Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

7

Hisaya Amagishi

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The Knight and the Toolmaker's Accumulation

"Longswords sure have some heft to them..." she said, holding it with both hands in the weapon shop. It was hard to imagine drawing the sword out of the scabbard with one hand. In her previous life, she had held a friend's bamboo kendo sword, but it couldn't compare in size or weight.

The fact that she'd had a previous life meant that this was not her first. Her name was Dahlia Rossetti, and she was a magical toolmaker—someone who made hot water dispensers out of water and fire crystals, refrigerators out of ice crystals, bracelets that counteracted poisoned food, and the like.

"That might be a little heavy for you since you're not used to them. Here, let me," the black-haired youth said, gently receiving the sword from her.

"Thank you. It looks like it weighs nothing to you, though."

"Yeah, I actually use ones with even thicker blades when I'm out fighting monsters." Volfred Scalfarotto was one of the Order of Beast Hunters, knights who served the Kingdom of Ordine. He had a tall and lean build, hair the color of a doused raven, a face that others would assume must be a master artist's creation, and—most strikingly—a pair of shimmering golden eyes that enraptured all those who looked his way. It was said that he was the handsomest in the kingdom, but the fact that his reputation preceded him made his personal relations very difficult. In contrast, Dahlia attracted little attention, despite her vivid red hair and green eyes.

"Monsters' hide and scales are tough, you see. Can't be swinging a sword with too delicate a blade," said the shopkeeper Flores as he wiped down a metallic shield with a cloth. He had already become a familiar face, as Dahlia often accompanied Volf to the weapon shop.

"I always manage to snap even thicker blades when I'm out in the field."

"Why don't you step up to a greatsword? You've got the height for it, and you've got yourself potent strengthening, don't you?" Flores was referring to

Volf's body strengthening spell, a type of magic that did exactly as its name indicated.

Indeed, this was a world of monsters and magic. The five major schools of magic were fire, earth, water, air, and healing; there were also other types, like enchantment magic, which was indispensable for creating magical tools, as well as the aforementioned body strengthening spell. Typically, nobility had much magic and commoners had less, but there were also those with none at all. Despite coming from an earldom, Volf could not express magic from any of the five schools and had only body strengthening. And because of that, his lineage as a nobleman was supposedly worth little, despite his tremendous skills as a knight. What a preposterous sentiment.

"Greatswords are too cumbersome; as part of a diversionary force, I have to be agile."

"Ah, that's right, yer a Scarlet Armor, aren't you?"

Not only did they spearhead the Beast Hunters in combat, the Scarlet Armors were specialists who acted as decoys, rear guards, and played other most dangerous roles within the order; schlepping a greatsword wouldn't be conducive to their hit-and-run tactics.

"Different targets call for blades with different hardness and weight, but monsters are also getting tougher, what with mutant species popping up more frequently. Back then, goblins could be taken down with spears forged from leftover steel. Now, I hear people saying they can cast magic and fight together and whatnot, and my adventuring clientele grumble about how it costs a lot more to get the job done," Flores continued. "I mean, at the end of the day, I can't complain 'cause I'm earning more coin."

Although monsters were doing their damnedest to survive, Dahlia could but worry about the Beast Hunters' safety.

Volf, though, smiled as he took the shield from the shopkeeper. "Not much we humans can do but try harder to beat 'em. We've improved our fundamentals and teamwork, and we've actually been having an easier time now going up against monsters like forest serpents and giant boars."

"Nothing but the finest in you Beast Hunters. Speaking of which, I went out

for some forest serpent barbecue a while back—tastier than I'd expected. Its jerky even helped with my shoulder pain too. If only I'd known about how revitalizing that stuff was when I was young, I'd've hunted one to help with my pa's chronically stiff shoulders too. Oh, my kid brother *did* write about his shoulders not feeling great as well..." Flores, now with his dignified hair and beard of pure white, must've been an adventurer fighting forest serpents once upon a time.

"Why don't you send him some next time?"

"The family home's a ways away; shipping raw meat all the way wouldn't be easy, and sending a refrigerated wagon wouldn't be cheap either. Serpent jerky wouldn't be a bad idea, though. Maybe I'll tell him to hunt one for himself and send him some spices instead." Flores must've seen Dahlia thinking, and he explained, "I was born in the mining town called Caledwulf."

"Famous for its plethora of skilled blacksmiths, right?"

"Oh, yeah, many of our order's swords come from there. Good stuff too."

That brought a proud smile to Flores's face. "You know it! With the monsters that trickle down from the surrounding hills, Caledwulf's a town where the finest swords and people are forged. All the adventurers and townsfolk come together when forest serpents show up."

"Working hard together to protect the place you all call home, I take it," Dahlia said.

"That was part of it, but what was dangerous was when the trade routes were blocked and food and medicine couldn't get delivered. Folks debated whether they should request support from the Beast Hunters, but everybody was eager to stand and fight—lest the tavern run dry, you know." Gluttony—or perhaps indulgences—had fueled their zeal.

"Were the townsfolk all right?"

"Unlike folks 'round here, the people of Caledwulf are used to fighting. The wooden walls around town usually take most of the damage, not that monsters like yellow slimes rolling around town would cause too much harm anyway. Hell, kids carry metal clubs with them when they go play on the outskirts of

town.”

“Those sound like quite the hard times...”

“Hard times create strong people. Many of them grow up to be adventurers too.”

“Maybe I would be stronger now if I’d trained against monsters when I was a boy...” For some reason, Volf sounded almost disappointed that he had had top-quality education and training from his mother—a masterful knight—instead of having been raised by literal monsters.

“You’re a Beast Hunter, Volf. Ain’t much better than that,” the shopkeeper said, to Dahlia’s agreement.

The knight returned the shield to its owner. “Flores, does Caledwulf have magical swords?”

He stroked his beard. “The most common enchantment was hardening, then perhaps sharpness retention.”

“Not enchanted swords—well, no, those are great too, but are there ones that are super strong or have special attributes?”

“Oh, like your captain’s Ash-Hand or the head retainer of Esterland’s Mist? Only royalty, extremely wealthy noblemen, and the most elite of elite adventurers would have those,” Flores said. “You won’t find many enchanted weapons outside of Ordine, so even just hardening and sharpness retention are real precious. Besides, all swords with magic—be that enchantment magic or what have you—are magical swords, aren’t they?”

“I mean, I guess...” Magical swords were a matter of romanticism and adoration for Volf, and he and Dahlia had been trying to create one of their own, though their trials had led to errors every time and their efforts had yet to bear fruit.

“I know you’ve been trying to enchant those shortswords, but applying a single enchantment to a properly made weapon is a different story. Take your time with the process—check your materials, polish your magic, and steadily and earnestly accumulate that experience.” Flores’s surmise was dead-on; they hadn’t told him about trying to craft a magical sword of their own, but Dahlia

had said she was a magical toolmaker.

“Just like physical training...”

“Just like studying...” That meant it was easier said than done. But whether it was a knight’s training, a magical toolmaker’s studying, or anything in between, Dahlia believed that no one would be sorry for accumulating more experience.

“In Caledwulf, they say it takes someone twenty-five years to become a proper blacksmith. Developing a discerning eye takes three years, controlling a fire takes four, forging takes ten, sharpening takes four, and drinking fills in the missing four.” Flores’s beaming smile was awfully infectious.

With their usual shortswords in hand, Dahlia and Volf left the weapons shop behind.

“The breeze has gotten quite cold,” commented Volf.

“All of a sudden too,” she added.

It was just about time to break out the thick winter coat, but she was reminded that the collar and hem had been mended countless times already; now that she frequented the castle, she would be rather unsightly wearing her old rags. She made a note to find her seamstress friend to figure out what proper outerwear for the castle was. Warmer socks would be nice too.

“I should try my hand at making that heating device again...” As Dahlia thought about her abandoned prototype, she noticed her company stopping in his tracks. “Is something the matter, Volf?”

“I was just reminded of what a tall order it is, asking you to make a magical sword. You can tell me if I’m causing you too much trouble.”

“You’re not causing me any trouble at all. I have lots of fun working with you, you know?” she said. “But twenty-five years of hard work, huh? That’s a long time, even if we’re able to make a really powerful one at the end of it...” Everything from coming up with the idea to enchanting the sword was genuinely lots of fun, despite the fact that they were still unable to produce satisfactory results. Maybe that would take many more years too. By that time, Volf would be retired and he wouldn’t need—

“I’m still very excited for that day to come, however many years or decades it may take.”

The way his golden eyes sparkled made her a little restless. “Um, I don’t want to get your hopes up...”

“I’m not worried. Any magical sword you make will be the best that there’ll ever be, Dahlia!”

Up against Volf’s look of anticipation, she forced the best smile she could. “Thank you for the vote of confidence...”

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A fine blue sand-like substance filled a small beaker on the workbench, sometimes sparkling when the sunlight struck it, complementing the rainbow dispersed by the crystal glass. However, Dahlia had no capacity to enjoy the beauty of it all; her brow was drenched with sweat. Likewise dressed in work attire was a boy with silver hair, who sat beside her murmuring to himself. They were in the workshop of their magical toolmaking instructor and chairman of the Zola Company, Oswald Zola. Today’s lesson was on magic control, and now that they’d finished the lecture, it was time for their hands-on training.

In the crystal beaker was the powdered epidermis of ocean worms—a deep blue monster that more or less resembled a colossal earthworm. The versatile material hardened shields and armor, added toughness to bags and cloaks, and even provided resistance to water magic. With golden specks scattered throughout, it shone with such beauty that Dahlia would even consider decorating her house with bottles of the stuff, though her good friend Irma would scream her head off if she learned what it was made of.

“Evenly flow your magic into the ocean worm for three minutes. Give it directionality, mix it clockwise, and turn it into liquid,” Oswald had instructed as he demonstrated.

He’d made it look much easier than it actually was. Not enough magic and the sand wouldn’t swirl; only the surface would stir. Too much magic and it would shoot out and scatter everywhere. And just when Dahlia thought she’d finally managed to swirl it, her magic hadn’t been strong enough to combine the contents of the beaker. Instead, they turned into lumps, forcing her to start

over again. “Simply give it constant, steady magic” was what the professor had told her, but his smile had concealed the true difficulty of the task.

“Aw...” whimpered Oswald’s son—currently majoring in magical toolmaking in college—as his shoulders slumped.

They were in the same rut. Despite having been blended well, a third of Raul’s sand had shot out of the beaker and covered the workbench, and this was his second attempt. As for Dahlia, her second failure in a row resulted in a sprinkling of solid bits throughout the odd navy bluish blob that had floated to the top of the beaker. Oswald’s example, on the other hand, was a viscous blue liquid, gleaming with gold glitter when light reflected off of it. There was zero sand remaining, not even a single solid bit in it.

Raul attempted again and blasted the glass with his magic, groaning and tensing his shoulders in the process. It was obvious that he was striving for success, but Dahlia worried that he might be a little overzealous.

Oswald must’ve noticed their weariness. “Raulaere, straining yourself will not do you any favors. Let us take a break; I am sure Dahlia is fatigued as well.”

“Father, is there a trick to enchanting with ocean worm?”

“Calmly and steadily apply your magic. That, and practice—accumulate lots of experience,” Oswald said before leaving the room to call for tea. No shortcuts, then.

“Hardly a helpful hint...” Raul said under his breath.

“Oh, Raul...” She had been wondering the same thing and completely sympathized with his sentiment.

“Dahlia, if you wouldn’t mind, may I ask how much magic you have?”

“I don’t mind; I’m at grade ten.”

“My magic just went up a grade in the past month and it has yet to settle...”

“Me too. I’m still not used to mine either. It’s not so easy to make it steady.” They were now at the same level, and a month was not enough time to get a good handle on it. Again, she sympathized.

“It’s the same ocean worm, yet it seems as though my attempts are leagues

behind my father's. I never had such difficulty in school..." The boy stared at his father's example product. It was indeed the same ocean worm powder from the same magically sealed box.

"Simply a difference in skill, I think. Your father's magic is so very stable." When she and Oswald had worked together—or rather, when she'd had Oswald's guidance in crafting the magic-leeching bracelet for Irma, the gap in knowledge, technique, and skill had been as clear as day. The experience had been as moving as it was enlightening. Flores's words the other day about how it took twenty-five years to become a blacksmith had seemed like a wild exaggeration, but not any more. There was no shortcut to becoming a proper magical toolmaker, only learning and practicing. "We've only just begun, so let's keep on trying our best."

"I got a little impatient. You're right!"

The boy was racing to catch up to his father just as Dahlia had with hers. She smiled from her heart seeing that earnest look in his silvery eyes.

When tea was ready, the two students moved to the lounge, where Marcella—who was accompanying Dahlia today—was learning etiquette from Oswald's third wife Ermelinda. Marcella's lesson today was on table manners and drinking tea. Although his preference was for straight black tea, his cup today was instead sweetened with two cubes of sugar. Stirring it without making so much as a sound was apparently a tall hurdle; his nervousness was evident on his face.

Ermelinda noticed that Dahlia was befuddled as to whether she should speak to them. "Chairwoman Rossetti, it is so great that you have found such a capable bodyguard."

"Thank you very much." A former elite adventurer like Ermelinda must've had a discerning eye.

"It is an honor to receive such kind words..." Marcella's smile and voice confirmed his nervousness. Meanwhile, Oswald was elegant as ever holding his teacup.

Then, there was a knock at the door and in came a servant with some

documents. “Pardon me, Lord Oswald, there is something that requires your attention.”

Oswald quickly scanned the papers and said, “Hm, there is nothing I particularly want. Please respond that I shall be absent from the auction this time.” He handed what was evidently a catalog back to the servant, who bowed before leaving the room.

“Is there something you are searching for, father?”

“Yes, I was hoping they would have fire dragon scales coming up.”

When crafting the magic-leeching bracelet, Oswald had used up a magical ring for flame fixing. It had been crafted with a fire dragon scale, and if he didn’t have any more on hand, that might hinder his future toolmaking. “Oh, I—”

As if he had anticipated her concern, Oswald continued, “It is indeed so I can craft a flame fixing ring, but I can always substitute volcanofish, and in any case, I have no urgent need for one.”

Dahlia did have some fire dragon scales on hand. However, as they were from Jonas, she didn’t want to offer them to Oswald without first getting permission. She decided she would ask Volf about it the next time she saw him. The volcanofish, though, were very rare. There were none to be found in the volcanoes within Ordine; thus, they had to be imported from elsewhere. Dahlia had heard that their material made for excellent fire magic resistance.

“Have you seen volcanofish and fire dragons in person before, father?”

“I have never seen a fire dragon. As for the fish, I have seen a live one captured before, but not in its natural habitat.”

“I’d love to see them one day,” Raul said, with a smile and sparkling eyes. Dahlia would love to see a fire dragon’s fang, talon, heart, bones, or its other materials, but she would much rather never come across a live specimen. The flames they spat left not even ashes behind. Making a trip to an active volcano hardly seemed like an easy task either.

Ermelinda explained, “Fire dragons have very powerful magic, you see, and you would be trembling in place if you ever had the misfortune of encountering one. Volcanofish swim in very hot water, so it would be difficult to get close to

them as well.”

“That means you have seen them, then, Miss Ermelinda!” the boy said, slamming down his cup and splashing the tea. His eyes doubled in size. “Are fire dragons really as big as they say? Do they freeze people up with their intimidation? Oh, and how do you catch volcanofish?!”

“Calm down, Raulaere. Mel isn’t going anywhere.” Oswald’s expression was halfway between a grimace and a smile.

His wife, wiping up the spilled tea, was doing her best to stifle a laugh too. “The fire dragon I saw was still a wyrmling, so though it could fly, it wasn’t very big yet. Still, all us adventurers immediately hid the best we could. No one dared to move or make a sound. They are *that* frightening.”

“Where was it that you saw the fire dragon?” Raul asked.

“On an island to the south. We were there to harvest their eggshells, as it is said that is one of their stopovers.”

“So I’ll be able to witness one for myself if I go there too!” He sounded as though he were going to pack his bags this instant.

“That will depend on some luck, as fire dragons don’t make regular stops.”

“I see. Oh, what about volcanofish? Are they difficult to catch?”

“Very much so. Getting to a volcano is plenty difficult already, of course, but the heat where they swim is nigh unbearable. Some people hunt them with very powerful bows and arrows attached to lines, while others slay them with spears and magic. Hand nets with long handles are also used to scoop them up, but that does little to mitigate the unending heat. If I had not been accompanied by an adventurer with ice magic, I’m sure I would have collapsed.”

“Wow, that does sound like quite the ordeal. Still, I would love to get the chance to see the real deal for myself.” The boy’s silver eyes stared off to the distance, yearning. Perhaps Raul had it in him to become an adventurer in the future.

“Going to see a fire dragon may very well be a gamble on your life, and the volcanofish are a couple of borders farther away, so it is difficult for me to

recommend—”

“But you are just as eager, aren’t you, dear?” Ermelinda cut Oswald off, and he cleared his throat.

“Are you, father?”

“When I was your age, I wanted to see such things just as badly as you do now, but I reconsidered after I realized I would have little luck in turning tail.”

“Father running away!” Raul giggled at his father’s joke, spreading the cheer to everyone else in the room. “Not to worry—we can train beforehand!”

“Raulaere...” This time, Oswald was full-on grimacing.

Man-Made Magical Sword: Sixth Attempt—Galeforce Blades

“So, Professor Oswald is in search of fire dragon scales...” During lunch on the second floor of the Green Tower, Dahlia recalled yesterday’s conversation to Volf.

“I’m sure Master Jonas would be okay with that. Should I ask, just in case?”

“Could you please? The rings are consumables, you see, so I wouldn’t want to cause any offense.” As Jonas had been blighted by a fire dragon, his arms grew red scales. He had given Dahlia some, but she wanted to make sure he had no problems with someone else using them or using them for a disposable tool. It wasn’t as though Jonas hid his blight, but Dahlia still worried about it.

“Of course. I’ll ask him the next time we do sword training,” he said. “Oh, are you not a fan of the pie, Dahlia?” Accompanying their coffee was a beautiful round salmon pie, courtesy of Volf. There was even a cute little fish on top of the crust—the handiwork of his private chefs. Fresh salmon, spinach, and lots of heavy cream formed the viscid filling. It was very delicious, but Dahlia’s first slice had been on the larger side, so a second slice would surely be too many calories.

“No, I think it’s amazing, but, um, well, I haven’t had much exercise lately...” She worried about her waistline but left that unsaid. Volf customarily ate more than double her portion, but he hadn’t anything to trim off his body—all his physical training and expeditions undoubtedly ensured that—and that made Dahlia just a teensy bit jealous.

“Exercise, huh? How about taking up equestrianism?”

“I don’t know if I have the athleticism to ride a horse...” She had ridden a sleipnir-drawn carriage before, but only as a driver; never had she ridden a horse by herself before. She didn’t have much faith in her coordination *or* her balance, so the thought of falling off was a little scary.

“I’m sure you can learn. Many noblewomen take it up as a hobby, and I think

it’s quite fun too. And it makes for good exercise, you know?”

It wouldn’t be all that dissimilar to riding a bicycle, she assumed, but the fastest she had gone in this world was riding in a speeding carriage, so she couldn’t say so for sure.

Volf continued, “We keep horses at home, so why don’t we give it a shot? You could go on horseback where carriages can’t, and once you get good enough, we could even go into the woods and hills to look for materials.”

“Now that’s a great idea! Oh, but what about monsters?”

“There’s nothing too strong around the capital, and if they do show up, I’ll turn them into materials for you. I think we’ll be fine if we bring guard dogs, and, if it would help you feel safer, even bodyguards.”

“No, I’m sure I’ll be safe with you.” Nothing could be more fun than going deep into the wilderness in search of materials with Volf, and she now felt she needed to learn horseback riding. Though neither of them had approached the subject, they both knew it would just be the two of them.

After lunch, Dahlia and Volf headed downstairs, where a shortsword and enchanting materials had already been laid out on the workbench. It had been some time since they were last in the workshop together.

“It’s been a while, but I’m aiming to make a properly functioning magical sword today.”

“How I’ve waited for thee, O magical sword of my dreams!”

Oh, no pressure or anything, she thought as she handed her enthusiastic friend a set of overalls.

This marked her sixth attempt at artificing a magical sword; the first five times had either been failures or not quite right. She did not mention to him that today would be another go at perfecting the first magical sword, what Volf had dubbed the Blade of the Dark Lord’s Minion. Where the previous attempt had been faulty was the coating of black slime. It was meant to counteract magical interference, but the result was that touching it would also dissolve the wielder’s hand—very dangerous indeed. She had since learned a new method,

and the materials and process should be straightforward. Today would surely be the day she crafted something worthy of being called a magical sword.

“I plan on using unicorn horn, so I’ll start with a shortsword. If it works out, then we can try it with a longsword next time. Would the usual self-sharpening on the blade, self-cleaning on the guard, a wind crystal in the hilt for haste, and weight reduction on the scabbard be okay?”

“Would it be possible to add haste on the blade as well? It would be handy to be able to draw the sword quickly.”

“Sure, we can do that. The effect should be straightforward too. Oh, and I have just the right material for it.” Dahlia brought a magically sealed box from the shelf and gingerly opened the top.

“Feathers from a bird?”

“From a greencrown, to be precise.” As its name suggested, the greencrown was a vibrantly green bird. In the bestiary, it looked as though it wore a very tall hat because of its prominent crest, like a green turaco at the zoos in her previous life. The greencrown wasn’t just different because of its size—its body ranged from sixty to seventy centimeters long, larger than a turaco—it also possessed magic that aided it in both fleeing from and fighting enemies. As such, its feathers could also imbue a tool with haste. This was a lesson that she had recently learned from the professor, and the handful of feathers were also from him. That should mean it would synergize well with the air magic in the hilt.

“Those damn green things?” Volf scrunched up his eyebrows; he must’ve done battle with them before.

“I take it you have encountered them before?”

“Yeah, and not just once. They’re pesky birds, all right.”

“Really? The bestiary said they were timid creatures that avoided humans. Perhaps the ones in Ordine are particularly aggressive?” It wasn’t uncommon that a monster’s behavior differed depending on the locale, so they may have been flighty in the nation next door but not so much here.

“No, they do tend to be timid, but not at the beginning of spring—that’s

mating season for them. The males fight each other, and they dart around very fast with their air magic and even get their beaks stuck in trees."

"How, uh, how passionate..."

"The females line up on branches to spectate the fight, then court the victorious male. The losers get neglected, whether dead or alive."

"It's a bird eat bird world out there..." It sounded like a spectacle, but also a little sad at the same time.

"And if you come across a fight, the victorious males will do the same unto you. You'd better be pretty good at dodging them."

"Or else you'll end up getting speared?"

"Yup. Just like the trees."

"That's a little frightening..." Dahlia didn't want to even imagine that. Those beautiful green feathers were getting scarier by the moment.

"It happened to Dorino, and he couldn't pull the bird free from his arm without opening up the wound some more. He took the chance and roasted the greencrown afterwards, and apparently it was rather tasty too—he said he'd try to catch some the next time."

"Gosh, Dorino is so tough..." Never mind, humans were scarier than greencrowns after all.

When that discussion died down, the duo took their seats at the workbench and began work on the magical sword. Dahlia prepared the guard for slotting in a water crystal, then inserted an air crystal into the hilt. She wrapped the weight reduction magic around the dark gray scabbard like a ribbon. The enchantments were quicker and more potent than they had ever been, pleasantly surprising her. She couldn't let that distract her and ruin the process, though.

"Your magic's become more vivid, Dahlia."

"I think that must've come with my increased magic. I still haven't learned how to control it that well, however." The moment those words escaped her lips, her beam went in the wrong direction—she decided to keep that a secret

from him. “Next, I’ll enchant the blade with greencrown.”

Dahlia slowly doused the green feather with her magic, making it flutter like puffy cotton. It looked more like a tuft of wool than a bird’s feather, but the enchantment was working as she intended and the green cotton dissolved into the blade. The feather discharged a gust of wind, transforming the blade from a metallic silver to a deep forest green.

“How pretty...” Tears welled into golden pools; Volf was captivated.

It made Dahlia slightly nervous. “Um, I think it worked. I’m going to enchant it with unicorn now.” To prevent magical interference, she sprinkled the crushed unicorn horn onto the shortsword parts and enchanted it. Now that she was equipped with the experience from making Irma’s bracelet, the process went without a hitch. She saved the rest of the powdered horn for next time.

“I’ll put it together, then,” Volf said. His hands, clad in leather gloves, moved like it was second nature. As soon as the shortsword was fully assembled, it began emitting a steady wave of magic. “Seems fine so far.”

Next, Volf pressed the base of the guard and a stream of water trickled out. The weight reduction on the scabbard seemed to be working too, but as the sword wasn’t heavy to begin with, the magic perhaps wasn’t making a huge difference. What Dahlia was most curious about was the haste enchantment on the blade and hilt. Drawing the swords activated it, so blood bonding it to Volf wouldn’t be necessary.

Volf stood up, stepped away from the workbench, and faced the wall as a precaution before giving the sword a few test swings. It didn’t look as though he was putting much power into it, yet the blade swooshed in the air. He stopped and pointed the sword at the ground. “This thing is *fast*. I think it would be pretty good as a throwing knife.”

“That doesn’t seem very practical, as you’d have to retrieve it somehow, right? It might be hard to keep track of too.”

“Maybe we could tie a string to it or something so I could reel it in? Well, a string would probably snap. Maybe some kind of steel wire?”

“Steel wire isn’t very durable, and it would rust too. It wouldn’t be too long,

but how about mythril?”

“Isn’t it really expensive?”

“My father had just a little leftover from another project, and I’ve been drawing it very slowly to practice my shaping magic. However, I’m not sure if it’ll be any good.” After seeing the steadiness of Oswald’s magic, Dahlia realized she ought to improve her precision as well. It was hardly satisfactory; the bluish-silver metal had been drawn into a fine thread with a cross section that was a barely rounded square rather than a circle—not the worst she could’ve done but not good enough for her either. “Well, there’s only one way to find out if it’ll work. You would want some sort of handle on the other end of the wire too, right? How about this for now?”

“Is this ring some sort of magical tool?”

“No, this is just a regular loop of metal. I once thought about fashioning it into a door knocker for my room, but, well, my father used to shout out my name, so there wasn’t really any point. It’s still brand new.” The impulse purchase at the hardware store had been lying around for a long time. Since this was a prototype anyway, Dahlia attached the shortsword’s hilt and the ring with the mythril thread and then reinforced the joint to make sure it wouldn’t come loose.

Throwing it around indoors would be unwise, and so the two of them stepped outside into the yard. “A magical shortsword with a silver ring and mythril thread really has romance to it...” Volf said.

“Uh, sure. Let me get out some boards and I’ll let you test it out.” Dahlia set out a thick wooden plank in front of the fence. She wouldn’t want the mythril thread to slice up Volf’s hand either, so she brought him a pair of sand lizard gloves with metal inserts on the fingers and palms; they had been Carlo’s for when he handled blades and other hard materials.

“Could you step back a bit, Dahlia? I wouldn’t want it ricocheting back at you.”

“Of course.” If the target broke, the fence was right behind it. She stepped well away from the danger.

“All right, here I go.” With his right hand, Volf threw the shortsword.

Dahlia meant to track it, but it was though it had blinked away. There was a whistling through the air, followed by a combination of a thunk and a crack, then a shrill clank immediately afterwards—only the handle was poking out from the wood.

“Whoa, sorry. I didn’t think I’d thrown it that hard.” Volf had thrown the ring out with the shortsword, and that must’ve caused the metallic clash earlier.

“Are you okay, Volf?”

“Yeah, I didn’t get hurt. The shortsword is good as it is, and seeing how far it goes, I think I could use it as a ranged weapon against monsters,” he said as he went to retrieve his new weapon. However, the mythril thread had lodged itself into the board as well and it was pulled taut. “Hey, Dahlia? Would you be able to make me a copy of the sword? I’ll pay for it, of course.”

Volf looked very serious about it, so she readily agreed. “I can do that. I have the materials on hand, so I’ll get on it now.” After all, having more than one throwing knife simply made sense. She returned to the workshop and collected all the materials needed, save for one—the ring. “It turns out I don’t have another ring, so should I quickly make something similar?”

“Just the sword is fine. I’m thinking of ditching the ring and connecting the swords with the wire.”

“Gotcha.”

Volf must’ve wanted to be able to reel both swords in together. He asked for a thread that was about half the length of the hilt and could be attached directly to the pommel. Dahlia had thought it would be better if the thread were attached directly to the center of the hilt, but Volf said it would get in the way. With the second shortsword now in his hand, Volf swung them both at the same time. The way it sliced through the air had a lot of punch to it—and was a little terrifying, to be honest.

“I think this will do just fine...” he said. The pair returned to the garden. Volf stood up a long piece of firewood in front of the plank, likely to test out how much penetration power the blades had. After Dahlia stepped back, he set his

sights on the plank, steadied his breath, and fired a sword from each hand. The whistling through the air was more than twice as loud, and they disappeared from his hands the same way the first sword had before.

"Uh..."

While the log looked untouched, the pair of shortswords crushed the board behind it and fell to the ground farther out. The log remained upright, at least until Dahlia began fretting that the mythril thread must've snapped, then the top half of the log slid off its base—exactly how she imagined it would have after a skilled swordfighter slashed it. The mythril thread was the hidden third blade.

"Wow." She pressed a finger to her temple, thinking she had messed up for the sixth time. The shortswords didn't seem much good as swords, but they seemed to make for great arrows. But to think they moved so quickly. Perhaps she should've started with a longsword instead—*no, throwing that would be infinitely more dangerous.*



Volf, though, was nowhere as troubled as she was. “Ha ha ha, this is marvelous! It takes a bit of skill, but I could totally clip a monster’s wing or leg at range!”

It finally clicked for her; she had not been on the same wavelength as a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. Being able to keep one’s distance when going up against a monster would provide some safety indeed. “Wouldn’t a bow be better suited for this?”

“A bow? How do you mean?”

“Um, let’s see. The arrowhead could be made of a hard material, enchanted with haste, and then connected with mythril wire like the swords. Oh, but to have two people firing synchronously would be impossible, I guess.”

Volf furrowed his brow. “It might work, but I’m not sure. Our bow knights are pretty good at rapid fire...” A Scarlet Armor charged into battle, while a bow knight would likely stay in the rear; the bow knight would likely not be able to observe the battle up close.

Dahlia changed the subject. “So? How about a name?”

“Hm. Do you have any ideas?”

“‘Magical Wire Blade’ or ‘Haste Sword’ wouldn’t do, would they?”

A pained groan came from Volf. “Those names certainly showcase how sensible you are...”

Dahlia wished he wouldn’t look at her with such pity. A magical sword was a magical tool, and a magical tool’s name should be descriptive. Everybody knew exactly what a hot water dispenser or a waterproof cloth would do. But *noooo*, they weren’t romantic enough for Volf, of course. “You should give it something you like. Something romantic.”

“Since they’re so speedy, let’s go with ‘Galeforce Blades’!” Under that contented smile lay the toppled firewood. “The Magical Log Splitter” felt more fitting, but she decided not to suggest it to Volf.

“I have come today to make a personal request for a magical tool.” Visiting the room in the Merchants’ Guild that the Rossetti Trading Company called their office was an unusual guest: Jean, Chief of Monster Nursery Operations at the Adventurers’ Guild. Sitting across from Dahlia, he had on a relaxed tan suit that complemented his brawny frame. He had looked to be on the verge of collapsing the last time they’d met at the Adventurers’ guildhall, so his rosy complexion and healthy, shiny chestnut hair were a relief to see.

“Thank you for coming to us with your request. What sort of magical tool are you looking for?” Dahlia asked.

“I would like to have a unicorn necklace made. My second wife is with child, and her case of morning sickness is particularly bad. She already carries a whole unicorn horn with her, but I’m hoping for something a little more portable, hence the necklace. I was hoping to have it made as designed in these documents.”

“Congratulations to you and your family. May I please take a look?” What joyous news—not only had Jean been able to reconcile with his wife, but they would now be having a child too. Dahlia examined the specifications, which broadly outlined his requirements: a necklace with an oval unicorn horn pendant about three centimeters long, shiny metal chain, and a rough budget too. At the bottom was a beautiful signature that read “Oswald Zola.” Dahlia continued, “I see that Professor Oswald has penned the specifications. Are you not planning to put in the order with him?”

“Professor Oswald actually recommended that I go to you with this request, as he said, erm, you may be able to produce a feminine design,” he said, quieter than before.

Dahlia nodded. “Very well, I accept your commission. Mr. Jean, do you have any specific requests for the design? For example, you could have a gemstone on the chain or a simple shape for the pendant.”

“In that case, could you put a small orange gemstone on the chain and make the pendant in the shape of a flower?”

“Yes, how about a sunstone?” Sunstones were technically the same mineral as moonstones. Their translucent orange color and ease of handling made them

a popular choice as a decoration on magical tools.

“That would be perfect.”

“And for the flower, is there any flower you have in mind? Say, rose, lily, marguerite, daisy, daffodil, for example.”

“Lily of the valley, please. That’s, um, what I gave my second wife when I proposed to her.” Jean had a sheepish smile as he cast his tawny eyes downwards.

“Here are the materials. I hope they are usable,” he continued. He took out a magically sealed box containing three white unicorn horns that rolled around, despite having been wrapped with cloth. One of them had a crack down the side. “I’ve had these for quite a long time now, so if they are too old, I could also hunt one.”

“No, these will do fine.” Though Dahlia had initially been shocked to see him treat them so carelessly, she realized that he did care about the quality of the horns—a rare material that Jean apparently didn’t have any difficulty acquiring, but perhaps that was only because he was a former elite adventurer. “Were these all unicorns that you slew, Mr. Jean?”

“Some of them were shed. They’re rather docile until their horns grow back, you see.”

“How long does it take for a unicorn to regrow one?”

“I believe it differs from specimen to specimen, but I reckon it usually takes about three weeks. They seem to hide away in their territory so they can force all their magic into growing their new horn.”

“Wow, I never knew that...” The bestiary had only said that “a unicorn can survive without its horn”; if all it took them was three weeks to regrow it, then one could potentially harvest multiple horns from a single unicorn.

“You wouldn’t see them in the capital if not for the castle. I believe it won’t be long until you see one for yourself, Miss Dahlia.”

“They have unicorns at the castle?” That was news to her as well. She could only assume that they kept them in cages.

“The orders keep unicorns and pegasi, and also wyverns for dragoons—and of course, they are reserved for knights. However, the beasts are often brought out to ceremonies, so you may have a chance to see them when they confer your barony upon you.”

Dahlia had heard they paraded unicorns and pegasi around, flying them in air demonstrations. But just thinking about how she would be there *in* the ceremony made her stomach churn, despite the exciting prospect of seeing these mythical beasts in person; she’d love to observe them up close if possible. It was surprising that the knights mounted these monsters, however, and she decided that the next time she saw Volf, she would ask him how they kept the unicorns and pegasi.

“Anyway, thank you very much for taking on the necklace. I understand that I came by without any sort of notice, so I ask that you not go out of the way for it.”

“Not a problem at all, Mr. Jean. I shall notify you as soon as it is completed.”

It wasn’t until business had been wrapped up that Jean finally took the cup of tea into his hands. “I’ve yet to say so directly, Miss Dahlia, but I am utmost grateful that you introduced me to Professor Oswald. Thank you very much.”

“Of course. I’m very glad that you enjoyed a nice glass of scorpio.” When Jean had mentioned that his wife had left home, Dahlia had introduced him to the professor under the pretense that both men wanted company for scorpio. But if anyone could offer helpful words, it would be a man like Oswald with his abundant experience. Not only had Jean managed to mend his relationship with his wife, but he had also reconciled with his ex-wife and remarried her too. Oswald was truly a mentor in all walks of life, worthy of a title like “professor.”

“Never have I had more delicious scorpio, though the liquor can no longer flow as it did—I *do* have a child on the way.”

His heartwarming words brought a big smile to Dahlia’s face. She decided to find a sunstone the color of Jean’s eyes.

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That same afternoon, Volf visited the main Scalfarotto estate after a long

absence. He chatted with his older brother in the den, then spoke to Jonas, who was standing slightly behind Guido and to the side. “Master Jonas,” Volf said, “Dahlia was wondering if it would be all right with you if she gave one of your scales to Chairman Oswald Zola, as I heard that he had used one to make the bracelet for Marcella’s wife.”

“I have given it to Madam Rossetti, so please tell her to do with it as she pleases,” Jonas responded without a moment of delay. His answer was exactly as expected; he didn’t have any emotional attachment to his scales.

Guido added, “I’m sure that Oswald wouldn’t go around and talk about it, but do point out that it’s just this time—I don’t want to have Jonas pluck his arm bare again.”

“I understand.”

“It is trivial, Lord Guido. I will be glad to offer my scales again if the need arises.”

“I see you’ve taken a liking to being bandaged with a handkerchief,” the elder Scalfarotto said. Jonas responded not with words but with his rusty glare.

Volf didn’t really understand the tension, and he decided to change topics. “As well, brother, I’m hoping to borrow a horse and to get your recommendation for an equestrian coach.”

“If it’s for Marcella, I think it won’t be long before he starts his training.”

“It’d be for Dahlia, actually.”

Guido scratched his chin with the back of his finger and thought deeply for a few moments. “Does Madam Rossetti truly need to learn how to ride?”

“I thought it would be a good skill to learn. Should I be worried about something?”

“I’m just thinking that if she is able to travel by horse, you two won’t get to spend that time together. The coach is a nice place to sit down and chat intimately, don’t you think?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought about it like that. I was just hoping we could go for a ride into the forest or something...” Volf had to admit that was a really good

point—once Dahlia knew how to ride, she would probably want to travel within the capital by herself. He wasn't sure whether he should persuade her to do otherwise or to simply let Marcella protect her.

But as Volf fretted, Jonas chimed in, saying, "Lord Volfred, I believe that your proposal is not a bad one. Traveling on horseback to coaching inn towns will allow you to meet new people, and I believe it would be rather freeing if you two could go incognito as well."

"Hm, I hadn't thought about that either. Still, would we have fewer chances to make conversation?"

"I'm sure you will have many chances to do so at your destination. But if you would like to travel quickly, I recommend riding a sleipnir together."

"Riding double, huh..."

"A sleipnir would have the energy for a long trip, and in an emergency, it would enable you to make a quick escape. Though it would have its own learning curve, I am sure it would pose no problem to a knight of the Beast Hunters such as yourself, Lord Volfred."

Riding double on a sleipnir was definitely an intriguing option. Volf and Dahlia would have time to converse on the journey and they would be able to outrun monsters if they were so unlucky as to encounter one. Come to think of it, Dahlia had been riding in a sleipnir-driven carriage when he had first met her; it hadn't seemed as though she was afraid of them.

"Even then," Guido said, "I'd want you to have a security detail when you go out. It's best to be prepared. Besides, women are delicate creatures—you ought to expect the unexpected."

"Like what?" asked Volf.

"Falling off or spilling a drink, for example. She may get sick from traveling too. You should definitely prepare emergency supplies, a change of clothes, and whatnot."

"Lord Guido has already prepared a change of clothes for Madam Rossetti in your villa, Lord Volfred..."

“He has?”

“Yeah, what if she spills some tea?” Guido answered, matter-of-factly. It was almost as if it should have been an obvious risk when a nobleman invited a lady over. “I think you even have a room in the villa for Madam Rossetti so she has somewhere to change or take a breather.”

“Huh. I didn’t consider...” Yet another thing that Volf had never thought of before. He had learned so many things from the duchess Altea, but this hadn’t been one of them. Perhaps it was so obvious for most noblemen that it went without saying; Volf felt bad for not knowing something so basic.

Jonas stepped up beside Guido. “Lord Guido, do you recall a nobleman with whom I am rather familiar and received backlash? ‘Going that far is a little disturbing,’ was it?”

Guido cleared his throat twice. He must’ve remembered it very well, but Volf wasn’t about to ask about the parties involved. Still, that was a little reassuring. Guido continued, “Regardless, if you’re planning to go on a longer journey, you ought to have protection. Even riding a sleipnir, you should have a pair of nightdogs with you. Say, if Madam Rossetti twists her ankle and can’t move, it’d be difficult even for you to do battle and defend her at the same time, right?”

“That’s very true.”

“You could even bring a few tight-lipped people and pretend as though they don’t exist. That way, you won’t have to worry while you’re out and about. Well, not like dogs could talk, but my point still stands.”

Being watched by bodyguards would be a little unsettling, so perhaps a safe destination, a sleipnir, and two nightdogs were the winning combination.

“Lord Guido, Lord Volfred, if I may, it won’t be until spring that Madam Rossetti will be ready to go on a trip. Of course, everybody learns at a different rate, but the typical noblewoman would take two, perhaps three months of once or twice weekly lessons before she would be able to venture out into the woods.”

“That’s a little longer than I thought...” said Guido.

“It really does take some time, I see...” said Volf.

“I trust you understand that Madam Rossetti would be approaching the equestrian arts for the first time as an adult, which is different from your experience, as both of you began riding when you were children.” Jonas chose his words very politely, but the message was clear—the brothers Scalfarotto had been riding since they were young, which put them in a completely different position than someone learning as an adult. Volf had casually recommended the sport to Dahlia, but now he was a little more worried than he had been. Jonas continued, “You two truly are brothers—even your reactions are the same.”

“Oh, that’s right, Dahlia mentioned the other day that I resemble you, Guido.”

“She did? She thinks we’re similar?” Guido’s blue eyes went wide as he and Jonas examined Volf’s face.

“Dahlia said that our eyebrows wrinkle in the same way when we’re troubled and that we laugh similarly.”

“I can certainly see that. When you two laugh, your eyes have the same look and your voices go up a register too,” Jonas said.

“Huh, is that right? We resemble each other?” Guido mumbled to himself before breaking into a grin. “Volf, you should be the one teaching Madam Rossetti to ride. Feel free to use the family horses or sleipnirs.”

“Me? But I don’t have any experience in doing so...” Volf had explained the basics of the saddle and assisted newbie Beast Hunters on their first rides, but he had never actually taught someone how to handle a horse before.

“Lord Volfred, you could also go the route of hiring someone, but female equestrian coaches are few and far between. Perhaps Madam Rossetti would become nervous when being instructed by or riding double with a man with whom she isn’t familiar.”

“If the riders are nervous, so will the horse be. I wouldn’t want her to fall off. I think you’d help her feel calm and comfortable if you taught her, at the very least until she is ready for an instructor.”

“That is a good point...” Dahlia had indeed said she wasn’t too athletic, so the safer option would be best. Volf decided to heed the words of Guido and Jonas.

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Guido smiled as he saw his brother off, though he wished Volf would've stayed for dinner, since he'd come all the way out to the main estate. Unfortunately, he had prior plans—and judging by his giddiness, he must be going to the Green Tower.

"Thanks, Jonas," said the master.

"What for?" replied the attendant.

"The thing about the instructor. The instructor who taught my daughter would likely be available."

"All I said was that female equestrian coaches were uncommon. I don't manage their schedules." Jonas spoke to Guido as a friend, as he did whenever they were alone.

"Even so, I didn't think about riding double on a sleipnir. I should've taken the chance to do so when my wife was still my fiancée."

"It's not like it's too late. Just stay within the estate or the villa—we can't have you traveling like that out of the capital."

"I know, I know." The higher one's social status, the more headaches and the fewer freedoms—that much Guido knew already, but facing it was nonetheless somewhat depressing. He'd already run into trouble twice this year while traveling, and though he hadn't been hurt, Jonas was more high-strung than ever.

"Guido, you're not going out later today, are you? Mind if I get out of the estate for a while?"

"Go for it. What are you up to?"

"I'm invited for dinner. I'll be back tomorrow morning." Jonas explained that he was meeting with a certain noblewoman who was a dozen years older than him. The noblewoman had gone through a divorce a few years back, and word was that she was still single. Apparently, she and Jonas had been seeing each other for some time now.

"Are you planning to go steady with her, Jonas?"

“I have no plans to get married, and she believes that marriages are a foolish notion, one she never wants to take part in again.”

“Never mind marriage—what about your blight? Still not planning to go to the temple to get rid of it? You wouldn’t have to worry about stuff like conduct and meals anymore.”

“Are you hoping to dismiss me, Guido?” Jonas asked, his voice lower and quieter than usual. “You know I can’t express magic if not for my blight. I wouldn’t be anywhere near as strong as I am now, so I wouldn’t be able to continue as your bodyguard. I mean, if I’m a burden to you, I’ll quit.”

“You’re more than enough without a monster possessing you, Jonas. I’ll just hire a few more bodyguards.” That was a problem that could be solved with money, and his family could spare it. But when Guido was about to explain it, he felt a wave of magical energy crashing into him.

The reddish black pupil of Jonas’s right eye morphed into a vertical slit, gazing deep inside Guido. “Would they be stronger than I am right now? Would you be able to trust them? Would they never, ever betray you?”

Under the barrage of questions, Guido was at a loss for words. His eyes closed, and all he saw was red. Memories he tried so desperately to repress came forth regardless. He hung his head, hoping to suppress the nausea boiling up from the pit of his stomach. Frost fell as he clenched his fist tight. When he managed to steady his magic and open his eyes, Guido found oxide eyes looking his way.

“Don’t try to protect me, Guido. It ought to be the other way around.”

“Forgive me. I retract my words.”

“Very well. I accept.”

After the by-the-book exchange, Guido finally unclenched his fist, and he realized he had even subconsciously released ice. A line ran down his palm, crimson seeping and turning into a trickle.

Jonas sighed. “Always getting hurt.”

“Just a scratch. No need to crack open a potion for me,” he said, faking a

smile the best he could; his attendant was such a worrywart.

“Keep pressure on it, then.”

Jonas offered a white handkerchief with his initials embroidered on it, which reminded Guido of another one. “Hey, what happened to Madam Rossetti’s handkerchief?”

He paused. “Hm, somewhere in my room, I think.”

With age came proficiency in lying, but the truth was obvious. Besides, the two of them had been joined at the hip from such an early age—his hesitancy had told Guido everything. “It’s fine that you accept it, but at least get a new one and have Volf deliver it to her. Unless, of course, you want to hand it to her in person.”

“Don’t be weird, Guido. And think of what Lord Volfred would do if he misunderstood me.”

“Would it really be just a misunderstanding, I wonder.”

“You know I have no interest in someone like Madam Rossetti—not unless she has an elder sister or if her mother is in good health.”

“I *really* don’t know if that’s any better...” Either of them would undoubtedly be married, and Jonas getting involved would sit well with neither Volf nor Dahlia.

“I’m kidding. Besides, it’s not like I’m gonna return a bloodstained handkerchief.”

“If anyone would want it back, it’d be Madam Rossetti—she’d want to do research on your blood or something. Do you remember how she cherished your scales?”

“Maybe I should give her a whole vial of my blood, then?”

“Oh, I take it all back. Wouldn’t want her to ask for anything more, would you?” They half-chuckled at their bad jokes; that tension from earlier had dissipated into the air.

When Guido stood up to leave, the attendant, with experienced swiftness, helped his master put on his jacket. “Well, looks like I’m not getting fired today,

but I should probably plan out my future a bit, eh?”

“Sorry! No need to hold a grudge!” Guido whipped around, surprised that Jonas would still be hot, as he’d usually never probe a sore spot like this.

All that was waiting was a big grin on his friend’s face. “If you do fire me, maybe I’ll sell myself as parts and materials to the Rossetti Trading Company.”

The Winter Coat and Dessert

“This should be it, right?” Marcella asked, effortlessly bringing an armchair through the door.

What had been Carlo’s bedroom on the Green Tower’s fourth floor was now empty, the sight filling Dahlia with equal parts loneliness and zeal to finish cleaning the room. She’d had Marcella make an appointment with the Couriers’ Guild to remove the junk; any furniture, documents, books, and other articles that were still usable had been moved to the study, the other room on the fourth floor. In Ordine, the bedclothes of those who had passed away were not reused. The bed itself was also worn and damaged, so that had to be taken away by the professionals as well. Dahlia had decided to turn the empty room into a guest room, though she also secretly hoped it would become a room for her own apprentice one day.

“This shade of green for the curtains, Dahlia?” Standing up on a stool and swapping in new curtains was Dahlia’s seamstress friend, Lucia.

“That’s perfect. What a lovely color.”

Helping out today were Marcella and Lucia. The pregnant Irma had also offered her help, but Marcella had stopped her with all his might and Dahlia had respectfully declined. Irma must’ve been getting antsy and restless being cooped up, but she absolutely shouldn’t be moving stuff around and running up and down all the stairs in the tower. The only way they could calm Irma down was by promising to invite her over after her children were a little older.

Whenever she stayed over, Irma bunked with Dahlia in her room. However, Irma would be bringing her twins next time, and so the space had to be safe for the toddlers to crawl and stumble around—it was now fully carpeted and the mattress had been taken off the bedframe and moved onto the ground. The mattress was also very convenient, as it could also be folded up when not in use. Two large winter blankets had been prepared for when Marcella and Irma stayed over as well.

Lucia had been assigned to the curtains and bedding. Her work at the Tailors’

Guild obviously had her around fabric often, and so she was familiar with the stores as well. Once she got the budget and requirements, she had had the details like pattern and color all planned out the next day. Not only was Lucia skilled in fashion design, but her interior design skills were on point too. The verdure curtains with the ivory and green bedding, pillows, cushions were all in slightly different but complementary shades, and when everything had been put together, it made for a very comfortable room.

"I chose light green as the dominant color since you wanted the room to be relaxing, but now I'm thinking it might be a little too springy..." Lucia looked around the room with her head tilted to the side, but Dahlia didn't understand how anyone could be dissatisfied with such a wonderful room.

"This is great! It's like I'm takin' a trip and this is my hotel room!"

"It really is great. I'd even consider taking this room for myself."

It wasn't until she heard Marcella and Dahlia's words of affirmation that Lucia finally smiled.

Afterwards, the three of them shared a carriage bound for the Central District. Marcella had plans to take Irma to the temple for prenatal care that afternoon. Though the bracelet had beaten back her magic disorder, Irma still needed regular checkups from a priest. This had all been arranged by Guido, and Marcella had voiced his gratitude.

Not only had Guido been very supportive, he also seemed to have taken a liking to Marcella. The pair of gloves Marcella had received the other day were embedded with metal plates imbued with powerful magic, and the black wyvern leather itself had more than two defensive enchantments for protection —a magical tool that was a perfect example of composite enchantment. Marcella even kept them in a magically sealed box with a white purifying crystal that cleaned them automatically. Dahlia would have loved to take the gloves apart and examine them, but she kept that to herself.

Meanwhile, in exchange for her interior design services, Lucia had requested that they go out shopping for clothes in the Central District; Dahlia had happily assented. However, Marcella had worried about leaving the two women alone

without security, but there was no way they'd have had him act as bodyguard and force Irma to go to the temple alone. After shopping, the two had their sights on desserts at a nearby café. When Dahlia explained to Marcella that the shopping district had many guards on patrol and the stores themselves had security as well, Lucia casually mentioned the fact that she had a security detail following her too, dismissing Marcella. Apparently, Forto had had protection shadowing Lucia at a distance ever since the development of the zephyricloth. Dahlia turned around, but she couldn't pick out who it was in the big crowd.

"Why do you seem so surprised, Dahlia?"

"I dunno. Isn't it a little weird that we both have security following us?"

"What are you talking about? You *do* know toe socks, insoles, and zephyricloth make a bunch of money, right? And when you have more money, more trouble seems to find you. Don't let it get to you."

"I suppose you're right." There had been unimaginable changes in Dahlia's life over the past half year, and there was so much that she was still not used to. She ought to be more like Lucia, who had a firm understanding of the position they were in.

"Heck, people come to my family's workshop and ask for loans, people send me proposals saying they want to adopt me into their families, and more. Imagine how frantic that got my dad. Things only calmed down after Mr. Forto got each and every one of them to cut it out."

"What a bother that must've been..."

"You're in the same boat, aren't you? We're in our prime—all the marriage proposals are going to come our way. But even if they seem to be decent people, an arranged marriage isn't my thing, you know what I mean? There's nothing I want to talk about more than my work, and I want to own my own atelier in the future. Maybe they'll give me half of everything when I marry them, though..."

"Yeah, maybe you're not looking for marriage." In the Kingdom of Ordine, there were many dual-earner families, though there were also those who wanted their spouses to stay at home instead. Some had to think about whether to return to work or to take care of household chores after marriage

and giving birth —the same kind of problem that the people of Dahlia's previous world suffered.

"Can you believe that there are still people who think women should always be a step behind them? I don't care about the gender or age or anything of the person I marry, just as long as we love each other. We'll talk about anything and everything, and we'll enjoy each other's company! Wait, am I looking for a marriage partner or just a roommate in that case?"

For whatever reason, the word "roommate" brought the image of Volf to Dahlia's mind. How much fun they would have if they lived together, she thought for a moment before banishing the impossible idea from her mind. Impossible, unless they were both commoners and the same gender.

Lucia continued, "Oh, and they've got to love clothes as much as I do and dress up in boy *and* girl clothes for me!" Now that was a tall order.

“That color’s sooooo drab, Dahlia,” Lucia said, as soon as Dahlia picked up a hickory coat.

This brightly lit clothing store was the third they had entered today, despite already having tried on many winter wear in the previous two. Every article that Dahlia had any interest in, she bought multiple—as long as they passed muster with Lucia. Their haul was far too plentiful to carry, and so they had it delivered to the Green Tower the next day instead. The last item on their list was a winter coat, and so Lucia had brought them here, where they had a great selection.

“*I* think it’s a good color. Hides stains well.”

“A chairwoman like you who has business dealings with the castle does *not* choose a coat based on whether it’ll hide stains well. And it’s way too thick! It doesn’t flatter your figure, and something this heavy and bulky is going to make it a chore getting on and off a carriage.” Lucia had a good point. Dahlia would indeed be traveling by carriage more often from now on, and she wouldn’t be walking as much as she had last year. “How about this ivory coat? I think it’d look good on you.”

“Oh, that’s going to get dirty real quick.”

“Okay, what about this one with pleats on the back? You’ve got the height to pull it off.”

“I dunno, isn’t it a little flamboyant?” It had a trendy, attention-grabbing design, but Dahlia couldn’t imagine it suiting her.

“Are you still hung up on Tobias? Or even that doofus at our graduation?”

Dahlia couldn’t stop laughing. “Gosh, no! I’m not hung up on anyone, and especially not either of those two.”

What Lucia was referring to was an incident that had happened at the end of primary school. The graduation ceremony was held every year before the winter fete. Unlike the education system in Japan, the schools here held entrance exams twice a year. There was a wide range in terms of the age of the students who were admitted, and a class had pupils that varied in age as well. Typically, children graduated primary school between twelve and fifteen years old—just when the idea of love first sprung to mind. Furthermore, not everyone

proceeded to college together. Some would major in chivalric studies and some in mage studies, for example, and they would be in different buildings, and many found employment too. If there was ever a time to ask someone out, it'd be after the graduation ceremony.

That day in front of the school, as everybody had been buzzing with bouquets of flowers in their hands, Dahlia and Lucia had been chatting—likely about which bakery to go to, as they had planned to go to Irma's to celebrate with cake. Suddenly, a boy that Dahlia hadn't really spoken to much had appeared, hoping to exchange badges—essentially, asking her to go out with him. It had caught her by surprise; dating hadn't even been something she'd thought about yet. All she had been able to say was sorry.

The boy had stuffed the badge back into his pocket and snarled, "It was a bet for dinner! As if I'd ask out a girl as homely as you!"

For a moment, Dahlia had been angry, but she had understood. She *was* plain and boring. She wasn't cute. She had been acutely aware of that a lifetime ago, and she was acutely aware of that then.

"Jackass!" A shrill voice screamed from someone, and Dahlia didn't immediately understand why it was raining petals. It took her a few moments to realize that it had been Lucia and that she had bashed the boy in the face with her bouquet. "How dare you toy with someone's feelings like that, you cretin!" The boy, lost for a comeback, ran away.

It wasn't as though Dahlia had forgotten about that incident—in fact, it wasn't so much a lowlight in her life as it was a memory of her desperately trying to calm Lucia down—but she hadn't spoken to the boy since that day.

"That was ages ago," Dahlia said, "and I promise you I don't still dwell on it."

"Good, you shouldn't. And I'm only telling you this because it's been so long, but after that, I told everyone about it. I didn't say your name, but I told my friends all about how he lied to win a bet for a meal. Everyone around us witnessed it too, so word spread quickly. Oh, and of course, Irma knows too."

"Wait, Lucia! How come *I* didn't know about this until now?!"

"That's because I never told you, duh. You'd never have let me," she said with

a devious smirk that hardly ever showed up. “I heard that for, like, two years after starting working, that boy was met with ‘Is this for a bet?’ every time he asked out a girl. Figures, huh?”

“Lucia...”

“Like you said, that was ages ago, so don’t get mad at or thank me. I just blew my top because I owed it to you.”

“What did I ever do to put you in my debt?”

“Remember the first day of school? I got lost and was about to cry, but you held my hand and walked me to the classroom.” That was a debt paid back with dividends. The school building was like a giant labyrinth, and Dahlia herself had also been at the verge of tears that day, but there was strength in numbers.

Dahlia was still frozen with that hickory coat in her hands, and so Lucia hung it back on the hanger. She continued, “By the way, Dahlia, would you forgive that boy if he were to apologize to you?”

“I mean, yes, but that was so long ago.”

“You heard it.”

“Huh?”

The clerk standing behind Lucia approached them and dipped his head, confusing Dahlia.

“He’s so much taller and different now, so I bet you couldn’t tell, could you? I didn’t know it was him until we chatted at the guild about the zephyricloth,” Lucia said. Apparently, this man was the boy they’d once known. His dark brown eyes seemed similar enough, but Dahlia couldn’t be sure of her memory.

The clerk, frowning, said to Dahlia, “I’m terribly sorry for what happened during primary school...”

“Don’t worry, it’s a thing of the past. I could barely recall that it happened until just now anyway. Did you, um, end up getting treated to dinner in the end?” She grasped onto the only thing she could find to fill in the conversation.

The clerk averted his gaze. “There was never a bet in the first place. I was, erm, just too proud to be rejected.”

“What do you mean?”

“He really did want to swap badges with you is what he’s saying, Dahlia, but he was embarrassed about getting turned down by you,” interjected Lucia. “I heard all about it when we saw each other at the guild the other day.”

“It’s exactly as Head Manager Fano says.” He still didn’t dare to look up into their eyes.

“I mean, I get why you’d do that, but that was absolutely a terrible thing to do to a girl! It’s because of what you did that Dahlia’s default option is plain now.”

“That’s just my style, Lucia. It isn’t anyone’s fault.” While she had adapted her fashion to meet Tobias’s expectations during their engagement, Dahlia had never been about flashy clothes. And it was true that her graduation was a bit of a sour memory, but she couldn’t blame him. “Um, I accept your apology, so let’s drop the subject. Anyway, do you have any other winter coats you could show us?”

“Of course. May I offer a suggestion? And of course, feel free to say no if it isn’t to your liking.” The clerk was back in work mode, and Dahlia agreed.

What he presented was a mahogany leather coat that had a shine on the outside and was lined with soft red fabric, neither too striking nor subdued. Dahlia slipped it on and found it shockingly light and warm.

The clerk must’ve seen the surprise on her face. He explained, “It looks wonderful on you. It’s made with baphomet leather enchanted with weight reduction, while the lining is woven monster silk.”

The coat was more magical tool than garment at this point, and the price must reflect that too. It did seem like it would last for a long time, and so it wouldn’t be a waste of money by any means. Lucia checked it out from the back and gave it her stamp of approval. Dahlia agreed to buy it and the clerk beamed, finally looking like the boy she used to know.

“Thank you very much. Though I cannot offer to discount the whole item, allow me to take fifty percent off.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll pay full price for it.”

“Dahliaaaaa! Just say yes!”

“If I took such a sweetheart deal, how could I ever come back again?” Dahlia didn’t want to feel bad the next time she visited; this was a store that someone as picky as Lucia was keen on. Besides, she’d mentioned that she had talked to the clerk about zephyricloth, so he must be connected to the Tailors’ Guild as well—better for Dahlia not to insert herself in their business.

After settling the bill, the customers said goodbye to the clerk and left the store. Lucia then said, “Gimme one sec, Dahlia, I forgot to give the guy a message from the guild.”

“All right.”

As her friend walked back inside, Dahlia heaved a sigh of relief. She had wanted to keep the memory of that incident buried, but that thorn that had been prickling her deep in her chest had dislodged itself. There was the smallest chance that the clerk might’ve simply been trying to be nice to her, but what was the point of finding out for sure?

Lucia looked at Dahlia through the window as she returned to the clerk. “Thanks, then I’ll send the store some zephyricloth to make up for the discount.”

“Thank you very much for offering, but you needn’t do that. Please don’t tell Chairwoman Rossetti, though.”

“Okay, we’ll keep it between us.” That mahogany coat had originally cost double of what the youth had sold it for, but he had planned to pay for half of it. Was it to make amends? To help him clear his conscience? Whatever it was, he must’ve felt a little guilty, although Lucia had never said a word to reproach him after the graduation ceremony. They had been classmates, and now they were professionals in the same field. There was, however, something else that Lucia wanted to ask. “It sucks that she doesn’t remember how on the first day of school, she had me—nearly crying—in her right hand and you—bawling—in her left as she brought us to our classroom. Not that I’m saying you should do so, but do you think you’ll give it another shot with Dahlia?”

“No...” The clerk shook his head, laughing almost uncomfortably. Word

traveled quickly through the clothing retail business; an assistant manager like him must've heard the rumors about Dahlia and the black-haired youth—not that Lucia was about to confirm or deny them.

"We'll come again. As real customers next time."

"I look forward to your future patronage, Manager Fano and Chairwoman Rossetti." He put on his customer service smile and watched Lucia and Dahlia depart. The latter had never once turned around but watched the bustling traffic as she waited outside.

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"Whew, that was hard work! Time to reward ourselves with sweets! I skipped lunch for this, so you'd best bet I'm going to get my fill!"

"But you're so skinny already, Lucia..."

Though Lucia wasn't tall, she had a great figure. Her baby and navy blue two-piece dress consisted of a blouse with a wavy overskirt and a lace-trimmed pencil skirt—stylish as always. Dahlia had on a one-piece dress in grayish pink—more technically, rose dragée. It had a slight stretch to it and was easy to move around in, and was, as usual, something that Lucia had picked out for her, though Dahlia hadn't told Lucia the key was the bicorn hair woven into the fabric.

"Clothes can hide anyone's shape, and it's not like you're pudgy either, Dahlia. In my case, the more weight I put on, the worse my clothes look. I mean, I know it's because I always work until late at the Magical Garment Factory, and then I go out and eat, and then I have late-night snacks."

"Late-night meals sure do stay on my hips..."

"Ugh, I know! If I keep on eating like this, I'll save up enough blubber that I won't even need winter clothes. And what's worse than gaining weight is not being able to wear all the cute dresses I designed for the season..."

That reminded Dahlia of her closet at home, and she gave a dry laugh. "To tell you the truth, the dress you and Mr. Forto made me is getting too tight at the waist."

“Oh, I put extra darts in that. Want me to take them out?”

“No way! You get rid of them and I’ll just stay like this forever...”

The two of them sighed and walked dejectedly until the scent of baked treats were wafting in the air. Just in front of them were the bakery and the attached café that sold the freshly baked desserts.

“Let’s leave the worrying for tomorrow!” Lucia offered a constructive suggestion, to which Dahlia heartily agreed.

“Oh, Sir Randolph.” In front of the store walking from the other way was a man taller than Volf and with a figure like a large boulder.

“Miss Dahlia, Manager Fano, good day to you both.” Randolph must’ve spotted them earlier. He had in his hand a bag from the bookstore; perhaps he was headed home after some shopping. After they greeted each other formally, Randolph continued, “You both look very charming today.”

The stiffness in his voice reminded Dahlia of the noble’s etiquette playbook: a nobleman was to offer compliments when greeting ladies. It was, however, very specific about what to compliment someone, so the custom was fraught with difficulty, and it showed in Randolph’s expression.

“Thank you! You too, Sir Randolph—your clothes are...” Lucia paused midsentence, running her eyes over the crown of his head to the bottom of his soles.

Randolph was not wearing his uniform but a white shirt, brown vest, olive jacket, and a pair of relaxed-fitting trousers in a darker shade of olive. His black leather shoes were squared at the front—bicycle toed, technically; Carlo had a pair like them too.

Though Dahlia thought Randolph was smartly dressed, her friend had a scrunched up brow. “If you don’t mind my asking, Sir Randolph, but were your clothes tailor-made?”

“Aye. I have a hard time finding off-the-rack clothes that fit my large frame.”

“Um, may I suggest that you try a V-neck sweater on your days off? As well, I

think straight-cut or tapered trousers may suit your bicycle toe shoes better. It would be a shame to not play into your good looks."

"I see... So my trousers not only do not match my shoes but even compromise my outfit..."

Lucia muttered something about that being the gist of it without acknowledging him. She continued, "And if you prefer earthy palettes, I think you would look even better in burgundy, wine, or chocolate rather than green." Randolph had garnet hair and brown eyes; shades of black tea would compliment him better than green.

"I had believed that all tea was the same."

"Right, but even if their names are similar, the colors can be quite different! Different shades work for different people."

"I see. I had only specified black or brown, then let the tailors pick what they thought was best."

"You deserve better if you're going to get your clothes tailored! Besides, I think rose gray or sand beige would make you look very sharp." Lucia had entered fashionista mode, relentlessly offering Randolph different color schemes, cuts, and fits.

However, the three of them were standing in the middle of the road; they weren't blocking anyone in particular, but they were drawing unnecessary attention. "Er, shall we head inside instead of chatting out on the street? The café serves desserts that come straight from the bakery next door," suggested Dahlia.

"Desserts, you say?"

"Great Idea! They're scrumptious, Sir Goodwin!"

In contrast with Lucia's eagerness, Randolph hesitated for a few moments. "Would that be all right? I believe not many men patronize such establishments, and so I would stick out like a sore thumb. And I would not like to impose on the plans you two may already have..." He was awfully reserved for a man with a sweet tooth as big as his, perhaps feeling awkward about joining two women.

It was too good a chance to waste, and bakers' confections were best hot from the oven. "You would love their famous apple pies, Sir Randolph. They should also have other fruit tarts in season."

"Apple pie..." It looked as though the temptation was fighting back and winning; his stiff expression was forced back into a gentle demeanor.

Lucia's decisiveness dealt the final blow. "Let's head inside!"

Few spots were available in the café; most of its patrons were women, and the men that were there seemed to be with their partners. Lucia had reserved a table behind a partitioning screen at the back of the store, and the extra guest seemed to be no problem for the waitstaff. Randolph sat across the table from Dahlia and Lucia. The window beside them had its pane in the design of a rose; light filtered through it, and the faces that passed by outside were murky, making a comfortable and somewhat private setting for the three to enjoy afternoon tea.

"Let me just pop this on," Lucia said, taking out a small silver pyramid from her bag—an anti-eavesdropping device. Dahlia was touched by her accommodation; she rarely used her own and had forgotten she had one of her own. It was good to have it on when a nobleman like Randolph was with them.

When the menus came, Dahlia's indecisiveness showed up. There were the classics, but also seasonal items that caught her attention.

"What are you getting, Dahlia?"

"With it being the fall and all, maybe an apple pie and a chestnut cake?"

"I think I'll get the apple pie and a pear tart. But there's the peach tart as well, and the cheesecake here is yummy too..." Lucia was in the same predicament. "Oh, what about you, Sir Goodwin? Have you decided yet?"

"I have never stepped foot into a store like this in the capital; is there anything you would recommend?"

Lucia pointed at the menu for the flustered knight. "The apple pie is a must-try! And maybe something autumny, like a sweet potato pie or a fruit tart?"

"Let's see. I think you would enjoy the pumpkin pudding," Dahlia said,

recalling the time that Randolph had had some of her bread and butter pudding. Deep in thought, he furrowed his brows—it looked almost frightening.

“In that case, should we order a variety and then split it between the three of us? Er, I mean, if that isn’t too improper?” Lucia’s suggestion could definitely be below a noble’s manners.

“Not at all; I would appreciate that. Fret not about proprieties outside of the castle grounds,” Randolph replied. “And feel free to address me as Randolph; there are many named Goodwin at the castle.”

“I’d be happy if you could call me Lucia, then.” She seemed to have made more friends lately, and Dahlia was glad to see that.

“Still, there are few men here enjoying sweets...”

Randolph had a point—Dahlia had seen very few male patrons on her way to their table at the back of the store, but she hoped it wouldn’t cause him undue discomfort. “Sir Randolph, I believe you had physical training yesterday?”

“Aye. With Volf too.”

“I wasn’t asking about Volf, but, um, sugars can help with fatigue, so it may help after a hard day of training or an expedition. I don’t think there’s anything unbecoming about a man liking sweets either.”

Randolph wavered. “I appreciate the gesture...” He was bound by his own fetters; Dahlia would know—she had once been bound to what she thought she ought and oughtn’t do, instead of being guided by the dreams and ideals that had driven her. Such were the heavy, oppressive chains people dubbed obligation.

Dahlia continued asking, “Sir Randolph, do you find a woman like me who drinks to be strange?”

“Certainly not.”

“Is it not the case, then, that ‘men who enjoy sweets are strange’ is as nonsensical as ‘women who drink are strange’? We impose on ourselves certain ideas of how men or women should behave, but shouldn’t we do as we like? Otherwise, all we have left is to hang our heads and lock away our true selves.”

Randolph then fixed his brown eyes on her without blinking, putting Dahlia at unease; she was acting all high and mighty, despite having done the very same until very recently. “I believe you are correct, Miss Dahlia. It is exactly as you say.”

Lucia raised her right hand. “I agree with Dahlia too! Sir Randolph, you like what you like—it doesn’t make a difference if you’re a man or a woman. What that means is you should order what you want to eat!” She called over the waiter and placed her order. “Could I get the apple pie and pear tart with a cup of black tea, please?”

“May I please have an apple pie, chestnut cake, and coffee?”

“An apple pie, sweet potato pie, pumpkin pudding, and a café au lait for me, please.” He let out a quiet sigh after the waiter walked away with a smile.

“I’m wondering, Sir Randolph, have people called you strange for liking sweet things?” Dahlia asked.

“When I was studying in my home country, others would laugh. Salty jerky and burning liquor is manly, they said, and so the boys avoided anything sweet. Thus, girls would get sweetmeats with their meals and boys would get crackers, shortbread, nuts, and the like.”

“That’s just torture for us who have a sweet tooth...”

Lucia sympathized, saying, “Here in Ordine, there are people sometimes who comment that it’s weird for men to like sweets, but it’s rather an outdated way of thinking. At the Magical Garment Factory, the men will have their share of sweets late at night. Even Mr. Forto will go for seconds if it’s cakes and profiteroles, but it beats me how he doesn’t gain weight at all.” Dahlia hoped her friend would let her in on the secret if she ever figured it out, since Forto was trim and fit.

“The guildmaster has a penchant for sweets too?”

“More like any kind of snack. When he works through the night, he’ll have stocked up on baked goods from downtown or at least candy. But it isn’t just Mr. Forto—the women there munch on jerky while they sketch designs and weigh out dyes. We’re rather relaxed at our factory, see.” Dahlia wondered if

that wasn't because of Lucia's influence, but she chose not to ask aloud.

As the three of them chatted, the waiter returned with their food and drinks. The apple pie was fresh from the oven, and the delectable scent of tart apples and butter billowed out with the steam.

Having skipped lunch, Dahlia tried her best to suppress her tummy from growling. "Let's dig in while it's still hot." As she pressed down with her fork, a crackle came from her pie. The crust was flaky and the buttery aroma filled her mouth, and while the plentiful jammy caramelized filling was still hot but not scalding, she enjoyed the texture of the coarser diced apples and its balance of sweetness and sourness. There was truly no better season for apple pies.

Across from her, Randolph was taking his time to savor a small bite as his stern military-man looks softened. "I never knew it would be so much more delicious when it is freshly baked..." He had only been able to imagine until today.

"It really is delicious." Dahlia caught Randolph smiling back at her; it was almost childlike, she thought. It was touching to see him being true to himself.

After their apple pies, they split their remaining desserts, just as Lucia had suggested.

"The chestnut really shines through the cake. Very much a taste of autumn," Randolph commented.

"The sweet potato pie is so sweet, but it doesn't feel like it's because of sugar. Maybe the sweet potatoes are extra sweet this year?" Lucia wondered aloud.

"The pear tart is not overly sweet and the pear is very fragrant. I think I taste almond flour in the dough too," Dahlia said.

"They were all so delightful..." As they gave their reviews, Randolph's plate had already been cleaned—the pumpkin pudding cup looked as though it hadn't been used before. He was a big guy and his stomach had room, and anything he enjoyed, he must've gotten his fill of.

Dahlia thought he ought to worry less and order more, even if the rest of the table wasn't finished yet, dinner be damned. She opened the menu again and coolly asked, "Sir Randolph, what will you have next?"

He slowly brought his gaze up to hers. His brown eyes no longer had any hesitation nor embarrassment, only joy. “Before that, I have a favor I wish to ask.”

“What is it?”

“Today has been such a wonderful day, and I wish to thank you lovely ladies. Please allow me to pay for the meal.”

“Oh, you don’t—”

“Thank you, Sir Randolph!” Lucia flicked Dahlia’s knee; it appeared that this was a situation in which she could allow herself to be treated.

“I shall take you up on your offer then. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Afterward, seven more dishes appeared, and Randolph’s blissful smile was revealed for the world to see.

Interlude: The Golden Owl and the Cerulean Crow

That's just how it is with generations upon generations of old money, mulled Ivano with a smile, as a servant patted him down and searched through his belongings. At one of the far ends of the nobles' quarter, there lay an old but well-kept mansion, gray with a black roof and fenced in by tall, thick walls. An impregnable set of doors, far too heavy to be opened by a single person, separated the outdoors from the entranceway. The windows on the first floor were at least chest height at the bottom, further reinforced by metal shutters. Beside each second-floor window was a narrow opening with a round hole at the bottom—an arrowslit, so Ivano had once read in a book. This place was more a warlord's fortress than a bureaucrat's manor, and it was hard to imagine it was the home of the castle's head treasurer, Marquis Gildovan Diels.

Perhaps that was not so odd; after all, House Diels had produced a long line of knights. Gildo's late father had been the vice-commander of the First Knights' Regiment, while Gildo's two sons and his brothers also belonged to various chivalric orders in the castle. If anything, what was odd was that the only bureaucrat in the family tree was Gildo.

As Dahlia had Lucia's help redecorating the tower today, Ivano had rented a carriage for his solo trip. He had enlisted Mena as the coachman, who had been left shaken upon learning their destination. When he had alighted, Ivano caught a rare glimpse of the employee's pale face. It was Mena's first time dressing up formally to serve as the company driver, and coming to a marquis' mansion probably didn't help. Ivano had figured Mena didn't have too much to do while he waited outside, and so the vice-chairman brought him some business literature and candy in a tin—the latter of which he had already been sucking on when Ivano alighted. *Hopefully, there's still some left by the time I'm back*—so Ivano had thought as he stepped forth.

The long hallway had twisted and turned, giving someone like Ivano—who almost never got lost in a building—difficulty memorizing the right path; it was

most definitely some kind of defensive architecture to make intruders as dizzy as possible. At the landing, where the servant who had been guiding the guest turned around, Ivano had helplessly asked, “I apologize for the inconvenience, but could you also please direct me back outside when the time comes?” The servant had returned a smile and his assent.

Gildovan Diels was an unreadable, indecipherable man, but Ivano had to acquaint himself better with that man for the sake of the Rossetti Trading Company. Though Guido was pulling strings for them, there was no telling when he would let go. Of course, it was unthinkable that he would do so, what with how close he was with both his brother Volf and Dahlia, but the company would very easily be made to close up shop if they ever fell from his grace. If Guido willed it, neither Viscount Jedda—master of the Merchants’ Guild—nor Viscount Forto—master of the Tailors’ Guild—had any power to stop him. There were other noble families to watch out for as well; the Rossetti Trading Company hadn’t the capabilities to take up arms against high-ranking nobles. There were only two people who could give the company legs to stand on: Head Treasurer Gildo and Captain Grato. They seemed to feel indebted to Dahlia, and perhaps they could be called upon if manure were to happen.

Freedom was the ability to do as one wished, to be free of restraints. Deep inside, Ivano wanted no one—not a duke, not even a royal—to interfere with Dahlia and the Rossetti Trading Company. He aimed to build up enough trust and ability so he may fulfill that wish of his—such were the thoughts in his head when he finally reached the parlor.

“Welcome, Rossetti Trading Company Vice-Chairman Mercadante.” Gildo had been sitting on a black leather sofa in the back of the room and waiting. In other words, the head of the Marquisate Diels was waiting for Ivano, a commoner. That was ludicrous, and Ivano panicked, wondering if he had gotten the time wrong. But Gildo saw right through his guest; he gave the document in his hands to a servant and said, “Fret not; it’s simply more comfortable for me to wait than to keep others waiting. Sit.”

Ivano reset himself and greeted his host, then passed to a servant several tins of dried barracuda, flounder, and other fish—Grato’s recommendation.

“Thank you for the gifts. I take it that you have a favor to ask, then?”

“I am just here to pay my respects today, though I would be delighted if I could come to you for advice if anything arises.”

“Nothing at all? I was sure you had questions for me already.”

“That’s correct, sir, nothing in particular today.”

“I see. Let us change topics. I have heard that your company has hired someone via the Scalfarottos. How much do you know about him?”

Ivano tensed up. As far as he knew, no one had informed Gildo, but like blood through a body, information coursed through the creatures called nobles so naturally. The company all of a sudden seemed so exposed, and Ivano could but force a smile. There was no use in trying to keep Marcella under wraps now, but he didn’t have to tell the whole truth either. “He is a friend of the chairwoman and Sir Volfred, and he was one of the company’s guarantors. Through the Scalfarottos, he has become a knight and bodyguard to the chairwoman.”

“Have you heard much about his background?” Gildo wasn’t looking at Ivano, who was trying to appear as nonchalant as possible. Instead, Gildo received a piece of parchment from a servant and elegantly cut through the wax seal with a silver knife. “Marcella Nuvolari is from a marquis family.”

“Excuse me?”

“I suppose that is news to you. Guido erased the footprints, so to say, to prevent others from tracking him. Your other new employee, the one who was raised in an institution, has history too.” Gildo set down a yellowed parchment with nothing written on it. “Blood bond yourself to it—that’s enchanted baphomet. From now on, only you will be able to read the text, and only when you course your magic through it. Once you have it all memorized, burn it.”

On top of the piece of parchment was a quill, though a needle was affixed to the tip instead of a nib. Ivano braced himself for the prick and dripped two drops of his blood onto the yellowed parchment. Immediately, the dark red text appeared.

Beside Marcella’s name was the name of a marquisate that even Ivano had some familiarity with. Below was Mena’s name, and details from when he had

entered the institution—around when Marcella had been born—to present day, recording their pasts. The breadth of Gildo's information network brought Ivano to his knees. "Thank you very much," he said. "What could I do to return the favor?"

"Nothing. I am merely repaying the debt I owe your chairwoman."

"But our chairwoman believes she has received much more assistance than anything she has given..." *What an upright man*, Ivano briefly considered, before realizing better. Nobles would never do anything that didn't benefit their own clan—Forto had taught him that much. Guido was the same; he would've never considered Dahlia to be anybody if not for Volf's involvement with her. Why, then, would the man before Ivano be so accommodating? Did he have feelings for Dahlia? Was he after the company's money? Did he see the true value of magical tools? All unthinkable. Ivano could not get a good read on Gildo, and there was no real way to find out. When he looked up, he found a pair of amber eyes staring back.

"Vice-Chairman Mercadante, you are undoubtedly mistaken," Gildo said.

"About what, exactly?"

"A nobleman must repay his debts. As long as I am indebted to your chairwoman, we shall be 'connected,' come hell or high water." There was no uncertainty in his words, and after they had left his mouth, his lips were shut tight.

Ivano finally understood. Not only was Gildo a nobleman through and through, he was a chivalrous knight too. He was the man who had dragged Dahlia into his dispute with Grato—something that initially hadn't sat well with Ivano, but he'd come to understand the reasoning behind it. Friend of Grato, Gildo had sacrificed himself as a scapegoat, consequences be damned. He had figured out Dahlia and made peace with Grato; whatever debt he was now claiming seemed to be nothing more than stubbornness. "In that case, Lord Diels, I do have a request to ask of you."

"Do tell."

"I would like your continued support even after you feel you have paid off your debt, so I would like to ask what steps could I take to ensure that."

Gildo returned Ivano's smile with a sly look. "That dried barracuda sure is tasty."

"How about some forest serpent next time?"

"That, Grato brought me a bundle already. His Beast Hunters must've hunted one."

"Ah, Sir Grato has beaten me to the punch."

"It was not bad. The next time you find something new and interesting, bring me some, and we shall chat." Gildo and Grato seemed to be good friends again, so perhaps the next gift would be something they could snack on over a drink. He continued, "Going back to the debt I owe your chairwoman, she has turned nearly twenty years of sour wine sweet and delicious. Add in interest and round it up to twenty-five years. This year is almost over, and so I shall start counting next year. Whatever jerky or the like that would go well with a dry red you bring will add to that clock too."

Ivano nearly burst out laughing but somehow managed to hold it in. "Thank you very much. I shall convey the message to our chairwoman." Twenty-five years from the next—how old would Gildo be by then? As long as he was alive, he would give his support to Dahlia, but he just couldn't be honest. "Lord Gildo is kind, but stubborn and unforthcoming," so Dahlia had once bemoaned, and *boy*, was she right.

"For the Rossetti Trading Company's sake, spend time and socialize with different nobles—though I must say that you would be better suited to that task than your chairwoman. They will come to you too, seeing how you are purveyors to the royal Order of Beast Hunters. It *ought* to be Grato guiding you through this, but, well, he's no good at it either..." Though Grato was a marquis as well, it was likely his personality getting in the way.

"I am most grateful to receive your instruction."

"I learned that you, too, have an adroit grasp on the gossip-birds. And your nickname too."

"*My* nickname? Not our chairwoman's?" Ivano didn't even know he had one.

"They call you the Cerulean Crow."

“Not the ‘Mustard Crow’, I see.” He was named after the color not of his striking hair but of his eyes. Whoever had given Ivano the name must’ve gotten a good look at him.

“Your eyes are reminiscent of your mentor’s, you see.” The person Gildo was referring to was the vice-guildmaster of the Merchants’, Gabriella. Her eyes were closer to a true navy blue, while his were closer to indigo, but that was only a matter of coincidence. “They even question if you aren’t related to the Jeddas or one of Gabriella’s relatives.”

“I suppose I have to apologize for causing them trouble.” Not only might that rumor be disrespectful to Gabriella, Ivano was terrified as to what Leone—a man who loved nothing more in the world than his wife—would do unto him. Besides, he was relatively close to both of them.

“Fret not. It was Viscount Jedda himself who circulated that rumor. Seems as though he still wants to keep you under his wings; he must cherish you.”

One more thing among the much that he owed the husband and wife team who ran the guild. “For that, I am very grateful. I digress, but a crow?” Was that a compliment or an insult?

“No need to look so disappointed. Take it as being compared to a clever animal. You will know your approval has fallen when they call you a hawk or eagle instead,” Gildo said. “Chairwoman Rossetti has earned a few names as well, but, hmm, it would be best if you do not ask.”

“May I, though? I shall keep it from our chairwoman.”

“One of them is ‘Red Cat.’”

“That’s a somewhat cute nickname, isn’t it?” Must’ve been something that stemmed from the camp stove thing with Gildo.

“Others include ‘The Sandalbearer’ because of the drying insoles and ‘Culinary Revolutionary’ for the camp stoves.” Nothing too bad, and frankly, the latter was rather cool, if anything. It was nothing that had to be kept from Dahlia either; she’d be happy to learn of it. “There is one more, and I am afraid it is the most common one: ‘Goddess-Savior of Athlete’s Foot,’ or ‘Goddess of Athlete’s Foot’ for short.”

“I *will* keep that from her!” Why would anyone shorten it like that unless it were supposed to be defamatory? Ivano pressed his hand to his forehead and shut his eyes—his headache was worse than his stomachache today.

“I believe it comes from a good place, but it certainly does not sound like it...”

“Truly. Surely there is a better way to phrase it...” Ivano found himself very like-minded with Gildo on that. “And if you don’t mind me asking, Lord Diels, what do they call Sir Grato?”

“Grato has his magical sword, so they call him the Ashen Archimagea. They call me the Golden Owl because of my position, even though I keep my eyes not on the royal treasury but the accounting records. I break my back to keep those numbers in the black...” He pressed his left hand against his stomach—a second thing the two men had in common. “By the way, do you have any nobles with whom you would perhaps like to share a drink? I may be able to introduce you to them, depending on who you have in mind.”

“Let’s see. Personally, I would love to have a drink with you, Lord Diels.”

“With *me*?” Gildo seemed utterly shocked by the answer, and he eyed Ivano suspiciously. “I am a boring man. There is nothing I can say about finances, and I alone am powerless to make changes to the budget.”

“I have no interest in either of those things. Rather, I was hoping I could hear some stories of your time in college. See, I’m not from the capital and I never attended college either, so I have long adored school life.” It was neither flattery nor deception; it truly was what Ivano had been curious about for some time. There was, however, another side to it. He was so curious about this dual-natured man who was so upright, dutiful, and was fine playing the villain, yet on the other hand, so kind and caring to Dahlia.

“School life, eh? That, I have plenty of stories about.” Gildo looked serious as he leaned forward. “Do you have plans afterward, *Ivano*?”

“No, Lord Diels, I have no obligations afterward.”

“Send your company’s carriage away, and tell your man that I shall send you home tonight,” he instructed. “Oh, feel free to call me Gildo.”

“Thank you very much for the honor, Lord Gildo.” To call a marquis by his first

name was frankly bad for Ivano's heart, but "feel free" wasn't an invitation to say no. Though not making Mena wait the whole night was a good idea—for both the vice-chairman's and the employee's nerves.

Gildo ordered a servant to serve some food, and the long list of dishes the servant responded with didn't sound like they could possibly fit on the table. Then, the host opened a cabinet behind him and brought out a bottle of clear but amber liquor and two thin glasses. "Shall I start with the mountain of trouble that Grato put me through when we were students?"

"That is *utmost* intriguing." Ivano sat upright in his seat, and, with a finger, loosened up his collar—this was going to be a long ride.

"Ever since we were in primary school, I helped him with his homework and schoolwork; if it had not been for me, he would not have achieved what he did in his studies. But because of that, and for whatever other reasons, I was made to take up civil service studies in college, despite my desire to advance in chivalric studies."

"You did a double major, Lord Gildo? I have heard that is quite the undertaking."

"It is, but nothing compared to everything that Grato dragged me into." The glasses were topped with the amber liquor and served neat; his eyes, the same color, swirled the same way. "Speaking of whom, let me tell you more about our colorful history together. It may help you in the future."

Ivano remarked to himself just how supportive Gildo was to the Rossetti Trading Company—and how adamant in pretending he wasn't. The food then arrived, and Ivano, as instructed, started on the colorful dishes while he listened.

"Grato and I are around the same age, our families are in the same faction, and we share many relatives. We had encountered each other numerous times ever since we were young, though we were not particularly close at that point in time."

"That means you two became friends in primary school?"

"I suppose that is true, but 'friends' is not quite the word I would use. We

were in the same class and our teacher had been at a loss of what to do with him because he was mischievous and didn't do his homework. I thought of him as a troublesome younger brother—but don't tell him I said that." Gildo had a few younger brothers himself, though he might have learned to take care of his siblings because of Grato.

"Of course. That said, I have a hard time imagining Sir Grato as a mischievous child." The Grato he knew was a knight who suited his uniform and armor, the dependable captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. He seemed cheerful and jocular, but also very serious about his duties.

"Oh, he would come to school by coach but still arrive late to class because he was too busy playing in the schoolyard, doodle in his notebooks, slide around in the halls in his socks, fill his schoolbag full of rocks to see who could carry the most, climb up to the roof, hop over fences; the list goes on. The worst part was that he would drag the people around him into his antics, and other children would lament their luck being stuck in the same class as him."

"Wow..." Ivano didn't know what else to say—Grato had behaved exactly like any lowborn kid would, stressing out teachers the same way.

"He made playmates with anyone, whether they were a noble or a commoner, but only I could rein him in."

Nominally, all students were equals, but there seems to be a hierarchy amongst school children as well. Stepping up to the heir to a marquisate ought to have been impossible; hence, the role had fallen to Gildo, a friend and another son of a marquis family. "You were your brother's keeper, in a sense."

"Someone had to tell him that cotton was better than silk for sliding around. The view from the rooftop was not half bad either."

Ivano was trying his best to place a steamed prawn on his fork, but hearing Gildo's words caused him to run the tines straight through it. *They were close friends—partners in crime, even.* As Ivano racked his brains, trying to recall whether etiquette dictated that he remove the prawn from his fork with his knife, Gildo stabbed a prawn and brought it straight to his mouth; Ivano saw his smile and decided to do the same.

Gildo continued, "In college, I pursued chivalry and civil service, and so I saw

Grato less. Without me, he began to play hooky and roam around town without his guards."

"He did as he wished, so you couldn't be blamed for it. Still, it is shocking to me to hear that Sir Grato was so, erm, different while he was in school." Grato was popular as captain and a very capable knight; it was hard to believe he was the same person who had been such a rascal as a schoolboy.

"One of Grato's younger brothers was very smart, even hailed as a child prodigy. Grato himself was better suited as a knight, and people often told him he could simply let his brother succeed the family. The brothers were very close with each other, so I'm sure it was no easy decision." Succeeding the marquisate was surely a complicated matter; nobles had it rough too. But Grato was still the head of the household, though perhaps only in name—it was said that one of his brothers handled family affairs. As far as people knew, the brothers were still close with each other.

"Did Sir Grato come to you for advice regarding that, Lord Gildo?"

"No. The succession matter, joining the Order of Beast Hunters, those things he figured out by himself. Besides, I was still a child at that time, and there was little I could do. Well, aside from dragging him home when he ran away and getting into fistfights with him at school—of course, the teacher and my father weren't very happy about that," Gildo said with a chuckle, making his stories seem far happier than they actually had been.

Ivano caught himself staring at his host. "Erm, I hope I'm not being too presumptuous in saying so, but you two sure were good friends."

"I suppose that is true. We fought often too, but the next day, we would speak to each other as though nothing had ever happened. We were good friends." Gildo looked off into the distance, likely recalling memories of his time with Grato. That friendship had ended once, after all. "My younger brother, a Beast Hunter, was killed in action, and I stopped speaking to Grato. I thought I would do so until he spoke to me first, but I jumped to conclusions and was too stubborn anyway. Grato, being Grato, blamed everything on himself too. For far too long was my wine sour."

That last sentence had barely been a whisper, but Ivano realized it was the

truest to his feelings Gildo had been. “Nothing but good wine now, then?” He wasn’t sure if it was proper to do so, but he topped up Gildo’s glass with the amber liquor.

A tender smile, one that didn’t seem possible for him, appeared on the man’s face. Gildo took his glass into his hand. “Say, Ivano, your other mentor, Chairman Oswald Zola—do you know his nickname in school?”

“He hasn’t always been the Silver Fox?”

“There was more to it: Silver Fox, Collector of Handkerchiefs.”

“Oh...” A lady’s handkerchief—was it something that one should collect? Was it something one *could* collect?

“Grato received his fair share of them, but Chairman Zola was on an entirely different level. Every time he received a handkerchief, he would slip it inside a card and write the sender’s name on it to keep track of who sent which one. There were even girls who would prepare a card for him ahead of time.”

“Incredible...” Oswald must’ve had a fulfilling student life, and it was no surprise Jean from the Adventurers’ Guild would revere him as a mentor. He was a mentor to Ivano as well, but *only* in the art of business.

“Keep these names in mind as well.” Gildo then proceeded to list out the names of various noblemen as Ivano jotted them down in a notebook that he had retrieved from his breast pocket. The noblemen were from all sorts of families and occupied all sorts of ranks, but Ivano couldn’t figure out what linked them. Afterward, Gildo explained, “These were some of the men whose wives gave Chairman Zola their embroidered handkerchiefs. I recommend that you refrain from mentioning his name in front of these men. And, of course, you ought to not address him as ‘Professor Zola’ either.”

“*Oh*. Duly noted.” Ivano checked the family names of all these noblemen again and wondered just how Oswald was still alive.

“Chairman Zola had many more *friends who were girls*, however, and any businessman with so many noblewomen as friends is a formidable foe.”

Ivano forced a smile. “College life in the capital sure is a lively time.”

“That is one of the objectives for some people. Those who do not already have marriage arranged would leave their dominions in search of a partner. There are also those who look for partners despite having plans for the future already.”

“I have heard that many nobles have their futures dictated for them like that. Is it usually a problem?”

“It depends. If both families stand to gain, they might defer them to being the second or third wife. Being a second husband is a rare case, but that does happen too. It isn’t only about a man’s rank; his finances and any magic he has to pass down come into play too.”

“I see...” Unlike commoner marriages, what noble marriages all boiled down to was the interests of the parties’ respective clans.

“If one is deemed a lost cause, then their family will try to cool them down by dragging them back to their territory, having them drop out of school under the guise of poor health, sending them to study abroad, and whatnot. You may know some of these extreme cases, like—”

Gildo continued, and Ivano could hardly keep up with his memos. That day, his notebook became a chronicle of the darkest histories.

The Battleground and the Naming

They said love and its battles were always raging in the capital, but to witness it was quite terrifying.

“Liar! You never told me you were seeing other women!”

“Sorry, I guess. But it’s not like you ever asked me about it. Besides, you’re friends with other guys.”

“What, you think you can two-time me just because I never asked? You said you weren’t about free love either! And my guy friends are coworkers, not lovers!”

On the landing between the first and the second floor, a man and a woman were engaged in a shouting match. Though they were at the back of the building where foot traffic was at a minimum, the Merchants’ guildhall was hardly the place to air out dirty laundry. There was no way of getting past those two, so no choice but to backpedal and use the other staircase, so Dahlia whispered to Mena.

“Chairwoman, would you mind keeping your distance?”

“No, but what are you...”

“Here, hide behind this pillar. Allow me to blaze a trail.” Mena set down the large crate of parchment he had been carrying and then trotted up the stairs, giving Dahlia much concern as to what he was about to do. “All right, all right! That’s enough!”

“Are you trying to stop us?!” snapped the woman.

“That’s correct, miss. Surely you’d expect someone to poke his nose in when you’re going after each other this loudly in public.”

“Oh...”

“And you, sir—the receptionist area is getting swamped. Would you mind going to lend a hand?”

“N-No! Right on it!” The man hightailed it down the steps, speeding past

Dahlia. She had never spoken to him before, but she recognized him as a guild clerk who usually worked on the first floor.

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going?! Who said we’re done here?!” The woman was about to give chase when Mena deftly stepped into her path. Dahlia returned behind the pillar after seeing that.

“Okay, so what if you chase him down and catch him? Do you wish to be so conspicuous inside the guild?” asked Mena. “Come on, you don’t need a joker like that.”

“Wha—What’s your deal, jumping in between us and cutting our conversation short like that?!” Volatile was her voice, which jumped an octave. Dahlia had to admit she’d be the same in that lady’s shoes—wouldn’t it be better if he had let them play it out?

“You thought you two were exclusive, but he had other intentions—does that summarize your conversation? Did you notice how you cornered him like that, but all he wanted to do was run away? He didn’t even say he’d break it off with the other woman he’s seeing. I don’t think your talk was going to lead to anything other than a breakup anyway.”

“Don’t act like you know me. This has *nothing* to do with you!”

“You’re right, this doesn’t have anything to do with me. But do you still have feelings for that jerk? Are you going to pretend like he didn’t do anything to hurt you? If so, you know where to find him,” Mena said, his voice suddenly becoming as calm as possible.

“I...” She was on the verge of refuting him, but her tears choked her up—Dahlia almost wanted to stop Mena herself and beg him to be merciful.

“Even if you get back together with him, you’ll always be wondering whether he’s lying to you again. Once a cheater, always a cheater, so just get rid of him, I say.” No objection followed from the woman. Dahlia had extended one foot out of the shadow of the pillar—*what if she’s crying?*—but hesitated to walk up those stairs. What came next was Mena’s voice, soft and soothing. “You two just aren’t meant for each other. Besides, you’re such a pretty lady; you can find someone much better than him.”

“Smooth talker for someone on his side. Are you working for the guild too?”

“No to both, actually; I’m a complete stranger. I also happen to be a free lover, but for a guy or a girl to cheat on and hurt someone is scummy. You should take a look in the mirror when you have the chance as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your hairstyle is a little dated, and your clothes aren’t very flattering.”

“And now you’re harassing me, calling me a hag?”

“No, no. I’m saying that you’d look even better if you parted your bangs and tried clothes in brighter colors and cuts that show off your hips a little. Your figure is a lot to brag about, you know?” Mena sure had the silver tongue to support his free love lifestyle. Maybe Lucia could help with the woman’s makeover too. “If you’re still going to be angry at him, you could always ask your friends to spread rumors and ruin his job. It’d be silly to get anywhere near him anyway. But the best thing you can do right now is to go out with your friends and eat a lot of yummy food. Forget about that lout.” He must’ve been smiling—he sounded jocular and not preachy.

“Ugh. I think we’d make for good friends if you were a girl.” The lady heaved a heavy sigh, dispelling all the poison she had bottled up inside. “I might be interested if you weren’t a free lover and if you weren’t younger than me.”

“How unfortunate for me. Regardless, I’d love to go for lunch with a beauty like you. We’ll even split the bill. Think about it once you feel better. I’m always here at the guild.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

After the two introduced themselves, Mena gave her a last thoughtful word of advice. “He might be waiting for you to walk down these steps, so why don’t you head up to the second floor and try another staircase?”

“You sure have everything thought out. I’ll do that.”

“And I’d wager that he’ll come running back to you, which you should respond to by giving him a hard slap across the face. A better choice, though, might be to simply smile and ask ‘Who are you again?’”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen, but I’ll keep it in mind, just in case,” the woman said. “And, um, thank you for your help.”

“My pleasure.”

As the lady’s footsteps became more and more distant, Dahlia silently wished her the best for what was to come.

“Thank you for waiting, chairwoman.” The way Mena dealt with people was astonishing; after he rushed down the steps, Dahlia looked at him with amazement. “Chairwoman, you’re staring a hole into the side of my face.”

“Oh! No! I was just moved by how you handled that!”

Mena chuckled; he didn’t seem to take any offense. His aqua blue eyes lit up with a roguish glint. “I’m used to this kind of stuff. I’ve always played arbitrator in lovers’ quarrels.”

“Wait, really? I believe you are only two years younger than me, right?”

“That is correct, but in the institution, nobody could wait to grow up. Love was everywhere for us teenagers, and, puppy love being what it is, fighting abounded, so there was always a need for someone with good communication skills to sort them out. That’s how I got to where I am.”

“I see.”

“Can’t have silly things like that making girls cry either. They have to stay positive and be beautiful so they remain a feast for our eyes.” Spoken like a true playboy.

If Dahlia had only had someone like Mena when her engagement was broken, she might have been able to take a more positive attitude towards the situation. She’d been blessed with new friends since, but even so, getting over it alone had been tough at times. That thought had her worried for the lady from earlier. “Will she, um, be all right?”

“She’ll be fine, I think. She looked like she was over him already. They say men get over relationships like sliding down a staircase but women jump out through a third-story window.”

“Is that true?”

“As far as I know. Guys probably don’t tend to get hung up when thinking of previous partners. By the way, chairwoman, you don’t practice free love but rather go for exclusive relationships, right?”

“I suppose so, but I have no thoughts of dating right now with work up to my neck.”

“Hm? Forgive me for asking, but what about Sir Volf? I was certain you two were dating.”

“What? Oh, no, we’re just friends! I’m very much obliged to him.”

“Is that right?” Mena readily accepted it. He picked up the crate from the floor and the two of them walked up the steps together. “Sir Volf sure is a good-looking fella. I got way too jealous when I first met him. Those golden eyes of his are so unusual and striking. It must be something else when he’s beside his brother.”

“His brother’s eyes aren’t golden, actually.”

“Really? Oh, but I suppose a lot of brothers have different colored eyes. Beats me how that works, though,” he commented. Dahlia almost asked Mena about his family too but immediately realized it wasn’t something she should ask someone who’d been raised in an institution and was likely an orphan. Mena continued, “I went over to Marcella’s place the day before yesterday, and both of Irma’s younger brothers were there as well. All three of them have the same eye and hair color and the same face as well, so I thought Sir Volf and his brother would look similar.”

“I don’t think Irma and her brothers would be very happy if you told them they look the same, though.”

“Well, I did already, and all three snapped at me, shouting ‘Absolutely not!’”

Dahlia could imagine that; Irma and her brothers behaved the same way too. They would never admit anybody could peg them as siblings by their black tea hair, cinnamon eyes, and facial features. Dahlia believed they took after their father, though Irma would probably deny that one too.

Mena said, “Since no one has any idea whether they will have boys or girls, they’ve come up with dozens of names for the twins.”

“They still have a while to go, so they’ll have plenty of time to rack their brains.” Double the babies, double the trouble, but she was sure it would be a joyful time regardless.

“They’re thinking about Bernholt as a boy name and Bertina as a girl name—very graceful if you ask me. Speaking of names, though, I presume yours is from the flower?”

“That’s right. The flower is from the other side of the border, and there, they call them ‘dahliya’ in the singular and ‘dahlia’ in the plural.”

“The plural, huh? Despite being one person?”

“Well, um, I think my father was hoping I would be surrounded by a whole garden of people.” Not only was she somewhat plain, she had no family remaining—Dahlia supposed that was what they called “failing to live up to one’s name.”

“I see. Your name suits you perfectly, then, chairwoman.”

“Do you really think so?” As soon as those words left her lips, she kicked herself for probing an off-the-cuff remark like that.

“You have plenty of friends, partners and allies in business, and colleagues, don’t you? I believe it is a great name that rolls off the tongue,” he said. “On the other hand, a lot of people get ‘Mezzena’ wrong and spelling it out is bothersome. They should have just named me ‘Mena’ from the get-go, I say.”

“I think ‘Mezzena’ is a stylish name.”

“Thank you. The institute’s director gave me the name, but I always thought that I would prefer something easier to pronounce and spell. Believe me when I say I don’t have it that bad, though—the director believed that ‘others look down upon a half-hearted name,’ and so many kids had awkward names.”

The director must’ve been quite particular about children’s names, and Dahlia wondered what those were. “What kind of awkward names?”

“Take Anvéta, Stephania, Jesterice, or Danavini for example. They’re

something, all right."

They were a little off the beaten path but very noble-like. In that sense, it was great to give the children a name they could grow into, she reckoned. "I think they're all wonderful, but it must have been hard remembering them, I imagine."

"Children don't have the best articulation, so we all gave each other nicknames, like An, Steph, Jess, and Dana. The director, though, would only use everybody's given names. He has an awfully good memory and will *never* forget the prank I played on him a decade ago."

"That's amazing. What kind of prank did you play, though?"

"Late one night after the director went to bed, I snuck into his bedroom and put glue all over the underside of his hairpiece. It was a *strong* glue and it covered the whole underside."

Dahlia stopped in her tracks. *What a terrible thing to do! No wonder he wouldn't ever forget it.* "I take it that he was very, very angry at you?"

"Quite the opposite. With a big smile, he said, 'Perfect for the breeze we have today. I shall head out like this.' It *was* a little off-center, though..." How touching it was to hear the director was such a magnanimous character and knew exactly how to act towards children. "Every one of us learned that day that we could not get the best of him, and so we listened to him like good little kids from then on. Even now I still visit him occasionally and bring him some wine." It was rare to see such an embarrassed smile on Mena's face. The director must've been a great teacher.

At the threshold of the room that the Rossetti Trading Company called their office, Mena shifted the crate of parchment onto one hand and opened the door for Dahlia with his other. He followed behind her, placed the crate down, and pulled out her usual chair for her. Though Marcella was the one training to be a knight, Mena seemed to be the quicker and smoother chaperone.

"Oh, uh, thank you."

"You needn't thank me, chairwoman. Just smile and accept it."

Then there was Dahlia, who was not used to having someone serve her like this and had suddenly become a mentee. She realized it was a serious shortcoming and vowed to study the etiquette book for thirty minutes every night before bed.

Marcella was sitting beside her and frantically scribbling down notes summarizing the day's chivalry lessons at the Scalfarotto estate. It was no easy task—not only was he forbidden from taking memos on location, he was tested before leaving every day and had pop quizzes the next morning as well. The company had an unspoken rule that Marcella wasn't to be disturbed until he put down his writing instrument.

Ivano raised his eyes from the account book in his hands. "Did you study noble etiquette somewhere, Mena?" He must've been impressed by the employee's cleverness too.

"I wouldn't go so far to say I have studied it, but, erm, I have spent some time with a noblewoman before."

"And she taught you?"

"No, I merely borrowed a few books on manners and escorting, and the rest is from experience. I did ask her to check that I was doing things correctly, though, so I suppose it would not be a stretch to say that I have been taught." The fact that a few books and a few questions had gotten him so far spoke eloquently to his hard work. Mena, looking composed, began taking documents from the box and shelving them.

"Was she a free lover as well?"

"No, and neither was I at the time. We were not together for a long time either." His expression did not change, but his voice became ever so slightly quieter. "That is the way it goes with nobles and commoners. That, and I'm an orphan too. Our worlds were simply far too different."

A pang shot through Dahlia. There was no avoiding the chasm between the social classes. Even after being bestowed with her barony, she could never escape her base birth. Their worlds were indeed too different; that was something she had learned from the first day she set foot in the castle.

Dispelling the gloom was Marcella. “Don’t say that, Mena. It ain’t hopeless. World’s much smaller than you might think. Look how far you’ve gotten—you’re a part of the Rossetti Trading Company.” Mena agreed, and he turned around with the cheerful smile that was usually seen on his face.

“Oh, that’s right, Mena, you mentioned you know how to ride. How much time did it take you to learn?” Dahlia asked, changing the topic to something that had popped into her mind out of nowhere.

“It took me about two months while I was learning how to take care of the horses. Are you looking to try your hand at equestrianism, chairwoman?”

“It sounds like a fun sport to take up.” For someone who seemed athletic enough, it had apparently taken two months; how long would it take someone like herself with zero athletic abilities?

“Vice-chairman, you know how to ride as well, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m very good at it, but I can manage myself on a docile rental in short bursts.”

Dahlia had known he could drive a carriage, but this was surprising news to her. “Did you learn through your job at the guild?”

“No, just so I could go out with the missus.”

“Chairwoman,” Mena began to explain, “commoners don’t go out of their way to learn how to ride a horse if not for a date, you know?”

“On horseback, though?”

“Yes, it’s common to see people riding double to a local coaching inn for a day trip.” Just like how people went cruising in cars or motorcycles back in her previous life.

“What’s wrong with a carriage, anyway, Dahlia? If you really want to hop on a horse, you can always get Volf to give you a ride. But riding double sure sounds fun, don’t it?” Marcella added.

“I was hoping to be able to ride by myself as well.” Volf had offered to let her ride his family’s horses, but she really didn’t want to embarrass herself, and so she would rather get used to the animals before she took a few lessons—not

that she was brave enough to tell Volf that. “Would, um, would you be able to teach me, Mena?”

“Erm, I have never had formal lessons either, so I wouldn’t be able to, I’m afraid.”

“Sorry for putting you on the spot like that. You’re right. I should probably find a proper coach...” Just because someone knew how to ride didn’t mean they knew how to teach; she shouldn’t have asked that.

Though Dahlia couldn’t see it, Mena, beside her, mouthed, “I’d be in trouble,” to which Ivano nodded in agreement.

“Aaaaand that’s all of it. Guess I’ll go through it once more before I hit the hay.” Just as Marcella finally shut his notebook, there was a knock at the door. It was a little earlier than usual, but this was around when the guild delivered the daily mail.

Dahlia opened the door and found a clerk as white in complexion as the envelopes she had been expecting.

“Oh! Chairwoman Rossetti, Viscount Luini of the Tailors’ Guild is here to see you. May I show him in? It, um, seems to be urgent; in fact, he is already waiting in the hallway...” squeaked the clerk. There must’ve been some kind of problem with the insoles or toe socks or zephyricloth, Dahlia fretted. Everyone stood up as she ushered in the unannounced guest.

“Forgive me for visiting without any prior correspondence, Miss Dahlia, but I have a question I need to ask.”

“Yes, what might that be, Mr. Forto?” She could but tense up—Forto even declined a cup of tea after his very brief greeting, and the skeptical look in his eyes reminded her of a customer demanding to see the manager to air out grievances.

“I have heard that you introduced Lucia to someone from Earldom Goodwin.”

“I did?”



“So I heard correctly, then. May I ask what the earl’s man wanted from Lucia?”

Hold on a tick. She had been caught by surprise, and there had been a question mark at the end of her response—it hadn’t been an affirmative. She explained herself to her interrogator: “Sir Goodwin is a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. We simply happened to come across him in front of a café.”

“A chance meeting, yet you were there for three hours?” Forto growled.

Dahlia understood that he had security on Lucia, but she would never have expected they would scrutinize her friend’s every action like that. “We were on the street when Lucia pointed out that Sir Goodwin’s clothes could use some improvement, and so she described what styles and colors would work better for him. Rather than be a hindrance to everyone passing by, we decided to head inside and chat over a cup of tea and some sweets.” That was nothing but the truth. Lucia had even written down her advice on a slip of paper for Randolph.

“I see. I hope you can forgive me, Miss Dahlia. I was worried that Lucia would be taken away by the Goodwins, you see.”

The Earldom Goodwin defended the kingdom’s border; Dahlia’s first thought was that that had little, if anything, to do with Lucia. But a territory at the frontier might want to deal garments to the neighboring country or even send Lucia across the border to work for them—Forto had the right to worry, especially because Lucia had activated her anti-eavesdropper at the café and so had likely left her guards wondering as to what the three were conversing about.

“I have no doubts that Lucia would refuse any offers to leave her current position, as she seems to really enjoy her work at the Magical Garment Factory,” Dahlia said.

“Is that right? That’s very reassuring to hear.” Fears assuaged, he finally smiled.

Lucia was the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, and she was responsible for products—everything from the toe socks to the zephyricloth—that were hugely popular with every social class. Not only that, but the

seamstress had also become more involved with fashion design and was even rumored to be Forto's right hand. Any headhunters headed her way would surely be firmly refused.

"I apologize for taking up so much of your precious time." After giving a small update about next year's zephyricloth, Forto bid them farewell.

The ordeal had drained Dahlia somewhat, and she needed a break. She decided to head down to the break area on the first floor of the guildhall and purchase treats for everyone—a well-deserved reward after such a tense day. Marcella offered to accompany her, but she asked him to brew some coffee instead and headed off alone.

"Was that the guildmaster of the Tailors' guild just now? He is as handsome as they say. Are he and Ms. Lucia..." Mena omitted the end of his sentence.

"Yeah, seems like it," Ivano said in return. Forto had likely been afraid that Dahlia had set up Lucia and Randolph, but the truth was that their encounter had been pure coincidence. Still, a busy guildmaster had taken time out of his day to hurry over for answers—he must have felt very attached to and protective of her.

"I believe the guildmaster is married already, but regardless, Ms. Lucia could very easily become his second wife."

"Well, like you said earlier, a noble and a commoner."

Marcella looked towards the other two speaking in hushed tones, his terra-cotta eyes filled with either pity or sympathy. "Hey, should we, y'know, say something to our chairwoman?" His question was met with poignant silence.

The Galeforce Blades and the Longicollis

The early morning autumnal air in the forest chilled the bones. In his tent, Volf checked over his scarlet armor and equipment. The horses should've been tired out by the constant drizzle on the journey here, yet their cheerful nickering could be heard throughout the campsite. It wouldn't have been possible for the knights to stave off the cold with a warm breakfast if not for the camp stove, and recognizing their own fortune, they had decided to improve the situation for the horses as well by packing extra apples and pears. The horses had a penchant for sugars, and their new diet made them very happy indeed.

Kirk, one of the younger knights in the squad, eyed Volf as the latter walked out of his tent. "Sir Volf, are those shortswords for backup? And are they tied together at the hilt?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm planning to give these a try in the field. I throw the swords, and the wire should cut anything in its path."

"How interesting. Is that a Scalfarotto family weapon?"

"Something like that." He had received them from Dahlia, which technically made them Scalfarotto property now. Volf didn't feel very nice hiding the whole truth from Kirk, however.

"All you could cut with a wire that thin is cheese. Chop up some salad, maybe."

"Careful, Dorino!" he shouted at the knight beside Kirk, who was pulling on the wire. "You're gonna slice your damn finger—that's mythril thread!"

"Who the hell made these, anyway? You're telling me it's not the swords but the mithril thread that does the cutting? What were they thinking?!"

It was Dahlia who had made them, and it had been Volf's idea. The blades flew quickly and the wire was sharp—there was nothing weird about them at all. "They're *innovative*."

"These are indeed quite novel," commented Randolph, standing behind

Dorino and examining the swords. “They may be able to immobilize a medium-size monster.”

“You really think they’ll do something?”

“Yeah, I’m confident.” To dispel Dorino’s suspicions, Volf stood up a handful of dead branches in front of a tree and then threw the swords with both hands. The weapon whirred through the air. Then came the sound of the blades sticking in the tree and the sharp snapping of the twigs as they scattered in pieces. A perfect execution—the fruition of his practice in secret.

“That’s amazing, Sir Volf!”

“Thanks, Kirk, but it’s the swords, not me.”

“Or perhaps more amazing is the mythril thread.”

“Hold your horses, Volf,” Dorino interjected. “It’s obvious with how powerful they are that those aren’t ordinary shortswords—they’ve got to be magical!”

“Yep, haste through air magic. Galeforce Blades is what they’re called.”

“Ya finally managed to convince your family to spoil you a bit, huh?” Dorino was clearly assuming Volf had talked his brother or father into getting these for him, and Volf wasn’t about to correct the misunderstanding.

“Sir Volf, can they only be used by your family or are they an heirloom, like Captain Grato’s Ash-Hand?”

“No, none of that. They’re not bonded to anyone at all.” The shortswords themselves were the cheapest ones available and had even been bought at a bulk discount. Throwing them with force was what activated them, and they didn’t have a blood bond—though Volf had just a little desire to apply one to make them a personal weapon.

“Um, if and only if you’re okay with it, Sir Volf, could I maybe have a try? Perhaps I might have an affinity with the enchantment,” Kirk asked, sheepishly.

A moment of hesitancy seized Volf, but the Galeforce Blades may actually work well for an air magic user like Kirk. Besides, Volf couldn’t test that out for himself—he couldn’t use magic. “Sure, give them a shot. Put these gloves on first, though; I don’t want you losing a finger to the mythril thread.” He

removed the metal-plated sand lizard gloves and passed them to Kirk, for whom they were a little large but not so much so that tightening the straps didn't help.

"Got it! It looks very sharp, so I'll be extra careful." Kirk took the Galeforce Blades into his hands and planted branches in front of the tree, just as Volf had done. "Here I go!" However, unlike Volf, Kirk used only his right hand to throw. Just when the swords seemed to be veering off to the right, their course was corrected by a sharp whistling noise and slammed into the tree even harder than Volf's attempt. The branches had already scattered silently across the ground. "These Galeforce Blades work superbly with my air magic!"

The spectators stared with mouths agape. "I could barely see them flying..."

"What kind of magic was that, Kirk?"

"I pushed them and guided them with air magic."

"That sure is some affinity..." The matching elements of the swords and Kirk's magic synergized perfectly, and Volf was just a bit jealous that Kirk could throw them even better than him.

"You sure it's fine using them, though?" Dorino asked. "They're magical swords, right? Must've cost you a lot. If you stuck them into a monster and it ran away with them..."

"That would be a problem, so I'll have to choose my targets. It should be fine as long as I can pick them up afterward, and I can deal with the monster if it tries to run away."

"I'm sure you're more than capable of dealing with it, Sir Volf!"

"Yeah, he's got a point. You can fly, after all..." Dorino said, staring off into the distance.

"You boys seem to be having fun." Walking towards them was the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters; vice-captain Griswald was on standby at the castle this time. He asked about the shortswords, and Volf answered that they were from the family estate, keeping Dahlia's name out of the conversation. "The Scalfarotto's Galeforce Blades, you say? Hm, they may prove useful today. Feel free to test them out on the longicollis."

Today's mark was a longicollis—a monster that resembled an oversized heron but with more meat on it. It was an herbivore and its habitat was deep in the forest, so it normally did not pose a problem until it approached civilization and ate fruit from orchards and seeds from newly sown fields. When it did, it consumed whole branches from fruit trees, thus compromising next year's yields. As for the wheat fields, it ate just the seeds but its earth magic packed the soil rock hard. Furthermore, if disturbed during its mealtime, the longicollis slung stones with its magic. It made for quite the pest. Average villagers could handle smaller specimens, but today's target was reported to be three meters tall; it must've been a particularly long-lived example or a mutant. Hence, the Order of Beast Hunters had been called into action today.

But no matter how apparently harmless the monster, fear was never completely uncalled for. Though the longicollis did not eat humans or other creatures, its wingspan stretched wide and its earth magic was menacing. There had even been a case in which one had caused a casualty by flinging a stone that penetrated a mage's skull. Today, consequently, the mages had equipped themselves with leather helms to protect their skulls and silver mesh for their eyes.

Volf asked, "Shall we aim for its wings, sir?"

"That would be a good bet. We cut off its flight feathers and this should be an easier battle, but hitting any of its feathers should disrupt it enough. Make sure it is in the air, though—we wouldn't want those shortswords coming too close to the men," Grato responded with a chuckle. Those who had witnessed Kirk's throwing arm laughed too, but likely in fear instead. Clean cuts were easy to heal, but getting injured would be unnecessary. The knights proceeded to discuss potential tactics against the longicollis and then moved to lay their ambush.

The specks in the carefully tilled soil suggested a field ready to grow wheat, but in reality, it was a trap set with chaff. To the side was an open sack of apples and pears, taken from the horses' feed. The previous crime scene had had its ridges flattened and the ground packed solid. If only the longicollis could be employed to build roads with its powerful earth magic—so joked the knights.

This field stood out from all the rest, as it was the only one that hadn't yet been devastated by the longicollis. Nevertheless, there was a chance that the avian monster was wary of tricks and that the knights were wasting their time.

By four and a half hours into their stakeout, when the sun had already shifted in the sky, the target began gliding in. Its body transitioned from brilliant white to dark brown to black at the tip of its wings. The squad collectively held their breath while the longicollis landed. However, along with kicking up the dust, the flapping wings threw the wheat husks into the air. Perhaps the monster had clued in on the ruse or had sensed something was wrong; in any case, it began taking off as soon as it touched the ground.

"Drats, we've been foiled!"

"I knew it was too obvious!"

"Bows, fire!" As some of the knights grumbled to themselves, Grato hollered out his command, and the bow knights waiting at the edge of the woods let their arrows fly. But the monster barked almost like a dog and repelled them with a sheet of sand.

"Sand Wall! Pretty smart for a birdbrain!"

"Hey, whose side are you on?!"

The bow knights seemed less than enthused about the outcome, but their projectiles were enough to cut the longicollis's take-off short. It still managed to take flight, but it was hardly flying at speed.

"Mages, immobilize it!"

"Ice Lance!"

"Ice Lock!" The mages chanted and fired their spells. The former managed to pierce the monster's leg and freeze it and the latter weighed it down, causing the bird to beat its wings ineffectively.

"Mind your eyes! Kirk, aim for its wing!"

"On it!" The young knight threw the shortswords with all his might, then guided and accelerated them with magic toward the swaying longicollis. The weapon sliced through the air, screeching as it flew.

Sensing it was in danger, the longicollis suddenly shifted its body, but it was too late—its eyes became vacant and its neck fell to one side as vivid red blood sprayed out. The monster crashed to the ground and dozens of its white and brown feathers fell from the sky.

“I did it, Sir Volf! The Galeforce Blades are so amazing!”

“Don’t downplay your skill with them, Kirk!” Though Volf really wanted to try the new weapon out for himself, he had let Kirk play to his strengths instead. Regardless, the positive feedback on the blades made him quite happy.

“Damn, Kirk! When did your air magic get so good?!”

“What a shot! And you’ve managed to preserve all the harvestable materials from the bird!” Despite a certain part that seemed out of place, the mages sang Kirk’s well-deserved praises.

“Oh, let’s get working on the bird too! We should bleed it while we have the chance.”

“We could roast it over the campfire later. The meat should taste fairly clean, since it’s an herbivore, right?”

“Yeah, and it should be nice and fattened up with lots of wheat and fruits.”

Killing a longicollis meant good eating for the villagers; the meat was somewhat tough but had good flavor.

“We should be able to harvest all the materials from it: the beak, core, heart, gizzard—what else is there again?”

“The flight feathers too, please. The mages and priests have been looking for some.”

“Sure thing. What kind of enchantments are they for, anyway?”

“After cleaning and drying them, we’ll use them for insulation. We’re not as physically fit as others, so lying in wait for hours on end gets rather chilly. I’ve also heard the feathers are good for stuffing cushions; it may help those whose behinds get sore from a carriage ride.”

“Huh, all right. I’ll try to collect as many as I can, then.”

The Beast Hunters were accustomed to long journeys on horseback and carriage, but it was another story for the mages and priests. Before, there had been very little chatter aside from things necessary, and materials were divided up evenly; now, however, people had been gathering around the camp stove to drink and converse freely, and that culture must've made everyone feel more comfortable around each other.

"I'll pluck the feathers and throw them in a hemp sack. But the meat, should we roast it or stew it on the stove?"

"How about skewers? We've got some more sauce in the chuckwagon."

"We've also got more of Chairwoman Rossetti's spice mix. Maybe we could do pan-seared steaks?"

"There's more than enough meat to cook all three ways. Besides, nothing else on our schedule but to trek home."

All the knights and mages hurried to get the campfire going and the booze ready. The longicollis was hung over a pair of logs to drain it of its blood, and when it was nearly done, Kirk shouted, "Could everyone please lend a hand in plucking the bird?"

"You got it!" the rest of the squad clamored back.

A ways away, lying on the edge of the field, was the large bird's head. Its eyes were wide open, looking as though a question mark was still on its mind. Randolph walked over to it and closed its eyes. "Hm."

"What's with the frown, Randolph?"

"I am unsure how to say it, but it seems I have strayed from the path of chivalry," he said in a quiet voice, his eyes to the ground.

Dorino clapped him twice on the back. "Ah, forget about it, man."

"You're getting good at this, Kirk!"

"I think I'm getting used to working the grill!" Kirk was adjusting the campfire with his air magic as he grilled the longicollis. While the camp stove was handy, there was something special about cooking over an open flame. And since the

monster had already packed down the earth here, all the knights had to do was spread some waterproof cloth over it; then they could enjoy a late lunch. Having achieved such a total victory put everyone in high spirits as they grilled or stewed their poultry to their liking. There was no getting bored with salt and pepper, the spice mix, and Dahlia's secret sauce. "The Galeforce Blades sure were something else, Sir Volf! Would it be possible to purchase a copy of them? It might have to be in installments, but I'll pay for them!"

"Could I, um, get back to you on that? I'll have to discuss it with my family first." Volf had to speak to Dahlia and Guido about it, but it might be possible to have her make a copy for Kirk without him knowing who the creator was.

"I know it's a pretty big ask, so I hope you don't bend over backwards for me. But with a pair of my own, I think I could be even more effective in combat."

As he grabbed a few skewers of meat, Dorino said, "The wire could stand to be longer. That way, you could split a wyvern in half."

"It might make them harder to throw, though."

"Hm, I agree—I might not be strong enough for that. I wish I had body strengthening magic too."

"About that," Volf added, "I've been asked, 'why not a bow?'"

"Is that you I hear talking about bows, Volf?" One of the bow knights, a senior to Volf who happened to be passing by, approached their group with a piece of meat in hand.

"That's right. There was an idea about how arrows enchanted with air magic might be even more effective, but I assumed it would be difficult for two archers to fire at the same time."

"Some practice with nocking and firing two arrows would do! An archer could get more range and power out of a bow than Kirk throwing it with his arm too. It should be pretty deadly."

"No offense, Sir Milo," said Kirk, "but I *am* able to push and guide the shortswords with my air magic."

"Well, I don't have the air magic to course correct my arrows, but you won't

see me missing. And with my strengthening spell, I could even fire a titanbow."

"Air magic and guidance? Or strengthening and ballista? Hmm..." Volf mulled it over as the two of them began to butt heads, then opened his golden eyes and flashed a big smile. "Why not both? Sir Milo could fire sturdy enchanted arrows tied with thick mythril thread and Kirk could push them with his air magic."

"That's a great idea, Sir Volf!"

"Good thinking!"

"Sir Milo's aim is good, and if the monster moves or dodges, Kirk can guide the arrows back on the right path—I'm sure that'll give it a greater effect! We could even take down a wyvern like that!"

The knights proceeded to get excited about what materials to use for the arrows, how long the mythril thread should be, bows, and air magic. Randolph, however, stayed silent. He reached for the skewer of longicollis with a look of empathy.

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"I think I'm getting old..."

Sitting across the table, Dorino choked on his dark ale. They were at a tavern near the capital.

After returning from the expedition and getting checked up by the physicians in the castle, the Beast Hunters had been dismissed, and so they had separated into groups, with many heading for a drink in the name of debriefing. Volf and the others had gone for a meal at the tavern.

"You, uh, you all right, Volf?"

"Our expeditions are so irregular; it's no wonder that you're tired," said a fellow knight.

The group of senior knights sitting at the next table swung around as well. "I've got some dried forest serpent, Volf. Want some?"

"What are you giving him, Sir Arfio?"

“Volfred! What are you moaning about, young man?”

“Vooolf! You’re not even at our age yet!”

“You’re out of shape! More training for you!” The senior knights had arrived earlier and sounded as though they were already many drinks in.

Volf forced a smile and brushed them off, then brought some dark ale to his lips. It had once been unthinkable that the older knights would be so chummy with him, but ever since he’d gotten picked off by the wyvern, whatever distance there had been between them had shrunken.

“Jokes aside, though, what’s up? We can talk about this later too, if it’s hard for you to bring up.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be much help, but I’ll lend an ear, Volf.”

“Well, lately, I haven’t been wearing my eyeglasses in the castle but women aren’t coming up to me like they used to, so I thought I must be getting old and losing my charm...” He still handled his liquor fine, but maybe he was aging prematurely, Volf thought.

Dorino buried his head in his arms as his shoulders shook, and Randolph patted him on the back.

“Burn in hellfire, you dolt!”

“Volf, I strongly recommend that you be a little more objective.”

“But it’s true! Women have stopped approaching me in the castle, and no one’s been hitting on me!” he explained.

As Dorino shook his head, he turned to their junior sitting beside Volf. “Kirk, you have any ideas why?”

“Um, maybe the ladies have a hard time approaching Sir Volf because I’m always by his side? And, well, he’s also working out on the training grounds all the time.” Kirk looked somewhat troubled as he turned green eyes onto Volf.

“Hm. So it’s all thanks to you.” Volf genuinely appreciated it.

“Maybe I’m getting in your way, Sir Volf.”

“Nah, I should be thanking you. It’s been a lot more peaceful with you around,

Kirk, so stay by me some more."

"If you are happy with me, I would be glad to!" The two of them shook hands as the rest of the knights watched.

"What an odd conversation, but they seem to be serious."

"Ah, let them be. I, too, am tired from the expedition, so I shall order something sweet." Randolph proceeded to order an apple pie; the waiter looked to be caught off guard but took down the order with a smile.

"An apple pie, Randolph? Does that go well with a drink?" asked Dorino.

"It aids in recovery—besides, I enjoy sweets."

"I mean, I knew that already, but I never thought you'd admit it. Not that I think there's anything wrong with that." Dorino's validation seemed to have come as a pleasant surprise to Randolph—he relaxed his shoulders and showed the slightest hint of a smile.

"You never said anything about it until now. Did something change?"

"Miss Dahlia. She taught me that sugars can help with fatigue and that there is nothing weird or wrong about a man enjoying his cake. It was not as though I tried to hide it from everyone either, but now, I can be proud," he said, as the waiter delivered the pie. Randolph set down his ruby ale and delicately cut into his dessert with a fork and knife.

Interrupting Randolph and Dorino's conversation, Volf turned around at the mention of his friend. "Randolph, when were you speaking to Dahlia?"

"Before the expedition. We met at a café in the Central District and enjoyed sweets together. It was quite delicious."

"Is that right." He downed his mug of stout as Randolph savored a second bite of the pie; there was an odd tension in the room.

"Ah, Miss Lucia was present as well. She offered me very valuable advice on clothes, then recommended that the three of us head inside for desserts and tea. Sweets and two beautiful ladies—what could be better?"

"Hm. Well, enjoy your sweets tonight." Unlike Randolph's smiling eyes, Volf's

rigid smile was downright frightening; the way the wind was blowing didn't look good. Dorino rubbed the spot between his eyebrows and thought it would be better to keep quiet. Randolph was bringing it upon himself anyway, and someone might end up needing to use a strengthening spell and carry him back to the barracks. Dorino thought maybe he should head home early too.

Kirk braved through the tense atmosphere and circled around the table with a fresh bottle of ale. "So, you like sweets, Sir Randolph?"

"I do. Do you think it strange?"

"No, I love my desserts too. I always get crepes and fruit sandwiches at the Central District park where they set up the food stalls."

"Ooh."

"Have you had them before? They have so much variety there, and you can even top them with extra whipped cream and honey drizzle." Kirk sat down and dug into the apple pie with his fork after Randolph offered to let him try some.

"Do you go to the stalls by yourself, Kirk?"

"Well, I used to go with my fiancée, but she didn't want me inviting her anymore..."

"Did you two get into a fight?!"

"No! You know how ladies can worry too much about their figures. She decided to give up on sweets for the time being, despite being nowhere near pudgy."

"Ah, I see."

"Let her be, I say. Another dress, another chunk missing out of your wallet..." chimed in a senior knight with four daughters. Beside him was a mage, whose daughter was about to get married, rubbing his temples.

"Ladies are better with a bit of meat on them anyway. And honestly, I'd be delighted to get the chance to buy someone a dress."

"That's a refreshing take, Sir Astorga."

"If you're going to say something like that, then why don't you find yourself a

new wife, Nicola?!”

“About that—I know it’s sudden, but I’m getting married during the winter fete,” Nicola Astorga said without looking up from his drink.

“Congrats! Since when were you dating anyway?”

“I’m so happy for you, you bastard! You shoulda told us earlier! And yeah, when did you two start seeing each other?”

“The other day, her family arranged for us to meet, and we got engaged that same day.”

“Wow, you sure aren’t wasting any time. I guess you can be assertive when you need to, eh?”

“Actually, *she* asked to get married. Her family ranks above ours, and my father and older brother were really pressuring me to do so too...” When familial ties dictated a nobleman get married, he married.

The others became much more empathetic. “I feel for you.”

“Not even your family has a say, eh?”

“Is this her second marriage too? Or is she a bit older?”

“No, neither of those.” Nicola cast his blue eyes downward again. “When I was returning to the castle from the field, she saw me with my greatsword. She was, uh, very fervent? Passionate? In any case, I told her she should give it some more thought, seeing how young she is.”

“Gods, I’m jealous! She fell in love with you at first sight! Just how young is she, though?”

“She just turned eighteen...”

Some of the other knights moved to sit beside Nicola, while others, like Dorino, scooted farther away from him. Randolph continued to silently devour his apple pie. Being a Beast Hunter was a dangerous job and one that often sent a knight away on expeditions, so many in the squad were single or divorced.

Still, marriage was a joyous occasion and many—particularly the veteran knights—wished for it for themselves. Some of them pried answers out of

Nicola, some kept filling his glass with hard liquor, and some cast strengthening spells and clapped him on the back; the envy surrounding him was not something Dorino wanted to participate in.

“That isn’t something that happens very often.”

“Why couldn’t it have been me? Well, at least it wasn’t Volf.”

“Please leave my name out of this.”

“It is simply a matter of probability.”

“And how did you come to those numbers, Randolph?” Volf glared at him. Randolph stared back as he started on his apple pie again.

“There’s some sort of romance to that, falling in love at first sight and then getting married.”

“Is it? I think I would rather take the time and foster our feelings.”

“I agree with Kirk.”

“What if you break up before anything develops?”

“Not every seed sprouts.”

“Hey, don’t get so serious! The truth hurts...”

As they chatted, a waiter came by to serve a large white plate with juicy pear cut into slices—likely another one of Randolph’s orders. “Kirk?”

“Don’t mind if I do! Oh, did you know they have pear pies at the stalls at the park? I know it’s a staple, but it really is especially good in the fall. There are also pancakes drenched in maple syrup.”

“Maple syrup is good for dipping cookies in too.”

“That sounds good, I’ll have to try it next time. Apples are in season right now too, and they’re really good fried.”

“Fried apples? What are they like?”

“They batter diced apples, deep fry them, then roll them around in sugar. It’s tart on the inside and sweet and crunchy on the outside—super yummy fresh out of the oil.”

As Kirk explained all of the different desserts available at the food carts to Randolph, Volf and Dorino sat there quietly. Before they knew it, people had crowded around them and were listening in.

“Are you free tomorrow, Sir Randolph? Would you like to go and sample all the sweets with me?”

“I would be delighted to.”

“How about you, Sir Volf and Sir Dorino?”

“I don’t have a huge sweet tooth.”

“Yeah, I think I’d prefer the savory stuff too.” Volf was nibbling on some cheese while Dorino was munching on a skewer of meat—neither hated sweets, but they couldn’t pound them back like Kirk and Randolph were doing with the apple pie and pears.

“Would you allow me to invite others, Kirk?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“As Chairwoman Rossetti mentioned, would anyone else like to relieve their fatigue with some sweets?” Randolph raised his voice to ask the crowd, and a few people stepped forward.

“Would you mind me joining you two?”

“I’m feeling a little worse for wear, so I’d like to tag along too.”

“Um, I would like to go too...”

“Let’s go taste everything they have there!” In contrast to the sheepishness of the other men, Kirk responded with cheer.

Apparently, there were quite a few knights in the Beast Hunters who liked their sweets. They may have been using their fatigue as an excuse today, but in time, they would proudly enjoy what they enjoyed. News about this traveled quickly through the castle, and in the near future, Dahlia would be treated to dessert every time she set foot in the castle—and so would her worries about her waistline increase.

The Heated Low Table and the Salmon Hot Pot

In the workshop of the tower, Dahlia held in her hands a beautiful horn of pure white—one of the unicorn horns that Jean had given her. It was about twenty centimeters long, and though it felt much like ivory, it was much denser than that. The magic it emitted warmed up her fingertips.

She had been practicing immediately before this, channeling magic into a crystal beaker of powdered ocean worm. "*Simply* flow your magic evenly for three minutes"? *Pah!* She had failed a dozen times yesterday, and it was a chore to scrub out the beautiful blue sand with blobs of ooze every time. But today was different—in the two glasses that lay on her workbench was a uniformly goopy liquid with specks of gold throughout, and it was so beautiful, she wanted to use it to decorate the house. It hadn't separated even when left alone for some time, so Dahlia had felt safe considering it a success—she now felt comfortable enough to move on to the unicorn horn. She had heard that Jean's wife was suffering from a bad case of morning sickness, so if possible, Dahlia wanted to have the necklace completed today.

Unicorn horns had a shallow spiral pattern and a slight curve to them, but, like the ones in the magically sealed box, all of them were slightly different—they ranged from white to ivory in color and their sheen may be gold or silver. Dahlia took a pure white one, which was in the best condition and measured a touch more than three centimeters wide at the base. With a magical toolmaking saw, she cut out a puck about a centimeter thick and finished it into an oval. As she carved a lily of the valley design onto the face, she recalled that Jean had said he had given his wife a bouquet of them when he proposed. That same flower was carved into the dresser Dahlia's mother had left behind, and perhaps Carlo had given them to her as well when he proposed—everlasting and joyous love was the message behind the flowers.

"Not that it's any of my business." She shook her head as though those feelings would come tumbling out of her ears, and she returned her focus to the

engraving. Once the intaglio was done, she sprinkled on some polishing powder and carefully rubbed it in.

With the pure white pendant complete, she laid it on her palm and wrapped it with her ribbony, rainbow magic. Now that her magic had gone up to grade ten, Dahlia was finally able to enchant unicorn horn. She was enchanting it with hardening in hopes of making it virtually indestructible, but perhaps that was overkill—unicorn horn was a very hard material to begin with.

Afterward, Dahlia attached the pendant and a small, sparkling sunstone to a metal ring. She had gone to a jeweler to look for one that was closest in color to Jean's tawny eyes, and, perhaps because of the very troubled look on Dahlia's face, the employee there had asked her whether she was looking for something for her own engagement—a suggestion Dahlia had vehemently denied. Fortunately, there had been a beautiful sunstone close to the shade she wanted, but from now on, she would avoid setting foot in that store. Dahlia threaded a thin gold chain through the pendant and sunstone and gently tucked it inside a box. The pure white and the orange reflecting in the light were rather beautiful to behold.

Though the necklace had now been completed, Dahlia found herself with magic and time to spare. All her tools were on the table anyway, so she brought out the unicorn horn she had received from Ireneo; this example was pure white with a slight golden sheen. Two-thirds had been used for Irma's bracelet, and the remaining segment could be fashioned into another necklace, but this time it would be for Dahlia herself; the increased paperwork as of late had made her shoulders stiff. She cut off a puck from the base and threaded a long silver chain through it.

"Pain relief... What about a cragsnake fang?" She retrieved a gray tooth from a magically sealed box and held it in her hand—like static electricity, the unique magic bit her finger from time to time. Cragsnake fangs had a property that numbed pain for a certain length of time, and Beast Hunters took powdered cragsnake heart prior to engaging in battles. Dahlia reckoned the fangs could be used as anesthesia for surgeries, but the power of healing magic and potions meant that its uses in daily life were limited. It seemed like it would be good for lesser ailments that didn't require healing magic, like headaches or

stomachaches, but medicine would be a better idea, to say nothing of its cost-effectiveness.

Yet although it was fairly pricey, the Order of Beast Hunters had readily bestowed the cragsnake fang upon her. As she struggled to come up with something she could give back to the knights, Volf, with a blank gaze, had explained that “a cragsnake blocked their path during their travels and Vice-Captain Griswald single-handedly slew it.” So long as humans like the Beast Hunters and Mr. and Mrs. Tasso existed, a monster’s life was difficult.

“Well, it’s better to be safe than sorry...” Now that she worked solo as a magical toolmaker, the danger of injury hung above her head. There was the chance that the pain could debilitate and prevent her from downing a potion or racing to the temple in a carriage, so warding herself with the cragsnake fang would give her many more options. Dahlia decided to make her necklace double-sided, so that the horn’s effect would be passive but the fang would activate only in an emergency.

The gray tooth was even harder than the unicorn horn; a saw wouldn’t cut it, and Dahlia used magic to shape it. She didn’t attach the two materials but hung them together instead. Fortunately, their magics did not clash. With the cragsnake fang on the outside and the unicorn horn on the inside, it made for a peculiar necklace.

One thing that she did have to think about was how to decorate the outer surface. The obvious choice was to etch a dahlia, but she wasn’t very excited by that idea. When she had chatted in the past with Irma about how nobility from the rank of viscount and above had coats of arms, Irma had insisted that Dahlia’s would be a slime—also something she did not want to use.

In the end, she decided on a guard dog as a symbol of protection. Specifically, she engraved the silhouette of a nightdog on the cragsnake fang. It wasn’t particularly feminine, but it looked pretty cool, if she did say so herself; it shouldn’t pose any problems either, as she planned on mounting it on a long chain and tucking it.

As she was adjusting the length of the chain, the gate bell rang. Waiting outside was a delivery carriage; the clothes from her shopping trip with Lucia

had arrived. Although she'd purchased only a handful of pieces, it had been the most money Dahlia had ever spent on winter clothes. Included with this delivery was the mahogany coat that her former classmate had recommended for her. She brought all her new clothes up to the third floor and hung them in her closet. She also meant to put her new shoes on the rack by the entrance, though when she took them out of the thick card stock, she couldn't help trying them on.

After having tea with Randolph that day, Dahlia had stopped in her tracks in front of a shop window. On display were these high heels the same color as her hair and with ribbons affixed to the backs—somewhat of a rare style in this world. Dahlia had never thought she would wear red shoes, but she had been simply entranced by just how precious these pumps were, and she'd dispelled her concerns that they may have been too tall or that she didn't have any clothes to match the red. After all, it was she herself who had told Randolph that one should embrace the things that one liked, and so Dahlia had impulse bought a pair of shoes for the first time.

The shoes, now in her hands, reaffirmed her love for their design. But as she caressed the soft leather while looking at the heels again, her brows knitted—this would be her first time wearing seven-centimeter heels in this life. Even though Lucia had no problem in ten-centimeter heels, these were very tall for Dahlia. She understood that comfortably walking around in stilettos was a matter of practice and that she needed to get used to them, or else she'd get terrible blisters on her feet. That would be just unfortunate, since she liked these shoes so much, so she decided she may as well get started today.

"Whoa..." When she stood up, it was apparent that her sight line had changed; she could now barely reach the top of the shelf without a step stool. *Who knows?* This might even be quite handy. Dahlia slowly took a few steps, but as the shoe store had fitted the heels to her feet, they were easy and painless to walk in. However, there were five flights of stairs to the first floor, and she went down gingerly—she still needed more practice. As she was about to change back into her regular shoes, the doorbell rang this time, so she opened the door. "Volf?"

"Sorry for dropping in on you. We came home from the expedition a day

early, so I thought I might give this to you now." In his hands was a bag filled with ice, buried inside of which was a chunk of meat.

"Is this meat?"

"Yeah, it's longicollis thigh. It's a little tough, but it's got good flavor to it. You could roast it or turn it into soup—" Volf curiously eyed Dahlia. "Hm? Dahlia?"

As different as she was for him, he looked different from her perspective as well. Volf was rather tall, but right now, Dahlia didn't need to crane her neck as much to make eye contact with him. "Oh, um, I bought new shoes and I was trying them out. They're a little taller than what I usually wear." Dahlia then walked to the stool where she'd left her usual shoes; she made sure to walk as perfectly as she could, though she didn't want him to notice how hard she was trying.

"They're gorgeous. The red fits you perfectly."

Dahlia had to fight her anxiety to keep from asking him if they weren't too flashy for her. She had bought them because she liked them, and she ought to let herself be happy when he complimented her. "Thank you!" she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"How was your expedition?"

"Our target was a longicollis this time; we only took a day, and only half of that time was spent breaking it down." The cut of longicollis thigh was large, and with the additional weight of the ice, it made for quite the hefty package, so Volf brought it up to the second floor for her.

"Shall I cook it for us tonight?"

"I had a lot on the trip, actually. It's tasty, so I wanted you to enjoy it too. And in a sense, you slew it."

"I did?" Dahlia figured Volf must've used the sköll bracelet to jump into the air and take it down.

He proved her assumption wrong. "I lent the Galeforce Blades to one of the younger knights with air magic, and he took it down in one shot. We went home

without a single scratch on any of us.”

“Oh, good, I’m glad to hear that.”

“Yeah, and we talked about whether we could get another set of Galeforce Blades made or even make a version around arrows.” Volf then proceeded to recount the day he’d had.

Dahlia felt a little bad for the longicollis, but the shortswords kept the knights safe, and that was most important. “I wouldn’t mind crafting another pair, but I think we ought to start with better shortswords for more effectiveness. If we do arrows instead, maybe a thicker mythril wire would be better.”

“Good thinking. Oh, and I’m also hoping that I can keep them with me.”

“Of course; they’re yours to begin with, Volf.”

“Thank you.”

Dahlia felt it was almost strange that he was thanking her. She looked up at him and saw the delight in his golden eyes. Even though it could do little but produce a trickle of water and keep itself sharp, Volf had treasured the Lamenting Blade and brought it home with him. He must’ve wanted to keep the Galeforce Blades in his collection as well.

“After I draft the specification documents for the shortswords, could you have a magical toolmaker or a mage with lots of magic see if they could come up with any improvements? They might be able to make them even more powerful for you,” Dahlia said. “By the way, what materials are the castle’s titanbows made of?”

“I’ve been told it’s wyvern bone, and the bowstrings are made of baphomet and bicorn hair.”

“In that case, I don’t think I have enough magic to do the enchantment. Also, it might be bad if anyone finds out that I was the one who crafted the magical swords...” Dahlia recalled what Ivano had said to her before, and Volf agreed.

“I’m planning to talk to my brother about that as well, though that would mean he and Master Jonas will know about it. Would that be all right with you?”

“Yes, that would be fine.” Guido cherished his little brother, and Jonas was their friend and retainer, so there shouldn’t be any problem.

“If the order could slay monsters from range with titanbows, us Scarlet Armors might just be out of a job.”

“But you’d be safe.” Though the Beast Hunters never seemed to have any trouble during their expeditions, Dahlia felt a little guilty that she was delighted by the idea of the Scarlet Armors becoming obsolete. “I assumed that you use ranged attacks and magic on your hunts, though?”

“It’s not like we don’t, but monsters tend to have high magic resistance. Besides, long-range and wide-area magic attacks are something only elite mages can cast. Strong air or water magic have a chance of destroying fields and crops, while fire magic might burn down forests and grassland, so we’re careful about when and where we deploy mages.”

“I’ve also heard that people with a lot of magic have a hard time controlling their output.”

In college, there had been a time when someone with powerful fire magic was trying to roast sweet potatoes but instead completely carbonized them. Someone who was adept with ice magic had been trying to chill some fruit juice in the summer but had encased the whole glass in ice, leaving Dahlia a little jealous. Lately, Marcella had been trying to create bricks, but all he could make were huge balls of stone—which might actually make for a modern, red brick-colored pickling weight. The greater one’s magic, the harder it was to control.

“It’s gotten a little chilly lately,” Volf commented.

“It’s almost November, after all.” She had the windows open to get some fresh air in, but the evening breeze was a little icy. Though it felt like summer had come early, winter seemed to be ahead of schedule as well. “Do you have any plans today, Volf?”

“No, I was just going to go home and rest.”

“I hate to be a bother, but could you help me with a bit of manual labor? I’ve been tinkering with a magical heating apparatus and it’s a little heavy for me to bring upstairs.”

“Of course. What kind of thing did you come up with?”

“Erm, it’s a heater that paralyzes you once you sit down.”

“Dahlia! What are you thinking, making something so treacherous?!” Volf was dead serious about halting her.

“It’s nothing dangerous! It’s just a low table with a fire and an air crystal.”

“Like a griddle? Or does it spit flames?”

That was beyond just heating—that would be cooking. And why would he imagine that she had created something as unsettling as a flamethrower? She had already grown out of the dryer. “Griddles aren’t tables, and anyway, those belong in professional kitchens. What I’ve made is something you can sit down in and warm up with.”

“It won’t spew fire?”

“No, it will not spew fire! Why would I want to scorch my legs or burn the house down?!”

“Oh. Right. Just kidding,” he answered as he averted his gaze.

Dahlia couldn’t believe she even had to convince him of this. But whatever—she got him to move the table from the workshop to the second floor.

“Could you help me move these?” In the corner of the workshop was a square wooden table with a removable top. The tabletop was rather thick and heavy, and Dahlia didn’t have the confidence that she could bring it upstairs without banging it against the walls.

“Sure thing. The second floor, right?” Volf grabbed both pieces together and trotted up the stairs, effortlessly as always. She watched him from behind for a moment but hurried up the stairs too when she caught herself staring.

On the second floor, Dahlia had Volf set down the table and its top to the side of the room, then move the loveseat all the way against the wall. The coffee table and armchair that had been in the living room went to the fourth-floor study. Meanwhile, Dahlia laid down a pair of large, fluffy sheepskin rugs; that should be more comfortable than the cold, bare floor. When Volf returned, she had him place the low table on the rugs, then she flipped on the switch at one of its feet.

Running on the inside of the table was magical circuitry, and depending on the setting of the connected pair of fire and air crystals, it could blow out hot or warm air—the same mechanism as the dryer. After Dahlia made sure that it was operating properly, she spread two thick duvets over the low table and sandwiched them with the tabletop. Volf looked at the finished product in astonishment.

“This is called the heated low table. It should really have a square blanket instead, but I couldn’t get one in time,” Dahlia explained. “Is it a little strange?”

“No, but I’m curious—I’ve never seen a heater that you use by sitting inside it.”

It looked a little sloppy, as it had comforters instead of a blanket, but it was close enough to the kotatsu of Japan. In fact, hers might be even better: since it used magic crystals instead of electricity, it was cordless.

“I could make a tall version with chairs as well, but I thought it might be a little cozier like this. Why don’t you give it a shot? Take off your shoes, sit on the rug, and stick your legs in.” She handed him a wide but thin cushion.

He did as she instructed and sat across from her. “The low table might warm

you up quicker, since you can stretch your legs out like this, but, I dunno, it could be a little hotter? You said it paralyzes you once you sit down; is it because your legs go numb?”

“Why don’t you relax for a while longer, then tell me what you think?”

In Ordine, fireplaces and space heaters powered by fire crystals were common, and they were much hotter than Dahlia’s creation. However, the heated low table’s circuitry was designed to reject magic when it reached a certain temperature to prevent low-temperature burns. Furthermore, it was designed to turn off after four hours of continuous use. As for the paralyzing powers of the heated low table, they would show themselves after Volf had spent some time inside.

“I want to give it an extended test run, so would you like to join me for dinner, Volf? It’ll just be a salmon hot pot.”

“Thanks. I’m always imposing on you, but today, I really did mean to just hand you the longicollis and then go home.”

“You already helped me out with setting up the heated low table, and I’d like to ask you to write a report afterward too.”

“It’d be my pleasure.”

Reminded of the reports on the toe socks and insoles, Dahlia giggled to herself. “I don’t need five pages of parchment this time, though.” Volf joined her in the giggling.

The two of them moved to the kitchen, where they boiled two pots of water and seasoned the sliced salmon with some salt. The salmon in Ordine had quite a strong flavor and, more often than not, was somewhat fishy, so it was necessary to prep it with a thorough salting and scalding. Meanwhile, Volf, showing his experience, deftly cut the napa cabbage, mushrooms, leek, and other vegetables into bite-size pieces.

Once the salmon had been scalded with boiling water, Dahlia brought another pot of water to simmer. The hot pot was only one half of the meal; the other half was the medium-dry estervino. She lowered the tipple, which had been

decanted in a spouted porcelain serving bowl, into the hot water.

Volf looked on, mesmerized. “Oh, you’re heating the estervino. What was that called again? ‘Caldo’?” It was a bit of a departure from their usual chilled estervino, after all.

“That’s right. I thought it’d be nice to have it warm, since it’s such a brisk autumn night.” She was hoping a tepid forty degrees would make the estervino a good match for the food, but there was only one way to find out for sure.

With the hot pot ready and the tin cups ready, Dahlia brought everything to the heated low table in the living room. The steaming salmon and vegetables went on the compact magical stove at the center of the table, accompanied by mustard-dressed steamed chicken she already had on hand and some quick pickles.

The only thing left to do was to fill the tin cups from the porcelain bowl. “Some estervino?” Dahlia asked.

“Please.” The liquid pouring from the spouted bowl to the silvery cups looked as though it had a slight viscosity to it. Just as she was about to pour her own, Volf, like it was the obvious thing to do, gently took the serving bowl from her hands and filled her cup. Though they did the same with wine instead of estervino, there was something about this ritual that made her tense up ever so slightly.

“To our successful expedition—and to the future success of the heated low table. Cheers.”

“Um, to the hot pot turning out okay. Cheers.” Dahlia threw a bit of a curveball, but neither of them paid it any mind and simply brought their vessels to their lips. The slightly cloudy estervino neither warmed nor chilled the tongue; instead, its flavor burst forth onto the palate. Billed as medium-dry, it was closer to the former than it was to the latter. It went down smoothly, and the ricey sweetness delighted the olfactory senses as the estervino heat warmed up her body from the core. The aftertaste begged Dahlia to take another sip.

“You can really taste it when it’s warmed up...” Volf said with a sigh, staring at his emptied cup.

As she poured him more estervino, she had him start on the deep bowl she'd filled for him from the salmon hot pot. "It should have enough salt, but feel free to add grated ginger or chilies as you like." Dahlia would have loved to add some miso, but the fermented soybean paste was nowhere to be found in the capital; she had to make do with salt and a pat of butter. If the flavor wasn't quite right or if the fish was still a little funky, there were at least the ginger and chilies to make up for it.

"All right, I'll dig in, then." Volf took his pair of chopsticks—a utensil which he now had a great grasp on—and started with a piece of salmon. It must've been hotter than he'd expected, as he huffed and puffed before slowly relishing the morsel.

The fish should've been simmered to tender perfection; Dahlia wanted to tell him he didn't need to give it such a thorough chewing. But he seemed to be savoring it, so she decided to let him be. After ladling some of the hot pot into her own bowl, she started with the salmon, and it flaked apart on her tongue and left no fishiness behind. She was glad she had pulled out all the pin bones, as now, she could just focus on her food without any fuss. Dahlia tasted the mushrooms and napa too; the vegetables had soaked up all the savoriness from the salmon. She finished with the broth, and its richness and complexity made her wonder if she hadn't accidentally saved the best for last.

On the other side of the table, Volf narrowed his eyes, looking almost sorrowful. "Where did this flavor come from?" he said to his emptied bowl in a contemplative tone.

"Is something the matter, Volf?"

"It's just that they're all ingredients I'm familiar with, but when put together like this, they're inexplicably delicious. Was there some kind of secret or trick to the hot pot?"

"None at all. I mean, you were right there beside me as I prepared it, weren't you? It's as simple as can be—everything simmered together in a pot. There was nothing special about the seasoning either."

"I don't get it..."

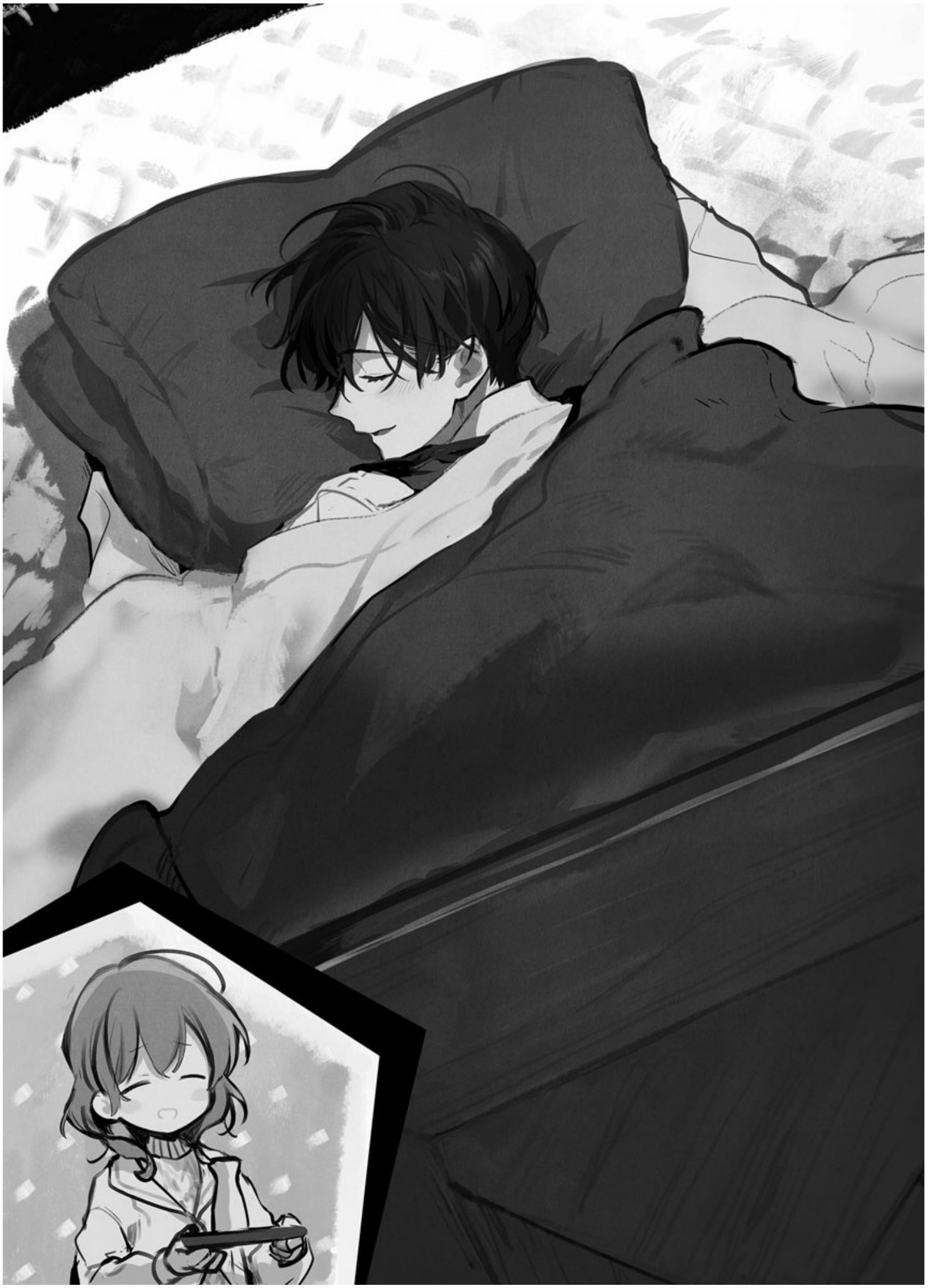
There was nothing *to* get, so Dahlia helped Volf to an extra large serving, and

the two made warm conversation as they ate.

As they finished the hot pot, the serving bowl and cups were emptied as well. “I’ll go prepare more caldo,” Dahlia said. “You must be tired from your expedition; feel free to lie down.”

“I know it’s not very polite, but I think I’ll do that.” Volf took Dahlia up on her offer and splayed out. The expedition yesterday, this afternoon’s drinking, and tonight’s hot pot and caldo made the heated low table and fluffy sheepskin rugs perfectly cozy in this slightly cool room. His eyelids were so heavy, he couldn’t keep them up.

When Dahlia returned with a new serving of caldo, the black-haired youth had already curled up into a ball and closed his eyes. He had even folded up the thin cushion into a makeshift pillow and pulled the duvet up to his collar. She could but smile to herself—with no instruction from her, he had already figured out how to fully enjoy her invention.



Volf was apparently still awake, if just barely. He slowly revealed his tired golden eyes and looked straight at her. “I’m in heaven...”

He sounded almost sad and empty, and Dahlia’s first thought was to try to stop that. “Please don’t die here.”

When she placed the caldo on the low table, Volf rustled around as he tried but failed to get up. He snuggled up against the folded cushion and heaved a heavy sigh. “Ah, I get it now. I’m hopeless; I really can’t move.”

“Just like I said, it paralyzes you, doesn’t it?”

“It’s not that I simply can’t move, but I don’t *want* to move. What kind of contraption is this ‘Table of Degeneracy’?”

The cruel and ill-omened name was completely unnecessary. “Its name is the ‘heated low table.’”

“When did you come up with this?”

“The year before last. My original was a personal-size prototype, but my father found that it was impossible to leave when he tested it. He even tried to move around with the table on his back, like some sort of turtle. That’s when I knew I had to take it apart. I meant to make a larger one for the living room the winter after that one.”

“Oh...”

But before that could happen, her father had suddenly passed away in the summer, and life has been a little hectic ever since. Every time she had thought about making the table, her motivation had drained away when she was reminded of him. “I wanted to have it done earlier in the year to get them out the door this winter, but it’s just been so busy lately.”

She had thought about it during the tail end of summer, but it had quickly disappeared from her mind with the magical toolmaking lessons, the slime farm visit, Irma’s bracelet, and the new employees. The next time she had been reminded of the heated low table was when the breeze had already become chilly—that day she and Volf had visited the weapons shop. It still stung Dahlia when she recalled memories of her father, but she had managed to put them

aside and build the table.

“So the table itself is a magical tool? Must be expensive.”

“On the contrary, it costs a low table and two dryers to make, and the process is simple as well. In fact, would you like to bring one back to the barracks?”

“I would. I really would. But I can imagine the ruckus when people find out about it. My room would no longer be mine, if I could fit it inside at all.”

“How about your room at home, then?”

“If it did that, I wouldn’t ever be able to return to the barracks. Heck, I might not even be able to leave today. No! I can’t lose to a dang table!” Volf mustered all he had to sit upright, then poured Dahlia some estervino. “If it doesn’t take much time to build one, Dahlia, why don’t you rush a few out and sell them? It’ll get even colder from here on out, and I think they’ll sell like hotcakes.”

“That’s not a bad idea. I’ll get the specifications and blueprints drafted up for Ivano tomorrow and see what he thinks. Oh, maybe Marcella and Mena should have a look as well.”

“Better yet, have them try it out for themselves. It’ll be much quicker once they all lose their humanity.”

“Hey.” It didn’t sound good when he put it like that, but he had a point—once he’d stuck his legs under the heated low table, it hadn’t taken Volf long before he understood it. Firsthand experience spoke much louder than words. Besides, the switches on the leg seemed to be a bit of a pain to use, and Fermo would definitely have suggestions on how to improve it.

As ideas swirled in Dahlia’s head, Volf folded over the table, planting his fair cheek on the tabletop. “The Table of Degeneracy purloins all energy and willpower, and only the degenerate will understand.”

There was so much Dahlia wanted to say, but, at the very least, she needed him to stop calling it the “Table of Degeneracy” as if that were its official name.

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The next day, sighs filled the second-floor living room of the Green Tower.

“I understand why it’s called the Table of Degeneracy now...”

“It’s such a simple contraption, yet it is so powerful...”

“I’ve never tried them myself, but is this what getting hooked on illicit drugs is like?”

“I ain’t tried ’em either, but it’s gotta be close, right...?”

Unsettling words came from the men at the two low tables—Ivano and Fermo, and Mena and Marcella, respectively. They didn’t just have their legs under the table, they were resting their heads on folded cushions, embracing them, and even rolling around on the rugs. Dahlia and Volf sat in chairs next to the tables and watched things develop.

This had begun last night. Volf had brought up a good point, saying that the rest of the Rossetti Trading Company ought to try the heated low table for themselves to truly understand it. And as Dahlia also wanted honest feedback, she had invited everyone over for lunch today. Furthermore, as she’d said that she would like to probe Fermo for suggestions, Ivano had brought him along as well. While waiting for her guests to arrive, Dahlia had crafted a second heated low table. She had also whipped up a simple hot pot from the seafood and vegetables Volf had brought along with some ingredients she had on hand and served it with half a glass of estervino. Once they filled their bellies, the true test of the heated low table would begin.

“There’s somethin’ Esterland-like about a low table on a rug.”

“This the Table of Degeneracy? It blows warm air underneath, right?” asked Fermo.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Looks like nothing more than a table with a blanket on it, if ya ask me,” said Fermo. “D’you give it some sort of enchantment to make it cause hallucinations or put you to sleep, what with it being called the Table of Degeneracy?”

“No, nothing like that. It is simply a heating device. And its name is not the Table of Degeneracy—it is the heated low table.”

“It certainly warms up your hands and feet, but it isn’t very hot...”

“No, this is plenty warm. Stay under there for an hour and you’ll understand the true power of the Table of Degeneracy!” Sell it as Volf might, the four of them, with their legs under the table, didn’t seem very convinced yet. Nevertheless, thus began the luncheon.

The six of them chatted about everything personal and professional while the seafood and vegetable hot pots bubbled on the compact magical stoves, one atop the heated low tables and another on the table where Volf and Dahlia were sitting. She was afraid that just the hot pot wouldn’t be enough to keep the men filled up, and so she brought out some steamed chicken and beans as well. Her guests praised the meal and hankered for more drink, but they didn’t have anything to say about the heated low table yet.

After the meal, though, Ivano was the first to fall onto the rug. “Oh, that was so good; I couldn’t stop myself...”

“Yeah, you got that right. Curious how a heater can make you need a drink, though...” said Fermo, placing his arms behind his back and propping himself up.

Marcella had his elbows on top of the other table as he conversed with Mena, who had a warm smile on his face as he snuggled into the duvet.

Ten minutes later, everyone was crumpled around the heated low tables. There was only so much space, yet nobody bothered to stand up or move to the sofa. No one even bothered to sip on the glasses of iced sparkling water that Dahlia had brought out.

The unsettling words were how things were playing out at the present time.

The first to touch his glass of sparkling water was Volf. “I’m glad you all understand the degeneracy,” he said to the rest of the men.

Just as Dahlia was about to chastise him for not calling it by the right name even once today, Fermo twisted his neck to the side and looked their way. “Oh, I totally get it now. I thought this was barely warm enough, but I’m glad it doesn’t get too hot.”

“Yes, I made sure it didn’t exceed a certain temperature, and I also made it so

that it would turn itself down to the lowest setting, then completely off after a certain length of time; I don't want it to cause any burns or fires."

"Burns and fires? Mm, yes, we ought to warn the user about that in the manual, just in case." Ivano took a notepad out of his pocket and began scribbling. There were zero signs that he was thinking about getting up from the ground; his trousers would undoubtedly be all rumpled if they had been starched.

"I don't think I would ever want to leave this table. In fact, I might just fall asleep here," mumbled Mena, half of his head covered up by the duvet.

"No kiddin'. If people had these at home, all the restaurants and taverns would close up shop."

Dahlia laughed at what Marcella—who was using his arm as a pillow—said. The different ways each of them loosened up and relaxed really showed their personalities too. "In that case, the establishments could set up rooms with floor seating and heated low tables."

"Would you mind if I suggested that to the assistant manager at the Black Cauldron, Dahlia? He was talking about how to attract customers."

"By all means. How relaxing it would be to sit and drink under a heated low table at a restaurant."

"Imagine the damage it'd do to their turnover rate."

"They can make reservations based on time slots, and the restaurant can charge extra for extensions," countered Ivano. He had his face in his notepad. "We can have the Black Cauldron advertise for us too, since they get a lot of traffic, especially knights. Maybe give them a slight discount for allowing us to stamp the company name on the tabletops."

Mena poked his head out of the duvet. "We could also go the other way and boost takeout sales. Perhaps something that could be heated up with compact magical stoves, like the hot pots we just had? I think a one-or two-portion meal kit would sell wonders, especially for people who get home late from work and wouldn't want to go out to eat."

"Mena, that's a great idea! Let's get the guild to connect us with some

establishments. We can definitely sell Tables of Degeneracy and compact magical stove sets, and we could also push the stove and meal sets as a winter convenience. That way, the establishments could pay *us* for advertising for them."

"Ivano's blue eyes turned to gold..."

Dahlia was having lots of fun with the brainstorming, except that she had a feeling that no one other than her had actually called it the heated low table; at this rate, the "Table of Degeneracy" was going to cement itself as the proper name. "I ask everyone to remember that it's not called the Table of Degeneracy but the heated low table."

Her curtness brought everyone to embarrassment; Volf, the one who had given birth to such a slanderous name, couldn't bear to look Dahlia in the eye.

"I didn't, uh, mean anything by that..."

"Yeah, sorry..."

The room fell deathly still until an ice cube clinked in a glass, which lit up Dahlia's light bulb. "Oh! If we add an ice crystal to it, then it could be used to cool in the summer as well! We can call it the cooled low table!"

"Absolutely not, chairwoman!" said Ivano. Apparently, what she had thought was ingenuity was not so. "We ought to bring it to market as is, since we don't have much time. We can register the cooling version now, then sell it as an improved version next year; those who are well to do would be able to buy the newer model anyway!"

"It's not like you're wrong, and I'm sure it'll sell regardless..."

"You really are blackhearted, Ivano."

"Awfully kind words unto a merchant! Nothing could be better than being in the black!" the navy-eyed man said with much gusto, making everyone else wince.

"I don't know," Dahlia said, "wouldn't that be unfair to the people who bought it at launch? Next year's model would have more features than this year's—"

“I believe you are viewing it the wrong way. It will take us some time to identify points to improve in our product, and we can implement those changes in next year’s model. Besides, it also takes time to come up with new features, and so we wouldn’t be able to make it in time for this winter’s model. The more time we take, the fewer smiles we’ll bring to the people.”

“That’s true, I’d want one as soon as possible...” added Volf.

“With one of these, folks with joint pain can forget it’s even winter,” said Fermo.

Dahlia decided to submit to the three voices. “Very well. In that case, I’d like to give a discount to customers who decide to upgrade to the cooling unit next year so that it’s fair for them as well.”

“Of course, chairwoman! It would be much cheaper for them to just upgrade the unit too!” exclaimed Ivano. “I believe we have enough sorted to bring this forward to the Merchants’ Guild. As for the blanket, throw rug, and thin foldable cushions for the Table of Degeneracy, we can get the Tailors’ Guild to start on them right away. The Merchants’ could do it as well, but since there’s so much fabric involved, going through the Tailors’ would be quicker.”

“Although people could use duvets as well, it’d be good to have blankets we can start mass-producing at the same time as the tables. Sewing them will take time, however.”

“If we’re not careful, the capital might just sell out of duvets,” Mena said.

Although he seemed to be saying it in jest, it still made Dahlia think. Comforters or proprietary blankets were fine and all, but it would be a chore to bring them to a launderer, never mind washing and drying them at home in the winter. “I think fabric covers for the blanket, throw rug, and cushions would make cleaning easier. Having spare covers would be very convenient in case of spills, and different designs and colors could make it a better fit with all styles of rooms. Lucia would know best about this. Preferably, all the material would be less-flammable as well.”

“Understood, chairwoman. I think Mr. Forto and Ms. Lucia would be very happy to take on this task,” Ivano said while jotting down notes.

Sitting beside him, Fermo muttered under his breath, “They’ll be so happy, they might weep...”

“Chairwoman, if the tables are rather simple to produce, may I please get two as soon as possible? I would like to bring one each to Madam Gabriella and Mr. Forto,” Ivano continued. “Marcella and Mena, could you two get a carriage and go purchase the tables?”

“Yes, vice-chairman. Two low tables with removable tabletops around the same size as these ones?”

“Purchase as many of them as they have in stock, as I’m sure everyone here would like one for themselves. Or rather, is there anyone who would not like one?”

Dahlia was very happy that Ivano’s question was met with silence—everybody seemed to love her magical tool. The heated low tables were simple to make as well, as they were more or less dryers under the hood. If she could get someone to help her, they could make enough for everyone in this room in half a day.

And just as she was thinking that, Fermo said, “I’m sure it won’t be easy makin’ all of ’em by yerself, Ms. Dahlia. Not sure how much I can help with magical tools, but my afternoon’s free, and I want to lend you a hand.”

“Thank you, Fermo. I’ll work on the magical circuitry, and I’m sure you can handle everything else.”

“Oh, good to hear, Fermo! You must’ve had so much time on your hands, today being your day off.”

“You said you’d buy me a drink afterward, Ivano? Pfft. I’m sure you saw all this comin’.”

“Just a fortunate coincidence. And I *will* buy you that drink—after today’s work, that is.”

“Sorry, Mr. Fermo. Allow me to treat you,” said Dahlia. For her to buy a drink would be nothing compared to Fermo giving up his precious day off.

“I can’t let you do that. You’ve done so much for me already, and you even made us lunch today,” he said, shaking his head hard. “But if you feel like you

must, then maybe I can have a Table of Degeneracy sooner than later."

"Oh, you'll be able to bring one home today."

"You've really fallen in love with it, haven't you, Fermo?" Ivano said.

"Yeah, I suppose I have. See, my Barbara's always complainin' about how it's so cold, so I want one for her." Fermo looked a little embarrassed to say it aloud, but his love for his wife was well understood by everyone.

"All right, why don't we think of a tagline while we enjoy the table?"

"How about 'The heated low table that cuts down on your heating bills'? The fire and air crystals shouldn't cost too much."

"That's not a bad idea," Dahlia said. "Heating a whole room does cost quite a bit."

"Not sure how good this is, but how about 'The heater that brings everyone together'? We could make a large model that everyone can gather under."

"Hmm..."

"If that's the case, then these small ones are perfect for two—'The low table that improves relationships.' Heats things up between people if they're too icy, you know?"

It didn't sit too well with Mena, though. "Vice-chairman, as someone who is single, that's far too frigid..."

"We could market it as somethin' that brings couples together, then. 'Want to come over to my place and check out my heated low table?' is a pretty good excuse, methinks."

Hold on. That was a line to hit on someone, hardly sales copy at all! You wouldn't need a heated low table for that.

"Spoken like a man who picked up his wife off the street, Fermo."

"Ivano! I told you not to bring that up again!"

"Wow, Mr. Fermo, teach me your ways," said Mena with a big smile, but Fermo grimaced as he brushed him off. Dahlia, knowing that it was a true story, chose not to say anything.

“I’ll wager some akvavit that the artisans making the tables are going to be up to their necks this winter.”

“I’ll wager some akvavit that the artisans workin’ on the blankets and throws won’t be gettin’ any days off this winter.”

Though they didn’t shake on it, Volf and Marcella bet potato spirits on some terrible things happening. It wasn’t as though magical tools—or consumer electronics, as Dahlia would have called them in her previous world—caught on that quickly anyway.

“Ms. Dahlia, have you thought on a price? I don’t think we would have any trouble moving them at fifty or sixty percent profit.”

“That would be fine for nobles, but minimize our margins for the commoner market.”

“Very well.”

It was shocking that Ivano so readily accepted her proposal. “Are you sure that would be fine?”

“Yes, chairwoman. If it is your wish, then so be it. We can make our money through the nobility with fancy decorations and premium materials.”

This talk about nobles got Dahlia thinking. It would be difficult for a noblewoman wearing a dress to sit on the floor, noblemen wouldn’t want to wrinkle their pants, and knights would have a tough time removing their tall boots. It would also be impractical if people had to change to enjoy her magical tool. “Instead of a low table, perhaps a regular-height ‘heated table’ would be better suited to the nobility. It would be difficult for them to sit on the floor, and commoners with mobility issues may have a better time with a regular table as well.”

“In that case, it would be good for dining establishments to have that choice as well. If they would like a higher turnover, the heated table would be the better option. If they would like customers to relax, then the original Table of Degeneracy would be better.” For whatever reason, everybody fell silent when Volf spoke. Dahlia found Ivano narrowing his navy eyes and Fermo rubbing his glabella.

The latter said, “Ms. Dahlia, you should get that heated table’s specs and blueprint drafted right now. We can amend them later if need be.”

“The mechanism would be identical, but the strength with which it pumps out air might need adjusting. The same registration document should cover both of them, I believe.”

“Even if they’re similar, they’re different from the hair dryer or the shoe dryer. It’d be good insurance if you registered them separately.”

“Oh, that’s a good point. Then why don’t we simply try our hand at the heated table while we’re at it with the low tables?”

“Sure thing. *Simple*. Right.”

Everybody then peeled themselves off the ground and out from under the heated low table and moved to the workshop on the first floor. Dahlia brought out the specification document and the blueprints for the heated low table and a test circuit to illustrate how everything worked. Fermo was the only one who understood everything at first glance, but when Dahlia explained that the space between the table and the blanket was where the detuned dryer would expel warm air, it clicked for everyone else. It truly wasn’t a particularly complicated design.

“Does anyone have any questions or comments?” she asked.

“I know it doesn’t get too hot, but it does use a fire crystal,” said Fermo. “It’d be safer to go with materials that can handle high temperatures. Even better if we could enchant them with heat resistance too.”

“Wouldn’t it be all right to just reinforce the part that holds the fire crystal? Make it stronger, and even big guys wouldn’t accidentally kick it broken.”

“Hm.”

Dahlia added the suggestions to the diagram in red ink. “I’m somewhat concerned about this part here. Right now, the switches are on one of the legs, but they become inaccessible once there is a blanket draped over the table.”

“Connect it on the outside, then. Better yet, put the switches on a separate unit and stand so that they’re easy to see and won’t be stepped on.” Fermo’s

suggestion was for a wired remote control, which would indeed make it easier to operate. “For restaurants, though, maybe it’d be better to hide everything, so that the customers can’t accidentally switch it off or mess around with it.”

“For domestic use, it might be better to place the controls on the leg so that children can’t play around with them.”

“If it’s a regular table, would it be warm enough if the heat source were that far away?” Volf asked.

Fermo immediately responded, saying, “Place the unit on the flooring and have the warm air blow upwards. A heavier blanket should be able to trap the heat in.” That should keep feet warm too.

“How big should the regular-height table be?”

“For two, for four, and for six should fit almost everyone, but I’ll ask the woodworkers when we get to mass production. We’ll see what their bestsellers are and base it off their numbers.”

Dahlia was so glad to have Fermo’s insight; she had never even considered this point. Different products for different use cases was the right way to go. She took down notes on the specification document for the heated low table and began writing the one for the regular table.

“All right, chairwoman. We’ll keep bringing you tables and you keep enchanting them. I’ll get a production line going in the meantime.”

“Thank you very much, Ivano.” A real businessman and former guildmember of the Merchants’ like him was ever-reliable. Dahlia could leave everything related to mass production and distribution to him while she focused on the crafting and improvements. *I have Fermo to consult, and I have to make my magical tool safe*, she thought as she clenched her right hand into a fist. Seeing her so enthusiastic put Volf, sitting beside her, in a good mood too.

Ivano, now at a distance from the two of them, continued to speak, but in hushed tones. “I’ll speak to Madam Gabriella, get a gag order in place, and get woodworkers who can build us some tables. I know you’re busy and not a furniture specialist, Fermo, but could we get your help wherever we can? The Gandolfi Company will be handsomely rewarded.”

“Count on it. I have some furniture guys who I go drinkin’ with, so I’ll speak to them too.”

“Marcella, Mena, buy up whatever tall or low tables you find that would fit our needs. I have the requirements written here, so spend all available funds and send them to the guildhall. I’ll be begging Madam Gabriella for the warehouse space for them right away, then I’ll head to Mr. Forto’s directly after.”

“‘Begging’? Oh, you’re breaking my heart, Ivano.”

“Good luck.”

As she threw together the documents, Dahlia stood up from her seat. “Before the tables get here, let’s assemble as many heater units and as much of their circuitry as we can.” She pulled her stash of air crystals from a shelf and placed them on a wooden dish.

Not needing to be instructed, Volf did likewise with the fire crystals. “I think I like the Table of Degeneracy better, and I really want one in the barracks, but I don’t know if I have the space for it; I’ve got all the furniture there already,” he whined.

If space was so limited, then a stand-alone heating unit would be better for him. “I could make you a miniature version with small crystals instead. You could tuck that into your bed and laze there instead.”

“Can you really make one that small? If so, I’ll be able to fit it in my room.”

“Maybe I’ll give it a weaker setting so you can use it while you’re sleeping too. I’ll make one while I’m at it with the other tables, so you should be able to bring it home—er, what’s wrong, Volf?”

His golden eyes looked terribly troubled and stared through her. “Look behind you, Dahlia.”

Everyone was in full swing. Mena was readying pen and paper for her to draft the new specification documents and blueprints. Fermo pulled out the chair that she had been sitting on and sat on another beside that one. The vice-chairman Ivano turned to Dahlia with a big smile. “Chairwoman, let’s get that down in ink too.”

“Guildmaster, vice-guildmaster! Ivano of the Rossetti Trading Company has come to beg!” A little past tea time, Ivano slid into the office of Merchants’ guildmaster. Ivano normally addressed them as Mr. Leone and Madam Gabriella, respectively; calling them by their titles was deliberate. It would ordinarily be impossible to make a same-day appointment with the guildmaster, but the three keywords of “new magical tool,” “meeting,” and “posthaste” in the letter from the Rossetti Company had proven to be very effective.

With grimacing smiles, the two of them received their guest. “Have you been drinking, Ivano?” the vice-guildmaster asked.

“Yes, half a glass or so. But anyway, may I borrow some space to introduce to you our new magical tool?”

“Go ahead,” responded the guildmaster.

Leone’s office was quite large; when he gave his permission, Ivano and a guild clerk brought in and set up a heated low table. Time was of the essence, so Dahlia had had Ivano bring one of the tables from her living room—much to the chagrin of Marcella and Mena, who had been lounging underneath it. Ivano laid a thick quilt on the office’s carpet, atop which went the heated low table with two thick blankets between the frame and the tabletop. It had been put together in haste, so he could only hope the Jeddas could overlook the mismatching aesthetics. “This is a prototype of our new heated low table. Could I please have you remove your shoes before entering it?”

“Do tell what your plan is.” Leone shot a terribly distrustful glare at Ivano.

“It is a device that circulates heated air to warm your body from the feet upward.”

“I see. It looks like it would take some time to heat up, though,” Gabriella said.

“For now, just tuck yourself in and have a snack. I shall put on some tea for you,” suggested Ivano. After setting out a basket of thin-skinned oranges and napkins, Ivano steeped a pot of Esterland green tea—Dahlia’s recommendation. The dainty combination, fit for a tea house, must’ve been from a cookbook somewhere; from her taste in liquor to food, she seemed to be quite the

Esterland-phile. Ivano returned with the tea on a tray and served it, and then the Jeddas entered the table and started on the fruit. Ivano sat under the table too. “These are the specifications and blueprint. Tentatively, we are planning to bring it onto market in a few days.”

Gabriella, sitting on the other side of the table, traded him the specification document for some oranges. Meanwhile, Leone, sitting on Ivano’s side, perused the blueprints as he sipped on his tea.

The vice-guildmaster said, “This is quite promising. The table is warm enough to be relaxing but not so much so that there would be a danger of being burned.”

“Not bad at all,” added the guildmaster.

With cups of tea in hand, the Jeddas looked very satisfied, though they were still maintaining proper posture. *Maybe nobility won’t succumb to the heated low table—the Table of Degeneracy—as we did*, Ivano thought fearfully. It had been so effective at the Green Tower; perhaps a bit more time would do the trick.

“Its production would require warehouse space and woodworkers to build—” Ivano proceeded to consult the Jeddas on the project, though it was a little odd to do so while the three of them soaked in the warmth from the table.

When she finished listening, Gabriella softly sighed. “Has Dahlia thought about further developments as well?”

“Yes, she has. She prepared the heated low table first, and in an hour, she came up with many iterations.” The cooled low table, the regular-height heated table, and the miniaturized version to tuck inside a bed came next; the Goddess of Lucre’s green eyes had sparkled as brilliant ideas burst forth from her imagination.

“There is much I would like to say, but I can secure warehouse space for you,” Gabriella said.

Leone added, “The guild will send out a request for woodworkers and bind them to secrecy under my name.”

“Thank you very much for your support,” said Ivano.

“I foresee new iterations waiting for you at the tower.” Though Leone muttered that in a joking manner, Ivano knew it was likely the truth.

Before Ivano knew it, the Jeddas had sunk deeper into the heated low table. He cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Leone, when it comes time to sell the heated table and low table to the noble market, I am hoping to give priority to the Merchants’ Guild—no, to Viscounty Jedda.”

“What are your intentions?” Straightforward—just how Ivano liked it.

“I am hoping that you will pull your informants from The Rossetti Trading Company—or rather, our chairwoman, employees, and the people around them.”

“Are you telling me to back off from your company?”

“No, not at all. Let either Ms. Dahlia or myself know and we can offer you anything you wish to know. If you wish to place someone in our company, I could make you a recommendation too. A spy’s service comes at a high cost, after all.”

Gabriella turned her navy eyes on Ivano, gauging his reaction. “Cunning.”

“Thank you for the kind words,” he replied. “I ask that you use the funds you’ll save on espionage to invest into Fermo—the Gandolfi Company, and I ask that you also be its guarantor.”

“Fine. Now tell me what else—what it is you are truly after.” Leone’s candor really did wonders to speed things along, and Ivano really did have an ultimate request.

“I’m really not sure whether it is all right to ask this of you, but I ask as a mentee that you revert the price of white silk to its original level for Mr. Forto.” His words froze up the Jeddas.

In the past, the Tailors’ guildmaster Forto had fed Ivano herbed wine under the guise of noble custom, and Ivano had learned a very valuable lesson from drinking the truth serum. Forto had then given him an expensive protective ring on the spot and had warned him to be guarded when dealing with nobility. Since then, Forto had been Ivano’s mentor in business with nobles. However, Leone and Gabriella had taken the herbed wine incident as a slight to Ivano—

their mentee as well—and raised prices on the Esterland white silk that the Jedda family controlled by twenty percent. It was a touching sentiment, but nobles at play were equally frightening.

"Ivano," Gabriella said, "might that be a request from Mr. Fortunato?"

"No. He has never mentioned it to me, not once." Forto was likely too prideful to say anything about it. Besides, the profits from the Rossetti Trading Company's zephyricloth undoubtedly more than made up for his losses on the silk, and he likely dismissed it as a necessary expense.

"Are you hoping to curry favor with Fortunato? Or to make business easier when it comes to the heated low table?" Leone asked.

"I hadn't thought about that. But no. It's to..."—Ivano hunted for the right word—"level the playing field with Mr. Forto, at least as much as possible."

"What do you mean?" Leone cast a doubtful look at Ivano, one that wasn't unwarranted. Forto was a viscount and a guildmaster, while Ivano was a commoner and a mere vice-chairman of a company—there *was* no level playing field to be had, and Ivano knew that much, having dipped a toe into the world of nobility after joining the Rossetti Company.

"What will you get out of being on an equal footing?"

"Well, with debts in the way, there is no way to have lighthearted scuffles with someone, right?"

"Ivano..." Gabriella called out his name in a rare moment of concern, something that had only happened when he first started working under her and pushed himself a little too hard.

"Very well. You will have your silk prices reverted. But do not make Gabriella worry for you like that. Just come to us if there is anything you need." Leone's words were those of a loving husband, but his dark brown eyes were those of a superior worrying for his subordinate; it was obvious he *still* thought of himself as Ivano's boss.

"I really appreciate it."

"However," the guildmaster continued, "there is a condition."

“And what might that be?”

“I need to promote the heated low table, so I need two of them as soon as possible—one for my office and one for home.”

“Hold on, I need one in my office too, so make it three,” Gabriella added.

“That would be no problem at all, but while the low table would be fine for your manor, wouldn’t the regular-height table be better for your offices? I fear that it wouldn’t be very sightly to be working from under this table.” Ivano wondered if he wasn’t just imagining that the Jeddas had sunk even further under the table. If the guildmasters succumbed to the degeneracy, business at the Merchants’ Guild would come to a standstill.

“To tell you the truth, the winter chill has not been kind to my knees for a few years now...” said the guildmaster.

“And my office is so large, my feet are always cold...” said the vice-guildmaster.

“I see. In that case, the materials going into your heated low tables ought to be fitting for your offices. Perhaps they could also be used for the models for the noble market.” A luxury version with premium materials would raise the price—and thus the profits.

“Bring us three made of ebony enchanted with heat resistance. Could you make them right away?”

“Of course.”

“Have the mat made of baphomet, the blanket of thin baphomet and either silver or crimson fox pelt. We should have silver fox pelts in stock; you may use them.”

“Very well.” For a table frame made of fine ebony, one could buy thirty copies of the example in front of them. Baphomet wool was leagues more expensive than sheepswool. Silver foxes were agile and clever beasts famed for their elusiveness. Crimson foxes lived only in the southern ranges of this kingdom and were even rarer than the aforementioned foxes. But their pelts were not for a noblewoman’s fur coat but for a Table of Degeneracy, making it a very dear table indeed.

“I would like an even bigger blanket,” Gabriella said. “Do we have enough silver fox pelts? We may have used them up for matching coats last year.”

“There should be some left. If not, I shall commission the Adventurers’ Guild to hunt more; five should be enough,” responded Leone. Silver foxes would have every right to bear a grudge against the Rossetti Trading Company this winter. “Shall we have a one-piece tabletop engraved? We would have to put in an urgent request with a craftsman.”

“A one-piece engraving...?” How many days would it take to engrave a huge slab of wood like that? Not to mention, how would they ever be able to work or relax on something like that? It would be a practical tool no more but a work of art! “Mr. Leone, I’m afraid that would be inconvenient for writing as well as very difficult to place teacups on.”

Gabriella threw Ivano a desperately needed lifeline. “Oh, then we could have it painted instead.”

“I shall find us an artist, then. We will stick with whatever is currently popular for the ones for our offices but perhaps have the one at home painted with your portrait, my dear wife.”

She nearly shrieked at his suggestion. “Surely you jest! *I* will be using the heated low table at home too, you know?” This was a conversation Ivano had no say in.

“We have that portrait of you in a white dress, and I was thinking we could use something similar for the tabletop...”

“The one painted after we got married? Pray tell, are you saying you liked me better when I was young?”

“I love you just the same now as I did years ago. Perhaps we can use a portrait of you now—”

“No, no, no. How can I possibly relax under a table with my own face on it?”

“I suppose you’re right, dear. We will come up with another idea. But if we are hiring a painter, we may as well have a portrait of us done as well. I could use another in my room—”

“No, you could not! How many dozens do you already have?!”

“I do need another one. I could use as many as the stars in the sky. Not that any painting could rival the beauty of the real—”

Ivano was no more than a stranger sharing a table with a couple. He could no longer tell how much of what Leone was saying was serious and how much in jest. Neither of the Jeddas seemed as though they were planning to leave any time soon either. The only thing Ivano knew was that he was no longer needed here. He slipped out of the low table and mumbled, “I’ll, uh, show myself out.”

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“Guildmaster, head manager, thank you for your time today. Ivano Mercadante of the Rossetti Trading Company has come with a new magical tool!” With blankets draped over one shoulder, he burst not into the Forto’s office in the Tailors’ Guild but the meeting room on the second floor of the Magical Garment Factory. Lucia’s workplace had only been built months ago, and the room still had a woody, new-furniture smell to it.

“Good to have you, Ivano. I’ve booked off two hours for you today.”

“Hello, Mr. Ivano. What has Dahlia made this time?” The duo looked eagerly at Ivano; he had made the right choice sending notice to get an audience with both of them.

“Thank you very much for having me today. Allow me to borrow this space to demonstrate our new magical tool.”

Stepping out from behind Ivano were Marcella and Mena, who brought in a heated low table and a heated table; Dahlia was a lifesaver, building them so quickly. After the two Rossetti employees had assembled the tables, they dipped their heads and quickly left to do more shopping.

“This is our heated low table and heated table.” Ivano had Forto and Lucia take a seat at the regular-height version and then gave a quick explanation.

“Hm, so warm air blows under the blanket? Efficient.”

“Dahlia’s always so clever! This way, it won’t burn through the magic crystals quickly, and it’s safer than fireplaces or crystal-powered heaters.”

Once they more or less understood the concept, Ivano directed them under the low table. He placed a basket of thin-skinned oranges on top and requested that one of the clerks send in green tea.

“Thin-skinned oranges and green tea? What a novel idea.”

“It’s our chairwoman’s suggestion. Please do give it a try.”

The duo looked dubious but nevertheless reached for the fruit.

Ivano continued, “We plan to market this to the nobility, the general public, and dining establishments.”

“The heated table would be easier for nobles to get in and out of, given their clothes. I think restaurants would likely go for that version as well,” said Forto.

“I believe women would prefer lounging under the low table, since many complain of chilly feet in the winter.”

“Yes, I like how the low table warms me up from my toes to my legs. The elderly and those who are prone to getting cold would really enjoy this too. The only problem for me is that sitting on the floor for a long time would be tiring.” Aside from the likelihood that he must’ve not thought about lying down inside, Forto had yet to get used to sitting like this; his knees weren’t underneath the table and his back was still stiff and straight.

“I think girls would love how it warms the feet without drying out skin, but skirts are going to get all wrinkly,” said Lucia—truly a clothier—as she smoothed out her own.

“I can tell every household is going to have one of these soon. We’ll need to pump out the blankets and the covers for them too,” Forto said.

“I wish Dahlia had come up with this sooner, since it’s almost winter, but we’ll just have to deal with it now. I suppose it’s still better than if it overlapped with zephyricloth production—that would kill us.”

“Oh, I know.” Forto seemed legitimately troubled by the idea; Ivano was about to laugh at what he thought was a joke, but apparently it was deadly serious. “Ivano, do you think you could give the Merchants’ just the table part and leave all the fabric-related components to us?”

“That is exactly what I had planned, though the Jeddas floated the idea of making the blanket out of pelt. For the office, they said.”

“Why didn’t you invite me as well, Ivano? We deal in them too, you know? And the margins are fantastic too...” The look in his eyes was spiteful. It wasn’t unwarranted, but Ivano hadn’t expected Leone to ask for pelt.

“My apologies. Our company *is* registered with the Merchants’ Guild. Though I believe that the Merchants’ doesn’t have the necessary materials on hand, and neither are there wholesalers for what they are looking for. Perhaps you could prepare some before they ask?”

“And what kind of pelts is the Merchants’ Guild hoping to use?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Jedda narrowed it down to either silver or crimson fox pelt.”

“Silver or crimson fox pelt...” Forto repeated, then let out a deep sigh. “How fitting for high-ranking nobles. Well, if that’s what they want, then I have to ask for a really big favor...”

“Mr. Forto, Dahlia once mentioned that red bear pelt is fire-resistant. Unicorn and bicorn hides would also be great choices for their shine. Aside from monsters, we could also go with bear, fox, marten, rabbit...” Lucia began fluidly writing out her ideas in her sketchbook while Forto added his own ink too, listing out all of their options—some Ivano hadn’t even heard of.

“And how about the fabric and the fill?”

“Would you like the insulation to be enchanted with fire-resistance, Mr. Forto?”

“That would make it much safer. We can make the outer shell with a durable cotton-hemp blend. As for the cover, we can use wool for the regular version, glossy wool for a premium line, and baphomet for the next grade up.”

“We could go with a nicer material for the outer layer of the cover that extends beyond the tabletop and a more affordable material for everything else. That way, we can keep costs down!”

“Good idea. We ought to prepare a variety of colors and patterns, so let’s confer with the textile factory. I’ll visit the Adventurers’ Guild soon too—oh, I

should send them notice first." Forto gave his instructions to his attendant and asked for a facsimile of the list of pelts as well.

Meanwhile, Lucia was reading through the heated low table's specification document. She paused and turned to her guildmaster. "Mr. Forto! I want embroidery on the covers too!"

"Okay, I'll have to speak to the embroiderers about it too, then."

"Oh! Making the covers reversible would be great too, so people can turn them inside out if one side gets stained. We could also make the two sides different colors for variety."

"If it's likely to get soiled, we should make the outermost layer out of waterproof cloth."

"We can use the same materials we use in the raincoats! It might not be as water-resistant as plain waterproof cloth, but there would be so many options with colors and patterns!" Dahlia's friend was just like Dahlia—or were they friends *because* they were similar? Ivano sipped on his green tea as he listened to Lucia's animated voice.

"By the way, Ivano, what did the Merchants' Guild want other than a silver or crimson fox blanket? Did they mention anything about the materials for the table frame?" Forto asked.

"Ooh, how intriguing! I'd like if we could get one for the Tailors' Guild and the factory but not have them overlap in style with the Merchants'." The duo were justified in asking—there was no better way to sell the heated low table than to demonstrate it in person. The Tailors' Guild would probably be in the market for covers with different materials and designs from the Merchants'.

"They asked for baphomet for the rug, ebony for the frame, and a painted design for the tabletop," answered Ivano.

"Hm. Very well." *Oh, crap. Forto doesn't sound happy at all.* The Merchants' Guild had no problem getting their hands on luxury furniture; Viscounty Jedda had access to international markets. Ebony was at the pinnacle of all woods, and Forto had no chance of matching them on that front. "If the Merchants' are collecting ebony and high-quality pelts, then the Tailors' Guild shall use double-

weave silk in abundance and the rarest pelts!”

“Great idea, Mr. Forto!” clamored Lucia. “We can lavish on gold, silver, and monster thread embroidery on monster silk, *and* we should also trim the edges with fluffy horned rabbit fur!”

“Yes! We’ll match the rug with the cushions and use longicollis feathers for stuffing!”

“I like the way you’re thinking!”

“Mr. Forto, Ms. Lucia, how much would that cost...?” Ivano might be exposing his base birth, but a double-weave monster silk suit cost as much as a whole horse! And longicollis feathers? Those didn’t grow on trees.

“Ivano, there are battles that the Tailors’ Guild absolutely cannot lose.”

“That’s right, Mr. Ivano. The table frame aside, how shameful would it be if we were to lose on fabric and textiles!” she exclaimed. *But of course.* Ivano had forgotten—underneath their titles, Forto and Lucia were first and foremost tailors.

“I have connections to woodworkers who make furniture fit for a noble’s wedding. I’ll also reach out to some jewelers.”

“Huh?” Ivano looked toward Forto. His blue eyes were brighter than ever, and he seemed like a knight about to depart for a battle.

Lucia wiped off some juice that had splattered on the table. “Yeah! Mr. Forto, how about a crystal tabletop?!”

“Crystal tabletop! Brilliant!”

“Crystal tabletop?” Ivano’s first reaction was to parrot back the words, which he had never heard before.

“If we use a one-piece slab of crystal, then it’ll showcase the cover underneath—we’ll embroider the whole thing. Not only would it look great, it’s more Tailors’ Guild than having a painted top, right?” Lucia said.

“I’ll handle the jewelers. Perhaps more trim work would be good too.”

“Erm, how much would the crystal cost...?” Ivano might be exposing his

merchant side, but a one-piece slab of very clear crystal couldn't be anything easy to come by.

"Don't worry about it. It's a necessary expense," the guildmaster said with a perfectly manufactured smile.

Once they managed to free themselves from the top-end, bespoke heated low tables, Ivano was finally able to get down to brass tacks. "Setting aside the conversation about the noble market, our chairwoman wishes to sell to the commoner market at the very minimum. As for myself, I'd like them to be inexpensive so every family will have one this winter."

"Very well, I'll get you the fabric we have the largest stock of. We also have insulation on hand and more factories and workers than we did with the zephyricloth, so I can cut you a good deal for this project."

"We have way more seamsters now too, Mr. Ivano, so I think we can get them out the door much quicker."

"Thank you very much."

Afterward, the three of them talked a bit about what the future looked like for the heated low table and heated table when they reached the general public. As Ivano wet his beak with his second cup of tea, he had a sudden realization: Forto and Lucia had sunk to their waists in the table. It wouldn't be long until they flopped over and finally came to experience the true darkness of the Table of Degeneracy. Hell, Ivano was about to roll over already. Who could blame him? His belly was full of hot pot. Relaxing in the heated low table on a full stomach was by far the best way to sell it.

Interrupting his thoughts, Lucia lightly smacked the top of the table and jumped to her feet. "Gah! This thing is making me lose control over myself. I have important work I gotta get back to!" This was humankind's first victory over the Table of Degeneracy, and who could have believed it would be awarded to Lucia?—so Ivano rudely thought as she ripped herself out from under the table. "I'll get in touch with the people in charge of fabrics and embroidery! It'll be easier for them to understand if they get under the table themselves. I'll also get a list of what fabrics we have in stock in our warehouses

and get green tea for everyone who will be here!”

“Thanks, Lucia.”

After she flew out the door and shut it with a slam, Forto planted his elbows on and slumped over the tabletop; the rigidity disappeared from his body in an instant. Perhaps he had been putting his best foot forward when Lucia was around, and, in a sense, if so, that was very chivalrous of him, in a sense. “I get it now. The heated low table stitches man to ground.”

“Mr. Forto, your jacket, you’re going to get it wrinkled. And try lying down like you’re taking a nap too—you’ll understand it even more.” As Forto’s attendant had gone to the Adventurers’ Guild, Ivano acted as his substitute, took the guildmaster’s jacket from him, and hung it on the back of one of the chairs at the meeting table. Unfortunately, there were no hangers to be found in this room.

When Ivano returned to the warmth, Forto crashed onto the rug, messing up his shiny blond hair. The man did not suit the heated low table. He didn’t look like he was relaxing but rather succumbing to exhaustion; an observer might have thought mistakenly that he had collapsed on the ground. Whatever fatigue he had been bottling up had been uncorked by the Table of Degeneracy. “This is a serious question, Ivano: what is up with this thing? I feel its malice trying to trick me into relaxing.”

“There are no tricks, no malice at all. It is simply a heating device—though Sir Volf did call it the Table of Degeneracy.”

“The Table of Degeneracy? Mm, how fitting,” he agreed with full seriousness as he surrendered to the debauchery and snuggled cozily into the blanket.

Forto’s guard was now down, and this was the perfect chance for Ivano to broach a difficult topic. “Mr. Forto, I am wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Well, that depends on the favor.”

“The Gandolfi Company has recently been established, and I am hoping you could lend them your strength.”

“Fermo of the Gandolfi Workshop is working with Miss Dahlia, is he not? We had our sights on him, but you snatched him away before we could do

anything.”

“Oh, no, there was no snatching involved. Fermo simply exercised his agency and decided to form the Gandolfi Company.” When Ivano downplayed it to that extent, Forto’s stare burned with even more spite than before. It wasn’t as though Ivano was lying—Dahlia had suggested to Fermo that he found his own business, though Ivano himself was the one who had pushed Fermo the hardest to go through with it.

“Fine. Let me know if the Gandolfi Company needs me as a guarantor, my recommendation, or anything else.”

“Much appreciated, Mr. Forto. One more thing: as a token of my appreciation, white silk will return to its regular price from next month onward.”

“Ivano, what are you—”

“Your mentee is working so hard for you, dear mentor. You ought to be praising me, if anything.”

“Thank you. I truly mean it. To be honest, I’m shocked by how fast you’re growing. I can’t help but feel like you’ll get ahead of me real soon.”

“It is an honor to receive such kind words,” Ivano said as politely as possible, beaming.

What little propriety remained in Forto now vanished. “Ngaaah! Gods! Why couldn’t you and Miss Dahlia be under the Tailors’ Guild instead?! Why must both of you belong to the Merchants’?!” Unbefitting the handsome man, he screamed as he rolled around inside the heated low table. It was the first time Ivano had ever seen him so bent out of shape.

“You’re far too kind, Mr. Forto. Not so much myself, but our chairwoman is highly contested over. You see, the Merchants’ Guild, the Order of Beast Hunters, and the Adventurers’ Guild are all competitors.”

“Don’t forget the future Marquis Guido too,” Forto snarled as he rolled onto his back.

“Lord Guido too?” Not Volf, not the Scalfarotto family, but Guido in particular.

“Mm. You wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of a future marquis like him. You know how they control water and ice crystal production and the purification of the sewer systems. He’d have no trouble ruining you if he wanted to.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right...” Obviously, no one would want to cross swords with Guido. The things his family controlled were considered basic necessities. They had power and distinction already, and they were about to be promoted. Besides, Guido—personally—was a terrifying nobleman.

“I had never been more glad to have graduated from chivalric studies than when he asked me for a ‘favor.’”

“I have a feeling I shouldn’t inquire as to what that favor was.”

“That’s right, Ivano. But I bet you’re dying to find out, aren’t you?” Forto slowly sat up, foisting the reins of the conversation onto Ivano.

It was troubling—of course Ivano was curious, but it was also a little scary to probe. “Well...”

“He had a big, bright smile on his face as he asked me: ‘I wholeheartedly wish for you to show kindness to the company of my younger brother’s dear friend.’ It felt like it was snowing in midsummer.”

“Ah. I believe I have gone through a similar experience. It was terribly icy, wasn’t it?” Just thinking about Guido’s intimidation sent a chill down Ivano’s back.

But he wasn’t the only victim; that much was obvious by the look in Forto’s eyes. “Were you all right, Ivano?”

“Yes, but, I mean, I couldn’t stand up for a while.” It was outright impressive that he, through sheer will, had managed to keep a straight face and hold back his tears until he left the room with Guido that day. Someone ought to acknowledge him for that. Of course, Ivano wasn’t about to let the world know that his knees had almost given out in the hallway.

“If you didn’t shed a tear or wet yourself, you are as plucky as any knight, Ivano. You didn’t go through intimidation training during chivalric studies, so it truly is very impressive. How about switching roles from vice-chairman to

Dahlia's personal knight?"

"I am a timorous merchant unfit to protect my chairwoman." And Dahlia Rossetti was not a dainty woman who needed his protection. She was undisputedly the head of Rossetti Trading Company and a most loving boss to all her subordinates. She would muster all the strength in her delicate arms to protect her employees. Ivano continued, "Besides, our chairwoman has that already."

"Sir Grato, Lord Gildo, and Lord Guido are all very capable knights indeed."

Ivano only smiled in response. Dahlia's knight was neither the captain, the head treasurer, nor the future marquis, and, of course, neither was it Ivano himself—the one who protected the goddess who turned all she touched to gold was the knight with eyes of the same color.

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After Ivano and the others left the tower, Dahlia, Fermo, and Volf had continued testing and improving on the heated low table. They had first experimented with external controls versus switches mounted on one of the legs. Then, they had improved the circuitry unit that housed the fire and air crystals by shaving off as much material as possible—the handiwork of a master craftsman like Fermo. He managed to make it two-thirds the original size and more durable while maintaining the same level of efficiency in the warm air circulation. Having finished that, they were supposed to install the units in the new tables that Marcella and Mena would bring back. However, the two of them had to deliver the low tables and blankets to both guilds, so it was going to take them some time before they returned.

That left the trio with some time, and Volf softly asked, "Could you make the Table of Degeneracy height adjustable? So that my hips won't slam into it when I turn around inside." The clearance was a little narrow; it was definitely not big enough for people who were so well-built.

"Sure, it would make sense for it to be a bit taller."

"Yeah, it'd sure be more convenient if it were adjustable," agreed Fermo.

Dahlia experimented with the idea of replaceable legs with three heights to

choose from, while Fermo, who was beside her, tried out extendable accordion legs. They might have to finalize the details with a woodworker or a cabinetmaker. Before long, both replaceable-and extendable-type legs were test fitted onto a heated low table and a heated table.

Fermo then talked about how his wife's feet got very cold in the winter; Dahlia knew what that was like, given her stone-built tower. But Barbara often entertained guests, and taking off shoes in the living room just to sit inside the table would be a bit difficult.

Earlier, Fermo had also suggested moving the unit down low, and so they gave that a shot as well. Dahlia added a piece at the bottom to mount the unit onto, and the rising air was quite warm. That was the upward-venting variant of the heated low table.

Finally, Marcella and Mena arrived with the additional low tables, and Dahlia got to work on fitting each of them with a central unit. As she did so, Volf took the mini heated low table and said, "If the unit on this thing was even smaller and thinner, I could bring it on my expeditions."

"Even smaller?"

"Ain't impossible, but..."

The consumer was a creature who demanded. The technician was a creature who pushed the bounds of what was possible. The craftsperson was a creature who tried to make feasible ideas into a reality. Most good products were found at the intersection of all three perspectives. Trading opinions, making prototypes, putting them into action, making improvements—those were joyous, meaningful parts of creating something. At the end, however, criticism was also unavoidable.

"Ms. Dahlia, the circuitry here—you think you can cut it down by half?" Fermo narrowed his deep green eyes at her, nodding expectantly.

She returned the nod. "I can do better than half by using small magic crystals and the absolute shortest traces. Mr. Fermo, could you make the housing just barely big enough to fit the small crystals while keeping the cover and strength?"

“You betcha.” Fermo nodded deeply again.

Dahlia had seen Forto’s pocket ventilator before. Tubes ran around his back under his jacket and through his sleeves, blowing air out by means of an air crystal. It was pocket-size but a little thick—about as thick as Dahlia’s hands pressed together. The heated low table’s circuitry unit needed a fire crystal on top of the air crystal, but it seemed like it could be made even smaller than the pocket ventilator. The circulator had three vents pointing in different directions and blew air onto the user’s back, while being quiet enough and soft enough that it would be discreet—such was Dahlia’s inspiration as she added magical traces to the housing and its lid. The experienced and skilled craftsman Fermo did his best to not be outdone by shaving off as much material as possible from the housing. Volf sat to their side, his golden eyes gleaming as he watched the process.

The end product was a far cry from the original heated low table. The thin heating unit was about fifteen centimeters square. Its output was weakened, and the ventilation holes only blew in one direction. It was compact and light, and it fit perfectly in Volf’s palm. Despite all that, it should still keep the user warm. It would be great for bedtime if tucked inside the blanket—such was the thought running through Dahlia’s head when Volf exclaimed in joy, “I can carry this on my back!”

“What?” Just what was he talking about? He wasn’t making any sense, as far as Dahlia could tell. There already existed a magical hand warmer that was essentially a cloth-covered metal container for a fire crystal. It was common and cheap. Why would Volf need anything like this?

“Now, what are you goin’ to do with that on your back, Sir Volf? Never heard of a magical hand warmer?”

“It’s difficult to adjust the heat on a magical hand warmer, so I can’t put it on my back for an extended period of time for fear of burning myself. The heat wouldn’t diffuse through my body either. With this, I can put it under my coat and keep warm on long winter treks. When I’m resting, I could put it in my blanket or place it against my feet. It’d be even better if it could blow cool air in the summer!” He took off his jacket as he spoke, then wrapped some hemp parcel twine around his body and affixed the small heating unit to his back.

“K-Kotatsnail...”

“Huh? What did you say?”

“Oh, uh, you kinda look like a snail with that on your back,” Dahlia said, quickly explaining the Japanese turn of phrase that had come to mind. At least snails existed in this world too.

Fermo cracked up as he extended a hand. “Pass it here, Sir Volf. I’ll bend it out a bit so that it won’t cling to your back and round out those corners so it won’t hurt too much when you bump into them.” He was like a father fixing and adjusting his son’s toy.

Volf continued with his requests. “Could you punch a hole in each of the corners so I can thread the twine through? And is there a way to make it not jostle too much even if suspended by twine?”

“Aye, I have an idea. But if you tie it too tightly ’round your back, it’ll make it hard to move around, won’t it? Maybe a string with a bit more give than twine would be good.”

“Yeah, that’d be great!”

“I have just the right thing,” Dahlia said as she fetched something a little more elastic.

The back-mounted system was well balanced and maintained the low center of gravity, keeping the body stable. As soon as it was ready, Volf put it and his jacket on. “It’s perfect! I can even attend ceremonies like this!” The unit was hardly two centimeters thick, and with a jacket or a cloak, it was as good as invisible. “It’s as warm as it ought to be, and I can even set the air speed.” Seeing Volf’s great satisfaction as he walked around the room made Dahlia smile too. “What should we do about the name? The ‘snail-type warm air circulator’?”

“More of a turtle, if you ask me. The ‘shell’ isn’t *that* big, though,” said Fermo. “Maybe somethin’ simple like the ‘portable warm air circulator’ would be good. When you make it blow cold air too, you could name that one the ‘portable cool air circulator.’”

Dahlia was relieved—Fermo’s naming sense was similar to hers. “I like it; it’s

straight to the point."

"It wouldn't turn anyone into a degenerate, so calling it the 'Portable Degeneracy' wouldn't make much sense."

"Volf. Perhaps you could dispense with the word 'degeneracy' from now on," she growled.

"Uh, yeah, of course." Volf had an uncomfortable smile on his face. After some more discussion, the three of them finalized the name of the small heating unit, dubbing it the portable warm air circulator.

Dahlia thought she ought to talk to Oswald about the heated low table too, but that would have to wait until tomorrow at the earliest. The table was adapted from the dryer, and although it had been on the market for a while already, she wanted another magical toolmaker to make sure it was absolutely safe. The Zola Company and the Rossetti Trading Company were sister companies in a sense—they were each other's guarantors. Not only that, Dahlia was a student of Oswald's too. If he would do so for her, she would love to leave the luxury version of the heated table and low table for the noble market to the Zola Company—so she thought to herself. It would be far too heavy a burden for her alone. How the Merchants' Guild, the Tailors' Guild, and the Zola Company would vie for sales in the castle and to other high-ranking nobles was a story that Dahlia would never learn.

"I think that's all we can make with the supplies on hand."

"You've finished installing the units in each table here. I'll bring one of the heated low tables to the assistant manager at the Black Cauldron on my way home." The Black Cauldron was a dining establishment in the South District. The Order of Beast Hunters, Volf included, were frequent patrons. The Rossetti Trading Company's get together had been held there too. The assistant manager was a former Beast Hunter and a good buddy of Volf's, and furnishing his restaurant with heated low tables would get Dahlia some candid feedback too. Volf continued, "When I get back to the castle tomorrow, I'll show the captain your portable warm air circulator—or better yet, I'll have him put it on so he'll understand it immediately."

"Sir Volf, how about bringin' the upward-venting model to the Black

Cauldron? It'd make good sense, since it'd be awkward taking off shoes at a restaurant."

"That's a good point. Dahlia, would you mind lending me two of them?"

"Oh, not at all. I'd appreciate that, in fact," she replied. "Oh, you're going back to the villa tonight, right? Take the one upstairs for yourself, Volf. I can always make one for myself afterward. And you would like one too, right, Mr. Fermo?"

"Just the unit's fine for me; I've got blankets and a low table at home. I've gotta make sure the height fits Barbara too. A token of appreciation for everything she does for me, you know?"

A token of appreciation—the words of the loving husband gave Dahlia an idea. "Volf, do you think it would be a fine gift for Lord Guido and Lord Jonas?"

"My brother would love it. Master Jonas, though, I can't say for sure."

Jonas, always standing diagonally behind his master Guido, was a stoic bodyguard; Dahlia couldn't imagine him relaxing inside the heated low table. But even if Jonas would not use it, others could, so she ought to send at least a couple.

"Could I also ask for one more for Lady Altea? A token of appreciation, like Fermo said."

"Would she prefer the low version or the regular-height version? Or perhaps one with adjustable legs?"

"She always has a long dress on, so a low table might be a little inconvenient for her. I think I'll go with the adjustable version, if that's okay with you. As for the blanket and the rug, I'll talk to my brother first."

"Sure."

"If it's a noblewoman yer giving it to, how about a colored glass top? Barbara's been itchin' to work on a big piece, and she can work in a nice design that you like too."

"In that case, Fermo, could I get it engraved with a white lily? I'll pay for it, of course."

"Double the cost of materials, then? Consider it a test piece."

“That’s too little money, surely.”

“Just the cost of materials is plenty, and she probably wants to try all sorts of stuff on it. How about this? Let Barbara carve her name into it, like your name is stamped on the Beast Hunters’ camp stoves. She’ll be delighted to make a comeback if her first job’s for a noblewoman.” Fermo was being considerate about Volf’s pocketbook, but Altea was more or less family to Volf and someone with whom he could talk about anything. Fermo, however, would likely turn pale when he learned that the recipient was Lady Altea Gastoni, dowager of Duchy Gastoni, after a flurry of requests came in from other nobles.

“Damn. That’s a whole lot more than when we started...” Fermo’s expression was halfway between a grimace and a smile as he narrowed his eyes at the small hill of inventions in the workshop.

Heated tables and low tables with heating units already installed were stacked up by the entrance; the rest of the room was crammed full of the height-adjustable heated tables and low tables, the replaceable leg version of the heated low table, the upward-venting heated low table, and the portable warm air circulator. Never had Dahlia thought her workshop was a small space until today. Though the spectacle filled her with a great sense of accomplishment, it was getting a little disorderly; she had to make sure not to do anything that would bring the pile crashing down.

“It’d sure be nice to supply the squad with these before winter hits.” The mountain of tables was nothing to him, as he had eyes only for the portable warm air circulator in his hands.

“Sir Volf, just the heated low table would be trouble enough. That’s to say nothin’ of all the versions we came up with this afternoon. The portable circulator will have to wait for the new year at the very least. Besides, gettin’ all the materials for it is going to be tough.”

“I’d love for everyone to have one for their expeditions this winter, but I suppose I’m asking for too much.”

Volf looked disappointed, but that was unnecessary—Dahlia had a trusty ace up her sleeve. “I’m sure Ivano can do something about that.”

The next day, when Ivano finally returned to the Green Tower, his eyes doubled in size upon taking in all the additional specification documents, blueprints, and the note about wanting to supply the Beast Hunters. There was not a single peep of discontent from him, though he did giggle excitedly to himself. For what it's worth, seeing Ivano happy was better than the alternative, thought Dahlia.

That same day, Ivano bought seven boxes of an expensive stomach medicine that had been co-developed by an alchemist and a physician. He kept two for himself and gave one each to Marcella and Mena. The rest went to the three higher-ups of a certain guild, along with a thank-you card. Once the news about all the new products was out, everyone reached for the medicine. When they met up the next week, everyone was of the same mind—the medicine didn't really do much.

Since the invention of the heated low table one week ago, Dahlia had visited and consulted Oswald on its safety. He had deemed the circuitry sound, and his only suggestion had been to add a heat shield to the top, so Dahlia's new product was good to go. She had become a recluse since then, holing up in her workshop and pumping out heating units from the crack of dawn to late at night. A case fit eight units, a shipment was in multiples of eight—her head was stuck in base-8. Fortunately, the subcontracted workshops had been quick to get up to speed, relieving Dahlia by the fourth day.

The Rossetti Trading Company had also given the Zola Company the connections to the heated low tables for the noble market. Dealing with expensive, premium materials would have been too much for Dahlia, and she was indebted for all the support she had received from Oswald thus far, so she was glad that he had been so pleased with the offer. Woodworkers of the Merchants' Guild and all members of the Tailors' Guild were very busy too.

Dahlia would have been working on the heated low table as well, but today, she was at the small room on the second floor of the Merchants' Guild: the Rossetti Trading Company's office.

"Thank you very much for the quick turnaround. My wife is now much better and can finally stomach her food."

"I'm very happy to hear that."

Sitting across the table from Dahlia and happily relaying the good news was Jean from the Adventurers' Guild. He had commissioned a unicorn necklace from Dahlia, and it sounded as though it was helping with his wife's morning sickness. "I know you must be terribly busy, but I'm afraid I have to bother you again with another request."

Ivano, sitting beside Dahlia, perked up his ears. He was probably going to stop Dahlia from taking on any urgent jobs from the Adventurers'; he had already prevented her from working overtime at home. Who was Dahlia to disobey her vice-chairman's orders? It seemed like each party was hawkeyed about making sure the other didn't overdo it.

Jean continued, "I am hoping to place an order for another unicorn necklace. I would have asked you to make two last time had I foreseen this..." Perhaps a

friend or a family member had heard of the wondrous effects and wanted one for their own use.

Crafting another unicorn horn pendant would fit into Dahlia's schedule, and she would want to relieve a woman of her morning sickness as soon as possible, though she only responded after Ivano looked over to her and gave her a trepid nod. "Not to worry. I accept your request."

"You have my thanks. I believe you should be able to make use of these," Jean said, placing a silver magically sealed box on the table; he had brought back the same container with the same horns as last time, which Dahlia had previously returned to him. "A copy of the previous one would be fine."

"Very well. Would you like the same design as well?"

"The same gemstone, please, but could you change the flower to a rose?"

As Dahlia wrote down the notes and wondered if the same gemstone meant it was perhaps for a relative, Ivano spoke up. "Many women enjoy roses. They say it's the go-to choice for a proposal."

"So they say."

"The stone ought to be the same size too, I presume. It just wouldn't do if one were bigger than the other, would it?"

"Yes, the same size would be ideal." Jean shifted his eyes as he brushed his temple.

It seemed like Ivano had been waiting for that reaction, and he put on a perfectly constructed smile. "I see your other wife is with child as well. I offer my heartfelt congratulations to you and your family."

"Oh! Congratulations, Mr. Jean." It had barely been a month since his first-wife-turned-ex-wife had turned into his second wife, for whom Dahlia had recently finished crafting a unicorn necklace. Now, his first wife needed a necklace as well. It was a joyous occasion, and Dahlia appreciated getting work. That was all. There was nothing else she wanted to say. *Just make the tool, toolmaker.*

"Thank you. Please let me know when the necklace is ready," Jean said

quickly, hurrying to leave, as he couldn't hide his bashfulness.

After sending Jean off, Ivano sat down in front of Dahlia with an indecipherable expression on his face. "I apologize in advance, Ms. Dahlia, but would you please allow me to say something that I cannot say aloud outside of this room?"

"Go ahead." Dahlia knew exactly what he was about to say; chalk it up to telepathy amongst colleagues.

"Mr. Jean, you sure have a lot in common with Professor Oswald!"

"I'm with you..." Was it because he had been an elite adventurer? Because his first wife was from a viscount family? Because of Oswald's direct influence? For whatever reason, Jean's attitude towards his wives wasn't too far from Oswald's.

"Don't get me wrong; it's something to celebrate for sure. There are a lot of things I can learn from the professor, but this is not one of them."

"I may be his magical toolmaking student, but I don't think I can ever reach his level when it comes to *this*."

Right as those words left her lips, a knock came from the door. "Something just came in for—hey, everythin' all right?"

"You both seem awfully troubled, chairwoman, vice-chairman." Marcella and Mena had stopped by the office to drop off documents and magically sealed boxes of materials before going out to lunch.

"Mr. Jean from the Adventurers' Guild has ordered a second unicorn necklace from us, you see," Ivano explained calmly; Marcella's eyes narrowed while Mena's widened.

"That's, uh, quite noble-like of him, eh?" By the look on Marcella's face, it was obvious he understood everything. Perhaps he had been exposed to it in his knight training at the Scalfarottos'—something Dahlia was curious about but didn't want to ask.

"How about Chairman Zola? Three wives—that's impressive in its own right..." said Mena. "Do his wives fight among themselves, I wonder?"

“Apparently not,” replied Ivano.

“Is his first wife his main wife?”

“Apparently not. When I drank with Professor Oswald last time, I asked him outright if he treated them all equally.”

“Mr. Ivano, that’s real bold of you...” Marcella was visibly bewildered; Dahlia empathized.

“He played it straight and answered with a big smile, ‘I love them equally.’” That sure sounded like Oswald, all right, though it wasn’t something Dahlia could ever imagine feeling the same about. Ivano continued, “He even turned it back on me. ‘What if there were three identical copies of your wife but born in different locations and on different dates? Would there be one or several you could not bring yourself to love?’ he asked.”

“Huh. When you put it like that...” said Mena.

“I get it, but I can’t say I could ever imagine feeling the same,” said Marcella.

It didn’t jibe with Dahlia either. Perhaps it was ingrained in her, as she had been born in Japan in her previous life, where lawful marriage was only between one man and one woman. She didn’t believe that it should *only* be between a man and a woman, but, to Dahlia, romantic love and marriage were between two people, and those two people ought to be faithful to each other. No amount of tutelage under Oswald was about to change that. But when she recalled how he had said that his first wife had run off with his apprentice, Dahlia couldn’t help but wonder if three wives meant three times the worrying for Oswald. That made polygamy all the less appealing for her. And when she tried to imagine herself as somebody’s second or third wife, she’d rather stay single—that much she was sure of.

“Chairman Zola sure is a role model to all men.”

“Do you really think so, Mena?” asked Ivano.

“I do. It would be a different story if his wives were discontent with the situation, but he can make them all so happy, and I find that very admirable. I revere him as my professor too.” For a free lover like Mena, that made perfect sense. Even aside from that, Oswald seemed very well suited to be a mentor, in

spite or because of his many talents.

“Different strokes for different folks, but I bet it also takes a lot of effort,” said Marcella. “It ain’t for me, though; a single lady is plenty for me.”

“With a drink in hand, a true, devoted, loving husband like you could gush about Irma for a whole hour.”

But the subject of Mena’s teasing did not smile one bit. “I don’t even need a drink to tell you how much I love Irma. I could go on for two hours—for the whole night, even. Now, come on! My stomach’s growlin’!”

Dahlia had no doubts that Mena had his ears talked off at lunch.

The Heated Low Table Tour

“This ‘heated low table’ thing, it spews warm air from underneath the tabletop? The hell’s that about?”

“All that heating and cooling is bound to damage the legs. I can make it for you, but it’s your funeral.”

There were nearly a dozen woodworkers in the far meeting room at the Merchants’ Guild. They had been invited under conditions of secrecy and in the guildmaster’s name. Vice-Guildmaster Gabriella had even had them all sign non-disclosure agreements in the room next door. It was a little exciting: *What kind of high-end furniture are we about to make? What kind of skills will I be able to show off?*—so thought one woodworker in particular as he and his fellows came to find six low tables, unrefined in their construction and beige in all senses of the word.

Then there was Ivano, vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, instructing them to take off their shoes before stepping on top of the thick rugs. “Please be seated. Do make yourselves comfortable, as this will take a little time,” he said.

The craftsmen did as instructed and split themselves up between the six tables. To each was then distributed a set of instructions numbering just one page with ten lines. In summary: *install the heating unit—the magical tool that pumps out warm air—on the low table or table, then place a blanket between the tabletop and the frame.* It was a simple affair.

But no way would this heated low table be as warm as a fireplace or a fire crystal—space heater. It *was* comfortable sitting under the blanket, but the air wasn’t nearly warm enough for the capital’s cold winters.

Before the woodworker could complain about it, Ivano set up a compact magical stove, a pot, and half a glass of white wine in front of each person. “Thank you all very much for your time today. I’m very glad to have the opportunity to convene here with everyone, and this humble meal is a token of my appreciation.”

Bubbling on top of each stove was a chicken and vegetable hot pot, perfuming the room with its delicious scent. And despite being seasoned with little more than salt, it was so unbelievably delicious that the wine seemingly vanished in an instant.

The compact magical stove was a very popular magical tool sold by the Rossetti Trading Company. “What, is your plan to bundle the heated low table with the compact magical stove and sell them to us?” questioned the woodworker sitting next to him.

Some had finished their meals in a snap. Ivano handed each of them a long, thin cushion, and they just lay down. That probably shouldn’t have been surprising—everyone, including this woodworker, had now licked their dishes clean.

Before he knew it, the heated low table had turned from lukewarm to toasty, although the temperature of the air coming out remained the same. He sank lower and lower into the table; the craftsman across from him did the same. They angled their bodies perfectly so as to stretch out without bumping into each other. When everyone was finished eating, no one was in a decent, upright position. Some were snoring, some nodding off, some staring off into the distance; this woodworker had no desire to move, and so he pulled the blanket up to his chest.

“What are you tryin’ to do to us, Iv—Vice-Chairman Ivano?” growled the oldest woodworker of the bunch. Only his head and hands were peeking out from under the blanket; his words were hardly menacing or imposing. Nobody in the room was being particularly polite with their lounging around, but that could be excused because just about all of them were at least acquainted with Ivano.

Ivano had been a longtime employee of the Merchants’ Guild. He enjoyed the favor of the Jeddas and had even helped this particular woodworker out with stocking and contracts. Climbing up the ladder would’ve been the obvious and easy choice, yet he had let go of everything and jumped ship to a tiny company of two people—himself included. The Rossetti Trading Company had made one big leap after another since then. Some close friends attributed seventy percent of the success to Ivano, others even ninety.

Said navy-eyed man slowly narrowed his eyes at this woodworker. “Our company wishes to offer our customers a relaxing and comforting winter under our heated low table,” he said with a business smile.

The other woodworkers, still lazing on the ground, muttered amongst themselves. “Yeah, I can see that happenin’. Hell, I might even want to stay here tonight...”

“I concur. Perhaps I could hibernate here until spring.”

“How did the inventor even come up with somethin’ like this? Were they some sort of angel descended from the heavens?”

“Probably the opposite—reducing the whole capital’s population to people like us has got to be the work of a demon.” It sounded like equal parts praise and condemnation.

Ivano, though, had a serious look on his face. “May I remind you gentlemen that you are not on the consuming end but the providing end of this relaxation.”

“Regardless, slapping the magical tool on a table should be easy work. And you lookin’ fer a hundred tables per person? That’ll more than tide us over through winter.”

Every household might need furniture, but only the nobility chased the trends. The woodworkers congregated here today were all commoners who made furniture for commoners—large orders and quick, easy money were foreign concepts. Furthermore, they had recently been facing some tough competition against beautifully-grained furniture from Ehrlichia, the nation across the border. Even though the job was simply to install the unit, the quantity of the order made it very much a lucky break.

Ivano folded his arms on top of the heated low table and said, “Now, let me tell you about the details of the job. We are looking to start a fresh production of tables and low tables, one hundred from each person. We are offering cost plus twenty percent with advance payment for the materials, and we shall handle transportation between your workshop and our warehouses.”

“That’s quite the offer.”

“Damn, Ivano! When did you get so bighearted?”

“Hey, you know I’m self-conscious about my size,” Ivano quipped. “Anyway, after delivery of the first batch, we shall ask you to make a variation of the original that features replaceable legs for height adjustment—a hundred of those from each of you as well. And a few days after that, it is likely that we shall come to you with yet another iteration. You can expect luxury versions for the noble and merchant family markets, versions tailored for dining establishments with different sizes and functionality, and more.”

“Oh, I’m itchin’ to show off my skills!”

“Looks like we will be staying busy this winter!”

“As you produce these low tables and regular-height tables and attach the heating units, I ask that you share with us any potential improvements. We would also appreciate it if we could come to you for after-sales service, color changes, and the like. Next—”

The woodworkers were excited yet nervous about what more Ivano had to say. “Hold on a minute, Ivano. When are you expecting delivery?”

“Immediately—well, as soon as possible, anyway. We can always come by to take your completed work whenever necessary as well.”

“Urk.”

“Oh...” Having lots of profitable work was good, but the dose made the poison.

“Like I said, gentlemen, you are not on the relaxing end of this all,” the Cerulean Crow said, reverting back to his smile. That was something they had recently taken to calling him. He had left the sheltering wings of his mentor Gabriella and found extensive success. They said that he had found friends within the nobility and was even on a first-name basis with many of them too. “However, absolutely do not put work before your health—so requested our chairwoman.”

“Chairwoman Rossetti herself, huh?” Dahlia Rossetti, chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, was a rising star of a magical toolmaker. Her inventions came one after the other, emplacing her as a partner with the castle

soon after the founding of her company. Word was that she was frightfully shrewd, but the reality was that her soft features were true to how kind and polite she was.

When her father Carlo was still around, this woodworker had once been to the Green Tower's first-floor workshop to repair a broken leg on their workbench. He recalled the bright green eyes of the girl who had taken a great interest in and watched his work, he recalled the day that he'd seen Carlo lying on the floor of the Merchants' Guild hallway unmoving—he knew her request was no mere lip service. The woodworker made a mental note to remind his fellow craftsmen to care for their health.

"Mr. Ivano, that is surely too much for us to handle. You mind if I get a few other people? I'll make sure their lips are sealed."

"Not at all. The more, the merrier." Having thus resolved, the woodworkers would not have any days off this winter.

The feelings of excitement and nervousness for the near future lingered in the room as this woodworker crawled out from underneath the heated low table. As he took a sip of the fresh refill of coffee, a young employee of the Rossetti Trading Company distributed packages to everyone.

"We sincerely thank you for accepting this job. You will find two heating units inside the package, with which you can experiment. Use one for yourself and the other one for the people you cherish," Ivano said.

His explanation was met with equal parts understanding and suspicion. "Yer sayin' that it ain't supposed to be a display model for my workshop?"

"We shall deliver that to you as well, but separately. No, we anticipate that it will be a very busy winter for everyone, so these units are for you to show your family and loved ones what you will be working on."

"Hm, somethin' to tell them what we'll be busy with, eh?" With a job this big, there certainly wouldn't be much time for the woodworkers to spend the New Year with their families. This was a time-sensitive project, after all.

"There is that, but I'm sure they, too, will really come to love our product.

Your wives' smiles, your children's smiles, your families' smiles, your significant others' smiles—don't you want to see the people you cherish smile? That is what our chairwoman aims for when creating her magical tools."

"Yeah, that's a good point." Chairwoman Rossetti was a true craftsperson—just like everyone in attendance.

Ivano said, "And if you give your loved ones a heated low table that you've created, you're showing how much you love them—you're saying 'I hope you get stuck under the heated low table like I've fallen and gotten stuck in love with you.'"

"Wow, that's corny..."

"As if it were that easy..."

"Even if you wouldn't be, I'd be embarrassed, vice-chairman..."

"I recently did a little bit of shopping for myself; take a look at these. Pretty, aren't they? I found them in a fancy shop," Ivano said. He took out a collection of white cards all decorated differently, with silver and gold trim, blue and pink floral patterns, or pictures of flowers and birds—all folded in half and now displayed on the table. "To my beloved," "My dear," "With all my love," and "I appreciate you," were beautifully penned on the cards—phrases that were a little difficult to say aloud. "Just some food for thought, but in my opinion, the biggest blunder you can make is assuming that 'they'll understand without me explicitly saying so.' Sign your name underneath, place it atop the heated low table you present to them, and your relationship can only get better from there. If you find it difficult to talk about these things or express your feelings, this could be a way to repair your relationship—but that's just my opinion, anyway."

Coffee nearly went up the woodworker's nose.

The vice-chairman continued, "You could get together with the person you had feelings for or even take the opportunity to propose to them. The money you will be making this winter can go to your wedding." The younger fellows at the next table hacked their lungs out, the older ones rapped their knuckles on the tabletop, and others the woodworker's age stole glances at the cards; they were all in agreement. "I have extras, so please help yourselves if you are interested."

Not one single person refused Ivano's work offer today.

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Dahlia knew information and preparation were two of the most important aspects of work—predicting what would happen and being ready for it was usually key to being stress free. However, she was not clairvoyant.

Today, she had convened with a dozen or so woodworkers—the craftspeople who would be working on the tables and low tables—in the Merchants' Guild. Aside from the guildmembers, Gabriella and Fermo had been present as well, leaving Dahlia nothing to worry about.

Placing such a large rush order right before winter made her feel a little guilty, and so she had made sure to let the woodworkers know to prioritize their own health. She had to say something—there were many of them around her father's generation. But, as the proud craftsmen that they were, all they had to say was there was nothing to worry about and that they were thankful for the opportunity; the lack of complaints somehow made her feel even worse about herself. Most of all, she wished they wouldn't all address her as "Madam Chairwoman Rossetti."

After that, just as Dahlia was needing a break, Gabriella invited her to lunch. It would be nice to chat and relax for a bit, and so Dahlia happily accepted the offer. When she entered the vice-guildmaster's office, she was surprised not only by Leone's presence but also by the fact that there were two heated low tables in the room.

"I thought I'd take the chance to show you the guildmaster's and vice-guildmaster's heated low tables, Chairwoman Rossetti," Leone said. Dahlia tried to smile, but she could not will herself to contort her face—it was painfully obvious that each of the heated low tables in front of her was worth a literal fortune. "The tabletops are made from the finest grade of ebony. Solid slab."

"The baphomet wool rugs are *so* soft and warm too," Gabriella added. Both of them looked so pleased as they entered under their own table.

Leone's featured a glossy silver pelt blanket. "Silver fox. We had extra in our family reserve."

“Wh-What a fine coat of fur.” Dahlia had heard from Lucia that silver foxes made top-quality pelts. Just one tail could buy a premium fox fur coat; how many lives had it taken to make that whole blanket? Then, as she walked closer, she saw something even more horrifying—Leone had placed his teacup *directly* on the tabletop. On it was a knight in shining armor slaying a blue dragon, depicted with bold strokes of the brush; it could have been sold stand-alone as a painting. Dahlia dared not move lest she knock over his cup.







“Sit with me, Dahlia. I have sandwiches waiting for you,” Gabriella said.

“Oh, um, thank you.” A bright red fur blanket, finely decorated, adorned the vice-guildmaster’s table, and when Dahlia sat underneath it, she was shocked by just how soft and fluffy it was. Then there was the white tabletop with a scattering of photorealistic deep crimson roses; she could but sigh when looking at it.

“This is crimson fox pelt. I tend to run cold, so I opted for an oversized blanket,” Gabriella said with cheer in her voice as she casually set a platter of sandwiches on the artistic tabletop. Accompanying the food was fragrant black tea. “You must be tired from being in that meeting all day. Why don’t you take it easy and relax for a bit?”

The vice-guildmaster’s thoughtfulness was touching. But all that a commoner like Dahlia could think about was getting a single crumb on the blanket or scuffing the tabletop. She could taste nothing but her anxiety.

These were the heated low tables of the top people at the Merchants’ Guild. It was natural that they needed something so special, so brimming with grandeur. To Dahlia, though, these were no longer pieces of furniture but unapproachable, untouchable works of art. There was surely nobody else in this world with such high-class heated low tables. Dahlia hoped that the ones she would soon be selling would be more—perhaps in a different sense of the word—comfortable.

Little did she know that her lunchtime musings would be so far off the mark. Other nobles who had tried the guildmaster’s and vice-guildmaster’s heated low tables were enamored with them, and every single one decided to get a unit of their own. The design, blanket, and tabletop were customized to the same extremes. Only later would it become apparent how families and businesses prided themselves on their luxury heated tables and heated low tables.

“I’m back...”

Ivano greeted Dahlia as she trod back into the office, his navy eyes looking on with pity. “Good afternoon, chairwoman. Erm, I was just about to brew some

coffee; would you like a cup as well?”

“Yes, please...”

“They were something else, weren’t they? The Jeddas’ heated low tables, I mean.”

“Uh-huh. I couldn’t possibly enjoy my meal.”

“I know, right?! When I was invited into the guildmaster’s office for a spot of tea, my teacup was glued to the saucer—I didn’t want to spill a single drop! Mr. Leone got one of those ebony tables for his manor as well, and I heard the tabletop he has in the works right now will be black with white lilies and butterflies. His initial idea was to use Madam Gabriella’s portrait, but she shot that idea down immediately.”

“I don’t blame her; who could be comfortable dining while staring at their own face?” It was no secret that Leone was head over heels in love with Gabriella, but drinking tea over your own portrait couldn’t possibly be relaxing.

“Right? I can’t imagine putting my wife and daughters on our tabletop.”

The fact that the underside of the tabletop in the Jeddas’ home featured a portrait of a sleeping Gabriella was a secret known to only Leone and the painter.

“Here’s today’s,” said Ivano as he handed over a handful of envelopes. He had already opened them, and Dahlia just needed to go through them.

However, there was one separate from the rest. The unopened letter bore two names: Fortunato Luini—guildmaster of the Tailors’—and Lucia Fano—head manager of the Magical Garment Factory. The wax seal was a curious marble of red and blue and imprinted with scissors, thread, needle—the emblem of the Tailors’ Guild. “Oh, this is from Mr. Forto and Lucia.”

“Yes, I wasn’t sure if I should open it.”

As she took a letter opener from Ivano and opened the seal, Dahlia noted she had never seen their names together like this before. “The Tailors’ Guild has completed their heated low table and are inviting us to go see it. It says here that—what?!”

“Is something the matter, chairwoman?”

“‘The embroidery looks beautiful under the one-piece crystal tabletop,’ it says.”

“Ah, so Mr. Forto went for it in the end? He talked about it when I went over last time.”

The second page read “It’s suuuuuper pretty! Come over and check it out!” in a bouncy, excited hand—undoubted Lucia’s, though there was no signature at the bottom. Dahlia could only give a dry laugh.

The vice-chairman said, “I suppose we should head over soon to take a look.”

“Ivano, if you have the time, would you mind coming with me?”

“Of course not. I have something I wish to discuss with Mr. Forto anyway. How about today?”

Having to go alone would have been so uncomfortable; thank goodness for Ivano. “The Merchants’ was impressive, and I imagine the Tailors’ won’t be any cheaper.” It might be rude to talk about price, but she was just being honest.

“It is what it is, chairwoman, as this is a battle for prestige for the Tailors’ Guild. The blanket is a textile product, so how could they possibly bear to lose to anyone?”

But the heated low table was an invention for relaxation, not a source of pride over which to fight.

Ivano continued, “Still, if we’re talking about luxury, then Professor Oswald is still in the race. When I went over yesterday, the table in his parlor had an ivory tabletop and a solid bright green blanket.” Expensive whitewood top and a silk blanket, Dahlia assumed, but he then dashed her expectations. “The blanket used an opal green fabric that looked like a field of grass blowing in the wind. It was even enchanted with griffin feather and it sparkled in gold. I bet it could stop an arrow.”

“H-How durable it must be...” Dahlia could not fathom why anyone would need an arrowproof blanket, though she *would* like to see how the griffin feather enchantment was done.

“My thoughts exactly. Oh, and the tabletop—you know how the Goddess’s Right Eye sells greeting cards? The image of a goddess in the same style had been engraved into the whitewood top, and then a plate of glass was placed atop of that so it would be smooth. I wouldn’t have been able to drink my tea at the table otherwise.”

“The glass does make it very practical.” At least it sounded more comfortable to use than painted wood or crystal, but that very comparison was absurd in the first place.

“Oh, and the royals have decided on the specifications of their heated low tables. The Zola Company’s design beat out the Merchants’ Guild’s and the Tailors’ Guild’s. It will be a flared white bear pelt blanket and an Esterland lacquer frame inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Other nobles have inquired about getting something like the royals’, but the wait time on that would be at least a whole year.”

“White bear? Mother-of-pearl inlay?” The polar bears of her previous world had been a threatened species, and there were no white bears within the borders of Ordine either. Their habitat was in the far north, and Dahlia was fairly sure that just the journey there could cost someone their life, though she wasn’t sure if she was remembering correctly. Anyway, a black lacquered top with iridescent nacre inlay was nothing like the kotatsu in her mind. “That’s, erm, very elaborate.”

“Furniture from Esterland is rather rare to begin with, and I have never seen inlaid mother-of-pearl either. I was sure they would go for the finest jewels for the royals, but the professor said that mother-of-pearl is a substance found on the inner layer of shells, cheaper than gemstones, and breathtaking. I can’t wait to see it in person.”

They could get an idea of what the table would be like by looking at the specification document and drawings, but Dahlia might just sprint to Oswald’s to see the real thing once it was completed. No tea or mandarin oranges could ever go on a kotatsu like that. And while it was true that nacre was less expensive as a material, the terror of accidentally dislodging the inlays would be so great that no one could possibly put their elbows on the table. But Dahlia couldn’t say anything to take away her subordinate’s excited smile.

“Chairwoman, vice-chairman, here’s a completed regular set!” Carrying a heated low table and all its accoutrements in one arm, Mena swung open the door with his other—the power of a man with body strengthening magic. He set down the parts, which were for a compact and efficient version sized for two people, then began assembling it by the wall.

The tabletop was made of glued cedar—a one-piece slab would have been too costly—and both the blanket and rug were made of thick, fluffy wool. Though not particularly sophisticated in its materials, the brown and ivory color scheme was tranquilizing. The cedarwood also gave off a pleasant scent that soothed the soul. *Now* this *is a kotatsu!*—or rather, this was the friend of all commoners and provider of warmth on a cold winter’s night, the magical tool named the heated low table. Dahlia could have snuggled into it right about now.

“Chairwoman, this is the itemized price list for the set aimed at the general public. Ah, and we factored in a generous amount for materials and labor too; the high volume from the get-go made it quite affordable.”

“At this price, I’m sure plenty of people can afford it!” she exclaimed after taking the parchment from Ivano.

“Did I do a good job, chairwoman?”

How could she not be earnest seeing his big, impish grin? “You’ve outdone yourself, Ivano! Even bearing in mind the materials and labor costs, I thought it was going to be at least one and a half times this number, if not double! I’m sure more people will be able to stay warm this winter. And you even said that it was generous to the craftspeople! Thank you so much for fulfilling my challenging request.”

He sputtered for a bit before he was able to get his words out. “That’s very kind of you to say...”

Dahlia kicked herself for getting so excited until she watched Ivano press his hands to his eyes and cover up the top part of his cheeks—though he could not hide his bright pink ears. Then she recalled that he had once said he promised his wife to never show his blushing face to another woman. Dahlia looked away

from him and quickly blurted out, “Um, I’m free later this afternoon, so we’re going to say hi to Mr. Forto! I’m going to touch up my makeup!”

After the chairwoman sped out of the room, Mena sat down and picked up the letter on the table. It contained a by-the-book thank-you message written by Ivano and to be rewritten by Mena—he had the best handwriting, so he was in charge of writing the final copies of letters and documents. Bit by bit, Mena was also being introduced to the paperwork.

With the pen in his hand and his eyes on the blank sheet of paper, he asked, “Was that too much praise for you, Mr. Ivano? Got you a little light-headed?”

“Not at all. But it was more than I was expecting, and as her subordinate, I was very happy to receive such high praise.” A boy like him was in no position to be teasing a grown man like Ivano. And the only person allowed to shake him up was his wife, though Dahlia speaking about new magical tools—and the developments afterward—was dizzying too. Ivano lowered his voice and asked, “I’m sure you understand full well that it’s not butterflies but excruciating pain that our dear chairwoman brings to stomachs, Mena.”

In stitches with laughter, Mena had to collect himself before he could start writing.

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“Daaahlia, Mr. Ivano! Over here!”

When Dahlia and Ivano arrived at the Tailors’ guildhall, Lucia—the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory and a close friend—came out to greet them. It was much appreciated, as Dahlia had yet to become accustomed to the building.

“The guildmaster’s heated low table turned out super pretty!” Lucia said in high spirits as she skipped up the steps to the second-floor meeting room. The table and chairs had been cleared out, making room for the embroiderers working their craft on the edges of the blanket and cushions. “Look! The amazing needleworkers did such a great job with the colorful monster thread in the double-weave monster silk! Once they finish up with the ends, we’ll be moving the table into Mr. Forto’s office.”

Dahlia and Ivano were momentarily stunned into silence.

“Oh, that’s nice...”

“Wow...”

There weren’t any words to describe the magnificent, sparkly table. The crystal top was bordered with gleaming obsidian. And though that the blanket that spilled out was still being worked on, the vivid ultramarine monster silk with gold and silver embroidery exquisitely depicted the Goddess of the Moon and the night sky. The cushions, in the same blue, featured owls, primroses, and queens of the night. The goddess especially was a sight to behold. Her long flowing hair and fair skin, upturned face, eyes with a hint of sorrow, and long lashes—how long had it taken to produce this work of pure art?

“Right?! Our needleworkers are amazing!” gushed Lucia like a proud parent; the embroiderers smiled as they continued their work. It seemed as though Lucia was already part of the Tailors’ family. “Let’s head to the next room!”

“What’s over there, Lucia?”

“The Magical Garment Factory’s table!” That was to say *her* table. Surely it would be a little more subdued than the guildmaster’s—so thought Dahlia as they walked over. “Mr. Forto gave me full control of the design and no budget, so I went for it!” Lucia said as she opened the door.

“Oh, my...”

“That’s something, all right...”

The sprawling light blue blanket was even larger than the last.

“This is the—whatchamacallit—the adjustable version? The one I can make taller, so I can use it as a low table and a regular-height table. That’s why the blanket is so big. This is monster silk embroidered with monster thread too.”

The blanket on the last table had shone, but the color on this one changed depending on how it caught the light. There were six people laboring over it at once, and every one of them looked extremely focused as they worked the colorful thread in. In the center, where the embroidery was already complete, a pure white unicorn slumbered in a beautiful maiden’s lap. She had golden hair

and kind eyes and was gently stroking the unicorn with her delicate fingers. The details made this, too, a masterpiece. What the needleworkers were now working on was the lush green forest background. A spring flowed from behind the trees, and beautiful wild roses and other flowers bloomed. Fluffy horned rabbit fur trimmed the edges.

"The blanket is designed to be folded in so that it can expand to fit both the short and tall configurations."

"But, Lucia, you're going to bump into it with your knees and ruin the embroidery!"

Lucia and the needleworkers turned to her with smiles. "Don't worry, Dahlia! Once it's done, I'm going to have a magical toolmaker from the guild toughen it up with an enchantment."

Thank goodness she was going to protect it, but even after learning that, Dahlia couldn't imagine being able to relax in that heated low table; she wouldn't want to snag a single thread loose. "Are you going to raise and lower it every day?"

"I don't want to wrinkle up my clothes during the day, so I'll raise it up. When I'm done seeing people in the afternoon, I can lower it back down. And it also depends on how cold the day is too, I guess. That's why I had to have the adjustable model."

"This version might end up being more popular than I had anticipated—in particular, among people who are particular about their clothes. 'Increase production of adjustable model,'" Ivano said to himself as he whipped out his notepad from the inner pocket of his jacket and crunched some numbers.

Relaxing in the low table with an artful blanket spread out—such was the noble elegance to be enjoyed in the winter.

"Welcome, Miss Dahlia, Ivano," said the Tailors' guildmaster Forto, announcing his presence. There was a tape measure coiled around his left hand, suggesting that he was in the middle of some work. "Our guild's heated low tables aren't too shabby, eh?"

“They are absolutely wonderful.” Neither the Merchants’ nor the Tailors’ tables were lacking in luxury.

“These cushions have yet to be dyed; we didn’t have in stock the light blue I wanted. Leaves from the World Tree have the most beautiful sky blue, but they are hard to come by even when you have placed an order.”

“Leaves from the World Tree?” That was a very valuable material, but surely Forto was talking about something else to be used as a dye that went by the same name. Dahlia knew of an eye shadow made from finely crushed leaves from the World Tree, and it was indeed a very pretty sky blue. When she had seen it at a cosmetics shop, a small amount of the stuff cost quite a lot of money. If Forto needed it as a dye, then surely he needed a lot and surely it’d cost a lot. As a magical toolmaker, she wanted to learn more of the rare material.

“With the big table, the blanket needs to be longer, so the embroidery will take some time. We need more horned rabbit as well, so we have an order with the Adventurers’ Guild,” Lucia said. Horned rabbits roamed in grasslands, but when they went after fields and crops, they made for fine ham. As such, right before winter was when people hunted them to cure their meat, but apparently, they were also being hunted for the Tailors’ Guild this year.

“About the regular heated low table sets, Ivano, I want to confirm the numbers with you for the first batch.”

“I want to ask you something about the warehouses too, if I could have some of your time, Mr. Forto.” The Rossetti Trading Company owned no warehouses; they wouldn’t have the people to manage one even if they had. Therefore, they partnered with the Merchants’ and Tailors’ to bring the products to market. In any case, the heated low table sets needed storage if they were to be sold.

“Instead of me bringing them up here, why don’t you come down to the first floor to look over the files? I’m not sure if we have much room at the moment, as a shipment of wool cloth just came in the day before yesterday.”

“I’ll do that. Sorry for the trouble.”

“Lucia and Miss Dahlia, please feel free to use the drawing room. We shall join you once we are finished.” And so they split into two parties.

As they waited for Forto and Ivano, Lucia and Dahlia were taken to the drawing room and served black tea by a maid. They chatted about the heated low table, and when they turned the conversation onto the maid, she enthusiastically promised she would buy one this winter, as she was susceptible to the cold. There were many in the Tailors' Guild who wanted tables of their own and were already busy preparing blankets, something that warmed the cockles of the inventor's heart.

A short while later, there was a knock at the door. When the maid opened the door, she let out a small gasp—she had expected Forto, but in came a slender woman on the shorter side with porcelain skin and eyes the color of the clear winter sky. Her light ash-blonde hair was tied up and held in place by a splendid Esterland comb adorned with pearls. As she sashayed into the room, her gray silk dress swayed.

Dahlia did not know who she was, but she did know immediately that she was in the presence of a noblewoman and a formal greeting was in order—even if the woman had entered the wrong room. Dahlia and Lucia immediately stood up.

The noblewoman briefly eyed them and smiled. "My name is Minerva. It is lovely to finally meet; I have heard a great deal about you two from my husband, Fortunato Luini." Though there was no jealousy or distrust, her words could have been perceived as stiff. But it was curiosity that filled her sky blue eyes as she looked at them.

"It is my pleasure to meet you. I am the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia Fano. It has always been wonderful to work under Lord Luini." Lucia's perfect introduction raised the bar for her friend.

"My name is Dahlia Rossetti of the Rossetti Trading Company. The guildmaster has been a joy to work with, and I am delighted to make your acquaintance." Her connection to Forto was somewhat complicated; while Lucia was a direct subordinate, Dahlia was little more than a business partner, hence her use of his title instead of his name. It *should* have been the correct choice, though she would've liked to have been able to mentally search through

the etiquette book.

“Would it be all right if I had some of your time?”

“Yes, of course,” Dahlia answered, and Minerva took a seat on the sofa across from them.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, I would like to thank you for placing your order of fabrics for the heated low table through Forto,” she said, smiling gently, as though aware of how nervous Dahlia was. Then she looked at Lucia. “Ms. Fano, how has your work been at the Magical Garment Factory?”

“It has seen a lot of business under Lord Luini’s leadership.”

“I hope you aren’t overworking yourself.”

“Not at all; I’ve been having a lot of fun!”

“I’m sure my husband really appreciates having someone as capable as you by his side. I hope you will continue to lend him your talents.”

“Thank you for the kind words; I’ll keep giving it my all!” To be acknowledged and appreciated as a seamstress—it was natural that Lucia would be genuinely delighted to receive such high praise.

Minerva smiled even brighter. “I hope you will forever be by his side—on a personal level too.”

“On a personal level?”

“Yes. I would love for you to marry Forto and become his second wife.”

“Hawha—?!”

Beside her, Dahlia froze. There was nothing she could possibly say; she didn't even know if she should be present for this conversation. Even the maid, who was preparing Minerva's cup of tea, caused the cup and saucer to loudly clatter.

"H-Hold on!" Lucia stammered out a series of frantic noises before she could reboot her system. "Mr. Forto and I do not have that kind of relationship!"

"But I know that Forto has taken a liking to you—he even has you, a single lady, address him by his first name. He wouldn't allow you to do so if he didn't respect you or feel close to you."

Dahlia and Ivano called Forto by his first name as well, but she didn't know what she could say to support Lucia.

"That's only because we work together so frequently..."

"Fret not; I'm not faulting you at all. Though I have noticed that ever since the summer, Forto has been spending many late nights at work," Minerva said. "Ms. Fano, if you have any conditions for marriage, I would be more than happy to fulfill all that I can."

Lucia's knee bucked for a second, only for her to lock it in place with her hand. It was obvious to an old friend like Dahlia that Lucia was trying her best not to talk back to Minerva. Dahlia put a hand on Lucia's back, and Lucia looked down and steadied her breathing. "Madam Luini, I truly do not have that kind of relationship with Mr. Forto. We can verify this with a temple contract."

Dahlia caught herself staring at Lucia. In Ordine, offering to sign a temple contract was a way to assure others that one was telling nothing but the truth, though the offer usually came from the mouth of an accused criminal or the witnesses to the crime and not from the average citizen. Lucia put her foot down and her dayflower eyes toward Minerva's.

Minerva responded with an elegant smile. "Is that so? Forgive me for being presumptuous. Though I have to ask—has Forto not spoken to you about it?"

"Not once. We don't speak about much other than work."

"I shall bring this up to Forto again, then. In any case, I hope you will continue to lend your strength to my husband."

“You flatter me,” Lucia said calmly.

Dahlia let out a deep breath. She realized she had become little more than decoration in this room.

“Chairwoman Rossetti.”

“Yes?!”

Minerva didn’t show any of Dahlia’s nervousness. “Chairwoman Rossetti, if you have given any thought to marrying Forto either, I would be delighted if you would please let me know.”

“No, I—” She cut herself off before she could flatly—and perhaps rudely—reject the suggestion, and she couldn’t finish her sentence.

“Please do not hesitate to approach us if Forto—if *we*, the Luinis, can lend you our strength. You are still so young, and your future is still up in the air.” Her sky blues contained hints of neither teasing nor jealousy; it was simply the look of a viscountess explaining the options available.

It was then that Dahlia finally understood. Minerva lived in a completely different world than theirs. If it were useful for their business, she would gladly have her husband take up a second or even a third wife—that much was obvious, given what she had said to them today. Everything was for Forto—or rather, the Luini Viscounty. It was today that Dahlia first felt fear at the prospect of receiving her barony.

Noble Way and Commoner Custom

The sunlight coming through the crystal window illuminated the man's handsome face. Colorful fishes covered the too-big-for-two table. Lucia fixed her posture and sat up straighter—not that the action had any deeper meaning behind it. Today, Forto had invited her to lunch in the nobles' quarter. Though she had refused him once, claiming that she wasn't confident in her table manners, she'd later agreed when he offered to pick out a more relaxed setting for just the two of them. It was a little past lunchtime, and they were now on the top floor of a fancy restaurant in the nobles' quarter.

The building itself was made of glossy black and white stone and had silver doors and hallways lined in thick red carpet. Even the servers were dressed in navy silk. This was not a place where Lucia belonged, but Forto had anticipated her anxiety. All the food had already been laid out on the table and the servers dismissed. He had even sent his attendant to wait in the next room.

Forto had on a black three-piece silk suit that was very sharp on him; he truly looked like the Tailors' guildmaster even more than usual. His shiny blond hair was tied at the back, accentuating his handsome jawline. Perhaps he had plans to meet with high-ranking nobles at the castle after lunch. He always made his clothes look perfect on him, but even by his high standards, his looks today were spot-on.

Lucia had on the dress she and Forto had designed together. The colors were very sophisticated, the white gradating to blue. Fine white lace, daintily sewn, wrapped around her chest and upper arms. Half a year ago, the thought of owning a dress made with top-quality silk like this had been nothing but pie in the sky. That wasn't a long time ago, yet the personal visits Forto had had to make to the magical garment factory, experimenting to get the gradient right, felt like fond memories of the distant past.

"Are you feeling unwell, Lucia?"

"Not at all! I'm not used to coming to a place like this, so I'm just feeling a bit like a fish out of water."

A sweet red wine filled her glass halfway; it must be something he had chosen for her, as his preference was for robust and dry. This was not the first time she had dined with Forto—they had done so many times before—but it had usually been in the company of others from the factory or from the guild. They were usually lots of fun, talking about fabrics, clothes, and how to make different styles work on each other. But today, it was just the two of them, and they were at a place that catered toward nobles; it was hard for her to be her usual lively self.

Besides, she could guess the reason for his invitation to dine together today: likely an apology for how Forto's wife had asked Lucia to become his second wife. Minerva had definitely been under the wrong impression about Lucia's relationship with Forto. It was true that theirs was purely a business relationship, but it was also undeniable that their closeness and overfamiliarity invited misunderstandings. Ever since the founding of the Magical Garment Factory, Lucia had been working nonstop and often late into the night, and Forto would even take her home in his coach. And despite the presence of servants and other employees, it was no surprise that their intimacy had been misconstrued—putting the shoe on the other foot, Lucia could not stay angry at those who assumed there must be something between Forto and herself.

Lucia had heard from her friends at work that Minerva was from an earldom background. Not only was her family higher in rank than Forto's, they had more status and power as well. Minerva had likely done what she had only because, as a noblewoman, she wanted to keep Lucia—someone who was so adept at her own role—under the control of the Luini family. Heck, it would have been preferable if Minerva had been up-front about it.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

Lucia smiled broadly in an attempt to dispel his look of concern. "I am, Mr. Forto. Let's clink glasses!" They raised their glasses to a prosperous future, then began dining.

The morsels loaded onto the white vessels were nothing short of works of art—various cheeses, roses of cured meats, bite-size pies with all kinds of fillings, tender panfried duck, and a soup made with uncommon shellfish. Everything was scrumptious, or, at least, everything ought to have been—today, it was as

though the flavors were hidden behind a veil.

“Does it not suit your taste, Lucia?”

“Everything is wonderful; I’m just a touch nervous.”

“Next time, I’ll be sure to choose a place where you can actually breathe.” Such small talk persisted as they continued with their luncheon.

When it came time for dessert, Lucia found chestnut tart; he must’ve remembered that when they had last spoken about it in the summer, she’d said it was her favorite. Forto personally poured her black tea. “I hope you can forgive my wife for yesterday,” he said at long last, having waited until she finished her tart. “I hadn’t expected Minerva to bring it up to you directly.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure she must be worried, since we spend long hours at work. Oh! More importantly, Dahlia has a lot of connections and supporters...” Ever since the beginning of summer, her friend had been all smiles as she developed magical tool after magical tool at an unstoppable pace, and Lucia was ecstatic for her too. Lucia’s own job was fulfilling and joyous, and she wouldn’t be in the role she was in now if it hadn’t been for Dahlia.

On the other hand, the burden on Dahlia’s shoulders was far from light. Her relationship with the capital’s handsomest man, Volf, made her the target of nasty, jealous rumors from other women. Her success as a magical toolmaker and chairwoman of her company made her the center of attention from solicitors and the envious. Her dealings with the castle and her advisory role with the Order of Beast Hunters put pressure on her and made her an object of animosity.

Yet Dahlia did not give herself enough credit. Even when she had become an advisor to the Beast Hunters, when Guido of House Scalfarotto had become her noble guardian, when Marquis Gildo had become the Rossetti Trading Company’s guarantor, and when she enjoyed various other triumphs, it was all just stomach-churning for her. When it came to her friends, though, she was foolhardy and unpredictably assertive. Despite all that—or perhaps *because* of all that, Dahlia had found herself with many allies and supporters.

“Right. I have sent Miss Dahlia a letter of apology via Ivano.”

“It must have been tough for you too...” Seeing Forto subconsciously put his left hand to his stomach, Lucia genuinely sympathized with him—he would have to deal with the Scalfarottos’ displeasure and Volf’s contempt. As for Lucia, she wished this would all blow over sooner rather than later. “I don’t hold resentment toward anyone, Mr. Forto, so if you could clear the air...”

“About that, actually—it was me who first brought it up to my wife.”

“Huh?”

“It has only been half a year since I met you, Lucia. I understand it might have been somewhat soon, but I have told my wife about you. I just didn’t think she would come to the guild and seek you out first.” Forto looked straight at her; his eyes—navy in the center, bright blue transitioning to dark blue at the edges—wavered. “When I first met you, I thought you were an endearing young lady in your lovely princess line dress. I was shocked to learn that it was your original design and handiwork.”

“Yes, and your silver-gray suit and white shirt fit you perfectly. The pattern was stitched with monster thread too.”

“I see you only remember me for my clothes.” The two of them shared a chuckle; his laughter had become so familiar in just a few months. “When I began working with you, I learned that you were a truly skilled and talented couturier. I admired your taste in fashion, but your inspired ideas were even more amazing. Working with you late into the night, then working with you the next morning has brought me so much joy.”

“Mr. Forto...?”

“Before I knew it, I wanted you to be by my side—not only in work and business, but in life as well.” He stood up and slowly walked to her side, then dropped to one knee and extended his palm toward her. “Lucia, will you marry me? I want to be your protector till the day I return to the dust.” Not a sword but a needle and pair of scissors belonged in Forto’s hand.

A mere half year. Their rank differed, their position in society differed, and their gender differed, but they were the same in their profession and the way they devoted themselves to and fulfilled themselves with clothes.

Lucia had taken his hand numerous times when he escorted her; she knew how warm it was. The misty aqua gemstones in the gold bracelet on his left wrist sparkled.

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“Sorry for dropping in on you, Dahliaaa. Can I crash at your place toniiight?”

When the bell rang, Dahlia opened the door to find Lucia waiting on the other side. The girl with the green hair in braids had a large mesh sack of onions in one hand and a bag from the butcher’s in the other. “Sure thing. Wanna make onion hamburg steaks together?”

“Yeah.” Lucia nodded, then slipped through the door, evoking a memory from many moons ago.

Not long after they had entered college, Lucia had come over to hang out with Dahlia and they had made hamburg steaks. “We’re on a diet, so let’s add lots of onion!” they had said, dicing away with eyes full of tears. Lucia had taken the moment to tell Dahlia about how the other seamsters were bullying her in school, saying how she needed a reality check if she thought someone the likes of her could run an atelier of her own. Dahlia had then recounted how her classmates ostracized her during the labs in magical toolmaking studies. Though her skills came from practicing hundreds of times, the other kids had derided it as no surprise on the basis of her toolmaker father and grandfather. Lucia and Dahlia had kept cutting onions, crying, and venting to each other.

At that point, Carlo had come home and he had been worried sick when he saw the girls. They had brushed it off, blaming their state on too many alliums, which they had turned into onion soup and hamburg steaks that had contained more onion than meat. The three of them had had cheerful conversation at dinner. Still, Carlo must’ve had noticed something was not quite right, and after dinner, he had brought out a prized jar of wild strawberry jam. The girls had then headed up to Dahlia’s room and loaded up cookies with jam even as they complained about how they were going to gain weight from eating so much. Afterward, the grumbling or complaining had been replaced with laughter and talk about their dreams for the future. Ever since then, whenever Dahlia or Lucia had anything to vent about, they would get together with onions and

minced meat, and today, there were enough onions to make up for the two-year hiatus since their last session.

As they were peeling onions in the kitchen on the second floor, Lucia said uncomfortably, “Guess what, Dahliaaa? Mr. Forto himself proposed to me todaaay...”

“Oh, Lucia...”

“I rejected him, so I think I’ll take tomorrow off... It’d be kinda awkward to pretend like nothing happened, right?”

“That must’ve been rough. And yeah, I’d feel awkward.”

Lucia placed an onion atop her cutting board and gave it a good thwack, cutting it in two. She then began finely dicing one of the halves. “How about you, Dahlia? Have you given what Minerva said yesterday any thought?”

“Not one bit. The only thing I’m thinking about is how to politely word my refusal.”

“Yeah, I figured. Lately, I heard a phrase from the seamstresses who work on dresses for noblewoman that goes like ‘Better off marrying an earl than the second son of a marquis.’”

“Even though he’d be one rank lower?”

“Yeah, because if your husband was the current head of the family, you’d wield more authority and forever be a noblewoman, they said. That’s why it’s called marrying outlandishly rich and powerful when a commoner woman marries the current head of a noble family.” Her words reminded Dahlia of Gabriella; she must’ve overcome many hurdles to become Viscountess Jedda. Lucia continued, “That’s what they’d say about me as well if I married Forto of Viscounty Luini. Like a little squid beating up a big kraken.”

“That sure is some comparison. Anyway, you rejected him?”

“Yeah. I said very clearly that I couldn’t be his second wife. He *did* take no for an answer, though he didn’t say anything in particular. Knowing Mr. Forto, I’m sure he won’t force me to resign as head manager either. It’d kinda suck if we aren’t able to chat and laugh like we used to, y’know?” Though Lucia had been

the one who had done the refusing, she didn't exactly look happy. "I wouldn't care about age gaps or ranks or gender or anything like that if I truly liked someone."

"Me either."

"But Mr. Forto isn't looking for his 'one and only'; he has a wife and daughter already. I guess that's just how nobles are, though." Lucia continued slicing away, her knife clashing against the cutting board rhythmically. "I'd hate the idea of not waking up to my significant other. I'd hate only being able to see them once every other day. I'd hate it if they were with someone else and I got jealous. I'd hate it if they had someone else. I've got so many deal-breakers," she said, all in one breath. Her dayflower eyes looked Dahlia's way. "Say, do you think a noble gets jealous if their spouse has other spouses? Or would they all be very happy with each other?"

"I, um, can't say. At least, I wouldn't be able to do it." Dahlia really didn't know. It'd seem natural for Minerva to be practical about the hypothetical situation. But she and her husband lived in a different world than commoners.

"I couldn't do it. No way. I'm jealous and selfish, and I want my significant other all for myself. Well, not talking about children or other family, of course."

"Yeah..."

"Besides, I couldn't imagine myself as Mr. Forto's second wife, and I have a dream to make pretty clothes in an atelier of my very own. Surprisingly, there's a lot I can't compromise on. But if Mr. Forto were a commoner and single, then just maybe I would think about it."

"Lucia..."

Dahlia's friend put on a brave, beautiful smile as she used her sleeves to wipe away the tears that wet her long lashes. "Gosh, these onions really sting my eyes!"



“Ah, what can you do? You need to chop them up really fine for hamburg steaks, right?” Dahlia kicked herself for not being able to come up with anything more sensitive to say. But she knew she was the same as Lucia—neither of them could share the person they loved, even if it was commonplace for nobles to do so.

“One medium-sized patty for each of us? I mean, we *have* been talking about how we’ve gained weight recently.”

“It’s been so long since you’ve come over and hung out; we ought to treat ourselves to two.”

Lucia nodded, threw the minced meat, salt, and pepper into a large bowl, then worked the mixture like it had wronged her parents. “Hey, you mentioned the other day that the waist on your dress was getting a little iffy?”

“Mhm, I think I did say it got just a teensy bit tight. Do you think you can work your magic?”

“Of course!” Her tears had already dried up, though red still tinged her eyes.

If Forto were a commoner and single—it was a moot point, so Dahlia tossed it into the bowl too. Once they had grilled the onion hamburg steaks, she opened her sweetest bottle of red wine for Lucia. If Lucia had anything to say, Dahlia would gladly lend both ears. If Lucia didn’t, then Dahlia would take out all the clothes they had bought together last time. If that wasn’t enough, then Dahlia would bring out everything she owned and become a dress-up doll for Lucia. There was cookie dough in the freezer ready to be baked, and they could have it with lots of strawberry jam and honey. Dahlia knew Lucia was a strong woman. She could grumble all she wanted to today, but she would definitely bounce back tomorrow, and her smile would shine as bright as the sun. Tonight, however, they would nestle close with each other.

“I’ll do something about your dress, and maybe you can make your special cheese sauce for me?”

“Sure thing, Lucia. I’ll make loads.” Dahlia reached for the cheese in the back of her fridge as she shook off the stinging deep in her nose. Tonight’s onion hamburg steaks might be a little salty.

***

At the Merchants' guildhall the same evening, Ivano had received an urgent request for a meeting from Forto. When the carriage came to pick Ivano up, he climbed aboard to find Forto inside. It was obvious at first glance that he was down in the dumps and not like himself at all. "Mr. Forto, did something happen? Is there an emergency?"

"I asked Lucia for her hand in marriage, and she rejected me."

"I see..." Ivano had heard that yesterday, Forto's wife had gone to the drawing room in the Tailors' guildhall. Ivano had assumed that she simply wanted to introduce herself, but Dahlia had seemed unsettled on their ride back to the Merchants'. Ivano's curiosity had been sated when he received a letter of apology from Forto today that explained the situation—his wife, Minerva, had asked Lucia and Dahlia if each would become his wife. It seemed like something the nobility would do, but it was still very shocking.

In a sense, it was fortunate that Dahlia seemed to be handling it pretty well, almost as if it didn't concern her at all. She had even instructed Ivano to write back to say that she didn't hold it against Minerva. Ivano just hoped that word wouldn't get out; he feared a certain elder brother's furious snowstorm. As for the black guard dog, Ivano almost wanted to rouse him with this news.

Today, though, Ivano focused on his mentor. "Mr. Forto, would you like to partake in a commoner's pastime known as 'drinking your sorrows away'?"

"A fine idea. Shall I look for a suitable establishment?"

"If it's all the same to you, how about going over to my home? I have moved into a larger house—though it may still be rather cramped compared to what you're used to—and I have two living rooms. We can enjoy our drinks in one while your attendant rests in the other." Ivano could see the surprise in Forto's widened eyes; a commoner inviting the head of a viscounty and guildmaster to his own home was unheard of. But getting blind drunk at a high-class restaurant wouldn't be right either.

After a moment or two of hesitation, Forto surrendered and accepted the invitation.

“Welcome home, dear.”

“Hi, dad.”

“Daddy!”

The moment Ivano opened the door, his three most beloved people heralded his return. He and Forto had stopped by a restaurant to order delivery, and he had taken the chance to send a messenger to say that he would be bringing home Mr. Forto as a guest. That had been barely ten minutes ago, but Ivano had figured sending notice would be better for everyone’s mental hygiene. However, when Forto and his attendant crossed the threshold, causing the eyes of Ivano’s youngest daughter to dart around, he felt a little sorry for his guests.

“I’m home, everyone! Mr. Forto, this is my wife Loretta and my daughters Irina and Loanne.” His wife was shorter than him, and his daughters were still light enough that he could still hold them in his arms. They all had fine, long silver hair; Loretta had aqua eyes, while Irina and Loanne had navy eyes like himself.

“My name is Loretta. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

“My name is Irina. I’m very pleased to meet you.” His elder daughter had only recently turned seven, yet she managed to do exactly as her mother had.

“I’m Loanne. Nice to meechu.” His youngest, only four, stumbled over her words at the end.

Forto responded with a nobleman’s grace. “My name is Fortunato Luini. Thank you all for welcoming me so warmly in spite of my sudden visit. It is my pleasure to meet beauties such as yourselves,” he said with the business smile of the Tailors’ guildmaster, a face that was famous for causing noblewomen to blush. In return, Loretta showed her guest-welcoming smile, Irina her composed smile, and Loanne her innocent smile. The ladies of the Mercadante family seemed to be relatively immune to the effects of Forto’s smile, for which Ivano secretly felt a little relieved.

“Now, everyone, Mr. Fortunato and I have important business to—” After his explanation, they brought Forto and his attendant over to the living rooms. Loanne kept inquisitively looking over her shoulder in the hallway, but her sister

took her by the hand and kept her walking. Ivano lifted her up and spun her around thrice as much as usual; he'd hoped she would let him today.

Ivano then brought the attendant over to the other living room to wait and told him that the door would be left unlocked. He may have been Forto's attendant, but Ivano would have felt awkward if someone had been watching them drown their sorrows.

In the other living room, he had Forto sit down in the chair at the back. Fortunately, the food had already arrived; Ivano had asked his friend at the restaurant to deliver as soon as possible and said he'd pay double. The room was really not very spacious, and so the smaller table and end tables were covered with food and booze. Not only did Ivano worry about whether it was to Forto's tastes and his attendant's, he prayed that they'd forgive him for the fact that a commoner like him did not employ waitstaff to serve them. The two of them silently touched glasses, then ate as they made small talk.

When Ivano was finished and Forto about two-thirds done, the guest rested his cutlery. Ivano took that as a sign to bring fresh glasses for the table. "Did you expect Ms. Lucia to reject you, Mr. Forto?" he asked, as blunt as could be.

Forto didn't flinch, and he answered flatly, "I gave it a fifty-fifty chance—maybe even sixty-forty in my favor." That was not arrogance. The prospect of marrying rich and powerful was awfully enticing for the baseborn, and, not to mention, Lucia had received a proposal from the head of a noble family, her superior at work, and someone whom she had had a very good relationship with up till now—saying no seemed like hardly an option. "I thought I could allow her to give work her undivided attention, offer her all the fabrics and materials in the world, and protect her from others who might bug her."

"I see."

"Why wasn't I enough for her..." Forto's words formed a question, but they sounded like a soliloquy. His unusually miserable expression was a little hard to speak to.

"I suppose what your wife had done didn't help."

"Not even I foresaw Minerva bringing it up to them."

“I presume, then, you have told your wife about Ms. Lucia?”

“Indeed—I told her the other day when I went to your office.” A nobleman talking with his spouse about taking a second wife was hardly strange. What *was* was the preemptive strike his spouse had launched.

“Forgive me for asking, but your wife is from an earl family?”

“That is correct. Furthermore, Minerva’s mother is from a marquis family. They take care of me a lot.” Minerva must have been powerfully connected; no wonder she had approached Lucia and even Dahlia. For her, it was likely more a matter of headhunting for business than it was for family itself. Some might even have commended her for her prowess as a noblewoman. “Ivano, there is something on which I would like your opinion.”

“Please go ahead.”

“I know I ought to let go and give up, but is there any way for me to get Lucia? I wouldn’t like for her to resign from her position, nor would I like to see the Goodwin Margravate or anyone else have her.”

“There is. It may not be very easy for you, Mr. Forto, but there is a way.”

“And what might that be?”

Though Forto’s eyes wandered, Ivano stared straight into them. “Leave your wife, your family, and the nobility, resign as guildmaster, and become a common clothier.”

“What sick joke are you playing, Ivano?!” He could not hide the frustration or anger in his voice, and it echoed loudly in the room.

“It was no joke, sir. Ms. Lucia is a baseborn woman; she does not share the same perspective that nobles have toward marriage. Ms. Lucia cannot share someone she loves with someone else. It may be natural for nobles to have a first and second wife, but such is not the case with us commoners.”

“Well, a percentage of commoners do, and I have heard that they make marriages of convenience too...”

“Sure, I shall concede that some do, especially among free lovers and wealthy merchants. However, you see, marriage because of love and commitment is a

commoner custom."

"A commoner custom, you say?" Forto parroted Ivano's words back at him before heaving a heavy sigh.

"Everything you have for Ms. Lucia—can you make that exchange, Mr. Forto?"

He paused. "I can't. There is much I have to protect." Forto grimaced, distorting his handsome features, and laughed at himself. His answer was the only answer Ivano had expected to that question. Forto continued in aching monotony, "I suppose I was selfish for wanting to keep Lucia by my side and protect her."

Ivano did not take Forto's evident pain as a sign to stop, however. "If you truly believe that, then what is stopping you from being a great boss who cares for and protects his subordinate? And if I may be so audacious, hasn't Ms. Lucia been happy up until now? What new joy do you believe she would find by becoming a nobleman's second wife, to be pressed into your mold?"

"I..."

"The Forto of Viscounty Luini I know would never have given Ms. Lucia the luxury of even contemplating." Lip service and honesty, evading commitment, gifts if not bribery—he was the one who had taught Ivano the noble way and all those shades of gray, so there was no way he hadn't thought of using those tactics in this case as well. "You should have gone to the Fano residence and talked Ms. Lucia's father. There is no way a mere baseborn workshop foreman could refuse a request from the Tailors' guildmaster for his daughter's hand in marriage. Take hold of her father first, and Ms. Lucia is bound to follow. Such methods are natural for nobles, are they not?"

If Forto had married Lucia against her will, Ivano would have been the first to throw down the gauntlet. Himself, Dahlia, the Rossetti Trading Company, and Lucia were all interconnected by now; he was well equipped to lean on Forto. Ivano continued, "Mr. Forto, do you intend on doing as I have described?"

"No. I cannot. If I were to do that, I wouldn't be able to face—" Forto covered his eyes with one hand before he could finish his sentence. "How pathetic I am, still pretending to be chivalrous."

Days ago, Randolph, Lucia, and Dahlia had spent a long time together in a café—that had been enough for Forto to set off to the Rossetti Company's office in demand of answers. He was a man as collected as they came, yet it was obvious that infatuation had taken over all his senses. He had not come as a viscount nor the guildmaster of the Tailor's but a knight gallantly defending his beloved's honor. "Nonsense. There is nothing pathetic about that. Besides, you're glad to have met her, are you not?"

"Even now do I consider myself blessed to have been able to meet Lucia."

"Then accept her choices and dreams and continue being a good boss and friend; what more do you need to do? And even if Ms. Lucia were to get together with someone, you could still protect and aid her, Mr. Forto."

"You sure don't paint a pretty picture, Ivano."

"But if you play your cards right, your title will forever be 'Lucia's Knight.'"

Ivano was prepared to be yelled at, but subverting his expectations, the corner of Forto's mouth turned upward. "You're ruthless, Ivano, as a vice-chairman from the Merchants' Guild ought to be."

"I will gladly lend you my ears for as long as you would like to converse. My lips are sealed, and I'm even willing to go to sign a confidentiality contract at the temple. So, tonight, why don't you stay, drink, grumble, get drunk, and speak from the heart? This is not a side you ought to show to your family, you see."

"I know."

"Good. Here." Ivano offered his guest a pair of gauze handkerchiefs and an ice crystal, but Forto didn't know quite what to do with the items on the table. "Wipe away the sweat from your eyes, then wrap the ice crystal with the other handkerchief and press it against your eyes if they feel puffy. Trust me on this one—I'm a seasoned veteran."

"And where did you learn of this?"

"From Carlo Rossetti."

"Miss Dahlia's father?"

“The very same. As Mr. Carlo once said, ‘a good man mustn’t show his unbecoming side to a woman’—something a gentleman ought to live by, apparently.” When Loretta was pregnant, Ivano had run into unfair problems at work, and so he and Carlo had spent some time together at a tavern. The elder Rossetti’s tip had been to let booze flush his problems out, and then Ivano would get home and show his wife a bright, drunken smile. He had done so many times since, and it was rather effective.

“A man can’t show his unbecoming side?”

“That depends on whom he shows it to, I say,” Ivano said. “Anyway, stay over tonight. It’s not a big place, but I’m sure your wife will understand if you’re with me. You can drink until you fall, and I shall accompany you. That way, my wife and daughters and your attendant won’t be seeing your face.”

“Thank you, Ivano, I’ll take you up on your offer. I owe you one.”

“Not at all. I’m simply returning the favor of our first bitter drink together, *dear mentor.*” The drink that he and Forto had shared a few months ago had indeed been bitter—an herbed wine that made one speak one’s mind. It was the noble way, so the mentor had said, and then he had given Ivano a ring that protected him against magical confusion, poisons, and aphrodisiacs. That silver ring was currently affixed to a finger on his right hand.

Ivano had been very wary of Forto in the beginning. The unpredictability of a nobleman and the murkiness of his thoughts had made him seem rather despicable. However, having eaten and drunk with Forto a few times, Ivano had begun to understand more of how the nobility, the textile industry, and the man himself worked. Forto was the head of a viscounty and the master of the Tailors’ Guild, but those titles were secondary to the man inside him—a true couturier. He looked happiest and the most himself when he was with Lucia and a pair of scissors, though Ivano couldn’t say that now.

Forto had given Ivano the gift of a handpicked outfit and a pair of dress shoes so he’d look proper when visiting the castle. Forto was frank and upright toward a mere employee and commoner like Ivano. Sure, of course it was because of Forto’s interests in the Rossetti Trading Company. But the fact that he had taught Ivano the noble way and to discern the realities of that very relationship

was something his student very much appreciated.

“Oh, how you’ve grown, Ivano, paying respects to your mentor with a drink. I didn’t think you’d outgrow my tutelage so soon; you’re very capable now, and your ears hear more sharply.”

“No, it is too soon for you to step down as my mentor. I haven’t grown to be more capable; all I have done is borrow strength from capable people. My ears are borrowed too. I have a long ways yet to go.”

“Regardless, I’m unfit to be your mentor anymore. Ivano, seeing how we’re about the same age, would you instead be my friend to whom I can pour my heart out?”

“It would be my honor, Mr. Forto.”

“Just Forto. And worry not about who hears you call me that.”

It was Ivano’s turn to freeze up. Not often did a viscount allow a commoner address him without a title, and even rarer was the permission to do so in front of a third party. But precisely because this sort of thing never happened, it drove home the point that they were equals, friends—though it would take bravery, and explaining it to everyone else seemed like it’d be a headache. In any case, Ivano’s respected mentor had asked to be a friend instead—among badges of honor, this was the biggest. He proudly accepted.

“Thank you, Forto. I’m glad to have you as a friend.” Ivano poured a dark gray drink into each of their glasses—a mysterious mixture with a terrible stench. It was a gag housewarming gift from a friend, who had said it would “definitely mess you up.” Ivano had already tried it, and in truth, it was liquid agony. “Let us drink.”

Forto removed his protective bracelet—he was ready to get drunk—and slammed back a big gulp. “Ack!” The moment it hit the tongue, it tasted sweet. That quickly changed to the stabbing pain of ethanol. Then, the carbonation washed out the palate before burning the throat as the drink passed downward. Bitterness lingered and lingered after the end. Forto’s shoulders shook and his blue eyes watered at his first taste of this poison; it was definitively unpalatable.

Ivano finished his drink and averted his gaze from Forto's. "Boozer's Bane, they call it—an eclectic mixture of spirits from the bowels of the capital. The bitterness of it makes you tear right up, eh?"

His friend put the glass to his mouth again, then smiled with just his lips. "Indeed. Never have I ever had such a bitter drink..."

White Horse, Black Horse

It was halfway through autumn, and the blue skies stretched high overhead—as did the horses before the two friends. In the yard of the Scalfarotto family estate, Volf was calming a beautiful horse with a fine white coat and mane—seemingly straight out of a fairy tale. However, the creature kept sighing and stealing sidelong glances at Dahlia with its blue eyes.

“Erm, take your time, Dahlia. If the mounting block isn’t quite tall enough, I can bring you another one.” Volf’s kindness cut her deep. Even with his assistance, the horse was too tall for Dahlia to get on. Or more accurately, she either couldn’t get her foot in the stirrup or, when she did, failed to lift herself into the saddle. Whereas Volf could hop on no problem without the platform, Dahlia’s balance was terrible, and she had slipped off three times already. “Ah, Grecale’s just too tall. Let me find a mounting block that’ll work for you.”

“Thanks...”

Grecale was the name of this white horse, and it was said to be the most intelligent in the stable. All the same, it was Dahlia’s first time riding, so naturally, she had little idea what she was doing; Volf’s instruction and assistance only helped so much. It had been difficult to get on the horse, but it might have worked if Volf had gotten on first and pulled her up or perhaps even if he had given her waist a little lift from below. Of course, he hadn’t dared to lay his hands on her, and so he was off to find a taller mounting block. After Volf turned his back, the white horse let out a long sigh again. It had been tied to a post in front of the stable and wondering for a while if the two humans were going to get on or not, and perhaps it was fed up with waiting.

Today, Dahlia was wearing a burnt umber jacket and vest, white jodhpurs, boots, and leather gloves. She had been told that the soft outfit was something they had lying around the villa, but the clothes were surely brand new. They also fit her perfectly—too perfectly, especially the trousers. Her debts kept piling up, and Dahlia, standing beside the horse, sighed too.

“Do you think this is tall enough for you?” Volf came back not with a

mounting block but a three-level step stool. It was definitely tall enough, but the question that remained was whether she could stay in the saddle after getting on.

“Thank you,” she said. “Now that I think about it, though, we won’t have a platform like that with us.”

Volf paused for a moment. “Well, I can help you on and off,” he said as he unfolded the step stool.

Dahlia felt bad; her lack of athleticism must’ve had him wondering how to respond. Still, if she required his help, then that would mean she wouldn’t be able to go horseback riding without him. She needed to work out, make a portable mounting block, or figure out some kind of magical tool to help her. The horse turned to her as she was lost in her thoughts. “Ow!” Some of her hair was now floating in the breeze.

“Dahlia!”

“I-I’m fine! It’s just a few strands of hair.” She was honestly a little worried about her scalp—in truth, what the horse had bitten off was more like a whole clump. Dahlia looked up with teary eyes at the culprit, who was now munching on her hair. It couldn’t have been tasty, but perhaps the red reminded it of carrots. She just hoped it wasn’t harmful to the horse.

“Grecale! How dare you hurt Dahlia?!” Volf scolded the animal and activated intimidation, and Dahlia immediately turned away from him. Marcella had taught her that the effects were stronger when facing toward its user, and sure enough, the freeze wasn’t nearly as bad as last time and Dahlia could even move. Grecale likely understood it was in trouble; it drooped its head and was shaking. The other horses in the stable turned silent too.

“Volf, that’s enough! The other horses are getting scared too!”

“Sorry.”

Dahlia looked at Grecale again, and its blue eyes were now teary—the opposite of earlier. “Since I couldn’t get on properly, it must’ve been frustrated and wanted your attention. It was just a little bit of mischief, that’s all.”

“I’m the one who should feel sorry—for our horse’s behavior. They said

Grecale is the easiest to ride, but if it has a mean streak, maybe we're better off choosing another." Volf looked toward the stable, but the other horses looked away, likely still shaken up.

However, from the farthest stall, a black horse poked its head out. It was two sizes larger than all the others, its mane was long, gray, and tightly curled, and its thick, sturdy legs were also gray below the knees. It stared back at the two of them with its sharp, black eyes. There was something special about this horse; it definitely felt a lot stronger.

"Selene?" The black horse lay down, not unlike a dog.

"That one is called Selene?"

"Yeah. They said she's not the best one to ride, likely because of her size, but it looks like she's volunteering. Let me go get her." He walked over to Selene's stall and brought her out. Now diagonally in front of Dahlia, Volf pressed both hands on the horse's neck and looked deep into her black eyes. "Selene, be nice to Dahlia, okay?"

As though answering him, Selene whinnied, then lay down again and even lowered her head to the ground, allowing Volf to easily put on a double seat saddle. "This should make things easier for you too, Dahlia," he said.

"Will it really be all right if I get on like this?" Selene was still on the ground; Dahlia assumed the normal thing was to mount an upright horse.

"Maybe it's not proper, but it'll do until you get the hang of horseback riding."

"It won't be too much strain on Selene?"

"Selene's bigger than the others, so I'm sure she's more than strong enough. We tamed her on the plains, and we believe she's a mix of regular horse and green horse."

The green horse was a monster that used its air magic to propel itself to nearly flying speeds, and Selene's build and features definitely suggested that she had monster blood flowing through her veins. And upon closer inspection, her black coat had a beautiful green sheen to it too.

"Wild horses tend to be hard to break, but Selene seems to be docile," Volf

said as he caressed the horse's neck. Selene was indeed very well behaved; she remained still on the ground.

"I'm counting on you today." After Selene responded with a soft neigh, Dahlia mounted the horse. All she did was sit on the saddle; Volf helped put her feet through the stirrups.

Then, Selene, taking good care of her rider, rose as slowly as possible. There was a little bit of wobbling in the process, but Dahlia felt perfectly confident and appreciative of how considerate the horse was being. Volf, perhaps using the sköll bracelet or his own strength, practically floated up into the saddle.

"I didn't think I'd be this high up. I'd say it's a nice view, but..." For fear of disturbing the balance, Dahlia remained facing forward. For some reason, though, she could feel Volf responding with a smile.

He reached around her waist and grabbed hold of the reins. "I've got you; you won't fall off. Now, let's get Selene walking. Here's how you hold the reins—" Volf's voice was much closer to her ears than she had expected.

Though the autumn air was biting, Dahlia felt an incredible warmth at her back. Thus began her heart-racing horseback riding experience.

"Thank you so much for today, Selene," Dahlia said to the black horse after her lengthy ride. She placed a brown sugar cube on her palm and held it out for Selene to see—a reward for working so hard, as Volf had said. The horse extended her muzzle and took the treat ever so gently into her mouth, her tongue tickling Dahlia's palm.

As he watched her gray mane flutter in the breeze, Volf said, "Go ahead, you can pet Selene."

She very much did want to, but she hadn't known it was written all over her face. "Only if she'll like it."

"Yeah, you can stroke her neck. She might get a little nervous if you get too close to her eyes, though. Call out to Selene first so you don't surprise her."

"Uh, here I come, Selene." Dahlia started by brushing her mane, and though the black horse tensed up her neck for a moment, she calmly let Dahlia

continue. Selene's curls were on the long side, but they were surprisingly soft. Seeing her narrow her eyes in apparent bliss, Dahlia couldn't stop delicately caressing it. "Selene is so smart and gentle. What a good horse."

"Thank you. I'll let the trainer know."

Though Dahlia had been a little unsure at first, her first horseback riding experience had been a good one, all thanks to a clever horse and Volf's guidance. Feeling that relief—and a bit of naughtiness—she said, "Thank you very much for today's lesson, Mr. Scalfarotto."

"Erm, keep up the good work? Aw, knock it off, Dahlia; you're getting me all flustered..."

Dahlia burst out laughing at Volf's very brief attempt at playing the role of her instructor. Selene looked the other way and neighed.

That evening, after Volf had taken Dahlia home to the Green Tower, he visited the stable again to lavish Selene with praise, pets, thanks, and a good brushing. Volf looked the black horse in the eyes. "It's not easy teaching others how to ride. I've been riding since I was a kid, and I've never done any one-on-one instruction with my squad either. I'm not much good at it, I know. Even with a horse as good as you, Selene, Dahlia's still a little insecure, so we've got to do our best to keep her safe..."

What had started off as a monologue about horseback riding had become all about Dahlia. Still, the black horse lent her ears as she gnawed on a pear.

"The key to putting her more at ease will be to keep riding together, even if it does make my heart race—don't get me wrong, I don't mean anything by that. It's just that I have to be careful and safe for her as her instructor."

With perfect timing, Selene shook her head.

"Sorry for talking your ears off."

The curtain of night had fallen without Volf realizing it, and he cut their talk short. His audience was a horse, after all—she probably had grown tired of the attention and the unintelligible rambling of a human.

“Thanks for today, Selene. Rest well tonight.”

As he began to leave, Selene quietly whinnied, lowered her head, and pushed her muzzle against Volf’s back between his shoulder blades. He turned around to find those deep, dark brown eyes looking the tiniest bit lonely.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you to the castle tomorrow.”

The black horse stiffened before heaving a longish sigh.

Until today, Selene had been known as a bit of a bronc, but her reputation was now for being intelligent and considerate. Volf found a new fondness for her too, and he soon began riding the black horse to and fro from the Green Tower.

As an aside, Selene had a large percentage of green horse lineage; she had been dispirited ever since being captured and stabled in the absence of an alpha male. That was why she had been uncooperative, despite understanding her trainers and riders well. When she had felt Volf’s intimidation and gauged his strength, she had realized he was her true master, after which she finally became obedient in this environment, this herd.

For his part, Volf had misunderstood one thing about Selene. She was not lonely—she was merely giving her master a physical push toward that metaphorical first step.

The Brother's Reproach and the Galeforce Bow

"Sorry about this, Dahlia."

"No, don't be. Is there some sort of emergency, Volf?"

"I'm in the dark just as much as you are. All I was told was that there was something urgent and that Dahlia was coming too."

In Volf's home—the Scalfarotto family villa—he and Dahlia advanced down the hallway at a quick pace; they had been suddenly summoned by his older brother, Guido. The horseback riding experience had taken place a few days ago, and nothing of particular note had happened since then. If only Dahlia had been summoned, then they might have inferred that the matter related to the company. But Volf as well? This was a true mystery. The duo was headed to a room at the very back of the villa, the one that Volf said was the designated meeting place. A servant waiting by the door opened it as they approached.

Guido and Jonas were inside. The master was sitting at a large table facing the door, while his attendant stood behind him and slightly off to the side. "Do forgive me for taking up your precious time, Madam Rossetti. I hope I have not interrupted your plans for the day," said Guido.

"Not at all; I had no obligations." After being offered a chair, Dahlia sat down, whereupon she realized this room hadn't a single window and the only door was the one through which they had just entered—a bit claustrophobic.

"Sit, Jonas," Guido said. Jonas did as instructed and sat across from Dahlia, to whom he gave a nod. He was otherwise expressionless, which made her all the more tense. Guido then continued, "Now, on the agenda today: a proper scolding."

"Huh?"

"Sorry?" The two of them responded at the same time to Guido's words, which terribly mismatched the smile on his face.

“This is what you two have made—the Galeforce Blades, correct?” asked Guido. Jonas brought a large case from a side table and set it on the large table. He opened the silver-colored lid, revealing Dahlia and Volf’s creation. Both of them answered in the affirmative. “Volf, you brought the Galeforce Blades on an expedition, used them to effectively slay a monster, brushed it off as Scalfarotto family property so as to not kick up rumors, and then came to me for advice. All that was fine. However, don’t you think you ought to have explained a little more about its power and what happened after you slew the monster?”

“Erm, I could have sworn I told you that the longicollis was decapitated...”

“Yes, that much I heard from you. And how delicious it was. But what I did not hear was that the longicollis was decapitated in a single blow, that an air magic user and a bow knight got all excited, and that there was talk about creating a new weapon. Do you know what happened between those two afterward?”

“Is it possible that Kirk and Sir Milo—”

“Kirk, actually. He is from a viscount family, but his mother is from a marquis family. You see, his mother’s family was very much against her marrying a viscount and had severed relations with her, at least up until little Kirk was born, so the former marquis’s darling daughter had given him a darling grandson, and recently, he himself traveled in disguise to our home and asked for the Galeforce Blades, money no object. It had been a while since I last saw our father so angry.”

“I-I’m sorry,” squeaked Volf.

Apparently the grandson of a marquis had taken a shine to the Galeforce Blades, and the grandfather had gone directly to the Scalfarotto estate to ask if they would concede the magical swords to him.

“Now, what do you think we ought to do, Madam Rossetti?”

“Um, we could hand over the blueprints or a copy of the swords. I should be able to get them done by tomorrow if Volf and I hurry.” Volf had said that he wanted to keep the shortswords with him, so she could simply reproduce them from the recipe.

Guido answered by squinting his blue eyes and lifting the corners of his mouth. “Oh, that would absolutely tickle him pink. But make it so easily and so quickly, and you would prove to the world that you have a mass-producible magical sword.”

His expression had the shape of a smile, yet Dahlia couldn’t shake the feeling that he was not truly smiling at all. In a moment of nervousness, she looked over to Jonas, who had two fingers pressed to the spot between his eyebrows.

Guido continued, “Kirk and the bow knight have been discussing it with other knights who are weapons experts and leadership personnel—they want to apply the same concept to a titanbow and arrows. The brass have asked who the inventor is, Madam Rossetti—and would like to recruit them if possible.”

“They have...?”

“Mm, yes. And if you choose to accept their offer, you would automatically become a royal toolmaker attached to the order. Successfully develop the titanbow, the accompanying arrow, and just a few more things, and you might skip your barony and jump straight to a viscounty.”

“Oh, no! I have no intentions of doing so! Is there possibly a way to hide my involvement?” Dahlia was horrified by the prospect and embarrassed to realize how thoughtless she had been. She hadn’t expected that the Galeforce Blades would make such a name for themselves either.

“Brother, it’s partially my fault for dragging Dahlia into this. Could you please hide her involvement and say that our family acquired the magical sword somehow?”

“It’s too late, I’m afraid—a friend of mine in the Intelligence Office has already asked me about it.” Guido coughed weirdly, as though his throat had been empty and air had suddenly gone back into it. “I’m positive that your involvement is no secret, Madam Rossetti. If the offer comes, *could* you refuse the castle’s offer to instate you as an order’s magical toolmaker?”

Check and mate. Dahlia could hear the crashing and clattering—the collapse of her dreams of having fun crafting household appliance—esque magical tools.

“That being said, I *am* Volf’s brother and your noble guardian—I have the

right and the responsibility to keep you two safe," he said as Jonas closed the case containing the Galeforce Blades and returned it to the side table, replacing it with a thick stack of parchment. "I do not have the ability to completely pull the wool over the Intelligence Office's eyes; you two cannot escape this. However, I can say that you two were merely helping out the Scalfarotto family. We will now have an arms development team."

It sounded as though Guido had run with a lie and somehow turned it into reality, and Dahlia gulped. "Um, are you sure that wouldn't bring a lot of trouble to your family?"

"Nonsense. Founding new businesses is our signature move. Besides, we already have someone who is very knowledgeable in this field, so worry not. Perhaps even you will be surprised by how well everything goes."

"Lord Guido," Jonas said chidingly. His rust-colored eyes shifted; he must've been just as troubled as Dahlia was.

"Jonas's family deals in arms, and thus, he has a great deal of knowledge when it comes to weapons and armor."

"You do, Master Jonas?"

"I learned the gist of things when I was young. My family and I are estranged, so I'm afraid I will not be of any help regarding current markets or business."

"Don't worry about it. All we have to do is to supply a few who want the magical bow. If anything, the scarcity means that they should be very valuable," Guido said with a grin. It was Dahlia's first time witnessing it, and she had to say that he and Volf were rather alike. Guido continued, "The Galeforce Blades will be an invention of Jonas and Volf of the Scalfarotto Weapons Development Team, produced in collaboration with Madam Rossetti. That way, they can't get to Madam Rossetti without getting through us. And if they do try anything, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. So, how does that sound?"

"That sounds amazing, brother! Thank you so, so much!"

"Thank you very much, Lord Guido..." Not only was Dahlia grateful to Guido for acting as her noble guardian, she felt as though she owed him more and more. She bowed deeply.

“I shall be your point of contact with the knights, and I shall send them the specification document and the product. That way, you can rest assured that you will know how the castle uses and modifies the inventions.”

“Thank you for being ever thoughtful.” It was clear that Guido understood the feelings of a creator, and his kindness made Dahlia very happy indeed.

“Now, let us not forget that I am here to reproach you. Number one: if a problem occurs, come to me sooner. Number two: tell me the complete details. Number three: do not place yourself in danger—though, I suppose, that last one would be unfair; you have not only given my brother and the Beast Hunters a new means to do their jobs effectively, but I must also thank you for your care and support toward Volf, Madam Rossetti. However, I am sure he doesn’t want you to put yourself in danger either.”

“Guido...” Volf sounded so relieved, and Dahlia felt the same. She had thought Guido would put a stop to their magical sword crafting, but it seemed like he wasn’t completely opposed to it. She did feel very sorry that she’d made him worry so much, though.

“You were only making the magical swords because of Volf, right? Because he wanted you to distinguish yourself with the Beast Hunters for your barony? I would not put a stop to that.”

Dahlia had to search for her response. Guido’s smile was so full of tenderness that she could not bear to disappoint him by revealing the truth that the magical swords were entirely the product of Volf’s zeal and self-interest. “It was, um, just a bit of research and experimentation,” she meekly said before glancing at Volf.

“It’s because I really like magical swords, Guido! They’re my passion! I wanted one for myself, and so I asked Dahlia for it.”

“Passion.” Parroting Volf’s words was Jonas, whose rusty eyes looked as cold as iron—or was that merely Dahlia’s imagination?

Guido’s sigh rang out in the room. “You as well, eh? Just like Lady Vanessa was.”

“My mother was fond of magical swords too?”

“Oh, yes. Neither gems nor dresses struck her fancy, but one day, she and father traveled to see a magical sword for sale. Perhaps because Lady Vanessa was an ice magic user, she could not activate the air magic on the blade, and so she didn’t purchase it. She sulked for three days upon returning home.”

“Mother...”

It made sense to Dahlia as she recalled that portrait of Volf’s mom in that beautiful dress. Not only did mother and son share similar features, they shared similar interests. Dahlia wondered if they also got disappointed in the same way when their attempts to buy a magical sword failed to bear fruit.

“Anyway, if it’s a magical sword you want, then who am I to put a stop to it? However, your actions have affected Madam Rossetti, and so you must take responsibility for her. Be mindful of her safety, and I hope you will come to me before introducing your magical weapons to others. I wouldn’t want anything bad happening to either of you.”

“I shall take it to heart.”

“Thank you as always for looking out for us, Lord Guido.”

Afterward, Guido went through the stack of parchment with them. With everyone’s signatures, they now founded the Scalfarotto Weapons Development Team, making for a convenient way to get their alibis straight. Dahlia felt as though she had done something wrong, but she had to roll with the punches. When everything was settled, Jonas left the room and returned pushing a silvery cart loaded with black tea.

“Madam Rossetti, I shall remunerate you properly, but I haven’t even an approximation of what that number may be. Would I be able to take some more of your time to sort that out? Of course, I shall pay you in advance as well.”

“You have done so much to protect me already, Lord Guido, so I won’t be needing any compensation.”

“At the very least, allow me to pay you for the material cost.”

The Galeforce Blades consisted of a pair of retail shortswords, some magic crystals she’d had on hand, and scrap mythril thread—the itemized bill for all

those would be laughable. But Guido wouldn't take no for an answer, and so they settled on Volf buying or otherwise providing the raw materials and Dahlia keeping whatever was left over.

But just as soon as she'd found relief and was thinking she could relax with a cup of tea, Jonas called her name. "Madam Rossetti, with the way our arrangement is, I shall be taking credit for your invention and work. I apologize, and I would like to ask if I could recompense you for it."

"You are doing so to protect me, so any kind of payment is unnecessary."

Jonas looked extremely troubled. He had spoken of taking credit for her achievements, but becoming a toolmaker for the castle was the last thing Dahlia wanted for her future—if anything, she seriously considered thanking him instead. Jonas said, "In that case, give the word and I shall offer you my body."

Dahlia's teacup slipped from her fingers, but she managed to catch it with her saucer. Her memory of the occasion on which Jonas had ripped scales from his arm was still vivid. She was about to say that she would not ask for his scales again, but she wouldn't be opposed to getting some if he had shed them naturally. Still, Dahlia couldn't bring herself to be so rude as to ask him outright. To her side, Volf was having a coughing fit; perhaps he had choked on the hot vapors from the tea.

Despite the unsettled looks from the others, Jonas collected himself. "I may be a knockoff fire dragon, but if you wish for any of my scales or fangs, please do come to me anytime."

"Oh, um, thank you very much."

The nerve-racking and discomfiting conversation was finally over, and the four of them adjourned to another room. "Today marks the establishment of the Scalfarotto family's Weapons Development Team, so let us have ourselves an informal celebration. Shall we hold it in the parlor? We have recently installed a heated table."

"Great idea, Guido. It'll be perfect for the chilly weather today."

Dahlia found it charming how in sync the brothers were. However, Dahlia had

experienced how obsessive nobles could be about their heated tables, and so, as she was led to the parlor, she dreaded seeing just what kind of extreme and unapproachable luxury they had introduced into their home.

After Jonas opened the door, the three of them stepped into a room that was modest in size. The dominant color was a warm shade of brown, and large windows afforded the occupants a great view of the white flowers in the garden. In the middle was a six-person heated table with only four chairs. It had a sandy table top, a fluffy auburn blanket, and a chocolatey rug underneath. This was only slightly more premium than the models commoners would have, which put Dahlia at ease. The chairs were trimmed in red leather that covered even the legs to keep them warm, and casters were attached to the bottom so it would be easy to move about—the ingenuity of the furniture maker for sure. Dahlia took the seat she was offered, and the warm air flowed from beside her feet. It was actually quite nice to experience for herself what it was like to get under a heated table without having to take her shoes off, but she kept her back stiff and straight, as she was still in Volf's home and a nobleman's parlor.

"Make yourself comfortable, Dahlia," said Volf, seated to her right. He must've seen the tension in her, and she appreciated him being so welcoming.

"This *is* where the Rossetti Trading Company is officially located, Madam Rossetti, so treat it as your second home," Guido added.

"That's, um, that's very kind of you." She smiled to suppress the *Yeah, right* she wanted to say. Dahlia was still in the presence of Guido and Jonas; how could she possibly act as though she were back at the Green Tower?

"This heated table is nice too, but my wife adored the heated low table we first received. She made space in our bedroom for it, you know? My daughter begged for one as well, and after we installed one in her room, her tutor was shocked by how quickly she got her schoolwork completed." How touching that was, but it shocked Dahlia too, as she would've guessed Guido's daughter would have fallen asleep in the heated low table instead. He continued, "It seems that a chilly room and a warm heated low table keep her mind running smoothly. She's very studious, just like her mother. I, on the other hand, get scolded by my wife because I keep falling asleep at the table."

“Oh, Guido,” Volf said, chuckling. Guido was also so busy with work and the kotatsu was so cozy; he couldn’t be blamed for falling asleep.

“I shall order that the food be brought in.” When the other three took their places in the heated table, Jonas left the room.

“Now that Jonas is gone, let me take the chance to express my gratitude to you for giving Jonas a heated low table, Madam Rossetti. He has been enamored with it.”

“I’m very happy to hear that.” If she remembered correctly, what Jonas had requested was a common six-person low table, large enough for him to use at home with his family. Dahlia had received the standard letter of appreciation from Jonas as well, but to hear that he had actually been putting it to good use pleased her greatly.

“The other day, when I visited him in his room, I saw the heated low table sitting right in the middle. He was lying on his belly reading a book with only his head and his hands sticking out. He was even sipping on his alcohol with a long straw dangling from the bottle! Seeing that colossal turtle made me split my sides.” Guido then put his index finger to his lips, and Dahlia and Volf stifled their laughter and agreed not to say a word. “It’s been too long since I’ve seen Jonas so comfortable and relaxed.”

“The Table of Degeneracy strikes again.” That name should have been buried deep in Volf’s mind already, yet here he had dug it out again.

Dahlia scrambled to find something to say. “Master Jonas must be very fatigued.”

“I’m sure he is, but he runs cold—well, only because of his fire dragon blight. I always have Jonas keep a fire crystal—powered hand warmer with himself throughout the winter months; he never seems to get warm enough.” Apparently, being possessed by a monster affected body temperature too. Dragons were reptilian and thus were poikilothermic creatures. Perhaps the fire part also played into it—any kind of weather would probably be cold to a fire dragon.

“Dahlia, do you think Master Jonas would enjoy wearing one?”

“I think he would, yes.” Volf must have been trying to discreetly bring up the portable warm air circulator. Just as she was smiling to herself about how great minds think alike, there was a knock at the door.

“I have relayed the order, and the food should be coming—erm, is everything all right?” When Jonas walked back into the room, all three pairs of eyes fastened onto him, and he narrowed his own in suspicion.

“We were just talking about the heated low table. Let’s continue that conversation over some food. You are a guest of honor today, so come sit, Jonas,” said Guido.

The attendant did as ordered, sitting across from Volf. It took only a moment before the other servants and maids brought a mélange of food to the table. Though Guido had said this celebration was to be informal, Dahlia couldn’t help but worry about her table manners. After setting the table, the servants departed, leaving only the cart, much to Dahlia’s relief. She would not have had a good time if she’d had to worry about when they would switch plates or how full her glass was.

“Let us raise our glasses to a joyous occasion—the founding of the Scalfarotto family’s Weapons Development Team. Cheers!”

“Cheers!” The others grabbed their glasses of red wine and drank to Guido’s toast.

On the table was a splendid display. Before each place were one plate of cooked vegetables shaped into bite-sized spheres and another of red, white and yellow cheeses; fried porgy-like fish with a vibrant green herb sauce; short-cut pasta in a cream sauce with thinly-sliced venison, all topped with a scattering of chopped basil; roses of cured ham, prawns, and savory custard on large spoons; and—what surprised Dahlia the most—little breaded and fried balls of rice. Those were known here as arancini; egg, cheese, and steamed rice were mixed together and formed into spheres, then deep-fried—so she had been told. It was unlike any rice dish she had ever cooked, yet it was such a nostalgic flavor.

Jonas, though, had something that better befit him. Instead of fish and ham and whatnot, he had a platter of various meats, all still dripping blood. It was a bit of a shame, as the food on the table was so delicious, yet a person with a

blight could not enjoy it the same way.

When they'd polished off some of the plates, Jonas brought over a deep silver dish from the cart. He opened the lid, and a cloud of steam billowed out. The dish itself might have been some sort of magical tool that kept food warm, as its contents did not seem to have cooled one bit since it came out from the kitchen.

"Osso buco—that's braised veal shank, a favorite of us Scalfarotto brothers," explained Guido.

Each of the thick, elliptical chunks of meat had bone jutting out from the center, and it had been cooked in what looked and smelled like a tomato-based sauce. Dahlia brought a bite to her mouth and was shocked first to find the meat melt-in-your-mouth tender. Then the sweetness and hint of acidity from the tomatoes, combined with the herbs, spices, and wine, burst into her mouth. It was so rich and delectable; Dahlia could see why it was one of Volf's favorites.

"How is the beef?" Guido asked. "It was raised in our lands."

"It's so very delicious." She didn't have the words to express what was so delicious or how delicious it was, just that it *was*, all of it.

And although the meat was so tender, Volf was chewing and savoring every bite of the osso buco for as long as he could—that much was obvious.

However, Dahlia must be on her toes at all times, lest she drip any of the sauce onto and stain her tea-colored dress. It wasn't possible to wait until the dish cooled down a little either.

"Madam Rossetti, you needn't fret about table manners when you're with us; don't forget that osso buco is our favorite."

"Sorry, I'm not sure if I understand what you mean."

Jonas answered, "Osso buco originates from the northeast of Ordine, and it is said to be a peasant food. Nobles tend to avoid dishes with bones as well as cuts of meat like shank."

"I never knew that. I feel sorry for them, missing out on something so delicious."

“Hear, hear! We don’t care as long as something tastes good, and so osso buco gets served at our family dinners quite often. If other high-ranking nobles knew about it, they’d surely call us parvenus,” Guido said.

“Parvenus?”

“Our grandfather is a viscount, our father an earl, and I shall become a marquis next year—a promotion per generation. Other high-ranking nobles would consider us nothing more than upstarts.”

“Being promoted for your deeds is nothing short of honorable. The whole Kingdom of Ordine is using your water crystals, after all,” said Dahlia. The Scalfarottos were best known for the Great Water Reform. The king at the time had desired that no household in the land should be without an adequate supply of water, and the Scalfarotto family had delivered by developing a system to mass-produce water crystals. Those affordable water crystals had brought great prosperity unto the kingdom and a marquisate unto the Scalfarotto family—labeling them as parvenus was outright slanderous.

“I appreciate that you see it that way. The mass-production of water crystals and wastewater treatment has become something so familiar; people clamor for more convenience now.”

“I empathize.” Without realizing it, Dahlia slowly nodded. It was the same with magical tools. Like the magical lantern, hot water dispenser, and dryer—they had become so commonplace and were now taken for granted, so people clamored for more fuel efficiency, more power, less weight, lower prices, and their voices were loud.

“The more troublesome and loathsome the problem, the more convenient and obvious the effects of the tool that solves it. In fact, if sanitation were such a clean, simple job, we wouldn’t have been such successful upstarts.” Being a future marquis must be hard, yet Guido’s expression bore Scalfarotto pride. “It’ll only get busier from here. When are you going to quit the Beast Hunters and help me with the family business, Volf?”

“I will think about it when I’m at retirement age,” the brother answered curtly, as he received a second helping of the osso buco from Jonas.

When everyone was finished, the maids came to take away the dishes, and then Jonas pushed in another cart; this one carried white wine and individual plates, each with four pieces of a pinkish sausage. “I believe this is a dry-cured red wyvern sausage from across the border. Please have a taste.” Ehrlichia wasn’t called the land of herders for nothing—they had finally reduced the monster into victuals.

“Red wyvern? That’s the same thing that almost turned me into a snack right before I met you, Dahlia.”

Dahlia had been reaching for a piece but froze with her hand extended in midair. “Why did you have to say that now?” she muttered.

“It’s no big deal—we’ve turned it into dessert, after all.”

His smarty-pants humor left her unimpressed, so Dahlia dropped the topic and tore a bite off the sausage. *Tastes like a savory whitefish* was her first impression. It had good texture and it wasn’t as salty as she had anticipated; in fact, it seemed lighter and healthier than ordinary cured meat.

“It tastes like chicken thigh,” commented Guido.

“And also a bit like whitefish,” Dahlia added.

“I suppose that makes sense. Wyverns fly in the skies, and draconic creatures have their similarities to fish too,” said Volf in reference to the inexplicable chicken-fish flavor.

As the three of them expressed three different opinions, Jonas cast his eyes downard. His blight was that of a fire dragon, and perhaps wyvern sausage was too close to home. Just as Dahlia was starting to worry, Jonas’s eyes of rust turned to her. “Madam Rossetti, how do you like the salami?”

She paused to find the right words before saying, “Erm, I find it quite novel.” He tilted his head as he looked at his oxide-colored arm.

“Is something bothering you, Jonas?” Guido asked.

“I was just wondering whether the flesh underneath the scales would taste more like dragon or human. I have never had the chance to find out.”

“Jonas, do not make me beg you not to turn your arm into salami.”

Dahlia was glad she wasn't taking a sip of her wine—she would've spat it out. Instead, she tried to look as neutral as possible as she witnessed a smiling Guido making a horrifying joke while Jonas's impassive expression remained unchanged. This must be ordinary banter to them.

"Guido, surely that's going too far. And Master Jonas, please don't treat your physical body like nothing but material." Volf was the only one who was making any sense. Then again, he would sometimes make off-color jokes along similar lines, so the two brothers weren't really very different in that regard.

"Ignoring my flesh, I would be glad to offer my scales as material if they would be of use. The right half of my body has self-regeneration that heals me quickly, just as a fire dragon heals itself—much faster than any ordinary human."

"Is that like a natural response that casts healing magic?"

"Yes. My healing magic is slightly different from a human's, but it is similar enough, so I hope you will not worry."

However, Guido was not so calm. "I'm still going to worry. You may have self-regeneration magic, but when anyone else casts healing magic on you, it doesn't work."

"Is that right?" Volf looked dead serious as he listened and nodded. Dahlia found herself looking at him, as she didn't quite understand the conversation.

Jonas explained before she could ask. "The areas that my blight affects are not very responsive to human healing magic, and if the area is large enough, healing magic does not work at all. Potions and the like help somewhat, though, so there is no problem."

That monsters could not be healed by human magic was news to Dahlia. "I have seen a priest heal the knee of a horse that was drawing a carriage before, but is healing magic not effective on animals?"

"It's effective if the animal has no magic or if the monster has very little. It will not be effective on monsters with some magic, as they say a human's magic and a monster's are incompatible. That's why, when our sleipnirs get hurt, we give them potions instead," explained Volf.

That must mean a person was imbued with the monster's traits and magic

when blighted. No wonder Jonas froze in the winter. “Master Jonas, I understand that you are susceptible to the cold in the winter?”

“Yes, ever since my blight. It does not immobilize me, so it does not pose a problem.”

Assuming that dragons, like reptiles, were poikilotherms, she asked, “The cold must make it at least somewhat harder for you to move around. I would assume it makes you rather sleepy as well?”

“Are all magical toolmakers so knowledgeable about blights? Or have you perhaps spoken to someone or read about this somewhere?” Jonas replied at a somewhat rapid clip; she must’ve hit the nail on the head.

“No, it’s just that lizards and snakes become dormant when the weather gets cold, so I figured that dragons may be similar.”

“I see fire dragons are but equals to the common lizard and snake in your eyes, Madam Rossetti.” Guido’s snickering earned a glare from Jonas.

“Master Jonas, we were just talking about this earlier—would you like to give it a try? Tuck it underneath your jacket and it will keep you very warm.” Volf was already taking off his top and undoing the portable warm air circulator—Dahlia would never have guessed he was wearing it.

“I do have a crystal hand warmer on me already...” Despite his furrowed brow, Jonas was not getting much of a choice. He took off his jacket as instructed, and a heavy metallic clank rang out as he set it down on on the side table. Jonas was an attendant and bodyguard; he likely carried a shortsword, or at least some stationery. Volf then strapped the portable circulator onto Jonas’s back; he was now down to his white dress shirt. Jonas put his jacket back on, then tugged on one of the two strings dangling in front of him—one controlled the power and the other the temperature—and fixed his collar. He pulled the other string three times, likely setting it to its warmest output, then simply stood there with his head hanging low for a while.

“Is, um, everything all right, Master Jonas?” Volf asked hesitantly.

“This is”—Jonas’s whole body trembled before he squeezed out the rest of his words—“nice.” He looked back up, showing his gleaming rust-brown eyes; the

pupil of the right appeared as though torn vertically. His V-shaped lips exposed more of his pearly white canines than usual, though Dahlia wondered if that was just her imagination.

“Jonas.”

“Master Jonas.”

When the Scalfarotto brothers called the attendant’s name at the same time, Jonas reverted his red eye to normal. It was the first time Dahlia had ever seen such a tender smile on his face. “It is as though spring has sprung and my body thawed.”

“I’m happy for you.” Dahlia was very relieved. It seemed like Jonas’s sensitivity to the cold was even worse than she had thought, and she wanted to fast-track a unit specifically for him.

“Lord Guido, may I have your permission to move about in order to try it out?”

“Go ahead. Don’t break anything, though.”

Jonas tapped his heel twice, backflipped high up into the air, landed, paused, and somersaulted another two times before landing again with a dull metallic clank. It would have been impossible to detect that he was wearing extra equipment just by watching his graceful moves—they were acrobatic, although putting it that way was perhaps somewhat demeaning.

“The warmth really helps you move around fluidly, doesn’t it, Master Jonas?” asked Volf.

“Yes, this is tremendous. May I inquire as to where you bought this pocket heater?”

Before Dahlia could say anything, though, Volf—with a bright smile—beat her to the punch. “This is a product the Rossetti Trading Company plans to release soon, called the portable warm air circulator! I’m planning to have our squad give it a field test.”

“This is the first time I’m hearing about this portable warm air circulator, Volf.”

“Same for me. Who is its inventor?”

The question was undoubtedly for Volf, yet eyes blue and rust-brown were pointed Dahlia’s way. “Oh, no, I wasn’t the sole contributor! Volf, Fermo—sorry, *Chairman Gandolfi*, and I developed it together. All three of our names are on the paperwork as well.” The portable warm air circulator was a magical tool derived from the heated low table. Dahlia and Fermo had insisted that Volf’s name be put on the documents, even if they had only been able to convince him by lowering his share of the profits. Ivano had fully supported the outcome.

“A co-development by the three of you? I see. Are there any other magical tools that my brother has a part in?” Guido stood up with the bottle of white wine and reached over to pour for Dahlia.

She scrambled to remember what etiquette required of her. “Yes, there’s a derivative of the heated low table—”

But Jonas cut her off as she was coming up with what to say. “Lord Volf, the Galeforce Blades are a wonderful design, but perhaps there are other charming magical swords as well?” He had already moved to stand beside Volf and, with an odd smile, was filling up the younger Scalfarotto’s glass. It was *filled* filled—wine would normally come no more than a quarter the way up the glass, but Volf’s had already reached the two-thirds mark. All of a sudden, the heated table they were seated at felt too chilly .

“The, uh, the other ones, you ask?” His golden eyes fluttered over to Dahlia. Volf had probably meant to talk to Guido about this earlier, but that ship had already sailed. Besides, he had pretty much inadvertently confirmed there were indeed “the others.”

In any case, there was no hiding it, though it was Guido who spoke next. “Madam Dahlia Rossetti, is Volf asking too much of you? As his brother, I am very concerned that his selfish requests are putting you at risk.”

Guido’s voice when he called her by her full name had been extraordinarily kind, yet Dahlia felt his true feelings must be absolutely the furthest thing away from kindness. “No, not at all. On the contrary, I would say he is helping me a great deal.”

“Now, why don’t you two tell me all about the derivatives of the heated low

table *and* all the other magical swords?”

“Oh, yes, I must say I’m very interested as well,” added Jonas.

With great anxiety, Dahlia and Volf began explaining everything from soup to nuts, pausing at intervals and locking eyes to check in with each other. It was an enlightening experience—Dahlia could not remember the last time she’d had rivers of cold sweat running down her back in spite of receiving bright smiles from her conversation partners. Fortunately, Guido and Jonas neither reprimanded her nor enjoined her to cease making magical swords; they only had her promise that she would immediately and accurately report to them if any sort of trouble were to arise. After their chat, Dahlia would keep one secret from them, though—the silent smiles shared by the nobleman and his attendant were clearly those of two worrywart older brothers.

“Isn’t it great, Dahlia? Now we can proudly craft our magical swords.” Any trace of nervousness in Volf’s manner had disappeared, and all that was left was an innocent grin.

Guido cocked one eyebrow at her. “Oh, that’s right. Volf is to train under Jonas today, isn’t it? Well, I could use a bit more exercise myself, so I think I’ll join as well.”

“Oh, uh, I’m thinking I ought to send Dahlia home after this.”

“I summoned Madam Rossetti out of the blue today and disturbed her work, so I ought to have her guard Marcella take her home.”

“Lord Volf, as I shall be borrowing the portable warm air circulator, I implore you to provide me further instruction on its usage.”

It seemed like Volf had lots of work ahead of him still today, so Dahlia thought she should get out of their hair. “Don’t worry, Volf—I’ll be okay with Marcella. I hope your training goes well.”

“Dahlia...” For whatever reason, the way Volf looked back at her reminded Dahlia of the dog she used to have in her previous life—Volf was so full of anxiety and fear, as the dog had been on one particular occasion: while still a puppy, it had encountered a big dog on a walk—

Jonas bidding her farewell interrupted her errant thought. “It has been a

pleasure today, Madam Rossetti. I hope to see you again sometime soon."

A few days later, when Volf visited the Green Tower, Dahlia asked him how the training had gone, and he responded that "it was as though a fire dragon and an ice dragon were before my eyes."

***

"Thank you very much!" In the reception room at the Order of Beast Hunters' wing of the castle, a young man beamed from ear to ear, his green eyes sparkling, as he clutched a black leather case with both hands.

"Sir Leonardi, please wear these when handling the Galeforce Blades." Jonas, not in his usual attendant uniform but a black three-piece suit, placed a pair of black leather gloves on the table.

Dahlia, too, could but smile seeing the youth even happier after taking the pair of gloves. Beside her stood Volf; Grato, the captain of the Beast Hunters; Griswald, the vice-captain; and a bow knight, who was smiling just as sweetly. What the young man by the name of Kirk Leonardi was holding was a pair of Galeforce Blades inside their case, and the gloves that Jonas had handed him were made from black wyvern leather.

A few days ago, the beautifully tanned full hide and the payment for the magical shortswords had arrived at the Scalfarotto Weapons Development Team's headquarters—Volf's mansion; the sender had been Kirk's maternal grandfather, former marquis. Dahlia had been present too, and she had been shocked by the blast of magic when the hide was unfurled. She never would have guessed that quality black wyvern leather held so much energy. Whatever was left over after making the gloves had been the team's to keep, and there was enough to make a whole coat—the piece of hide alone had been more than enough to pay for the Galeforce Blades. Furthermore, the Scalfarotto family had given the leftover hide to Dahlia as research material to cover developmental fees, as they already had their own supply. It had taken some convincing, but in the end, she had finally accepted the leather and was now looking forward to all of the things she could do with it.

"Sir Volf, Sir Goodwin, thank you so very much! I'll treasure these!"

“I’m glad you’re glad, Kirk.”

“Thank you for your patronage, Sir Leonardi. Please let us know anytime if you ever need adjustments or maintenance.”

“I will, thank you!” If people took their eyes off him for a moment, it seemed certain that Kirk would fly out the door and try out his new toy.

However, seeing how everyone remained seated, Jonas brought from behind him a long magically sealed case and opened it atop the table, revealing the only thing inside—a dark green bow. It must measure more than two meters, as it stood even taller than Volf. “This is an air magic—enchanted titanbow, the Galeforce Titanbow prototype, developed and crafted by Scalfarotto Weapons Development Team technicians.”

As he’d been rehearsed to, Jonas told nothing but the truth and deliberately concealed Dahlia’s involvement. In reality, she had gone through the specification documents and checked the materials. Jonas and the bowyer had assembled the titanbow, while a subordinate of Guido’s had enchanted it—incidentally, the enchanter’s grade twelve magic had been just enough, meaning that the Dahlia, with only grade ten, would have had no chance.

“The bow itself is made from green wyvern bone, the bowstring from bicorn tail, the arrows from green horse bone, and the thread connecting the arrows is mythril. It is enchanted with moderate air magic via wind dragon scale. Some physical strength is necessary to draw it, though I am confident it should pose no problem to the bow knights,” Jonas continued. He pointed the Galeforce Titanbow towards a window and drew it. That activated its air magic, causing a mirage in the form of thin, fluttering wisps. Something composed of so many rare materials should have quite the powerful magic, and when Jonas dry loosed the bow, the bowstring shrieked sharply enough to hurt unprotected ears. “The draw weight on the finished product could be one step heavier, though I am afraid it may be tiring to keep it drawn when lying in wait for monsters. We can always adjust it to the archer as well.”

The bow knight’s eyes widened. “Right...”

“This bracelet is for you, Sir Leonardi. It has been enchanted with wind dragon scale as well, so it should work very well with your course correction air magic.”

“Thank you.” Kirk and the bow knight both had very serious looks on their faces.

“Hm, it may be easier to ascertain if we give it a test; I have the training ground reserved for us. With your permission, of course, Mr. Goodwin,” the captain said.

“Yes, and thank you for organizing everything,” he replied. “Oh, and please call me Jonas, Sir Bartolone—I believe we shall be working together more in the future, not to mention that there are many knights here with the same family name.”

“Very well, Jonas. Call me Grato as well. And the quick turnaround is much appreciated.”

“My pleasure, Sir Grato.”

“Guido and I are quite familiar as well, so feel free to come to me directly from now on.”

Dahlia was quite impressed to see Jonas all smiles with Grato—she had been the quintessence of nervousness the first time she came to the Beast Hunters’ headquarters. Perhaps Jonas, like Volf, was a natural businessman, or perhaps it was something he had learned with his family.

Grato asked, “By the way, I was wondering if there are people from your family in the Scalfarotto Weapons Development Team.”

“No, this is purely a Scalfarotto family venture; it has nothing to do with my family. Please come to me or the Scalfarottos if there is anything you need.” Jonas’s voice sounded a little icy.

The group headed to the very back of the castle’s training grounds. It was a ways from the Beast Hunters’ wing, and covering that distance in heels was an ordeal and a half.

“The target is all yours,” said the knight who had likely readied it ahead of time.

A look around her surroundings revealed to Dahlia that a handful of

spectators had been waiting for them; their dress suggested they were bow knights and air mages. Then there was the circular target off in the distance at the other end of training grounds. That was no exaggeration, and it was much farther than Dahlia had expected it to be. It took her a few moments of looking to realize that there was a log next to the target, and she decided she did not want to know why there was a metal plate nailed to the log.

"Here, use these, Dahlia." Volf handed her a pair of field glasses, which she was very thankful for. Grato and the mages each had a pair as well; the bow knights and Kirk stared down the target with naked eyes, however.

"Wind's picking up."

"The target is swaying a little too."

Even with binoculars, Dahlia could not see what they were seeing. *Just how good are their eyes?!*—the question must've been painted on her face, as Volf answered, "Many of our bow knights are capable of farsight magic, as is Kirk. Some of them put lenses in their eyes during combat as well."

"Oh, I see." She had just learned something new. What Volf was referring to was like the contact lenses she had once known, and she would like to see what they were like in this world.

"Let's give it a shot." A bow knight donned black leather gloves and drew the bow—or rather, he *attempted* to. His arms trembled and could not reach full draw, and he relaxed the bow. "Apologies. My hands slipped." The knight smiled stiffly as he stuffed his hands deeper into the gloves and drew the bow again. Now under tension, the softly creaking bowstring and the nocked arrow began to emit magic. When he loosed, there was a sound as though a monster were crying out, followed by an abrupt crash at the other end of the arrow's trajectory. The target and its stand flew backwards.

"Wow!" Griswald exclaimed in awe after confirming the disappearance of the target with his azure eyes.

Dahlia forced a smile and recalled the process of designing the bow. When they were deliberating on the materials, she had offhandedly mentioned that wind dragon scale enchantment would have a great effect. Such a treasure was terribly hard to come by, and she had never imagined that Jonas would simply

grab one off a shelf. As she was still dumbstruck, Jonas had asked that she help out with the research into its properties and casually handed it to her. Fire dragon and wind dragon materials had been nothing but lofty goals when she founded the Rossetti Trading Company, yet there she was receiving such prized material from Jonas. It had been slightly terrifying, to be honest.

Grato's voice snapped her back to the moment. "We will have quite an easier time if we can manage to attack monsters from this distance."

"It's really something, but if we don't dial it back down a bit, we'll lose out on any harvestable materials," Volf muttered in Dahlia's ear. She could not agree; there was nothing better than slaying monsters without putting anyone in danger.

"Ready, Kirk?"

"Yes!"

The youth raised his right hand, while the bow knight beside him nocked the mythril-tied arrows one at a time. The latter made the bow creak again, and it must've taken him a lot of strength, as his weapon was a little shaky. The pair of arrows all but disappeared; little more than a faint green shadow was visible as they whistled through the air. If she could have tracked them, Dahlia would guess they flew even faster than the first time. A sharp metallic sound cut through the air.



“Such power...” mumbled one of the spectating bow knights. Then came the applause and cheering from the others.

Through her binoculars, Dahlia finally noticed something odd: the log and its metallic plate slowly slid rightward. Whether the arrow continued flying or landed immediately behind the target was a mystery, however.

“We’d be able to take care of a forest serpent in an instant!” Volf said.

Grato did not answer with the same excitement. “If anything, we ought to learn how far the arrows go after striking the monster. If we’re not prudent about what’s beyond our target, you boys might just get split in half too.” The captain did have a very good point; it wasn’t as though the arrows had brakes. “Another problem might perhaps be that monsters would learn its distinctive noise.”

“That might be helpful if we want to scare them off, but it will definitely be a hindrance if we are out to cull.” Monsters that settled too close to civilization had to be eradicated, and it might be disastrous if they scattered as soon as they heard the whistling.

“I have heard that blades tend to slip off a kraken’s soft flesh, so perhaps if the Galeforce Titanbow were made stronger and its arrows’ mythril thread made longer, it would be effective in that application as well,” Jonas said.

“Honestly, the limiting factor is the user. Even with strengthening magic, I was barely able to draw the bow,” the knight who had tested the bow put in with a grimace.

Kirk turned to him and smiled. “Shot as it is and with a bit more practice on my end, I think we can give it some more air magic!”

“You think you can make it even more powerful, Kirk? Hm, if we put on some more muscle and get our strengthening spell stronger, it might just work—let’s *make* it work!”

“Slaying a kraken with a magical bow—how romantic!” Volf exclaimed.

“Finally, the era of the bow knight has dawned!”

“The Galeforce Titanbow could still use some improvement. I shall do some

research on magical tools that can amplify air magic. I hope to count on your help with future development—”

The bow knights cut off Jonas in their rowdiness. “We should be the ones thanking you!” Apparently, magical bows were just as full of romance as magical swords, and Volf was silently nodding in empathy.

“With this much power at this distance, the Scarlet Armors might be able to make fewer appearances on the field,” said the captain.

“Perhaps one day, us Beast Hunters will all be able to wear armor of the same color,” replied the vice-captain. This time, it was Dahlia who silently nodded to herself. The day that Volf—and all of his comrades in arms—no longer had to don the scarlet armor could not come soon enough.

“Ah, Rossetti, Jonas, if you are free, join us next week for our field training. It will be a day trip by carriage to a reservoir along the western highway. Just a quick inspection, but I’m hoping to test out the portable warm air circulator and how the Galeforce Titanbow handles in the woods.”

“I would love to go. It would be great to see how the portable circulator works in the field as well.”

“I would be delighted to attend.”

“Much appreciated, you two. The location we’re inspecting is a rocky stretch in the hills upstream, and so there are likely to be many armored crabs around. We can take their shells back as material and use up everything else on location.”

Grato seemed to be saying more, but Dahlia was scratching her head. *Keep the armored crab shells but use up everything else? Does he mean...*

“Fresh armored crab? We’ve got to grill them!”

“Armored crab hot pot sure sounds good.”

“Ooh, can we grill up the tomalley too?”

The knights’ smiles and words just did not seem appropriate for an expedition involving monsters. Griswald laughed dryly and explained, “A celebration for the rookies upon reaching half a year with the squad. We usually hold it in the

castle with plenty of liquor, but we shall be having armored crab by the water this year. Part of the field training too, of course."

"Lucky. In our year, we had ours in the conference room with little more than red wine and cheese."

"It was good stuff, but I didn't know anything about wine at the time. All I could think was how bitter it was..."

"By winter, I had a little less than fifty percent of the rookies I started with. There was a lot of wine left over."

Their reminiscing about their rookie years failed to bring a smile to the faces of the other knights, and Grato cleared his throat to dispel the gloom. "Virtually every rookie stayed with us this year, and there has even been word of other knights wanting to transfer over to our squad. Might just have to order more camp stoves."

"Thank you very much." Dahlia didn't know how else to respond.

The captain of the Order of the Beast Hunters chuckled. "Putting someone through hard work and getting good results merits treating them to a good meal, you see."

Interlude: Their Tables

Down by the docks, there was a certain restaurant with black shingles and black bricks that stood three stories. On one wall were the words “The Black Cauldron” painted in a contrastive white—hard to miss. That was Volf’s destination at teatime today, when the restaurant was yet to open for business.

Blinding him with a brilliant smile was a man by the door. “Volf! There you are!”

“You didn’t have to wait outside, Samuel—it’s so chilly out today.”

“And fail to welcome such an important business partner as yourself? What kind of business would we be?” Samuel, current assistant manager of The Black Cauldron, was a former Beast Hunter and a contemporary of Volf’s. He had gotten himself a wife and then a job at the restaurant that his father-in-law ran. In fact, he has become quite the assistant manager. Samuel learned what all the knights in the squad liked and was great at recommending drinks and food—he was so good at his job that Dorino and Randolph complained about getting their purse strings pulled too loose whenever they came.

“Hey, it’s not like I’m here to sell you anything.” Volf had introduced him to the heated table and low table, but he wasn’t here on business today.

Samuel slapped him a couple times on the back (painfully, by the way). “Ha ha ha, is that right? Well, if a buddy is here to visit, then I ought to spend some pocket money and treat him to a bottle of wine!” They had been former squadmates, but apparently, they had been retroactively promoted to buddies.

Volf smiled back at him and crossed the threshold.

The interior was impeccable as always. The establishment had been in business for a while, yet the tables and even the floors still gleamed.

“Come check out the private rooms!”

The duo passed by the bar seating and made their way to the back of the first floor. Inside, Volf immediately removed his shoes and stepped onto the gray carpeting to get to the heated low table. Perhaps to fit the name of the place, it

had a black tabletop, a black-and-ivory filled blanket with a diamond pattern, and a fluffy, dark beige rug underneath it all. The low table had been heated up to a delightful temperature already, and after a journey through the cold outdoors, Volf was ready to flop down and relax. “I like how you’ve designed it, and it’s really cozy.”

“We originally had a thinner beige blanket, but it just didn’t fit the room. After we discussed it with the Tailors’ Guild, they did it up like how it is now to match the store. The fabric is supposed to be stain-resistant too.” That was the Tailors’ for you—sense for style *and* function. Samuel continued, “And like the vice of the Rossetti Company suggested, these private rooms are by reservation only and have a time limit. At first, we thought we’d try it out for a week only, but we’ve got bookings all the way to the end of January!”

“Damn, that’s fantastic!” Volf replied. “Oh, but that means I won’t be able to get a spot until next year...”

“Volf, just say the word and I’ll fit you in. And bring that green-eyed babe with you again.”

“Samuel?” What was a married man like him thinking? Well, actually, it’d make sense to introduce him to Dahlia as the inventor of the heated low table and the chairwoman of the Rossetti Company.

As Volf hesitated, the assistant manager continued, “We’ve got a new menu, and we’re thinking of adding an Ehrlichian dessert. We’re still developing the recipe and figuring out whether we should make it sweeter, so I’d appreciate a lady’s opinion.”

“All right, I’ll ask her.” *Dahlia would definitely be interested, but it wouldn’t be a bad idea to invite Randolph too, since he’s got such a big sweet tooth*—so contemplated Volf as he extracted himself from the heated low table.

Next, they headed up to the second floor. The old table and chairs had already been replaced by a heated table. This one had a black tabletop too, of course, but its blanket was black and red and looked even warmer.

“The heated tables on the upper floors are all the upward venting kind. Guests will be taking off their shoes before stepping onto the rug—we’ve only got so much time to clean, you know?” Samuel’s chestnut eyes were fixed onto

the table. Cleaning a heating unit installed way down there would be no joke.

The assumption was that the guests would be able to keep their shoes on, but shoes off was more relaxing anyway, and Samuel seemed to want nothing more than for his guests to be comfortable. He really has become a good assistant manager—or rather, Volf realized the Beast Hunter he'd once known was long gone.

When he left the squad, Samuel had insisted on not having a send-off party but a kick-out party. There he had been, surrounded by almost all of his buddies. Everyone in the squad had understood that he didn't want people to convince him to stay but rather to see him off with smiles. There at the party, Volf had meant to congratulate Samuel on his upcoming nuptials. But as Volf was pouring Samuel a drink, he had thought back on how much Samuel's sword fighting had improved, how splendidly he and Volf had worked together during expeditions, and how much closer they had become—close enough to call each other by their first names; Volf had expressed his sadness to see him go and wished him the best in the future. He should have just put on his biggest smile and said congratulations. Samuel had looked a little surprised, and then he had drunk from his filled glass. "Thank you," he had said, "and I wish the best for you too." Indeed, he had thanked Volf, even though Volf had done the one thing he wasn't supposed to.

That wasn't the reason why Volf wanted to support The Black Cauldron, but he really did want to cherish their relationship. After all, he had always pushed people away from him, and he had only turned around this spring when he met Dahlia. He still didn't know how close or far to keep people, to be frank, but he was at least trying his best now, all thanks to her.

"All right, now let's test out this upward venting table, you and I!" When servers brought drinks and food, Samuel's smile looked just like the one he had worn that time. However, it was now his turn to pour Volf wine.

When they were squadmates, they hadn't been close enough to call each other friends, but they had become that after Volf began visiting The Black Cauldron more often. And as someone who didn't have many of those, Volf was quite happy to be able to laugh and drink like this.

“Say, Volf, you’re on team behinds like me, right?” And they were only on their first bottle of white wine! There was nobody else in the room and no need to keep up appearances, so Volf muttered quietly in the affirmative. “That’s why the upward venting tables are great, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Wait, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. Think about it seriously! Hardly anyone reveals anything under the knee in the winter, so when the ladies get into the heated table with their shoes off, the upward-venting air moves their skirt just enough—be honest, Volf, isn’t that just the best?”

“Erm, yeah, I, uh, I suppose so.” The way Samuel phrased his question didn’t allow Volf to do anything but agree. Volf wondered if that wouldn’t be more like team legs than team behinds, but he didn’t mention it. The thought of Dahlia’s father Carlo and his estate (if you could call it that) of assorted artwork suddenly came to mind for a brief second before Volf shook it away.

“I’ll make sure to reserve an upward-venting model for you next time, and maybe one where you can sit side by side at a window looking out at the nice view?”

“Huh? No, I...” Before Volf could decide whether to reject his friend’s offer, he topped up Volf’s glass with wine; it seemed like they had a long conversation about upward-venting heated tables ahead of them.

Turning the clock back a bit—*Scalfarotto's Blighted* and *Knight of Rust* were a few of the names they called him behind his back, he who was now stretching out and lazing around in his sunlit room. Today was a day off, and it had been a long time since he'd had one of those. His principal Guido had had a meeting this morning with his father—the head of the Scalfarotto family—and had no plans to leave the estate today; his afternoon was reserved for spending time with his wife and daughter, he had said. With so many knights and mages on the payroll, there was never much danger at home. Besides, the two Scalfarottos, father and son, would swiftly encase any intruders in ice.

Jonas looked out at the sky beyond the window, one half blue, one half white. It was the time of the year when the mornings became chilly. Guido had bestowed this room upon him, and he had lived here since college. By now, he was far more accustomed to this chamber than any room in his family home, but seeing as the Scalfarotto manor had been his home for about half of his lifetime, perhaps it was only right that that should be the case.

Right in the middle of his room was a heated low table large enough for six, in which Jonas had buried himself up to his shoulders. He was lying prone with a flat cushion under his chest and arms—that made for good balance—and only his head and hands stuck out. Stacked up on the fluffy rug were foreign travelogues, and beside those was a silver tray with lightly smoked and dried kraken and a bottle of estervino. It was far too much trouble to have to refill his glass, but an interconnected pair of straws enabled him to drink without getting up *or* spilling a single drop—his genius knew no bounds.

Having immersed himself in such unparalleled indulgence and lassitude, the man closed his oxide eyes and let out a long, comforted sigh. "The Table of Degeneracy—talk about a fitting name..." Jonas had come to understand oh so well the peculiar nickname Volf had given the heated low table.

The other day, when the Rossetti Company brought over the tables, Jonas had become fixated on them. *I bet it'd be so warm underneath there, even I could be comfortable in the winter*, he had thought. However, those tables were so hot—figuratively—and there was such a long waiting list that he hadn't planned on ordering one for himself.

“Our chairwoman would like for you to have one as a token of her appreciation for you, Master Jonas. Would you prefer a heated low table for four or for six people?” Ivano had asked him, as though it were a forgone conclusion. Jonas had opted for and received the latter, along with a set of fabrics that Dahlia’s seamstress friend had picked out. The plush ivory rug wasn’t only warm but had a stain-resistant enchantment too—he didn’t need to worry about spilling his drink. The thick brown blanket, woven from quality wool, was also warm but very lightweight.

Jonas almost never had visitors, so after some contemplation, he had had the sofa and coffee table taken away and plunked down the heated low table smack-dab in the middle of his room. He had tested it by splaying out underneath, and he had let out a long sigh as the warm air wrapped around him. It had taken only moments for all of the chill and discomfort to wash away from his body. The warm air had pulled his eyelids shut.

There had been something he needed to do—write a thank-you letter to the Rossetti Trading Company—and so he had mustered every bit of willpower, ripped himself from underneath the table, and headed to another room. His letter had had no present attached, so he was now thinking with all sincerity that he ought to pluck a dozen of his scales or perhaps even rip a fang out sometime soon.

“Winter might just pass by in a blink...” Jonas muttered to the void as he slurped up some estervino with the straws.

Not a full decade had passed since Jonas had received his fire dragon blight. His original magic had only been at grade six, and after Guido took him in as his attendant, the Scalfarotto family had used their financial resources to raise Jonas as far as grade ten. Not only was that on the low end among nobles, he had not been able to use a single offensive spell, having only weak body strengthening—good enough to be neither a mage nor a bodyguard. Pure happenstance had given him his fire dragon blight, and with it came greatly increased magic and the ability to use both fire and powerful body strengthening magic. It was because of that happenstance that he had been able to become Guido’s bodyguard on top of being his attendant. Jonas had

zero regrets about being blighted; if anything, he thanked his lucky stars. That was not to say there weren't any inconveniences involved, however.

For one, food: his sense of taste was more aligned with his draconic side. He could taste nearly raw meat and strong liquor quite well, but vegetables tasted like lawn clippings and anything too cooked tasted like charcoal. He *could* stomach it if need be, but anything he disliked, he tended to swallow whole. Food had often come back up when he wasn't yet accustomed to the change. Jonas wasn't much of a thespian either—he could not pretend like he was enjoying something he wasn't, and because he did not want to affect the atmosphere at the table, he had avoided eating with others. That had very much worried Guido. Even if subsisting entirely on meat hadn't hurt Jonas's stomach, it hadn't done his body any good. There were times when physicians and priests had been called, but he hadn't any ailments per se. Adventurers who had been blighted had said that that was merely a matter of having picked up the monster's traits. Jonas had explained many times to Guido that his tastes have simply changed and that he didn't want to eat like he had before, that it wasn't a symptom of anything bigger. Even then, Guido had, at times, looked at Jonas with pity and sympathy, perhaps less than consciously.

Secondly, the winter's cold: Jonas had always known that he hadn't much affection for the cold, but the first winter after being possessed by a fire dragon was when he had truly realized the extent of his aversion. The left and right half of his body were at different temperatures, and some parts were particularly sensitive to the cold. His scaly right arm and upper right body had strengthening magic from the blight, but the surrounding areas—namely his back and lumbar—froze every winter. Furthermore, the continuous passing of chilly days and nights made his body stiff and sluggish, which in turn made his sleep shallow and left him perpetually tired. Crystal-powered warmers only warmed the part of his body with which they were in direct contact, and too many of them would burn the left side of his body—he knew that from experience. Strong spirits were also a great way of warming up, but that method got Guido very concerned and had to be practiced in secrecy. The secrecy, though, had had the servants in the house worrying about his nonexistent drinking problem.

Neither the diet nor the cold were debilitating problems. Liquors had never

given Jonas a hangover. What would be a problem was losing his blight-induced magic, which made him fit for his bodyguarding role. He had explained that much on multiple occasions, yet no one seemed to understand until the attack on Guido. It had happened last year while they were riding in a carriage, and Guido had trusted Jonas to dispatch the threats. He had been able to resolve the situation without suffering a single scratch, and the Scalfarotto family's people had finally accepted Jonas's blight by virtue of the prowess with which it had endowed him. Guido, as a friend, still suggested from time to time that he have it dispelled, but Jonas wished his master would give up—or rather, accept it.

"Hm?" Jonas had not been speaking of him, yet the devil had appeared—there was a familiar presence on the other side of the door. When the knock came, Jonas gave his permission immediately.

"Jonas, heard you got that heated low table—" After stepping into the room, Guido staggered. He closed the door behind him, then leaned onto his knees with both hands as he cackled and howled, unable to hold back any longer. "Bah ha ha! Jonas! Since when did your dragon turn into a turtle?!"



“It’s the dragon’s day off today,” he quipped back from within the heated low table.

Guido at last somehow managed to contain his laughter and said, “You deserve it, all right. Glad to see you’re reveling in it too.”

“I have been blessed to receive such a wonderful gift,” he answered with all genuinity as his master regained his posture.

Still, a nasty smirk remained on Guido’s face. “You have Madam Rossetti to thank.”

“Truly. Have you had the chance to try it out for yourself, Lord Guido?”

“Yeah, I love how warm my legs feel inside. Mother and father seem to like it very much as well—recently, they’ve even ordered more for the help. I think the villa and the homes in the territories will get some too so that everyone can stay warm.”

This winter, the Rossetti Trading Company was neck deep in manufacturing heated low tables. Well, it was indisputably a good thing that business was booming, but Jonas prayed that its employees would be able to weather the season.

Including the one that Jonas was inside, the Scalfarotto estate had received a handful of them. Guido had had Jonas move one of the six-person tables, which had a white tabletop, but Jonas was curious as to where Guido had set it up in the end. “Where have you placed your table, Lord Guido?”

“In our bedroom. You know, putting my head on my wife’s lap while I’m basking in the warmth of the table might just be the greatest thing.”

“*Ugh*.”

Guido’s smug grin only turned smugger. “Jonas, was that some sort of scoff I heard?”

“Just your ears playing tricks on you, sir.”

“Is that right? In any case, you should find yourself a wife and give it a try before too long,” snarked Guido. Jonas had no such plan. It was true that he was basking in his table, but apparently his master’s was superior. “By the way,

I want to ask you for a favor."

"What may that be?"

"If anything happens to me, I'd like for you and Volf to be by my daughter's side until she becomes an adult."

Jonas perked up—his upper torso did, at least. "That is quite the large favor to ask of your attendant."

"With you, Jonas, I know I'll have nothing to worry about. You know everything in our household so well, and besides, you were with me for my lessons when I was preparing to take over as head of the family one day—we practically studied together. Of course, I'm more than happy to put the deal down in writing."

The way Guido made it sound so easy really irked Jonas. "Yeah, right, as if anyone would grant you such a pain-in-the-ass favor."

"So cold of you. Are you truly going to leave me so utterly helpless?"

"You'd best bet. Anyway, if any problem were to befall you, I'd be there to solve it."

"That's very troublesome. Have you thought about what would happen if I were to suddenly get very sick and—"

"You sure are dogged. If you're so worried about your health, then lay off the liquor and the greasy food and don't stay up so late working."

"All right, now you're asking for the impossible."

Guido *shouldn't* have any health issues; the only reasons for concern were the fact that he fastened his belt at the outermost holes now and the fact that he didn't get enough sleep. *Maybe he feels ill or the physician said something*—now Jonas was worried. "Guido, why did you bring this up all of a sudden? Did something happen?"

"So, earlier, my daughter found two strands of gray hair on me, right? And then she pleaded, 'Please live for a long time, father.'"

"Get the fuck outta my room," Jonas said, ending the conversation as he once again flattened himself on the floor in a relaxed position and buried himself to

his shoulders in the heated low table. Graying prematurely hardly deserved this precious emotional investment, and Jonas wished Guido would stop looking like he was in such anguish. Besides, how would anyone be able to spot the gray hairs in his full head of steel blue?

"Get a load of this jerk! Here I thought I could come to my best friend for help."

"You want advice? Fine. Just insist that it's silver, not gray. Or you could pluck them out or dye them. And you have a wife to go to for help, don't you? Don't make me waste my valuable day off." He averted his eyes from Guido and instead cracked open and resumed poring over the book at the top of the stack—a travel book on the top sights in Ehrlichia. As Jonas read about the sleipnir ranch, he enjoyed the dry estervino with his sippy straw.

His self-proclaimed best friend shot him a glare. "More grays grow when you pluck them! And it's not exactly easy to bring up to my wife."

Guido, nicknamed the Marquis of Ice—although still the eldest son of an earl—had been so deeply shaken by a few of his daughter's words and so perturbed about his appearances in front of his wife. He has always had a soft spot for family, but it seemed to have gotten worse as of late, and that included how he treated Volf. Furthermore, ever since reconciling with him, Guido seemed to have thawed and become more cheerful. He had always spoiled his daughter, but now his affections included his little brother too—which wasn't all that surprising, knowing how Guido had been when he was a boy. The way he doted on Volf and his new friend was somewhat sickening, but, well, those were merely displays of his extensive network and skills. And as Guido so merrily endeavored to help his brother behind the scenes, he had gotten Dahlia's company involved in all sorts of things—and vice versa. Jonas *was* able to relax in his heated low table, so he supposed that showed how little he knew about relationships. Regardless, the gratitude he felt unto Dahlia was genuine.

"Then dye it. There are professionals who can help."

"I bet the Rossetti Trading Company has connections who know something about good dyes."

"Last I heard, she was a magical toolmaker—" Jonas was about to stop

Guido's train of thought, but it wasn't such a completely misguided notion. "Oh, what about Ivano?"

"Great idea! I'll hit him up and see what he has to say."

Ivano was a crafty merchant, but surely this was beyond his ken. That being said, he and Guido could certainly discuss the problem over a cup of tea. Ivano would send Guido some hair dye that perfectly matched his blue-silver—the product of a magical toolmaker who had begun research on rare materials, a tailor with a great eye for colors, and a hairstylist who was an expert at dying hair—but that was yet to come.

What came that night was Jonas trying to stifle his laughter when he saw his master's humorless reaction to the wisecrack. "If no one else can help, seek out the Rossetti Trading Company, eh?"

Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries—Heated Low Table Mk I

"What is this, Dahlia?"

"The heated low table! As a prototype, I made a miniature version for one person." Autumn was fading to winter, and Carlo's daughter had put a rather portable low table in the living room—it would be perfect as a side table for when guests came over. Between the frame and the tabletop was a brown blanket inserted. "Father, lie down inside and give it a try—it's perfectly cozy," she said as she lifted up the blanket for him.

It was just a smidge small considering his size. *Why does an old man like me have to climb under a dang table anyway?* But it was his magical toolmaker daughter's prototype, and if he had to pretend like he was playing hide-and-seek, then so be it.

"Okay, now just stay there for a while. It'll make sense soon enough." Dahlia had a lot of pep in her voice and in her step as she went back down to the workshop.

"Oh, it *is* warm..." It didn't take long before what had seemed to be a children's game became a foretaste of paradise. Warm air enveloped his body, melting away all sense of time. Carlo lay his belly down on the carpet, and the heat did wonders to soothe his back, which had been nagging him lately.

Is Dahlia a genius? He knew the answer already; his daughter was full of talent—overflowing with talent, even. But this magical tool she had created was a menace. Escaping its clutches was impossible, if one could strain oneself to do anything at all. However, there was a letter he had to read and respond to before the day was over; fortunately, it was right on the table, not far from his grasp. *I just have to crawl there with this thing on my back like a snail*—good thing Dahlia was out of the room.

As with many things in life, there was good timing and then there were situations like this. Dahlia returned to the room with more mail in her hands. “Father! Don’t move around as though you’re a turtle! You’re going to ruin the knees of your pants!” she scolded as she lifted the whole table up.

“Ngah! My shell!”

“Humans do *not* have shells!”

Nay, for the tabletop and blanket from me ripped had been mine armature. Carlo’s flesh shriveled in the sudden onset of the cold, and he curled up, shivering; Dahlia, with a look of pity, bestowed upon him the blanket. It was a painful moment for a father who wanted to win his daughter’s respect. But it was cold. What was a man to do? Thinking about the paradise he had just dwelt in was enough that he wanted to hunker down right where he was.

“Perhaps it is too much too soon for the people of this world...” Dahlia’s muttering sounded as though she were a goddess. She then committed a most deplorable act—she disassembled the low table.

Carlo could not withstand the cold any longer, and he stood up to put on a coat. Dahlia’s, hanging beside his, caught his attention. Its ornamental button in the shape of a red flower brought back vibrant memories of a certain woman. Teresa Lamberti’s hair was the vivid red of crimson clover—something she had passed down to their daughter Dahlia. The first time he had met her was in the hallway of their college.

As an alumnus, Carlo had periodically gone back to the campus to visit the Magical Tool Research Group’s advisor, Professor Lina. She had lost her voice due to a disease of the throat, and neither physicians nor priests could cure her of her affliction. Though she could muster up a meager, raspy whisper, she had been forced to make use of notes and teaching assistants to continue her lectures.

Thus, Carlo had begun to figure out a magical tool to help her. After some trial and error, he had come up with the voice caster—a piece of pure silver enchanted with siren hair that allowed its user to amplify or diminish the volume of their voice as well as to adjust the timbre. Professor Lina had strongly

urged Carlo to bring it to the Merchants' Guild and to market, so that he might help out others who were suffering as she had. His invention had apparently received such high praise that even the castle was headhunting him.

The model Carlo had given to Professor Lina that day was the fourth revision of the voice caster—a silver necklace that was lighter, slimmer, and louder than its predecessors and sounded more natural as well.

After he had her put it on and gave it a bit of fine-tuning, Lina spoke with the voice of the professor he had once studied under. "Thank you, Carlo," she said, her smile warming his heart.

With her gratitude and in high spirits, Carlo left the staffroom. The setting sun pierced the windows and spilled onto the hallway. He hopped from puddle to puddle of light, but just as he tried to swerve around the corner, he crashed into someone before he could check his forward momentum. Both of them stuck their arms out to brace themselves.

"Please forgive me! The light was in my eyes!" A large blossom, even brighter than the evening sun, bloomed before him. She was on the taller side, and her long red hair reached her waist. Most captivating of all were her eyes, which glowed like the sunset. Cladding her unparalleled figure was a dark green dress, and though simple it may have looked, the finish was obviously top notch. She also looked to be a dozen years his junior.

He stood transfixed by her incredible beauty and red eyes, and when he eventually snapped out of it, he hurriedly took a step back.

"Ah!" Suddenly, the woman fell forward, as if diving toward him.

Carlo could but catch her in his arms. They had been standing pretty close to each other in the first place, so it was only a slight stumble before they steadied themselves on their feet. It was then he finally realized that her red hair had gotten caught on his jacket. "Sorry!"

"I'm terribly sorry!" They apologized to each other at the same instant, then chuckled awkwardly.

The force of their impact had gotten her red hair tangled around a button on his left jacket sleeve. Made by a local artisan, the button had quite an intricate

design—a dahlia crafted out of an iridescent shell. He had put it on his jacket because he had taken a liking to it, and now it had even brought him a somewhat fortuitous encounter. The woman in front of him was truly gorgeous, though he understood she was out of his reach.

"It looks like we're, uh, twisted up here," Carlo said as he failed to unravel her soft, fine hair from his arm. Perhaps it was on account of the slight waviness.

"I should like to ask to borrow a pair of scissors from someone in the office; it ought to be a fairly simple—"

"That would be such a shame." He didn't know what compelled him to say that, but her hair was as fine as silk thread and looked like it could be worked into a colorful embroidery project. "It would be too much of a shame to harm your beautiful hair." Without a moment's hesitation, Carlo tore the button off its stitches, unraveled her hair, and slipped the dahlia button in his poc—

"Um, erm, your button! May I please have it?" She grabbed his sleeve, and her pleading expression had him frozen completely. Perhaps the colorful flower design was novel to her, or perhaps she worked in the clothing business and found it interesting. "Oh, I'm sorry! That was very rude of me to ask—"

"Perish the thought; it's yours."

When Carlo handed her the dahlia button, she smiled. It was as though the large blossom had bloomed once again. "My name is Teresa Lamberti, an alumnus of this school. May I ask you for your name?"

"I'm Carlo Rossetti. I'm an alumnus as well and now a magical toolmaker."

"The one who invented the voice caster! That and your compact magical lantern as well are such wonderful magical tools! I have heard much about you from Professor Lina, and I—oh, I do apologize for rambling."

"Please don't be, and thank you very much for your kind words."

"I am so grateful for your voice caster. My granduncle is finally able to speak with his grandchildren."

"I'm very happy to hear that it has had such a big impact on your life." It was entirely possible that she was merely trying to be kind with her beaming smile

and tender words, but nonetheless, they made him very happy. The two of them proceeded to effervesce over magical tools and monsters for so long that the sky turned from orange to navy. A knight—presumably looking for Teresa—even came by and glared at Carlo. The young toolmaker said, “It’s gotten dark out already. Maybe you’d best hurry home.”

“Thank you very much for your company today. Please allow me to come thank you at another—” The iridescent shell button was still in her hand.

Though it truly had been a lot of fun chatting with her today, and with her looks, anyone might have fallen in love with her at first sight, she was undoubtedly the darling princess of some noble family who had business with the school—too far out of reach. Besides, Carlo couldn’t accidentally offend someone who knew Professor Lina so well. *What exactly am I supposed to say to a younger noblewoman in this case again?* “You needn’t. It is my wish that a breathtaking lady such as yourself accept the button as a memento of our encounter today.”

Though he modeled his response after what Oswald would have said in his position, Carlo would come to greatly regret his words.

The next day, Carlo was flabbergasted when he went to the front door of the Green Tower. A coach had pulled up to his home to let off a woman in a wine-red dress; the coach was drawn by a pair of sleipnirs, which screamed nobility. After they exchanged some very formal greetings, Teresa cut straight to the point, saying, “Mr. Rossetti! Would you, um, go out with me?”

Jokes could go too far—*what is she trying to do? Stop my heart permanently?* “Where to? Shall I introduce you to the artisan who made that button?”

She seemed slightly crestfallen about Carlo playing the possum. “You said the button is a memento of our encounter yesterday, and I thought that, well, perhaps you might like to converse again...” Her cheeks were now perhaps the same shade as her hair. “I understand that this is very sudden, but even so, I would also like to—”

“This is no joking matter. A lowborn man like me and the daughter of a nobleman are worlds apart. Perhaps you ought to return home before acting

rashly again.”

Teresa’s maid seemed bewildered by his response, but the two women did little to protest; rather, they simply turned around and returned to the coach.

Carlo was still a little hung up on what Teresa had said, and so he flipped open a manual on noble etiquette that had belonged to his father, a baron. *A memento of one’s encounter: giving a noblewoman a small gift such as an accessory to mark a rendezvous sets the stage so that she may speak to the giver again in order to express her thanks*—so said the entry, and Carlo slumped forward onto the desk. He had inadvertently been so insensitive and boorish towards her, but his ignorance was no excuse.

Then, he opened a somewhat dated list of noble families and lost all hope. The Lamberti Earldom had existed since the early years of the kingdom. There was no chance he could send a letter to her at her family home to ask to see her again, nor would he have another chance to apologize. A young lady like Teresa had had the determination to stomp here the very day after their encounter and yet had gone home immediately after his explanation—it must’ve really been an impulsive act, and that should be the end of that. As he emptied a bottle of red wine, Carlo kicked himself for wasting his good fortune—but there she was again the next morning.

Before she could say anything, Carlo begged for her forgiveness. “My apologies! I only learned the meaning of ‘a memento of our encounter’ after you left, and I’m sorry that I was so rude to you!”

She responded with a long, stinging silence; it would’ve hurt less if she had yelled at him, dismissed him as a peasant, or even slapped him.

“Thank goodness. I thought what I did must have made you loathe me, so I came today to apologize...” she finally said in a quiet voice. He wanted to tell her that was absolutely not the case, but he could not get his words out. “Even if all we do is chat, could you at least be my friend?”

If the circumstances had been any better, Carlo might have suspected he was dreaming. He explained to her that there were so many obstacles between them—status and age, for two—and that any relationship with him would be detrimental for her. Nonetheless, Carlo thanked Teresa for coming. He could

but grin after he went back inside, and he punched himself for it—though he'd never tell her of this.

People at her age tended to daydream. There probably weren't any guys like Carlo around her, so naturally he seemed exciting to her. This would all blow over soon enough.

So Carlo thought, but he didn't count on Teresa being so overly passionate and unwavering.

To summarize, this is what happened:

The first time she visited, he told her that a commoner and a noble were incompatible and had her return home by the coach she had come by.

The second time she visited, they stood by his front door and he apologized for doing something he hadn't meant to, gave her every reason he could think of to reject him, and had her return home in the coach she had come in.

The third time she visited, he brought her to the backyard and warned her that, as a noblewoman, she might embroil herself in a scandal by visiting a commoner's home, and he had her return home in the coach she had come in. He heard from Professor Lina that Teresa had also visited her to chat. The professor's maid stared at Carlo, though.

The fourth time Teresa visited, they stood by his closed front door and he explained that she should not make her family worry for her, and he had her return home by the coach she had come by. Furthermore, he asked the coachman to report this incident to her family. It was partly to protect himself, partly to put an end to Teresa's actions.

The fifth time she visited, they stood by his opened front door. He explained that it was extremely dangerous for a young noblewoman—and a very beautiful one at that—to venture out on foot like this. He took her to the carriage station and had her return home. However, as there were many others present, they spent some time chatting about magical tools while they waited for a ride. And if Carlo was honest with himself, it was a lot of fun.

The sixth time she visited, he brought her to the workshop, left the door wide open, and talked to her about tools and materials. He didn't have much of a

choice—it was raining cats and dogs that day and he couldn't just send her out in that. When the rain finally eased up, he walked her to the carriage station and had her return home.

After the third time she visited, the Lamberti Earldom had sent Carlo a letter voicing their objections in a very roundabout manner. After the fourth time, a servant had spoken to him directly. After the fifth time, Carlo received a letter of apology. After the sixth time, he received apology gifts and a visit from her knights. Apparently, Teresa had locked the door of her third-floor bedroom and climbed out the window to visit him. Her bodyguards explained that she must've contracted "the febrilities," and they profusely apologized for her antics. Carlo empathized.

With Teresa coming to his home like this, the neighbors were bound to take notice. People gave Carlo sidelong glances and whispered behind his back.

"Oh, if it ain't the dogged lady's mark?" asked the neighborhood artisanal buttonmaker—a friend of Carlo's late parents. "Carlo, me boy, if yer gonna marry her, then get on with it. If yer not, then be frank and reject her. Time and gossip can really hurt a girl, you know?" The admonishment was just what he needed to hear. Carlo had not meant to be vague or leave her hanging, but his hesitation had surely had that same impact. That was when he made up his mind.

The seventh time she visited, Carlo and Teresa sat across from each other at the table. He gripped his fist so tightly, it hurt his nails. "Lady Lamberti, you are a very charming woman. I find myself unbelievably flattered that you would think so highly of me. However, we live in two different worlds. I am also afraid that if this were to continue, it would impact my work, and as a magical toolmaker, I cannot have that. I implore you to refrain from coming to the tower ever again," he said. He was hanging his head, but he didn't sugarcoat his words one bit.

"I understand, Mr. Rossetti. I sincerely apologize for all of the trouble I have caused you, and I thank you for the treasured conversation you have given me." Her voice was barely louder than a whisper. She left of her own volition, never to return to the tower again.

As hypocritical as it sounds, Carlo found it a bitter pill to swallow. There was no doubt that he had feelings for her too. He had known he was infatuated from the first time he had laid eyes upon her, and the more they chatted about magical tools, monsters, and magical crystals, the more interested in her he became. But, as he had said, they lived in different worlds, and it hindered his work, though he would never have guessed it was not seeing her that affected him so greatly.

Another season came and went, and this time, Carlo received a sudden invitation from the Lambertis. The letter said that since their last conversation, Teresa had become bedridden, unwilling to eat, unable to keep down her food, and she was growing thin and frail by the day. He flew to her. The first person he met was Teresa's mother, looking terribly haggard. Contrary to his expectations, she did not get mad at him but begged for him to see her daughter.

The next person he met was Teresa's father, Earl Lamberti, who had a horribly resentful look in his eyes. "Allow me to apologize. My daughter must have caused you a great deal of trouble foisting her one-sided feelings on you, and that despite your constant resistance to her advances, so I have heard," he said with seemingly genuine guilt, although it did not match his glare. "We have had many physicians see Teresa. They all have said she does not have a sickness of the body but of the heart and that no medicine can possibly help her. I never imagined her spirit was so delicate..."

Knowing that he had hurt Teresa so wrenched Carlo's heart.

The earl continued, "It seems there will be no heirs to our earldom. I doubt we will be able to marry her off to another noble family either. She will not be fit to take up the family business either. Teresa will become immobile and likely need to be sent to our villa outside of the city, but my missus asked that I let Teresa see you before that happened."

Nobles... Carlo seethed internally. Teresa was not an object to be tucked away in some far-off villa. Did they want to drain the color from her beautiful red eyes? Before he knew it, he ran his mouth. "May I ask for Lady Teresa—your daughter's hand in marriage?"

Her father laughed without so much as trying to hold it in. “Ha ha ha! I knew it. What are you after in exchange for my daughter’s heart?”

Teresa’s heart was beyond price; what the man was saying made no sense. “I don’t follow.”

“The Lamberti family will give you nothing. We will not be your support in the future, and neither will we give you money. Teresa was born and raised a noble, and she knows nothing about the life of a commoner. And of course, she knows nothing about housework. All that will happen is that we shall strike her off our family register and send her off without a single copper as a dowry. Even if you were to divorce Teresa, she would never be permitted to return. Do you think you can truly take her as your wife?”

“Teresa is all that I want,” Carlo said with the biggest smile.

For whatever reason, the earl eyed Carlo with suspicion and then, after a long, long silence, finally laughed, admitting his defeat. Carlo would not learn until later why the earl had approved of him.

Carlo then walked to Teresa’s room. He mustered up his courage and cracked the door, and there she was. Teresa, lying on her bed, looked a size smaller than when she used to come to the tower.

“Is that you, Mr. Rossetti...? Am I dreaming?” She looked at him with eyes wide. Her red hair was all matted up, skin pale, cheeks sunken, lips chapped—yet she was more enchanting than anyone he had ever known.

He had known all along. The first time he laid eyes on her, she had lodged herself in his heart, and the day they’d first chatted, he had already been in love. Everything else had dulled in comparison. Ever since he’d been unable to continue seeing her, his work had fallen by the wayside. Yet, when he closed his eyes, he could recall her face without a single detail missing. Perhaps he was the one suffering from a serious bout of the febrilities.

They formally greeted each other, then he expressed his concern for her and added a few classy overtures in noble-speak—those had all been premeditated, and Carlo employed them all. “I’ve come for you!”

“Oh, Mr. Rossetti!”

“I have received your father’s blessings. Teresa, I vow to bring you the least hardship and the most joy—be with me.”

“I will!”

“It’s a small place, but come live with me. And I’d love for you to call me Carlo instead; what shall I call you?”

“Please call me Teresa, Carlo.” The redhead’s great bloom of a smile blossomed. She reached out with her thin arms, and he took her into his, embracing her as tightly as he could. Witnessing everything, the maid—with equal parts tears, laughter, and anger—shouted, “And out of wedlock too!”

Every day had become a dream for Carlo. Teresa came with a seasoned maid by the name of Sofia. Soon, Teresa was able to keep her food down, and she strengthened her body by climbing the stairs. When she fully recovered, Earl Lamberti offered to adopt Carlo into the family and to support them financially. Despite having said that he wouldn’t lift a finger for them, the earl apparently still loved his daughter.

Carlo politely yet firmly refused. He wanted the name “Magical Toolmaker Rossetti” to be passed on and he did not want Teresa to have to leave him for her family home again. He wanted her by his side forever. Besides, even without the financial assistance, Carlo managed to keep them from living in anything like destitution. Teresa gave it her all too, adapting to her situation, learning how to do chores, taking care of the home—all with a cheerful smile on her face.

They kept to themselves—her ties to the nobility and her family meant that they couldn’t tell the world about their relationship—though the friendly neighbors would help them out and share with them; they even gave enough for Sofia.

“Congratulations! So, you ended up getting together with that dogged lady, eh?” joked the button artisan as he gave Carlo a few hard smacks on the back. Carlo choked and laughed with him.

They put in their marriage registration without any wild celebrations, and they lived their days together without the grandeur or luxuries of the nobility, although they couldn't even visit where many commoners congregated. But they savored their time together, and that was enough for them. With Teresa, Carlo needed nothing else—he truly believed that.

His work went well too. If Carlo's accomplishments with his inventions earned him a barony in two or three years, they would finally be allowed to publicly announce their marriage—Earl Lamberti had promised him that at one point.

What was unexpected and out of their hands was the sickness that came with Teresa's pregnancy. It soon became very hard on her and it lasted for a long time. There was no room for any what-ifs, and she would stay at her family home with a physician on hand until she gave birth—that was the only occasion when Carlo and Teresa ever accepted any of the Lambertis' offers.

To this day, Carlo had never decided whether or not that had been the correct choice. After she gave birth to Dahlia, circumstances prevented Teresa from returning home to the tower. She would never call his name again. He could not even tell her that all that mattered to him was that she was still alive. And when Dahlia was still in primary school, Teresa passed away.

Carlo had failed to protect the one woman, the only woman he had ever given his heart to.

"It's noon and it's already freezing..."

Outside the window, fallen leaves danced in the breeze. The skies in the distance were higher and farther than all else. Beyond was where Teresa was surely waiting for him; he would finally be able to see her again when he arrived there too—so he was fantasizing when he heard his daughter calling to him.

"Father! Help me with the cheese for the salad!"

Carlo looked away from the window and answered, "Be right there." After all, shredding hard cheeses and moving heavy pots were his responsibilities—and only for a little while longer.

It wouldn't be long until she got married, yet he could not think of anything

he could give or do for her. Sure, he still had lots to teach her as her magical toolmaking master, but he was lacking as her father. If Teresa were still alive, she definitely would have chastised him for feeling sorry for himself.

That pair of dahlia buttons, including the one he had given her, was still tucked away in a drawer. His friends had told him to forget her. They had strongly suggested he remarry. “Carlo, find love and happiness again,” they had said. But now, he could laugh off the former self that had believed he would never be happy again. His dreams of the future together with Teresa may have popped like bubbles, but he still had his daughter. The days spent with Dahlia, the days spent with his apprentices—those were more than enough to fill Carlo’s life with happiness. It didn’t matter what anyone else had to say. He was happy.

The low table he had carried on his back—the one that had already been disassembled that very same day—had been paradisiacal. He was sure Dahlia would have no trouble making it again from memory. Carlo knew it would not be for him but the man by her side or perhaps even the child in her arms—no, the circle of smiles that would surround Dahlia was definitely going to be much larger than that.

“All right! Watch out, cheese! Here I come! We’re making a cheese salad tonight!”

“Grow up! Everything in moderation, father!”

Whatever was outside the window was already of little significance; instead, for a sight of his precious daughter’s smile, Carlo stepped toward the kitchen.