cook for Volf’s next visit, she noticed him gazing over at her with a smile.

“This makes four times you’ve cooked for me like this.”

Suddenly feeling as though he were listening to her very thoughts, she was struck speechless for a moment, and she simply nodded.



“Volf, have you ever seen the horn of a unicorn mare?” Dahlia asked.

Wine in hand, the pair were relaxing after the satisfying meal. Volf, his shirt collar slightly loosened, looked at her curiously.

“Yes, I have. Do you need one as a material?”

“No, no. I have one already. They have detoxifying, water-purifying, and pain-relieving properties, so I was wondering if you ever use them during your missions.”

“When we need water, the mages or knights who can use water magic make it for us. There are always water crystals too. And if we need water purified or painful wounds treated, a mage or priest will take care of that.”

Now that he said it, it seemed obvious. When considering the ease of procurement and value for money, magic crystals would win over unicorn horns every time.

“Although I did hear that they used to use them in the days before water crystals became common. They’d make a strong painkiller out of them and use it along with a strengthening spell before fighting certain monsters—ones that cause especially painful injuries.”

“There are monsters out there that are that painful to fight?”

Dahlia couldn’t imagine what kind of creature would call for the knights to prepare themselves with a painkiller *and* a strengthening spell. Why wouldn’t their shields and armor be enough to protect them?

“You get some, like armored crabs, for instance, that spit acid at you. It always manages to get through the gaps in your armor and burn you, so those types are a real pain in the backside to deal with. Then there’re plant types like devil nettle. When prey comes near it, it wraps itself around it and sucks its blood till it dies. Really hard to see too; they look just like a regular vine with blackish leaves. Its spines are the worst. They’re all covered in barbs, so once they get into you, it’s not easy getting them out again. Excruciating too.”

“That’s diabolical...”

“I’m just glad they don’t come crawling after you.”

“Wait, are there plants that do that?”

“So I’ve heard. The most famous one would be the alraune. They say its top half looks like a beautiful woman, while the bottom is a huge flower. I’ve heard of them being hunted in the kingdom west of here, but there’s never been a confirmed sighting in Ordine.”

“I was convinced that alraunes only existed in stories.”

This was an excellent discovery. Another creature she’d known from fairy tales in her past life had turned out to truly exist in this one. Next time she found herself near a bookstore, she would look for some field guides to the monsters of other kingdoms. Further surprises might lie in wait.

“Oh, I just remembered—unicorn mares’ horns are fairly popular with married noblewomen.”

“Are they good for health or beauty in some way?”

“They’re for childbirth. They say that if you hold one, you’ll have a safe and easy delivery. Sometimes mothers gift them to their daughters. Brides often receive them in the form of special magical tools.”

“I never knew.”

A possibility suddenly occurred to Dahlia. Could it have been for *this* purpose that her father had told Ireneo to get her the horn? She didn’t care to follow that line of thinking, quickly shooing the thought away. She had no plans to give him any grandchildren. Instead, she would do her level best to find a capable apprentice one day whom she could nurture and entrust the Rossetti name to.

“I was just thinking—in a way, the horn itself is triply enchanted, isn’t it? I wonder if you could use it as an enchanting material for an accessory like a bangle,” Dahlia mused.

“I’ve never heard of unicorn horns being used that way. I know they’re sometimes carved and turned into pendants or set into bracelets and the like, though.”

“That makes sense, actually. Using it as an enchanting material might be rather a waste.”

Unicorn horns were fairly expensive and, more to the point, *rare*, just like fairy glass. Your options were either to put in a reservation for one and wait (and wait...) or spend weeks searching high and low for it. To finally acquire one only to destroy it in a failed experiment would bring anyone to tears. Dahlia couldn’t even guess how many hundreds of times she’d cried over her mistakes. She’d mishandled magical crystals and wrecked casings, turned a dryer into a flamethrower, and—in a bid to create her own cooling fan—had ended up with something more akin to a leaf blower. While researching how to use slimes as enchanting materials, she’d wasted a lot of time and effort boiling and burning the slime before she learned how to powder it correctly. Masses of regular materials, and a few rare and expensive ones, had been sacrificed to her failures. Looking back on them all was enough to make her shudder.

“I’ve heard that they catch unicorn stallions by luring them in with a beautiful maiden,” Dahlia said, hoping to take her mind off of those depressing memories. “I wonder how it works with mares.”

“They seem to like boys, at least while they’re still pure of heart. I suppose you could lay the same sort of trap.”

“It sounds like you’ve had experience with them.”

“It was when I was about eight. I went on a walk through the forest with my mother, my third-oldest brother, and a couple of knights. I found the unicorns—two of them—beside a spring. They had pale golden horns and these deep, ruby-red eyes. They were like two beautiful white horses, but even more slender and graceful. They even had a sweet scent like spring blossoms, and they could communicate telepathically, though their words were a little broken. Mind you, if I had to hunt one now, I don’t think I’d hesitate to cut it down.”

“Huh?”

How he could talk about killing them after he’d just described them so poetically? Worse yet, he had an awfully cold look in his eyes all of a sudden.

“I was completely taken in by how beautiful they were. I went up to them, and they even let me pet them.”

“Volf, you don’t have to say any more. Something tells me we’re opening up a wound here.”

“No, I want to tell you! Before I knew it, they’d suddenly decided I belonged to them both—they called me their ‘treasure.’ They were about to take me away and use me like some sort of ornament. That was when my mother realized what was happening and went berserk. She cut them into pieces.”

“Unicorns are...terrifying!”

Dahlia’s whimsical mental image of unicorns came crashing down around her. She would never have imagined that their thinking and behavior could be so sinister. She couldn’t blame Volf’s mother for acting to protect her son—though chopping the creatures up into little bits might have been overkill.

“Unicorns are supposed to have black or dark-blue eyes, so the ones I met were obviously some mutated form. I’ve never liked them since, though,” Volf said cheerlessly, almost sighing the words.

Dahlia couldn’t help pitying him. She’d never have thought that his

magnetism would extend even beyond his own species. If only there were shrines here like the ones she'd known in her past life, she'd take Volf along and have him examined for signs that he was cursed with ill fortune with women, then get a priest to perform an exorcism. It was a pity they didn't offer such services at the temple.

"I can't believe you even charmed *unicorns*..."

"Don't get the wrong idea—that's the only time anything like that's ever happened. No other monsters have reacted to me that way. If anything, they hate me more than most."

Sure enough, being a Beast Hunter who was loved by beasts would come with its own problems. Nevertheless, it wasn't hard to imagine Volf dressed in black armor, sitting astride a black sleipnir, flanked by a black bicorn, with ranks of black slimes gathered before him. *What a handsome team they'd make.* Dahlia decided to keep that thought to herself.

"So, I'm going to go to the Merchants' Guild tomorrow and consult them about this order you brought me. What are your plans?"

"I'll go with you. The captain told me to do everything in my power to close the deal as soon as possible, and I want to help in any way I can. I don't really know anything about business, though... Ah, Dominic would be just the man to talk to. He'll know how to make a contract that's fair for you and us."

"That's a good idea. We can go along and wait until Dominic has time to see us. After that, I'd like to speak to the vice-guildmaster, Gabriella, as well. Of course, we may have to wait for a while if she's busy, though."

Tomorrow was suddenly shaping up to be rather a long day. However, being completely inexperienced in running a company, Dahlia had no other option than to seek advice. For a moment, she found herself wishing her father were here, but she quickly scolded herself. She was more than blessed as it was, having so many people willing to help her succeed. For fear of disturbing her father's eternal rest, she put him out of her mind.

"I'll come get you in the morning, then," Volf told her.

"There's no need to go so far out of your way. I'll take the omnibus."

“No, it’s fine, honestly. I’ll be on official business, so I can use one of the castle’s carriages. Besides, you’re the one doing us a service. I’ll also be in my dress uniform, so I’d rather use the carriage.”

“Is that different from what you wear on your missions?”

If Dahlia remembered correctly, when they’d first met, he’d been dressed in a dark-gray, almost black uniform with his battered scarlet armor over the top and leather boots.

“The Beast Hunters’ dress uniform is just the same as the royal knights’ formal dress, but in a different color. It’s black with silver trim.”

“Well, it sounds quite dashing, but isn’t that rather hot to wear in summer?”

“Incredibly hot. It’s fine in winter, but if you’re stuck standing out in the sun during summer, well...it makes you want to get your hands on the guy who designed the thing, I’ll tell you that.”

“So there’s no summer version?”

“Nope. I’ll change as soon as we’re done. By the way, about us going to the guild tomorrow...”

Volf’s gaze dropped, and he hesitated. Though she had no idea when, Dahlia realized that she had learned to read these signs—the slight deepening of his voice, even the movement of his eyes. He had something on his mind that he was finding difficult to say.

“What’s the matter? Please, tell me.”

“I know that by putting my name to your company as an investor, it might help your chances of getting hold of the materials you want, but...it might also cause some rumors that could hurt your reputation. I’m so sorry I didn’t think of this sooner. So, at the guild, would it be better if we put some distance between us and pretend I’m just an investor looking to profit from your business?”

She could tell how worried and uncertain he was, but he explained his concerns to her openly.

“When we agreed to become friends, I already knew what people would say about us. I don’t care if they think you’re toying with me or that you’re my

patron or whatever. All I'm interested in is putting out my best work and building up the business with the help of those who see the value in what I'm doing. I couldn't ask for anything more than that."

"Dahlia..."

After merely uttering her name, he fell silent. He seemed shocked that she'd already thought all of this out. It was certainly true that once word of Dahlia landing a deal with the knights got out, Volf's name was sure to come up as well, leading to a fair amount of curiosity and gossip. Inexperienced as she was, even she understood that much. Even so, she had no desire to pretend her relationship with Volf was anything less than friendship. She didn't want to change it in any way. However, she had no control over Volf's feelings. If he felt they couldn't continue as they had until now, there was nothing she could do about it. Though a little frightened by that thought, she knew the best thing was to speak plainly.

"If you're concerned about those sorts of rumors, then it's not just how we act inside the guild that we have to think about. Would you want to stop coming to the tower and stop walking with me in town?"

"I...I'm sorry, I wouldn't want to change a thing," he replied on the spot.

Dahlia felt relief wash over her.

"I'm putting you through so much trouble. What can I do to protect you?"

"I'll be fine. I can't stop people from talking, but that doesn't mean I have to pay them any mind. Besides, if I were in their place, I might make the same assumptions. You can't know the truth unless you speak to the people involved."

This had been true in Dahlia's past life as well. Her boss, a married man and a famously devoted husband at that, had once approached her with an utterly disgusting proposal. She'd thought one of the senior staff members hated her because of how harsh they were during her training, but she later learned that was just their way of showing their support. There were people like that in this world too. She'd known someone who was said to be selfish and cold when, in truth, they'd just been trying their hardest not to hurt anyone. She'd known someone who was beautiful and strong and seemed to be loved by everyone,

but deep down was scarred and kept everyone around them at arm's length.

Dahlia didn't gossip. She tried never to assume too much about people she didn't know. That was her policy, at least, but it wasn't always easy to stick to.

"Forgetting about the rumors for a minute, what do you want to do at the Merchants' Guild?"

"I want to tell them loudly and proudly that you're my friend and that I'm supporting your toolmaking. I don't want to hide that from anyone."

"Thank you so much..."

She was very grateful, but it wasn't quite what she needed to hear after this much wine. She felt her eyes begin to sting.

"Come to the guild as my friend, then. I'll do my best not to be embarrassed." She managed to keep her voice from trembling. So as not to worry the young man, she continued in a cheery tone. "You know, the way you've gathered these reports for me and gotten me all these orders, you're almost like one of my staff."

"I wonder, Dahlia, would you let me become one of your company's guarantors, rather than just an investor? Arranging the deal with the knights will be easier then. It might stoke the rumors a little bit, but if anything happens that could threaten you, I'll be in a better position to do something about it."

She had to admit, if it was the level of problem that even Volf would be affected by, she was probably better off letting him fight that battle. She'd be hard-pressed to tackle it on her own.

"All right. If you're sure that's what you want, then I'm beyond grateful. But I don't want you to put in any more money. The money you've already invested can count as your deposit. If we encounter any trouble in the future that I can't resolve on my own and that affects you too, then I'll be happy if you'll act on my behalf."

"Sure. I don't have a shred of real authority, but I *am* a royal knight and a Scalfarotto. I promise to do what I can with whatever power that affords me."

With that agreed, Dahlia sighed softly with relief. Those terms should satisfy

Volf while allowing her to trouble him as little as possible. Thinking of him becoming a guarantor reminded her of something: he'd already bought one of her compact magical stoves—the item she'd given as a thank-you present to the rest of her guarantors.

"I've been gifting all my guarantors with magical stoves, but you already have one. Would you like another? Or is there something else I can give you?"

"If you could spend a little extra time working on our magical sword, I'd be more than happy with that."

His expression, somewhat stiff until now, softened in an instant. His golden eyes shone as he smiled at her. If someone came up to Dahlia and told her that magical swords were the center of Volf's universe, she wouldn't doubt them for a second.

"You really are in love, aren't you? With magical swords, I mean."

Though Dahlia was none the wiser, as she spoke, Volf's breathing stopped dead for just a moment. Right between her first sentence and her second, to be exact.

The Meeting at the Merchants' Guild

The next day, Dahlia rose early to prepare for her visit to the Merchants' Guild. She gathered the most suitable of the knights' reports and checked that her specification documents for the toe socks and insoles were correct to the letter. After that, she did her makeup and put on her usual lampblack dress and vanilla-beige jacket. With the summer heat ramping up, this outfit would soon be too warm to wear outside. Perhaps it was time she added some summer business attire to her wardrobe.

Dahlia waited outside the tower's gates, and before long, a black carriage decorated with silver accents rolled into view. Emblazoned on its side was a crest featuring a stylized dragon and a sword. The dragon evidently symbolized monsters, while the sword crossing over it represented the Beast Hunters. The carriage looked very stylish indeed, but when she remembered she herself was going to have to ride in it to the Merchants' Guild, her expression stiffened slightly.

"Morning, Dahlia!"

She opened her mouth to reply to the familiar voice, but her words caught in her throat as the young knight stepped out of the carriage. Volf's dress uniform was a lusterless coal-black color and had a mid-length coat. Though the initial impression was overwhelmingly dark, a careful look revealed tasteful, subdued accents of silver at the lapels and encircling the cuffs. A pair of garnet pins sparkled on the somewhat wide lapels. Dahlia would learn afterward that only the Scarlet Armors wore garnets; the other knights' pins were silver. A pair of black leather boots with a subtle shine emphasized Volf's long, slender legs. It suited the tall, lean figure of the black-haired, golden-eyed youth so beautifully that it was almost as though it had been designed for him. If some enterprising painter were to capture Volf like this, Dahlia was convinced they'd become rich overnight. Those pictures would turn a better profit than her magical tools, at any rate.

“Good morning. That uniform’s just as dashing as I imagined.”

“Yeah, it’s nice. Hot, though,” Volf replied, a halfhearted smile belying his discomfort.

The bright, blue expanse of the sky above was interrupted by just a few puffs of white cloud. Dahlia could only pray that the temperature wouldn’t rise too high as the day wore on. Volf carried Dahlia’s bag in one hand, taking her hand and escorting her to the carriage with the other. She didn’t find herself getting flustered by these gestures like before. It was amazing what you could get used to.

“The captain’s been in contact with the guild for us already, so we shouldn’t have to wait too long once we get there.”

“That’s very helpful, but are you sure we’re not imposing on him?”

“Don’t worry about it—if anything, we’re the ones imposing on you. The captain sends his regards, by the way. He hopes to meet you in person one day.”

“Oh, there’s really no need! He must have much more important things to do.”

That meeting could have been taking place in a matter of minutes if Volf had not stepped in earlier that morning.

“I’ll accompany you at the guild today,” Grato had said to him back at the castle. Volf had implored him to stay, insisting he was only going along to send the order’s regards.

“The first thing I’d like us to do is get my name down as one of your company’s guarantors,” Volf told Dahlia. “Then, after that, I thought we could have a consultation with Dominic and the guild staff.”

“That sounds like a good plan. I’m afraid it’s going to be rather a hassle for you, though.”

“Not at all. I’m just doing my job.”

Volf took out the enchanted glasses Dahlia had made him, slightly narrowing his golden eyes as he looked at them.

“Are you going to wear them at the guild?” Dahlia asked.

“I thought about it, but no. I’ve got to do this properly.”

He carefully returned the glasses to their case and put them away in his bag.

“I know you might not like him so much, but I’d better start acting like ‘Volfred Scalfarotto of the royal knights’ now. At least until we’re somewhere we can talk as friends again.”

“Thank you for taking the trouble; it can’t be easy. I’ll put on my best ‘Chairwoman Rossetti’ act too. Not that I’ve ever played her before.”

It was only then that Dahlia noticed the sense of fatigue that hung over both of them. This wouldn’t do. Today would only be the first of many such visits to the guild. She couldn’t allow herself to feel so defeated already.

“But enough about that,” Volf said briskly. “Want to go for a drink when we get a chance?”

“That sounds like a great idea.”

Now with something to look forward to, the pair regained some of their pep and steeled themselves for the long day ahead.



The moment the carriage doors opened, dozens of gazes shot like a volley of arrows toward Dahlia and Volf. It was only natural. In his all-black uniform, Volf stood out even more than usual. It was only natural people would wonder at her identity as Volf took her bag and escorted her graciously from the carriage. No matter how prettily she did her makeup or what fine clothes she wore, she would never be a match for him. These self-deprecating thoughts abruptly stopped her in her tracks.

“Mind your step, Miss Dahlia.”

Volf held out his hand. His smile had become that of an aristocrat. It was calculated and beautiful—a world away from the boyish grins and mischievous smirks he showed her when they were alone. In all honesty, Dahlia disliked it. However, she realized that she was the reason he needed to don such expressions. For the sake of selling her magical tools, he was suffering through

wearing that hot, heavy uniform and playing a perfect noble gentleman without a hint of fatigue.

This was no time to shrink like a timid little mouse. She may not have been able to match his beauty, but the least she could do was stand tall and show some dignity. *Don't look down, stand up straight, eyes forward*, Dahlia repeated to herself as she laid her hand upon Volf's. Keenly aware of the many pairs of eyes following the man at her side, she walked with him calmly toward the tall black brick building. The guards at the Merchants' Guild's doors bowed to Volf as though he were their master.

As soon as Dahlia and Volf set foot inside the first floor of the guild, the volume of the usual hubbub dropped at once. Even people's movements appeared to slow down before Dahlia's eyes. It was a strange spectacle. Moments after dozens of curious gazes had zeroed in on Volf, murmurs and whispers suddenly began to ripple among the women in the crowd. His expression not betraying a hint of emotion, Volf walked on until he and Dahlia stood before a familiar man, who bowed politely.

"We have been expecting you, Sir Scalfarotto, Chairwoman Rossetti. Allow me to show you to the reception room."

It was Ivano who had come out to greet them. He led them to a reception room on the second floor, where Gabriella was already waiting.

"I am Vice-Guildmaster Gabriella Jedda. I shall be representing our guildmaster, Leone Jedda. Thank you very much for your visit today. I hope we can be of service."

"I am Volfred Scalfarotto of the royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters. Please accept my apologies for calling on you so abruptly."

As she watched them, Dahlia felt peculiarly as though she were on the other side of a window—a stranger looking on at this genteel display of noble etiquette. Of course, that couldn't be further from the truth. If it weren't for her, this meeting wouldn't even be taking place.

"I apologize for any inconvenience, but before we begin the meeting, I would like to register myself as a guarantor for the Rossetti Trading Company."

“Certainly. We shall arrange that right away. Ivano, please prepare the necessary paperwork. Dominic is standing by, so I shall summon him. In the meantime—Dahlia, would you mind coming into the reception room next door with me?”

Though framed as a question, the look in Gabriella’s dark-blue eyes told Dahlia it was all but a command. She assented and came out into the corridor, leaving Volf behind.

“Wait there just a moment, will you? I’ll send someone to fetch Dominic.”

“Right.”

While Gabriella went to pass on the message to one of the guild staff, Dahlia noticed two men coming up the stairs carrying bulky, heavy-looking boxes. Both of them wore the bright-green armbands of the Couriers’ Guild.

“Dahlia! Here for work?”

“That’s right. You too, Marcello?”

“Yup, deliverin’ a shipment of paper.”

Marcello and his colleague were each carrying three large boxes packed full with reams of white paper. They must have been terribly heavy, but with how the men were carrying them, they might as well have been filled with cotton wool.

“By the way, Dahlia, that soap dispenser of yours? Terrific.”

“Oh, does Irma like it?”

“She likes it fine, but not as much as me. It’s perfect for my morning shave. No more razor burn. I get a cleaner shave too.”

Holding the boxes in one arm without even a wobble, Marcello reached up with his free hand and stroked his chin. Though he looked the same as always to Dahlia, he could obviously feel a difference.

“Razor burn? How have you been shaving until now?”

“Just takin’ the soap and rubbin’ on my face. It’s a real pain, and you can never get a good lather goin’. There’re a whole load of guys out there with the

same problem, y'know. If you could get those dispensers into production ASAP and sell 'em at a reasonable price, it'd be a lifesaver."

This development came as a surprise to Dahlia. She had only imagined her dispensers being used for washing hands and faces.

"Noted. I'd better make that a priority, then."

"That'd be great. We're countin' on you! Oh, and come have a drink with us when you can, eh?"

"Will do. Say hi to Irma for me, okay?"

Gabriella returned just as Dahlia was waving goodbye to Marcello. The vice-guildmaster ushered her inside an empty reception room.

"Dahlia, what in the world is going on?" she asked before the door had even closed. "We got a notice this morning from the captain of the Order of the Beast Hunters. Normal enough to begin with: 'Apologies for the short notice. I shall be sending one of my men to consult with you on a matter of business.' But do you know what he said next? 'Please do everything in your power to aid the inventor.' In all my years here at the guild, I've never heard such a thing."

"I'm sorry about all this. Please, Gabriella, tell me what I should do." Dahlia bowed deeply to the other woman, laying bare her dismay.

"Start at the beginning and tell me what's happened. Just the gist will do."

"I made some enchanted toe socks and insoles that would help keep the wearer's feet dry. I gave them to my friend—er, Sir Volfred, whom you met just now—to try out while he went on an expedition."

"All right. And then?"

"The day he returned, he came to me with a large and urgent order for these items from the Beast Hunters. They requested a continuous supply of them too. They want far more than I can possibly make."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Me neither. They've asked for eighty sets as soon as possible and at least *three hundred* sets every six months. I don't know who to turn to."

Just thinking about it made Dahlia's head spin. It wouldn't have been so bad if she'd had nothing else to do, but she had waterproof cloth and raincoats to craft as well. There was a little flexibility on the deadlines for those, but she didn't want to push them too far.

"How many would you estimate you can make per day?"

"I'd need to have the socks made at an atelier. Once I had them, I could manage about fifteen to twenty pairs a day, I think. As for the insoles, I'd need to have them cut out for me, and then I could enchant about twenty pairs—though not on the same day I did the socks, of course. The thing is, I need green slime for those..."

"And that's the fastest you can manage?"

"Well, with the help of another magical toolmaker or a mage with greater magical power, we could probably double that pace."

"Then I think you'd better employ one."

Gabriella stood there deep in thought for a few moments, then she glanced up at Dahlia, only to look off to the side again.

"I have to apologize, Dahlia... I'm afraid you're going to be busy with your soap dispensers as well."

"What?"

"They were so pleasant to use that I recommended them to a friend of mine—a noble. I received a letter from them earlier by express delivery. They want two hundred."

"Thank you so much. I'm so grateful, I...I could cry."

She truly was thankful, but the crack in her voice betrayed her feelings. In trying to help her, Gabriella had only added to her already unmanageable workload.

"Let's get all our facts and figures straight, come up with a plan, and talk it through," Gabriella said reassuringly. "It'll all be all right; I'm sure we can work something out."

"Gabriella, please don't put your hands together and pray when you say

that.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I never dreamed we’d have such a pileup on our hands.”

Their voices strained and weary, the two women could do little else but laugh.



Gathered around the reception room table were Dahlia, Volf, Gabriella, Dominic, and Ivano. Captain Grato’s ‘Plan for the Introduction of Toe Socks and Drying Insoles to the Order of Beast Hunters’ was laid out before them. Dahlia and Volf each explained their side of the story and presented a summary of the captain’s plan and the reports the knights had written. Following this, Gabriella added the details of her friend’s order of the soap dispensers. Dahlia almost brought up her compact magical stoves as well, but the atmosphere in the room quickly made her think better of it.

Now, all was silent. Dahlia’s expression was half exhausted, half unsettled. Volf wore a charming but wooden smile, his eyes sometimes vacant. Gabriella only peered at Captain Grato’s plan with narrowed eyes. Dominic examined the specification documents, pausing now and then to close his eyes in thought. Ivano had a rather stiff look on his face as he carefully read through the summary of the knights’ reports. The clerk who came in to refresh their tea all but scurried from the room. Only once they’d left did Gabriella finally break the silence.

“Pardon me, Sir Scalfarotto, but for the purposes of our discussion here, may I consider you part of the Rossetti Trading Company?”

“Of course. And I’d be glad if you would call me Volfred. I’m more accustomed to that.”

“Very well, Sir Volfred. My proposals, then, are as follows.” Gabriella quietly cleared her throat. “First, Dahlia, you should register contracts for your foaming soap dispenser, toe socks, and drying insoles immediately. I’ll have a clerk assist you with the paperwork.”

“Right. I have all the specifications with me, so I’ll do that right away.”

Gabriella was absolutely right; putting the items into production without registering them first would invite all sorts of trouble.

“Second, I’ve found a workshop that will be able to handle crafting the foam dispensers, so we should arrange a meeting. They currently have an open schedule, so shall we say this afternoon?”

“Yes, please.”

“Third, we’ll establish a contract between you and the knights for the supply of the toe socks and insoles, and I’ll send a messenger to the Tailors’ Guild. I expect a manager or someone from their footwear department will come by sometime this afternoon, so please wait here until then. My apologies, Sir Volfred, but may I ask you to attend as well?”

“Of course. I’ll be glad to.”

At the prospect of someone being summoned from the Tailors’ Guild, Dahlia’s blood ran cold.

“Er, we couldn’t simply ask the Tailors’ Guild to introduce us to a workshop?”

“That is a nonstarter, I’m afraid,” Dominic piped up as he shook his head. “Sir Volfred, if my understanding is correct, the toe socks and drying insoles received extremely high praise from you and your colleagues. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely. They were hugely helpful during our expedition through the marshlands.”

“At the castle, aside from the Order of Beast Hunters, do the other knights and soldiers also wear leather boots and shoes?”

“Yes, almost everyone does.”

“How about the civil servants?”

“I believe nearly all of them wear leather shoes.”

“In other words, the numbers we’re dealing with are far too great for a single workshop to manage. The Order of Beast Hunters is asking for three hundred sets every six months—six hundred per year. If these items’ popularity spreads throughout the entire castle, then we may reasonably say the figure will be five times that. From then on, they may find favor with the nobility and commoners alike too.”

“Ah, I see. *Anyone* who wears leather shoes is a potential buyer.”

Volf looked utterly convinced. Question after question bubbled into Dahlia's head—was athlete's foot such a widespread problem? Were the city streets really so overrun with sweaty feet? Or were people concerned about having sure footing at work? Was that it? However, having read the room, Dahlia realized these inquiries were better kept to herself.

"Why don't we first see if the workshop that's currently providing footwear to the knights can help?" Volf asked.

It made perfect sense. They would possess all the necessary expertise and be well prepared for the scale of the project. Besides, it wouldn't be right to pull the rug out from under them by going to a different supplier.

"Do you know who they are, Sir Volfred?"

"Yes, I have their details right here."

It seemed they could avoid involving another guild after all. However, Dahlia's relief was short-lived.

"We should contact the Adventurers' Guild to secure a ready supply of green slimes for the insoles. I believe there have been overhunting problems with the blue slimes you use for your waterproof cloth, so it would be wise to have them farmed."

"Indeed. I'll summon someone from the Adventurers' Guild and have them sign a non-disclosure agreement. They can hunt the slimes for us and farm them as necessary. It's the only way."

Hearing Gabriella and Dominic talk about farming slimes as though it were an entirely natural solution, Dahlia almost doubted her ears.

"But I don't use all that much!" Dahlia said. "Just one small slime gives me enough powder to enchant five pairs of insoles."

"So sixty of them for three hundred pairs... Six hundred of them for three thousand... These insoles are disposable, aren't they?" Ivano mumbled the sums to himself as he jotted them down on a piece of paper. "Disposability is going to give you a very high turnover, so you'll want to be ordering those slimes by the thousand. I agree that we should begin having them farmed as soon as possible. There's one other thing..."

“Wh-What would that be?”

“As soon as you complete some more prototypes, I’d like to buy them from you. We’ve been working together for five years now, after all, and...well, even if you cure it, it soon comes back again, you know.”

“Athlete’s foot, you mean?”

Surely Volf intended to whisper that quietly, but in the silent room, no one could have failed to hear.

“Ivano, am I to take it that there’s a need for these items in our guild as well?” Gabriella asked.

“Well, I don’t think I’m exactly at liberty to disclose that, but I would ask this—I understand that the knights must be served first, but please put the Merchants’ Guild next in line!”

“I’ll gladly second that,” Dominic added. “My little grandchildren hate when I have smelly socks...”

There was no greater joy for Dahlia than to see her creations making people’s lives better. However, her customers were forever finding uses for these new inventions that she herself had never even considered. Today was no exception.

With the initial meeting concluded, Dahlia turned her attention to the contracts needed to register her new inventions with the guild. First, she double-checked the specification documents for the foaming soap dispenser, toe socks, and drying insoles. To the toe socks’ document, she added several points for improvement she intended to implement. Having done so, she could proceed with the contracts. On either side of her sat the scrivener, Dominic, and a clerk, ensuring she dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s. Volf observed fretfully from the other side of the table as Dahlia doggedly filled out the three separate documents. She found this work horribly stressful. Just as she thought she was finally ready to submit the contracts, she found herself butting heads with Gabriella over the profit margins.

“These items should be as accessible as possible,” was Dahlia’s argument. “I want to help cure as many people as I can of athlete’s foot. That’s why I need

the margins to be as low as is feasible."

"But this is precisely the time to secure your future research funds," Gabriella countered.

Thus began an intense debate. Dahlia respected Gabriella deeply and relied on her. So far, she had accepted nearly all of the vice-guildmaster's advice, but on this matter, she was determined to hold firm. Volf and Ivano took Dahlia's side, while Dominic leaned toward Gabriella's, but in the end, as the maker, Dahlia had the final say and settled on a low profit margin.

By that time, it was just past noon. The afternoon was shaping up to be even more hectic than the morning, but Dahlia was already so exhausted that she didn't even want to think about it. She was more than glad to accept the lunch provided for them by the guild. Considering Volf's attire, it would have been virtually impossible to enjoy a relaxing meal at any of the restaurants nearby.

They were led to a spacious room on the guild's fifth floor. It was clear at a glance that the furnishings here were exceptionally fine—even the carpets were deep and plush. This room must have been furnished especially for receiving nobles, Dahlia thought to herself. As a commoner, she couldn't help feeling out of place. In fact, she found herself quite daunted by the sight of the vast dining table, already meticulously laid with cutlery, and the servers waiting to attend to them.

"Miss Dahlia? Are you feeling all right?" Volf asked as they took their seats.

Clearly, her emotions had been showing on her face.

"I'm fine. It's all just been such a rush," she replied, attempting to reassure him, but the worry on the young man's face only deepened.

Just then, Dominic intervened.

"Sir Volfred, I would like for us to speak confidentially. Would you mind if we have the dishes brought in all at once and then dismiss the servants?"

"Not at all."

Ordinarily, courses would be served consecutively, coming out each time everyone in attendance had finished their plates, but, at Dominic's suggestion,

they had all their courses placed in front of them. Thankfully, the table was more than large enough to accommodate everything. As soon as everyone's glasses had been filled, the servers bowed and exited the room.

"There. Now that it's just the four of us, I think we can relax a little. Master Volfred, Miss Dahlia, feel free to speak as you normally do within this room. You have a busy afternoon ahead of you, so you had better unwind while you can. It is permitted in the terms of the agreement, is it not, Gabriella?" Dominic said with a warm smile.

Dahlia noted he had changed the "Sir" before Volf's name to "Master." Ivano wasn't present at the table, having gone to the offices to prepare for the afternoon's meetings.

"'Dahlia Rossetti will be recognized as a friend of equal status and permitted to speak freely without fear of censure...' Was that it?"

Gabriella's brows drew together slightly as she gazed levelly at Volf.

"That's right. Dahlia is my friend and equal."

"V-Volf!"

In an instant, the noble and courteous knight had vanished, and Volf was his usual self again. Blurting out his name in surprise, Dahlia realized too late that she had forgotten to attach any formality to it.

"I see. As per the agreement, then." Without betraying the slightest surprise, Gabriella picked up her glass. "Would you like me to be your poison taster, Sir Volfred?" she inquired. "Or would you prefer we exchange glasses and dishes?"

"No, that's all right. Thank you for your consideration, though," Volf replied quite matter-of-factly.

Only then did Dahlia remember that Volf's status was such that it wouldn't be at all unusual for him to have a poison taster. Eating meals without one, as he always had with her in the tower, probably wasn't his usual custom.

They raised a toast with sparkling water before commencing the meal. Somehow, the glass felt terribly heavy in Dahlia's hand. Hors d'oeuvres garnished with colorful petals were followed by an herb-seasoned salad, navy

bean soup, and a procession of other delicious dishes. At least, Dahlia could only assume they were delicious; she couldn't taste them very well. She took a drink of sparkling water and was trying to cheer herself up when Volf pointed to one of the plates to draw her attention.

"Dahlia, that's red bear."

"Huh? You mean the red bear you sent flying?"

"Well, it's not *exactly* the same one, of course, but it's the same species," Volf replied.

He seemed to recall his tussle with the bear fondly. Red bear steak turned out to be the meal's main course. It was served sliced into two halves.

"Don't worry; the area these bears are from is uninhabited," Volf assured her.

She hadn't been worrying about it at all, but now that he mentioned it, eating the meat of a man-eating bear was definitely something she wanted to avoid.

"It's a singular flavor, but quite robust. I believe you'll enjoy it, Miss Dahlia," said Dominic, already cutting into his steak. "Oh my, this *is* a tasty one."

"Quite so," Gabriella agreed. "There's barely any smell to it."

A little slower than the other three, Dahlia too picked up her knife. True to its name, even this beast's flesh was strongly tinged with red, but despite initial appearances, it was properly cooked. She put a piece into her mouth. Though the meat was definitely on the firm side, she found it came apart readily as she chewed. Perhaps she had the chef's skillful preparation to thank for that. It was difficult to compare to any other meat she had tasted, truly unique in its flavor and aroma. *So this is what bear tastes like.* However, no sooner had that thought crossed her mind than the flavor began to change. The distinct, gamey character faded slightly, and grassy, summery notes began to shine through. Every bite of the juicy meat released a burst of delightful aromas, and Dahlia began to appreciate its deep, intense savoriness. She couldn't be sure whether these flavors came from the meat itself or the marinade. Either way, she found great pleasure in savoring little bite-size pieces of the meat, taking the time to allow its shifting flavors and aromas to fully unfold.

Only when she came out of her reverie and glanced around the table did she

notice how quiet it was; everyone was simply chewing away contentedly. There was just one thing missing, Dahlia felt—this meat was crying out for a dry alcoholic beverage to accompany it. A little of that estervino she'd had the other day, for example, would glide down beautifully after a mouthful of red bear. The thought of the afternoon ahead had part of her wanting to escape out of the nearest window, but if she was able to indulge in thoughts like these, perhaps she had more strength left over than she realized.

"What this needs is a dry white wine."

"Dark ale would be ideal too," Gabriella said briskly, responding to Dominic's thoughtful mumble.

They too were connoisseurs, it seemed. Dahlia's gaze darted toward Volf. He emptied his glass of sparkling water and looked back at her. His golden eyes were tinged with regret. Dahlia read the expression like words on a page.

"Dry estervino, right?"

"Exactly."

Dominic and Gabriella laughed aloud at this exchange.

"What a wicked bear to leave us all so thirsty," Dominic said dryly.

"Dry white wine, dark ale, and dry estervino... I shall remember that. Once your first shipment arrives with the knights, Dahlia, I suggest we have a little party to celebrate. We'll have this steak again—this time with the proper accompaniments," Gabriella promised.

"That sounds marvelous."

The thought of the hectic afternoon ahead weighed heavily upon her, but with a pleasure like that to look forward to, Dahlia felt more than able to overcome it.



With the end of lunch came word that the owner of the workshop that could produce Dahlia's dispensers had arrived. Dahlia entered the meeting room along with Gabriella and Ivano, while Volf and Dominic waited in one of the reception rooms. They judged that the representative from the workshop

would not feel at ease with a royal knight in attendance. Waiting in the meeting room was a man with gray-flecked brown hair and deep-green eyes. He was of average height and build and dressed all in olive green. His chin was slightly darkened with stubble, and his shirt was creased. Perhaps it was because he'd come in a hurry, or perhaps he always looked this way.

"I'm Fermo Gandolfi, from the Gandolfi Workshop. Pleased to meet you." The man stood and bowed, but his face remained impassive; he made no attempt at a smile.

"I'm Dahlia of the Rossetti Trading Company. Delighted to make your acquaintance."

Dahlia returned the greeting to be met with an appraising stare, as though she were a product being inspected for quality.

"I understand you often manufacture pump bottles at your workshop, Mr. Gandolfi. What other products do you make?"

"Various bottles, atomizers, vaporizers, tubes, boxes; those sorts of items."

Dahlia breathed a sigh of relief. From the sounds of that, they should have no problem manufacturing her foam dispensers.

"What I'd like to consult you on today is this—my foaming soap dispenser."

Dahlia placed one of the small bottles on the table and demonstrated its function, dispensing some foam soap into a cup. Fermo's brows knitted as he watched her.

"Is there some special foam inside that?"

"No, it's ordinary liquid soap. I've adjusted its concentration, that's all."

"Could be useful for all kinds of things. Face washing, handwashing, in barbershops, or for kids' toys..."

"Yes. Someone who tested it for me found it very useful for shaving."

"Shaving? I wouldn't mind giving that a try myself."

Fermo picked up the bottle, handling it as though it were a delicate treasure. His hands were calloused and marked with scars both large and small. They

were typical craftsman's hands, and they reminded Dahlia of her father. She realized a little late that she was smiling slightly.

"Ivano, bring Mr. Fermo a razor from our inventory, would you? Show him to a room with a washstand and let him try Dahlia's dispenser."

"Very well."

"Since the opportunity presents itself, Mr. Fermo, please do take your time *tidying up*," Gabriella said, the last words coming out somewhat pointedly.

Fermo just gave a wry smile as he followed Ivano out of the room.

"You don't find him too prickly, do you, Dahlia?" Gabriella asked, turning back to her.

"No, no. He seems like a typical craftsman."

"Up until last year, his wife was in charge of this side of the business, but she's unwell at the moment. He's skilled at his work, but, well, you see what he's like."

"I don't mind at all. I think a lot of craftsmen are like that."

Even among magical toolmakers, it wasn't unusual to come across individuals who were notably taciturn or otherwise difficult. People like her father, who would chat cheerfully to anyone and everyone, were a rare breed. Then again, her father used to go around the tower with a drink in hand, talking to the slimes she'd put out to dry. "Don't think too badly of my Dahlia; she needs you," he'd say and apologize to them. Comparing other toolmakers to a man like that wasn't exactly fair.

It wasn't long before Fermo and Ivano returned.

"This is excellent!"

The power of a good, clean shave was striking. Fermo looked so much more refined. He smiled so warmly at Dahlia that she almost doubted he was the same man.

"Mr. Fermo, may I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

“Have you previously suffered from razor burn?”

“That I have. Especially on busy mornings, and I have a lot of those. It’s been getting me down. If these dispensers became popular, you could make razor burn a thing of the past for a lot of folks. They give you a cleaner shave too.”

Fermo’s attitude toward her had completely changed. She placed two empty bottles on the table in front of him and took one of them apart, laying the pieces out separately.

“Here we have the upper part of the lid that pushes down, the lid itself, the pump that attaches underneath, and the bottle.”

Fermo stood up, and before she knew it, Dahlia had followed suit.

“What’s the mechanism?”

“Pushing the upper part of the lid down creates pressure inside the bottle, which draws the soap up through the pump’s tube. There’s a mesh filter inside the pump which turns the soap into foam, which is then dispensed. This spring pushes the lid back up.”

“All right. Would you mind if I take a look at the parts?”

“Not at all; please go ahead.”

Before she’d even answered, all his attention had shifted to the collection of parts on the table. After inspecting each one, he assembled the dispenser with ease and then took it apart once again. After quickly repeating the process a further three times, he nodded in satisfaction.

“What materials are you using?”

“Here’s the specification document.”

Dahlia handed over the document, which Fermo studied intensely.

“Yep, we’ll have no problem with these materials and processes at the workshop. We can take this job for you.”

Dahlia was glad not to have had to ask whether he was up to the task.

“How many would you be looking at ordering?” he asked Dahlia.

However, it was Gabriella who replied.

“How many can you manage? Is a thousand per month feasible?”

“Are you selling through the guild, Miss Rossetti? You’ll lose about twenty percent that way...” Fermo said.

“I will. I’ve only just established my trading company, so I’m still conducting all my sales through the guild for the time being.”

“Ah, I suppose you’ll have gotten some investment from them, then.”

The man nodded in understanding. Dahlia did have the guildmaster as a guarantor for her company, so in a manner of speaking, yes, she had received investment from the guild. She understood that the circumstances facing her now were too much for her to handle alone. She wouldn’t make the same mistake she had in her past life and work herself to death. This time, she was resolved to share her problems with the people around her and ask for help when she needed it.

“It’ll take me two days to set up a production line and one day for checks. At that point, I’d be grateful if Chairwoman Rossetti could visit the workshop and confirm everything’s satisfactory. After that, there’ll be two days of staff training. Once all’s well, we’ll start production at a hundred units per day. The price will be two gold, one gilt silver for each hundred; cost of materials included,” Fermo said, rattling glibly through the process, but Gabriella narrowed her dark-blue eyes and regarded him with a beguiling expression.

“And your delivery fees, Mr. Fermo?”

“Uh, yes, they’re included too.”

“We’d like the first month’s shipment as soon as possible. Let us say a minimum of one thousand five hundred units per month, at two gold, *three* gilt silver per hundred units for the first month. What do you think?”

“That’s fine by me. I’ll accept those terms.”

As simple as that, the deal was done. Inside, Dahlia was cheering in celebration, but then the man turned back to her.

“Now, according to the letter I got, you wanted to talk about a joint development project. Is that for a separate item?”

“No, I’d like for us to collaborate to improve these dispensers. If we can bring an improved version to the market, then I’ll amend the registration contract so we’ll share the profits equally.”

“For these? But they’re perfectly salable as they are. What do you want to change your contract and split the profits with me for? If there’s something you want improved, then just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. No need to make it more complicated than that.”

Judging from the hard look in Fermo’s eyes, he seemed to have taken offense at something. He turned that glare on Gabriella next.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? It’s not like you to sit back and let someone get a raw deal. Do you feel sorry for me because the workshop’s on hard times? Is that it?”

“If I were the type to invite you here out of sympathy, then I wouldn’t have the right to call myself vice-guildmaster. The joint development was Dahlia’s idea. You read my letter. It’s just as I said: ‘An extremely capable and promising magical toolmaker is seeking an artisan for a joint development project.’”

Gabriella...did you have to introduce me like that? And what was the woman thinking, ordering the dispensers in such quantities? What if they didn’t sell? It would be no laughing matter. While Dahlia’s chest wasn’t yet aching, her stomach certainly was.

“Still, this isn’t how joint development normally works. It’s something you get into *before* you’ve made the product, not after...”

The man trailed off, but Dahlia saw him gazing down at the collection of parts on the table. There was a certain glint, a zeal smoldering in his eyes that Dahlia knew well. It was a special look that belonged to artisans, burning all the while as they crafted, inspected, adjusted, or made anew while they tested their creations and experimented tirelessly. She’d seen that same fire in her father’s eyes ever since she was very young.

“But Mr. Gandolfi, you *could* make improvements to this design or come up with different versions, couldn’t you? I’m sure of it,” Dahlia insisted.

“I could, yes,” he answered immediately and with confidence. “If men are

going to use it for shaving, for instance, you'll want to do something about the cap—it's too little for men's hands. Better make it at least one size bigger. That'd be safer for kids and old folks too. It might not *look* quite as appealing, though."

"I see. So we should make that part in a range of different sizes."

"We'll want to make ones with larger vessels as well—for situations where a lot of people will be using them. And to stop them from falling over, we should make some with either a square or weighted base. If they're going somewhere where they're likely to be stolen, then we should equip them with a base that can be fixed down."

"I hadn't even thought of that..."

The man came out with one idea after another; this was thanks to his years of experience making pump bottles, no doubt. Dahlia was in complete agreement with all of his suggestions.

"To go back to shaving again—a thicker foam would be even better."

"That should be possible by either changing the concentration of the soap or adjusting the filter," Dahlia replied.

"Any degradation might cause damage where the parts join, so some waterproofing measures might not go amiss."

"In that case, you could ask a magical toolmaker to apply some kraken tape where necessary."

"You can do that, huh? Oh, pardon me for being so familiar."

Dahlia couldn't help smiling as Fermo apologized for his manner of speaking.

"That's all right. Shall we speak informally?"

"If you don't find it rude. 'Fraid fine manners don't come all that easily to me." The man scratched the back of his head as he chuckled awkwardly. "So, I say we exchange ideas, I make the ones I can and let you take a look at 'em. If you see any you're happy with, then we'll put them into production. How does that sound?"

"That sounds perfect. I'll pay you for your time and the materials you use for

the tests.”

“I don’t need either. And you can keep my name off your contract. Just keep me busy with all the orders you can—that’s all I ask.”

“That won’t do. We’ll be working together to come up with new ideas, and you’ll be crafting them for me. You must put your name down as my collaborator. If not, you should register the new versions for yourself.”

“No, no. It’s the original creator who deserves the respect and the profits.”

Just as the pair had seemed to be getting along well, they’d begun to quarrel. Gabriella, standing on the sidelines, pressed a hand to her forehead in dismay. As Dahlia searched for a way to convince the man to join her in a joint development contract, she had a sudden realization. As an artisan, Fermo was by far her senior. Perhaps he didn’t want his name on a contract alongside that of a fresh-faced novice toolmaker like her. That made more sense to her than anything else she could think of. She felt guilty for trying to force the idea upon him.

“Forgive me; I should have realized this sooner. I’m just a novice and there’s a lot I don’t yet understand. I shouldn’t have asked so much of you. Please, register the new products under your own name.”

“Er, no, that’s out of the question...”

The man was at a complete loss as he stared at Dahlia, who suddenly looked rather crestfallen.

“I understand,” she said. “It would be terribly embarrassing to put your name beside that of a novice like me.”

Her tone was melancholy and full of remorse. Fermo froze up completely. Meanwhile, Gabriella looked on in a mixture of fascination and amusement.

“All right, all right! You got it. We’ll collaborate. You can put my name on any contracts you like!” Fermo exclaimed, throwing up his hands in defeat.

“Really? Are you sure? You wouldn’t mind signing a contract with someone like—”

“I didn’t want to take any money for something I didn’t create. I know my

workshop’s seen better days, but that doesn’t mean I need anyone’s charity.”

“Charity? I’m so sorry, I never meant it that way!”

“I know you didn’t. You want to do it out of respect for my experience as a craftsman—that right?”

“Yes.”

She had thought that was obvious. She’d seen the deftness of his hands, the speed with which he’d assembled her dispenser, and the way he’d immediately identified points for improvement. She wanted to learn from him.

“Then I’ll gladly team up with you. Know that you’re doing me a favor here, though, and don’t let me forget it.”

With a smile that radiated confidence, the man picked up the pieces of the disassembled dispenser and put them together with astonishing speed. He barely even looked down at his hands. As if by magic, the parts flew together, and all of a sudden, there it was, standing complete upon the table’s surface.

“Just you wait—I’ll come up with great ideas, make ’em well, and one day, I’ll be raking in even more than you!”

His strong craftsman’s hands closed into fists, while his grin told Dahlia that he meant every word.

“I’m looking forward to it, Mr. Fermo,” she replied, smiling from her heart as she looked back at him.

Tricky Negotiations at the Merchants' Guild

Was she *really* supposed to be here in this room? Were they sure there hadn't been some kind of mistake? Dahlia had asked herself these same questions several times over since entering this room, covering her bewilderment as best she could with a blithe, professional smile. She was on the guild's fifth floor, in the most luxurious meeting room she had ever seen—it might have been more accurate to call it a VIP lounge. The walls were papered in ivory-white, and on one of them hung a magnificent painting of golden wheat fields. The floor was gleaming gray marble, covered by a red carpet that was sumptuously deep. The inordinately large ebony table was polished to such a gloss that Dahlia feared leaving fingerprints on it.

Volf sat to Dahlia's right, Gabriella to her left, and Ivano sat next to Gabriella. Seated across from them were the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild and one of his staff and the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild and one his staff as well. Even though it *was* past teatime, never in Dahlia's wildest dreams had she imagined she'd be coming face-to-face with a guildmaster and vice-guildmaster this afternoon. She'd completely frozen up when she'd heard the news. Though there was ample space for the eight of them to sit comfortably in the large room, it felt oddly crowded and confined. Dahlia and the others had come here directly after the meeting with Fermo. She glanced over at the rectangle of blue sky visible through the window. She was so nervous, she longed to turn into a bird and simply fly away.

"Welcome to the Merchants' Guild," Gabriella said graciously to formally open the meeting. Her voice betrayed no hint of nerves; she seemed completely at ease.

"I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Sir Scalfarotto, Chairwoman Rossetti. My name is Fortunato Luini, and I am the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild. Please call me Fortunato."

"Thank you for your kind greetings. I am Volfred Scalfarotto of the royal

knights' Order of Beast Hunters."

"Very pleased to meet you. I am Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company."

Dahlia was flustered at first as she was addressed by name, but Volf went first and then turned to her, giving her a few moments to collect herself. It seemed to be customary for guildmasters and company chairpersons to call each other by their first names, though it might be dependent on their respective social ranks in the case of nobility, as well as their ages. Dahlia couldn't see herself getting used to this anytime soon.

Fortunato was a fine-featured man with beautiful golden hair and blue eyes. He looked maybe ten or so years older than Volf. He wore a summery outfit in a light, silvery shade of gray with a white shirt. Closer inspection revealed that the material was delicately woven, not embroidered, with decorative patterns. It was a chic and tasteful ensemble that only revealed its true quality once you came close enough. It suited its eye-catching wearer very well.

Then, the young woman with green hair seated at the guildmaster's side introduced herself. "Thank you very much for your invitation, Sir Scalfarotto, Chairwoman Rossetti. I am Lucia Fano, assistant manager of the Fano Workshop."

Like Dahlia, she was looking rather pale. Once Dahlia and Volf had introduced themselves in turn, her eyes locked with Dahlia's, and she mouthed the words, "What's going on?" Dahlia answered silently in the same manner: "I don't know." Lucia worked at the same workshop Dahlia had ordered her prototype toe socks from. She was also the seamstress who had ordered the patterned raincoat fabric from Dahlia. As far as Dahlia knew, Lucia's workshop was just a small family business. Since when had Lucia become assistant manager? Since when had they even *had* an assistant manager? Something about it gave her a bad feeling, and she decided it was better not to ask.

"Pleased to meet you, Chairwoman Rossetti. I am vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild, Augusto Scarlatti."

"Jean Tasso. I'm head of materials at the Adventurers' Guild."

The vice-guildmaster was a tall man with indigo hair. His colleague looked so

fit and muscular that he could have still been active as an adventurer. Once the pair had made their greetings, Volf spoke up.

“Good to see you again, Augusto.”

“Been keeping yourself busy, I hear, Volfred.”

Dahlia observed their friendly conversation with curiosity. Given that they were on a first-name basis, she could only guess that the vice-guildmaster had once been a knight.

“My family’s related to the Scalfarottos. Sir Volfred’s great-uncle was my grandfather,” Augusto clarified.

Dahlia offered an understanding smile. With the introductions concluded, Gabriella began to explain why the meeting had been called.

“The Rossetti Trading Company has only been established very recently and does not yet have a full complement of staff. Therefore, our guild shall be mediating on its behalf during these negotiations.”

In her letters to the other two guilds, Gabriella had seemingly provided the following three pieces of information:

“The captain of the royal knights’ Order of Beast Hunters has submitted an urgent order for enchanted socks and insoles.”

“It is likely that this order will require a large number of green slimes as material.”

“The captain of the Order of Beast Hunters made a further request, namely: ‘Please do everything in your power to aid the inventor.’”

Upon reading this, the guildmaster of the Tailors’ Guild had decided to come at once and had sent a messenger to Lucia, requesting that she accompany him. The guildmaster of the Adventurer’s Guild might have attended too, but it seemed they had prior business, so the vice-guildmaster and materials department head had come in their place. Dahlia was mortified; she wanted to give her most heartfelt apologies to every one of them.

“So, that is how this order came to be placed,” Gabriella concluded. “Here we have a proposal from the captain, the ‘Plan for the Introduction of Toe Socks

and Drying Insoles to the Order of Beast Hunters.' Would you like to take over here, Sir Volfred?"

"Of course. Allow me to explain."

Volf picked up the thread from Gabriella. He conveyed the effectiveness of the toe socks and drying insoles, the evaluations and opinions from the reports, the improvement in comfort these items brought, and their potential for combatting athlete's foot. It was a comprehensive and flawless presentation—most importantly, he spoke as only someone with firsthand experience could. He made a particular point of linking the comfort and dryness the items provided with improved performance in battle and the workplace, as well as relief from athlete's foot and unpleasant odors.

His explanations were straightforward and convincing—Dahlia was reminded of watching the shopping channels on TV in her past life. Volf had once said to her, "The only useful talent I have is slaying monsters." What a big fib that had been! When he put his mind to it, his salesmanship was second to none. By the time Volf had finished his pitch, the four faces on the other side of the table had grown intensely serious. It was rather intimidating, frankly.

"Chairwoman Rossetti," said the master of the Tailors' Guild, "I believe you wish to have your products made at the workshop that currently supplies the royal knights with socks. However, you do not intend to make the design a trade secret. Is that correct?"

"Yes. I would like these socks to be as widely available as possible."

"And you have no plans to establish a factory of your own?"

"None. My company is not large enough to make that feasible."

Dahlia chose her words carefully. She'd prepared for this beforehand in a meeting with Gabriella, so she knew exactly what to say and did not hesitate. Fortunato thought for a moment and then turned to Lucia.

"With the Fano Workshop running at full capacity, how many pairs of these socks do you suppose could be produced per day?"

"By hand, no more than twenty pairs."

“Are they that challenging to produce?”

“We can make them up to the toe section with our regular knitting machines, but the toes themselves need to be knit by hand. It’s very time-consuming.”

“Is there not some way you can speed up the process?”

“Hmm, well...I suppose it might be possible to modify the machines we use to make glove fingers so that they’d make toes instead. Then we could simply stitch the toe sections onto the socks. If that’s possible, I think it would at least triple our daily output.”

Sitting with her clasped hands pressed to her forehead, Lucia came up with a solution. Dahlia could see the odd bead of sweat running down from the young woman’s temples. She felt terribly guilty.

“Knitting machines? Very well; I shall call a meeting of our technicians tomorrow. In the meantime, I shall summon all available staff from the royal knights’ current supplier of socks and any other suitable workshops, then find a site within the Tailors’ Guild where we may commence production. I see no reason not to start right away, even if the items must be made by hand to begin with. We will work on setting up a production line and ship all the completed socks to the Merchants’ Guild.”

Gabriella nodded in satisfaction at the guildmaster’s proposal.

He went on, “We will have the insoles cut by our cobblers. Shall we send them to the Merchants’ Guild as is, or would you prefer we have a magical toolmaker enchant them so we may send you the finished product?”

“We would like to have them enchanted, if you please.”

“Very well. That will be no problem at all. Now, I propose the Tailors’ Guild pays the Rossetti Trading Company its dues as per the contracts that have been registered with you, plus twenty percent of net profits. Is this agreeable?”

“From the Merchants’ Guild’s point of view, twenty-*five* percent would be more so.”

“That would be a somewhat hard bargain, given the time commitment on my guild’s part.”

Gabriella had entered the negotiation on Dahlia's behalf. The man sitting at her side then raised his hand.

"Pardon me, but might I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, certainly, Ivano."

"Please forgive my interruption. I propose the Tailors' Guild pays twenty percent of net profits to the company and, in addition, creates and provides us with reports on production numbers. Our guild also wishes for the Rossetti Trading Company to have full control over which buyers to prioritize."

"Reports on production numbers...?" Fortunato repeated, furrowing his brow.

Gabriella narrowed her eyes in a feline manner as she regarded Ivano.

"Agreed, then; we shall manage the numbers and report regularly. These terms are acceptable."

"The Merchants' Guild is in agreement as well."

"I believe this arrangement would be best for all concerned, Chairwoman Rossetti. Do you agree?"

There was a strength and conviction in Ivano's words that didn't bear argument.

"I am also in support," Volf added.

Dahlia quickly gave her assent, though not clearly understanding what she was agreeing to left her vexed and upset with herself.

"Well then, as my guild will be handling the production side entirely, you will be more than welcome to send a member of your staff to supervise operations, Chairwoman Rossetti," Fortunato said with a very professional, if not very warm, smile.

However, even if she had wanted to, Dahlia had no staff from whom she could appoint a supervisor. Her company consisted of her alone.

"No, you have my trust, Mr. Fortunato. I leave everything to you," she answered hurriedly.

The guildmaster's eyes widened just slightly, and for some reason, he bowed

to her.

“I am very grateful. Be assured that I shall do everything in my power to remain worthy of that trust.”

There was a small clunk of a chair from Dahlia’s right. It seemed he was merely adjusting his position. In the hush that fell, someone cleared their throat.

“Right then, if I may...”

Augusto, vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers’ Guild, turned to Dahlia with a smile so meager it barely creased his eyes.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, I’d like to ask you about the green slimes you’ll be using to make your insoles. How many pairs are you able to make from one slime?”

“One small slime is enough for five pairs; ten insoles in total.”

“So for a thousand pairs, that will be two hundred... That’s no small amount. Jean, what’re your thoughts?”

“In the long term, we cannot possibly hunt that many. Please allow us to begin farming them immediately.”

The man whose name had been called, the Adventurers’ Guild’s head of materials, turned his rust-colored gaze upon Dahlia. Although he was smiling at her, there was an unmistakably hostile glint in his eyes. What on earth had she done to earn this man’s ire? While she frantically searched her memories, Jean’s smile grew.

“I’m very much indebted to the Rossetti family. I had the honor of hunting the kraken needed for the seals in your late father’s hot water dispensers and the sand lizards for the heat-resistant parts in his dryers. Such fond memories.”

Hearing this, Dahlia’s practiced professional smile froze on her face. While he was obviously well built, he was supposed to be one of the guild’s staff, not an active adventurer. The circumstances must have been dire if even he had needed to join the hunts.

“We were very grateful to receive your orders for blue slime as well,

Chairwoman Rossetti, when you developed your waterproof cloth. I'll never forget how our guild looked back then; everywhere you turned, you saw nothing but blue. Yes, I remember it well."

His tone was casual and airy, yet Dahlia could almost feel invisible daggers jabbing into her as he spoke. While she couldn't imagine exactly what the situation had been at the Adventurers' Guild, it was abundantly clear that both she and her father had put them through some considerable trouble.

"Please allow me to apologize. My father and I must have troubled you greatly."

"Not to worry; this is our work, after all. However, we are *extremely* grateful for your notifying us of your need for green slimes in advance. Now we can proceed in an orderly manner. We will make the necessary arrangements for farming the slimes as soon as possible."

"Thank you very much," Dahlia said meekly, bowing her head low.

Augusto began to lay out his plan. Green slime was not a popular material, so the Adventurers' Guild was happy to give Dahlia priority access to their current stocks. Meanwhile, they would send out a request to all intermediate-level adventurers to begin hunting green slimes, making sure to keep the activities under wraps until they had secured a relatively large stockpile. The slimes would be processed into powder at the guild, allowing production of the insoles to begin without delay. As for farming, it seemed that a handful of suppliers were already experimenting with raising green slimes; the Adventurers' Guild would contact them and have them increase their capacity. Dahlia felt reassured by the vice-guildmaster's comprehensive plan.

"Now, if I may, I'd like to make a request on behalf of the Adventurers' Guild. With regard to the slimes, we will take responsibility for as much as we can, from hunting and farming to powdering and so on, in order to maintain a stockpile for you. In return, may I ask that we have priority access to a regular supply of your products? After the royal knights, of course."

Now, not one but *two* guilds were vying to be first in line for her creations. She imagined the vice-guildmaster's interest was for much the same reasons as the knights'.

“Will you sell them to adventurers?” she asked.

“Exactly. Adventurers have few opportunities to take off their boots while hunting monsters and gathering materials. They often sleep in them. As you can imagine, this gives rise to problems with sweat, athlete’s foot, and reduced performance in battle. I realize the socks may take a little more time, but at the very least, I would like to provide our members with some of your insoles as soon as possible.”

“The insoles can be produced quickly, and we will aim to produce the largest quantities possible. Following further discussion between your guild and the Rossetti Trading Company, we can furnish you with as many insoles as can be made available,” said Ivano, smoothly stepping in to settle the matter.

“Thank you. That would be greatly appreciated.”

Dahlia was grateful to have someone as experienced as Ivano at her side. As the guild’s contract manager, he was more than accustomed to mediating negotiations such as these. Neither Dahlia nor Gabriella intervened.

“I hadn’t realized materials were such an important side of the Adventurers’ Guild’s business,” said Volf, sounding impressed.

Augusto replied with a grin. “They are indeed. Adventuring is a young man’s game, after all. We’re always looking into creating more opportunities for retired adventurers, such as in materials and education.”

Even Jean was looking slightly more friendly and relaxed now, perhaps relieved that these initial negotiations had gone smoothly.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, what kinds of slimes do you use most at the moment?” Jean asked.

“Definitely blue slimes. Of course, I’ll be going through a lot of green from now on as well.”

“Are you planning any projects using other kinds?”

“Well, I couldn’t say for sure, but I would like to try using red and yellow slimes one of these days. Oh, that reminds me... I’m also using a small amount of black slime.”

“*Black* slime...?”

Just when his expression had finally been softening, his brows knit together in a frown. Doubt and mistrust flickered in his rust-colored eyes.

“Black slimes cannot be farmed. They’re a class one mark and impossible to contain. They melt their way out of the enclosures.”

“Oh, I see. What about if you made an enclosure out of magic-sealing crystal?”

“Well, that might stop them getting out, but the cost would be astronomical...”

“Even if you kept several of them in a small cage lined with crystal?”

“Lined with... Right, right. That just might work...”

“Miss Dahlia,” Volf chimed in. “Perhaps we ought to leave this discussion for another time.”

As Dahlia eagerly made suggestions to the pensive Jean, Volf gently reined her in with a polite smile. He was right; until she actually needed some black slime, there was no need to work out any particulars. She let the subject go.

“Be assured that the Tailors’ Guild shall do its utmost to have both items in mass production as soon as possible. We will also endeavor to incorporate the potential improvements detailed in the registration document. My first priority will be to search for a stronger type of thread.”

“Regardless, producing these toe socks is going to be a slow business,” Gabriella said, almost sighing the words.

Just then, a thought struck Dahlia.

“Oh... I suppose you could always make the socks from cloth.”

“Cloth?”

“Yes. Miss Lucia, say you made the main part of the socks from some material with good elasticity—perhaps woven with unicorn or bicorn hair—and stitched that to the toe section. Would that work?”

“So all we’d have to do is stitch the two sections together. That’s a great idea,

Dahlia! Oh, excuse me.”

In her excitement, Lucia forgot their situation for a moment. She cast her sky-blue eyes down bashfully as she apologized.

“Unicorn? Bicorn...? They’re rare at the best of times—both of them. You’re lucky to even *see* one...” Jean’s head was bowed; his shoulders trembled. “Chairwoman Rossetti—no, *Lady* Rossetti—why don’t you just give us a shopping list? Every material you want, anything you might use for whatever invention you dream up next... Go on, spit ’em out!”

“Calm yourself, Jean!”

The last few words of Jean’s outburst were drowned out by Augusto as he sternly cautioned the other man, slapping him loudly on the back several times.

“Please forgive my colleague’s rudeness. He’s just very passionate about materials, you see. I’ll discuss the matter of the cloth with Miss Fano after we conclude the meeting.”

“I sincerely apologize.”

Everyone fell silent, either because of Augusto covering for his subordinate or because of Jean as he sat there with his head bowed. And yet, it was neither Jean nor Lucia whom everyone’s expectant gazes turned on next, but Dahlia.

“If I may, Mr. Jean, I will provide you with as thorough a list as I can after the meeting.”

“That would be much appreciated...”

Once the meeting was over, it was simply a matter of waiting for the minutes and relevant contracts to be drawn up. Tea was served, and everyone began to chat among themselves. Dahlia took out the notebook she always carried and hurriedly wrote out a list of all the materials she might need in the near future. Then, hoping to take a few minutes to decompress, she headed toward the powder room. However, she found herself pursued, at speed, by Lucia.

“Daaahliiiaaa!”

The moment she entered the powder room, she heard her name called out in a distinctive, singsong fashion. Lucia’s vivid blue eyes, usually so cheerful and

gentle, had a chilling look in them.

“L-Lucia...”

“Would you mind telling me what’s going on? When the messenger arrived from the guildmaster earlier, my dad was so shocked, he nearly fell over! Then mom said I’d made those things, so *I* had to go, and made me assistant manager right there and then! Assistant manager! We’re a little family workshop—there’re only five of us running the whole show. I prepared as best I could and came running over right away!”

Even though there was nobody else in the powder room, they both knew they couldn’t raise their voices too much. Lucia was whispering all of this into Dahlia’s ear.

“I’m sorry about all this. I gave the toe socks to my friend in the knights. I never imagined it would come to this.”

“No? Well, I didn’t either! I only made them to get a smile out of Carlo. If someone had told me then that they’d be a hit with the royal knights one day, I’d have said they were crazy. Oh, by the way, is it true you broke up with Tobias to focus on work?”

“We separated by mutual agreement...”

“You’re an awful liar. So? What *really* happened?”

Dahlia soon realized she wouldn’t get away with hiding anything from her longtime friend. Lacking even a good excuse to escape with, she decided to come clean and explain.

“Mr. Orlando found himself a new woman and broke off our engagement. I’ve decided I’m happier married to my work, anyway. The ‘mutual agreement’ thing was just to avoid any complications.”

“A new woman? Wouldn’t have expected that from him. Oh well, his loss.”

Dahlia didn’t quite understand what she meant by “his loss.” It may have been rather harsh on Tobias—he was her ex-fiancé, after all—but she felt so distant and disconnected from him now.

“If he’d married you, you could’ve been doing this work together. Besides,

you've gotten so pretty all of a sudden. He must be kicking himself, don't you think?"

"I doubt that."

"Still, I'm surprised. He used to be so protective over you; it was almost sickening."

"He was?"

"You always went all by yourself to visit clients' workshops, even if they were men. One day, when it was raining, one of my big brothers walked you home, and he said Tobias was beside himself with worry. Even Carlo laughed at him."

"I never knew."

"Well, of course not. Men always hide these things and act brave. It's their pride."

Hearing about this side of Tobias she'd never known surprised her somewhat. That said, it didn't change how she felt about him.

"But anyway, you seem fine with it, so I guess you weren't really in love. Now, what about that dreamboat who was sitting beside you, Sir Scalfarotto? How are you two involved?"

"He's a friend. He's interested in magical tools too."

"Working relationship, huh? I guess this *is* you we're talking about. Shame. Though I guess a man like that's a little too high-class to fool around with."

The conversation moved swiftly on from Tobias to Volf—a topic considerably worse for Dahlia's heart. She couldn't help feeling ever so slightly hurt at the words "too high-class."

"It looks like I'll be back and forth between the Tailors' Guild and the workshop for a while, so d'you think you could send me that raincoat material by wagon? I'll pay on delivery."

"Yeah, no problem."

"I was hoping to make some cute little raincoats out of it pretty soon, but goodness knows where I'll find the time now."

“I’m so sorry, Lucia. Just when we were making progress...”

“Don’t sweat it. This job’s gonna be a great earner, so I’m definitely not complaining. If I put in enough hours, I’ll be able to afford some repairs in the workshop and some new fabric! Maybe it’ll even help me save up for my own workshop! That’s still a long ways off, of course, but you’ve gotta dream big, right?”

After swiftly reapplying her vermilion lipstick, Lucia gave her cheeks a light pat. It was her dream to make pretty clothes in an atelier of her very own. At present, she worked at her family’s workshop, which produced mainly socks and gloves, but she’d been gradually squirreling away the funds necessary to one day establish her own business. Ever since Dahlia had first met her, she had never once wavered or considered giving up her dream. That determination was inspiring.

“Okay, see you around, then. I’ll go on ahead; probably better if we don’t come out together.”

“Right. Take care.”

Dahlia watched Lucia go, the patter of the young woman’s footsteps quietly echoing in the corridor before she turned to the mirror and reapplied her lipstick too. Her reflection looked a little weary.

“Chairwoman Rossetti.”

As Dahlia walked down the corridor on her way back to the meeting room, she was stopped by Augusto, the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers’ Guild. He bowed.

“Please allow me to apologize once again for my colleague’s behavior.”

“It’s all right. I may not have realized it at the time, but I clearly caused your guild a great deal of inconvenience.”

“Er... Jean has his own particular circumstances as well, you see. Regardless, I’ll have him write an official apology in the morning.”

“There’s no need, truly. I’m not offended.”

Dahlia and her father had never given any thought to the guild’s stocks of

materials, pursuing their projects without much in the way of planning. Looking back now, it must have been a dreadful headache for Jean, the man in charge of the guild's materials. Dahlia couldn't find it in herself to blame him just for voicing his frustration.

"Do you think you could expand on those 'particular circumstances,' Augusto? Jean's behavior toward Chairwoman Rossetti was completely unacceptable, in my opinion."

As if from thin air, Volf appeared to intervene in the conversation. He wasn't his usual self, his voice noticeably deeper and colder.

"Oh, Volfred... Very well; I'll explain. Please understand that this is all rather personal. When Jean married, he took the opportunity to retire as a senior adventurer and join the guild staff instead. His first job with the guild was a kraken hunt. The expedition took a full month, in which time...his first wife left him."

Either because he was choosing his words carefully or he simply found the subject difficult to discuss, Augusto had an extremely uneasy expression on his face as he continued.

"Right after he married his second wife, he had to leave for two weeks to hunt sand lizards. Then, around the time his child was to be born, the rush on blue slimes came, and he was so busy that he even slept here at the guild some nights. He's had such a run of bad luck with these jobs coming up at all the wrong times. His wife has taken their child and gone to her parents' house several times. I heard she finally came back just the other day..."

"Thank you very much for telling us. Rest assured that our lips are sealed."

Volf's anger had completely evaporated, with only sincere sympathy left in its place. Dahlia wanted to prostrate herself on the floor before Jean and beg for his forgiveness. It would bear reporting to her father's grave as well. She accepted now that Jean had the right to resent the Rossettis with every bone in his body. She felt awful for his family as well.

"I've told him to delegate, of course, but he's such a capable man that he ends up taking everything on himself. I should have managed him better. It is my negligence that led to that unfortunate slight earlier, and I cannot apologize

enough. I promise you that we will have proper measures in place to guarantee you have all the materials you need for this venture, and any in the future as well. Mistakes like these must not be repeated."

"If anything, Guildmaster, I feel it is I who should apologize to Jean..."

A volley of apologies bounced between the two parties, and then, at last, they returned to the meeting room. Dahlia silently vowed to plan her projects far more carefully from now on, with consideration for those who would be fetching her materials.



With the goodbyes exchanged and the carriages from the Tailors' Guild and Adventurers' Guild finally rolling away down the street, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief. Gabriella departed for her office with Ivano for yet another meeting, while Dahlia and Volf borrowed a meeting room under the pretext of checking over her contract with the knights. In reality, their only plan was to wait here until the rush hour had subsided and then hail a carriage.

"That was exhausting," Dahlia said.

"Tell me about it. But it seems to have all worked out, somehow or other."

"Does it? I still really want to apologize to Jean."

"That's understandable."

A grim silence fell. After they'd both exhaled long sighs, Volf folded his hands upon the table.

"So, Dahlia, don't take this the wrong way, but since you're likely to have more meetings with nobles in the future, I thought I ought to teach you about some phrases you should avoid."

"Wait, did I say something I shouldn't have?!"

She thought back to her manner of speaking during the meeting and the way she'd let her guard down for a moment while talking with Lucia—there were so many instances that might have somehow been inappropriate in front of noble company that she couldn't pin one down.

"'You have my trust, Mr. Fortunato. I leave everything to you,'" Volf replied,

repeating her words from earlier back to her.

“Huh?”

“When an unmarried noblewoman says that to a noble gentleman, it means she considers him worthy of being her knight. It expresses both her respect and affection.”

“But...why?”

All she’d wanted to communicate was that she trusted him, so she didn’t feel the need to supervise the work at the Tailors’ Guild and would happily leave that side of the business in his hands. That was all. She’d had no ulterior motive to convey. She couldn’t for the life of her understand how her words had taken on the sort of meaning Volf described.

“You see, er...Fortunato’s family, the Luinis, have been knights for generations. But he decided to follow a different path, becoming a tailor. I think he must have been quite surprised to be addressed as though he were a knight.”

“But that’s not what I meant by it—not at all!”

“It’ll be all right. It was only a minor thing, and I think he’ll have realized what happened by now. He knows you’re not a noblewoman, after all, and he’s married. If you do hear anything more about it, don’t worry—I’ll take care of it.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t believe I said something so ridiculous, even if it was by accident.”

Dahlia held her head in her hands. Luck, it seemed, was not on her side today. She sincerely hoped she’d never have to see that man again.

“It comes from an old opera. In the final scene, the heroine says to the main character, a knight: ‘You have my trust, Sir Orfeo. I leave everything to you.’ I heard there was kind of a craze for reenacting that scene at the time.”

“Did people admire the kind of affection you find between a woman and her knight? Did it have a romantic image?”

“Not exactly. That old phrase ended up taking on an extra meaning because of the opera scene, that’s all.”

Volf's golden gaze left Dahlia and fixed on the opposite wall instead.

"This is *really* difficult to say, but...it was a popular thing for noblewomen to say when they spent the night with a man for the first time, so you're definitely better off avoiding it."

"Wha—?!"

Dahlia slumped onto the desk with a loud clunk, feeling like a bit of her soul had left her body.

"That doesn't make *any* sense! How was I supposed to know? I don't want to open my mouth ever again!"

"It's okay—this was a special case. It's not likely to happen again. I'm pretty sure it was only me and Augusto who noticed it, anyway. Gabriella didn't seem to. I guess she could have just been pretending. Or maybe she's from the wrong generation."

In other words, if a noble from the *right* generation had happened to be there, Dahlia might have committed social suicide. If there was one thing she took away from this, it was that she was not suited for noble life in any way, shape, or form.

"Honestly, this is an exception. There are other phrases like this, but they're easy to understand. Say you were taking a woman home in a carriage and she said, 'Will you take off your gloves for me?' You'd know what that means, right?"

"I... No. What would it mean?"

"It's a woman's way of propositioning you."

"I can't do this... Who could work that out?" Dahlia said miserably, feeling her headache rapidly worsening.

"It's not your fault if you've never heard it before. I'll make sure I'm present as often as possible when you have to meet with nobles. Also, I'll bring you some notes and books on noble conversation rules and etiquette."

"I'd be really thankful if you could accompany me. Are there really books on this sort of thing?"

“Yeah, I still have some that my mother used to read, as well as notes that she made. They’re a little old, but they should still be useful. I’ll bring them next time I come to see you.”

“I appreciate it,” Dahlia replied, still hunched over the desk.

She couldn’t bear to show her face just yet.



Ivano was seated on the sofa in the vice-guildmaster’s office, smartly dressed in a blue jacket. Gabriella sat opposite, her dark-blue eyes gazing unflinchingly at the man.

“May I ask exactly what you were thinking, Ivano?”

“Forgive me. I acted as a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company instead of a member of this guild.”

Gabriella’s inquiry pertained to the way Ivano had intervened during the meeting with the other guildmasters. As a member of the Merchants’ Guild’s staff, it was Ivano’s duty to put the interests of the guild first in all negotiations. However, during the meeting, he had formed a plan that prioritized the profits of Dahlia’s company and proposed it to the guild. “Our guild also wishes for the Rossetti Trading Company to have full control over which buyers to prioritize,” he had said. These words could have more consequences in the future than any amount of money that changed hands over this deal. For a trading company that hoped to grow powerful, there was nothing more valuable than the right to pick and choose its buyers. The moment he’d made that call, Ivano had relinquished his role as a member of the guild and spoken on behalf of the Rossetti Trading Company instead.

“I am sorry. I’m deeply grateful for the support you’ve given me all these years, but...Vice-Guildmaster—no, Madam Gabriella—please allow me to resign.”

Ivano stood up and bowed low. He did not move from that position as he waited for the woman to speak.

“I thought you’d say that one of these days. Perhaps not quite so soon, though. Please, raise your head.”

Gabriella was not shocked. She'd known what Ivano was here for since the moment he'd stepped into her office. Despite the heat, he'd fastened his shirt right up to the top button and even put on a tie.

"You expected this, then? Is that why you always had me work closely with Carlo and Dahlia?"

"That's right. I thought it would help you make up your mind about what you really wanted, whether that was to start your own company, join one, or stay here at the guild."

"Sixteen years I've been here under your care—and the guild's. I thought I'd be working here until I retired."

"And now you wish to throw all of that away for the Rossetti Trading Company's sake—or for Dahlia's, I should say."

"It isn't for Dahlia. It's for me. I know now what calls to me, and it isn't this guild. It's the merchant life," Ivano confessed with the sunniest smile Gabriella had ever seen from him.

She couldn't help taking a tiny bit of umbrage.

"Before you leave, wouldn't it be a good idea to ask Dahlia if she'll employ you first?"

"That wouldn't be fair. Please allow me to resign immediately."

"You're sure you don't want to talk to your wife about it?"

"She's never complained about any decision I've made at work before. 'Just do what you think is right,' she always tells me."

"How nice of her. Well, in that case, here. You can fill this out right away."

Gabriella retrieved a pen and the resignation forms from her desk and handed them over. Ivano began writing without a moment's hesitation. Once he'd completed them and handed them back, Gabriella nodded and slipped them into the top drawer of her desk.

"That's fine. I'll hold on to these."

"Hold on to them? Not accept them, you mean?"

“Just a precaution. If she turns you down, come straight back. We’ll retrain you. Oh, now...before you do anything else, I think you should go and see Sir Volfred. If you can gain his backing, I’m sure Dahlia won’t refuse you.”

“Are you sure that’s the easiest way to go about this?”

He had reasonable confidence in his ability to convince Dahlia; getting an endorsement from Volfred, however—a nobleman and a knight—sounded like another level of difficulty altogether.

“Go and talk to him. Have a man-to-man chat, or whatever you want to call it. It’ll be a good chance for you to check him out as well—see what kind of man he is. If you’re to stay with the Rossetti Trading Company, you two will be crossing paths for many years to come, I suspect. By the way, I’m not letting you go officially until the end of next month, understand? There’s business to tie up, and I’ll need to find your successor. But since I foresee the Rossetti Trading Company being a valuable business partner to the guild from here on out, I’ll overlook you working for both of us.”

“I hope you’ll forgive me. This is a poor way for me to repay you after all that you’ve done.”

“I don’t like a man who holds on to regrets. Off you go now, before Dahlia goes home.”

Ivano stood and gave the woman another deep bow before leaving the office with hurried steps. Only once the door had closed and all hint of Ivano’s presence had gone did Gabriella let herself sink wearily into the sofa, even letting her head fall back. Sixteen years... How could such a long time feel so brief? She could scarcely believe it was sixteen years since she’d taken that young greenhorn of a merchant under her wing and given him all the knowledge and experience he would need to be a capable, upstanding member of her guild. But at his core, Ivano had never changed. No matter how long he sat behind his desk at the guild, he still looked at the world with the eyes of a merchant. All along, he’d yearned to be a part of the lively commerce all around him, not to be a mere administrator stuck behind a desk. Gabriella had held onto the hope for a while that he might change his mind, but in the end, his answer was just as she had predicted.

“If only you’d hung in there until I retired, I could have adopted you and named you my successor as vice-guildmaster...”

Gabriella’s wistful words were at odds with the mirthful smile on her face.

“Oh, Dahlia... That’s a fine man you’ve pinched from me.”



“Pardon me, Sir Scalfarotto—do you have a few moments to discuss your guarantorship at the Rossetti Trading Company?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Miss Dahlia, I hope you won’t mind if I borrow him for a little while.”

“Not at all.”

Ivano saw Dahlia slumped, motionless, over the meeting room desk. The long, busy day had clearly taken its toll. He couldn’t help feeling sorry for her.

“If you’ll come with me then, please, Sir Scalfarotto...”

Ivano led them to a corridor toward the rear of the second floor. It was past office hours, and there were very few staff left in this part of the building. Volf narrowed his eyes warily as the man in front of him abruptly stopped in the middle of the empty hallway.

“Excuse me if I’m being intrusive, but there is something I must ask you, Sir Scalfarotto. What is your opinion of Miss Dahlia?”

“I think she’s an outstanding magical toolmaker. She’s also a cherished friend of mine.”

“I see.”

Ivano gave a small nod. Then, he extended one hand and gestured to a spot on the corridor floor.

“Right here is where Mr. Carlo Rossetti breathed his last. He collapsed completely out of the blue. I was the first to reach him, but there was nothing I could do, and he passed away there and then.”

“Here...?”

Volf immediately sank down on one knee and clasped his hands. After

murmuring a few words of prayer, he rose to his feet again.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“There’s no need to thank me. I think I just wanted to see that.”

Volf’s eyes, though not outright hostile, were charged with caution as he regarded Ivano. It was a look many men would have shrunk away from, but Ivano gazed back at the knight steadily.

“In my eyes, Miss Dahlia appears like a goddess robed in gold. I’ve never seen someone with such a brilliantly golden aura as hers. Yet I think she herself is completely unaware of it.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that the Rossetti Trading Company has the potential to grow very powerful and make Miss Dahlia very wealthy.”

“That may be the case, yes.”

“I want to give my all to developing this company at Miss Dahlia’s side. To that end, I’ve just given my notice of resignation to the guild. I hope to convince Miss Dahlia to allow me to join her in her venture.”

“So why are you telling me?”

“I would humbly ask for your recommendation, Sir Volfred.”

“Why exactly would I want to give you that?”

Some of the gentility had left Volf’s voice, replaced by a note of annoyance. Nonetheless, Ivano smiled calmly, seeming relieved.

“I’m a married man. I have two daughters. I’m not a threat to Dahlia in any way.”

“I don’t think that’s up to me to decide.”

“A question for you, then, Sir Volfred. Do you prefer breasts or behinds?”

Volf felt his head begin to hurt at this impertinent question. He dropped all pretenses, letting his distaste show as he replied.

“Where are you going with this?”

“I’m in the former camp, myself. I like a little lady with a fulsome pair of breasts—the bigger, the better. That’s why my wife is the woman of my dreams. It’s also why I can assure you that I’m no threat to Dahlia whatsoever. Surely you see that I can be trusted to work with her. What’s more, I have sixteen years of experience working at this guild, so I know the ins and outs of the business world well. I’m also the firstborn son of a merchant family. I worked at our trading company in another city until I was nineteen.”

“If you’re the firstborn son, why not take over your family’s business?”

“Because we lost everything. When I was nineteen, the business folded. Both my parents and my younger sister committed suicide. I was a little wild back then. I stayed for a while with my girlfriend—now my wife. Couldn’t face going home. She and I ran away together, coming here to the capital. I found myself a job at this guild doing chores—taking care of anything that needed doing.”

Ever since then, the guild was where he’d remained. The only people who knew the whole story of how he and his wife had ended up in this city were Gabriella, Viscount Jedda, and now the knight who stood before him.

“Wouldn’t you rather start a company of your own?”

“The prospect of joining Miss Dahlia’s is a hundred times more appealing. Besides, a company without any experienced merchants on its staff is easy prey for the Merchants’ Guild and others to take advantage of. I couldn’t stand to let that happen.”

“Even though it’s not even your company?”

“Something tells me that at Miss Dahlia’s side, I can dream of gold and of making a mark on this world. There’s no merchant in the world who could resist that call.”

“I guess...that’s not something a knight would understand.”

“I have experience, and I have confidence. I would never even think of harming Miss Dahlia’s interests or hindering her in any way. So please, Sir Volfred, may I have your backing?”

Volf didn’t reply right away, resting a finger thoughtfully on his chin. After a few moments of silence, he raised his golden gaze to meet Ivano’s.

“You may, as long as you promise me two things.”

“As long as they’re within my power, I’ll be glad to.”

“First, I want you to go to the temple and enter a magical contract. Promise that you will never intentionally bring harm either to Dahlia or her company.”

“You don’t trust me. But that’s understandable. Very well, I’ll do it,” Ivano replied with a nod.

Imposing such a condition was typical of a nobleman, and it wasn’t outside Ivano’s expectations.

“And second...no matter what happens, protect Dahlia. Before you think about the company or its finances or anything else, protect *her*.”

“As a merchant—no, as a man—you have my word.”

This, he had not foreseen. It was not an order from the young knight, but a plea. The safety and well-being of just one woman was more important to him than any wealth he might gain from the company or deals he might broker for the knights. It was at this moment that Ivano decided to place his trust in Volf.

“You’ll need money to prepare. Use this.”

“Hm? Wha—this is a royal accession commemorative coin! Do you realize how much these are worth?!”

While he’d been absorbed in thought, Volf had casually pressed a gold coin into his hand. This coin had been specially minted to commemorate the twenty years since the current king’s accession to the throne. It was larger than regular gold coins, and only a limited amount had ever been produced. There had been frequent inquiries about them at the Merchants’ Guild, but their prices had soared as soon as they’d gone on sale. One would easily sell for ten regular gold coins. Quite some time had passed since then; Ivano couldn’t even guess what the price would have risen to by now.

“It’s just a gold coin to me. I’ve heard it’s an expensive process to change jobs, and you won’t be getting your first pay from Dahlia’s company for a little while. Please, consider it a gift from me and don’t say anything about it to Dahlia.”

“Understood. Accepted with gratitude. And I hope you’ll call me Ivano from

now on—no formality needed."

"Shall do, Ivano. You can feel free to call me Volf."

"I'll make that *Sir* Volf, but thank you. I'm looking forward to working with you."

Having struck an accord, the two men made their way back to the meeting room where Dahlia waited. By now, the streets outside were growing dark. The guild's stairways, lit by magical lanterns, were empty of people. It seemed they'd been talking for a little longer than they'd realized.

"By the way, Sir Volf, about what I asked you earlier..."

"Hm?"

Ivano stopped Volf on the landing.

"In all seriousness: breasts or behinds?"

"...Behinds."

"On the other team, then." Ivano sighed, seeming faintly disappointed.

Volf couldn't help a wry grin.

"Nearly all the men I know are into breasts," Ivano continued. "Is it the same in the knights?"

"I can't speak for the knights, exactly, but at least among everyone I know, I guess about two-thirds probably prefer breasts."

Midway through their conversation, the men were interrupted by a figure descending the stairs, the magical lamps greatly lengthening its shadow.

"Ivano, one of the clerks on the second floor is looking for you."

"Oh, M-Miss Dahlia! Thank you so much! I'll head there right away."

Ivano, who had frozen stiff, defrosted himself just as rapidly and gave Dahlia a bow before making his escape. Volf was left behind, doing his best to adopt a nonchalant expression as he turned to the young woman.

"Erm...did you hear any of that?"

"Some of it. I'm very sorry. Your voices carried up the stairs, you see."

“Which part did you hear from?”

“The part where you said you like behinds.”

“So, er, this is just one of the ways men joke around when they’re alone together. Um...”

Volf, a man who wouldn’t flinch before even the most fearsome monsters, suddenly found himself breaking out in a cold sweat. Though he tried to explain himself, his instincts were telling him there was nothing he could say to ameliorate this situation.

“Legs.”

“What?”

Volf was nonplussed, sounding rather stupid as he blurted his response.

“My father liked legs. Once, when he was drinking and making merry with his friends in the tower, he started raving about the beauty of women’s legs and didn’t stop even when I came in. I didn’t speak to him for a week.”

“Er, Dahlia...”

“So next time you want to talk like that, Volf, please do it in a private room and only in male company, all right?”

Volf had never seen a woman’s smile so devoid of warmth. The only reply he dared make was a meek nod.

The Unicorn Pendant

It was a sweltering day. Dahlia had had her cooling fan running in the workshop since morning. Earlier, she'd finally gathered up all the finished raincoat fabric and had it loaded onto a wagon bound for Lucia's workshop. The now-empty workshop felt as though it had doubled in size. While she cleaned up, Dahlia thought back on yesterday's events.

Just as she'd been about to leave the Merchants' Guild, Ivano had come to her. "I want to join the Rossetti Trading Company," he'd declared. Although it was indeed a company on paper, it heretofore consisted of Dahlia alone, someone with no experience in trade. She'd been daunted by the thought of everything that she had to learn, so Ivano's request to join her was extremely welcome. Volf supported the idea, and she could tell how firm Ivano was in his resolve, so she accepted on the spot.

Nonetheless, she'd felt the need to ask him at least three times whether he was really okay with quitting the guild—whether he was sure he wouldn't regret it. She told him she couldn't be sure when she'd be able to pay him, but he assured her firmly that the toe socks and insoles would generate more than enough profit to cover his wages. If she was worried, he said, then he wouldn't mind if she waited until the money started coming in. Of course, she wouldn't accept that. She promised him the same wage he had received at the guild and that they could discuss bonuses when profits were good. They agreed that once Ivano had officially quit the guild, he would relinquish his guarantorship at the Rossetti Trade Company to become a staff member instead.

As much as Dahlia was thankful for Ivano's decision, there were things about it that bothered her. Firstly, she was worried about what a nuisance his departure might be for the Merchants' Guild—and Gabriella in particular. She was also puzzled by how friendly Volf and Ivano seemed to have become all of a sudden. They must have just clicked, she supposed, if they felt comfortable sharing *those* sorts of jokes with each other. *Why*, though, did men feel the need to put themselves in teams based on whether they liked women's breasts,

behinds, or legs? On second thought, that was a question she didn't care to have answered.

She happened to pass by the mirror in the workshop, and just for a moment, her gaze flitted down to her rear. It looked utterly ordinary to her. There was certainly nothing fascinating about it. She recalled that in her previous world, some people did so-called "butt-boosting" exercises. She wondered if bookshops in this world carried beauty guides with those sorts of routines.

"Why am I thinking about this nonsense?"

The fatigue from all of yesterday's meetings must have caught up to her. She shook her head and got back to her cleaning.

While tidying up the shelves, she happened across the box containing the unicorn horn Ireneo had given her. The horn was on the slender side but fairly long. It might be a good idea to cut a small piece off to ascertain its quality, she thought. As soon as she opened the lid of the magically sealed box, she felt the unicorn's unique magic radiating from within. The horn was pure white with a faint golden sheen. As she looked closely, she noticed that it had grown in a gentle spiral. She remembered Volf's description of the unicorns he had seen—their horns, too, had glimmered with gold. That must have been the standard coloration. All that was written in her bestiary was "generally white," so she hadn't been sure. Perhaps it was a sign that this horn had been cut relatively recently.

The horn was so brimming with power that simply holding it in her hands brought some magic languidly trickling out, warming and tickling her fingertips. In terms of texture, it felt very similar to the ivory she'd touched in her previous world but somewhat heavier and denser. At the base, it had a diameter of about two and a half centimeters. Holding it still with a piece of cloth, she carefully cut off a slice about eight millimeters thick. Her usual saw proved ineffective, so she used her enchanted fretsaw instead, though even that struggled.

As far as she'd been informed, this horn's properties included detoxification, water purification, and pain relief. How powerful would the effects from a piece this size be? Testing it would not be easy, but it promised to be fascinating.

At a glance, the slice of horn she'd cut off merely looked white, but as she turned it over in her hand, she saw its surface give a golden sparkle here and there. Perhaps it would fit nicely into a little accessory. Feeling the gentle tingle of magic as she held the sliver of horn, Dahlia tidied up its edges and carefully polished its surface. This material had such a beautiful shimmer, it would have been a waste not to show it off, and so she decided to delicately carve it with a rose motif.

She was pleased with how well it turned out, completely losing track of time as she carefully deepened the relief of her carving, refined the details, and prepared it to be used as a pendant. Only when she was distracted by a dryness in her throat did she finally look up. It was already high noon, the hot sun shining straight from above.

To finish off the pendant, Dahlia sent her magic flowing into her fingertips and tried to apply a hardening enchantment to improve its durability, only to find that the magic bounced clean off of the surface. She remembered what had happened with the sword and tried manipulating the stream of magic so it enveloped the small object instead of hitting against it. However, this time the magic simply scattered and dissipated into the air. Wondering if that particular enchantment was incompatible, she attempted a weight-reducing one, but this too failed to stick.

"Hmm..."

Dahlia tilted her head pensively as the remainder of her repelled magic lingered in her fingertips. Two possibilities came to mind. First, that the unicorn's magic was simply too strong for her enchantments to compete with. Second, that it possessed a certain degree of magic resistance, making it repel any kind of enchantment. Testing the first theory would be straightforward; she would simply have to call on the services of a more powerful mage. As for the second possibility, she had managed to cut the horn with a magical tool, her enchanted fretsaw, so it was logical to conclude that it didn't repel *all* magic. It was possible that it only rejected being enchanted. The only way she could test *that* out would be to dismantle one of the shortswords, see if she could use the horn as an enchanting material, and discover whether that enchantment produced a magic-resistant effect. However, it wouldn't be fair to Volf to

conduct that experiment while he wasn't here, so she decided to give up on it for now.

Dahlia put the unicorn horn pendant down on the table and had a long stretch. Her shoulders felt terribly stiff, perhaps due to her sitting in the same position for so long. She remembered then that the horns of unicorn mares were supposed to have a pain-relieving effect—one that ought to work on stiff shoulders. That was the reason Ireneo had searched it out for her.

She took a leather cord and strung the pendant onto it, hanging it around her neck so the back of it would be in direct contact with her chest. She had her doubts as to whether it would really work, but very soon, she found her shoulders feeling much lighter. The pain and stiffness didn't *completely* vanish, perhaps due to the piece's small size or the quality of the horn. However, there was a marked improvement. She could see herself managing long stints of work with far less discomfort as long as she wore this.

How much magic would be needed to enchant a sword with this unicorn's power? As she considered this, Dahlia's mind was drawn back to the most exhausting enchantment she had ever performed, her brows drawing together in a frown.

That material she used that day...was a sköll's fang. Much like the unicorn's horn, it had gleamed snow-white with a subtle golden shimmer. The sköll was a lupine beast with jet-black fur and gold or silver eyes. It ran as swiftly as the wind and was said to prey upon other monsters such as cockatrices, unicorns, and pegasi. Her father had received the fang from a customer who'd placed an order for some large hot water dispensers. Finding himself with a little left over, he'd given two small fragments to his daughter.

"It's a very difficult material, that one," he'd warned her. "I don't want you to use it right away. Give it five or ten years, then you'll be up to it."

However, Dahlia had still been a student at the time, brimming with insatiable curiosity. In the dead of night, holed up in her room, she decided to try using one of the fang pieces in secret. Unable to pull away from it, she'd had her magic wrenched out of her until she almost fainted, and she was violently sick afterward. The sköll fang's ability to drain magic was truly unnerving. Once

she'd begun the enchantment, it wouldn't allow her to stop, greedily wresting her magical energy as though to devour it. It was a completely different sensation than she'd felt with fairy glass, stirring an instinctive terror in Dahlia's soul. She didn't say anything to her father about what had happened, but he seemed to realize. He didn't scold her, but he insisted she rest in bed for two days and fed her lots of sweetened bread in milk.

Carlo himself had had no trouble using the fang to enchant his large hot water dispensers. He employed the fang's air magic to prevent overheating. Four years had passed since then—Dahlia was still shy of the five years he had advised, but her reserves of magical power would certainly have deepened by now, along with her skill as a magical toolmaker. Of course, she still had a long way to go before she matched her father's level in enchanting and magical circuit crafting.

"I'm sure I put it away in that drawer in my room..."

Not wanting her father to know what she'd done, Dahlia had hidden away the fragment of fang she'd tried to use in the back of a drawer. It had been there ever since. It should still have a little magic left in it. What if she added some of her own and tried enchanting her sturdiest bangle with it? There was a chance that her first failure had rendered it useless as a material, but she had to try one more time. If it ended in failure again, then she would admit defeat.

There was no one besides Dahlia in the tower now. If she collapsed, no one would be there to help her. However, looking at it from another angle, it meant she wouldn't be worrying anyone if she did happen to collapse. Even if she were drained completely dry of magic, the worst that would happen is that she'd vomit or pass out. There was nothing to worry about. Well, not *nothing* exactly, but she didn't feel she was in any real danger. In her previous world, the saying had gone, "No time like the present." In this one, however, people said, "When inspiration strikes, mark the shadows." In other words, when you think you have a good idea, stop, look around you, and think carefully before you act. Dahlia wasn't a big fan of the latter.

"Should be fine if I give it a try right before bedtime..."

Only the materials scattered about the workshop heard the intrepid

toolmaker’s murmur.

His Brother and His Nightmares

For the first time in a long while, Volf had returned to the Scalfarotto villa. The trees visible from his bedroom window seemed to have shot up in the time he'd been away. By all rights, this house belonged to Volf, but an entire season had passed since he had last been here. The servants were bustling about with an air of unease. *It's so much quieter at the Green Tower...* The moment the thought crossed his mind, his temples began to throb painfully, and he pressed his fingers against them.

During yesterday's informal chat with Ivano, he'd let slip his preference in women. He'd never dreamed that Dahlia would overhear them, and he'd felt thoroughly ashamed of himself since. She must have been disgusted. However, since they'd taken separate carriages home, he'd returned to the barracks without getting a chance to apologize to her. He'd sat down to pen a letter of apology as soon as he got back, only to be called to the captain's office. After he'd given a full report of the negotiations that had taken place over the toe socks and drying insoles, the captain had thanked him heartily and immediately taken him out for a meal. By the time they'd returned, it was midnight.

This morning, he had left for the villa. He was here for a meeting with the last person in the world whom he wanted to see. To buoy himself up, he had once again put on his black dress uniform. In all honesty, he would have felt more at ease facing a monster. All that said, he was the one who had requested this meeting with his father. Yesterday, while Dahlia had been engaged in a meeting with the man from the small goods workshop, Volf had spoken with Dominic, the scrivener. Well aware of Volf's inexperience in the business world, Dominic had offered him some advice. He considered it important that Volf inform his family of his guarantorship with the Rossetti Trading Company and its involvement with the knights as soon as possible.

Volf had been torn. His desire to avoid such a meeting far outweighed his interest in having it. He could count on one hand the number of times he'd had a meaningful conversation with his father on any subject. Volf couldn't imagine

how his father would react to his youngest son abruptly showing up to offer an account of his activities. Whether he'd agree to the meeting at all wasn't certain. However, if it would benefit Dahlia and her company in even the smallest way, he knew he had to try. He'd sent a messenger to his father, and soon he received a curt reply.

Tomorrow at the villa. Morning teatime.

With some time to spare before his father's arrival, Volf entered the room containing his mother's effects. When he had moved here from the main house, all of her things had come with him. They included books, clothes, and ornaments—very little, actually, for a noblewoman, but enough to fill this room. Her several suits of armor and swords were kept elsewhere. He very rarely came in here, but it seemed the servants had kindly kept it clean and tidy nonetheless.

Volf perused the bookshelves until he found his mother's guide to noble conversation and collection of notes, which he put away in his black leather bag. He hoped to have Dahlia study them as soon as possible.

Yesterday's faux pas had been preying on his mind—"You have my trust, Mr. Fortunato. I leave everything to you." Directed at the wrong person, that could have been taken as, "I consider you my knight." When he'd first heard those words, he'd stiffened in panic. *He* knew that Dahlia had meant nothing untoward by it, but the possibility that the other man might misunderstand had been extremely worrying. He wasn't in any position to tell Dahlia what to do and how, but he was determined to exercise whatever caution was needed to ensure his friend's safety.

As soon as Volf left the room, he was met by one of the male servants.

"Pardon me, Sir Volfred. Lord Guido has arrived."

"I'll be right there."

For a moment, he'd doubted his ears. It seemed that it was not his father, Renato, who had come, but his elder brother. Volf went straight to the drawing room, where he found Guido, the eldest of Earl Scalfarotto's sons, waiting for him.

“Been a while, Volfred.”

“It has. It’s good to see you.”

With his blue-tinged silver hair and deep, sapphire eyes, Guido was the spitting image of their father. He was eight years Volf’s senior. Dressed in a dark-blue three-piece suit, he sat waiting at the drawing room table. Volf seated himself opposite. Once a maid had served them tea, Guido dismissed all of the staff, leaving the two brothers alone in the large room.

“Father was summoned to the palace first thing this morning. I think he was disappointed not to be able to see you. I hope you don’t mind speaking to me instead.”

Volf sympathized with his brother as he spoke somewhat awkwardly. As far as he could guess, his father had never had any intention of meeting him and had sent Guido in his place. It had been at least a season since he had laid eyes on his elder brother, and their last meeting had consisted of little more than a greeting.

“No, of course not. I have become a guarantor for a trading company that has recently secured a deal with the Order of Beast Hunters. I believe it will have further dealings with the castle and other parties in the future, so I thought it best to inform you of the situation. Here is a summary.”

He had worried that he might stray from the crucial points if he wrote the summary himself, so he had entrusted the task to Dominic and Ivano. Guido took the two sheets of parchment and quickly cast his eyes over their contents. Then, apparently to examine them more carefully, he laid both sheets flat upon the table.

“You appear to have made some very good connections.”

“Yes, I’m very thankful.”

Volf couldn’t quite pin down his brother’s meaning, offering only a brief, innocuous response.

“As far as Father is concerned, this villa and all its staff are yours to do with what you like, Volfred. This Rossetti Trading Company has no properties yet, correct? I think this house would serve far better than the Merchants’ Guild for

any meetings with nobility they need to conduct. And be sure to send word to me if they're in need of any water or ice crystals. I'll be more than happy to supply them."

"Thank you very much."

"Don't hesitate to let me know if you run into any problems at all. I'll do everything in my power to aid you."

"That's very kind of you," Volf replied sincerely, bowing his head.

As far as he knew, Dahlia had no plans of meeting any nobles anytime soon, but access to a good supply of magic crystals, as well as sage advice, would be more than welcome.

"Now, Volfred, is it not time you considered marriage? If you'll tell me your preferences, I'll do my best to find a suitable young lady for you."

"There's no need. I'm not considering it."

"I see. It's just that you're about the right age now..."

Despite having been the one to bring up the subject all of a sudden, Guido was being rather equivocal. Feeling ill at ease, Volf looked up to find his brother's deep-blue eyes gazing at him steadily.

"You're still seeing Lady Gastoni, are you?"

"Yes. We have a very agreeable relationship."

Volf understood Guido's concerns. As far as the Scalfarottos were concerned, the talk of him being Altea's young lover was an embarrassment. Their message, no doubt, was for him to stop wasting his time with her and find himself a respectable wife.

"You know...I heard this was the first time you've contacted Father of your own accord."

"Was it? I've never needed or wanted anything, so I suppose there's been no reason to," he answered noncommittally, putting on a thoughtful expression.

But what was he supposed to want with his father, anyway? The man had left him to his own devices, barely ever reaching out. If nothing else, he had at least

ensured that Volf did not want for the necessities of life. He was thankful for that.

“Are you thinking of quitting the family?”

“I...would like to be independent one day.”

Volf was slightly discomfited by this sudden inquiry. He tried to veil his intentions by calling it independence, but he suspected that something in his voice gave him away.

“I thought this business with the trading company was something you’d started to prepare for leaving us.”

“No, it has nothing to do with that.”

“Right. Tell me, is there anything you need at the moment? Anything you want that I can get for you?”

“There’s nothing at the moment. I’m well provided for by the knights and our estate.”

“You don’t think you’ll transfer from the Beast Hunters to another division?”

“Not particularly.”

“And you don’t intend to step down as a Scarlet Armor?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

Guido’s persistent questions were starting to grate on him. When he’d graduated from college and joined the knights, he’d received a congratulatory gift from his brother, but they had never once discussed his future. They simply didn’t share that sort of relationship. It felt as though Guido was trying a bit too hard to play the role of big brother all of a sudden, and Volf couldn’t help wondering why.

“Is something the matter, Guido?”

Volf’s gaze, which had been hovering at his brother’s lips, rose to meet his eyes. He saw those blue eyes—so very like their father’s—shimmer for a moment and then close. When Guido opened them again, they were downcast and forlorn.

“I’m sorry. I know you’ve been doing your best to avoid me. I’ve been running away as well, always making the excuse that we never have the time to talk. But I...I’ve always wanted to apologize to you.” He stood up and sank into a low bow. “Volf, I am truly, deeply sorry. If you and Lady Vanessa had not protected my mother and me that day, we would both be dead now. I know that nothing I can say will change the fact that I couldn’t help Lady Vanessa—couldn’t stop her from being stolen from you—but allow me to offer my deepest apologies.”

“Please stand up. You have nothing to apologize for.”

Memories Volf had no wish to revisit began welling up, as sharp and vivid as though they were from yesterday. He saw once again the glaring afternoon sun, the verdure flanking the highway, the burning carriage, men lying prone on the ground, and his mother’s body, torn in two at the waist. Finally, he saw his own blood-soaked hands.

“If I had fought, Lady Vanessa might not have had to die. It was *my* duty as a man and as your older brother to fight and protect you both. It should have been me who died that day, not her.”

“Guido, take that back at once, please.”

Volf had rarely heard such a cold, hard edge in his own voice. Bound by her honor as a knight, Vanessa had put her life on the line to protect Guido and his mother. Volf, her son, was the one who had failed to save her. The responsibility was not Guido’s.

“My mother fought that day because she chose to.”

“But with my magic, if I had gotten out first, I could have—”

“My mother—no, the knight, Vanessa Scalfarotto—gave her life to save ours. You do not honor her sacrifice by saying you wish you had died instead. Please take it back.”

Volf was vaguely aware of the cold fury burning in his eyes. He knew he had no right to turn such a look upon his elder brother, but he couldn’t help himself.

“I am sorry. Forget what I said.”

“Thank you. Excuse my behavior.”

After seating himself on the sofa again, Guido let out a short sigh. Volf looked away from his brother, gazing out of the window instead. The window was wide open, and outside he could see the villa's lush green lawns and flower beds filled with white blooms.

"I fully understand why you must resent me, and why you've wished to avoid me too."

"I do not resent you, brother, nor have I been particularly avoiding you. It's just that...I've been living here at this house and at the castle barracks for a long time. I can't exactly say that I feel close with the rest of the family."

"Forgive me, Volfred. I should have apologized to you and had this conversation much sooner."

"No, it's...all right."

It was already too late. There was nothing Volf had to say to any of his relations. The trilling of a bird outside felt unpleasantly shrill in his ears. Powerless to stop it, he sat and waited for his brother to speak again.

"That day, while you fought, I was frozen with fear. My mother threw herself around me, trying to shield me from harm. She wouldn't let me go. By the time we left the carriage, everything...everything was red. Even now, I still see them in my dreams—Lady Vanessa and the other knights, lying there on the ground..."

His brother's strained words left Volf speechless. All he could do was watch Guido in silence. The other man's hands slightly trembled as he held them tightly clasped upon the table, his nails pressing little red crescents into the backs of them. It was an eerily familiar sight. He had sat just this way countless times after waking from his own nightmares.



“I’m afraid I’m a poor excuse for an older brother.”

“No, I have those dreams too,” Volf confessed.

Guido’s head snapped up and he gazed at Volf in astonishment. A moment of bewilderment, surprise, and understanding passed between them, until they both nodded, their faces equally etched with bitterness.

“If only there were a way to rid yourself of the dreams you don’t want.”

“For that, Volfred, again, I urge you to marry. I can’t promise the nightmares will never visit again, but they should lessen.”

“Not exactly a simple method, but I’ll remember it,” Volf replied with an empty smile.

Guido smiled more warmly in response.

“I’ve not been a good older brother to you. If it isn’t too late, do you think I could begin to make amends? If there’s anything I can help you with, either with this trading company or at the castle, I’d like you to tell me.”

“That’s very kind of you. I don’t know anything about business, so I’d be grateful for any advice you could offer. Oh, and...if you’re sure you don’t mind indulging me, there *is* a certain material for magical toolmaking that I’d like to get a hold of.”

“Certainly. I’ll be happy to acquire it for you if I can. What is this material?”

“It’s called fairy glass.”

“Fairy glass? That’s a rare thing. Very well, I shall have some sent to you as soon as I find it.”

“Thank you so much.”

Encouraged by his brother’s words, Volf plucked up the courage to make the request. Dahlia had said that fairy glass would not be easy for her to find. Perhaps it would come easier to a Scalfarotto, with all their extensive connections.

“Why don’t you have a talk with Father one of these days?”

“Well, if the opportunity comes up...”

Their father had obviously made a point of avoiding Volf again today—perhaps Guido had noticed and was offering to act as a go-between. Volf couldn't be sure. Seeing Volf's hesitation, Guido continued.

"Though I'm ashamed to say it, I'm afraid I only make it to Lady Vanessa's grave a few times a year. I believe Father, however, visits every month."

"Does he?"

Perhaps his father's affection for his mother ran deeper than he'd realized. He was content just to know that. He didn't mind if that affection didn't extend to him—he was a grown man now, after all.

The conversation wound up, and the time came for the brothers to part once again. Guido turned to his younger brother with a gentle smile.

"I'll pray that dreams of that day trouble your sleep no longer, Volfred."

As Volf watched him go, he happened to think back over the past few weeks, realizing that, in fact, he hadn't had those dreams for a while now. Sifting through his memories to find when exactly this period of peace had begun, he suddenly broke into a broad grin. He hadn't had a single nightmare since the day he met Dahlia.

The Sköll Bracelet

Yesterday evening, a messenger had arrived at the tower with a letter from Volf. The first page consisted of a long, meandering apology for the way he'd spoken with Ivano at the guild. On the second, he wrote, *"If it would not displease you, I would very much like to visit you tomorrow afternoon."* The messenger politely requested Dahlia's reply, and she asked them to convey her acceptance.

Now, minutes before Volf's arrival, Dahlia was wondering if she should see him at all—and if so, how in the world she would explain herself. She peered timidly at her reflection in the mirror. An angry red graze cut across her right cheek, all the way up to the side of her eye. At the back of her head, on the right-hand side, was a painful bump. She had awoken with a sore neck and shoulders. Her clothes concealed a nasty bruise on her right shoulder as well. It was only thanks to the unicorn pendant that the pain wasn't too severe. Her injuries weren't serious enough for her to want to use a potion, so she'd been using a wet towel as a makeshift cold compress instead.

Last night, in her bedroom, she had found the fragments of sköll fang. She tried infusing a little magic into the smaller piece to see if it was usable, and to her delight, it didn't repel her. She climbed onto her bed—a soft landing, in case she should pass out—and prepared to enchant a bracelet using the fang piece as the material. She even readied a sick bucket, just as a precaution.

Dahlia was to receive a potent reminder of the terrifying power sköll fangs had to absorb magic. The results of enchanting with them could be just as frightful. Her experiment left her in no doubt of that whatsoever.

When she first began the enchantment, her magic streamed in at quite a normal pace. It seemed to be pouring in with ever-increasing ease when the sensation quickly changed, transforming into that primal hunger that clawed the power out from within her to consume it. Although Dahlia had been prepared for it this time, it was still hard to bear. She endured wave upon wave

of a sickening, lurching sensation in her stomach, much like one feels going down a slope on a roller coaster. However, she still had the presence of mind to be glad she had skipped dinner.

The piece of sköll fang eventually shattered and vanished, leaving Dahlia with a bracelet powerfully imbued with air magic. She was overjoyed at her success. She tried the accessory on right away, pleased by its pale, silvery gleam. Then she let her guard down. Before properly gauging its strength or finding the correct action to use it with, Dahlia let just a tiny amount of her magic flow into the bracelet. In a split second, her body was hurled into the wall. The impact must have knocked her unconscious because, the next thing she knew, it was near noon the next day.

Hurrying to get ready for Volf's arrival, she quickly poured a bath and stepped in, only to let out a yelp as the hot water smarted on her injuries. She'd been struck dumb as she stood in front of the mirror, staring at the cuts and grazes all over her face. Beside Dahlia's bed, a red, floral-patterned tapestry hung over the stone wall. Thanks to that slight cushioning, she'd gotten away with mere scrapes. She didn't care to imagine what a state she'd be in if she'd gone straight into the stonework.

At the end of all this, Dahlia was left with her completed sköll fang bracelet, enchanted with the strongest air magic she had ever managed. Sitting on the worktop with a cloth enchanted with magic-sealing silver spread beneath it, it gleamed coldly but beautifully in the light. It was a highly durable men's accessory made from the hardest metal she'd had on hand. She'd enchanted it successfully, and its magic was powerful. However, what possible use could it have if the tiniest drop of the wearer's magic would send them flying?

"Better just seal it up in a box," Dahlia muttered dismally.

Then she heard the bell at her gates. Volf was a worrier. Rather than trying to hide, she figured she'd better just see him and be truthful about what had happened. Her mind made up, she stepped out into the sun.

"Please forgive me for the other day. I realize that my words upset you."

"Oh, no, I haven't dwelled on it."

Dahlia was taken aback by Volf's sudden apology, not knowing what to say at

first. Any talk of breasts, behinds, and whatnot had completely gone out of her mind.

“I brought you my mother’s conversation guide and the notes she made. I’d be happy if you’d take a look at them when you have time.”

“S-Sure. Um, come on in.”

Thinking it better to explain herself once he was inside, she beckoned him into the tower.

“You’re favoring your right leg. Did you hurt it?” Volf asked her as they began to climb the stairs.

“Huh? My leg?”

She hadn’t even noticed until now, but he was right—her right knee did have a sort of heaviness to it, though it was nothing serious. As she turned around to say as much to him, Volf’s expression suddenly turned frighteningly dark.

“Dahlia, your face... Who hit you?”

She wasn’t used to hearing that low, husky tone in the young knight’s voice. He dropped his black leather bag where he stood and approached her. Dahlia found herself rooted to the spot by his unblinking golden gaze.

“Oh, no, it’s not like that. It was my own fault.”

“Let me see.”

Dahlia had let her hair down to hide the grazes on her face as best she could. Volf reached out and ever so gently brushed it aside, silently inspecting her wounds. As he lightly touched the back of her head, Dahlia involuntarily let out a groan.

“U-Um, Volf, as I said, I did this to myself. Besides, it’s nothing serious.”

“So you say, but these wounds didn’t come from a fall. Not with the angle of these cuts and that blow on the back of your head. I can see your shoulders and leg are hurting too. Tell me the truth. Who did this to you?”

Volf looked positively frightening. It wasn’t difficult to detect the anger underneath the thin veneer of calm. Dahlia scrambled to explain.

“I promise you, no one else had any part in it! It was the sköll enchantment—it blew me off my feet!”

“Uh-huh.”

The black pupils dotting the centers of Volf’s golden eyes swiftly dilated.

“An enchantment, was it? Why don’t you tell me exactly what happened?” he suggested.

He had a divinely beautiful smile on his face that wasn’t a smile at all. If anything, he looked twice as chilling as before.

“W-Well, you see... I had the idea to enchant a bracelet using a sköll fang...”

Dahlia decided to come clean and tell Volf the whole story. They sat in the living room on the second floor, where Volf listened to her calmly and patiently, chiming in only to confirm the details. Once she had finished, he let out a long sigh.

“You have two options now, Dahlia. You can drink a potion, or I can take you straight to the temple.”

Those surely weren’t the *only* options, Dahlia was about to say, but his intense stare silenced the thought before it left her lips.

“It really isn’t that serious.”

“Oh? Then would you be happy to go out with me looking like that?”

“That...probably wouldn’t be the best idea.”

The marks on her face were sure to attract some glances. In the worst-case scenario, people might even think that *Volf* had done this to her. She couldn’t possibly allow that to happen.

“All right. I’ll take a potion.”

Regretting her decision not to have simply taken it before Volf got here, Dahlia opened a potion and drank it down. The subtle sweetness and the hint of mint reminded Dahlia of a kind of soda she’d drunk in her past life—once it had gone flat. It left a green, grassy sort of aftertaste in her throat when she’d finished, and she quickly washed it down with some water. It wasn’t very

pleasant, in all honesty, but then the flavor wasn't the point.

"It still feels like a waste. Especially when I think of how many bottles of wine I could buy for the price of one of these."

One potion cost five gilt silver—equivalent to about fifty thousand yen. Dahlia could buy several dozen bottles of her usual wine for that amount. She hadn't reckoned for this expense.

"I can bring you another one next time, then."

"Certainly not! I've got no one to blame but myself here."

Volf still seemed somewhat on edge. Dahlia bowed her head to him meekly.

"Look, um, I'm sorry, Volf. I worried you, didn't I?"

"It's all right. I'm sorry for touching you without asking."

"No, that's okay. I know you were just looking out for me."

It felt terribly awkward as they exchanged apologies, each avoiding the other's eyes. In an attempt to clear the air a little, Dahlia pointed to the bracelet she'd made.

"Erm, that's it there—the sköll bracelet."

"It's a beautiful color."

"It is. The only trouble is that if the wearer expresses any magic, it sends them flying."

"May I touch it? I only have my strengthening magic, nothing that expresses externally, so I should be fine."

"Well, um, try just touching it with your fingertips to start with. Please don't put it on."

"Sure... Yeah, seems like I'm safe." After giving it a light, cautious touch, he confidently picked the bracelet up. "I couldn't put any magic into it even if I wanted to, you see. It won't come out."

"So, when you use magical tools that require magic expression, do you need to make a blood bond instead?"

“That’s right. Unfortunately, that then means I’m the only one who can use them, so it’s not a perfect solution.”

There were plenty of people in this world who couldn’t express magic or could only do so very weakly. Many magical tools, like magical lamps and her compact stoves, were operated with switches, which meant anyone could use them without issue. Those made for combat, however, such as self-defense bangles and enchanted weapons, were generally activated by the magical energy of the user. When people who couldn’t express their magic externally—or could only do so very weakly—wanted to use these tools, they often used a method known as “blood bonding.” As the name implied, blood bonding required the user’s blood—only a drop or two—for them to be registered as the magical tool’s owner. Once this simple process was complete, they only had to touch the tool directly and it would activate—except in a few special cases. The downside to blood bonding was that only the registered owner would be able to use the tool, meaning it couldn’t be sold, given away, or shared.

“Do you think that if I blood bonded with it, it’d make me fly?”

“Well, since all you’d be able to do is activate it...perhaps it would make you fly a little bit. It would be like a support item.”

“I can’t add any magic of my own, so in theory, it shouldn’t blow me away like it did to you.”

“Not in *theory*, no, but it’s still dangerous. Even just as a support item, it’ll still be very powerful.”

“My strengthening spell would help me stay in control, wouldn’t it? If I just went straight up, for instance.”

“Straight up?”

“Yeah, just up and back down again. I’d recast my spell during the fall, so I wouldn’t be hurt. I mean, I *did* survive a crash landing with a wyvern once.”

“But that was because the trees broke your fall, wasn’t it?”

“I could easily jump off the top of this tower without doing myself any real damage.”

That strengthening spell was beginning to sound even more incredible than regular magic. Since Volf couldn't actually release any of his magic, it was quite possible that he could use the bracelet as a support item that made him leap higher. Besides, sköll fangs were such a rare material that it seemed like a total waste not to take this chance to test its capabilities.

Hold your horses, Dahlia. It suddenly occurred to her that she should *not* be using Volf as her crash test dummy.

"Volf, I couldn't let you take part in such a dangerous experiment."

"Aren't you curious about its effect? You've got more of this sköll fang, right?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Besides, it's hardly that dangerous when I can easily do *this* already."

Volf bent his legs just slightly as he spoke, then sprang upward. He had no trouble touching the ceiling with his elbows before he came back down to earth. It was an impressive jump, made possible by the power of his strengthening spell. Considering Volf's agility, he would most likely be fine even if he did accidentally send himself sailing off to the left or right, so long as there were no obstacles in the way.

"See? I won't get hurt, even if I do get a little airborne. Won't you let me make a blood bond with it? I'll pay you for it, of course."

"Oh, no. I don't need any money. If you're really sure you wouldn't mind, I'd like you to test the action and power of this bracelet."

Dahlia had Volf prick a finger on his left hand and collected two drops of his blood upon a glass spoon. She carefully poured the tiny droplets onto the bracelet's surface and then drew her magic into her fingertips, using it to spread the blood over the metal. It gradually formed an even film that grew ever thinner until it finally became invisible, as though it had been absorbed into the bracelet.

"And now it's yours."

The bracelet, originally pale silver, now shone with a subtle and beautiful golden glow. There was something quite mysterious about the way the color

shifted in the light.

“Could I try it on now?”

“It might be dangerous in here, so let’s go out to the yard first. It’s around the back, so we’ll be safe from prying eyes.”

Once they had stepped outside, Volf slid the bracelet onto his left wrist. He handled it as casually as any ordinary accessory and, thankfully, didn’t immediately go flying off anywhere.

“Could you step back a bit, Dahlia? Just in case.”

Volf tucked in his chin and bent his legs. Sensing its master’s will and the tremor of magic inside him, the sköll bracelet responded.

“Wha—?”

With unbelievable ease, Volf suddenly leaped to the height of the tower’s third floor. The jump had a slight angle, but he landed nimbly on his feet with no difficulty whatsoever.

“Wow, I wasn’t expecting that,” he commented.

“Um, you *are* using your strengthening magic right now, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but I feel so much lighter than usual; kind of like I was propelled upward. I’m just going to try it again.”

Dahlia had never seen a man fly into the sky like that before. For a few seconds, it was as if gravity itself forgot about him. When Volf at last alighted, he stood holding his hand over his mouth.

“Volf, please stop right away if you feel sick!”

“It’s not that... This is so much *fun*!”

He leaped again, easily reaching the fourth floor and eventually the height of the tower’s roof. Dahlia couldn’t be sure how much power was coming from his strengthening spell and how much from the bracelet, but at any rate, these jumps were leagues beyond what any human could achieve unaided. She remembered her bestiary saying skölls were “as swift as the wind.” It appeared Volf had a natural affinity for their powers.

“Volf, I can see you’re having fun, but *please* don’t go any higher than that! There’ll be trouble if someone sees you.”

Until Dahlia’s plea stopped him, Volf had been rocketing into the air with the biggest, most joyful smile one could imagine.



The two of them retreated inside the tower shortly afterward.

“I’m serious, Dahlia. Please let me buy this from you!”

As Dahlia looked at Volf, whose eyes still sparkled with excitement, her mind was once again drawn to the dog she’d had in her past life. A particular memory surfaced—the day she’d first played Frisbee with her beloved pet. *That’s odd...*

“Instead, how about you take it as a thank-you present for becoming one of my company’s guarantors? That’ll be in addition to my time working on the magical sword, of course.”

“But you’d be left at a loss, then.”

“All right... Let’s compromise. Could I ask you to bring me two potions?”

“Thanks, Dahlia. I’ll bring them next time I visit.”

His eyes creasing as he smiled broadly, he traced around the bracelet with his fingers. The pale silver accessory, glinting gold where the light hit it, suited Volf to a T.

“It won’t be easy for me to make another one of these, though. The other fang piece I have is bigger than the one I used to enchant that bracelet. It’ll take more magical power than I possess to use it. I haven’t a clue where to procure sköll materials either.”

“It’s an amazing little thing, but I can’t think of many people in the knights who’d be able to use it. There’s hardly anyone besides me in the Beast Hunters who can’t express any magic.”

Unwittingly, she’d made an accessory that was quite bespoke to Volf, and now that it was blood bonded to him, no one else would be able to use it. Even if someone else picked it up and did happen to release some of their magic, they wouldn’t be blasted off their feet anymore. In that sense, it had been rendered much safer.

“I can definitely see myself using this on hunts. I’ve only used it to jump upward so far, but once I get used to it, I’ll probably learn to shoot around in different directions.”

“Are you sure that won’t make your job *more* dangerous?”

“No, it should definitely help with evasion. Should help me work with the guys who use air magic too.”

“Wait, those knights... Can they fly?”

“Not fly, exactly, but they can leap as high as I did outside—even higher sometimes.”

If the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters were to star in the Hollywood movies Dahlia had known in her past life, she imagined the special effects department would be out of a job.

“I’d really like to show this off to everyone, but would it be better if I tried to keep it secret instead?”

“Yes, please do. Even if I wanted to, I could never mass-produce these like socks or soap bottles. If you explain the enchantment to a more powerful magical toolmaker or a mage you trust, you could probably have them make you another one.”

The first person who came to mind when Volf thought of a powerful mage was his older brother, Guido, whom he’d met just yesterday. Guido was a water mage almost as powerful as their father. His abilities were on par with any of the first-class mages in the royal army.

“There is someone who comes to mind, but it might take me a while to get in touch with him...”

He still didn’t feel entirely comfortable asking his brother for such favors. He might bring it up if the right opportunity presented itself, but it would not be easy.

“Ah, speaking of powerful magic, I’ve found another material we might be able to use for the sword—unicorn horn. It may have the magic-resistant properties we need.”

“Have you tried it?”

“Well, I tried enchanting the horn when I made this pendant, but it wouldn’t work. That’s either because my magic is too weak or because the horn itself has magic-resistant properties. I was thinking it’d be worth disassembling a

shortsword and using the unicorn horn as a material to enchant it.”

Volf’s eyes sparkled with childlike fascination at first, but after a few moments, his gaze fell.

“Unicorn horns... They must be a pretty rare material.”

“Yes, I believe so. I hear the pelts are a rare commodity at the Adventurers’ Guild too.”

“Maybe we could lure some out and hunt them for ourselves.”

“Er, Volf, I think that’s a little ambitious, for you or for me.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Volf had made a career out of slaying beasts, after all. A unicorn would surely turn tail and run at the mere sight of him. Dahlia, meanwhile, was far more likely to be trampled than to emerge victorious from that battle. Volf fell silent, apparently considering alternative hunting methods. Dahlia decided to change the subject.

“It’s a good thing I chose a bracelet to enchant with that fang. If it’d been a sword, I might have nailed myself to the wall.”

“I’m...very glad you chose that too.”

Perhaps she could have chosen her words more carefully; that slightly frightening gleam had returned to Volf’s eyes.

“I’d be much happier if you’d leave experiments with new materials until I’m here,” he said. “Or perhaps you could get an assistant. You’re here on your own, after all; it could be seriously dangerous if you hurt yourself or collapsed.”

“I’ll be careful. Oh, come to think of it, there’s only one other person who can open my gates at the moment.”

Dahlia looked at the control panel as she thought. Her father had passed away, and she had removed Tobias’s name—that left Irma as the only one who could open the tower’s gates if anything should happen to Dahlia.

“That won’t do, will it? If I need help, I can’t have people locked outside the gates... I’ll get a few more people on the register. Better safe than sorry.”

Her father's death at the Merchants' Guild had been very sudden. There was no guarantee that something wouldn't happen to her with just as little warning.

"If you wouldn't mind, could you include me in that? Ideally, I'd like you to avoid doing anything dangerous like last night, but if anything *did* happen and you couldn't leave the tower, I'd at least be able to talk to you from the door."

"I really appreciate your concern. All right, just to be safe, then. This way."

Dahlia led Volf to the back of the workshop, where the control panel resided. It measured thirty centimeters on each edge and, at a glance, appeared to be nothing more than a slab of black stone.

"Ah, you don't register at the gate itself with this type?"

"That's right. You do it here at the control panel."

Dahlia brought her magic down into her fingertips and activated the control panel. The smooth surface turned from black to light gray.

"Could you lay your hand flat in the center?"

"Do you think it'll still work even though I can't express my magic?"

"That shouldn't be a problem. I have a friend who can hardly cast any magic at all, but she registered just fine."

Volf pressed his left palm onto the control panel. It flashed white twice in quick succession. After checking the handprint left on the panel's surface, Dahlia concentrated her magic in her index finger and wrote Volf's name in the bottom right.

"All done. Let's go and try it, shall we?"

They walked down the tower's front path and through the copper-colored gates, which gently swung closed behind them. While Dahlia watched, the young knight gently touched the gates. Without any delay, they obligingly opened as though to welcome him in.

"That's great. Do you mind if I try it one more time?"

"Of course. Go ahead. The day that friend of mine registered, she opened and closed it about thirty times."

Something about being able to open the gates with merely a touch seemed to delight people.

“Before I met you, I always imagined that a wizard lived here. These gates certainly fit the image.”

“I think a real wizard’s tower would have stairs that took you up and down automatically.”

Every day, as she worked and did her chores, Dahlia was constantly climbing up and down those stairs. Living in a tower demanded a certain amount of stamina.

“I don’t like to ask this of you, but...if you ever arrive and I don’t answer the door or respond to any other contact, and you suspect something’s amiss, please call the guards.”

“I pray that I’ll never need to.”

“So do I. I’ll take care to do things safely, but...things can happen to people, you know? Completely out of the blue.”

“Out of the blue...? Yeah, you’re right. There’s only so much you can plan for,” Volf replied as he stooped to pick up the leather bag he’d left lying on the floor.

Late in the afternoon, a little after teatime, Volf and Dahlia were on the second floor, finally taking a moment to relax with cups of iced tea.

“We’d better leave shopping for those estervino glasses until everything’s calmed down a bit, I guess.”

“Yes, I think so. I have more paperwork at the guild to deal with tomorrow. I need to sort some things out with Ivano as well.”

“The Beast Hunters have joint training exercises tomorrow. Shouldn’t be too bad, so long as they don’t send us out on an expedition. By the way, I hope you didn’t mind me recommending Ivano the other day.”

“Not at all. I’m very grateful, truly. I do feel awful for making him quit the guild, though.”

“It was what he wanted. You shouldn’t feel guilty. I think he’s going to be much happier as a merchant in his own right, rather than guild staff.”

There was one part of his conversation with Ivano that Volf chose not to relay—the part where Ivano had called her “a goddess robed in gold.”

“Oh, right, here’s my mother’s guide to conversation and her notes. Feel free to take a look.”

Volf retrieved a book from inside his leather bag. A bundle of notes was sandwiched between its pages.

“Thank you. I really appreciate you letting me borrow them.”

On its own, the book wasn’t particularly hefty, but the notes added significantly to its thickness.

“My mother’s handwriting is a little peculiar; let me know if you have trouble reading any of the notes. You’ll find examples of phrases to avoid, like that one about the gloves, in this section here.”

“Gosh. There are a lot, aren’t there?” Dahlia sighed as she opened the bookmarked page.

The whole two-page spread was completely crammed with examples. How could anyone possibly remember all these? She began to read some aloud.

“Will you take off your gloves for me?” That sounded like an invitation to literally throw down the gauntlet and declare a duel.

“Let me look after your coat.” Why would she want to do that? To clean it?

“I am so tired from dancing, I cannot move.” *Then go home right this minute!* she immediately thought.

“Shall we go to the west window and gaze at the stars?” Dahlia could summon no other interpretation of this than literal stargazing. *And why the west?*

“May I offer you a brandy before bed?” A strong drink like brandy would help you sleep—that much made sense. With a bit of thought, she *supposed* she could see how this one could acquire an alternative meaning, but she would never have taken it as anything other than an offer of a drink.

“I don’t get these at all...”

As Dahlia turned these bafflingly cryptic phrases over in her mind, she suddenly noticed how strangely quiet Volf had become. She looked up at the young knight sitting across from her. He was sitting completely still, elbows on the table and hands folded, shielding his closed eyes.

“Volf? Is something wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Dahlia, but do you think you could read silently?”

“Oh! Oh, goodness, I’m so sorry.”

She’d thought nothing of reading these phrases aloud, but it seemed that from Volf’s point of view, they were so mortifying to hear that he couldn’t even look her in the eye. Dahlia wanted to flee from the room. She was desperately trying to think of something she could say to clear the air when an extremely welcome sound broke the silence. It was the clang of the bell at the gates.

“Must be a customer. I’ll be back in a minute!”

Once Dahlia had dashed from the room, Volf’s head slowly sank. He didn’t open his eyes. Volf had, of course, heard the kinds of phrases she’d just read aloud dozens of times. He’d received many even more brazen proposals too. Yet he had never before been so disarmed or so robbed of his composure before. Of course, Dahlia had read out those phrases in complete innocence—and besides, he didn’t look at her that way! This time, it was Volf’s turn to slump facedown on the table.

“Hi, Dahlia! Here—somethin’ to repay you for the other night.”

Marcello stood before the tower’s gates with a case of six red wines and a wooden bucket in hand.

“Oh, thanks, Marcello! You really didn’t need to.”

“Nah, I drank more than my fair share, and you gave us a real feast. These’re from Irma. They’ve been purged, so they’re ready to go.”

The bucket Marcello held up was filled with water. At the bottom nestled a large heap of shellfish.

“Ah, clams! They look great!”

“It’s just the time of year for ’em. Say, want me to carry these up the stairs for

you? They're heavy."

"Oh, well, I have a guest at the moment, actually..."

Volf was waiting up there. It would be an awkward introduction if they suddenly met like this.

"Say no more. I won't keep you. All right if I just stick this inside the workshop, then?"

"That'd be perfect. Thanks."

Marcello did just that, leaving the case of wine and the bucket beside the workshop door. He turned to Dahlia with a grin.

"Now, don't go drinkin' too much when you have those clams, huh? See you around, Dahlia."

"Yeah, see you soon!"

After their brief conversation, Marcello hurried back to the carriage he had parked outside. Dahlia gazed down into the bucket of crystal-clear water. The clams' siphons were protruding just slightly, like two little horns. These clams were just somewhat larger than the ones Dahlia had known in her past life. Their shells were also more vividly colored, and they glittered in the light as though speckled with mica. Judging from the color of the siphons poking out from within the shells, the meat inside would be delicious.

The clams sold in the capital were one of Dahlia's most beloved foods—especially when they were in season. Leaving the wine for later, she happily carried the bucket of clams up to the second floor.

"Was that a friend of yours?" Volf asked.

It seemed their voices had carried up through the open window. Dahlia gently set the bucket down on the table as she replied.

"That's right. His name's Marcello. He's married to one of my oldest friends. He works at the Couriers' Guild, and he's also one of my company's guarantors."

"Ah, I see."

“Actually, um, the two of them have invited me over for drinks sometime soon, and I was wondering, if you felt up to it...whether you’d like to come with me.”

“Well, I’d love to, of course, but...what sort of person is his wife?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot you might be worried about that.”

“It’s not your fault.”

Volf’s daily struggle to avoid trouble with women had completely slipped Dahlia’s mind. Now she understood the reason for his hesitance.

“You don’t need to worry about Irma. If it would make you feel more comfortable, though, you could always wear your glasses.”

“Is she a lot like you? The type of person who’s not too swayed by people’s looks, I mean.”

“It’s not that so much as she only has eyes for Marcello, so...hmm. It’s a little difficult to explain.”

Dahlia couldn’t imagine how any person, no matter how determined, could come between those two lovebirds. Even an Adonis like Volf wouldn’t turn Irma’s head, nor would any voluptuous beauty tempt Marcello.

“If you’re sure, then yes. I’ll be more than happy to meet your friends once the chance comes along.”

“That’s wonderful. Now, would you happen to like clams? Marcello just brought these along.”

“Yeah, I love them.”

Both of them peered into the bucket. There were quite a lot, but they would do nicely split between the two of them.

“They’re in season right now. Care to share them with me?”

“That’d be great. Sorry for making you do this every time. I brought this with me today, but I’m not so sure it’d be good with clams...”

From his bag, Volf produced a bottle of amber liquid. It was on the small side and exceedingly simple; it had no label or any other sort of adornment. Nothing

distracted from the beautiful amber glimmer of its contents.

“Is that whiskey?”

“Apple brandy. Slightly aged, I believe. The duchess—Lady Altea—gave it to me. She said to enjoy it with a friend.”

The brandy had a fine, rich color. It would be best enjoyed with some simple snacks, rather than a meal.

“Clams probably aren’t the best match for it, you’re right. Shall we try some afterward?”

“Sure. I’ll leave it right here.” He placed it down on the table in front of the sofa before turning back to her. “So, is there anything I can help with?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, could you set the table for me? And pour us each a glass of white wine too.”

“You wouldn’t prefer red?”

“Not with clams. White’s better.”

They went to the kitchen together, where Dahlia prepared to cook and Volf readied their glasses.

“I’m thinking clams steamed in white wine with a side of garlic bread. Does that suit you?”

“Absolutely. That’s one of my favorites.”

While the clams got a quick rinse, Dahlia heated olive oil and chopped garlic in a shallow pan. Beside her, Volf—following her instructions—thinly sliced a baguette and spread the pieces evenly with garlic butter.

“Do you often have clams steamed in wine?” Dahlia asked him.

“I do. Doesn’t matter whether I’m at a fancy restaurant or a regular bar; it’s a go-to for me.”

“They’ll all come served on a plate, then. Even in bars, they don’t bring you the pan so you can take them right out, do they?”

“No. Some places serve them already shelled for you, though.”

Hearing that, Dahlia hesitated slightly, but she decided to suggest how *she* thought they were best enjoyed.

“My father was very particular about this dish. He liked to enjoy the clams right away, while they were still piping hot. We used to cook them over a gentle heat, then bring the pan to the table. We each had a plate and just picked the clams straight from the pan. If it’s all right with you, shall we try doing it that way?”

“Sure. Rossetti style sounds good to me.”

Rossetti style, hm? Dahlia smiled at that as she tipped the shellfish into the pan. Listening to them hiss and squeak, she poured in the white wine and then put the lid on. Next to the pan of clams, the garlic bread was toasting on a sheet of mesh. She kept a close eye on it, watching as it slightly browned and the delicious aroma of butter and garlic wafted into the air.

“Volf, could you take this to the table and go open the wine for us, please? I’ll bring the clams as soon as they’re done.”

“No problem. I’ll make sure everything’s ready,” he replied cheerfully, taking the wine and warm garlic bread through.

Dahlia followed a minute or so later, carrying the pan of now-opened clams to the table.

“Let’s have a quick toast first,” she said as she sat down.

Volf obliged. “Here’s to prosperity for the Rossetti Trading Company and a blessed tomorrow. Cheers!”

“May tomorrow bring peace to our hearts... Cheers.”

The two of them exchanged wry smiles at Dahlia’s painfully honest wish, bringing their glasses together with a bright clink. All of a sudden, Dahlia’s throat felt awfully dry. The chilled white wine was a balm to it.

“Just take your clams from the pan and pop them on your plate. If there’s some meat stuck in the shell or you want to eat the adductor muscle, use one of these little knives. Erm, don’t be too shy to use your hands either... I’m afraid it’s not the most elegant method, but anyway, let’s eat up while they’re hot.”

Dahlia lifted the pan's lid, releasing a puff of mouthwateringly fragrant steam. The aroma of the clams mingled with that of the olive oil and garlic, instantly rousing their appetites.

"I recommend dipping your bread into the liquid left in the pan; it's delicious. As for the clams, add some black pepper if you fancy, but they're good without too."

"Got it. Let's dig in, then."

They began helping themselves to the steaming clams, using forks to separate the meat from the shells. Each mouthful of clam meat, almost hot enough to burn their tongues, was bursting with rich, savory juiciness. The clams were completely clean of grit, and the pleasingly springy meat released more of its delicious, salty flavor with each bite. A sip of white wine to follow smoothly washed away the saltiness and cooled the tongue, rendering it ready for the next piping hot clam. So began a delightful series of alternations between hot and salty, cold and clean.

Once you could bring yourself to break the chain, the crisp, crunchy texture of the garlic bread offered some welcome variety. Perhaps thanks to the clams' freshness, even the juice soaked up from the bottom of the pan held no unpleasant fishy odor—it was scrumptious to the last drop. The garlic bread also paired very nicely with the wine, and their glasses emptied fast. On the other side of the table, Dahlia saw Volf chewing silently and slowly and decided not to interrupt his reverie. The silence lasted, in fact, until every last clam had been polished off.

Finally finished, Volf regarded the veritable mountain of shells perplexedly. "Where do these clams come from? Are they some special variety? They're the tastiest I've ever had."

"I think they're just the regular clams you can buy anywhere. They *are* especially fresh, though."

"Do you suppose they lose their flavor if you take them out of the shells beforehand, or if they cool down even a little? Maybe it's important to keep the lid on until the last moment too. Could it be that straight from the pan is the only way to eat them...?"

Dahlia couldn’t help a giggle as Volf pondered the best way to enjoy clams with grave seriousness.

“Just make sure you consider the place and company, won’t you? Eating straight from the pan isn’t very good manners, after all.”

“So, your clams steamed in wine are a Green Tower exclusive, then?”

“Not just wine. I can make them with other drinks too.”

“Really? You could steam them in, say, estervino as well?”

“Absolutely. Estervino is perfect for steaming; it’s delicious.”

“Would you mind if I bring a bottle and some clams next time?”

Volf’s expression was intense. She was glad that he’d enjoyed the meal, but she hadn’t quite expected *this* level of enthusiasm.

“It takes quite a while to purge the clams of sand and grit. If you let me know in advance when you’ll be coming, I can prepare some the day before.”

“Right. In that case, I’ll bring along the best estervino I can find.”

“Oh, no, that would be such a waste! For steaming, a cheap one will work just fine.”

“But surely, whether it’s wine or estervino, a top-quality one would make the dish even more delicious.”

“I don’t think it works like that...”

Dahlia cautioned Volf thoroughly against buying a fine estervino merely for the sake of some clams.

Drinking together after a good meal was fast becoming a habit for the two of them. They relaxed on the sofa with a platter of cheese, crackers, and dried fruits on the coffee table in front of them. Volf opened the apple brandy, and once he had poured them each a small glass, they raised a second toast. Dahlia thought hard about whom and what to dedicate this one to.

“To the good health of Lady Altea, who kindly gifted us this brandy, and to a prosperous tomorrow.”

“To a prosperous tomorrow.”

Dahlia, having been steeling herself for a strong alcoholic punch, was pleasantly surprised by the brandy's sweetness. She'd never had the good fortune to smell apple blossom before, so the brandy's thick, heavily sweet fragrance instead brought to mind roses. The flavor had a distinctly fruity note. It certainly warmed the throat on the way down, as was typical of brandy, but it was a soft, gentle burn. Dahlia had poured herself a glass of water as a palate cleanser, but she was left with no desire to sip it anytime soon.

"What a wonderful brandy. The fragrance and flavor are just beautiful."

"It's made at the Gastoni estate. I hear even the queen's a fan."

Dahlia was happily basking in the warm, sweet afterglow of the delightful spirit, but the mention of one of the kingdom's most exalted personages soon pulled her from her reverie.

"Did you say the *queen*?"

"Yeah. Apparently, the Gastonis present her with a batch of it every year. The queen is the younger sister of Lady Altea's late husband, you see. Although they weren't related by blood."

"Um, are you sure it's okay for me to hear this?"

"It's not a secret or anything. The queen's birth family didn't have sufficient rank to allow her to marry into royalty, so she was adopted by the Gastonis and married after that. Adoptions like that, to fix a mismatch in rank, are pretty common among the nobility."

Whenever Dahlia heard about these noble customs, she felt as though she were peering into a mysterious, unknown world, completely separate from her own. However, the takeaway was that this brandy glimmering in her glass was something truly special. She couldn't be sure how many times she'd get to enjoy it in her life. She raised her glass with reverence, taking only tiny sips. As she nibbled at a dried red date, she felt herself being watched. She looked up to see Volf's shoulders shaking as he fought to stifle his laughter.

"Is something wrong?"

"You suddenly started eating and drinking like a little squirrel... It just looked so funny!"

“*Squirrel*? I’m just trying to appreciate the flavor!”

“If you like it that much, I’ll buy you some for next time.”

“I appreciate it, but no thank you. If you drink the good stuff all the time, it stops being special.”

It was nice to indulge in an expensive tipple from time to time, but making a habit out of something she couldn’t easily afford for herself wouldn’t feel right. Besides, regardless of what it was or how much it cost, she couldn’t mooch drinks off of Volf all the time.

“You’re right, though. That fragrance is lovely,” Volf said, his golden eyes gazing into the deep amber brandy. The contrast of those rich, warm colors was beautiful to behold. “Perhaps we ought to buy some brandy glasses too.”

“I was just wondering if I should get a bigger drink cabinet.”

Once you began turning into a drink connoisseur, the expenses could rack up quickly. She’d just have to work that little bit harder during the day, Dahlia thought to herself.

“You’re going to be busy from now on, huh?”

“I’m sorry. I just handed you those socks in the hope that they might be useful. I never imagined what it would lead to.”

“There’s no need to apologize to me. I’m the one who went handing them out to my friends and the captain. I thought they felt great, sure, but I didn’t see this coming either.”

They slowly sipped at their glasses as they chatted, looking back on how all this craziness had started. The conversation seemed to flow even more smoothly thanks to the sweetly fragrant brandy.

“As a magical toolmaker, you should be so proud of yourself. It’s truly amazing to have created something that so many people want.”

“Well, it’s very nice of you to say that, but I feel like I’m causing so much trouble for everyone around me... Are there really so many people in the Beast Hunters who worry about having sweaty boots?”

“Not just the Beast Hunters; I think there are a lot among the knights in

general. People can't avoid sweating, after all, whether they're training or just standing guard, and leather boots really exacerbate the problem. That said, it's not as if we could wear sandals or cloth shoes or something while on missions. I heard those insoles alone made a big difference, you know."

Volf had a point. Sandals would neither be good for the knights' performance in battle nor their image. For those like the Beast Hunters, especially, who battled dangerous monsters out in the wilds, strong, sturdy footwear that kept the water out was essential.

"Do you wash your leather boots and shoes, or perhaps cast purifying spells on them?"

"No, we don't wash them much—it damages the leather. I've never heard of anyone using purification magic. If we've been tramping through the swamps or something, we'll wash them, of course, but then they take ages to dry out. When there're long spells of rain, the mages sometimes use air magic to dry them a bit, but that only goes so far. The toes are always still damp. They start to smell too."

Given the lack of cleaning and the boots' poor breathability, it was inevitable that they'd be prone to molding, which could easily lead to the wearer developing athlete's foot. The slow drying would surely hasten the deterioration of the leather itself too.

"Do you never use dryers on them when they're damp?"

"The heat's not good for the leather. I tried using a dryer once, but it really parched the surface. If only you could lower the temperature somehow, it might work."

"If that's all that's needed, I can quickly alter one of my dryers. I'll just pop down to the workshop for a minute."

"Ah, I'll come with you, then. I like to watch you work."

Once they had both emptied their glasses, Dahlia and Volf descended the stairs to the workshop.

"What sort of temperature would be best for drying boots, do you think?" Dahlia asked as she fetched a spare dryer from a box upon one of her shelves.

“Just warm enough so it feels comfortable on your skin. That shouldn’t affect the leather too much.”

“In that case, I’ll increase the power a bit while lowering the temperature.”

“Cold air would be handy too. Sometimes if your boots are a bit musty, you just want to blow some fresh, cool air in there to clear them out.”

Guided by Volf’s suggestions, Dahlia adjusted the fire crystal’s magic circuits in order to lower the minimum temperature. She also altered the part housing the air crystal, adding the option of a stronger blast of air. She added three temperature settings: cold, lukewarm, and a third one just slightly warmer than the last. She set the temperatures low so that even with heavy use, there was no risk of anything catching fire. An automatic shutoff if the maximum temperature was exceeded also sounded like a good idea.

Keeping safety foremost in her mind, Dahlia took a new crystal plate and began pouring magic through her index finger, carefully drawing out the magic circuits. First, she made the setting for the slightly warmer air with the excuse that it might be useful for drying the likes of slippers and shoes made of cloth. Truthfully, she just wanted to make life easier by keeping the three-level temperature setting intact; reducing it to two would mean altering the structure. Simply adjusting the temperature and power settings was straightforward; she had it done, with all of Volf’s requests fulfilled, in about fifteen minutes.

“I think this temperature’ll be perfect. Is there a way you can make sure the air reaches right to the boot’s toe?”

“An extending tube should solve that problem. We do the same thing with the water dispensers. I’ll punch some extra holes in it to make sure the air reaches everywhere it should,” Dahlia replied, thinking aloud.

The extending tubes had originally been made for her father’s hot water dispensers. She added some extra holes along the middle and end sections to let the air blow through. This too took only a few minutes.

“That’s great,” Volf said appreciatively. “It bends and it’s long enough to reach down a long boot. Should get the toes nice and dry in no time.”

“I’ll go get us a boot so we can test it.”

Dahlia went to the entrance hall and opened the shoe cabinet that sat just inside the door, taking out a black pair of men’s boots. They had been her father’s best pair, so she’d held on to them. She’d taken them out and polished them a couple of times since his passing, so they had a good shine to them. Just as she was pushing the tube of the new shoe-drying device down into one of the boots, Dahlia suddenly frowned.

“Oh, Father! Honestly!”

*Father, we do **not** scrunch up our socks and leave them in the toes of our boots!* Finding these socks, hidden away in the darkness for over a year, felt almost like excavating some historical artifact. And he’d stuffed them *both* in there too; one in each boot. Unbelievable. Dahlia gingerly extracted the socks, her shoulders trembling. Volf spoke up, his voice soft and tinged with concern.

“Er, Dahlia... Do you want to keep those to remember him by?”

“No,” she replied without hesitation. “I’m burning them.”

Dahlia threw the socks straight into the trash can and once again inserted the tube into one of the boots. After letting the warm air blow for a little while, she touched the boot’s toe and found it distinctly warm.

“What do you think, Volf?”

“Perfect. It’ll work on all shapes and sizes.”

Volf seemed pleased with the temperature as well, happily examining the dryer’s tube.

“Why don’t you take it back to the barracks with you to test out? If you could write me a report on it afterward, that’d be very helpful.”

“Thanks, but...I get the feeling we had this conversation before.”

“Huh? Is something wrong?”

Volf’s smile had suddenly vanished, a frown creasing his features.

“Well, just like last time, I gave you this list of things I wanted, and you whipped it up in no time... I can’t help thinking that if I take this back and use it

at the barracks, we might end up in the same situation we had with the toe socks and insoles."

"Surely not. It's an ordinary dryer; all I did was tinker around a little. I'm sure the magical toolmakers at the castle could make one of these in minutes."

"It's not so easy for ordinary knights to go asking the toolmakers for favors. Besides, you and I had no idea the toe socks and insoles would be so popular, right?"

"Well, I suppose not. Even so..."

"Just to be on the safe side, I think you should write up a specification document and take it to Ivano at the guild before we do anything else."

"Okay. I really don't think this is anything special, but I'll talk to him anyway."

Although tomorrow Ivano would see his workload double, for the moment, both he and Dahlia remained blissfully unaware of the fact.

"Even with just one, we could all take turns using it," Volf commented happily.

"Um, there shouldn't be a problem if the boots have just been thoroughly washed, but otherwise, I'd avoid sharing with anyone who's suffering from athlete's foot. You could get infected too, so please be careful."

"Wait, you mean it can pass from person to person?"

Volf clearly had no idea. He must have thought it came solely from damp boots.

"It can, sometimes. How do they treat it in the Beast Hunters?"

"If it's a mild case, a mage takes care of it with restorative magic at the castle. Bad cases are seen at the temple. I've heard it often comes back, though. I never realized it was infectious."

Seeing Volf's shock prompted her to scour her memories of her past life for any helpful advice.

"When you bathe, it's important to wash your feet thoroughly with soap, right up to the toes. People with athlete's foot should make sure to dry their

feet thoroughly after bathing and then apply ointment. They should keep their feet dry as much as possible. Oh, and please make sure never to share your boots or shoes. With leather shoes or boots, make sure to wear your toe socks when possible. When you're on your own, it might be a good idea to wear something breathable like sandals. And make sure to take your socks off when you go to bed too."

"Hold on, let me write this down! I have friends with athlete's foot—they need to know all this."

Volf grabbed a piece of paper and began to jot each point down. Dahlia repeated them all for him and added a few more. She hoped the advice would help his friends make a full recovery and keep Volf from contracting the condition himself.

"You sure know a lot about athlete's foot, Dahlia."

"Er, yes. My father had it," she answered shortly.

It wasn't a lie, but it had been her father in her past life who'd suffered from it. As she offered up a silent apology to Carlo, she was reminded of something he'd said to her on the way home from Tobias's father's funeral.

"Even after I'm gone, Dahlia, if you ever think you can use my name to get yourself out of trouble, then do it."

Her father, grieving his friend, had gotten very drunk that day while the rain sheeted down outside. He'd seemed to struggle just to get those words out. She'd brushed it off at the time, chiding him not to say such gloomy things, and quickly put it out of her mind. He'd worn these boots on that rainy day. Just now, she'd used his name just as he'd told her, but she couldn't help wondering if it was *really* the right situation. After all, even if it was in the context of her work, having a case of athlete's foot wrongly attributed to him was surely not what he'd envisioned. Dahlia decided she'd bring him a bottle of something a little more expensive next time she paid a visit to his grave. If she *had* invoked his ire, that ought to quell it. She prayed for forgiveness while she put his boots away in the cabinet again.

Once Volf had completed his list of athlete's foot care tips and Dahlia had completed her list of alterations needed to make the shoe-drying device, the

pair returned to the second floor. Volf was firm that he wouldn't take the drying device into the castle until they had Ivano's permission. It seemed rather a shame.

"So, Dahlia, would you mind if I wore the bracelet during the joint training exercises I'll be having tomorrow? I'll wear gloves over the top."

The pale metal of the sköll bracelet glinted on the young man's left wrist.

"I don't mind, but you'll be found out pretty soon if you jump too high, won't you?"

"Yeah, I'll be careful not to go overboard. Sorry about earlier. I know it might sound silly, but...I've hardly ever been able to use magic like that before. It was so much fun."

Dahlia understood at last why he'd been bouncing around her garden like an overexcited child. The sköll bracelet's effect was akin to casting powerful air magic. Volf had used other enchanted bracelets before—ones that prevented the likes of poisoning and anemia, as well as magical devices like the anti-eavesdropper—but the sköll bracelet was a different thing entirely. She also remembered hearing from Marcello once that the strengthening spell didn't really feel like casting magic. That spell was the only kind Volf had ever been able to use. Being able to borrow the sköll's powerful air magic to leap into the sky must have been such a fresh, exhilarating experience for him. He'd have been like a child just discovering their magical power for the first time. No one could fail to be excited at that truly *magical* moment. She'd like to let him leap as high as his heart desired, but if he went soaring over the tower's roof, someone was sure to call the guards. He'd be better off enjoying himself somewhere safely within the castle grounds, although even that left her with some concerns.

"You don't find the bracelet difficult to control?"

"Not really. Going straight up is easy enough. I think I've got a good enough handle on how to control it, and I'll only activate it when I need to anyway."

To anyone who expressed even the tiniest drop of magic, that bracelet would be nigh uncontrollable, but Volf, it seemed, had gotten the hang of it with relative ease.

“When you do your training, are there mages with healing magic or priests standing by?”

“Yeah, there’re always a few on hand during joint training. They mostly keep out of the way unless they’re needed, though. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you’re still not used to the bracelet. You could get hurt.”

“I’ll be fine. Fractures and the like are easy to fix.”

“Volf...a fracture is a serious injury,” Dahlia said hesitantly.

The knight smiled at her somewhat awkwardly.

“I appreciate the concern, don’t get me wrong. It might sound a little scary to you, but these sorts of injuries are a daily occurrence for us knights. I guess I’m so used to it, it’s hard to see from your point of view. It’s not unusual for the mages or priests to regrow whole limbs for us when we get attacked by beasts during missions.”

Volf may have been able to speak about it quite casually, but that wasn’t “a little scary.” It was *horrifying*. One would think he was talking about replacing the arms and legs of dolls.

“You mean they do it there on the spot? They don’t take you to the temple?”

“Generally speaking, yeah, though it also depends on the ability of the mage and the nature of the injury.”

“And they can regrow whole limbs in that short of a time?”

Volf straightened himself up, his expression deadly serious as he asked her, “Do you want me to explain this in detail?”

“Yes, please do,” Dahlia responded in kind, listening carefully.

“Let’s say someone’s been injured by a beast; maybe it’s hit them or bitten them. They’re left writhing in pain on the ground. What usually happens is that a few other knights will come hold them still while someone applies healing magic. Now, the healing starts from the bone. First, you see the white bone slowly grow out from the joint, stretching out until it’s regrown right to the tip. Then the white tendons and red muscles gradually appear and cover the bones. Last of all, a shiny new layer of skin spreads out over the top, and it’s done. An

arm takes about five minutes to regrow. If it's a messy injury, then the best thing we can do is find a good place to make a cut, chop the limb off cleanly with a sword, then get it regrown right away."

"That hurts just to listen to!" Dahlia cried, cringing at Volf's gruesome, rapid-fire explanation.

"Well, that's why I asked if you really wanted me to explain. I thought it might scare you."

Don't say it with such a big grin! Dahlia shook her head to chase away the unpleasantly graphic images forming in her head. She was sure Volf knew exactly what he was doing when he gave her all those gory details—it was patently obvious from his smile. It left her a little bit peeved with him.

"Do you have any frightening stories or memories? Aside from when you melted your hands with black slime, of course."

"Um...that time when I was drying all the slimes here, I suppose."

She'd racked her brains, but every incident that came to mind had some connection to magical toolmaking. What's more, the amount involving slimes was abnormally high.

"You and those slimes seem to be tied by fate."

"Much as I'd like to deny it...you're right."

"Couldn't you have gotten your supplier to dry the slimes for you?"

"I was still a student at the time. These days, they're often sold ready-powdered, but that wasn't so common back then. It would've been expensive to have someone else do it, so I decided to deal with them myself. I had all different kinds of slimes—blue, red, green... I dried them on the roof, in the windows, even out in the yard. They were all over the place."

This had been the period when she was developing her waterproof cloth. She'd gathered all the varieties of slimes she could lay her hands on. Tobias and her father had looked on with bemused smiles, while Irma, coming over to visit one day, had let out a shriek as soon as she'd stepped through the door.

"Must've been a riot of color. But hold on, didn't any of them try to get away?

Unless they're completely dead, slimes usually divide themselves to escape from danger."

"When they hunt them, they make sure to destroy the slimes' cores. Then they seal up any puncture wounds with kraken tape. That way, they hold their shape and can be brought back in one piece. All you need to do then is flatten them out, put them in a spot with plenty of sunlight and good airflow, and they'll soon dry. Unfortunately, they rot pretty quickly in the rain."

"I never knew."

Volf had slain countless slimes over the last few years, but he'd never come across this harvesting method before. He made a mental note to bring along some kraken tape on the next hunt.

"Birds are another problem. They often went for the slimes I had hanging out to dry."

"You mean birds eat slimes?"

"Uh-huh. They like some species more than others, but as long as the slimes haven't melted, the birds'll have a peck at them. As I remember, green slimes were the most popular choice."

"Maybe it reminds them of leaves."

Volf pictured some green slime sitting upon a platter with a side of meat. It wasn't an appetizing image.

"They certainly seem to find the color appealing. They ruined quite a few of my green slimes by pecking them to bits. I went up to the roof thinking I'd try hanging up some nets to keep the birds off when I found that the black slime I had drying up there was still alive."

"Black slime...so you rear your ugly head again."

Volf's expression darkened as though he'd heard the name of his archnemesis. Dahlia couldn't help a little smile.

"Yes. I only had one of them. It seemed that its core had survived intact, and it had caught a bird that had come to feed on it. It had half dissolved the little thing already. I ran crying to Father, and by the time we both went back up to

the roof, it had finished the bird and started eating the green slimes I was drying too. It was a pretty chilling sight."

"Black slimes are a class-one mark. What did you do? Call the guards?"

"Father burned it with a dryer and finished it off."

Volf's glass stopped just as it reached his lips. Without drinking, he placed it back on the table with a hard *thunk*.

"Hold on. Black slimes are *very* resistant to fire."

"Only up to a certain temperature. Once you pass that, they'll burn all right. They'll burn very nicely. Very cleanly. Leaving nothing but dust," Dahlia answered quietly, averting her eyes.

Her mistakes had given rise to the first dryer-cum-flamethrower, but the new version that her father had used to defeat that black slime had been his work. All she'd done was ask him one day, "Father, would it be possible to make a dryer with even more firepower than the one I made?" Her intentions had been entirely pure; it was sheer curiosity. Never once had she said, "Make it for me!" or anything of the sort. Therefore, it wasn't her responsibility. She wouldn't hear otherwise.

Carlo had been cool as ice as he'd turned on the flames. Faced with a blast of fire more powerful than that of any flamethrower from Dahlia's past life, the slime was reduced to dust before it could ooze any closer. Dahlia had scooped up that dust and kept it as a material in a magically sealed box. The day she tried to use it was the day she melted her hands and was rushed to the temple. Perhaps that slime got its revenge in the end.

"Um, when you say 'dryer,' are you talking about the kind I know, or is this some new weapon that's been developed?"

"Just a regular dryer. It was a one-off version with its output turned up to the maximum—probably about as powerful as an intermediate mage's fire spell. It's only thanks to this tower being built of stone that we could safely exterminate the slime like that."

"You can't call that a *dryer*! That's even scarier than the slime!"

Dahlia burst into laughter at Volf's shocked response. *The boot's on the other foot now, huh? How does it feel?* Grinning to herself, she drained her glass of brandy. After that, Volf peppered her with questions about the safety of the modified dryer. Dahlia, forced to tell the story of how these dryers had come to be, was soon humbled after her moment of smugness.

New Staff and a Royal Invitation

"Miss Dahlia, I cannot thank you enough for coming to talk to me about this first," Ivano said with a broad smile.

It was early morning, and he and Dahlia were seated in a meeting room at the Merchants' Guild. Evidently, Volf's advice had been on the mark. Ivano seemed absolutely delighted to hear about the new drying device Dahlia had developed with Volf yesterday.

"I say we get this shoe-drying device registered right away. Please hold back on speaking about it publicly until we have the means in place to mass-produce it."

"*Mass*-produce it? Do you really think it'll sell that well?"

"Sell? Why, of course it'll sell! I'll *make* it sell if it's the last thing I do. However, if we go public with it before we've properly identified our market and sorted out the production side, we'll end up with a crazy rush on our hands. Perhaps not as bad as we had with the socks, but bad enough."

"All because of this thing...?"

Dahlia had brought the shoe-dryer along just to show Ivano what it looked like. No matter how *she* looked at it, it seemed nothing more than a slightly modified but otherwise ordinary dryer to her. It felt odd to call it an entirely new product.

"There's no question that we can sell to the knights, the Couriers' Guild, and the Adventurers' Guild. But during the wet months, you've also got shoemakers' warehouses, any estates with a large staff, plus sufferers of athlete's foot and foot odor. These are just off the top of my head; I'm sure there are even more possibilities besides."

"Ivano, that's amazing," Dahlia said, stunned at how he listed off all these potential markets for a product he'd only just learned existed.

He ruffled his mustard-colored hair bashfully.

“It’s you who’s amazing, Miss Dahlia, not me. Anyway, first things first—let’s get the registration document filled out. You can make any improvements you want later. By the way, when did you start developing this item?”

“Yesterday.”

“Huh? Yesterday? You mean you did this in one day?”

“Well, I did start yesterday, yes, but all I had to do was make some adjustments to an ordinary dryer, so it only took about twenty minutes. Oh, but I made sure to check that it works correctly. It’s actually even safer than the regular dryers since it’s not so liable to overheat!”

Not wanting Ivano to misunderstand and think she’d whipped this thing up with no regard for safety, Dahlia quickly explained her process. She felt very relieved when Ivano’s dark-blue eyes slightly narrowed as he smiled gently.

“Miss Dahlia, I’d like you to tell me everything—everything you’re working on or planning to, everything you want to make. Give me all the ideas you can think of. I want to prepare myself—no, I want to prepare our future sales strategy.”

Ivano took a notepad bound in brown leather from his breast pocket and readied a pencil. Hearing that phrase that she’d known even in her past life —“sales strategy”—was a potent reminder that the man before her was a merchant to his core.

“Er, well...this one isn’t a magical tool, but I’ll be working with a Mr. Fermo from the Gandolfi Workshop to produce foaming soap dispensers. Other than that, I want to create an even smaller version of my compact magical stove and a lighter version of my waterproof cloth. I’m currently working on a refrigerator that includes a freezer compartment in the top half. I want to create more affordable refrigerators and freezers. I also have ideas for something that can dry clothes during the cold and rainy months, and for a kind of pot that’ll make cooking easier. Oh, I’d like to create a heating device for the winter too. There is one other thing... I’ve no intention of selling it, but I’m also trying to create an artificial magical sword. It’ll only have a weak double enchantment, though.”

At first, she’d thought about concealing her work on the sword from Ivano, but it felt somewhat disrespectful considering that he’d be helping her manage

her company. Besides, he'd probably have found out in due course when she went looking for the materials. It was better to be upfront.

"Got it. Feel free to follow your instincts and create whatever ideas appeal to you. As long as you can draw up accurate blueprints, draft specification documents, and perform all the appropriate safety checks, that's all I need. We'll register everything you come up with, and I'll sell whatever I can find a market for. You can leave all the matters of production and sales to me. About that sword, though... I believe I'm right in thinking it's for Sir Volf. I think it would be better if we kept quiet about that."

"I thought so. It's not really a toolmaker's place to make something like that, is it?"

This enchanted sword would be a weapon, after all. Such things were traditionally the domain of blacksmiths and mages working in collaboration. If she managed to make one that could actually be used, it would need to be thoroughly checked for safety. Spurred by her meeting with Volf, she'd dived headlong into the challenge with no knowledge or experience in this area of the craft. The first result, the "Blade of the Dark Lord's Minion," had been too dangerous to even hold. She could hardly blame anyone for telling her this work wasn't suitable for a magical toolmaker.

"No, that's not it. It's just that if word of it got out, you could easily attract the wrong sorts of people. Powerful ones too."

"Me? But it'll only have a couple of very weak enchantments. It'll be nothing like the real thing."

"That may be the case now, but you never know where your experiments might take you. It doesn't need to match the power of a mage trained in offensive magic—if it reaches the level where nobles or criminal gangs could use it to increase their power, that's where things could get dangerous. I could even see them being exported to kingdoms where mages aren't so common."

"I hadn't thought of that."

The young woman vowed to remain absolutely silent on the subject of the sword. That was when she remembered something else. Right about now, Volf, wearing the sköll bracelet, would be training at the castle—or possibly

bounding across the skies above it. Luckily, he was the only one who could use that particular bracelet. The thought of someone using one for nefarious purposes made Dahlia shudder.

"Um, there's something else I forgot to mention. I enchanted a bracelet using a sköll fang. The air magic in it makes it a kind of support item that lets you jump higher, but it seems that only people who can't express magic externally can use it. It's blood-bonded to Volf now, in any case."

"If it's only for his use, that should be no problem. I'm glad it went well. So you presented him with a bracelet, then?"

"Not 'presented,' exactly; he bought it from me."

"Oh! Oh, excuse me. I misunderstood." Ivano hastily apologized.

Dahlia paused to replay the conversation in her mind. Then it dawned on her.

"It's not like *that*! It's not an engagement bracelet—nothing of the sort! It is purely for use in battle. It's not even set with any stones!"

"Ah, right, of course. It's just that when *I* got engaged, it was my wife who presented me with the bracelet, you see. I couldn't help being reminded."

"Your wife gave hers first?"

"Yes. I was in a low place at the time, having just lost my family. She came to me and almost forced the thing onto my wrist, saying, '*I'll* be your family!' I didn't have any say in the matter."

"She, er, sounds very passionate."

Dahlia faltered, unsure of what to say next. It was then that Ivano produced a cylindrical case made of black leather, taking a roll of parchment out from inside.

"Please take this, Miss Dahlia. I went to the temple with Sir Volf yesterday and entered into this contract."

A faint magical aura emanated from the parchment. It read, in letters that almost seemed to have been scorched onto the page, "Ivano Badoer shall not intentionally harm the interests of Dahlia Rossetti or the Rossetti Trading Company." Ivano's signature beneath, written in a dark, blood-red ink, almost

sent a chill through her. She was speechless.

“I’m very grateful that you agreed to employ me, but I realize how sudden my request was. It wouldn’t be reasonable for me to expect your complete trust right away. I thought this might give you a little more peace of mind.”

“Thank you so much, Ivano. I’ll look after it very carefully. Er...forgive my ignorance, but is it normal to enter a magical contract when you join a trading company?”

“It’s certainly not uncommon. Trust is important in this business, after all.”

Truthfully, the vast majority of magical contracts were made when one of the parties was a noble. The expense involved and the frightening weight of their inviolable nature made them rare between commoner merchants. However, Dahlia didn’t need to know that.

“I’d be delighted if you’d surpass the number of inventions your father registered. I have every confidence that you can do it.”

“My father’s number? That’s a ways off yet.”

“There are twenty-eight in total. Including improved versions, he registered twenty-two of those before you were born, and a further six afterward.”

“I...must have really slowed him down.”

Even though they’d had a maid, her father had always made plenty of time for her when she was young. They’d often gone out together on his days off, and he’d taught her everything she needed to know about magical toolmaking. He hadn’t neglected his work by any means, but if she hadn’t been there, Dahlia felt sure he could have developed many more inventions. If he hadn’t been so devoted to her, if he’d remarried, he could have achieved so much more. He might have made such a mark on the world that his name would be known far and wide, and he would never be thought of merely as Dahlia’s father.

“Pardon me, Miss Dahlia. That isn’t what I meant to say. Besides, as it happens, the inventions he created *after* you were born were by far his most popular. There’s hardly a home in the kingdom without a hot water dispenser or a dryer these days. That’s what I was getting at. I should have said that first, shouldn’t I?”

“Oh, no, it wasn’t your fault. I just couldn’t help thinking he’d have achieved much more if he’d spent more time on his work and less on me.”

“You mustn’t think of it that way. He loved you. Ignoring you to focus on his work wouldn’t have made him happy; I’m sure of that. I never miss out on spending time with my sweet little girls, even if it means losing sleep,” Ivano said with the warm smile of a doting father.

He must have seen the uneasiness in her face. However, it was the words “losing sleep” that immediately stuck in Dahlia’s mind.

“Ivano, I don’t want you overworking yourself at my company. Work the same hours as you do here at the guild and then go home. Make sure you take a day off at least once every five days. And take the summer and winter festival periods off as well.”

“I don’t need all that much time off. I’m fit and healthy, and my wife won’t mind. I’m prepared to work day and night until we’ve got the company on an even keel.”

“You’ll do no such thing! I’ll not be responsible for taking away your quality time with your wife and memories with your little daughters. Think of what would happen if you collapsed one day and we lost you. What would your family and I do then? I never want to see you working without proper rest. If the workload’s too much, then we can scale back our operations. Alternatively, if we can afford it, please employ someone to help you.”

In her past life, Dahlia had worked herself to death, leaving her parents to grieve. In this one, her world had been rocked by the sudden death of her father. She couldn’t stand to let a similar fate befall the man before her.

“It’s too painful to leave people behind like that...and to be left behind.”

She was surprised to hear how her voice trembled, as though she might cry.

“I’m sorry, Miss Dahlia. You’re right. I’ll make sure I’m always well rested so I can do my best work. When I can, I’ll employ someone. Erm, I promise you I’m in perfect health, though, so please don’t worry.”

“R-Right.”

Dahlia quickly gathered herself and did her best to put on a smile. What with her eyes being so watery, it must have been an awkward smile indeed. For the first time since having her vision restored, she found herself somewhat missing her glasses.

After concluding her meeting with Ivano, Dahlia paid a visit to Gabriella in her office. She had some documents pertaining to the Rossetti Trading Company that needed the stamp of approval from Gabriella, who represented the guildmaster in her husband's absence. At the woman's invitation, Dahlia sat down on the sofa and watched silently as Gabriella flipped through the pages.

"This all seems to be in order. If Ivano's checked it, then I'm sure it'll be correct in every detail. I'll take care of liaising with the other guilds."

After looking through the documents just once, the vice-guildmaster laid them down, and Dahlia at last spoke up.

"Um, Gabriella, about Ivano..."

"Don't tell me you'll give him back to me, Dahlia. I won't hear of it. Once I've decided I'm letting a man go, my decision is final."

She'd clearly been anticipating what Dahlia had been about to say, regarding the young toolmaker with a placid smile.

"I understand, it's just...I realize how sudden this was. I didn't intend to cause you such an inconvenience."

"Well, I can't deny that I've lost a valued member of my team, but it'll take more than that to shake this guild. Besides, Ivano chose this path himself. It's nothing you should apologize for."

"Even so, I'm the reason he made that choice."

"Listen, Dahlia. I represent the guildmaster. My position demands that I put the interests of my guild, not your company, first and foremost."

"Of course. That goes without saying."

"You're too naive. By now, I could have already maneuvered your company into such a position where it would line the guild's coffers for years to come without growing too powerful."

“I probably wouldn’t have noticed. Even if I had, I know it’s not the sort of thing I could manage on my own, so I expect I’d have gone along with it.”

“Exactly. That’s why you need Ivano,” Gabriella said firmly.

She was no longer smiling. She crossed one leg over the other and folded her hands in her lap before looking Dahlia squarely in the eye.

“Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses,” she began. “From here on out, you will learn a great deal about business, I have no doubt. However, the knowledge and experience necessary to run a successful company takes years to acquire. Until such time, Ivano will fill this gap in your expertise.”

The day Dahlia’s father had collapsed in the guild, Ivano was the first person who’d run to his aid. She remembered how, at the funeral, he’d apologized to her for being unable to save him.

“I’m very grateful to him. That he’d join my company to help me like this is extremely kind.”

“Don’t misunderstand him. He is not such a sentimental man. He’s a consummate merchant, and he joined you because he has dreams of his own to fulfill.”

“But it’s only me at the company. If that’s what he wants, surely he could find a bigger one.”

“He’ll be completely in charge of the company’s sales, with a wide range of products and markets to explore and no one to hold him back. It’s a merchant’s dream, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’m not sure about that... It’s not the most profitable business. The raw materials are expensive, and many of the prototypes are failures. It was a sheer stroke of luck that the toe socks went down so well with the knights.”

After all, if Volf hadn’t taken them with him on his mission, they’d have stayed in their box and never seen the light of day. Dahlia had never envisioned how they could improve the comfort of the knights’ boots and even help prevent athlete’s foot.

“You cannot see your own potential, that’s all. Leave Ivano to it, and the

money will come rolling in. As long as you believe you can trust him, then you can entrust him with running your business and craft your tools in complete freedom."

"Ivano said a similar thing. 'Follow your instincts and create whatever ideas appeal to you,' he told me."

Her father and Tobias had always questioned her when she was crafting her magical tools. A few times, they'd even made her abandon ideas. "Is it really needed?" they'd ask. "Is it useful? Is it safe? How many people would use it?" More than once, these interrogations had sapped her motivation so much that she'd simply given up. Hearing that she could create whatever she wanted, *however* she wanted, gave her a strange, unfamiliar feeling. She was reminded then of how her father, who ought to have loved magical tools more than anything else in life, had produced only a fraction of what he was capable of once she'd been born. It had to have been because of her; there was no other explanation.

"Gabriella, um... There's something I'd like to ask you about my father."

"Feeling like a trip down memory lane? Ask away."

"I was wondering...was there no one Father might have thought about marrying?"

"Not as far as I'm aware of."

"Do you suppose I'm the reason he stayed away from women?"

"It wasn't like that. I'm not sure I ought to say this, with you being his daughter, but...Carlo was fairly popular with the ladies and went drinking with women now and then. For whatever reason, though, it seemed remarriage didn't appeal to him."

Hearing that, Dahlia found herself thinking of the closet and dresser she used at home. They were both beautifully carved with lily of the valley and bird motifs. Her mother, their original owner, had never returned to the tower where Carlo had waited for her.

"Perhaps...it was because of my mother, then."

“Carlo never mentioned her to me. All I know is that he cherished you more than anything.”

“I’m sorry for asking about these things,” Dahlia said as she bowed her head.

The whirlwind of the last few days had left her somewhat emotional. In some corner of her mind, she’d been asking herself what she would do if her father were still here, and what he would do in her shoes. However, Gabriella had brought her to her senses.

“I have a request, Gabriella. Please consider your debt to my father settled.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that everything you’ve done for me has been, well, for *me*. Not for my father. I’m the one who owes you now. I can’t be sure how many years it’ll take, but I promise you I’ll repay you.”

There was a brief silence before Gabriella uttered a single, clipped word.

“Unbelievable.”

Convinced she’d said something to sour Gabriella’s mood, Dahlia hurriedly bowed her head in apology once again.

“Forgive me! I know it’s impertinent of me to make such demands, but—”

“That isn’t it. You remember how Carlo asked that I give you advice, should you need it, either as a magical toolmaker or as a woman? Well, there was a little more to it.”

“There was?”

“‘Knowing my Dahlia, though,’ he said, ‘if you do her a favor, she won’t rest till she’s paid you back.’ He seemed very proud.”

“Father said that?”

“When I look at you now, I can see that he was absolutely right.”

It seemed her father, not content with simply putting Gabriella in his debt, had even left her with a perfect prediction of his daughter’s reaction. Dahlia was flattered, but these expectations represented a challenge that she didn’t yet feel ready to surmount. Nonetheless, it was no time to be discouraged. She

was the one who had presumed upon Gabriella's kindness and she needed to own it, not hide behind her father.

"If you're determined to repay me, then go ahead and try. Though I'm not sure I'd like to see you *completely* free of me, so I hope you won't mind me sticking my nose in now and then."

"Thank you, Gabriella..."

She was firm in her resolve, but as she remembered her father and saw the warmth in Gabriella's eyes, she couldn't hold herself together, smiling weakly like a child holding back tears. However, their tender moment was soon shattered by an insistent knock at the door.

"Pardon the interruption!"

After sticking his head around the door, Ivano slipped into the room. His expression was stiff and uneasy.

"An envoy has arrived on behalf of Marquis Grato Bartolone, captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. He wishes to speak with Chairwoman Rossetti. It's the vice-captain, Sir Griswald Lanza."

"Dahlia, what have you done now?"

"Nothing that I reca— Oh. It couldn't be about the shoe-dryer, could it?"

"If my ears didn't deceive me, I believe I just heard the name of a new product. Perhaps you'd like to tell me about it later?"

Gabriella turned a frosty smile on Dahlia, her gaze disconcertingly steely. In an instant, the warmth radiating from her just a moment ago had evaporated into the ether.

"Madam Gabriella, wait. I'm handling that matter. I'll discuss it with you as soon as the registration is complete."

"Very well. I'll hear all about it from you, then."

Relief washed over Dahlia as Ivano threw her a lifeline, but it was short-lived, soon replaced by an even greater anxiety.

"I've shown Vice-Captain Lanza to the nobles' reception room," Ivano said to

her. “May I ask you to join him?”

“Gabriella, could...could I ask you to accompany me?”

“By all means. If it’s business involving the castle, I should be there to represent the guild.”

Their guest could not be kept waiting. All three of them hurried on their way to the reception room.



“Good day. My name is Griswald Lanza, and I am vice-captain of the royal knights’ Order of Beast Hunters.”

The tall, burly man with blue hair rose to his feet and bowed. He wore the same black uniform Volf had the other day. The only difference was his lapel badges—shining silver swords instead of the red stones Volf wore.

“Thank you very much for coming. I am Gabriella Jedda, vice-guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild. I represent the guildmaster in his absence.”

“I am Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company. Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“I thank you for taking the time to see me. I bear a missive from Grato Bartolone, captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. He humbly requests that Chairwoman Rossetti accept his message.”

With the greetings exchanged, Griswald presented Dahlia with a large white envelope. Each of the four corners was delicately decorated with silver thread, and it was sealed with blue wax. She had scarcely imagined that a mere envelope could look so splendid.

“Thank you very much for coming all this way. I shall be delighted to accept the captain’s message.”

Dahlia put on her most courteous smile and took the envelope carefully in both hands.

“If possible, I should like to return with your reply. Therefore, may I ask that you read this message at your earliest convenience? I shall be happy to wait if you require some time.”

There was no question of keeping the vice-captain of the Beast Hunters waiting. Doing her best to suppress the trembling of her hands, Dahlia opened the envelope and took out the folded white letter inside. The corners of the paper were faintly emblazoned with silver swords. As she unfolded it and read the elegantly penned message inside, Dahlia became keenly aware of the blood draining from her face.

“If you’ll permit me, Chairwoman, may I see also?”

“Y-Yes, certainly.”

Gabriella must have noticed her distress. She handed the letter over, watching as the other woman quickly scanned its contents. Gabriella’s expression was inscrutable; she gave no reaction beyond a slight narrowing of her eyes.

The letter began innocuously enough, with a standard greeting and some words of gratitude relating to the products Dahlia would be supplying to the knights. But the rest of the letter read as follows: “Chairwoman Rossetti, I am eager to meet with you as soon as possible and shall make every effort to be available at whatsoever time would suit you best. I shall await you at the castle.” Though it was framed as a hopeful invitation, it left no avenue for escape.

“If I may, Chairwoman Rossetti, have you any engagements tomorrow?”

“None.”

“Will a verbal reply suffice, Sir Griswald?” Gabriella inquired. “Or would a letter from Chairwoman Rossetti be preferable?”

“A verbal reply will be plenty.”

“Very well, then let us say early tomorrow afternoon. If that will not be convenient, then anytime afterward.”

“Understood. Thank you for your cooperation. Bartolone will be delighted,” Griswald said with a smile.

After another exchange of formalities, the man left without so much as sipping his tea.

“Why would he send me a thing like that...?”

In a leather-upholstered chair too lavish to be comfortable, Dahlia sat in a daze, staring at the captain’s letter. “A thing like that” wasn’t the most polite way to refer to a formal invitation from the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, but she was beyond caring about that right now. She was exhausted, and her nerves were in tatters.

“He must be in quite a rush. Or it could be that he’s merely curious about you.”

“It’s not completely beyond understanding, but he’s going about this somewhat strangely, don’t you think? When someone’s called to the castle, they usually receive a summons with an appointed time and date well in advance,” Ivano said, his head tilted in puzzlement.

None of them held the answer. Only the captain himself could explain his reasoning.

“What were you *really* planning to do tomorrow, Dahlia?” Gabriella asked.

“Um, I was going to take care of some paperwork with Ivano and also pay a visit to Mr. Fermo’s workshop.”

“That can wait. We need to start preparing you right away.”

“Preparing me? Oh!”

Those words at last broke her out of her stupor.

“Yes, you must be properly prepared. What will you wear to the castle? What will you do with your hair and makeup? How will you greet the captain?”

“I...I’m sorry, I have no idea.”

“Well, I can’t pretend to be an expert, but I can drill the basic etiquette and set phrases into you by tomorrow. My husband’s and Sir Volfred’s reputations depend on this as well, so please do your best to remember what I teach you.”

“Thank you, Gabriella. I will.”

Dahlia felt as though a huge stone were pressing down on top of her head. Tomorrow afternoon was a mere twenty-four hours away, and it seemed they

had a great deal of preparation to fit in before then. Would it be enough time? What if they forgot something? Dahlia could do little to quell her anxiety.

Now that she thought of it, though, in her past life, she had occasionally stayed up all night cramming for exams in those subjects she liked least. She had never aced them, but she had always managed to scrape a pass. It was a strategy worth considering. That said, she decided she'd rather not think about what a failing grade would look like in this situation.

"Ivano, go along as Dahlia's attendant, will you? Take care of her bags and so on from the carriage up to the entrance. Wear your navy suit—the one you wore at the reception desk. Instead of the usual gift, gather some samples of the toe socks and insoles. Say you need them for the company's research or something."

"Understood. I'll go right away! Er, I'm afraid I don't fit into my navy suit anymore, though. Too fat."

"Borrow one, then, or rent one on your way there. It must be navy or dark gray, *not* black."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"And once you get back here, come and study with Dahlia. Now that you're an employee of the Rossetti Trading Company, you can expect many more meetings with the nobility."

"I will. Thank you very much."

Ivano acknowledged Gabriella's rapidly issued orders with a firm nod, seeming to completely grasp the situation. There wasn't a hint of hesitation in his step as he strode from the room. Dahlia couldn't help but be impressed by his coolness.

"We need to rent some clothes for you, Dahlia. There's no time to have them properly made. Next time you're summoned, have a consultation with the seamstress and get some outfits tailored."

"I-I will..."

"It's almost unknown for a female company chair to be summoned to the

castle. You *are* Carlo's daughter, so a noble-style dress might be appropriate. Then again, a merchant-style matching outfit might be a safer choice... We can discuss it at the shop. Oh, we need to get you proper shoes as well..."

Dahlia trotted after Gabriella as she led on, muttering to herself. On this very day that she'd vowed to repay her debt to Gabriella, that debt had suddenly grown like a snowball barreling down a mountainside. She had no intention of running from her responsibilities, but the scale of the challenge ahead and the speed at which it was approaching had already triggered a dull ache inside her head. For some strange reason, her mind was drawn back to her past life—a childhood memory of vaccination day.

The Castle, Athlete's Foot, and the Magical Toolmaker

"Are you feeling nervous, Miss Dahlia?"

"Slightly. No, very?"

Halfway through, Dahlia's reply turned into another question. Ivano, sitting opposite her inside the carriage, gave her a wry smile. He was smartly dressed in a dark blue suit, his mustard-colored hair all combed back. The friendly, easygoing guild member he'd been yesterday was gone, and in his place was a polished and dependable merchant. To Dahlia's eyes, he would wear the title of chairperson far better than she. Was there any chance he might agree to change places with her? She found herself considering this in earnest, letting out a weary sigh.

Dahlia's attire consisted of a teal-green dress and matching jacket. Her shoes were green too, though a shade deeper. She was feeling a bit *too* warm. Her red hair was tied up into a bun, her face elegantly made up with a muted palette. For accessories, she wore the detoxifying ring that Volf had given her and her unicorn pendant—strung on a long chain so it wouldn't be visible. She wasn't wearing the pendant to ornament herself, after all, but to prevent a stomachache. The way she was feeling now, even the finest, most delicious tea might hit her gut like poison.

Simply selecting her outfit and shoes had taken two hours the previous day. The bulk of the discussion had been between the shop assistant and Gabriella. Dahlia had wished for the least eye-catching, least offensive outfit possible, but she was soon told that dressing too drably was just as impolite. The shop assistant had recommended a dress in a brighter shade of green than the one Dahlia wore now, while Gabriella had leaned toward shades of cream. In the end, the shop assistant had fetched the manager's wife, a former noblewoman born the daughter of a viscount, who had proposed the deep teal-green dress.

Dahlia had explained that she was visiting as her company's chairwoman. In

light of that, plus the fact that she was unmarried and a first-time visitor, the woman advised a restrained but elegant outfit. Further, due to the castle's many stairs and long corridors, she cautioned against long, cumbersome skirts and uncomfortably high heels. In any case, she said, the knights were relatively permissive with regards to women's dress, so there was no need to be overly concerned.

When Dahlia expressed surprise at her detailed knowledge, she revealed that she had once worked at the castle. After that, she had married her husband, a merchant, relinquishing her noble rank to live with him as a commoner, she explained with a smile. It was a small world at times.

The manager's wife had some additional advice. If one was hoping to attract a suitor at the castle, warm or bright colors and long hair were sure to find favor. She offered various tidbits along these lines, to which Dahlia listened with a polite smile, although she couldn't imagine having any use for them herself.

Next, Dahlia and Gabriella paid a visit to the cosmetics shop Gabriella had introduced her to after she became chairwoman. There, they consulted the assistant on the appropriate makeup and hairstyle for tomorrow's trip. Mercifully, they were able to arrange for someone to come over to the Merchants' Guild in the morning to take care of Dahlia's styling. With time running short, Dahlia was relieved not to have to memorize a new hair and makeup routine on top of everything else.

After that, they returned to the Merchants' Guild, where Gabriella treated both Dahlia and Ivano to a long and intensive lesson on noble etiquette. Even dinner became a lecture in table manners; Dahlia couldn't even remember what anything had tasted like. By the time her carriage home had rolled up to the tower's gates, it was just after midnight. Gabriella had been satisfied with her progress, but her brain felt like an overfull cup of water that could spill its contents at any moment. Her nerves wouldn't settle.

Dahlia's thoughts of the previous day were interrupted as Ivano spoke. "I wish I was able to go with you," he said with a sigh, his shoulders dropping despondently.

Had her company itself received official sanction to come and go to the castle,

she would have been permitted to bring along her employees as needed, but at present, she was visiting under the auspices of the Merchants' Guild. Besides, the letter she'd received had been a personal invitation for her alone; bringing along an unexpected guest would not be looked upon kindly.

"I just can't help wondering what this is all about," Ivano added.

"I'm sure Volf wouldn't have said anything about the shoe-drying device, so...I suppose that only leaves the bracelet."

"You don't think the captain might have misunderstood that, just like I did? Could *that* be why he's curious about you?"

"I don't... No, surely not."

Engagement bracelets were supposed to be set with stones that matched the color of the giver's hair and eyes. If Dahlia were making one, for instance, she would set it with rubies for her red hair and emeralds for her eyes. However, the bracelet she'd given Volf was simple, pale-silver metal with a golden glimmer; no stones of any sort adorned it. Nonetheless, it had given Ivano the wrong idea at first. She couldn't say with certainty that the captain hadn't made the same mistake. She began to feel a headache coming on.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought it up."

Dahlia quickly reassured Ivano with a shake of her head, then looked out the carriage window. The castle's tall, white walls were rising into view, and they soon entered the North District where it was situated.

The moment they passed through its enormous stone gates, the view transformed. It was as though they'd passed into another city entirely. At the center of the sprawling grounds, surrounded by defensive walls of white stone, lay the castle—the monarch's official residence. Around it were clustered a number of buildings used by the royal knights and mages, as well as training grounds and other facilities. From its position at the heart of the complex, the castle loomed over all that surrounded it. Even at a distance, it was undeniably imposing. While there was an atmosphere of the ancient or medieval about it, it didn't have the tall, sharply pointed roofs and towers of a typical fairy-tale castle; the architecture was largely made up of squares and rectangles, with three towers standing proud over the enormous building. It radiated

indomitable strength rather than elegance. Even its surrounding buildings made the Merchants' Guild look small. All of them featured the same white stone construction.

The road the carriage followed was light gray in color and remarkably smooth; it reminded Dahlia of concrete, a material she hadn't seen since leaving her past life. She was intrigued as to what it was made from and how. She tried to restrain herself from gawking at everything they passed by, but it was all so extraordinary.

Just inside the castle gates, the carriage pulled to a halt. Ivano courteously held his hand out to Dahlia as she alighted, but finding that hand a little lower than it always was when Volf was accompanying her, she hesitated for a moment. Seeming to read this as nerves, Ivano smiled at her warmly.

"You've got this," he mouthed to her.

She nodded, returning the smile. Ivano could accompany her only as far as the entrance; after that, she would proceed to a waiting room. A pathway led from the area where the carriage had parked up to a single entryway. Along the path, they passed by several knights, politely bowing to each one. Dahlia proceeded inside the entrance to find the path split—one way for men, one for women. She entered the women's room, where her identity was checked and her bag searched. Once she showed the letter from the captain, it became clear that she was expected. The female knight performed only a cursory inspection of her belongings before giving her the all clear.

"A member of the Order of Beast Hunters will arrive to collect you shortly. Please remain here until then."

She had expected to walk to her destination, but according to the knight, she would once again be traveling by carriage. Were the castle grounds so large as to make a carriage necessary? Why would they send an escort for someone like her? These questions kept wheeling around in her mind, but she kept them to herself, sitting in silence with her lips fixed into a wooden smile. The waiting room she'd been shown to was luxuriously furnished, but its comforts did nothing to ease the tension gripping her. When she sat down on the black leather sofa, she was so surprised by its softness that she almost tumbled over.

She forced herself to take deep breaths, to the point of taking in almost *too* much oxygen, until there finally came a knock at the door.

"Good day. I come on behalf of the Order of Beast Hunters to escort you forthwith. Sorry, Dahlia, I'll explain in the carriage."

The first and second halves of Volf's greeting didn't match up very well, but Dahlia was relieved to see him all the same. Speaking in hushed tones, the young knight took her bag and proffered his hand to her. Somewhere along the way, she'd become accustomed to the feel of his hand beneath hers, allowing him to lead her to the waiting carriage.

Once they were both inside and it began to trundle away, Volf apologized a second time. "I'm sorry. I only heard that the captain had summoned you this morning. If I'd known yesterday, I would've sent a messenger."

"Not to worry. Er, do you happen to know the *reason* he wants to see me?"

"He said he just wants to thank you for your work on the socks and insoles. He's gathered together all the men who wrote reports on them too, but it's honestly just for a chat. The captain's a marquis, you see; he wouldn't think anything of sending for you like this."

Now that she thought of it that way, it suddenly made sense. To a marquis, there was nothing so unusual about calling on a merchant to discuss even the most trifling matter. He may simply have wanted to make direct contact with the supplier before the first shipment of socks and insoles arrived. That thought brought Dahlia considerable comfort.

"That makes me feel so much better. I couldn't figure out why he'd want to speak to me at all."

"There's nothing to worry about. I haven't said a word about the shoe-dryer, and I've kept the bracelet hidden."

"How did your training go yesterday? Did you have any trouble handling the bracelet?"

"No, none. I feel like I've really gotten used to it since the other day. I was only using about half of its power during training, but it was still a lot of fun. Being able to hop right over your opponent's head really expands your battle

tactics.”

Hang on. Half power or not, surely *somebody* must have twigged that something was amiss. It was hard to imagine that antics like that wouldn’t have attracted attention.

“Over their head...?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I could do that anyway. It just got a little easier, that’s all.”

“Really? Did no one say anything to you?”

“They just laughed it up. ‘Volf’s getting pent-up again!’ ‘Those monsters better come quick!’ ‘He’s bouncing around even more than usual.’ That kind of thing.”

Clearly, all of Dahlia’s worrying had been for naught. In spite of herself, she broke into giggles at the unamused knight. Just as she managed to compose herself, the carriage slowed to a halt.

“It’s just my comrades, but still, got to keep up appearances, so...Miss Dahlia, I bid you welcome to the Order of Beast Hunters.”

“How very kind of you, Sir Volfred.”

The young knight extended his hand once again, and Dahlia, with a genuine smile, laid hers upon it.



Volf led Dahlia to a lavishly decorated drawing room. The number of people gathered inside did nothing to diminish its spacious feel. Once Volf had taken his seat at the glossy black table, Dahlia was left standing before an audience of seven knights.

“Thank you very much for your gracious invitation. I am Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company.”

After she had made her greeting and given a somewhat longer than usual bow, one of the men, with a head of thin, dark-gray hair, smiled and nodded.

“My name is Grato Bartolone. I serve the kingdom of Ordine as captain of the royal knights’ Order of Beast Hunters. I thank you for taking the time out of

your busy schedule to visit us today, Chairwoman Rossetti."

"You are too kind, sir. It was an honor and a privilege to receive your invitation to the castle. I pray you will forgive me if my manners are lacking; I am unaccustomed to such distinguished company."

I'm going to screw this up, I am absolutely *going to screw this up...* While that singular thought echoed inside her head, Dahlia carefully recited the words Gabriella had taught her, being sure to maintain her professional smile all the while. When invited, she carefully sat down in one of the leather-upholstered chairs and waited for Grato to speak.

"In addition to Volfred, the six of us gathered here have all had the pleasure of testing out the toe socks and insoles you created. We would all like to thank you for your excellent work. This occasion is simply for us to chat and become acquainted, so I hope you will relax and enjoy yourself."

"Your generosity is much appreciated. Gentlemen, please allow me to offer my gratitude for the detailed reports you were kind enough to write in the midst of your expedition."

Following this, each of the other knights briefly introduced themselves with a polite bow. There was one knight of somewhat senior years, two in middle age, and another two around the same age as Volf.

"Here are some samples of the toe socks and insoles we are currently preparing for mass production. You may expect the final products and a gift of thanks in the near future, but for today, I hope you will accept this token."

Dahlia lifted the white box at her feet and placed it on the table. As Gabriella had explained, these brand-new samples served as a small gift and a nod to the purpose of Dahlia's visit. There were about twenty sets—more than enough to go around.

"Now there's a welcome sight."

"Marvelous. I could do with another pair to change into."

"This makes me look forward to the next mission."

As a smile brought creases to the captain's red eyes, the rest of the knights'

expressions softened in turn. Dahlia felt her anxiety abate by a tiny fraction. Just then, several maids appeared and served everyone tea. Dahlia picked up the snow-white, silver-rimmed cup, raising it to her lips but only pretending to sip as she listened to the knights talk.

"I'm ashamed to admit I had not heard of the Rossetti Trading Company before now. May I ask when you were established?"

"Only this year, sir."

"How remarkable. Most companies could only dream of beginning their enterprise with such profitable products. I look forward to your future endeavors."

"Thank you very much."

As she thanked the middle-aged knight who'd addressed her, she felt the trickle of a bead or two of sweat. Thanks to these toe socks and insoles, she'd been honored with an order from the royal castle, many a craftsperson's dream. Yet she could almost hear her departed father grumbling. "Bit dull, aren't they?" he'd say. "Couldn't you have come up with something more exciting?" *There's nothing wrong with being down to earth*, she thought to herself, and she resolved to tell him as much if he came to bother her in her dreams.

"Oh, these aren't Miss Dahlia's first inventions," Volf suddenly chimed in, shaking Dahlia from her daydream. "Long before the founding of her company—when she was still at college, in fact—she single-handedly developed waterproof cloth. She is not only a very capable chairwoman, but also an extremely talented magical toolmaker in her own right."

Volf, stop! What are you, a little kid boasting about what amazing friends he has? You don't have to tell them my life story! Much as she wanted to shout these things at the top of her voice, not a sound came out of her mouth as she opened and quickly closed it again.

"Waterproof cloth? You don't say. Our tents are so much lighter now, thanks to that."

"It's perfect for covering the wagons too. The rain rarely gets in now."

“So it’s *you* we have to thank for that, Chairwoman.”

Following Volf’s glowing compliments, the other knights showered her with praise, but it only made her want to flee the room as fast as she could.

“By the way, Chairwoman Rossetti, Volfred was kind enough to convey this list of measures you provided for combating athlete’s foot. You’re quite confident that they will be effective?”

To Dahlia’s great relief, Grato changed the subject, and she eagerly replied. The captain had clearly listened to the concerns of his men and was searching for solutions.

“Yes, sir, they should be reasonably effective. If carefully followed after receiving treatment, they ought to help prevent recurrence of the condition.”

“When bathing, would you say that washing one’s feet and toes with soap *twice* might be even more effective?”

“As long as it’s done thoroughly, once should be enough. Too much washing can bring its own problems, you see, so please avoid hard scrubbing and over-frequent washing. Thorough rinsing is also important, so as not to leave any soap residue.”

For some reason, the list of tips Dahlia had given to Volf had been neatly copied out and distributed among the knights. What was more, despite this supposedly being an informal chat, one of the middle-aged knights sitting beside the captain was assiduously taking notes. Dahlia couldn’t understand why; they weren’t discussing anything particularly weighty. The thought occurred to her that it might be a castle regulation to take such notes during meetings with outsiders.

“So, after bathing, sufferers of athlete’s foot should wipe their feet thoroughly, apply ointment, and ensure they keep their feet dry... Does this routine apply even after treatment at the temple?”

“Yes, even after visiting the temple, you should be sure to wipe any excess water from your feet and keep them dry. Also, when receiving treatment at the temple, I would strongly recommend taking along a pair of thoroughly cleaned shoes to change into afterward. The disease can linger inside your shoes, so this

will help prevent reinfection.”

“It stays inside?!”

“I came back in the same ones after I went to the temple...”

“So did I. Never guessed the bugger was hiding in my shoes. No wonder it’s never healed, even after four visits.”

Dahlia fancied she could see an aura of despair hanging over the captain and the other knights. Her mind was obviously playing tricks on her. It was the nerves and fatigue, no doubt.

“A question, if I may, Chairwoman Rossetti. Can sharing the boots we wear in battle also lead to infection?”

“There is a risk, yes, so I would avoid that where possible. As I wrote on the list, when in your private rooms, it’s a good idea to wear breathable footwear such as sandals, but please avoid sharing these as well.”

“Should we wash our feet before putting on the sandals?”

“If you find that you’ve sweat a lot while outside, it may be a good idea to wash and dry your feet once you come home and then change your footwear. But as I mentioned, overwashing isn’t healthy either...”

“What about wearing the toe socks to bed? Would you recommend that?”

“No—if you sweat while you sleep, it could aggravate the condition, so please do not do that.”

Judging by the steady stream of questions that poured forth, athlete’s foot might be an even more widespread concern among the knights than she’d realized. Even if not all of these knights suffered from it, they would be concerned for their friends and concerned about the risk of transmission too. Dahlia reexamined the list she’d dictated to Volf, adding additional explanations as she went.

“Where possible, please make sure to wash and thoroughly dry your shoes. For those that cannot be washed, there is a chance that purification magic may be effective.”

“I see. In other words, we should think of it as a contagious disease.”

The other knights nodded thoughtfully. He was right. Athlete's foot was indeed an infectious disease, caused by trichophyton fungus. Furthermore, shoes weren't the only possible source of transmission—they needed to cut off the other avenues as well, or it would continue to reappear.

"There are some people who just don't get it, aren't there, Chairwoman?"

"That is true, but...it can also be the case that they simply do not *realize* they have it."

"But it causes all that blistering and itching—you'd know soon enough, wouldn't you?"

"In extreme cases, it can manifest with other symptoms. There may be weeping from the skin, redness, and whitening of the nails—so I believe." The captain was watching her, his gray eyebrows drawn together in such an intense frown that she had to avert her gaze. "Even when no blisters are present, a persistent swelling of the toes can be an early sign of athlete's foot."

"What?" came an oddly high-pitched voice from right alongside her.

Volf had always said he'd had no trouble with athlete's foot, so what was that tone of shock all about? She threw him a look that said, "We'll talk about this later," getting a sheepish smile from him in return. Despite her concerns, she decided to let the matter go for now.

"Athlete's foot can sometimes cause whitening and hardening of the heels and soles of the feet, with little itching."

"Whitening and hardening...of the heels and soles...and little itching," the older knight repeated in a low murmur.

Her father in her past life had suffered from both the standard athlete's foot symptoms and the type that caused keratinization on the heels. He had worn leather shoes to work every day and took to treating them with a UV sterilizer. Sadly, Dahlia had never heard of anything like UV technology in this world, which left the options of healing magic, cleaning, and medicines.

However, there was something that concerned her. The royal knights lived and worked as a collective, with many of them making the barracks their home. Even just one infected person could easily spread the disease to many others.

Though a little worried about being considered impertinent, Dahlia plucked up her courage and spoke.

"Erm, it is very easy for athlete's foot to spread when you have many people sharing the same facilities, so the best approach may be to have everyone take the same precautions. Footwear is not the only way it might transmit. Anything you touch with bare feet—bath mats, for example, or shared towels could also be promoting spread."

"What?!"

"Is this true?!"

Every pair of eyes in the room had suddenly fixed her with a piercing glare. She gulped.

"Let's burn every last mat and towel in the barracks!"

"Yeah!"

Wait, no! Please don't set it all on fire! Dahlia was flustered and dismayed as the knights let out hearty cheers of agreement at the captain's declaration.

"Please, sir, wait! The mats and towels will be fine as long as they're properly washed, and everyone only uses their own—"

"No, we must rip this evil out by its roots!"

The captain wasn't hearing any of it. It wasn't the mats and towels that were to blame, but how could she make them understand this? As she cast around desperately for another way to explain the problem, the youngest-looking knight spoke up, cocking his head thoughtfully.

"The *source* of the problem is actually our own feet, isn't it, Captain Grato?"

"Well, yes."

"In that case, I've just thought up the perfect solution! All we need to do is cut them off, have them regrown, and voilà! No more athlete's foot!" the young man declared triumphantly.

"*No*!" Dahlia cried before she could stop herself. "That is out of the question!"

Why was she shouting at the top of her lungs on her first visit to the castle?

More to the point, where in the world would someone get such a terrifying idea? Surely no one would actually go through with his plan. Yet why did none of the other knights say anything to him?

“Pfft!”

Volf’s mask of formality crumbled as he fought and failed to hold back his laughter. So much for keeping up appearances. If not as a friend, then at least as a guarantor of her company, surely he was supposed to be backing her up in this situation. As the other knights too broke into laughter and rueful smiles, Dahlia was at a loss.

“Volfred—*Sir* Volfred, I mean—please!”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t hold it in... You’ve had your share of hardship too, huh?”

“What?”

“You used to live with your father, right? If it spreads that easily, then...”

“Why, you...! That doesn’t mean *I* got it!”

“Sorry! I won’t mention it ever again!”

“Are you listening to me?!”

All Dahlia’s painstakingly practiced manners had flown right out of the window. The knights looked on with sympathy as Dahlia scrambled to correct Volf’s misconception. Inexplicably, from this day forth, the men gathered here would treat Dahlia with particular kindness and always speak highly of the Rossetti Trading Company.



Due to her father in her past life suffering from athlete's foot, Dahlia had accumulated knowledge about the condition. Now, in her new life, she was able to use that knowledge to help people. She was glad it had proven useful, but thanks to Volf, all her efforts to control her nerves and make a good impression on her first visit to the castle had gone up in smoke. Her attitude and her language had been completely inappropriate.

Seeing her becoming horribly flustered, Captain Grato stepped in to scold Volf. "Volfred, I can permit a little banter to lighten the mood, but see that you don't get carried away."

Thanks to the captain's warning, the rest of the meeting proceeded in a businesslike manner. They talked of the contracts made for the provisions of the toe socks and insoles and of the Merchants' Guild. Nonetheless, Dahlia had sustained considerable psychological damage. It had been such an ordeal that she'd be happy never to set foot within the castle grounds again.

Once the discussions had wrapped up and everyone had said their goodbyes, Captain Grato selected not Volf, but another knight with coppery-red hair to escort Dahlia back. Even once they had left the building and boarded the carriage, Dahlia's gloom showed no signs of abating. The knight in front of her was even taller than Volf and built like a bull. He made the interior of the carriage feel somewhat more cramped than before.

"My name is Randolph Goodwin. May I have a brief word with you, Chairwoman Rossetti?"

"Yes, of course. How can I help?"

Dahlia straightened herself in her seat as the knight kindly introduced himself.

"When being guided around the castle by a knight, it's better to walk diagonally—not directly—behind, and a little bit closer. Also, during meetings, there's no need for you to bow your head to people when they ask you questions. If you speak to some of the merchants who visit the castle regularly, I'm sure they'll be happy to offer you further instruction."

"Thank you very much, sir. I will do that. I apologize for my poor manners,"

Dahlia replied with a deep bow.

It seemed her cramming strategy hadn't been as effective as she'd hoped. She'd never even considered things like how close she should walk behind a knight.

"Oh, you did nothing to cause offense. These are only minor details. Certainly within the Order of Beast Hunters' quarters, you needn't worry about such things. However, there are other areas of the castle where these customs are more strictly observed. For as long as Volfred Scalfarotto's name is associated with your company, you will draw attention, for better or worse. For Volf's sake and for your own protection, I recommend you arm yourself with all the knowledge available to you."

"I am very grateful for your advice, Sir Goodwin."

Though she had essentially just received a warning, Dahlia found herself heartened by the knight's words. Volf had mentioned he'd finally made a handful of friends among the knights whom he could talk to openly—and good friends they were, judging by the concern this man showed for him.

"I understand you're a friend of Volf as well. There are a lot of Goodwins in this castle—please, call me Randolph."

"I'd be delighted to, Sir Randolph."

"Would you mind if I addressed you as Miss Dahlia? If you feel it's too familiar, I'll refrain, of course."

"Oh, no. Not at all."

Randolph held his chin thoughtfully for a few moments before he inhaled and spoke again. "I mean no offense, Miss Dahlia, but I've rarely seen that side of Volf before. He seemed so different from his usual self. I was quite surprised."

"He isn't like that normally?"

"Around the castle, he's a cool and collected knight. Among the Beast Hunters, he's known for his exemplary talents. To his friends, he's helpful and trustworthy, while on the battlefield, they call him 'the Dark Lord.'"

"Dark Lord...?"

One of those things was not like the others. Weren't the likes of "dark lords" usually on the monsters' side? That was how Dahlia understood it, at least, but she decided to let it slide.

"I wonder if that was his true self."

"I don't know about 'true'... Simply another side of him, perhaps."

During most of their time together, Volf was his relaxed, natural self, but it made sense that he'd be quite different at work. All people wore different masks for different situations. Dahlia herself behaved quite differently when she was working, when she was representing her company as chairwoman, and when she was relaxing. Naturally, spending time with someone you "clicked" with would reveal yet another aspect.

"Is he always that unmannerly in your presence?"

"That's just Volf; I'm sure he didn't mean anything by it... Oh!" Randolph had looked so serious; in her hurry to defend Volf, she'd forgotten to add the "Sir" to his name. "P-Please forgive my disrespect."

"You've no need to apologize. It might not be my place to say this, but I'd like to thank you for becoming such a good friend to Volf."

"Oh, no, I...I think he's very lucky to have friends like *you*, Sir Randolph."

Flustered by the man's praise, she struggled to convey her thoughts with the appropriate formality. Randolph stiffened for a moment, then his red-brown eyes softened.

"That's very kind of you. I hope he and I shall remain friends for many years to come."

As the two of them exchanged somewhat awkward smiles, the carriage arrived in the parking area. Once Randolph had helped her down, Dahlia politely bowed before returning down the path she'd come.



"Volfred, there are certain things that *are* appropriate to announce to the world, and others that are *not*."

"I understand, sir."

Immediately after Dahlia and Randolph had left the room, Grato fixed Volf with a steely glare.

“Regardless of how well acquainted you may be, that is *not* how you speak to a young woman.”

“Pardon me, Captain,” another knight chimed in. “But I believe the rest of us may be partly to blame. We were somewhat overenthusiastic while questioning her on her list of measures against athlete’s foot.”

“I cannot dispute that.”

“But it’s a good thing we did ask! Otherwise, we’d all have gone on infecting one another without even realizing it.”

At the young knight’s words, all the men’s faces darkened. It was an abominable idea to consider.

“This discussion does not leave this room, men. You’ll take that part about Chairwoman Rossetti to your graves.”

“Yes, sir!” the knights replied in perfect unison.

“And *you*, Volfred, will think long and hard about what you have done.”

“I should say. If I were a girl and someone spoke to me like that, I’d cry, I tell you,” one of the knights lamented.

“That was too far, Volfred,” added another. “There’s no getting around it.”

“She’ll dump you, y’know, if you go on teasing her like that.”

“It’s, er, not that sort of relationship. Chairwoman Rossetti and I are friends.”

“Is she now? Well, better be careful, or she’ll start avoiding you.”

“Huh? Avoiding me?” Volf repeated.

The other man regarded him with a hint of exasperation.

“Listen, Volf, when you hurt a girl’s feelings, they don’t forget it in a hurry. You’ll be involved with her company often from now on, right?”

“Yes. I mean...I intend to be.”

“I’ll not be pleased if your actions jeopardize our future dealings with her,

Volfred," Grato warned. "Take her something and apologize."

"Very well, sir. Er, is there anything you'd recommend?"

The eldest knight's brows shot up in surprise at Volf's question.

"You ought to know better than us! If you're stuck for ideas, why don't you buy some of her favorite flowers and bring her a bouquet?"

"I don't know her favorite flowers."

"Gods above... What about her favorite cake or candy, then?"

"I don't know that either."

"Volf, you've got to ask these things! You've known her long enough." The other man, Dorino, couldn't hide his frustration.

"You're right. I should have."

In truth, it had been less than a month since they'd become acquainted, and including today's meeting, they had met a mere nine times. Volf couldn't bring himself to admit this to the other knights.

"For the time being, Volfred, get yourself to a popular florist and have them make you a bouquet for a young woman. Ask for one with plenty of red. After that, go to a patisserie in the nobles' quarter and pick up some cream puffs and some of those sugar decorations that go in your tea. You can't go wrong with some nice consumables like those."

"Thank you very much, Sir Alfio."

"You always know just what women want."

"I've got four daughters. I've seen enough young men turning up with ill-advised gifts, and more to the point, I've seen the consequences."

As Alfio's dark-brown eyes stared off into the distance, the other men fell silent. It seemed that every one of them had experienced their share of failures.

"I wouldn't want you to miss closing time, Volfred, so you're free to leave early today."

"Thank you, sir."

It was clear in Volf's tone that his mind was already elsewhere. His gaze slid subtly toward the door; escape was all that occupied his mind now.

"Very well. Dismissed."

As soon as Grato gave the word, Volf immediately stood and left the room. Watching his retreating back, one of the middle-aged knights smiled wryly.

"It's so unlike him. I could hardly believe it."

"Volf, of all people... And is it just me, or does he not even realize?"

"Hard to say. All I know for sure is that I've never seen that look on his face before."

"Chairwoman Rossetti acted quite normally, though, even though she was sitting right beside him."

"You didn't have to say it..."

The terms in which people described the man known as Volfred were many and varied. Some knew him best as a Scarlet Armor of the Order of Beast Hunters—a level-headed and dependable comrade-in-arms. He was a fearless warrior whose willingness to face even the toughest monsters without hesitation had earned him the moniker "the Black Reaper." In other circles, he was an impossibly handsome but cold man who rejected every love letter and proposition his angelic looks attracted. Sensational rumors swirled of his love affair with a dowager duchess. There were whispers of frequent visits to the city's brothels.

Until now, this was the man the knights gathered in this room had known. But just a short while earlier, he had looked as bashful as a teenager. It was so out of character that no one had even thought to tease him for it—or perhaps they had recognized their own boyhood selves in his expression. It was so far behind him now, Grato had almost forgotten how they felt, those "measles."

"First love is like the measles," a song from an old opera went. "The older you get, the harder it grips you, and the harder it gets to let go."

Could it really be that Volf, at his age, was finally coming down with his first case of measles?

“Not a word about this to anyone either. Knights do not gossip,” Grato ordered firmly, his red eyes narrowed, putting an end to the conversation.

The captain offered a silent prayer to the heavens, wishing his young subordinate success.

The Apology and the Confession Game

After departing from the castle, Dahlia returned her outfit to the clothing shop, then she continued on to the Merchants' Guild to report to Ivano and Gabriella. They had clearly been worried, and as she explained all that had transpired at the castle, their expressions became extremely dubious. Dahlia was vaguely aware that her own face was as stiff as a wooden mask. She'd thought she would feel better if she told them everything, but instead, the sense of pressure bearing down on her only worsened. Nonetheless, they made a fuss of her, praising her efforts and congratulating her on conquering this mountain of a challenge. After that, Dahlia went straight home.

She couldn't bear to think about anything else for the rest of the day; all she wanted now was to rest. But just as that thought crossed her mind, the doorbell rang. Somehow, she knew at once that it had to be Volf. She hurried down the stairs and opened the door to find the young knight cloaked in an air of utter gloom. His countenance was as beautiful as ever, but the expression of guilt it held was uncannily like that of Dahlia's dog in her past life after it had done something naughty. Any wish she might have had to reproach him was instantly dispelled.

"I'm so sorry for what I said earlier! It'll never happen again."

Volf bowed low before presenting her with a charming bouquet of flowers. A pretty variety of blooms including red roses, lily of the valley, and pink rhodanthes were arranged in a pleasingly full and rounded bunch tied with a red ribbon. As Dahlia took the bouquet in both hands, the gentle perfume of the roses wafted toward her.

"Well, all right. I'll let you off this time," she said coolly.

"Thank you!"

"But if I ever hear you implying I've got athlete's foot again, I'll call you Sir Volfred for the rest of your days. Even in the tower."

“You have my word, Dahlia, so please, spare me that.”

Volf’s expression was so tragic that she couldn’t help but laugh. Perhaps reassured by her laughter, Volf revealed the pale blue box he’d been holding behind his back and handed it to her.

“I got you some cream puffs. I hope you like them.”

“Thank you. I like them very much. Since you’re here, why don’t we go inside and have a couple?”

“Sure. I’d love to.”

With the air finally cleared between them, the pair climbed up to the tower’s second floor. They sat down on the sofa, where Dahlia untied the blue ribbon encircling the box. Six cream puffs were nestled inside. There were two each of three fillings: whipped cream, custard cream, and custard cream with liqueur. In a thin box underneath, Dahlia found a beautiful selection of sugar decorations in the shapes of flowers and animals. *I’d better get the good tea leaves out*, she thought.

From among the cream puffs, Dahlia first chose one with the standard custard cream filling. Volf took the one flavored with liqueur. The cream puffs in this world were somewhat larger and flatter than the ones Dahlia had known in her past life. As she carefully picked one up, she could feel from its weight how generously filled it was. She bit in carefully to avoid any spillage, and right away, the sweet flavor of the custard and fragrant vanilla flooded her mouth. The custard was richer than that of any cream puff she’d had before. It must have been made with top-quality milk and eggs. The sweetness of the filling was perfectly offset by a savory accent in the pastry. Dahlia forgot all about the tea she was supposed to be brewing, savoring the sweet treat to the last bite.

“These cream puffs are *gorgeous*.”

“I’m happy you like them.”

Seeing Dahlia’s enraptured smile brought Volf immense satisfaction. He’d had to travel to a famous patisserie in the nobles’ quarter and stand in line for half an hour with his enchanted glasses on to get these, but that smile alone had made it all worth it.

“Would you care for one more?” he asked.

“You could probably manage three of these easily, huh?”

“Oh, no. One’s enough for me. I don’t have that much of a sweet tooth, to be honest. These ones aren’t that big, though, so there’s no reason you shouldn’t have two if you feel like it.”

Dahlia, who’d found herself a tad concerned about her waistline as of late, was extremely torn. On the one hand, stopping now would leave more to look forward to tomorrow. But on the other, these cream puffs were undeniably at their best when freshly made. They could be stored in the fridge or even frozen, but they wouldn’t taste as good as they did right now. As she sat wrestling with this conflict, Volf smiled fondly and picked up the box, offering it to her. The whipped cream-filled cream puff she ate soon after was almost criminally good. She was left basking in its indulgent glory as she relaxed into the sofa, until a question from Volf pulled her back to earth.

“What’s your favorite flower, Dahlia?”

“I like all flowers, really. But especially ones with a nice scent like roses and gardenias.”

“Are you named after the dahlia flower?”

“That’s right. My father named me. People often assume I like dahlias because of my name, but they don’t have much of a scent.”

“I see... And what about your favorite sweets?”

“I have quite a few that I like, but cream puffs and cheesecake are probably my favorites. How about you, Volf?”

“I like salted butter cookies, zabaione... Oh, and shrimp crackers. I guess they’re not sweet, though.”

Only a regular drinker would give an answer like that. Cookies or crackers like the ones he’d mentioned accompanied many a beverage throughout the city. Zabaione, meanwhile, was made by whipping egg yolks and sugar into a froth and cooking the mixture with white wine. The wine had to be the reason Volf favored it.

As the two relaxed with cups of tea, Dahlia suddenly remembered the conversation she'd had on her way back from the castle.

"By the way, I'm very sorry for all the mistakes I made today. I didn't even realize. It must have been embarrassing for you."

"Mistakes?"

"Like when you're walking behind a knight in the corridors, you're supposed to walk diagonally behind them, rather than directly, and not so far back... That sort of thing. Sir Randolph was kind enough to tell me. There's still so much I don't know, so I'll be sure to go and consult some other companies so that I'm better prepared next time."

"Randolph...?"

It had taken about two months before Volf was finally comfortable calling him "Randolph" instead of "Lord Goodwin." What's more, they had spent those two months in each other's company from dawn till dusk as comrades in the Order of Beast Hunters. Dahlia and Randolph had been together only for the short ride from the Beast Hunters' quarters to the pickup area for the royal carriages. How in the world had they managed to get on a first-name basis in that time? It didn't exactly matter, he supposed, but he couldn't help being curious.

"Yes, he said some areas of the castle are stricter about these customs than others. I think it's my responsibility as a chairwoman to make sure I know all the proper etiquette. The last thing I want to do is embarrass you when you've put your name down as one of my guarantors."

"That's Randolph for you. I didn't notice a thing."

"Is Sir Randolph a noble, then?"

"Have you heard of Earl Goodwin? He's often called the Earl of the Eastern Frontier. Randolph is his second son."

"When he gave me that advice, he said it was 'for Volf's sake and for your own protection.' You've got a good friend there."

"Yeah, I'm grateful to him."

Volf was ashamed of himself for thinking anything untoward might have been

going on. Both Dahlia and Randolph had merely shared concern for him. He just couldn't seem to get into his stride today. He'd found himself in one unfamiliar situation after another recently; he could only imagine all that upheaval was what was throwing him off.

"It looks like your socks and insoles will soon be worn all over the city. You never know; before long, you might even be recommended for an honorary title like your father. I bet the captain would be in favor."

There was no denying the advantages of being an honorary baroness, both financially and socially. However, Dahlia's smile was noticeably bitter as she replied.

"I could definitely do without a title for this, actually."

"Why do you say that? Becoming an honorary baroness would make your work easier in all sorts of ways, wouldn't it?"

"I'm sure it would. But you see, when a magical toolmaker accepts an honorary title, they often end up with a name based on the invention that earned it, or on their most well-known invention at the time. My father, for instance, was known as Baron of the Water Dispensers."

"Huh. I'd never heard that before."

In short, when a magical toolmaker received a title, they also received a nickname along with it. Oftentimes, it had quite a cool ring to it.

"I just don't think I'd be thrilled to become known as Baroness of Toe Socks or Baroness of Insoles. And those would be the best-case scenarios—what if someone decided on Baroness of Athlete's Foot?"

"Pfft!"

For the second time that day, Volf failed to maintain his composure and burst into laughter. He laughed and laughed until he could hardly breathe while Dahlia glowered at him with narrowed eyes.

"Um, *Sir Volfred*?"

"I'm sorry... Anything but that..."

The young knight did his utmost to suppress his laughter, but his shoulders

kept on trembling for quite a while.



Once Volf was finally calm again, he took out three potion bottles from the leather bag he'd brought with him.

"These are for the sköll bracelet."

"I did say *two*, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but I thought it'd be good to have an extra one in the workshop, just in case. When we're making the enchanted sword, my hand could slip or something as I put it together."

Dahlia was about to ask if that wasn't just an elaborate excuse to bring her an extra one, but she decided against it. In the very slim chance that somehow they *both* got hurt, or one of them ended up with extensive injuries, these potions could save the day. It was far better having them than not. She thanked him without any complaints and placed the potions in an easily accessible spot in the workshop.

It was still rather early to be thinking about dinner. Most restaurants and bars would only just be opening around this time. Besides, after gorging herself on not one, but two large cream puffs, Dahlia didn't have much of an appetite. So, she took some meat and vegetables from her refrigerator and prepared a meal just for Volf. She grilled the meat as they had the other day and opened a bottle of wine. It was common fare made without any special ingredients, but Volf, as always, was deeply appreciative. It was a mealtime unlike any they'd had so far, Dahlia surreptitiously observing the young knight as she sipped her wine.

"I know it's a little unconventional, but would you like to give this a try?"

After dinner, while Volf sat on the living room sofa, Dahlia brought out a bottle of white wine wrapped in a cloth. The bottle was so cold that she was hesitant to touch it directly.

"Is that white wine?"

"Yes. 'Freezing wine,' I call it. I chill it until just before it reaches freezing point. You have to take the cork out when you do this, otherwise the bottle will crack, so it does lose a bit of fragrance, unfortunately."

The common people of this kingdom generally had little concern about the temperature of their wine. Wine was difficult to transport and store. Now and then, if you were unlucky, you'd happen across a bad batch. Even wines from a single maker could vary considerably in acidity and astringency; all of a sudden, your favorite wine could no longer suit your taste. At times like those, Dahlia chilled the wine almost to the point of freezing before drinking it. *This* was her so-called "freezing wine."

"'Freezing wine'? That's a first for me. I'd love to try some."

Dahlia passed the wine to Volf, who carefully poured them each a glass. Even once decanted, the wine gave up little of its aroma.

"Here's to a new wine and the prosperous future of the Rossetti Trading Company."

"To the success of the company and peaceful days ahead."

With a rueful smile, Dahlia clinked her glass with Volf's and then raised it to her lips. The ice-cold wine slid smoothly down her throat and into her stomach, carrying its cooling sensation all the way. It reminded Dahlia of eating shaved ice, and it was the perfect antidote to the summer heat and humidity. Following this sensation came the subtle flavor of the wine spreading over her tongue. Her cooled throat was warmed again by the alcohol, and finally, the wine's acidity and fragrance were revived. Enjoying the cold more than the wine's flavor, Dahlia took a second, larger mouthful.

"It feels so nice on your throat. I've never had white wine like this before," said Volf, his golden eyes peering into his empty glass.

Dahlia refilled it generously, then replied, "The aroma does suffer, but it's very cooling. I recommend it."

"There's something special about cold drinks in summer."

"There is. But you can enjoy this in winter too—it's wonderful after a long, hot soak in the bath."

"Dahlia, that's pure decadence... I really do love this, though. I might get the family to send me some ice crystals so I can have this in my room."

“People who don’t usually drink much can often take this far more easily, so make sure to warn them if you’re recommending it. When it hits, it hits hard, even for people who have a high tolerance. I’ve known my father’s friends to suddenly end up legless or burst into fits of laughter after drinking it.”

“Scary how just chilling it can give it that effect. I’d better watch myself too.”

Alcohol was to be consumed at a sensible pace and only as long as it was enjoyable for all involved. It was no fun for anyone if you made yourself sick, suddenly passed out, or became loud and obnoxious. It was vital to stay in control.

“Do you ever drink at the barracks?” Dahlia asked.

“Sure. I often drink with Randolph and Dorino, whom you met today, and a few of the other knights.”

“But you don’t talk much about magical swords with them?”

“Not much. To them, I suppose, magical swords are something far out of their reach, so they aren’t all that interested. Mostly, we just joke around or complain about this and that. To spice things up, we’ll play our ‘confession game.’ It’s kind of a contest where we tell one another our secrets.”

“A confession game?”

That sounded somewhat ominous to Dahlia. Could it be that they were trading dangerous secrets about the knights and the kingdom’s government?

“I guess it’s a little like when women have a heart-to-heart. Not quite the same, though. It usually starts once we’ve had a few drinks. We each take turns revealing whatever secrets we dare. The only rule is that nothing anyone confesses leaves the room.”

“It must take a lot of courage to say something—or even just to listen.”

“Oh, it’s not that serious a thing. To be honest, since it’s all guys, we often end up talking about women. People might talk about their first love, or their taste in women, or about the brothel...ahem. Sometimes we get stories about when they screwed up at college or at work. Sharing these things you can’t talk about in everyday conversation helps bring us closer together as a unit, I think. Builds

solidarity.”

Dahlia wasn’t sure whether this was a more or less serious version of the tales of romance (and romantic woes) women often swapped among one another, but in any case, it appeared to be similar. Perhaps that “breasts or behinds” conversation between Volf and Ivano had had the same sort of rationale.

“Don’t these secrets sometimes end up getting spread around?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard of. If anyone was caught doing that, no one would ever trust them again; you can be sure of that. Besides, I don’t think anyone shares secrets that could put them in real trouble. The game usually wraps up after two or three rounds, anyway. We get off track talking about something and just forget about it.”

As Dahlia returned from fetching a second bottle of freezing wine, Volf turned to her with a smile.

“We could give the confession game a try. What do you say?”

“All right. I like a challenge.”

“The person who wants to speak says, ‘I hereby confess.’ The others lay their dominant hand palm-down on the table or floor. It means you’re prepared to let the person speaking cut off your hand if you tell their secret to anyone else. That’s what the older knights told me.”

“Well, that’s terrifying.”

Dahlia had no intention of telling anyone what was revealed to her, but it was still disconcerting to play under such a severe rule. Knights seemed to have a penchant for this sort of thing.

“It was my idea, so shall I go first? Or shall we flip a coin?”

“Let’s have the coin decide.”

“Heads, you go first; tails, I will. Okay?”

Once Dahlia nodded, Volf flipped a shining silver coin with well-practiced ease and caught it on the back of his hand. The side he revealed was engraved with the kingdom’s name and some ears of wheat.

“Heads,” he noted. “That’s you, then. You can say anything you like.”

“I hereby confess, um... When my mother was pregnant with me, she returned to her family home, where she gave birth to me, and then my younger brother a year later.”

“I wonder if she felt more at ease there. It’s a common story among nobles—you hear of men’s wives going back to their families all the time.”

“I expect so. It seems she loved her noble home so much that she decided to divorce my father, give me to him, and marry the man who fathered my brother instead. That’s why I never knew her.”

“I’m sorry, Dahlia. I didn’t mean to bring up any painful memories.”

“Don’t worry. It isn’t painful. I just thought I’d rather tell you myself than have you hear it from someone else someday. Any ties between my mother and I were severed a long, long time ago. And she’s gone, in any case. Same as Father.”

Dahlia’s glass, still quite full, was beginning to chill her fingers. As she traced lines in the condensation, the corners of her mouth quirked up.

“My mother loved Father so much that she practically forced him into marriage, I heard, but perhaps the passion died once I was born. Even so, I never heard Father say a word against her. Not once. Actually, he barely spoke about her at all. He always kept her trousseau, though.”

This was the kind of talk that could only be had over drinks with a trusted friend like the man in front of her. It would be forgotten as soon as the night was over, as if it were just idle grumbling. That was the unspoken understanding.

“I don’t remember her at all, but I’ve been told my hair color is exactly like my mother’s. Sharing the blood of the woman who abandoned my father...almost makes me even gladder that my engagement ended the way it did. If I did fall in love and marry, I’d never be able to shake the feeling that my affection might fade one day, like hers did.”

The last thing Dahlia wanted was to abandon someone like her mother had. Ephemeral passion that would melt away like sea-foam was nothing better than

a delusion. It wasn't worth hurting someone or being hurt over such a fickle thing. This thought had dogged her for a long time, hiding away in some dark corner of her mind.

The reality was that she seldom thought of the man she'd been engaged to for two years. She was far more interested in her work. This undeniable truth had been stuck in her heart like a sharp little thorn, preventing her from ever believing with confidence that she wasn't the woman her mother was.

"I can't tell what course your feelings will take... But what I do know is that you're *you*, Dahlia, not your mother or your father. And people don't always follow in their parents' footsteps."

Volf's careful, quiet words were somehow reassuring.

"I...suppose you're right," Dahlia mumbled, dropping her gaze. She felt somewhat embarrassed. Perhaps she'd said too much.

"I don't know whether I can offer something as heavy as that, but I'll tell you something about my family as well—with all the wretched details a noble can offer!" Volf declared suddenly.

"Wretched details?"

The knight drained the remainder of the wine in his glass.

"My mother was my father's third wife. She had been the personal bodyguard to a duchess, but due to her beauty and her affinity for ice magic, I suppose, my father took her as his wife. However, I was the child she gave him. Since I could barely use magic, my father wasn't much interested in me, and my mother trained me in the sword instead. Once I was old enough, I joined the Beast Hunters, and here we are. I think I've told you this much."

"Yes, I remember."

"Okay, then I hereby confess. When I was ten, we were attacked while traveling by carriage across my father's domain. Twenty or so people died that day, including my mother. Protected by her and the other knights, I, my father's first wife, and her son—my older brother—survived. Ever since then, the pain of losing my mother has kept me from getting close to anyone. But I learned recently that all this time, my older brother has been suffering even more. He

blamed himself for not preventing my mother's death. I realized what a child I've been. I never even considered how he felt before." It sounded like a harrowing tale, but there was no hint of pain in Volf's smile as he continued. "I'm so glad I found out. If I hadn't, I'd still have been that self-centered child, thinking I was the only one in pain. I'd still be running away."

"Volf..."

"I'm weak. That's the reason I want a magical sword."

"You seem very strong to me."

"Not nearly strong enough. I want the strength to take on a dozen men. I want the strength to take down a beast in moments. For someone like me, who can't use magic, I thought that a magical sword could be the key to that strength... No, now I'm trying to sound like some sort of hero." After that moment of self-derision, Volf's expression turned grave. "I just wanted an end to the nightmares. I never wanted to see my mother lying there on the ground again, or myself, just a scared little boy who was too weak to save her. Now, though, what I want more than that is the strength to defeat my mother. That's what still draws me to magical swords."

"To defeat her?"

"Yeah. She was a mystic knight who used ice magic. Her power was staggering."

"You don't think you could defeat her as you are now?"

"I can't picture it. I think the sköll bracelet's brought me a step closer, though."

Of course, any battle that took place between them now could only happen within Volf's imagination. However, the young knight was still convinced that he couldn't outmatch the version of his mother who dwelled in his memories. She wielded her heavy sword with extraordinary speed, aided at every turn by her lethal ice magic.

"Well then, this magical sword we make you will have to be a good one, won't it? Let's give it everything we've got."

“Thanks. I can’t tell you how much I’m looking forward to it. I’m going to work harder than ever in training.”

Dahlia’s words softened the knight’s expression, and he smiled. Although the pressure to succeed had ramped up considerably all of a sudden, Dahlia felt that that burden of expectation would serve well to spur her on.

“You know, Volf...I have nightmares too, sometimes. I see people nearby me, but I can’t call out to them for help. In the end, I fall to the ground and die all alone.”

Hesitantly, Dahlia revealed a memory that may as well have been from a nightmare, though in truth, it was nothing of the sort. It was the last thing she remembered from her past life. In a sense, this was her second confession of the game.

“Next time you have that dream, call me into it. I promise I’ll help you.”

“How will I do that?”

It was a kind thought, but she couldn’t envision how that was supposed to work. If anything, it sounded like a rather unsettling ability to have.

“Couldn’t you come up with a magical tool for that?”

“I make *tools*, not miracles, you know. I don’t think entering people’s dreams is really in my job description.”

“But this is *you* we’re talking about! I know you could do it!”

“Even I have my limits!” Dahlia retorted loudly.

She was well accustomed by now to that tone of mischief in Volf’s voice. Long into the night, the tower’s stone walls echoed with the sounds of their laughter.

Respects after the Rain

By afternoon, the light rain that had fallen all morning had cleared away. In the northeastern part of the royal capital, beyond the temple, lay a vast graveyard surrounded by trees and gray brick walls. Almost everyone who lived in the city, regardless of whether they were nobles or commoners, rich or poor, would be interred here upon their death. The graveyard was managed by the temple, but entry wasn't restricted to believers. Use of the public cemetery was practically free. This was to prevent unattended bodies from causing disease or turning into undead, Dahlia had heard.

The carriage pulled into the parking area, and Dahlia stepped down onto the flagstones. The earlier rain had left them somewhat slippery underfoot. Since Volf's boots had better grip, he had insisted on carrying all the baggage, aside from the bouquets of flowers. He was once again dressed in his black uniform and wore his fairy glass spectacles. On his back, he carried what appeared to be a sword wrapped in blue cloth, while in his hands, he held two bundles containing drinks and glasses. Dahlia held two small bouquets—one white and one red.

Last night, as the two of them said goodbye, Volf had asked Dahlia about her plans for today. She'd told him she would be visiting her father's grave. As it turned out, the anniversary of his mother's death was drawing close, and he had already ordered some flowers. Out of politeness, she initially refused his offer of sharing a carriage, but he reminded her that they both had to go to the Merchants' Guild that afternoon anyway, so she eventually agreed.

All visitors entered the graveyard through the same tall, white gate. Beyond it, the path split two ways: right for commoners and left for nobles. The Scalfarotto family grave would, of course, be found in the nobles' section. Although both Dahlia's father and grandfather had been honorary barons, their plot was with the commoners.

"We go different ways here. My family's grave is in that section."

Dahlia made to take the items Volf had been carrying for her, but without any hesitation, he began to walk toward the commoners' section.

"Let's go together," he said. "I'll say a prayer at your family's grave too, and then we can go to mine."

"Huh?"

Dahlia stared at him, frozen stiff for a moment before she quickly averted her eyes.

"Dahlia? Is something wrong?"

"I-It's just, er...we commoners only visit another family's grave when we're with someone very special—a partner we've vowed to spend our life with. Going to each other's family graves to offer prayers is something we do after getting engaged or married, so...someone might misunderstand, you see."

"I'm sorry. Truly. I didn't realize."

"It's all right! I know you didn't mean anything by it!" Dahlia exclaimed rather more frantically than she'd meant to.

"Well, if you're sure..."

Volf's eyes became oddly distant. The difference in customs between nobles and commoners had a way of throwing up a high wall between the two sometimes. Both of them must have felt keenly aware of it in the awkward silence that fell over them. In a halting exchange, Volf and Dahlia arranged to meet back at the carriage before going their separate ways.

The Scalfarotto family grave was located at the far end of the nobles' section. Having originally been built for a viscount, the grave was not particularly large. Even so, it was far grander than any commoner's place of rest, with six stone steps leading up to its high altar. Volf approached the two gravestones that stood there like pillars of ivory. Already lying before them was a fresh bouquet of white lilies, wet from the rain. Volf placed his own flowers gently beside it. On the low table in front of the grave, he laid down a handkerchief and a glass that he filled with white wine. Then he removed his enchanted glasses and activated his anti-eavesdropping device.

“It’s good to see you, Mother. I’m sorry it’s been so long.” Volf had never once spoken to the grave before. For some reason, the urge struck him today. “I spoke with Guido a few days ago. I learned that Father’s been visiting you as well. I’ve...been such a child. If only you could speak to me, I’m sure you’d give me the scolding I deserve.”

Until now, he’d convinced himself that he’d mourned her all alone—that no one else in the world would shed a tear for her. Afraid of one day suffering the same pain again, he’d distanced himself from everyone and shirked his responsibilities. Although in theory he’d long since become a man, on the inside, he’d changed little from the frightened young boy he’d been that day. Now, at long last, he was ready to grow up and stop running away.

Last night, during his conversation with Dahlia, Volf had seen deep, deep pain in her eyes. That young woman who always seemed so strong had revealed to him a scared and fragile side of herself. It was a side he wanted no one else to see.

“I’ve made a friend. Someone I want to protect.” The words fell quietly from his lips, like drops of rain. “She saved me when I was lost. She crafted a magical item to protect me. Soon, she might create the most amazing magical sword. I’ve been nothing but a burden to her so far, but one day, I want to be strong enough that I can protect her from anything. That’s why I need the strength to defeat you, Mother.”

When Volf was a child, his mother had asked him, “Volf, what sort of knight do you want to become?” He’d always thought she was asking about his fighting style—whether he preferred to fight offensively or defensively, whether his focus was on power or speed. Now, however, he realized it might have been deeper than that.

“I know it’s taken a long time, but I finally know what kind of knight I want to become. I want to be a man who can protect those dear to him. It may not be the answer of a real knight, but that’s my wish.”

The sword wrapped in dark-blue cloth that Volf had brought with him was his mother’s—it was the sword she had wielded in her final moments. It had been almost falling apart, the blade broken, but it had now been lovingly repaired

and kept safe for a while in his mother's armory. Without removing its cloth, Volf turned toward the grave and reverently offered up the sword. It was said that a knight who died protecting someone could offer divine protection to the loved ones they left behind. Whether it was a mere myth that only existed in this kingdom or just a way to comfort the bereaved, Volf couldn't be sure. But if there was even the smallest possibility that it were true, there was a wish Volf had to make.

"I'll fight with my own strength. If it's within your power, I beg that you grant your protection not to me, but to my friend. To Dahlia."

Volf closed his golden eyes, remaining for a long while before the grave as he prayed.



Washed clean by the morning's rain, the gravestones shone brightly, as though they were brand new. Dahlia stopped in a corner along a row of nearly identical light-gray pillars. Here was the small grave where her father and grandfather had been laid to rest. The stone pillar was about as thick as the palm of her hand. Someone must have come here recently to offer a prayer—a small bottle of her father's favorite liquor had been left before the grave.

In this city, almost everyone was cremated after death and their ashes returned to the earth beneath their gravestone. The day after she had entrusted her father's casket to the temple, a priest had returned to her the pure-white ashes in a glass box. There had been barely more than a handful. She had removed the thin stone slab before the gravestone and gently scattered the ashes in. A slight breeze had picked up a few of them then, and she hadn't known what to do.

It had been a month and a half since Dahlia had last visited her father's grave. If she had gone through with her marriage to Tobias, the two of them would've come here on that day. With her engagement being broken off, meeting a new friend, starting her own company, and visiting the castle, life had been an utter whirlwind ever since. After laying her bouquet of red flowers, she poured two glasses of the red wine she'd brought with her and placed one before the grave. Holding the other in her hand, she gently touched them together.

“It’s all over between Tobias and me, Father. But if you saw why, then I’m sure you’re not angry with me.”

In fairness, if anyone deserved her father’s wrath, it was Tobias, but if he saw how she was doing now, she was sure he’d just laugh it off. “Ah well, no harm done,” she could hear him say. “Good for you.”

“I’ve founded the Rossetti Trading Company. Ivano’s going to join me. He’s been very helpful. Oh, and I went to the castle yesterday. I’m afraid the company’s first products are going to be toe socks and insoles, of all things, but everyone seems very happy with them. Actually, the very first ones were meant for you. It’s funny, isn’t it?”

Dahlia tilted her glass a bit, speaking softly.

“I never knew you had such a knack for putting people in your debt. There’s Lord Jedda, Gabriella, Oswald...and probably others I don’t know about.”

Those three were no less than the guildmaster and vice-guildmaster of the Merchants’ Guild and the owner of a famous magical tool shop, the Goddess’s Right Eye. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that her father would leave those people with a debt of gratitude to be settled with her, his daughter. *Leave it to you to still be fussing over me from beyond the grave.*

“You were always so sloppy and careless around the house, but the whole time you were doing these amazing things in secret. That wasn’t fair, you know.”

Dahlia turned toward the grave with a pout. She could see the wry smile her father would have given her if he’d been standing there.

“Still... Thank you, Father,” she whispered, reaching out to lightly touch the gravestone.

A single clear droplet fell and landed beside the wine glass. It had been one year since her father’s death. In truth, it was only recently that she’d properly come to terms with it. For a long time after his passing, she’d lived in a kind of daze. Nothing had felt real anymore. After that, she had simply locked her grief away and thought only of carrying on as normal. She changed herself, stifling all her individuality for the sake of becoming her former fiancé’s ideal wife. And in

the end, he left her anyway. Even in his grave, her father must have had little rest, worrying about his daughter.

"I appreciate you looking out for me, but we can't go on like this. At this rate, I'll never truly grow up. I'll never be anything but your little girl."

Since she was a child, Dahlia had never been able to imagine surpassing her father as a magical toolmaker. His magical power, technical skill, planning ability, and knowledge of magical toolmaking had always seemed impossibly far beyond her own. At some point, she'd made peace with the idea of walking in his shadow—and her fiancé's—in order to lead a quiet life. Perhaps it was the loneliness and terror of how she'd died in her previous world, exhausted to the point of death with no one by her side, that pushed her to think this way. However, since her engagement had been broken off and she'd promised herself not to meekly hang her head any longer, she'd changed a great deal.

She still loved her father. Since his passing, she had learned anew just how much he'd loved and cherished her. As his daughter and as a magical toolmaker, she was eternally grateful for how lovingly he had raised her. Even so, she knew now that she couldn't continue walking in his shadow or relying on him to protect her. Yes, she was afraid. She was uneasy. She was unsure. But until she walked on her own two feet down a path of her own choosing, she couldn't call herself a grown woman. *Until I'm grown, you'll never be truly at peace.*

"Right now, my magical power and my skills are still nowhere near where they need to be. I don't know how many years it'll take to get them there, but still..." Dahlia raised her eyes and gazed unflinchingly at the gravestone as she confidently declared, "Father, I want to be an even greater toolmaker than you were."

When she recalled his strong, broad back and the powerful, scintillating magic that flowed like rivers from his fingertips, it seemed like a hopeless dream. So many of the ideas Dahlia was praised for only came to her through the memories of her past life. There was still so much she didn't know about her craft, and her skills couldn't yet hope to rival her father's. Nonetheless, surpassing her father's legacy seemed a fine goal to dedicate her life to.

“I’ve made a great friend who supports me. I’m not alone. Whatever happens, I’ll be all right.”

Dahlia turned a radiant smile on the gravestone. She knew that her dear friend Volf would do anything to support her in her work. He wasn’t the only one; Irma, Marcello, Gabriella, Dominic, and many others were also ready and willing to lend her a hand should she need it. It was thanks to them that she made it this far without losing heart or faltering in her conviction. She had her share of worries and hurdles to overcome, but she also had the strength to face them each day with a smile on her face. Thus, she wanted her father to be at peace and not worry about her any longer. She wasn’t his “little Dahlia” anymore. If she stumbled, she could pick herself back up on her own now.

“Someday, I’m going to be twice the toolmaker you were, Father. You’ll see.”

As Dahlia raised her glass up to the height of the tombstone, it caught a brilliant reflection. Upon its surface glowed the seven colors of a rainbow arching across the sky above.



Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—Waterproof Cloth

"Dahlia... Wait, you asleep?"

Carlo's daughter often chided him for nodding off in the workshop. Today, however, that same daughter sat slumped over the workbench, dead to the world. There was a large white cloth spread out over the bench alongside a collection of bottles filled with blue and green powder—the powdered remains of blue and green slimes. Noticing one of the bottles was open, Carlo grew concerned that Dahlia might breathe the stuff in, and quietly closed the lid.

For the last few weeks, Dahlia had been working tirelessly in an attempt to make a kind of water-repellent fabric, using slimes as her enchanting material. However, the project didn't appear to be progressing well. Likely due to their relatively weak magical power, slimes were seldom used for enchanting. Dahlia had had little success finding reference materials on them in either the college library or the city's bookshops.

She'd been met with odd looks when she went to order slimes from the Adventurers' Guild. The first batch that had arrived had been muddy, far from fresh, and smelly. They were also lacking in variety and few in number. That was only the beginning of her troubles. One of the blue slimes, only half-killed, escaped from its bottle. Birds carried off the green slimes drying on the roof. Others rotted in a persistent spell of rain. Barely a day had gone by without something going wrong.

It was a hazardous endeavor as well. When Dahlia had developed a persistent cough while powdering some slimes, Carlo had insisted that she drink a potion. As far as he could tell, she'd burned her throat by breathing in some red slime. Her vocal cords could have been in danger. Dahlia, however, wasn't pleased. It was a waste, she said, to use an expensive potion over something so minor. When a black slime resurrected itself one day and began to creep menacingly toward them, Carlo managed to hold on to his fatherly dignity and exterminate

the creature with apparent ease. In truth, however, the sight had chilled him to the bone.

But even in the face of all these setbacks, his daughter persisted with her research and experiments. The idea of leaving her project unrealized seemed unthinkable. When it came to dealing with other people, Dahlia could be somewhat shy and reserved at times, but as a craftswoman, she displayed extraordinary innovation and always welcomed a challenge. To put it another way, she could be recklessly, *dangerously* adventurous. Of course, Carlo knew better than anyone where she got that from. He was in no position to criticize. What was a father to do?

“Dahlia. Dahlia...” Carlo called softly, giving his daughter’s shoulder a gentle shake, but to no avail. She was obviously sleeping more deeply than he’d thought.

Until ten or so years ago, Carlo would often carry his sleeping daughter up to bed and tuck her in. But as the gray hairs had crept in, the strength and will to carry his now-college-aged daughter had slipped away from him.

Thankfully, the nights were warm at this time of year. He gave up trying to wake her and draped his coat over her shoulders. At that moment, he felt a twinge in his right wrist. He’d been working too hard lately; his arthritis was flaring up. The heart palpitations had been coming on a little more frequently too. He had age and excessive drinking to thank for that, no doubt.

Once, he’d been able to wrap his little Dahlia up completely in a jacket of this size. How she’d grown.

She had begun her magical toolmaking studies at age five. She’d loved to play with magic crystals and read her illustrated crystal guide. Before long, she was attempting to craft her first tools—with a little help from her father, she even achieved some successes.

While she was in elementary school, the maid had begun teaching her to cook. In the early days, her style had been...individual, to say the least. Carlo always praised her and ate up whatever she produced, though he found himself losing weight for a while. Her skills rapidly progressed, and now Carlo eagerly anticipated each and every meal.

When she'd turned sixteen, this kingdom's age of majority, Dahlia had tried her first glass of wine. Carlo could still remember what a grimace she'd made upon that first sip. He'd thought that perhaps, unlike him, she might not take to liquor, but these days they often shared a drink or two over dinner. She seemed to enjoy it a great deal too.

How many more years would they have together in this tower? Surely not as many as he might like. Carlo loved living with Dahlia, but recently, he'd begun to worry that his existence might be robbing her of the encounters a young woman ought to be having. He could scarcely imagine any man wanting to come live in a tower with his bride and father-in-law. No, when the time came for Dahlia to be married, he would have to let her go. Considering her age, he couldn't put off thinking about this much longer.

However, Dahlia had never shown any particular interest in romance. In all their conversations, she'd never made a single mention of the subject. For a time, he'd thought that perhaps she simply kept those feelings private from him, but a visit from Irma—her childhood friend—the other day had dispelled that thought. "Slimes, slimes, slimes, every single day! Are you going to *marry* a slime, Dahlia?!" Irma had cried in exasperation. His daughter's total lack of appetite for love remained a mystery.

Carlo put on a pair of reading glasses and sat down beside Dahlia to look over an order form. On one end of the workbench, he noticed a little blue slime powder that had been spilled. As he gazed at it, an idea occurred to him, and he brought down several bottles of the liquid chemicals they used for crafting their tools. So far, Dahlia had been using only one type of liquid to mix with the slime powders, but as far as Carlo could surmise, combining two or more would be much more likely to produce the effect she was striving for. However, he knew that if he did it himself, he'd be getting in the way of her research.

Suppressing his urge to experiment, Carlo selected four liquids that were likely to combine usefully and placed them in a row upon the workbench. He made doubly sure that they were far enough out of Dahlia's reach that she wouldn't accidentally knock one over when she awoke. He still worried about these little things. She'd long since grown into a young woman, but he was as doting and overprotective of her as he was when she was five years old.

As Carlo looked at one of the bottles of blue slime on the workbench, a memory surfaced. He recalled the first time Dahlia had come to him and begged to be carried. He had bent down and lifted his darling little girl up toward the clear blue sky above. She was so small and so light, yet her smile shone with all the radiance of the sun. Carlo knew then that he would do anything—he would become the most pious saint or the blackest villain—as long as he could protect that smile. It was as simple as that.

Whenever Dahlia stumbled and fell, he could never keep himself from rushing to her side.

“Mr. Carlo, you mustn’t coddle her so! Children must learn to stand up on their own!” the maid always scolded him sourly.

It became such a regular occurrence that eventually, after taking a tumble one day, Dahlia told him, “No, Father! You’ll get in trouble!” and got up by herself. He felt like a pitiful excuse for a father.

He may have been a half-decent toolmaker, he’d thought, but as a father, he was third-rate or worse. While he could teach her his craft and help her with her school studies, there was almost nothing he could tell her about being a woman and making her way in the world. And so, in the hope that others might do so in his place, Carlo began secretly asking favors of his friends and acquaintances. He called them debts to be repaid, but in truth, they were pleas. In return for some small kindness, he asked people to look out for his daughter once he was gone—to lend her their aid should she ever need help.

Most of them laughed. They’d probably never met a man who doted on his daughter the way Carlo did. He expected most of his pleas would go unanswered, but that was all right. If Dahlia found out about them one day, would she be thankful? Or would she just laugh too? Of course, ideally, she would never need to know a thing about what he’d done.

Someday soon, once Dahlia had found someone she could happily spend her life with, Carlo could pass all his knowledge and skills on to his apprentice and at last rest easy, without regrets... His train of thought petered out there, and he smiled wryly. *Not a chance.*

No matter how many years went by, his attachment to Dahlia would never

wane. He would forever be fretting about his precious daughter. Once she married, he'd start longing for grandchildren. Once they were born, he'd fret over them too. If his ex-wife—Dahlia's mother—were still by his side, could he have watched his daughter fly the nest with a smile and not spend the rest of his days fretting about her? He very much doubted it.

"Live a life unshackled by regret"—so went a teaching from the gods. But what kind of life would you have to lead to achieve that? "Live righteously," the temple priests regularly proclaimed. "Live with love for your brothers and sisters. Live without regrets." Was it his age that made those words sting his ears? Or was it the thoughts of those he'd been unable to protect?

Carlo had been an incorrigible child. He was always up to some sort of mischief, and he vexed his parents terribly. As a student, he'd loved to amuse himself with experiments and frequently caused trouble for his friends and teachers. When his mother and father died of illness in quick succession, he was inconsolable, filled with regret at not having been a better son to them.

At times, his path to becoming a magical toolmaker had felt like running into one brick wall after another, leaving him helpless but to grit his teeth against the pain of failure. After a fiery whirlwind romance, he was soon married only for his wife to desert him, leaving his daughter Dahlia bereft of a mother.

He often thought about what he could have done differently at one time or another. His was a life littered with regrets. These last few years, he'd found himself at the funerals of friends and acquaintances increasingly often. He guessed that his own turn wasn't far off.

Perhaps before his time came, he ought to find someone who could protect his daughter once he was gone, he'd thought. It had been suggested to him a few times that Dahlia could be presented for marriage interviews as the daughter of a baron, but he couldn't see the formality of noble life suiting her in the slightest. Dahlia had genuine talent as a magical toolmaker. However, her extraordinary inventiveness and headlong approach to experimentation could easily put her in danger. She would benefit from someone with a cool head who would rein her in when necessary.

As Carlo pushed up his reading glasses, his eye was caught by a glint of light. It

was reflecting off a silver sheet that sat propped against one wall of the workshop. Its surface had been very evenly enchanted with a hardening spell—an impressive feat for a first-timer.

It was the work of Tobias, his apprentice and the son of a good friend. Despite there being no history of mages or magical toolmaking in Tobias's family, he'd worked long and hard to enter college and pursue his dream of becoming a toolmaker. This young man was diligent, level-headed, and, much like Dahlia, he appeared to be a stranger to romance. Though he kept it well hidden, he too was always looking out for Dahlia, his junior apprentice. It comforted Carlo to see him care for her like an elder brother. He hoped that they would go on supporting each other as fellow apprentices for many years to come.

Carlo's friend—Tobias's father—had recently floated the idea of his son marrying Dahlia. It wouldn't be a bad arrangement for either of them. But try as he might, Carlo simply couldn't picture Tobias and Dahlia as a happily married couple. Thus, he'd been holding off on giving his friend an answer.

Frankly, he didn't care if he was called overprotective or arrogant. If he could have his way, he'd see her wed to someone he knew would protect her no matter what and who would carve her a peaceful path through life that spared her every unhappiness. He didn't want her to marry a man like himself, who'd been unable to take care of even his own wife. He hoped she would find a man who would protect her until the end of her days. He wanted that man to be like the waterproof cloth Dahlia would one day finish, wrapping around her to shield her from every cold drop of rain and gust of wind. He wanted a man who would stand between her and any danger, not letting a single hair on her head come to harm. It didn't matter where this man came from or what position he held in society. It didn't matter if the life he and Dahlia led was ordinary and uneventful. All Carlo wanted was for Dahlia to be blessed with happiness for as long as she lived. That was all he could ask for as her father—a simple yet grandiose wish. Naturally, he had no way of knowing whether it would be granted.

"Are you awake, Dahlia? No, still sleeping..."

She'd shifted her posture a little as she slept; that was all. The coat he'd laid over her slipped off onto the floor. She must have been having a good dream;

there was a smile upon her lips. It looked so childlike, somehow. Carlo picked up his coat and laid it over her once again, smiling ruefully at himself.

She couldn't forever stay that little girl he'd held in his arms. "No, Father!" she used to say. "You'll get in trouble!" How would she scold him for his pampering now, he wondered. Having grown up as remarkably strong as she had, she might just laugh and tell him, "You don't need to worry about me anymore."

If, one day, she strayed from the quiet path he'd carved for her onto one of her own choosing, that was fine. If she was determined to go her own way as a craftswoman—as her own person—then far be it from him to discourage her. Even if that road were steep and entangled with thorns, he would congratulate her for braving it. After that, all that was left for him was to pray for her—pray that whatever road she took, it would lead her to happiness.




Handsome Knight from the Order of Beast Hunters
Volfred
Eldest Son of Earl Scalfarotto
Guido
Contracts Administrator at the Merchants' Guild
Ivano
Reincarnated Female Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia
Vice-Captain of the Order of Beast Hunters
Griswald
Captain of the Order of Beast Hunters
Grato


Scarlet Armor in the Order of Beast Hunters
Dorino
Scarlet Armor in the Order of Beast Hunters
Randolph
Dahlia picked up the bundle of reports and began leafing through them, sometimes tilting her head perplexedly, sometimes breaking into a smile. However, as she read further, her expression gradually filled with consternation and her cheeks reddened.
"HERE— THE REPORTS YOU ASKED FOR. EVERYONE WHO USED THE ITEMS WROTE ONE."
"THERE'S A WHOLE PAGE HERE JUST PRAISING MY INGENUITY AND SKILL AS A MAGICAL TOOLMAKER..."

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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 2

by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by Nikolas Stirling Edited by teiko

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Illustrations by Kei

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2021