Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

9

Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Hachi Komada
Character Designer: Kei




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Employee of the Rossetti Trading Company
Mezzena
Vice-Chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company
Ivano
Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory
Lucia
Dahlia's Childhood Friend and Hairstylist
Irma
Reincarnated Female Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia
Handsome Knight of the Order of Beast Hunters
Volfred
Employee of the Rossetti Trading Company
Marcella


"IT'S SO PRETTY..."
OFF
Crimson Lotus Blade

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Chicken Meatball and Jumbo Leek Soup

“I think it needs just a little bit more time.”

“All right.”

Across from the golden-eyed young man, who was staring intently at the pot, she gently sipped estervino from a polished tin cup. The cloudy white drink had a sweet aroma but a crisp, medium-dry flavor.

The first time she’d had this drink, she’d found it similar to the Japanese sake her father from her previous life had been fond of. She occasionally compared her previous life to this one in that way because she had in fact been reincarnated into this world.

Her name in this life was Dahlia Rossetti, though she couldn’t recall her name in her former life. She had been born and raised in the country of Japan and had worked at a company that produced household appliances. She had wanted to work on the production side, but her life had ended abruptly before she could realize that goal. Perhaps because of that, she had been born into this world with a magical toolmaker for a father, and she herself had followed in his footsteps.

A magical toolmaker was an artisan who used their own magic, magic crystals containing elements such as fire and water, or monster materials to create tools that utilized that magic. Dahlia focused her efforts on creating magical tools rooted in everyday life, such as hot water dispensers, refrigerators, and freezers powered by magical crystals, as well as waterproof cloth with magically applied powdered slime, among others.

In front of her now, in her home, the Green Tower, was a heated low table, reminiscent of what she’d known as a kotatsu in her previous life, and resting on top of that was a compact magical stove with its gently simmering pot. They were both tools she had made with her own magic.

“I’ll go ahead and slice some cheese.”

The young man who held a knife with a practiced hand was Volfred Scalfarotto. He was a royal knight of the Kingdom of Ordine’s Order of Beast Hunters as well as the fourth son of an earldom.

In contrast to Dahlia—who had vivid red hair and bright green eyes but an otherwise plain appearance—Volf was a handsome young man, and he made heads turn everywhere he went. From his tall, toned physique to his ebony hair and flawless pale skin to his perfectly balanced facial features—most striking of which were his golden, almond-shaped eyes—his beauty was unforgettable after witnessing it even once. Even a gorgeous portrait would pale in comparison when placed next to him—and no, that was not an exaggeration.

His appearance meant he was quite popular, but after all the jealousy and misunderstandings, as well as a string of extreme attempts women had made to approach him, romance had become a sore point for Volf.

However, Dahlia was similar in that regard. She'd had hardly any relationships in her past life, and although her father in this world had picked her a fiancé, their engagement had ended just before they were to be married. It seemed that she had no luck in love, either before or after her rebirth.

Volf and Dahlia had become fast friends after their chance second encounter and had even become business colleagues.

"Thank you. You're pretty good at that, aren't you, Volf?"

With smooth movements, Volf sliced the flat, round, orange cheese with a silver knife. This particular cheese was fairly hard, but he cut the slices as thin as fish flakes and piled them all onto a small plate.

The freshly sliced cheese, with its pleasant, salty aroma, made for a great accompaniment to their drinks. Although it was ill-mannered to do so, they picked up the slices of cheese, slightly curved at the edges, with their fingers and ate them like that.

Volf sliced two small plates' worth of cheese and then placed the bottle of white wine he'd brought on the table. As he gathered a pair of glasses, the white steam began to take on a pleasant aroma.

"I think it may be about done. Could you remove the lid?"

"Sure thing."

Volf placed a hand on the lid of the pot, his expression serious. After he carefully lifted the lid, white steam filled with the scent of cooked chicken wafted up gently. Simmering in the broth-filled pot were thick chicken meatballs and chopped leeks.

Today, at the recommendation of the neighborhood grocer, he had ended up buying a whole box of large leeks. Called

jumbo leeks, they were incredibly juicy and delicious.

The chicken meatballs, which were too big to be eaten in one bite, were a mixture of chicken meat, grated ginger, salt, and the green parts of the leeks, finely minced. Although the only seasoning was salt, the chicken and ginger flavors were strong enough to be sufficient in themselves. Volf inhaled deeply of the steam, letting his golden eyes gently roll back.

“The smell alone is delicious…”

“Don’t satisfy yourself with just the smell, please.”

He hadn’t even taken a bite yet, after all. Dahlia filled a bowl with an ample serving of the chicken meatballs and leeks, then placed it in front of Volf. Once she filled her own bowl, they made a toast.

“Cheers, to good fortune and health, and to great-smelling soup!”

“Cheers, to good fortune and health.”

Apparently Volf really enjoyed the scent of the chicken meatballs. He only took one sip of his wine before bringing his spoon to the bowl. As she watched him, Dahlia tilted her glass of white. The medium-dry wine had a clean flavor and went down smoothly. After the sensation of the alcohol warming her throat was gone, the mild sweetness lingered. Before the aftertaste disappeared, she took a bite of the sliced cheese so she could fully enjoy its rich, slightly salty flavor. She could never tire of this combination.

As Dahlia alternated between tasting the wine and the sliced cheese, Volf, seated across from her, was chewing his food with full concentration. He seemed to be enjoying the flavor of the chicken meatballs too, as his bowl was already half empty. Perhaps noticing her gaze on him, he gulped down a piping hot meatball and looked at Dahlia.

“It tastes even better than it smells…”

“I’m glad you think it’s tasty.”

Dahlia thought it was a little odd just how much he was fixated on the smell.

“I think a good smell is part of the flavor. But with this dish, the flavor is better than the smell. This combination of chicken, ginger, and leek is—how should I put this?—like a beautiful love triangle.”

What an unsettling compliment. But although Dahlia didn’t think there was such a thing as a good love triangle when it

came to romance, perhaps it was an acceptable way to describe flavor.

“Jumbo leeks and chicken meatballs really are the perfect combination, aren’t they?”

“Spicy scallion shoots also go well with them.”

“Oh, really?”

“You can fill even smaller chicken meatballs with loads of spicy scallion shoots. They can be cooked in a pot like this, or you can eat them boiled and dressed with soy sauce or lemon juice.”

“Spicy scallion shoots… Are they sold at the market?”

“I don’t think so, but they should have them next summer. Jumbo leeks won’t be available then, though.”

“Got it. Then, in order for us to compare the two next year, let’s fill a box with ice crystals and freeze the leeks!”

“Volf, foods should be eaten in season…”

And so the two of them continued to satisfy their ravenous appetites for both food and conversation.

Once they had finished their meal, they switched out their white wine for red and continued talking. Their topic of conversation turned to Volf’s home.

“The other day, the gardener dug up the flower bed at the villa and planted some bulbs. I was a little surprised. I thought bulbs were only planted in the spring.”

Remembering that some flower bulbs needed a certain level of cold in the winter in order to bloom the following year, she asked, “Are they flowers that don’t bloom unless they endure a cold winter?”

Volf nodded. “Yeah, that’s what the gardener said. They asked if they could plant more types of flowers, so I left it up to them. Until now it was mostly filled with my mother’s favorite white flowers, but the gardener thought they seemed a little lonely on their own and wanted to plant some red flowers too.”

“I’m sure the garden will look gorgeous next year, then.”

“Yeah. We can see it together once the flowers bloom.”

Volf’s villa was the location of the Rossetti Trading Company’s headquarters and the Scalfarottos’ magical tool workshop, so Dahlia visited it regularly. She was excited to see what kind of flowers would bloom.

“But I’m not great at describing the garden. They say understanding gardens is part of being a noble, but I can barely

tell flowers apart. I thought ranunculuses were roses for the longest time, and I even mixed up lotuses and water lilies while out on expedition."

"Those look similar, so I don't think you can blame yourself for that. My father taught me that while both have round leaves, a lotus doesn't have a notch in its leaf, while a water lily does."

"Knowing that would have made it easy enough even for me to tell them apart. When I asked Randolph about the difference, he said lotuses are the ones you can get lotus roots from..."

Although he wasn't wrong, Dahlia wasn't so sure that was the best way to distinguish the flowers.

"Come to think of it, I think there were water lilies in Lady Altea's summer guest room."

"Her...summer guest room?"

"Yeah. At Lady Altea's house, she switches up the guest rooms depending on what season it is. I think she chooses whichever bedroom has the nicest view of the garden, but I don't remember very well, so I can't explain it..."

Dahlia wouldn't have expected anything less from a dowager duchess. She'd read in a book that the arrangement of the garden in a noble's home was part of the art of hospitality, which she could understand. And now she knew there were some guests on whom that hospitality was lost.

"I'm sure those who have an interest in gardens enjoy the alternating rooms."

"Admiring gardens is a common practice among the nobility. But I think I'd get bored looking at a pretty garden. I have more fun wearing these and walking around the market."

As he spoke, he lightly stroked his shirt pocket with his fingers. Inside the pocket were his glasses made of fairy glass. Those glasses were a magical tool of Dahlia's own creation, made to change Volf's striking golden eyes into ordinary green ones. They were a convenient disguise that allowed him to freely walk about the town.

Ever since this past summer, it had become a favorite pastime of Volf's to don those glasses and walk through the markets. As a result, here in the Green Tower, the two of them made full use of the ingredients and alcoholic drinks he purchased there.

Dahlia placed her drained glass on the table, and hearing the faint thunking sound it made, she furrowed her brow.

"What's wrong, Dahlia?"

“Yesterday, I took a class on etiquette for people preparing to receive a peerage, and I was warned not to make a sound when setting my glass down on a table. It looks like I still have a lot to learn about etiquette.”

“At parties among nobles, there are always tablecloths on the tables, so I doubt it would make that much noise. Besides, I think you’ve already got the etiquette down pat, Dahlia.”

She was thankful for Volf’s encouraging words, but unfortunately, she was still entirely lacking on that front. During yesterday’s etiquette class, her teacher had warned her with a smile twenty-seven times. Her notebook had turned completely black. Dahlia had vowed to herself that she would bring a larger notebook from now on.

“Not at all. When I first entered the room, I said, ‘Thank you for having me.’ I was chided for that.”

“Huh? That’s what I say, though.”

“The correct way for commoner merchants and barons to address nobility when entering a room is ‘I humbly thank you for your hospitality.’ Also, depending on the topic of conversation, instead of saying something like ‘Okay,’ you should say, ‘Certainly’ or ‘Very well.’ There are lots of rules like that that I fumbled.”

“I didn’t know… I think I might be worse off than you. My family’s going to become a marquisate, and yet I have no idea how to talk politely. Maybe I should review from a book, or no, maybe I should ask my brother…”

Holding his glass in one hand, Volf rested his chin on his fist and sank into thought.

In the past, Volf had spoken of his plans to leave the Scalfarotto family and become a commoner, but he’d stopped saying that of late. And Dahlia herself wasn’t going to ask about it. Volf had been estranged from his family for quite a while, but now their relationship was finally improving. It was probably safer for him to stay with his family, who were soon to go from being an earldom to a marquisate. Dahlia wanted to hope that their friendship would remain unchanged—but whether that was possible was hard to say.

“Dahlia.”

As she was brooding, she heard her name called out, and she quickly looked up. Volf was holding a bottle of wine, waiting to fill her empty glass.

“Next summer, let’s go looking for spicy scallion shoots in the market.”

“Yes, let’s.”

As the flowing wine filled another cup, so their promises to each other increased by another.

The Spellbook and the Order of Beast Hunters' Robes

"This came for you from Orlando & Co., Chairwoman. I've gone ahead and opened it for you, just in case."

In the Rossetti Trading Company's office in the Merchants' Guild, Vice-Chairman Ivano placed a bundle of white cloth on top of the table.

The rays of the afternoon sun shone on the bundle. Dahlia had a fairly good idea of what it was. She gently removed the cloth, revealing a largish leather box and a sheaf of papers. The first sheet of paper was a letter, with the signature at the bottom spelling "Tobias Orlando"—senior apprentice to Dahlia's father as well as her own former fiancé.

In the letter, carefully written in his familiar angular penmanship, he explained that he had copied out the entire contents of Carlo's spellbook. He'd even included a few things that he'd been taught orally by Carlo and wanted Dahlia to know, plus his own observations. He also let her know he had added warnings about things he thought were dangerous on separate pieces of paper that he'd stuck in between the pages of the spellbook.

Inside the leather box was the leather-bound spellbook, wrapped in thin paper. The spellbook her father had left behind in his room in the Green Tower had been intended for Tobias. Although Tobias himself had said he wasn't entitled to the spellbook, he'd accepted it on the grounds that he'd been her senior apprentice.

Now that Tobias had copied out the spellbook, he'd sent the duplicate manuscript to Dahlia. In the center of the cover was a bright green jewel, perhaps a peridot. The clear jewel was the same color as her father Carlo's eyes, and the sandy-colored book itself was very close in hue to his hair.

This felt like a sly choice of colors—as Dahlia fought back the heat that had slowly started to sting her eyes, she flipped through the pages. She felt herself nearly becoming lost in reading about the numerous magical tools she'd yet to make as

well as ones she had never even seen before. However, she was currently at the Merchants' Guild, and she had plans for the day.

Dahlia closed the spellbook as if shaking herself off, then immediately pricked her finger with a needle and allowed the blood to drip onto the green jewel. With the blood bond now complete, this spellbook could only be opened by her alone. Despite the throbbing pain in her fingertip, she felt a strange sense of relief.

As for the sheaf of papers, she removed the one-page letter addressed to herself, then handed the rest to Ivano.

"Please copy these papers and use what you need."

"All right, Chairwoman. But it sure was thoughtful of Orlando & Co. to give this to us, wasn't it…"

Ivano stared fixedly at the documents.

From the second page of the stack of papers onward was a list of companies from which they could obtain a myriad of rare materials and their approximate prices, followed by a list of contact information for their respective manufacturers. This was valuable information, not just for a magical toolmaker, but for a company that dealt in magical tools. As long as they had this, they would be able to purchase materials without having to go through Orlando & Co.

"Yes. This should be useful not just for finding materials, but also for when my magic isn't enough for crafting or when I need different types of magic. It's helpful to be able to consult with manufacturers in the event that I need to."

"It seems Orlando & Co. have really come to consider themselves as our subcontractors."

"Ivano, that's—"

Dahlia couldn't help but feel uncomfortable speaking that way about a company that was similar in stature to the Rossetti Company. But before she could finish her sentence, Ivano asked, "Chairwoman, you no longer hold any attachment to Orlando & Co., right?"

She understood he was concerned for her, but she was no longer dwelling on the termination of her engagement. Besides, now that they were managing a company, Orlando & Co. was a valuable business connection.

"I don't. Please conduct business with them as you would with any other company. I'll leave things in your hands. You're the one in charge of our business dealings, after all."

“Okay then, do you mean to say I can do whatever I like?”

Her dependable vice-chairman fixed his navy blue eyes on her for confirmation. The slight chill in his gaze must have been due to the winter sunlight streaming through the window, enhancing the blue of his eyes.

Dahlia suddenly remembered a set phrase used by merchants and said, “Um, may we thrive and succeed under your direction.”

“...Understood, Chairwoman.” Ivano gave his usual laugh.

After they finished their conversation, Dahlia headed for the wing of the castle in which the Order of Beast Hunters was headquartered. The plan was to check on how things were going with the impact absorption material that they’d applied to the broad shield used by Randolph, Volf’s fellow knight.

Jonas came to pick Dahlia up in the Scalfarotto’s family carriage so that he could give her the report on the slime research before they arrived at the castle.

Ivano had a meeting with the Tailors’ Guild, so they parted ways at the carriage stop. He boarded the Rossetti Trading Company carriage, which was being pulled by the sleipnir named Iris. The sleipnir looked to be in a good mood, having just been given an apple by Mena, an employee of the company.

Dahlia boarded the Scalfarotto family’s carriage, sitting across from Jonas and next to Marcella. Jonas wasn’t wearing his usual attendant’s uniform but rather a starched white shirt and a dark gray three-piece suit. His right sleeve bulged out a bit, most likely due to the scales caused by his blight. Even though his scales were hidden from the naked eye with a misperception bracelet, it was difficult to disguise the look of his sleeve.

“Regarding the blue slimes enchanted with ice magic, it appears that they are still cold as of yesterday. Lady Idaealina has addressed other developments in her report.”

The other day, during a meeting with the Scalfarottos’ Magical Tool Development Team and with the cooperation of Volf’s older brother, Guido, and various guild masters, they had experimented with enchanting slime powder. They’d found several possible uses for slime-based magical tools, but there were still several that were under study. One of those was the blue slime mixture, which was enchanted with ice magic.

In the report Jonas handed to Dahlia, it was stated that the slime was still maintaining a reasonably low temperature. If it could stay cold for this long, then it could be very effective as a

sort of ice pack. After scanning the report, Dahlia looked back up at Jonas.

“At this temperature, there’s little worry for frostbite, so it should also be useful for keeping things cool.”

“Yes. However, if one were to hold it with one’s bare hands for a long time, there’s a possibility it would cause redness and irritation to the skin.”

Dahlia must have overlooked that in the report. She hastily looked back at the document to check.

“My apologies, I seemed to have missed that…”

“No, it’s not written in the report. When I met with Lady Idaealina, her hands and cheeks were a bit red… I was unable to determine if it was due to the corrosive properties of the blue slime, mild frostbite, or because she had been touching it for too long,” he explained, choosing his words carefully.

Dahlia completely understood. Idaealina, whom Dahlia called Idaea, was the chief researcher of the slime farm and wholly devoted to slime research. She must have become quite attached to the blue slime that was the ice magic enchantment test subject. Dahlia had no trouble imagining Idaea rubbing the cold, blue slime against her cheeks.

A mage of the Scalfarotto family had apparently healed her then and there, ensuring her condition didn’t become anything serious, and other personnel had been tasked with checking on Idaea once a day going forward. Dahlia was very relieved to hear that.

As they spoke about such topics, the carriage arrived at the castle. She had come here so many times by now, but she was as nervous as ever when they passed under the large stone gates into the grounds. There, she saw the extensive, towering castle walls, the cluster of white stone buildings, and in the center, the enormous castle. The three towers that were built into the exterior of the castle were called “proof of impregnable peace.” The Kingdom of Ordine had suffered not a single war or rebellion in the more than two hundred years since its founding. Dahlia felt incredibly grateful for that peace.

Once they reached the carriage stop, Jonas alighted first, and Marcella began descending after him. When Dahlia lifted the hem of her dark green dress slightly to stand up, however, Jonas thrust his head back inside the carriage.

“Stay quiet. Marcella, don’t open this door until I say so.”

“Yes, sir.”

In response to Jonas’s whispered orders, Marcella remained in the carriage, closed the door, and locked it. Then, as he readjusted the black leather gloves on his hands, he stood in front of the door. Dahlia didn’t know what was happening, but this was the royal castle. All they could do was follow Jonas’s instructions.

“Jonas, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Through the barely finger-length gap in the window, opened to prevent motion sickness, Dahlia heard an unfamiliar voice. The sound of footsteps approached the carriage before stopping right next to it. Dahlia reflexively stifled her breathing.

“It has been quite a while since we last saw each other, Lord Goodwin.”

The speaker seemed to be a relative of Jonas’s. Dahlia had heard there were many nobles with the surname “Goodwin.” Perhaps it wasn’t so rare to run into relatives of his at the castle stop by happenstance.

“Last week, we welcomed a child. Another boy.”

“Congratulations. I shall send a belated celebratory gift.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just that I wanted to take this opportunity to have your blight cured at the temple so you could come back home. Of course, I’ll find a post for you in the company as well as do what I can to find you a suitable marriage partner.”

“I’m afraid I must refuse. I currently serve Lord Guido.”

The other person seemed to be a close relative, but the flat tone Jonas was speaking in made it sound as though he were not conversing with a family member.

“I heard you have become the head of the Scalfarottos’ Weapons Development Team. However, you started working in the same industry as our family without so much as a word. The family can’t turn a blind eye to that.”

“I understand. And what shall be my punishment?”

“There’s no intention of punishing you. However, the family has met and discussed making you choose between establishing a liaison with our company to exchange relevant information or, failing that, completely removing yourself from the family—”

“In that case, I shall remove myself from the family.”

“Jonas!” the other party cried out at his abrupt response. The shout caused the horses to whinny.

“You may serve the Scalfarottos, but you are a member of the Viscountcy Goodwin. After you leave the family, if something should happen to that Lord Guido, would you be able to stay with the Scalfarottos, what with your blight? If you happened to fall out of their good graces, you’d have no one left to support you.”

Jonas impassively struck down the other party’s attempts at persuasion. “I would ensure I perished before anything happened to Lord Guido. I will protect my master until he decides I am unneeded. Your concern is unnecessary, Lord Goodwin.”

There was a short pause, then the sound of a deep sigh.

“Lord Goodwin? So you still insist on calling me that…”

“I believe it was you, Lord Goodwin, who told me to never again call you ‘elder brother’ for as long as I lived, was it not?”

Jonas’s words were polite, but Dahlia felt she could see the cold blade behind them. And now, finally, she’d learned the person Jonas was speaking to was his brother.

“I suppose it’s too late to apologize for that…”

“No apology is required. After all, you were only telling me I wasn’t fit to be part of the Goodwin family.”

Dahlia heard the sound of hooves—another carriage must have pulled into the carriage stop. One of the men coughed lightly.

“Okay. Let me know if and when your adoption is decided. And if you reconsider, or if you should need anything, you can come to me for— No, if not me, someone else from the family will be fine. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Very well. Thank you for your consideration.”

Without any words of farewell, the sound of one pair of footsteps faded into the distance. Dahlia could sense Jonas had remained behind. She held her breath and waited a moment, then she heard a knocking at the door.

“Okay, Marcella. You can open up now.”

Jonas’s words spurred Marcella, who had been frozen, to finally move. He unlocked the door and opened it. There stood Jonas, his expression unchanged.

“Go and check if there’s anyone on the road up ahead. If you find anyone, come right back.”

“Yes, sir.”

Following Jonas’s command, Marcella exited the carriage.

Jonas took his spot in the carriage, then narrowed his eyes at Dahlia.

“...Judging by your face, am I to assume you heard that interaction? It seems I miscalculated the range of my anti-eavesdropping device. I’m terribly sorry you had to bear witness to that unpleasant conversation.”

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to eavesdrop like that...”

“No, it was my mistake. Please, forget about it.”

This was Jonas’s personal business and had not been meant for Dahlia to hear. But despite thinking that, she was worried about Jonas, whose stiff expression resembled a doll’s, and she couldn’t stop herself from asking, “Um, are you all right, Master Jonas?”

Jonas suddenly froze and stared intently at Dahlia with his rust-colored eyes.

“Are you concerned about me?”

Surprisingly, Jonas faced her with an elegant, artificial smile. But in his eyes, she saw a dark flicker of light—a flicker that reminded Dahlia of Volf when he spoke to her about his painful past.

“I am, Master Jonas. You’re an important colleague to me.”

“I— Thank you.”

Jonas’s artificial smile vanished as if it had melted away. He settled himself back into his seat and turned his gaze to Dahlia once more.

“As I told you before, I am estranged from my family. That man’s mother was our father’s first wife, while my mother was his second wife. Furthermore, his mother married in from an earldom, while my mother was a dancer from a desert country who was offered to my father.”

“Oh, um, do you mean in the matchmaking sense?”

“No, I meant it exactly as I said. While there on a diplomatic mission, my father inadvertently called her beautiful three times during a banquet, so— Ah, in the desert country Išrana, calling someone beautiful three times in one night is equivalent to a marriage proposal.”

What an astonishing custom that was. In Ordine, it was a matter of courtesy for a male aristocrat to compliment a woman, which must have been the source of the misunderstanding.

“And so your mother ended up becoming his bride...”

“That’s right. A noble from Išrana bought my mother, wrapped

her up in a rug, and gave her to my father as a gift."

"Huh?"

"My mother became a slave. Išrana has an officially sanctioned slave system."

"...I didn't know that."

Jonas spoke so matter-of-factly, Dahlia wasn't sure what she should say. In Ordine, the only slaves were criminals, and since they were isolated on work sites, they were never seen.

"My father, unable to give back my mother, who was a gift from a foreign country, made her his second wife. In so doing, he terminated her slave contract, but no one else around her accepted that. Unable to adjust, my father divorced her and she returned to her homeland. I haven't returned home in a long time, but now that I am the head of the Scalfarottos' Weapons Development Team, my name has begun to become well-known. I'm sure they want to make use of me as some sort of pawn. Presuming that to be the case, I felt it would cause Lord Guido less trouble if I were to remove myself from the family entirely."

"I'm sorry, I asked about something that's uncomfortable for you to speak about..."

"No, it's fine. I wouldn't talk about anything I preferred not to."

After he'd finished speaking, Jonas's brow furrowed slightly. Unsure whether to ask him what was wrong, Dahlia raised her hands before quickly bringing them back down. Seeing her do that, Jonas spoke up again resignedly.

"It does create a bit of an issue. If I am not adopted by a noble family soon, I won't be able to enter part of the castle."

"There's an area like that?"

"Yes. There's a location that's meant to be used for meetings among those of earl rank and higher. Not even attendants and bodyguards can enter unless they are nobles or people in certain special occupations, like priests. Furthermore, not many families are willing to adopt one with a blight into their family, so even if I asked Lord Guido, it would likely take some time."

Hearing Jonas speak about adoption as if it were entirely ordinary, Dahlia blurted out a question.

"Um, is adoption common among nobles?"

"Yes, I hear it happens much more often than among commoners."

"So, for example, does it happen frequently that a commoner would be adopted into an earldom?"

“…Yes, it’s not uncommon. In order to protect an exceptional commoner, or to join two families together for business reasons. Adoption and marriage are both typical, but—you heard about this from Lord Volf, yes?”

It seemed Jonas was already aware. He was Guido’s attendant and bodyguard, after all. He had probably been present at the time.

“Yes. I was only joking, but Volf laughed when we were talking about him becoming my brother…”

“Lord Volf, your brother… I see. In that case, Lord Guido would also become your ‘dear brother Guido,’ no?”

“That is out of the question! Oh, I mean, it’s not as if I dislike Lord Guido, but, um, he’s of much higher status, or well, it’d be rude of me…”

Dahlia desperately tried to explain herself to Jonas. Although her discussion with Volf had ended in laughter, she had no intention of calling Guido “big brother,” even as a joke.

Before she knew it, Jonas had his fist over his mouth, his shoulders shaking. She wished he would just go on and laugh out loud.

Around the time Jonas’s shoulders stopped shaking, Marcella came back.

“I’ve confirmed there is no one up ahead.”

“All right then, let us go.”

As Dahlia descended from the carriage, Jonas extended a hand to her to help her down. She took it without protest and alighted from the carriage.

The plan for the day was to check on the equipment that made use of the impact absorption material derived from yellow slime. Dahlia was very keen to find out how things were going with Randolph’s well-used broad shield.

Behind Dahlia, the sound of Jonas closing the carriage doors muffled his muttering.

“That student of mine still has a lot to learn…”

Dahlia, Jonas, and Marcella moved to the conference room in the Order of Beast Hunters’ wing. Already gathered there were Randolph and Grato, the captain of the Beast Hunters, as well as other knights who managed the shields. After the standard

greetings, they quickly moved on to inspecting Randolph's broad shield.

His thick, steel-plated broad shield, which he said he'd "put through a good bit of testing," was riddled with deep scratches. Just what sort of training he'd done was anyone's guess.

However, the impact absorption material affixed to the back of the shield showed no sign of damage or wear. Nor did it show any sign of deterioration after one week. Dahlia was pleased that they were one step closer to implementing it.

"Sir Randolph, would you suggest we make the impact absorption material thicker?"

"No, this is enough. But wearing these gloves with it, I feel like my shield gets caught when I try to let go of it quickly."

"That's because those gloves are a little thicker now too. Let's open a little more space at the grip and adjust its shape. Also, this lower left part here—does it seem to be a little bent?"

That fact had escaped Dahlia's notice, but apparently it was obvious to Jonas and the other squad members. They were touching the broad shield and nodding as they confirmed as much.

"Randolph's been sending the troops flying higher than ever lately."

"It's probably because I mostly attack using the left side. It's taking more force now that I can put more power into it."

"The whole thing is dented. Let us strengthen the entire shield. Sir Randolph, would it be acceptable if your shield became a little heavier?"

"Considering its attack power, I'd want the weight to be increased by a quarter. If possible, I'd also like the bottom part to be thicker."

"Randolph, it'll be hard for the other squad members to handle that amount of weight. Jonas, sorry for the trouble, but could you make two sizes?"

"Certainly. However, if possible, perhaps it would be best to adjust the heaviness and thickness for each person—"

As they listened to what Randolph and the others had to say, they examined the different ways to make improvements to the broad shield. This time, it was up to Jonas to decipher and respond to the various opinions, since Dahlia didn't have a good understanding of weapons. Instead, she focused her efforts on taking notes as she listened in.

After their brief inspection was complete, Dahlia and Jonas were invited into Grato's office. She figured he might need their signature on some delivery of goods or a contract. As she was thinking that, he urged her to sit down on the sofa along with Jonas.

"Today, I have something to give to you two."

Once Grato said those words, Vice-Captain Griswald and Volf entered the office, each carrying a large, flat, silver-colored box. They placed the considerably large, magically sealed silver boxes on the low table.

"This one is for you, Rossetti. And this one is for Jonas. Go ahead and open them."

Jonas opened his box first, and following his lead, Dahlia gently removed the lid of her own. What she found inside was a silky black cloth with fine silver lines running throughout. She reached her fingers toward it and sensed its strong magic, like many layers of thin, invisible cloth. It seemed to have a much, much stronger enchantment than zephyricloth. Depending on one's viewpoint, it could be considered quite a sophisticated magical tool.

Dahlia heard Jonas's breath catch beside her.

Amid their surprise, each had their respective cloth spread wide and placed upon their shoulders—Volf doing so for Dahlia and the vice-captain for Jonas. The two of them were now cloaked in black robes with silver trim.

"They look good on both of you. We Beast Hunters only have knight uniforms, so I had these custom-made for our advisers. I went with an overcoat so it would go well with whatever you wore underneath it."

"Th-Thank you…"

"…Thank you."

Dahlia's voice came out as a squeak. Even Jonas's words of thanks were a beat late.

Was this robe meant to be a uniform for the Order of Beast Hunters? The uniforms of the Order of Beast Hunters were also black with silver trim. However, the silver at the hem of this black robe shone reddish depending on how the light hit it. It was not wholly like silver or copper but was some other strange hue.

Griswald, who'd noticed Dahlia inspecting the hem, explained with a smile, "The trim is argentorosso. It suits you both very

well.”

“Argentorosso… Um, is that what’s taken from silver lodes where salamanders have nested?”

“So you are knowledgeable about it, Master Dahlia? I’m not surprised.”

She didn’t know much about it, just that it was a rare metal she’d wanted to try holding at least once.

Salamanders were spirits that looked like lizards. They could stand in a blazing flame with no problem and were fond of hot places like volcanoes and hot springs.



Argentorosso was said to be created when salamanders happened to live near silver-ore veins for a length of time. The resulting metal was a silver that contained strong fire magic and so had exceptional heat resistance and temperature-control properties. There was a low chance of argentorosso forming, and even alchemists were still unable to produce a similar substance artificially—that was what Dahlia had learned in college, but she'd never been able to see the real deal. It was also a very expensive material.

"It had been lying unused in the treasury for a while," explained Grato. "The castle mages took it out for us for this special occasion. Also, this is as much as can be used. Add any more and the cloth can't take it."

"This is much too precious for me..."

"What're you saying? You're our squad's advisers. It's frustrating that this is the best I can do," replied Grato. He then took out the sheets of parchment that remained in the box. "The magical toolmakers and mages of the castle incorporated some of the latest magic in these magic circles. Here's an explanation of the circles, but...the letters are small, so you can read them on your own."

Grato handed over the sheaf of parchment with a wry smile. The densely written explanation spanned several pages. Apparently, the five small magic circles stitched into the back of the robe provided the effects of increased magic resistance against fire, earth, water, and air as well as lightweight defense for emergencies. In sum, the robe had five layers of enchantment. For a magical tool, that was tremendous enough to make one shudder.

"You should wear these adviser robes as often as you can for ceremonial events, but aside from that, feel free to wear them wherever you please. I believe they will be useful in the castle too. When you wear those robes, whatever anyone may say to you will be considered as spoken to a member of the Order of Beast Hunters. Should you ever need anything, please do not hesitate to say so. We shall take care of everything."

There was a noticeable stiffness in Griswald's tone.

Dahlia knew that when she wore this robe, she would have to stand up tall as an adviser and member of the Order of Beast Hunters.

"If you wear it in the castle, you'll be treated on the same level

as a baron," said Grato. "Although, this has become largely arbitrary now."

What do you mean by that? she was about to ask when Grato smiled brightly at them.

"Madam Dahlia Rossetti, Lord Jonas Goodwin—from the bottom of my heart, congratulations on your baronies."

"Huh?"

"Pardon?"

Thinking they'd heard wrong, the two of them both uttered that flabbergasted response in unison.

"Ah, so you haven't received the official notice yet? It was officially decided yesterday. It'll happen next spring."

Somehow, Dahlia and Jonas managed to respond.

"...Thank you for this undeserved honor."

"Th-Thank you very much..."

"Congratulations, Master Dahlia and Master Jonas!"

"Congratulations, Dahlia, Master Jonas!"

As the words of congratulations came pouring in, Dahlia felt dizzy. *Please wait. My heart can't keep up.* She had heard that it took an entire year to be selected for a barony, so she'd assumed that, even if she had been selected, she wouldn't be notified until next year. Why, then, had things accelerated so quickly? While her mind was in a state of confusion, she sensed Jonas stir beside her.

"Sir Grato, this may be impertinent of me, but...I fully understand this for Master Dahlia, but I am an adviser in name only. I believe my contributions to the Order are woefully lacking."

"Master Jonas, you've made plenty of meaningful contributions on the weapons development front. From the Galeforce Bow to the broad shields to improvements to our weapons, you've provided us everything we could ask for and more. If you don't think that's enough, then by all means, continue providing us with a steady supply of weapons and innovations."

"Of course, I will endeavor to my fullest extent on that end. However—I have a blight. And I have no intention of curing myself of it. If I were to continue this duty as I am, I believe I would only cause trouble for you and your troops."

"That's no problem. You use your blight to protect your master. Besides, there've been blighted in the squad in the past

too. Their night vision proved convenient, so they kept their blights until they retired. And besides, I'm leading these troops, and I have a magic sword. And we've got a squad member who's practically obsessed with getting his own magic sword too."

Volf had a big smile on his face—without even being called out by name, he seemed to know Grato was talking about him.

"Master Jonas," said Griswald, "you have the support of even the retired knights, so please set your mind at ease. We've received many recommendations stating, 'Please grant a title to Master Jonas, head of the Scalfarotto Arms Works.'"

"Recommendations, for me?"

That was the first he'd heard of it, it seemed. Dahlia had never heard his voice go that high before.

"If you don't have a noble rank, you can't attend the royal budget meetings, now can you?" Grato remarked. "Lord Bernigi received as many as thirteen letters. You don't want to slight the veterans, do you? So just accept it."

"...I truly appreciate this. I will do my very best."

Dahlia was frankly impressed by Jonas's conscientious remarks. Before, when she had been asked to act as adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters, she'd been completely thrown for a loop—so much so that after the presentation, she had barely been able to get her words out right. Compared to her then, Jonas was calm. His voice might have been a little shaky earlier, but now his face was expressionless as usual. Dahlia felt acutely envious of his composure.

"I'm just speaking out loud here, but now that our veterans have come back, a lot of the top brass of the knights' order have gotten stomachaches like it's parents' day at school. And that includes me."

"Dahlia and I would both like to extend our deepest apologies regarding that."

"I-I'm sorry..."

Dahlia had just been admiring Jonas's conscientiousness, but now she'd gotten caught in his cross fire.

She was glad about the revival of the knights, but having one's seniors return to the workplace was sure to put people on edge. The comparison to being a kid during parents' day was really on point.

"You two, this is the part where you're supposed to laugh," Grato said with a mystifying expression. The people around

them burst into laughter, but Dahlia and Jonas could only chuckle weakly.

“Medical workers and magical toolmakers in the castle have also started work on developing prosthetic arms and legs. Even knights who have been discharged might be able to return to duty.”

“That’s amazing. It looks like we’ll have to hunt more green horses after the slimes.”

“So it’s the green horses’ turn to cry next?”

“Skybats aren’t safe either.”

Everyone was talking and laughing with each other, but none of what they said sounded like a joke to Dahlia. Although she had been the one to develop all these tools, Dahlia felt sympathy and guilt for those monsters that would be turned into materials. There was no such thing as a monster graveyard, but perhaps she should seriously think about a prayer and an offering for them. She raised her face with that thought in mind and saw Grato turn his red eyes toward her.

“What? Making monsters cry is what makes us beast hunters.”

Dahlia gave thanks for the robe once again and exited the room. She would be escorted from the castle back to the tower in the Scalfarotto family’s carriage. In the corridor on their way to the carriage, Volf covertly asked her, “Is it all right if I come by later to celebrate?” Dahlia wordlessly answered with a nod.

Later, in the middle of conversing with Jonas and Marcella in the carriage, she arrived home at the Green Tower.

“Master Dahlia, allow me to carry this in for you and make sure everything is in order. Is that all right?”

“Yes, thank you, Master Jonas.”

“Marcella, wait here.”

Usually, Marcella would have been the one to bring her things in for her, but this time she had the magically sealed box that contained her adviser’s robe from the Order of Beast Hunters. She accepted Jonas’s offer, figuring he was just being mindful of the box’s contents. Since they had talked about those contents on the way, Marcella also seemed understanding. He bowed and remained behind in the carriage.

“Pardon me.”

After he entered the first floor of the tower behind Dahlia, Jonas delicately placed the magically sealed box on top of the

workbench. He then returned to the doorway, left the door half-open, and leaned his longsword against it. When she started to ask him why he'd done that, he lifted the corners of his mouth slightly.

"It would be improper of me to be alone with an unmarried young woman, so please allow me to leave the door ajar. I apologize for the chill."

"Not at all! I mean, thank you for the thought."

She was ashamed of herself for not having considered that at all. Since Volf came and went so often, she had thought nothing of Jonas being here.

Jonas stood in front of her, slightly flustered just as she was, and placed his right hand on his left shoulder. Seeing him suddenly perform a knight's sign of respect toward her, Dahlia's eyes opened wide.

"Master Dahlia—no, Madam Dahlia Rossetti—you have my deepest gratitude."

"Huh?" she blurted inanely, not understanding what he meant. However, his rust-colored eyes were unwavering as he stared straight at her.

"It would have been impossible for me to receive a barony on my own. My accomplishments are all thanks to you. All I have to offer you in turn is a meager sum of money and my fangs and scales. My sword belongs to Lord Guido, so I cannot offer my loyalty as your knight. However, if there is anything you wish to have, I can request it from Lord Guido, so—"

"I don't need anything, Master Jonas."

It wasn't as if she didn't understand what he wanted to say. The weapons team had begun with the Galeforce Bow, derived from Dahlia and Volf's Galeforce Blades. The impact absorption material was also something she had begun developing herself. However, if they were to trace things back to the beginning, the team had been created to protect her after she'd gone ahead with recklessly developing and creating a weapon. Moreover, at this stage, both Jonas and Guido were involved in developing the magical tools. None of her tools was her accomplishment alone.

"I am indebted to you for your protection. Creating weapons is a labor we share, and we are both advisers to the Order of Beast Hunters, so you and I are colleagues. Lord Guido is also taking care of my expenses, so I have no need for anything more."

“But a peerage is not an insignificant thing…”

“Um, perhaps you should thank Lord Bernigi and the ones who endorsed you rather than me?” Dahlia suggested automatically, seeing Jonas’s baffled expression. She didn’t mean to imply Bernigi was in need of anything, he was just the first person who came to mind.

“I shall consult with Lord Guido about that. However, I wish you would allow me to repay you in some way, Master Dahlia. I can now continue being useful and having access to the rooms of the castle as Lord Guido’s bodyguard—”

Ah, now I get it, Dahlia thought, suddenly understanding. What Jonas truly wanted—more than being a baron—was a position that allowed him to protect Guido everywhere he could. In a way, it wasn’t much different from her wanting to be a baroness so that no one would question her being by Volf’s side.

“Master Dahlia, will you accept my pension? You can consider it additional funds to purchase materials of your choosing.”

“That would not be an appropriate use of that money, Master Jonas. I really don’t need… Ah, all right then, please just be in my ‘debt,’” Dahlia said with a smile, suddenly recalling her father’s practice.

“In your debt, you say?” Jonas responded dubiously.

“Yes. Once I have a favor to ask you, please allow me to bring it to your attention then.”

“Understood. Please feel free to call upon me when you so need to. I’ve heard repaying a ‘debt’ to a woman can be quite costly, so I will prepare myself.”

Dahlia sensed some uneasiness in Jonas as he nodded deeply; his face looked a little grim. She wasn’t intending to make any absurd demands or ask for any costly objects, so she wished he wouldn’t look so apprehensive.

However, was being indebted to a noblewoman perhaps such a serious matter?

“Um, it’s not my intention to ask anything unreasonable of you…”

“Nonsense, I am at your service, whatever it may be. The comment about a woman’s debt being a costly thing—that was something I heard from Lord Guido.”

Based on prior experience, Dahlia felt she shouldn’t press for details. She couldn’t bear the thought of prying too much only to regret it. That thought kept her from responding to Jonas’s

statement, but he quickly elaborated in any case.

“The other day, Lord Guido was working late and was unable to read a book aloud to his daughter. His daughter wrote him a note saying he needed to read her *two* books on his next day off to repay his debt.”

Dahlia had to stifle a laugh. What an adorable way to collect on a debt.

“She must love her father very much.”

“Yes. And she is the apple of Lord Guido’s eye. He paid her the highest compliment, calling her ‘the perfect daughter, who not only wrote up a document billing for double the service but also made sure to hide that document in my room.’”

“Is that so?”

Guido usually kept his expression so well composed, but Dahlia was sure that in front of his daughter, he had the face of a kind father. As she imagined that, she felt a sense of relief.

Jonas watched Dahlia as she smiled tenderly at his story about Guido’s daughter. Perhaps she was remembering her own father, Carlo.

Just when the matter of leaving his family and adoption had formed a pit of worry in Jonas’s mind, a barony had practically fallen into his lap. The fact that he hadn’t heard a single word from Guido meant that he wasn’t involved. In all likelihood, Bernigi must have done something behind the scenes. If so, Jonas could consider Marcella to be his repayment to Bernigi.

However, when it came to the red-haired magical toolmaker before him now, he found himself in an incomprehensible situation. She was making it her mission to evade every single one of his offers. It was a matter of course to give to a noblewoman whatever she might desire, like a dress, jewels, or some household commodity. It wasn’t uncommon even for households to make that request themselves in a noblewoman’s stead.

Jonas had made several suggestions, but Dahlia hadn’t accepted a single one, and in the end, she had just requested he be in her “debt.” Moreover, he was fully aware that she would keep him in her debt forever. He could neither accept nor understand it.

“Master Dahlia, knowing you, I have a feeling this debt of mine will remain uncollected.”

“No, because I will be in your care going forward. Also, I feel more at ease now that we will be receiving our titles together. That’s enough for me.”

“…I am honored.” His response came a beat late.

Not only does this woman go beyond selflessness, she is also very dangerous—Jonas rethought that judgment. *We’ll be receiving our titles together*, she’d said. If he’d taken that the wrong way, then it would have sounded like she was asking him to be her partner when their titles were bestowed upon them.

To partner with Dahlia, who was a single woman with no family, held great meaning. If he were a high-ranking noble or married, then he would be viewed as her “guardian” or a “supporter.”

Having an unmarried man as her partner could easily have been taken to mean they were either very close or had plans to live together. A partner was typically assumed to be one’s fiancé or lover.

Normally, Dahlia’s partner would have been Guido, her “noble guardian.” However, on the same day Dahlia received her barony, Guido would be taking over as the head of household and the Scalfarottos would become a marquisate. It would be difficult for the two of them to be partners.

Having said that, if Jonas were to be Dahlia’s partner, he feared he would have a very, very depressed black-haired student on his hands.

Well, since his intention was to immediately return to being Guido’s bodyguard after getting his rank, she was most likely asking him to be her “supporter.” Remembering Dahlia’s ignorance of the aforementioned, and his student who needed a bit more educational guidance, Jonas decided to propose something.

“Very well, let’s go to the ceremony together. Would you allow me to send you a dress for this special occasion?”

“Thank you, I am looking forward to attending the ceremony with you. Regarding the dress, I truly appreciate your thought, but that’s all I can accept. Lucia has been working on my dress for a while now.”

For an instant, Jonas had thought Volf might’ve been the one giving her a dress, but unfortunately, it seemed he’d been wrong. Apparently, the boundlessly cheerful young woman who reminded Jonas of nemophila flowers was making Dahlia’s dress.

That meant the master of the Tailors' Guild, Forto, was likely bearing the expense. The Tailors' Guild was also working hard to win over Dahlia.

"I look forward to seeing how it turns out. May I ask Ms. Lucia about it ahead of time?"

"That is no problem for me, but I'm not so sure she will tell you. She still won't tell me about it…"

"I'm sure it will be a dress fit for a beautiful woman."

"I told her to make the design as subdued as possible… What do people normally wear for this sort of event?"

"I believe women mainly wear dresses, but since that choice offers plenty of variety, they have a little more flexibility than the men—though of course, female knights wear their uniforms."

"I see. So the menswear is more or less decided?"

"No, there are no set rules. It is just that most wear either a knight's uniform or a formal black three-piece suit with a long tailcoat. I am planning on wearing my knight's uniform and the robe I was given today."

"I see… Ah, if my dress is too showy, then maybe I can wear my robe on top of it…" she murmured. If Lucia were to hear that, she would protest with all her being. It was natural for any noblewoman to want to stand out as much as possible when receiving the honor of a title, but this woman was the complete opposite.

When Jonas tried to continue their conversation, a cold breeze blew in from the half-open door. Realizing it was time to head back, he stood up straight to say his goodbyes.

"Master Dahlia, I truly thank you for today. Even aside from my 'debt,' if there should ever be something I can help you with, no matter how small, please do not hesitate to tell me."

"Ah… Well then, I do have a small favor to ask…" the woman said with a somewhat feeble laugh.

He prepared himself, wondering just what sort of request she had for him, as she rummaged around in the lower shelf of a cupboard that was standing against the wall. Perplexed at this unpredictable outcome, he watched as she placed a large glass jar on the table with a *thunk*. At the bottom of the jar was a mass of quivering blue slime—and the fact that he could tell it was a grade A specimen with fine color and luster showed just how accustomed he'd gotten to slimes himself.

"I borrowed this from Ms. Idaea the other day for observation,

but I haven't been able to remove the lid since this morning. I want to give it its water for today."

Jonas had to struggle to keep his voice composed as he responded to the redheaded woman in front of him, who looked to be at a total loss.

"...Please, allow me."

Holding back a laugh with all his might, Jonas opened the lid of the jar.



"Dahlia, congratulations on your barony!"

"Thank you, Volf."

That evening, as promised, Volf arrived at the tower. As soon as he entered, he handed her a lovely bouquet of flowers. The roses, arranged so that they started pink in the middle of the bouquet and gradated outward to white, smelled wonderful.

After Dahlia thanked him and took the bouquet, Volf went back to his carriage. No sooner did she go check to see where he'd gone than he came back carrying a black liquor bottle and a three-tiered flat wooden box.

"I brought drinks and snacks to celebrate."

The black bottle was smaller than a wine bottle, but its contents were a mystery. However, the gold label had the word "Rejoice" written in the Eastern Kingdom's elegant script, so it must have been a liquor meant for celebrations.

The two of them walked up to the second floor of the tower and decided to have dinner. The three-tiered wooden box Volf set on top of the heated low table resembled the jubako Dahlia had known in her previous life. He lifted the glossy wood-grained top off the box, revealing a colorful assortment of food inside.

The first tier of the box contained sautéed duck, herb-grilled shrimp, and crispy fried red- and white-fleshed fish. The second tier had a terrine with an assortment of vegetables and a salad of edible flowers and vegetables cut into ornate, decorative shapes. The third tier was filled with several miniature cupcakes. The sugar work of flowers, butterflies, kittens, and puppies that adorned the tops of the cupcakes was so splendidly done that Dahlia almost wanted to keep them as decorations.

"This is amazing..."

"Master Jonas told the family and had some food prepared.

Also, my brother told me to bring you this alcohol… I'm sorry, I didn't do anything," Volf said regretfully, though she wouldn't have known that if he hadn't said anything. Dahlia shook her head at him.

"This came from your household, so it's from you too. Besides, you're the one who brought this here for us to celebrate. And you got me such beautiful flowers. I'm really happy."

She suddenly recalled the stewpot in the kitchen. For today, she had prepared a commoner's stew filled with large chunks of vegetables. She'd gone ahead and added beef too, but she'd used the tougher, less expensive neck cut. Dahlia had heard that Volf had had training today, so she'd made the stew fatty and rich in flavor. She doubted the high-end, delicate flavors of the foods he'd brought would go well with the stew.

"Dahlia, what's on your mind?"

"I made a beef and vegetable stew, but I was just thinking about whether or not it would go well with this. Um, the stew meat is kind of tough and the flavor is nothing fancy…"

"If you want my opinion, I'd rather have the stew," Volf stated decisively.

This was the season of chilly mornings and evenings. He had come all the way here by horse, so that must have been why he preferred to have a warm stew.

"I'm glad. Okay then, I'll bring the stew out too."

Dahlia was about to head for the kitchen when the gate bell rang. She looked out the window to see a black carriage with a distinctive ash-silver design parked in front of the gate. Whether it was a letter or a gift, she had an idea of who the sender was.

"I think I've got a delivery, so I'll be right back."

"I'll come too. Just in case it's something heavy."

"Thank you, that would be helpful. If possible, maybe you could help me think of what to write in my thank-you letter."

"Dahlia, do you already know who sent it?"

"…I'm fairly certain that carriage is Lord Gildo's."

"Lord Gildo…"

Dahlia watched as Volf's golden eyes narrowed and a wrinkle appeared at his brow. She was sure she was making exactly the same expression.

After thanking the courier, they took the parcel and returned to the second floor. As Dahlia had expected, that carriage

belonged to the family of Gildo, the head of the royal treasury. What she hadn't expected was that the letter included both Gildo and Grato's names.

The letter spelled out congratulations for her barony as well as gratitude for the contributions she'd made to the Order of Beast Hunters and the castle. In addition, they had sent a gorgeous bouquet of red and white flowers and a crystal vase that was perfect to place them in. Of the two remaining boxes, one contained black tea leaves and the other dried, sugared fruit.

Setting aside the thank-you letter and return gift to worry about later, Dahlia gazed at the two names on the stationery, deeply moved.

"Sir Grato and Lord Gildo really seem to be getting along, don't they?"

"Yeah, sometimes I see them having tea together when I go to the captain's office."

"That's great."

Gildo's younger brother, who had been a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, had died on the way back from an expedition as a result of falling off his horse, the cause being his poor eating habits on expedition, which had led to malnutrition and anemia. Grato had been with him on that expedition, and he had blamed himself for not being able to protect the young man, despite Gildo having entrusted his younger brother to him. Thankfully, their relationship, severed for so many years, now seemed to have been completely restored.

What that story also made Dahlia realize was the importance of food on expeditions. Both traveling and fighting used up stamina, so keeping up a fully balanced diet was of paramount importance. She thought about that as she set the stew down next to Volf's gift on top of the heated low table in the living room.

They were both hungry, so they quickly dug in as they talked. Volf mainly ate the stew, while Dahlia focused on the contents of the tiered box. Once they were about done eating, Dahlia asked about something that had been on her mind.

"Volf, is there anything about your diet on expeditions that bothers you? Like if it's easy to become anemic, or if there's not enough of a certain food..."

"Our meat supply has increased, so anemia's not much of a

problem, but maybe there aren't enough vegetables... Oh, but since we have the camp stoves now, we get a little more of those dried vegetables for the soup. In the winter we get to bring apples and pears, so we eat those with the horses."

"Does the inside of your mouth get irritated on expeditions?"

"Yeah, pretty often. Also, I can get a little backed up... Ah, sorry! Forget that!"

"No, I think that's a really important part of maintaining your health!" she responded, earnest if not a little flustered.

On a serious note, that was probably because they really were lacking vegetables in their diet. That was why it was common for the knights to get mouth ulcers or become constipated. What Volf had said reminded Dahlia that she had just the perfect thing in her fridge. She promptly stood up and went to go get it.

"Let's see, for an irritated mouth, this should do the trick."

What she had brought back from her fridge was a green liquid. It was called "green vegetable juice" and was part of the beauty routine of commoner women. It was close to what had been called "green drink" in her previous life. Kale, the main ingredient of most green drinks, was unfortunately nowhere to be found here, but this world did offer plenty of other green vegetables, like mustard spinach.

This juice was mainly made out of edible greens like mustard spinach and the green parts of lettuce. Sometimes Dahlia also added carrots or tomatoes if she had some extras lying around, or apples and honey to make it easier to drink.

"I made it a while ago, so the color looks a little off..."

She had made a big batch that morning and left it in the fridge, which explained the cloudy, dark green color. When Dahlia poured the contents into a glass, Volf eyed it with great suspicion.

"Dahlia... Is that green stuff...liquefied green slime?"

"No, this is green vegetable juice. It's made with blended vegetables."

Why would they drink green slime? A sleipnir might like it, but if the two of them were to drink it, it would burn their mouths before they could even taste it.

"Blended vegetables..."

Volf peered at the glass, still not looking convinced.

Green vegetable juice was made using a magical tool called a "food mincer." It worked similarly to the blenders and food

processors of her previous world. The food mincer consisted of a large cup or bucket-like container with three to eight blades fitted on the bottom or side, which were turned by the power of air crystals. Depending on the size of the container and the blades used, it could finely chop or crush various types of ingredients.

The food mincer was a magical tool her father, Carlo, had invented. Apparently, he had originally made it for his friend's food stall, so they could finely chop meat and vegetables. Dahlia had admired him for making something for his friend, but her father had just told her, "I owed him one." Whether or not she should call him an honest person was something she thought about even now.

Incidentally, the tool came in different sizes and offered different blade shapes, but all of the variations were called food mincers. The different models that had been created after the initial one were registered as different sizes, such as medium, small, and miniature food mincers. Her father had told her, "I prioritized understandability. It's definitely not just because I didn't feel like coming up with different names." Dahlia was certain she had inherited her own naming sense from her father.

"Please try it, if you'd like."

"...Right."

Volf's expression had changed from skepticism to anguish. Dahlia decided maybe she should take the first sip, to put him at ease. She picked up her glass and took a gulp. It smelled a bit like grass, but the addition of the apple helped curb its intensity. The fact that it was well chilled also made it quite a tasty drink.

After she finished hers, she looked across at Volf, who had started gulping his down with both hands firmly holding his glass. He downed the whole thing in one go, not even pausing once.

"It's actually not that bitter, huh? It's got a bit of a grassy aftertaste, but it's easy to drink. I was imagining it having a much more intense flavor."

"A bitter, intense flavor... You mean like a green pepper juice?"

"...I can eat green peppers just fine now, thanks to you," he said, his peevish tone and slight pout making him look a bit childish.

For a while after they'd first met, Volf had not been a fan of green peppers. She remembered him asserting that green

peppers didn't like him—the memory almost made her burst out laughing. She fought the urge and changed the subject.

"I thought maybe if you froze this green vegetable juice into single servings, you could drink it while on expedition. One glass contains half a bowlful of leafy greens, so it should take care of your vegetable deficiencies."

"Aha, yeah, I think this should do it! If we put it in a box with an ice crystal, it should keep for a while as long as we change out the ice crystal every few days. We can make things like sautéed herbs and mushrooms now thanks to the camp stove, but harvests decrease in winter. This drink should really improve our health, though."

"Then next time I come to the castle, I'll bring the recipe with me."

"Thanks, Dahlia."

This winter, the Order of Beast Hunters might be seeing a few more vegetables in their diet than in the past. Although this effort wasn't related to magical tools, Dahlia was happy the knights could enjoy even slightly better health during their expeditions.

"Okay, now that we've finished eating, let's make another toast."

After their meal, Volf opened up the black bottle of liquor he'd brought with him. The liquid he poured into their glasses was a transparent estervino. When held up to a magical lamp, the contents glittered and sparkled.

"It's so pretty..."

"This is an estervino that just came in from the Eastern Kingdom. My brother said it contains real gold dust, and they usually break it out for weddings there."

"Sounds like quite the celebratory drink."

"Yeah, it's perfect for today. All right, cheers! To Dahlia becoming a baroness!"

"Umm, I'll do my best to live up to my title. Cheers!"

They clinked their glasses, and the tiny flecks of gold swam inside the liquor like they were alive. Before the flecks settled down, they brought their glasses to their lips. The nearly room-temperature liquor had a clean, smooth flavor. The aroma was also pleasant, and the refreshing taste went down without any cloudiness.

After she took her first sip, Dahlia exhaled, taking in the light, sweet scent. The memory it brought forth was of white plum blossoms. It was a very strange combination.

"Just what sort of alcohol is this? After I drink it, I smell flowers…" mused Volf.

"It's like plum blossoms, isn't it? I'm not sure how they make it, though."

The two of them took their time savoring the liquor with its glittering gold dust and strange, sweet flavor.

"Dahlia, mind if I ask what you're doing tomorrow? I have the day off."

"I'm going to Irma's in the morning. Lucia and I, and a few others, are going to ask what she wants for baby presents. Then, in the afternoon, I have a lesson with Professor Oswald. Would you want to come with us in the morning?"

"Sure, I want to get a present for Marcella too. Is he escorting you in the afternoon?"

"No, Marcella is taking Irma to the temple tomorrow. Ivano has to handle a delivery, so I'll be going alone. But Ms. Ermelinda will be in the room next to us, and Raul— Oh, I mean, Raulaere is usually at these lessons too."

Oswald was a married noble and Dahlia was a single woman, so whenever they were alone together, he made sure there was always someone in the adjacent room. As with Jonas earlier today, Dahlia found herself reflecting that nobles were a bit complicated.

"Mister…Raulaere?"

"He's Professor Oswald's oldest son. Sometimes he joins me for the lessons. He's just entered college, but he's very clever."

"I see. So he's like your junior apprentice?"

"No, Professor Oswald calls me his student, not his apprentice. Besides, Raul calls me Miss Dahlia, so… Our magic is at about the same level, so I'm trying my best not to lose to my junior pupil."

Raul had strong magic, and he had good intuition when it came to enchanting. His magic control was still rough around the edges, but if he could become as precise as his father, then he'd surely make a wonderful magical toolmaker. Dahlia would have to give her all in order not to be surpassed by that sort of opponent. While she was thinking about that, Volf refilled her glass with estervino.

“Next summer, you’ll be ‘Baroness Rossetti.’ You’ll have caught up to your father.”

“It’s only thanks to the Order that I’m becoming a baroness… Besides, I still have a lot to learn about magical toolmaking. But I will work hard in my role as an adviser for the Order of Beast Hunters so as not to let anyone down.”

“Dahlia, you’re working plenty hard already. You’ll be ‘Viscountess Rossetti’ before you know it.”

“That won’t happen. But, by becoming a baroness, I will be a little closer to you.”

Although, Volf’s family was going to become a marquisate in the future, so in actuality, the distance between them would remain the same. Still, to be honest, she was just glad that they wouldn’t be moving further apart.

“Nothing’s going to change about me just because my brother is becoming a marquis. I’m glad you’re becoming a baroness sooner than you thought. Now you can talk to me normally, like you talk to Marcella and everyone else.”

That was the promise she’d made to him before: once Dahlia became a noble, she would speak casually to Volf like she did to Marcella and the others. Hearing him say that like he’d been eagerly waiting for it made her feel a little embarrassed.

“Um…has my way of speaking bothered you this whole time?”

“No, it’s not like it bothers me that much. It’s just, it sort of makes me feel there’s more distance between us than there is between you and them, and, well, that seems like a shame, or something…”

“Aren’t I closer to you? I see you much more often, and—”

Why did she have to discuss how close or distant she was with her friend? Dahlia felt her cheeks grow hot. Maybe the gold-dust-filled liquor was much stronger than she’d thought.

“That’s right, let’s celebrate your barony! We’ve been putting it off since we’ve both been busy, but I’ll make a reservation at a restaurant where you can eat monsters.”

Volf’s suggestion put her at ease once more. She was keen to see how monsters could be made into food rather than materials.

“Thank you. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Good. Also, I want to give you something to commemorate the occasion. Is there anything you’d like?”

“Hmm… Okay, please buy me a longsword, one that’s not too

expensive.”

“A longsword? Not a shortsword?”

“I received a copy of my father’s spellbook. There are a few things in there that I want to try out. Why don’t we try making a magic sword? It’s been a while since the last time we tried. Though, with my level of magic, it’ll probably just turn out to be something that *looks* like a magic sword but doesn’t have any offensive capabilities.”

She couldn’t enchant it with strong magic, so she felt obliged to give him fair warning. Nevertheless, a pair of sparkling golden eyes homed in on her.

“You got it! You know I wish I could go find a good sword for that purpose right this second but unfortunately the shops are closed.”

Dahlia was very much entertained by Volf, who seemed to have forgotten that punctuation existed. He seemed to think she wouldn’t notice since they were sitting across from each other at the heated low table, but underneath the quilt, his flapping hands said it all. As of yet, it was still a mystery what they would be doing on the day they made the sword. However, as she looked at Volf, Dahlia couldn’t contain her own bubbling excitement.

“Recently, we’ve caused a lot of trouble for Lord Guido, so this time, let’s not let this leave the tower.”

“You’re right. This’ll be our little secret.”

The two of them shared a slightly mischievous grin, like two children planning a prank together. That very day, there were others who were taking stomach medicine for various reasons, but that didn’t occur to either of them.

“Leaving the family, hmm? If they’re going to let you go, that’s very much appreciated.”

“My apologies. I know this is a busy time.”

Guido was signing documents in his office at the Scalfarotto family estate. Only a few documents remained on his desk, but the pale moon was already visible outside the window.

“No, I believe your older brother was showing concern for you. I’ll make sure to tell him when he next comes to the castle for a delivery—that even if something were to happen to me,

you would continue working as a knight for the Scalfarotto family for as long as you yourself wish. And if necessary, I'll put it in writing."

"I apologize for the trouble. I knew the subject of me leaving the family would come up eventually. I never returned home, after all, and I am blighted."

"You don't see yourself clearly, Jonas. If your brother wanted to let go of you, he would have ordered it with a slip of paper a long time ago. He wouldn't have waited for you at the carriage stop like he did today."

"My brother...was waiting for me?" Jonas murmured in spite of himself at that unexpected information.

"That's right. He'd apparently been waiting for you at the carriage stop for two hours by the time you left my side at the castle."

"...What a waste of time."

Jonas took the document Guido handed him and lightly applied a dryer to the signature. Once he was sure the ink was dry, he placed it in the leather box on top of the desk. Guido picked up a new document and spoke without raising his gaze.

"I won't tell you what to think, but it's clear your brother cares about you. The connections of the Goodwins' 'family council' reach far and wide. This is probably the wish of a certain someone behind the scenes."

"I don't have that much utility. With me out of the family, the areas where I'm unable to escort you temporarily increase, so perhaps their target is actually you."

"I wonder. Other high-ranking nobles will be present in places where you won't be able to escort me within the castle. If they want to target me, they'll have a better chance to do so when I'm traveling, or when I'm en route to another's home."

Although he spoke of being a target, Guido's voice held no apprehension. Jonas was hesitant to say Guido was used to danger, but there had been attacks. Once or twice a year for the past several years, they'd found themselves in dangerous situations that caused Jonas chills. He wished Guido felt the danger more keenly.

"Very well. What about the possibility that they would recommend another chief for the workshop, citing the opinion that it is inappropriate for a kinless commoner to serve as the head of the weapons team?"

“To lodge a complaint against the head of the Weapons Development Team, who has the endorsement of the former vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters as well as the support of retired knights? That would simply be asking for one’s own ruin.”

“Indeed, it is thanks to Lord Bernigi and Master Dahlia that I’m going to become a baron next year, and I even received an adviser’s robe…”

“I wonder if Lord Bernigi wanted to surprise us. Lord Grato and Lord Gildo both kept the robe a secret from me too, so they were probably unlikely conspirators. It’s as though they’re trying to startle a couple of children with a jack-in-the-box,” Guido said with dissatisfaction.

Jonas felt a bit relieved. So Guido really hadn’t known anything either. However, now it was only becoming less and less clear just who was pulling the strings.

Guido narrowed his blue eyes. “I can think of three reasons they may have for wanting you out of your family. First is a connection to the Scalfarotto family. We will become close with the family who adopts you, after all. However, since you are able to choose your adopter, it’s difficult to imagine that’s their only goal. It would be a risky gamble if they were not absolutely sure you’ll be adopted.”

“I haven’t so much as received an offer for adoption.”

“The second is Madam Rossetti. It’s possible that, in exchange for approaching us with an offer to adopt you, they hope to form a connection with the Rossetti Trading Company. Although, if that were to happen, we could discuss it with everyone who is in the company ‘boat.’”

However, no high-ranking noble would want to endanger their relationship with the various guilds just for Dahlia’s sake. If anything were to happen, Grato, the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, and Gildo, head treasurer and guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company, would come out in support of her. Any noble who knew as much would not try to interfere out of consideration for the safety of their own house.

“And the third would be you, Jonas.”

“Me?” Jonas blurted out in response to Guido’s startling remark. That was the most absurd possibility. “Setting aside the loss one would take by adopting a blighted, what would one gain by it? If I remove my blight, I can no longer express magic, and

my appearance makes it obvious that I hail from the desert kingdom. Taking me into their family would just be a disadvantage for them."

"You've got to stop with the useless humility. There are only a handful of people in this castle who are stronger than you when you get serious. And your appearance is just fine. Our kingdom has been trading closely with Išrana, so more people are marrying their nobles. Moreover"—Guido looked up from his document and faced Jonas; the lord's features, illuminated by the magical lamp, were cast in stark shadow—"here's what I think. If they can get you, then they can use that connection as a bridge to your mother's husband."

"That can't be. I have no relationship with that person."

"But surely, if anything happened to you, *that man* would show himself, wouldn't he?"

"...I cannot deny that."

His mother's current husband was the chairman of a large trading company in the desert nation. Be that as it may, he wasn't Jonas's father. Any care that man showed him was simply for his mother's sake.

"Soon he'll be making his biennial trip here. We cannot have monsters suddenly popping up on the main roads. In order to protect the caravan's delivery, we'll dispatch some mercenaries as escorts."

"Thank you for your consideration."

Each time that man came to the Kingdom of Ordine, he requested a meeting with Guido. It was a custom of his to bring Guido an exotic gift from the desert and tell him to look after Jonas. He did also conduct business with the Scalfarotto family, so that custom likely wasn't a detriment to his work either.

"It's not as if I'm doing this for you, Jonas. Shed kingsnake skin is indispensable for slime processing, isn't it? We're going to need a lot in the coming days, so we need to renew our purchase contract. Oh, and choose a distilled liquor for a return gift."

"Thank you."

It was true that the year before last, the man had quite enjoyed an aged distilled liquor, and when he'd made ready to return home, he'd bought another bottle of the same. This year, Jonas would prepare that liquor as well as a darker amber one.

"By the way, Jonas, do you have anyone in mind to bring with you when you receive your title?"

“After my title is conferred upon me, I shall prioritize being your bodyguard. You’ll be receiving yours on the same day, after all.”

“It’s your big moment too, Jonas. Please attend as a baron, not as my bodyguard. I’ll also have to deliver my address as the new family head, so my father will be with me. I’ll ask him to serve as my guard.”

“I am not sure if that is for the best…”

How could a former earl, and one taking over as head of the family at that, make his own father his bodyguard? Besides, although it was true their security would be perfect, that father and son were too much alike.

“With my father and me being together, even if we are attacked, we can freeze the whole room, end of story. We wouldn’t let anyone get away.”

“I believe the both of you have a problem with holding back. Isn’t there a risk of freezing the people around you too?”

“…Let’s just hope nothing happens,” Guido responded nonchalantly as he looked down at his documents once more.

Restraint was not a strong suit of either the present head of the Scalfarotto family, Renato, or his son Guido. Both of them had frozen their bodyguards along with their assailants multiple times, so Jonas had gotten into the habit of always carrying a fire crystal on him. The number of knights who had been sent to the temple, including himself, was not exactly small either.

“Regarding your adoption, shall I reach out to Augusto—the Scarlatti family?”

“There’s no need for that, Lord Guido. Lord Scarlatti is the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers’ Guild. Having a blighted enter his family would only cause him problems.”

“Aren’t there several blighted among the adventurers? Besides, I don’t think Augusto would mind when it comes to you.”

“Even if that’s true for Lord Augusto personally, ever since that incident a few years ago in which a blighted adventurer lost control and died, as a rule, it’s recommended that one have a blight removed. It’s left up to each individual, but it would likely be frowned upon if Vice-Guildmaster Augusto allowed it in my case. It would set a bad example for the adventurers.”

“I see. Another option would be— Well, I suppose we cannot ask another Viscount Goodwin, even if they are close to our own

faction. Otherwise, there's Viscount Ghione, Viscount Tallini... I'll stop there. You have plenty of candidates as a baron, but do you have any preference?"

"I do not. Anyone is fine, so long as I can continue my work unchanged."

After Jonas gave his answer, an impish glint danced in Guido's eyes.

"You know, Jonas, why don't you just become part of my family?"

"Come off it."

All politeness had flown out the window. Honestly, just what was this man, who was about to become a marquis, saying?

"Just the thought of calling you 'big brother' makes me shudder."

"You're right. If you called me 'dear brother' or even 'father,' I think I'd just laugh."

"Perish the thought!" he shot back vehemently, and his friend cackled. It had been a while since Jonas had heard such a lighthearted, nonaristocratic voice out of Guido, as if he'd returned to his school days.

"Well, jokes aside—what about marriage?"

"Too much trouble. No one wants a scaled man as a partner. They'd be afraid, or repulsed—I don't have any desire to have someone run away from me again."

Jonas recalled confessing his true feelings to a woman only for her to shriek upon seeing his scales. Then, after he'd told the woman he intended to remain as he was, she had drawn back and announced she was leaving him.

In the end, she had been nothing more than a fiancée assigned to him due to family ties. It was actually helpful that their engagement had been broken off before their engagement ceremony, where things would have been formally decided. Even though that was the extent of Jonas's feelings about the situation, Guido was the one who looked pained as he turned to him.

"Not all women are like her. The women we were running experiments with the other day didn't shrink away from you one bit, now did they?"

"Those women—they are the exceptions of the exceptions."

Guido was referring to Dahlia, Lucia, and Idaealina. The three of them were barely aware of Jonas; they had eyes only for their

own work—though he couldn't say he was unlike them in that way.

Guido put a finger to his chin and seemed to ponder. Jonas had a feeling he was going to continue talking about setting him up with someone, so he decided to bring up his beloved younger brother.

"Lord Volf has apparently talked to Master Dahlia about adopting her into the Scalfarotto family."

"Adoption? Not marriage?"

"I hinted at that, but she was unfazed. Maybe she didn't hear me."

The pen Guido had been signing his name with halted, and his face turned grim.

"Let's have Volf serve as Madam Rossetti's partner when she receives her title. We'll have clothes made for them in each other's colors. Those two should accept if we tell them we're taking care of the preparations. After that, things should progress naturally—"

"I wouldn't hold your breath. Moreover, Ms. Lucia is already making her dress, it seems. Also, Dahlia told me, 'I feel very much at ease now that we'll be getting our titles together.'"

"Jonas, I'm going to ask you this seriously..."

"Don't keep making me say it. I'm not interested," he said, cutting Guido off. Jonas wanted to tell him to stop teasing him with that fake troubled look, but he had something more important he wanted to say. "You ought to worry more about Master Dahlia than me. That woman is genuinely dangerous. She would make endless promises if led to. There may come a day when some high-ranking noble family calls upon her for her magical toolmaking only to arrange a marriage."

Once Jonas had said his piece, his friend exhaled a long, deep sigh.

"Hah... It's a very good thing I'm Madam Rossetti's noble guardian. I'll tell Ivano to consult with me if she's ever invited to another's home. I think dealing with a marquis or higher would be too much for him."

"You think so? I think that before long, he may be able to interact with them just fine. That man may be a commoner, but I think it's frightening how much of a match he's become for nobles."

"You're afraid of him, Jonas? What a high compliment. I almost

want to tell him that."

Jonas scowled at his master, who was smiling cheerfully.

"This is not a joke. That man is not only close with all the guildmasters, he is even on familiar terms with Sir Grato and Lord Gildo. Recently, he's been sending the recipients of prostheses 'maintenance kits' via Lord Bernigi."

The contents of each prosthesis maintenance kit included a stain remover, polish, a rag, a polishing cloth, and a small dryer. The kit, which was also portable, did not contain the name of the sender, the Rossetti Trading Company. Ivano had handed one over to Bernigi, telling him it would be useful with prostheses, and Bernigi had since begun distributing kits free of charge.

"I was impressed by that. The small dryer and the polishing cloth have the company emblem on them. Seeing that emblem creates a connection to the company without it being necessary to include their name. I think that's a good method for inviting someone to join your side without making them feel indebted. Besides, the other day, he gave Lord Grato and me the most highly effective stomach medicine. Only then did I learn that bear is more effective than cow in that regard. Apparently he got it from the Adventurers' Guild, not from Augusto. I wonder just *who* was the one to tell Ivano about it."

That certain someone could no longer be traced—that was just how long Ivano's reach was becoming. He hadn't even shrunk back in the face of Guido's attempts to shake him, his face instead plastered with a bright, business smile. The more Jonas recalled those bottomless navy blue eyes, the warier he felt of them.

"There really is no telling the limit of his potential. Isn't the real reason you're teaching him the ropes that you're afraid of him too?"

"Yes, because I'm a coward. Before a dog bites me, I'll make sure to give him food—and a sturdy chain."

"...Now that's a compliment I *don't* want to share with him."

"It's not like I plan to either. And I'm not going to hold him back. Ivano should keep moving forward."

Slowly lifting the corners of his mouth, Guido signed his name on the last of the day's documents.

"He can't be their watchdog if he's not at least reasonably scary."

Deciding on Gifts

“Here, for lunch.”

“Thanks, Dahlia.”

It was Irma who thanked Dahlia for the basket packed full of snacks, but the one who took it from her hands was Marcella.

“Thanks a bunch, Dahlia!” he said, echoing his wife. Dahlia smiled at him in response.

They were currently in Marcella and Irma’s house. Gathered in their kitchen-slash-living room were Dahlia and Volf, Ivano and Lucia, and Mena. The women were sitting in chairs around the table, while the men were sitting on a row of stools. With this many people gathered, the room felt cramped.

Sitting on the upholstered armchair under a sunbeam pouring in through a window was Irma. Her stomach was so big, it wouldn’t have been strange to think she must be due to give birth this very month.

She seemed to have sensed Dahlia’s worried gaze. Irma’s cinnamon eyes squinted as she smiled and said, “These days, my neighbors keep asking if I’m due soon, but I’m still only seven months along.”

“Irma, isn’t it hard to move?”

“A little, since I’m so heavy. But even though both me and the children are healthy, I have to move to the temple when I reach the ninth month, since I’m having twins. Preparing for that has been harder.”

Since having two children or more put a lot of strain on both mothers and their babies, it was recommended that the mothers move to the temple before giving birth. Dahlia felt this was a good method to ensure their safety, but Irma seemed not to be too happy about it.

“There’s nothing you can do, Irma,” said Lucia. “You’re having twins. Besides, won’t you have more peace of mind being at the temple? And when is Marcella staying with you there?”

“Oh, no, I have work…” Marcella responded evasively.

Ivano, with a smile on his face, spoke up.

“Once Irma goes to the temple, take the afternoons off, and then, starting from the day before the babies’ due date, take two

whole weeks off. After that, continue taking the afternoons off for three weeks. That's how we'll do things. I've already run it by the Scalfarottos, so you will have a temporary replacement. Do you approve, Chairwoman?"

"Yes, of course," Dahlia said with an enthusiastic nod.

"No, you've done so much for me already. I can't take that long of a break—"

"Raising one child is hard enough, and you're having twins. How will your wife cope without her husband looking after her? I took two weeks off after each of my daughters was born. Oh, you'll still receive your salary, so please don't worry about that."

Marcella was hesitant, but considering how much care Irma and the babies would need after they were born, a husband's help was absolutely necessary.

In Ordine, homes were the most common settings for childbirth, followed by clinics and, if there were any extra concerns, the temple. The kingdom took care of all childbirth expenses, so the burden was very light. However, since there were few facilities for hospitalization, it was typical after childbirth for people to ask for the aid of family or helpers and recover either in their own homes, their parents' homes, or the homes of other close family.

While both Irma and Marcella's families were going to come help, Irma's first childbirth would be twins, and this would be the couple's first time taking care of children. Dahlia wanted Marcella to prioritize his family over being her bodyguard.

"I'm very grateful for that, but who will guard Dahlia? If you find someone else to do it, you'll have to pay them too. I feel terrible putting everything on a friend like this."

"We can find a substitute bodyguard. Besides, a bodyguard distracted by worry for his wife would not be helpful. Also, if you don't take a proper break, the next employee who has a child won't be able to take one either, will they? I made the break a little longer, since you're having twins, but we need to allow for everyone in the company to rest and not push themselves."

"The one pushing themselves the hardest here is you, Ivano," Dahlia responded reflexively to Ivano's lecture.

He scratched his mustard-colored hair with a wry laugh. "I know, Chairwoman. I've been trying as best I can to avoid overtime recently. I'm delegating what I can."

When Dahlia had found out Ivano had been working overtime

for consecutive days, she'd quickly put a stop to it. She had proposed three options: use outside resources, hire more people, or take on less work. He had chosen the first.

However, Ivano had also begun meeting with nobles more often outside of his working hours. Apparently, he also now routinely had tea with Volf's older brother Guido and the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild, Augusto. He'd even come to be on close terms with the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, Forto, and had stayed over at his home.

The other day, when he had mentioned he was on his way to have a meal at Head Treasurer Gildo's home, she had unthinkingly asked him about it. He'd asked in turn if she wanted to come along, an offer she had vehemently declined, as she'd felt she wouldn't be able to keep up with her subordinate's social prowess.

"Okay then, it's time to start deciding on baby gifts for the Nuvolaris!"

The youngest among them, Mena, picked up a pen and spread a large sheet of paper on the table. Written on the sheet was a list of items the couple would need after the childbirth. Their close friends would be choosing which gifts to give them to celebrate the birth of their children. Dahlia thought this was a great, efficient custom.

"My family took care of the two baby beds."

"And mine provided the bedding."

After they checked off the things the couple already had, the rest of the group proposed what they wanted to give in order from youngest to oldest. The rule was to alleviate whatever burdens they could.

"All right, I'll get baby soap and tableware for baby food."

"Thanks, Mena. I'll give you a gift in return when you get married."

"I'm a free lover, so unfortunately, I have no plans for that. Instead, how about you give me a discount on my next two or three haircuts once you're back at work?"

"I'll cut your hair for free, Mena. Oh look, your bangs are getting quite long, actually. If you want, I could cut them now..."

"No, Irma. You promised you wouldn't pick up a pair of scissors starting this week," Marcella said firmly. Everyone looked at him with understanding smiles. Noticing the attention, he shifted his gaze toward the wall and let out a shallow cough.

Lucia raised her hand, her dayflower eyes sparkling.

"In addition to baby clothes and diapers, I'll get a baby carrier and a baby wrap, and a new wardrobe for Irma for after she gives birth!"

"Thanks, Lucia. But you're already giving us enough. You're giving us twenty sets of baby clothes, and so many diapers—"

"Then I'll give you some more clothes after they're born and you know what their sex is. Later, I want you to look at some of the designs I've drawn up for baby clothes! All of us at the Tailors' Guild drew up a bunch of ideas for both boys' and girls' clothes!"

It seemed Irma and Marcella's children would have a full wardrobe waiting for them. It was also starting to seem likelier every day that the twins would be made to model baby clothes for Lucia, but Dahlia decided to keep that thought to herself.

"Thanks. Right, let us know the second you're planning on getting married. We'll have to save up to repay you."

Dahlia, smiling at Marcella's remark, suggested her own present. "I'll get a baby carriage. I hear there's a baby carriage for twins that also has a rain cover. Does that sound good?"

"Thanks, Dahlia. That'd be great."

"Thanks, Dahlia."

Dahlia was glad she had looked at a store catalog ahead of time. First she had thought about getting two regular baby carriages, but there would probably be times when one parent had to go somewhere with both twins. The twin baby stroller was for moments like that.

As for the rain cover, that had been Ivano's suggestion. Not only was it good for protecting the babies from sudden rain or the strong sun, it was also good for when they fell asleep. Incidentally, the rain cover was actually made of Dahlia's very own waterproof cloth. That made her happy.

"This isn't on this list, but I'll get a magical tool that prevents spontaneous magic discharge. My brother told me it's possible for even young kids to express magic, so the sooner they have one, the better. They'll probably be like you, Marcella."

"Now that you mention it, I heard that babies who have earth magic tend to shoot sand everywhere where they're crawling around…"

Marcella, his face unreadable, nodded at Volf's suggestion. Magic control was difficult for children. While most commoners had no use for a tool to mitigate that problem, Marcella's birth

mother had worked in the red-light district, and his father was in all likelihood a noble. Marcella had strong magic, and it was clear his and Irma's children also had considerably strong magic. It wouldn't hurt to have a magical tool as a preventative measure.

"There are several left over at my house, so let me give them to you as a gift."

"That'd be great, but...aren't those expensive?"

"Not really. Besides, they're good for several purposes."

"No, Volf, we haven't thought about the future yet..."

"That's not what I mean, Marcella. I mean they can be used for other things..."

Volf huddled close to Marcella and the two of them started murmuring about something while the others ignored them.

Ivano raised his right hand. "Okay, now it's my turn! Allow me to give you a large washbasin for bathing, a baby-grooming kit, and baby oil. I've also got some recommendations of things that I found useful when my daughters were infants."

"Thank you, Mr. Ivano."

As Irma thanked him, Ivano ran his navy blue eyes over another sheet of paper.

"This isn't written on the paper, but Lord Bernigi D'Orazi and his wife, Lady Mersela, who will be signing their hands, will also be signing you up for a year of goat milk deliveries. Of course, it will be enough milk for two babies."

"Goat milk deliveries?"

"It's a service that delivers fresh bottles of goat milk once a day, ready to drink. Some people in the Tailors' Guild use it too. It'd be great to have for the twins," Lucia explained.

Shops in Ordine sold goat's milk too. However, nothing beat having it delivered straight to your home. In this world, where powdered milk wasn't a thing, it was a pretty convenient service. This was just like Bernigi—he was always so attentive. While Dahlia was admiring the veteran for that, Marcella turned a little pale.

"Mr. Ivano, that service requires a delivery fee, and a year's worth of milk for two babies is going to be pretty expensive, isn't it? How in the world are we ever going to repay Lord Bernigi...?"

"Lord Bernigi's family owns goats, and right now, there are no other children or infants around, so they have a lot to spare. And he said he doesn't require anything in the way of a return gift, so please just write him a letter, Marcella. The man is also signing

his hand for your children. Write to him to express your gratitude, talk about the things going on in your life and with your children—whatever you write about, just make it long!"

"Ugh, but I have terrible handwriting!"

"I'll help, Marcella…"

Marcella's voice had nearly risen to a scream, and he was clutching at his head with both hands. Irma encouraged him with a smile, but she had a very faraway look in her eyes.

However, this was for their precious children. Dahlia hoped they could find the resolve to pull through.

"When you can't use the goat's milk right away, I hear it's good to store it in a fridge or a freezer, since babies can eat at irregular intervals."

Ivano's words reminded Dahlia of the fridge she had back at the tower. The one unit she had successfully made as an experiment was currently empty, waiting and willing.

"Irma, I have a prototype fridge with a freezer attached, so why don't you take that? It's a little big, but I think it'd be good for storing goat's milk and baby food."

"Thanks. I'd love to say I'll keep it, but I'll take good care of it and give it back to you when it's your turn."

Irma said that as if it were just a natural fact, leaving Dahlia unsettled.

"I have no plans in that regard."

"She can just make another one when that time comes."

When Dahlia and Volf responded at the same time, she gasped and automatically froze. He didn't stir an inch either.

Perhaps because their timing had been so perfectly aligned that it had created a moment of awkward tension, the entire room had fallen silent. *Someone, please, start talking about something else!* she prayed.

"…That's right, the chairwoman is a magical toolmaker! You can make one whenever. You could even make a new model next."

Mena's cheerful voice permeated her ears. He was ever the people person. Dahlia was so grateful, she wanted to make sure that his next paycheck included what she would have called a "bonus" in her previous life.

"That's right! I want to make the next fridge a little lighter and also increase the storage space."

"Both weight and storage are important. It'd be great if I could

bring a fridge out on an expedition…”

When Dahlia and Volf started talking about work, Irma let out a small groan and winced.

“Irma?”

“Irma, are you okay?!”

Dahlia and Marcella were about to stand up when Irma gave a small shake of her head.

“I’m fine. The babies just started getting a little rowdy.”

Irma’s tea-colored hair swayed as she slowly adjusted her position. Even under her loose-fitting clothes, her stomach was visibly moving. Just as she had said, the babies looked very active.

“I wonder if they’re a pair of mischievous boys, like Marcella?”

“I don’t know, Mr. Ivano. Maybe they’re a couple of playful tomboys!”

“Either way, it seems like they’re definitely strong, healthy babies.”

Marcella tilted his head slightly at Lucia and Volf’s words. “What’re the chances they’ll be quiet, obedient children…? It’s zero, isn’t it?”

“Please don’t get yourself down, Marcella!”

“It’s no use, Mena. If they take after either of their parents, there’s no way they’ll be quiet kids.”

“You’re merciless, Ms. Lucia…”

In the midst of all the laughter and talk, Dahlia and Irma met eyes. Dahlia’s friend smiled happily at her and muttered, “As long as they’re born safely, I don’t care about anything else.”

The Black Dog, the Kit, and First-Name Bases

The garden—which, although lacking in flowers, was well-groomed and carpeted in dark green grass even in winter—could be seen from the window of Oswald's villa in the nobles' quarter. Dahlia and Volf were sitting on the sofa in the room next to Oswald's workshop.

Since Irma was having trouble moving, Marcella had taken the afternoon off to get things ready for the coming days. He had been reluctant to do so, but Ivano had promised he'd ask him to do some overtime in the future. After they had decided on baby presents for Irma, Ivano and Mena had returned to work, and Dahlia had gone to Oswald's house with Volf.

Oswald, his son Raul, and his third wife, Ermelinda, were sitting across the low table. The pleasant smell of tea wafted from the silver-trimmed porcelain cups that sat on the table.

After Oswald introduced his son, Volf and Raul exchanged their first greetings with somewhat stiff smiles.

"Sir Volfred, this is my eldest son, Raulaere."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Scalfarotto. My name is Raulaere Zola. Thank you for looking after my father."

"Thank you for the kind words. I am Volfred Scalfarotto. And it is Chairman Zola who looks after me."

Volf had removed his fairy glasses the moment he'd entered the room, so golden and silver eyes were staring directly at each other. A black-haired, golden-eyed young man facing a silver-haired, silver-eyed youth—their beauty made for quite the picturesque scene.

Dahlia, Oswald, and his wife looked on as the pair conversed.

"Sir Scalfarotto, Miss Dahlia once mentioned that you are not only a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters but a member of the famously strong Scarlet Armors."

"R-Raul."

Where had this come from all of a sudden? It was true that sometimes their conversations would turn from magical materials to the Order of Beast Hunters and the Scarlet Armors,

and then to the association between the Zola Company and the Scalfarotto family, which in turn brought them to talk of Volf. However, she hadn't expected Raul to bring that up to the man himself.

"That is an honor. I have also heard from Dahlia that even though you are still a student, you are quite the talented magical toolmaker. How amazing, considering you've only just entered college."

Wait, Volf. He had spoken with a genial smile and might have intended to compliment Raul, but piling on the facts that he was still a student and still in school could have made it sound like Volf was treating him as a child.

As she had feared, Volf's words seemed to have bothered Raul. His silver eyes narrowed slightly as he said, "Sir Scalfarotto…I see you call Miss Dahlia simply by her first name. Could that mean you two are engaged?"

"No! Volf is a friend!" Dahlia's voice had inadvertently come out as a shout. And she had forgotten to refer to Volf with his title.

Volf's golden eyes flitted to her before turning back to Raul. "Dahlia and I are on equal terms as friends, and soon after we met, we had a scrivener write up a certificate guaranteeing that very thing."

"I see. So you two are very close friends." Raul smiled and nodded. Dahlia was relieved he seemed to understand without further questions. "Miss Dahlia also permitted me to call her by her first name alone when we first met. However, I was not sure I should be so informal in addressing someone who is, after all, my senior in magical toolmaking, not to mention a lovely unmarried lady—"

"Is that right?"

Raul had inherited his habit of flattery from his father. He must have properly learned that aspect of noble education. Even though they were fellow magical toolmakers, he just couldn't become accustomed to addressing someone older than him without a title.

Across from Raul, Volf held his smile in place as he dropped three sugar cubes into his tea, which was very unlike him. Before coming to Oswald's, he and Dahlia had eaten at a spot in the Central District, where he'd chosen the lunch set, but perhaps that hadn't been enough to satisfy him.

The room became oddly quiet, so Dahlia decided it was time to change the subject. She pulled a small magically sealed box out of the bag on her lap. “Professor Oswald, thank you for your guidance and cooperation the other day. I wondered if you might have some use for these scales?”

Dahlia opened the lid of the box. Inside were the red scales she’d received from Jonas. She had brought them here with his permission and Guido’s.

Before, in the process of creating the bracelet to manage Irma’s hypermageia, Oswald had broken his red ring, which had been instrumental in helping him apply flame fixing magic to the bracelet. In order to create a new ring of the same kind, he needed the scales of either a fire dragon or a volcanofish. Jonas’s scales were similar in appearance to those of a fire dragon, but Dahlia was unsure whether they could be used for the ring.

“Allow me to take a look.”

Dahlia handed him the entire box, and Oswald pushed his silver-rimmed glasses slightly higher on his nose. He put on a pair of white gloves, picked up one scale, and examined it from front to back.

“It seems to hold a proper amount of magic, so it should be perfect for manufacturing into a ring. Judging by their size, the dragon was likely still a child… No, there are no waves in the magic, so perhaps closer to an adult dragon…”

Oswald’s words trailed off there. He slid his glasses down, his face suddenly stern.

“This fire dragon scale isn’t something you just picked up, is it? There are lines of blood at the root.”

The scales had been wiped off, but faint lines of crimson still remained on the inside. It was Jonas’s blood. He had ripped the scales from his arm himself, after all. Of course they must have looked different from those that fell off naturally.

“Um, you see—”

“Dahlia, I won’t ask where you procured these. Raul, you are not to speak of this outside of this room. However, just remember one thing: blighted are only one false step away from endangering everyone around them.”

“Blighted…?” Raul looked at Dahlia with wide eyes.

Next to him, an obvious scowl had appeared on Ermelinda’s face.

“Blighted can utilize their magic, so isn’t it fine as long as they

can control it?" Volf responded promptly. Dahlia had heard that Volf had been receiving sword lessons from Jonas, so the latter must have had complete control over his magic even when the two were fighting.

From her own perspective, although Jonas had scales on his arm and was restricted in the foods he liked, he seemed to have good control over his magic.

"There's a difference between having a grasp of their magic and having full control over it in moments of crisis, Sir Scalfarotto." It was Ermelinda who said this, her voice hard. Her light green eyes were intently staring at the red scale Oswald held in his hand.

"I believe the owner of these scales can control himself," Volf stated decisively.

Ermelinda opened her mouth but ultimately said nothing.

"If you say so, Sir Volfred, then it must be so. I will gratefully use these. Now then, it's about time we get started."

Oswald stood up as if nothing had happened and declared the start of the lesson. Dahlia and Raul followed him to the adjacent workshop.



Remaining in the other room, Volf took a new cup of tea and drank it, bearing with the heat.

Earlier, caught up in the moment, he had added a great deal of sugar to his tea without being conscious of it. Now, finally, the sweetness in his mouth was neutralized.

When he finally caught a breath, he looked at Ermelinda, who was sitting across from him. Her gaze was fixed on the spot where the magically sealed box had been sitting.

Worried, Volf spoke to her. "Mrs. Zola, there really is no need to worry about the owner of those scales. He has full control."

"What makes you so certain, Sir Scalfarotto?" Ermelinda responded in an unexpectedly quiet voice. Her eyes, now fixed on him, were dark and held a hint of melancholy.

"Because I know that person well."

"...I also thought I knew him well. But I was mistaken."

"Mrs. Zola?"

"When I was an adventurer, a friend of mine who had a blight went on a rampage. He was nearly defeated in a fight against a

monster and lost control. As a result, the monster was killed, but the flames spread to everyone in the vicinity. The others only suffered burns, but my friend himself perished. He was an advanced adventurer, and yet it happened even to him. I implore you, please keep that danger in mind."

"...I understand. Thank you for the word of caution." Hearing her near-pleading tone, Volf couldn't help but thank her.

Ermelinda rearranged her expression and reached for her cup of tea. Volf saw sword callouses on the palm of her hand that seemed incongruous with her appearance.

"Mrs. Zola, you mentioned you were an advanced adventurer, but do you still train even now?"

"I am but a former adventurer with a lot of free time. I do train a bit here, but I am a guard with little opportunity to make use of my skills."

"When you say you train at home, do you mean to say that Mrs. Zola— I mean, all the wives have experience in military arts?"

Volf was unsure how to ask if Ermelinda's training partners were Oswald's other wives. He couldn't decide whether it was all right to call them Oswald's first wife and second wife here or if he should refer to them by their names.

"No, I am the only one in our home who carries a weapon. Oh, if you call me Mrs. Zola, it'll cause some confusion, so if you don't mind, please call me Ermelinda, Sir Scalfarotto. I have no ulterior motives in asking you to call me by my first name, so there is no need to worry."

Nobles often asked others to call them by their given names when they wanted to close the distance between them, or when they wanted to make their closeness known to the world. When Ermelinda told him beforehand that she had no ulterior motives, Volf realized she was being considerate of him.

"So then I will, Ms. Ermelinda. And please, call me Volfred. Your family has done a lot for us as well."

"Thank you. It is an honor, Sir Volfred."

Ermelinda responded with a perfect business smile and voice. Her lack of warmth and flattery made him feel strangely relieved.

"By the way, Sir Volfred, I hear you are skilled with a sword. We'll be waiting for their lesson to end for quite a while, so if you would like, could I request that we spar? My training is somewhat limited by my partners here."

“You want to spar…?”

Unsure how to respond, Volf found his gaze subconsciously moving toward the workshop where Dahlia and the others were. From here, he could hear Oswald explaining something, Dahlia asking some sort of question, and then Raulaere’s cheerful laugh. He couldn’t hear the details of what they were saying due to the anti-eavesdropping device, but it sounded like they were having a fun lesson.

“I have my husband’s permission. When I told him I want to occasionally polish my skills as a guard, he said, ‘As long as Sir Volfred is amenable to it.’”

Ermelinda must have judged Volf’s look toward the workshop to mean he was unsure whether Oswald would permit something like this.

Volf had no idea how to respond to the black-haired woman’s words, uttered so nonchalantly. Although she was one no longer, she had been an advanced adventurer, so it stood to reason that she was considerably strong. However, he found it very hard to imagine himself sparring with this woman, who wore such an elegant black dress.

“Are you worried? Would it put you at ease if we were to spar in the garden, where you’re able to see the workshop?”

Why was she asking if he was worried? It wasn’t as if he was watching over Dahlia, and he didn’t have any particular concerns. Slightly irritated, Volf couldn’t stop himself from throwing an unreserved glance at Ermelinda.

Those sprout-green eyes that met his own, free of the fairy glasses, held not a shred of desire—and yet something behind her cheerful smile sent a rush of excitement down his back.

This rush felt familiar. It was what he felt when squaring off against a strong senior in a training session with the Order of Beast Hunters, when he and Randolph were sparring and got serious, and when his wrestling match with Marcella had started heating up. It was the inevitable zeal that got his blood pumping when he found himself in front of a strong opponent.

Volf suspected the woman felt the same way, which was all the more troublesome. He hadn’t expected to find a kindred spirit in Ermelinda Zola.

“Let us have a match, Ms. Ermelinda.”

In the garden, from which they could see the window to the

workshop, Volf stood with a training sword in his hand. The black leather battle shoes and breastplate he had borrowed were shiny and free of any scratches.

Volf had a sneaking suspicion that this equipment, which Ermelinda had said was intended for guard knights, was in fact a new set taken out of the company's storage just for him.

After they'd agreed to spar, Ermelinda had gone out to get things ready, so Volf had planned to sit back and relax while he waited, but she had returned before he'd even finished his tea. Her long black hair was tied up in a ponytail, and she wore a white shirt and a red leather breastplate as well as black pants and boots.

That look suited her almost too well, and it suddenly reminded Volf of his mother, making him smile bitterly inside. Perhaps it was discourteous of him to think that about Ermelinda, who was close in age to him.

Together, they went into the back garden, where there was an open clearing. The flower bed, situated farther away, was devoid of flowers, but nevertheless, short green grass carpeted the ground under their feet.

From the variety of training swords a male attendant had brought to him, Volf had chosen one of the longer weapons. Meanwhile, Ermelinda had chosen two short blades. Evidently, she was a dual wielder. Although short, the two swords weren't slender or light but rather had short, heavy blades. In order to wield those effectively, one either needed considerable strength or excellent strengthening magic. Volf wondered which of those applied to Ermelinda. This was looking to be a decent bout.

"Let us allow for body strengthening spells, but no attacks and thrusts above the shoulders. Does that sound acceptable?"

"Yes, it does."

Those were more or less the same rules for the basic training they did in the Order. It was easy to cause serious injury to the head or throat, so combatants generally tried to avoid that possibility, even when using training swords. Although, training in the Order of Beast Hunters was fierce enough that they were used to injuries despite wearing helmets and armor.

Volf suddenly remembered that Dahlia had never seen him train like that. The truth was, he wanted to do everything he could to prevent her from seeing it in the future either. He didn't want to cause her any needless worry.

“Now then, I look forward to learning from such a talented knight, Sir Volfred.”

“It is I who will be learning from you, Ms. Ermelinda.”

Once they finished speaking and bowed to each other, they took up positions. A beat later, Ermelinda’s shortsword had struck against his own at unbelievable speed. His body automatically evaded the follow-up sword, the longsword in his right hand slicing upward.

Ermelinda struck back with the shortsword in her other hand, her expression unflinching. Seeing that, Volf experienced firsthand her skill as a former adventurer.

Before, when he’d wrestled with Marcella, he’d been shocked by the man’s strength. That was why he wasn’t planning on letting his guard down this time. However, that wasn’t the level things were at here. Volf laughed faintly at the slight tingling numbness that remained in his palms. This was the result of being hit with just a single one-handed attack. The day he let his guard down, he’d be the one to fall flat on his face.

Being mindful of his defense, Volf used strengthening magic before rushing in.

They exchanged blows as if figuring each other out, closing and widening the distance between them. The strikes reverberated all the way down into the bones of his arms; they were on par with Randolph’s, her counters as fast as Dorino’s. Even when Volf raised the strength behind his attacks, Ermelinda had no trouble following suit. In fact, she raised hers even more.

Her dual blades began to ring out with enthrallingly loud clanks. The noise, which almost gave the illusion that they were fighting with real swords, was pleasing to hear—and before he realized it, the corners of both their mouths were lifting.

“Sir Volfred, instead of sparring, what do you say we have a real fight?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Once Volf gave his approval, Ermelinda laughed so heartily, he could see the inside of her mouth. It was an impressive laugh that didn’t seem as though it could possibly come from the wife of a chairman, but she looked incredibly natural doing so; if anything, this was likely her true self.

“Here I come!”

She cried out in a voice harsher than he’d yet heard from her—chills ran down his spine as he regripped his sword, but the

black-haired woman was already within range. She'd rushed so close to him with just a single leap and no running start, and he broke into a nervous sweat.

"Tch!"

When he avoided the forward slash of her blade, he saw the image of his own black-haired, black-eyed mother superimposed on Ermelinda.

He had never once reached her level with the sword. She had always been just out of reach. That faraway day, the next thing he'd seen after watching her walk away was her body on the ground, rent in two. She had protected him and protected him, and without doing anything in return, he'd just let his own mother die.

"Sir Volfred, pardon my asking, but is fighting against other people perhaps not your strong suit?" Ermelinda asked after he kept repelling her swords and shuffling backward. She must not have meant anything bad by it, but she had a very odd expression on her face.

Through no fault of hers, Volf's memory turned even darker and murkier. He felt the low growl of an animal deep in his throat. "...That's right. My job in the Order is to dispatch monsters, after all."

He kept his voice calm and his face composed as he adjusted his grip on the sword in his right hand. The duty of the Scarlet Armors was to confuse the enemy at the front lines and to act as decoys during retreats. Even when he fought against other humans during training, it was with the expectation that his enemies would be monsters. Lately, Jonas had been instructing Volf in person-to-person combat, but it was unavoidable that someone used to fighting other people would see that it was not his strong suit—or, to put it bluntly, that he was bad at it.

"I would rather you think of me as a monster," Ermelinda said regretfully. Her words made him remember something his mother had once said. *Come at me like I'm a monster, Volf.* At the time, he'd had no experience with monsters, and so he had just attacked her as earnestly as he could.

The woman who stood before him now, wielding two shortswords, had black hair like his mother's. He knew it was rude to equate the two, but he decided to take her up on her offer to let him practice against a talented opponent. He wanted to feel he had at least come a little closer to his mother's level,

which he had never gotten anywhere near as a child.

“Then with all due respect, don’t mind if I do. Ms. Ermelinda, please feel free to use magic. There’s no more need to hold back.”

“Then I shall do just that. And you too, Sir Volfred—kindly refrain from being a good boy.”

Volf couldn’t hold back his laugh. It was as if she’d seen right through him. But when Ermelinda repositioned her dual swords, the wind around them changed, blowing in his face so forcefully that it stung his eyes and inhibited his movements.



The woman's light green eyes turned a shade brighter, and he felt her strong magic wavering like heat haze—and felt, too, an intense sensation of mirth.

Ever since Volf was a young boy, he'd always thought women were frightening, but Ermelinda as she appeared before him now was different. Irrespective of gender, she was just genuinely scary—and as a sparring partner, she was fascinating. Even considering whether or not to hold back was disrespectful.

Volf rushed forward without hesitation and slashed his training sword down and to the right. Ermelinda deftly blocked his sword with her own two and, as if cloaked in wind, leaped high in the air. At once, Volf activated his sköll bracelet and leaped after her.

Like a pair of monstrous birds, the two of them danced in the air.



"This is difficult…"

In spinning baphomet wool, the stronger one's magic was, the harder it was to keep it from getting twisted up. Oswald had just been making them laugh with a story he'd told about an upperclassman with strong magic who had gotten completely entangled in the wool.

However, at the moment, what Raul and Dahlia were furrowing their brows at was the baphomet leather on the workbench, which they were trying to reinforce.

They were going to magically apply powdered armored crab shell to the leather, which would raise its heat resistance and durability. It was often used for furniture like chairs, or in chefs' gloves and knights' armor.

After finishing his explanation, Oswald had smoothly placed the powdered shell on top of the baphomet leather and let his magic flow from the left to the right, easily applying it to the leather.

Dahlia had been able to apply the powdered shell to the leather for practice, but it had turned out a warped mess. She'd tried the same technique she used on waterproof cloth, but it hadn't worked well at all.

Even Raul was simply rolling the powdered shell around on the outside of the leather but wasn't actually able to apply it. He

was tilting his head and staring at the powder.

“Raul, your magic is too strong. Keep it even and under control, and apply the powder slowly. Dahlia, are you spreading your magic the same way you would with waterproof cloth? That’ll make it stiff, so instead, try to exert a fixed amount of magic in one area at a time, without letting it spread to the other areas.”

Easier said than done. Paying extra careful attention, Dahlia let magic flow gently from her fingertips. This time, there was no warping, but the powdered shell left a pattern like polka dots all across the leather. It hadn’t been her intention, but it looked kind of cute.

“Miss Dahlia, that looks very stylish!” Raul said with a smile. On the desk in front of him, half of his powdered armored crab was forming a radial pattern. It was a pretty design.

“Good heavens.”

Dahlia felt a momentary chill and braced herself for a scolding. However, when she turned to look at Oswald, he was facing the window.

“It seems Sir Volfred has accepted my wife’s request.”

“Your wife’s request?”

“Yes. Ermelinda told me she wants to polish her skills as a guard from time to time. I thought Sir Volfred would refuse even if she asked him, but they seem to be sparring.”

Standing on the lawn below the window, Volf and Ermelinda bowed to each other. Both were wielding training swords—Volf held a longsword and Ermelinda two shortswords—and neither had a shield.

“Um, will Ms. Ermelinda be all right…?”

“She is a former advanced adventurer, so she is strong. However, with her opponent being an active knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, I’m not so sure…”

As he spoke, Oswald took out additional bottles of powdered armored crab and began placing them on the table, setting them down in such a way that the bottoms of the bottles hit the table with abnormally loud thunks. Raul regarded his father with silver eyes wide.

At that moment came the sound of a heavy clash from outside the window. Ermelinda had blocked Volf’s longsword with her dual swords, and magical energy rose from her like heat haze. She must have been casting a powerful strengthening

spell.

Their bout began, and soon, the two duelists' movements sped up. The sound of their successively clashing swords was so loud, Dahlia almost doubted they were really just training swords.

Volf was strong, but evidently, so was Ermelinda. They didn't seem to be fighting seriously or even at their full potential, but Dahlia didn't want to see them get hurt.

Oswald and Raul were silent; their gazes, too, had been stolen by the fight outside.

Dahlia herself was subconsciously following Volf with her eyes. That was when she noticed—Volf was smiling like he was having a great time.

He was clearly enjoying the fight. She had never seen him smile so brightly before—like a mischievous child. Perhaps it was something he only showed to those he trained against.

I'm jealous—that thought rose to her mind out of the blue.

If she were a strong knight or an adventurer, then maybe she would be able to fight against Volf and he would smile at her like that. Dahlia tried to put down the bottle she'd just picked up but accidentally slammed it loudly against the edge of the table.

The noise brought her back to her senses, and she hastily shook off those warped thoughts. The very idea was impossible from a professional and athletic standpoint—no, she couldn't bear even the thought of turning a weapon on Volf.

Outside the window, the pair had exchanged some words before resuming their fight. A strong magical wind blew as they soared into the air, one after another, and then collided. Their movements were so quick, Dahlia couldn't comprehend them, and it was difficult to keep up with her eyes.

The reverberation of their swords had become even faster and more violent, and Dahlia only grew more concerned. Then, on the latest of their many soaring leaps into the sky, Dahlia heard a dull *crack!*

"Ah!"

A broken shortsword flew from Ermelinda's hand as Volf's longsword knocked her out of the air. She rolled over several times on the ground, ripping up the lawn, and when she tried to spring back up—she fell right back down.

Dahlia heard the overlapping sound of a muffled, anguished groan and Volf's voice crying out "Are you okay?!"

“*Mel!*”

For a moment, she wasn’t sure who’d shouted that.

Oswald tore open the window, grabbed a nearby chair, and dragged it noisily over. Using the chair as a stool, he jumped out of the window. Raul looked at Dahlia, and she nodded. Then, also using the chair as a stool, Raul vigorously leaped out the window.

Dahlia was about to follow them, but she stopped after placing a foot on the chair. The window was a little high. She wasn’t confident she’d be able to land if she climbed out. Not to mention, she was wearing a skirt. Instead, she quickly exited the room and headed for the garden by way of the adjoining room.

The grass in the garden was ripped up in spots when Dahlia arrived a little later than the other two and came to a stop next to Raul. Ermelinda was pressing down on her right leg as blood streamed down from around her knee. She seemed to have suffered a large cut during her collision with Volf. Oswald was wrapping a handkerchief around her knee to stanch the bleeding. Once he was done, he laid her on her back and turned to face Volf.

“What have you done to my Mel?! Think about how you treat a woman, Sir Volfred!”

The usual elegant Oswald had vanished. He looked just like a large silver fox, baring its fangs and raising its hackles menacingly. Dahlia had never seen him look so frightening—the fact that Oswald could make a face like that shocked her to her core.

“I am so very sorry!” Volf apologized, his voice tense.

“This was my mistake!” cried Ermelinda. “I was even the one to ask that we have a match, so it isn’t Sir Volfred’s fault!”

“Even still, that doesn’t mean you should fight in such a way as to end up with an injury like this! What if something were to happen to you?!”

Not even Ermelinda, his wife, was spared from Oswald’s harsh tone. However, she responded in matching intensity.

“This is no severe injury—it will heal quickly with a potion! Besides, I am strong enough that your worry is unnecessary—”

“A man who does not worry about his wife cannot be called a husband!” Oswald cut her off sharply. His voice almost sounded like a bark.

Dahlia was frozen, unable to speak. Raul had inched closer to her side.

“I am truly sorry. Due to your strength, I was unable to hold myself back…” Volf said. He bowed his head deeply, his face pale.

Oswald started, and the anger in his expression disappeared.

“…No, I should be the one to apologize, Sir Volfred. I am sorry for my rudeness. Are you hurt?”

Oswald’s voice and expression had resumed their usual character as he apologized to Volf.

Now that his tone had returned to normal, the situation finally settled down. Next to Dahlia, Raul quietly exhaled, as did she, taking care not to be noticed.

“I am fine. More importantly, please see to Ms. Ermelinda’s injury.”

“So I shall. Let us take a break. Please rest in the other room and I will have some refreshments brought to you. Raul, tell the maid. I will have Mel treated in the main building.”

As soon as he was finished speaking, Oswald picked up Ermelinda. His gray jacket was stained red by her still-flowing blood.

“D-Darling?! I’m heavy! You can just have the potion brought to me here! Ah, your coat, it’s getting covered in blood…!”

“Injured people ought to stay quiet.”

Carried in Oswald’s arms, the flustered Ermelinda almost looked like a young girl. Her silver-haired husband bore her off, allowing no room for debate. The three left behind simply watched wordlessly as the others left.

“I’m sorry, I caused you such trouble…” Ermelinda apologized in a small voice while her husband carried her down the hallway. Deep down, she was panicking. Her match against Volf had been so fun that she had started fighting him seriously. Then, on top of getting injured, she’d upset her husband and made it so he’d had to apologize to a guest. It was all one huge blunder. The single saving grace was that Volf hadn’t been the one to get injured.

But now look at her, being carried like this. Trouble was the only word for it.

“It’s no bother. If a wife gets injured, a husband will worry. That is only natural.”

His words were kind, but it was clear he was in a foul mood.

Ermelinda could sense that from his somewhat flat voice, though his expression was the same as ever. She'd have rather he scolded her, but her husband didn't say anything beyond that.

"Honey, you're upset, aren't you?"

"No... Well, I will admit I was a bit displeased."

"I claim to be your guard, and yet I let you see me in such an undignified state. I'm sorry. This is all because I am weak... I was too vain."

"That is not true. That man is a Scarlet Armor in the Order of Beast Hunters, the division that holds the kingdom's strongest knights. It goes without saying that you couldn't win against such an opponent."

"Then what are you displeased about?"

At her question, Oswald's face turned sour, as if he'd swallowed something bitter—an expression most unusual for him. However, he still wouldn't offer her a response.

"Um, darling... Be honest, what was it that displeased you? Please tell me. If I have done anything wrong, I will do whatever I can to remedy it..."

Ermelinda grew very anxious, her voice turning into a plea. She knew her face was betraying her nerves; she was wearing an expression she never showed to anyone but her husband. However, at the moment, she found it difficult even to keep her expression under control. In the several years since she had become his wife, she had never been able to admit that she still feared he would come to dislike her.

"...Mel, I'd like to ask you one thing. When did you start calling him Sir Volfred and not Sir Scalfarotto?"

"Right before our match. Since we also deal with Lord Guido Scalfarotto, I thought it would be a good way to avoid any confusion."

"Yet he also called you Ermelinda?"

"Yes, I asked him to. If he were to call me Mrs. Zola, it would be difficult to tell whether he was referring to Ms. Caterina or Ms. Fiore, and the servants might become confused. Sir Volfred understood I had no other intentions by it, so... Um, should I have not asked him to do so?"

Her husband did not answer her question but stopped suddenly in his tracks. He stared at her, very closely, an unrecognizable expression on the face she had thought she knew well.

“You really seemed to be having fun fighting against him. I’ve never seen that expression on your face before.”

“Pardon?”

“A strong fighter like him, even if you set aside his looks, must be very attractive to a former adventurer like you.”

“Dear…?”

Mel froze for a moment, then stared intently at her husband. His face, always the perfect picture of elegance and composure, was now tinged with clear displeasure and irritation. But also revealed in his silver eyes was a possessiveness he couldn’t completely hide. Once she finally understood that, her face broke into a smile.

“…Mel, why do you look so happy?”

“Because this is the first time you’ve been jealous over me…”

It was impossible to hide her smile. While she herself had often felt jealous over Oswald, the reverse had never been true. Possibly never in her life—or so she had thought, but now it was becoming reality.

Even though she felt apologetic toward her husband, she was also, frankly, happy. Ermelinda wrapped her arms around Oswald’s neck and buried her face in his chest. She didn’t want him to see how broadly she was smiling.

“…As if this were the first time,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Invitations to return to being an adventurer, impassioned greetings at the guild, letters of invitation sent under the guise of simple courtesy, flowers addressed to you that I did not request… You can’t know how jealous each of those incidents made me.”

Those words, spoken close to her ear, weren’t said in his usual kind voice. It was the rough voice of a man who hid not even a shred of his displeasure.

“Those were all from my old colleagues or other people I knew from work, nothing more. Besides, you never said anything…”

“That is because I did not want you to know. It is just an old husband’s ugly pride.”

Squeezing her a little more tightly in his arms, Oswald simply faced forward. It was only then that Ermelinda noticed that his ears were bright red.

“Mel, now that you know, remember this well: I am a deeply

jealous man…”

Man-Made Magical Sword: Seventh Attempt ~Crimson Lotus Blade~

A short while later, Dahlia and Volf left Oswald's villa. Naturally, they had found it difficult to resume class after what had happened, so they had decided that next time they would pick up where they had left off.

As Volf and Dahlia were leaving, Oswald and Ermelinda, who had recovered with a potion, apologized, and Volf apologized again in turn. Having concluded that back-and-forth, Volf and Dahlia finally boarded the carriage. Then, after consulting with each other, they headed straight for a branch of the temple in the Central District. They decided to have a decorative box of several potion bottles express delivered to the Zola home.

Their next stop was the florist.

Volf surreptitiously consulted with the elderly shopkeeper in a corner of the store, saying he needed "get-well-soon flowers for an injured person." The shopkeeper asked, in a quiet voice and with an unassuming expression, if the flowers were for a man or a woman, how old they were, their marital status, whether Volf would have the chance to meet with the recipient again, and whether he was going to have the flowers delivered or would bring them himself. Then the shopkeeper suggested several choices of flowers. Neither Volf nor Dahlia knew what kind of flowers one should send to an injured person, and this wasn't something that was even addressed in her noble etiquette books.

In the end, Volf just said that the flowers were for a married woman who had done a lot for him and whom he'd caused trouble, and to whom he wanted to apologize again the next time they met, then left the rest up to the shopkeeper.

In the end, the shopkeeper skillfully put together a large white box filled with flowers called nerines, which had a somewhat strange shape. They looked a bit similar to what Dahlia had known as red spider lilies in her previous life.

The nerines in the box were arranged in a pretty gradation from white to pink to red. Some silver dust was also sprinkled

over them for decoration, which only made the lovely flower petals look even lovelier. Hoping that these flowers would please Ermelinda even a little bit, the two left the shop. Back in the carriage, Volf let out a deep sigh and put a hand to his brow.

“Maybe I should ask Guido if he thinks we should send something from our family too…”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

Even though the idea to spar had been Ermelinda’s, Volf had injured her. And even though he was sending her expedited flowers, it would also be a good idea to ask for Guido’s expert opinion on what to do next.

“I can’t believe I got so into our fight that I hurt Ms. Ermelinda that badly…”

Something about the way Volf had all of a sudden started calling Ermelinda by her first name instead of “Mrs. Zola” didn’t sit quite right with Dahlia. But right now, what she was more worried about was Volf’s depressed mood.

“Volf, I know you’re concerned about it, but please don’t blame yourself too much. Ms. Ermelinda is an ex-adventurer and strong, so I think it was only natural that you couldn’t hold back…”

“But I do think it was wrong to switch from sparring to actually fighting. I dealt her a serious injury, and I feel bad for making Oswald that worried.”

“That was a bit surprising…”

Oswald’s open anger had honestly shocked Dahlia. She hadn’t expected something like that from him. Volf, however, followed up with some unexpected words.

“I think I understand his reaction. Ms. Ermelinda is someone Oswald cares about a lot, after all. When someone important to you gets hurt, it can be easy to lose control.”

Dahlia knew who Volf was thinking of when he lowered his gaze. Ermelinda also had black hair, and although she was an adventurer and not a knight, she must have had some traits in common with his mother. Also, Dahlia knew that if any harm were to come to a friend or a member of her company, starting with Volf, that would make her emotional.

“Will you go meet with Lord Guido right now?”

“No, he’s still at the castle today, and I don’t want to disrupt his work. I’ll ask that he contact me once he gets back home. What about you, Dahlia? If you need to work in the tower, I’ll see

you home. Otherwise, if you have some time, we could go around to some shops—”

Fortunately, she didn’t have any work she had to do today. Shopping with Volf didn’t seem like a bad idea. However, Volf had started speaking a bit rapidly, so he must have been feeling restless. Dahlia wanted to try giving him a little change of pace until Guido returned home.

“Well, it’s not that this is a way to kill time, but why don’t we try making a new magical sword? The construction is simple, so it shouldn’t take that much time.”

“What kind of magical sword?”

She wished he wouldn’t suddenly lean forward like that, looking so serious. They were in a carriage, so they were already very close to each other. For some reason, it made her feel nervous being so close that she could clearly see all the details of his well-featured face, golden eyes, and long eyelashes, though she should have been used to his features.

The carriage shook and clattered along the uneven road, making Dahlia’s heart jump. Meanwhile, their closeness and the shaking carriage didn’t seem to bother Volf at all. He waited for her answer with a sparkle in his eyes. He reminded Dahlia of her dog from her past life, who had waited patiently by the front door while she was getting ready to take it on a walk. Suddenly, her nervousness dissipated.

“A red magical sword. You’ll have to wait to find out the rest.”

“I can’t wait!” He responded to her slightly cryptic answer with a boyish smile.

Back at the Green Tower, the two entered the workshop. They both donned long-sleeved work clothes and sat down side by side on chairs. On top of the workbench, Dahlia placed the longsword Volf had procured for her as well as several fire crystals, two vials of argent firefly wing dust, and a small, reddish-gold metal bar.

“Today, we’re going to be using this crimson gold. I want to use it to enchant the sword with fire magic,” Dahlia explained, pointing to the metal bar.

Crimson gold was a metal that could be enchanted with strong magic, and it was robust and withstood impacts well. However, since it was produced in volcanic zones and was difficult to find and collect, it was even more expensive than

mythril.

“Dahlia, isn’t crimson gold really expensive? Where did you…”

“I purchased it at cost from Orlando & Co. Since I have it, I wanted to try using some high-grade material.”

Volf must have hesitated to respond because he knew that it was Tobias who had purchased it originally. However, she had purchased it through Orlando & Co. and hadn’t actually met with Tobias. Also, the material itself had no connection to him.

“When my dad was around, we hardly ever used expensive materials because he was afraid of wasting them. But Ivano has created a fairly large budget for materials, so I want to try using materials I haven’t used before.”

Her father had also prohibited her from using even slightly dangerous materials when it came to enchanting and manufacturing, but she kept quiet about that.

Recently, she had been dealing with a wider variety of materials, but naturally, she couldn’t learn how to use them just from reading books and grimoires. She wanted to obtain those materials for herself and practice enchanting and creating with them as often as she could. Of course, for safety reasons, she wouldn’t forget to have Volf or other magical toolmakers in the room with her and to prepare potions ahead of time.

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“You’re such a worrywart, Volf. I’ll be fine. I make sure to have safety measures in place. And if I think something is too much for me, I can consult with Professor Oswald or the Scalfarottos’ magical toolmakers.”

Thankfully, many magical toolmakers and mages frequented the Scalfarotto Arms Works. There were many who were more experienced than Dahlia and from whom she could learn mountains.

When she brought up the magical toolmakers at the workshop, Volf’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. Her words had probably made him more eager to have the magical sword. Thinking that, Dahlia ended the conversation and picked up the longsword.

The sword that Volf had brought her was a kind used in the Order of Beast Hunters; this particular sword was one that he himself had often wielded in battle. It had a black scabbard and hilt, and the blade was a dull silver-gray. Apparently, all of the swords Volf used were dyed black so as not to reflect light.

The sword was so heavy, Dahlia could barely pick it up with both hands. She wasn't used to handling it either, so Volf took it out of its sheath and placed it on the workbench for her.

"Should I take it apart?"

"Yes, please remove the hilt."

Dahlia drew a magical circuit inside the hilt for the fire crystals. The magic from her fingertips coiled around the hilt, making it glow faintly for a moment.

Next up was the silver-gray blade. First, she stood in front of the bar of crimson gold, and Volf followed suit. Dahlia figured he probably wanted to watch up close, so, remaining in front of the crimson gold, she gripped a carving knife used for magical tools. Then, slowly letting magic flow into the knife, she started shaving the metal.

The crimson gold was harder than she'd imagined. Since it didn't hold any magic itself, she'd thought she would be able to thinly shave it with the magic-infused knife, but her first cut only left a small scratch. She gradually strengthened her magic output, pouring in three times more than she used for regular metal, until she was finally able to shave off a piece as thin as a strand of hair. Repeating that process, she managed to carve off a piece that was as thick as wool yarn and long enough for the sword.

"Is this your first time seeing something like this?" In order not to disturb her, Volf was standing a little ways away, but he was leaning forward and his eyes were wide. "It's kind of fascinating... So this is how you work with crimson gold?"

"I've heard that magical toolmakers with strong magic don't need to use a knife and can do this with their hands. My father told me another toolmaker showed him that once."

"Did they make a sword or shield or something? Considering how strong crimson gold is, I mean."

"A drinking cup for alcohol, apparently. To keep liquor hot longer."

"A cup for hot liquor..."

Dahlia felt sorry for Volf, who seemed to have been anticipating something more exciting, but that was the reality. However, considering they had used crimson gold to make a cup, she couldn't help but think that the magical toolmaker must have been either a friend of her father's or a drinking buddy. If it had been a friend, she really wanted to know who it was and

how they'd processed the metal.

Moving on from those thoughts, Dahlia placed the crimson gold on the very center of the blade on the workbench. Once she found the right spot, she brought together her right pointer and middle fingers and poured fairly strong magic into the crimson gold. She slowly spread it out like thin veins on a leaf, laying down the magical circuit alongside it. Then she took two batches of argent firefly wing dust that had been mixed with red and yellow paint respectively and used those to paint the surface of the sword.

Argent firefly dust was also used in the magical lanterns carried by the royal guards during their night watches. It dried quickly and couldn't be applied twice, and for that reason, it was a task that had always made her nervous as a student and still did now.

"Lastly, I'll use these so the fire magic can easily pass through the circuit."

Inside a magically sealed box were Jonas's red scales. In her father's spellbook was written "For a crimson gold magical circuit, you should either use grade thirteen fire magic or higher, or use a material with strong fire magic and channel magic through that." Thus, she had decided that the time had come to use the scales.

"At last, Master Jonas is being turned into a sword!"

"Why do you have to put it like that...?"

She wished he wouldn't say something so ominous. What if the man himself were to hear that? Though Dahlia had a feeling Jonas wouldn't get angry and would probably just give a wordless smile.

Getting her thoughts back in order, Dahlia gently wrapped her hands around two of the scales and pointed her fingertips toward the blade.

"Volf, I think the magic might look a little bit like flames, but don't worry. They won't burn."

"...Got it."

Dahlia had enough magic of her own to extract the magic from the fire dragon scales. The problem was control. Her goal was to channel all of its magic at once without letting any escape. For that, she needed to be close enough to touch the sword as she poured in as much magic as she could all at once. The magic stained Dahlia's fingers bright red, and the blade and

magic circuitry just beyond her fingertips began to glow red as if burning.

Volf let out a wordless exclamation.

In her peripheral vision, she saw him almost stick his hand out but then manage to hold himself back. Her red-stained fingers might have looked as if they were burning or even bleeding. But it was only red-colored magic flowing out, and she felt no heat, only a slight tingling sensation like weak static electricity.

Once the entire magical circuit on the blade was dyed red, the flow of magic stopped. Dahlia opened up her pressed palms, inside of which the scales had turned into white fragments.

“Aww, Master Jonas broke apart…”

“He stripped these scales off a long time ago!”

Having just been released from her tension, Dahlia unintentionally responded to Volf’s comment seriously. Volf dissolved into laughter, and Dahlia hurried him to reassemble the longsword. Into the hilt, she placed the fire crystals and regulated the magic current.

“You can use this to switch the magic on and off.”

She didn’t mean the hilt itself but the tassel on the pommel, which could now be pulled. If one were to carelessly activate one’s magic while gripping the hilt, one could accidentally activate the flames.

Dahlia couldn’t move the heavy sword around while she was holding it up, so she had Volf hold it as she explained.

“This is what happens when you pull on the tassel.”

There was a clanking sound, and then flames ran over the blade in a leisurely fashion. They started as a golden color at the base and gradually turned orange and then red toward the tip; the softly gradated flames enveloping the blade made it look as if the entire thing was burning. Though, since the flames were simply sitting on top of the sword, it was hard to call this a magical sword. Then, too, the color of the sword was derived from the painted surface of the blade, so it looked a bit unnatural. But glowing sabers had appeared in the movies of her past, so Dahlia thought the sword looked pretty stylish painted like this.

“It’s pretty…”

Startled by the voice right next to her, Dahlia quickly pulled the tassel to turn off the flames. Then, she stepped lightly away

from Volf.

“Volf, the hilt is heat resistant, but please be careful not to get burned.”

“I will. But this isn’t that hot, you know.”

“It operates on the same basic principles as a magical lamp or a magic stove. But for this one, the flames burn at a certain length, and the color changes in each spot. That’s why, rather than a magical sword, it’s probably more accurate to call it a sword-shaped room lamp…”

As she explained, her voice started getting quieter and quieter. At this rate, the sword was going to end up being named “the Sword-Shaped Room Lamp.” Volf would probably have something to say about that.

“You really are amazing, Dahlia. This is probably even prettier than the Ash Hand…”

“Volf, you really can’t say something like that.”

The Ash Hand, Captain Grato’s magical sword, was famous even throughout the royal capital. There was just no comparison between a magical sword that contained real power and a sword that simply had flames dancing over its surface.

“This isn’t any stronger than a regular sword, so it’s really just a slightly brighter room lamp.”

“And it’s a great lamp. I could have a drink while staring at this…”

“It’s not meant to be paired with alcohol.”

“Hear me out. This’ll make a drink taste really good for sure. I know it.”

Seeing Volf gaze at the sword, enraptured by it, Dahlia let out a dry laugh. He’d said it with such conviction—she knew he would put that idea into practice.

“Please be very careful about burns and fires when using it inside a room. I’ll enchant the sheath with armored crab to raise its heat resistance. Also, make sure to have a water crystal within reach.”

“Understood, *Master Dahlia*,” Volf said with a broad smile, finally looking her way.

“Ugh… Please don’t call me that. Hearing you call me that is just, how do I put this…”

“Yeah, even though everyone in the Order calls you that, I just can’t do it. I just can’t stop myself from laughing when I do it.”

Ever since Dahlia had become an adviser to the Order of

Beast Hunters, the squad had started referring to her as “Master Dahlia,” but she still wasn’t used to it. She wholeheartedly wanted to avoid having Volf call her by that title too.

“I bet a fight using two swords like this would look really pretty at night…”

“I think so too. Should we make another one sometime? I still have some crimson gold, and as long as you fight where no one’s around, it should be fine.”

There should be no problem with Volf calling Randolph and Dorino over to his villa to fight in the back garden, for instance—though it would be more like recreation than training. It would be a pretty sight to see two glowing swords clashing against each other at night.

“So, Dahlia, does this one get to be named ‘Red Magical Sword’ after all?”

“No, I’ll leave the naming up to you, Volf.”

Now that the topic had turned to naming the magical sword, Dahlia decided to leave it entirely up to Volf. Truthfully, the only names she could think of were in fact Red Magical Sword or Sword-Shaped Room Lamp.

“…Red, flames… Not exactly a lamp… Oh! How about ‘Crimson Lotus Blade’?”

“…I think that’s a great name.”

The flames weren’t blossoming like a lotus, but image-wise, it seemed to fit. Regardless, she decided not to comment on Volf’s own naming sense.

The inventor of the name pulled the tassel over and over again, making the flames erupt and extinguish themselves repeatedly, without ever getting tired of it. His profile, illuminated in red light, looked dangerously gleeful. His expression reminded Dahlia of something, and she couldn’t stop herself from bringing it up.

“…You looked like you were having a lot of fun today.”

“Huh?”

“No, I mean, when you were sparring against Ms. Ermelinda, you looked like you were having a lot of fun, and…”

She’d almost said it had made her jealous, but she stopped herself. She didn’t want to make Volf feel bad.

“Yeah, it’s fun to train against a strong opponent. I get to learn a lot from it.”

“Ms. Ermelinda is very strong, isn’t she?”

“I think she’s about as strong as Randolph when we train together. And her wind magic is probably close to Kirk’s…”

Ermelinda was an advanced adventurer, after all, even if a former one. She could easily fit in with the Order of Beast Hunters.

“I had such a great time fighting against her that at some point, I got too carried away and completely forgot my restraint… I probably looked like a child.”

“…I caught a glimpse of that too.”

The golden eyes that looked back at her suddenly wavered.

Contrary to his words, what loomed up in his eyes was not only a cheerful gleam but also a helpless darkness—and yet when she continued to look at him, not turning away, he eventually muttered, “…I was thinking of my mother.”

“Of course, your mother.”

“Yeah. I know it was very rude of me to think of what it would have been like fighting against my mother, but I couldn’t stop myself from comparing her and Ms. Ermelinda. Then, before I knew it, I went from thinking, ‘She’s strong, so I don’t have to hold back’ to ‘I want to win’… I really did something awful.”

Dahlia thought of the portrait of Volf’s mother that she’d seen before. She’d been a beautiful, dark-haired, dark-eyed noblewoman. Ermelinda also had black hair, and although she wasn’t a knight, she was an ex-adventurer—Volf had probably recalled his mother, whom he’d been unable to protect, and wanted to test his own strength.

It was hard for Dahlia to understand it herself, but a knight or other fighter’s desire to be strong seemed similar to a type of passion. That was the feeling she got when she watched Volf, Bernigi, and the others in the Order of Beast Hunters.

“You really are a knight, Volf.”

“I wonder. I’m probably more like a child who wants to do fun things like swing a sword around. I was actually just thinking that I wished I were a magical toolmaker like you, Dahlia.”

“Huh? You…wish you were a magical toolmaker?” she replied, taken aback. Being a knight seemed like his life’s calling.

“Yeah. But I can’t, and I don’t think I’d be suited for it.”

Volf gave a carefree laugh, then relit the Crimson Lotus Blade. The swaying flames emphasized the darkness of the room, making Dahlia realize that the day had somehow already turned to evening. The red illumination also cast dark shadows on the

side of Volf's face.

"You look like you have a lot of fun in Oswald's lessons and when you and the other magical toolmakers from the workshop get excited about something… I can't join in on that, so sometimes I get jealous."

For some reason, Dahlia couldn't admit that she felt the same.



Volf left the Green Tower to return to his villa, but it was long after dinner before he was able to meet with his brother. As he was waiting restlessly in his room, he heard an orderly knock at the door. When Volf gave permission to enter, Guido came in, followed by Jonas.

"Volf, your letter stated that you injured Mrs. Zola, but I received a get-well gift and apology letter from Oswald stating *they* caused trouble for you. You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, I'm fine. What happened was…"

They sat across the table from each other as Volf explained all that had occurred at the Zola home. Guido nodded here and there as he listened, then turned to Jonas, who was standing behind him.

"Bring us something to drink. Whatever you prefer, Jonas."

"Right away."

As Jonas left the room, Guido turned back to face Volf.

"So it was Madam Ermelinda, Oswald's third wife, whom you injured? Oswald gave his approval for the match, and she was the one who asked you for it—I would love to say that makes it a nonissue, but that woman is someone you need to be careful with."

"She really was very strong."

"I'm sure. A former advanced adventurer, with grade fourteen magic, who excels in strengthening magic and uses wind magic in combat. There are still many people who want to bring her into their households or recruit her as a subordinate—or who want her to return to being an adventurer."

"Grade fourteen magic…" Volf echoed automatically, surprised by such a high number. But when he thought back to their fight, he remembered that her body strengthening and magic had both been spectacular.

"However, although she has common origins, she is the

adopted daughter of a viscount family and the wife of a baron and chairman of a well-known company. She can't be officially headhunted."

"I was unaware of that."

"Madam Ermelinda was adopted by the family of Oswald's first wife. Same with his second wife. All three of the women whom Oswald married came from the same family, thus creating a perfect alliance between their families."

Volf tilted his head slightly. He wasn't sure what Guido meant by "alliance." In political marriages, it was normal to marry off daughters. Even granting that Ermelinda and the second wife were adopted daughters, had it really been necessary for them to come from the first wife's family too? Volf couldn't help but see it that way.

"I see, you're unfamiliar with these types of arrangements..."

Guido was looking at him as though he were a child. It rubbed Volf the wrong way.

"His first wife's family was interested in Oswald's economic power and talent, while Oswald was probably interested in the family's noble connections. His first wife's family doesn't have an heir, so I hear it has been decided that they will adopt Oswald's second son. By that point, you can already consider their two families as one."

"Why do it like that?"

"To protect both of their families, of course."

Volf found himself at a loss for words. He had never considered such a method of protecting a family. A thought suddenly occurred to him. Had Guido married his own wife in order to protect their families too? However, he hesitated to raise that question here.

"By the way, you mentioned that you sent a get-well gift to the Zolas, but what precisely was it that you sent?"

"I sent potions and flowers," Volf responded, getting his voice back under control. He was happy Guido had changed the subject.

"I see. Can I ask what kind of flowers you chose to send?"

"Let's see, they were flowers called nerines. I had several different colors sent in a box."

He'd simply asked the shopkeeper for get-well flowers for an injured person. He hadn't thought too hard about the rest. Guido wordlessly narrowed his blue eyes at Volf.

In an instant, he understood—he had messed something up.

“Nerines, you say…? I think the Tormenta’s mood is about to get worse.”

“What’s the ‘Tormenta’?”

“Oswald’s nickname during his school days. Father told me before I came here. Despite how he is now, apparently he was fairly vivacious in his younger years.”

Volf had to stop himself from saying he thought Oswald was still plenty vivacious these days too. That was beside the point. Volf needed to confirm exactly what those flowers meant. He’d recently read all those noble etiquette books, but nerines hadn’t been mentioned in the pages about flowers, and he didn’t know the language of flowers either.

“Volf, in the language of flowers, a nerine means ‘I look forward to seeing you again,’” Guido said, as if reading his thoughts.

Volf froze. “‘I look forward to seeing you again’…?”

“Nerines were brought here from a neighboring country and are still rare. Even I only know of them because I heard my colleagues in the Mages’ Corps talking about them. By the way, they also hold the nuance of ‘a happy memory’ and are often sent after a lover’s tryst abroad. However, it is not uncommon to infer multiple meanings from the flowers if several different colors are sent. And if you send them in a box, that can mean you want to send them directly to the recipient without letting anyone else know.”

“Euhhh…?”

Before Volf could stop it, a terribly pathetic noise had escaped from his throat. A happy memory, and he would like to see her again—he might as well have written her a love letter. Volf pressed his hands to the sides of his head. He suddenly had a terrible headache.

“I would like to hope that they won’t realize it, but Oswald’s wives belong to a family famous for its garden-owning flower enthusiasts. If she happens to thank you for the flowers, just tell them you asked the florist to send the prettiest flowers they had.”

“…I will.”

“Also, tell the servants to send them to Madam Rossetti tomorrow too. An even bigger box. If you can say you sent them to her too because they were pretty flowers, it’ll make for an

even better excuse."

"Okay..."

How would that make for an even better excuse? Volf nodded mechanically to Guido's plan even as he looked off into the distance. Right at that moment came a knock at the door.

"I have returned. It is getting a bit chilly, so I've brought spirits with hot water."

On top of the cart Jonas was pushing were a bottle of liquor, hot water, and a set of thick glasses. On the shelf below that were sliced lemons as well as cheese and crackers.

"Sit and drink with us, Jonas. You don't mind, do you, Volf?"

"Of course not. Master Jonas, I'll make the drinks, so please sit down."

"Impossible. I cannot have you make my drink, Lord Volf."

"I wish you wouldn't deprive me of this precious opportunity to have my younger brother make me a drink. Oh, now that you mention it, you have been reducing your alcohol intake this year, haven't you, Jonas? I feel like every year around this time is when you're knocking back hot drinks to raise your body temperature —"

"Lord Guido."

Guido was about to give some sort of inside story, but Jonas cut him off in a lower pitch than usual. Unperturbed, Guido responded with a wordless smile, and Jonas resignedly sat down on a chair. In his place, Volf stood up and began making the drinks. He added a slice of lemon to each of their drinks but made Guido's on the weak side, while making his and Jonas's a little on the strong side. Once he was done, he set the cheese and crackers down on the table.

"Jonas, the reason you're drinking less is thanks to the portable warm air circulator and the heated low table, isn't it? We'll have to thank Madam Rossetti. We should also buy an additional portable warm air circulator, in case the one you have breaks."

"I already have one. Master Dahlia provided me with a spare just in case it broke."

"What a considerate young lady— No, I mean, *magical toolmaker*."

Volf was somewhat happy to hear his brother start to refer to Dahlia as a magical toolmaker rather than a young lady. He placed the steaming cups of alcohol in front of Guido and Jonas,

and then the three of them made a toast.

"Jonas, tomorrow, deliver a large box of ice crystals to the Zola household. I'll write the note to go with it."

"Understood."

"Guido, I can go myself. We don't have to bother Master Jonas with this..."

"Volf, I'm sure you want to avoid the chance that they'd take the flowers to mean you wanted to see her again. Instead, come with me to the castle tomorrow morning as my guard."

"Please guard him well, Lord Volf."

Jonas had completely accepted the situation without asking for any details, which made Volf feel a bit sorry.

"Okay. And thank you, Master Jonas."

After Volf thanked him, Jonas turned his rust-colored eyes toward the wall. "Lord Volf, pardon my asking, but does that sword over there contain some sort of enchantment?"

"You can tell?"

"Yes. At least, I can tell it has some fire magic..."

Jonas had picked up on the Crimson Lotus's presence. On top of containing fire magic, the sword had also been enchanted with one of his scales. That must have been how he'd known.

"Dahlia made it. It's a safe magical sword—all it does is glow. I was just about to file a report about it."

"Did you say 'a safe magical sword'?"

"It doesn't have higher offensive capabilities or put the wielder in danger, does it?"

Hearing his teacher and brother's questions said in turn with serious faces, Volf couldn't help but smile.

"No, it does not. There's just a fire crystal that makes it glow brightly, though if you hold it for a long time, your palms might get burned. And the painted surface of the sword makes the flames different colors, which is pretty. That is why Dahlia calls it a 'Sword-Shaped Room Lamp' instead of a sword."

He had planned to show them and report about it immediately, since Dahlia had given him permission to do so. They'd decided that this time, Guido and Jonas, too, would have to see it as being safe.

"Although, for the fire magic, we did use some of Master Jonas's scales... I apologize if that makes you uncomfortable."

"Not at all. I am happy you were able to find a use for them."

Relieved, Volf stood up and walked to the wall to pick up the

sword, which was lying on top of the table. Then, in the center of the room, he slowly removed the sword from its sheath. Thin red lines, glimmering gold, ran over the silver-gray blade like the veins of a leaf. Volf pulled on the red tassel at the end of the hilt, and flames began to fan slowly over those lines, making their way to the tip of the sword. Covered in flames that changed in color from amber to crimson, it brightly illuminated the room.

“What a beautiful sword…”

“The colors are stunning…”

Satisfied with their amazement, Volf couldn’t stop himself from smiling.

“This is the Crimson Lotus Blade. As you can see, it only produces light, so it’s not suited for combat.”

“Crimson Lotus? That has a nice ring to it. Just looking at this sword’s flames is entertaining enough. It would go well with a drink.”

Volf and his brother apparently had the same taste when it came to what paired well with alcohol.

After they’d enjoyed their fill of the flames, Volf quietly extinguished it.

“Lord Volf, can that sword be made even brighter?” Jonas asked as he stood up.

“That might be possible with another magic crystal. Also, someone who wields fire magic might be able to put their own magic into it.”

Dahlia had said that Carlo’s spellbook had explained how to make the colors of the flame into a gradient, which she had put into practice with this sword. Originally, the technique had been for magical lanterns, but this sort of enchantment steeply raised the cost of production, and for lanterns, colored glass provided richer colors and was cheaper, so products made this way wouldn’t be in general circulation to start with. When it came to magical tools, better technology did not always mean a more profitable product.

“Lord Volf, that sword… If you wouldn’t mind, could I borrow it for a moment?”

Jonas was hesitant as he asked, but his strong curiosity was clear in his eyes.

“Be my guest, Master Jonas.”

Volf returned the sword to its sheath, handed it to Jonas, and stepped away from him.

“Okay then, if you’ll allow me—”

Jonas unsheathed the sword and pulled on the tassel. When he did, the flames that reached the tip of the sword were a little longer. Perhaps due to Jonas’s magic, or because the sword was responding to Jonas as the owner of the scales, the slender, swaying red flames grew in length, giving off a fantastical image. Volf kept it to himself that he thought they looked like the red tongue of a monster.

“Maybe if you channel more fire magic into it, the flames will get even longer,” suggested Guido.

“Shall I try it out?”

“By all means, Master Jonas.”

The sword itself was one used in the Order of Beast Hunters, so it was a durable weapon of considerable length and thickness. It was often employed to cut down monsters that used fire magic, so it had its own level of fire resistance. Dahlia had said the magical circuit also had some leeway.

Jonas angled the sword upward. Then, he turned his hand slightly in front of him, and the flames began to billow up from the sword. They bathed the room in a bright red light, suddenly looking like they might reach the ceiling.

“Jonas!”

At Guido’s shout, Jonas lowered the sword’s hilt to the ground. The next second, white ice covered the sword, extinguishing the fire. The frozen sword dropped to the floor with a thud.

“Did it burn you, Master Jonas?!”

“I’m sorry! I channeled in too much magic.”

“No, I didn’t sense that much fluctuation in magic. Besides, Jonas, you meant to put in a small amount of magic, didn’t you?”

“That’s true, but since I have never used this before, perhaps I miscalculated…”

Jonas’s rust-colored eyes were cast downward apologetically. On the carpet, the ice had begun to melt, drenching the floor. Inside the ice, the Crimson Lotus Blade lay as if nothing had happened. Thankfully, the fire hadn’t spread to any part of the room.

“I will have the maids clean up the floor.”

“Please do. Now then, let’s take this to the back garden.”

Guido stood up and gently stroked the magic sword, still encased in ice.

“To do what, Guido?” asked Volf.

“The Scalfarotto Arms Works can’t just leave it at that, right? We must run a proper investigation into the Crimson Lotus Blade’s capabilities.”

The trio moved to the back of the villa, and Guido called two mages—one who could use healing magic and one who could use water magic—to stand by just in case. However, Volf found the box of potions next to them very unsettling.

They were in an open field that was also used for training. There was very little wind this evening, and they were far enough from the villa that they wouldn’t have to worry about the fire spreading there.

The orange glow of the magical lanterns dimly illuminated their surroundings.

“Okay, Jonas. Try upping the strength of your magic gradually. But make sure you don’t burn yourself.”

“Very well. Lord Volf, I shall borrow this, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.”

Volf felt a little uncomfortable with Jonas always asking permission before touching the magical sword. But then, when Jonas held the sword at the ready in both hands, leaving the tassel untouched, Volf’s gaze was riveted. In the dark courtyard, the sword, gleaming with Jonas’s magic, was even more beautiful than it had looked indoors. The flames adorned the sword, starting as a nearly golden amber, flowing into orange, then finally turning red.

In the darkness, each time Jonas slowly waved the tip of the sword, the flames grew a touch larger. Then he inhaled deeply. The flames momentarily disappeared, leaving an afterimage behind Volf’s eyelids, and a few seconds later, a rush of strong magic spread through the air.

“Ahhh!” one of the mages cried out. Volf wasn’t even holding a sword, but he still braced himself on reflex as if he were.

Evoking the image of giant lotus petals, the red flames, varying in brightness, extended out from the sword, painting Volf’s field of vision in a blossom of dazzling light.



Though he was some distance away, his cheeks felt hot. He was unable to regain his posture in the face of the strong, undulating magic.

Jonas lifted the corners of his mouth slightly, and the flames grew even longer. Volf felt nothing but shock at the flower of flames, which could have easily engulfed the room they'd just been in.

But even though the flames were moving in a different direction, wasn't Jonas getting hot? Just when Volf began to worry about that, Guido took a step forward.

"Jonas."

When Guido called his name, Jonas swung the sword, making the flames scatter in all directions. He must have stopped the flow of his magic, since the flames immediately disappeared. However, the blade continued to glow red with heat in the darkness. Just when the darkness was feeling like it had gotten more intense, one of the mages turned a compact magical lantern on to its maximum brightness.

"Master Jonas, you really are strong..."

"I see... As expected of a sword that was enchanted with you, Jonas."

"Lord Volf, it is the sword that is magnificent, not my power. Lord Guido, may I raise an objection to your phrasing?"

Jonas gave an uncharacteristic lax smile. He was still firmly holding on to the red-bladed magical sword.

"Jonas, I know you're having fun, but let go of the sword. That's an order."

"...Very well."

Somewhat reluctantly, Jonas set the magical sword at his feet. There was a hissing sound as steam rose up from the ground. Jonas's right arm looked the same as always, but a thin stream of smoke was rising from his cuff. He slapped it a few times so it wouldn't burst into flames, and the cloth of his shirt was reduced to tatters from his cuff to his elbow. The heat of the sword must have been fairly intense.

"Go check for burns and change your clothes. You might want to wear something more fire-resistant next time."

"My apologies, I didn't..."

"It's not a problem. Just go before you catch fire."

Obeying Guido's words, Jonas quickly walked away in the direction of the villa.

On the ground, the Crimson Lotus Blade had finally lost its red hue. Guido gently picked it up, then used magic to pour water from his right hand, washing off the mud and grit.

"Is this a sword used in the Order of Beast Hunters? It's quite heavy. It's not Madam Rossetti's enchantment making it heavy, is it?"

"That's right. It's just as heavy as it originally was."

"Let me borrow this for a moment."

Guido readied the magical sword in one fluid motion. As Volf watched his brother, he thought nostalgically of how they had trained with his mother when they were both children.

Guido took a practice swing, and the sword made a surprisingly piercing sound as it cut through the air. He might have been an advanced mage, but Volf could believe he was still keeping up with his sword training too.

Guido swung the sword several times to fling the dirt off, then pointed the tip toward the ground and readjusted his hold on the grip. "It might be better to wipe it off and give it a once-over before putting it back in the sheath."

"Right, allow me to do that." Volf took the sword from Guido and was making to step away when he was stopped by a look from his brother.

"Volf, I want to ask you for something. Before Jonas comes back," Guido whispered, leaning in close to him.

Volf responded, also in a whisper, "What is it, Guido?"

"I want you to ask Madam Rossetti something. I'll provide another sword, so I'm wondering if she might enchant it with Jonas's scales, in secret. If she can't, then I'd like her to tell me the method for creating another sword like this one. Of course, I'll pay her for her time."

"What do you need the sword for?"

"I want to give it to Jonas as a gift when he receives his barony. He seems to have taken an immense liking to it, and I'm the one he pledged his sword to. I know this might not be something you would want to do, though..."

Volf understood why Guido had made that request in Jonas's absence. He couldn't say he didn't have any reservations about it, but it would probably be the best thing to give Jonas for his barony. Above all, Jonas would be an invincible bodyguard with that magical sword he'd just had in his hands. Honestly, though, Volf was worried about fire spreading—and about the state of

their clothes.

“No, I don’t mind. I’ll ask Dahlia. If it’s difficult for her to make another one, I’ll just ask for the method.”

“Thanks,” Guido responded. Then he shifted his gaze to stare intently at the ground that had been blackened by the magical sword.

Worried by the way Guido placed a hand to his chin and by his serious, brooding posture, Volf asked, “Guido, is something the matter?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking how great a magical sword would be… If I could get my hands on some ice dragon scales, do you think it might be possible to make something like an Ice Lotus Blade?” Guido asked with very keen interest. The day had been filled with moments that made Volf powerfully aware of their bond as brothers.



Ivano and Mena came by the Green Tower first thing in the morning. Several heavy materials had been delivered, so they had come to carry them to Dahlia’s workshop.

Marcella was spending most of his mornings working at the Scalfarottos’ villa. Recently, on top of earth magic, he had also begun learning hand-to-hand combat and sword training from the former marquis, Bernigi, in the back courtyard. Dahlia had heard that since Bernigi was getting used to his prosthetic leg and Marcella was a novice with the sword, the two of them made a great training pair. She just prayed that Marcella’s nerves weren’t giving him a stomachache.

“Where should I place this box?”

“In front of the shelf, please.”

Dahlia opened the box in front of the shelves and took a look at its contents, which included some materials she hadn’t used before. She couldn’t wait to try them out.

“Chairwoman, I received a message from the company that deals in this shed kingsnake skin. The chairman is coming from Išrana at the beginning of the new year, and he wants to meet with you. They’re a large company, and we’ll be dealing with them directly in the future, so may I accept on your behalf?”

“Yes, please do.”

The chairman was coming to the Kingdom of Ordine all the

way from the desert empire, Išrana. Ivano would take care of all the arrangements, but just thinking about what to say when she met him made her nervous.

"Also, Lord Gildo has sent a proposal regarding your debut."

"Um, my debut?"

The beginning of her planned greeting to the chairman vanished from her mind in an instant. *Her debut*, Ivano said, but she wasn't even a baroness yet. *Did he actually mean the debut of the Rossetti Company?* she wondered, tilting her head to the side.

"According to Lord Gildo, it's best if you acquaint yourself with other nobles sooner rather than later—before you become a baroness. The Marquisate Diels regularly holds social functions, so they suggested doing it during an event with fewer guests."

"I suppose I should accept?"

"I'd say so. As your noble guardian, Lord Guido could also host it for you, but he still hasn't taken over as the head of the Scalfarotto family, and Lord Gildo is of higher rank. It's a good opportunity, and you can think of it as practice for when you get your title."

"I see... You're right."

If she was being honest, she wanted to avoid such an event, where she'd have to pay careful attention to how she acted. However, since she was becoming a baroness, it seemed like a good idea to get more accustomed to nobility before her conferment. She was close with Volf, and she interacted with other nobles for work, but all those people accommodated themselves to her. She couldn't deny she should experience interacting with nobles in their natural state at least once.

"Please accept Lord Gildo's offer. I'd like us to cover the expenses."

"Understood. Lord Gildo definitely won't accept any money, so I'll send him an equivalent number of yellow slime cushions. I'll say it's because we want to hear his thoughts on how comfortable they are."

Ivano had mastered the art of dealing with Gildo.

Mena, who had been quietly standing beside Dahlia this whole time, let out a dramatic and melancholic sigh. "Ahh, our chairwoman is finally blossoming into a full-fledged noble. She's getting further and further away."

"Mena, what are you talking about?" Dahlia couldn't help but laugh at her subordinate's teasing. "I'm only getting a title

because of my connection with the Order of Beast Hunters. Nothing about me will change at all. Besides, I'm still not very chairwoman-like, so much so that sometimes people ask me where the chairwoman is."

It was painful to admit, but visitors to the room of the Merchants' Guild where the Rossetti Company borrowed an office often asked her if the chairwoman was in. The number of times that had happened was now in the double digits. When she introduced herself as Chairwoman Dahlia Rossetti, they would, without fail, offer profuse apologies. Considering she lacked presence and impact, she knew there wasn't much to be done about it. Recently, however, her employees had begun handling visitors, so that sort of occurrence was finally coming to an end.

"Chairwoman, don't you think you should act a little more haughty?"

"And how would I do that, Mena?"

"Like, if you sat on a big leather chair with your arms crossed? But I can't really imagine you like that... I think you might just come across as worried about something."

"You're shooting it down before I even try it?"

While she was chuckling at her subordinate's enigmatic suggestion, the gate bell alerted her to a visitor. When she went outside to check, it was a delivery from the florist in the Central District. She accepted the box, looked at the card that came with it, and saw that the sender was Volf.

Back in the workshop, she opened the box to find nerine flowers of the same kind they had sent to Ermelinda yesterday. But instead of silver, a dazzling gold dust had been sprinkled over the flowers. The gradation from light pink to deep crimson petals was beautiful. She had been admiring the flowers yesterday, so Volf must have noticed and thoughtfully sent her some too.

"What unusual flowers. I've never seen them before."

"That choice is definitely very Sir Volf!"

Dahlia wondered if Mena was referring to the gold dust, in contrast with Ivano, who was observing the flowers. Thinking that odd, she looked at him, and he narrowed his aqua blue eyes at her and smiled.

"'I had fun on our date yesterday, so let's meet again,' right? Sir Volf is actually pretty classy."

“Wait, is that what these mean?”

“In the language of flowers, nerines can mean a fun or happy memory, or looking forward to meeting someone again. I don’t think that’s too far off the mark.”

“You know your flowers, Mena.”

“I bought one of these last week. One of my girlfriends works at the flower shop,” Mena responded as only a free lover could.

But Dahlia had other pressing thoughts. “Um, Volf sent these same flowers to Ms. Ermelinda yesterday…”

After swearing Ivano and Mena to secrecy, Dahlia told them the gist of what had happened the previous day. She not only wanted Ivano’s opinion as her vice-chairman but also Mena’s, as he seemed to know a lot about flowers.

Volf had come to the Zolas’ home in the first place as her escort. If she was going to be held accountable, then she also needed to do something to help patch things up.

“Why did the florist pick these flowers?”

“Volf asked the florist for flowers to send to someone he hurt… And I’m certain he mentioned she was already married and he wanted to apologize again the next time they met.”

While Ivano and Dahlia were conversing in lowered voices, Mena gave a slight nod.

“Ah, I see. If that’s what Sir Volf said, then florist must have taken it to mean, ‘I broke it off with a married noblewoman, but I want to tell her I enjoyed the time we spent together, and I hope there might be a chance we’ll meet again.’”

“What?”

“When it comes to sending flowers to an injured or sick person, light-colored bouquets are common, right? But Volf didn’t ask for that, and the flowers were put in a box for the recipient to open herself. Taking that the wrong way, it could be misunderstood as him wanting to see her again without her husband’s knowledge. Since it was a high-end shop in the Central District, I think the florist might have read too much into it.”

“Goodness…” He’d gone running full tilt toward a misunderstanding. Dahlia sympathized with Volf from the bottom of her heart. “Ivano, is there something we can send to Professor Oswald’s home too?”

“That is entirely your call, Chairwoman, but—considering Sir Volf is one of ‘our own,’ I could send them something from us.”

“Please do!” Dahlia replied immediately. Volf was her friend and a guarantor of the company. She wanted to do everything she could to cover for him. Her dependable vice-chairman flipped through a black leather notebook and got right to work giving suggestions.

“We could send a bottle of black scorpio with a message saying it doubles as thanks for Oswald’s continued teaching, so they can’t send it back. And for Ms. Ermelinda—I believe she is fond of honey wine. I’ll send some high-quality wine along with a bottle of scorpio.”

Hearing Ivano say that, Mena turned to him with eyes wide.

“Vice-Chairman, you’ve even looked into his wife’s taste in alcohol?”

“I didn’t need to look into it. In the past, Ms. Ermelinda and her companions were famous even among advanced adventurers, so much so that she earned the nickname ‘Bladefury.’ On top of being incredibly strong, she would also thrust gold coins into the pockets of retired adventurers and pay for the meals of young adventurers who couldn’t afford to eat.”

“She must have been popular, then. Are her companions still working as adventurers?”

“No. Several years ago, they lost one of their companions in a fight against a monster and disbanded. Ms. Ermelinda also retired after that, although she is still being solicited to return to being an adventurer or to become an instructor at the Adventurers’ Guild.”

Dahlia had seen Ermelinda out and about several times, but always by Oswald’s side. Even if she were to receive an invitation with the right conditions, Dahlia doubted the woman would accept it.

“Professor Oswald is becoming a viscount next year, and he frequently visits with high-ranking nobles in the castle. I doubt she’s being solicited too aggressively.”

“I wonder? I heard a rumor that a long time ago—a nobleman tried to pressure ‘Bladefury Mel’ into marrying him and was rejected… But maybe he hasn’t given up yet?”

Mena’s words were very surprising to hear, so Dahlia felt she had to confirm them. “You know Ms. Ermelinda is already married, don’t you?”

Ermelinda was certainly a beauty, and as a former advanced adventurer, she was also very capable. However, she already had

a husband, Oswald. Even if someone were to solicit her, it would be out of the question for her to accept.

"If Chairman Zola were out of the picture, then his third wife Ms. Ermelinda could probably remarry. Isn't that something to worry about?"

"Huh…?" Dahlia reworked what Mena was saying inside her head and finally came to a superficial understanding. There was a possibility that someone could target Oswald, so that was why Ermelinda was acting as his guard—suddenly, Dahlia became concerned for the both of them.

However, at her side, Ivano smiled and carried on the conversation. "You know your gossip too, Mena. But it seems your information is somewhat old, so I'll get you up-to-date. That high-ranking noble passed away from illness a long time ago, and Professor Oswald and his family are well-known enough to surpass their rank, so there's no need for him to worry. Moreover, it was apparently his other wives who suggested that he and Ms. Ermelinda should be together so often."

"Isn't that so she can protect Chairman Zola?"

"The opposite. It's to protect Ms. Ermelinda, by making it known she is a member of the Zola family. After all, both Ms. Fiore and Ms. Ermelinda are the adopted daughters of Oswald's first wife, Ms. Caterina's family. All of them are daughters of a viscount family."

They all had a good relationship with the first wife's family, and the wives themselves were very close. And all the Zolas got along very well. Dahlia wished that Oswald's son, Raul, would someday also be able to speak happily with his father, but it wasn't for her to comment on as an outsider.

"Now then, let's get back to business. Chairwoman, this is the 'special delivery,' yes?" Ivano asked, pointing to the ten compact magical stoves wrapped in cloth.

His navy blue eyes had a mischievous gleam in them, so Dahlia responded precisely, "They're not a 'special delivery.' They're just regular compact magical stoves I made with the Rossetti name on them."

"*That* is what makes them special. There are people crying to Madam Gabriella that they'll do anything to get their hands on a stove with the Rossetti name on it."

They had only planned to engrave the camp stoves for the Order of Beast Hunters, but they'd ended up creating several

more to be used by nobles and to give as gifts. They weren't difficult to manufacture, so Dahlia felt a little uneasy boasting about it.

"Chairwoman, it must be hard to engrave every single one individually. Wouldn't it be better to make a brand or a permanent stamp?"

"I'll think about it..."

Mena wasn't wrong. While Dahlia pondered over what to do for the stamp, Ivano and Mena carried out the packages.

Underneath the winter sky, Mena, carrying a bundle of boxes, called out to his boss, who was walking ahead of him.

"Vice-Chairman, you sure are well-informed, aren't you?"

"No, I just happen to pick up on things. I'm sure you hear many more stories as a gossip-bird, wouldn't you say?"

A gossip-bird was someone who was paid to spread stories in restaurants and pubs around the royal capital. It was Mena's second job and a valuable source of income.

"I wonder about that. All I hear are the rumors that someone wants to circulate."

As he answered, he spread out a blanket on the carriage floor, then gently set the bundles of compact magical stoves down on top of it. As a company employee, Mena had also received a compact magical stove. His very considerate chairwoman had given it to him directly, and since it was engraved with her name, he treasured it. However, it almost seemed like the woman herself didn't understand the value of the engraving.

Before Mena had become a company employee, one of the rumors he'd spread in the drinking establishments was an account of a certain chairperson's delivery of camp stoves to the royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters. A commoner magical toolmaker who had gone to strenuous efforts to construct a camp stove, going so far as to reduce her own profits to bring the cost down, and sent those stoves to the Order of Beast Hunters. A praiseworthy woman whose name was engraved on the bottom of those stoves, both praying for and supporting the squad's safety—that story had become the talk of the taverns with no need for further help from a gossip-bird.

It was a story of such theatrical splendor that even the bards had stopped their singing to take notes. In one tavern, Mena had been caught by one such bard, who had told him they would

buy him a drink if he told the story again from the beginning. It had taken a while before he'd been able to escape from their grasp.

A while later, he'd gone back to the tavern, and this time he'd been the one to hear the story of the Rossetti camp stoves. In no time at all, the rumor had blossomed. The gossip-bird himself couldn't help but laugh at how things had developed. Moreover, when he'd found out the rumors he'd spread were all true, he could do nothing but laugh even harder.

Mena didn't need to ask who had requested that gossip. He knew without a doubt it was the man in front of him now. Just as his nickname "the Cerulean Crow" suggested, the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company was a commoner but had no problem flying among the nobility and gaining advantages. Ivano was more knowledgeable about all types of information than Mena was as a gossip-bird, and sometimes he gave subtle indications of having ears as sharp as a noble's.

Ivano had already known about the noble who had tried to take "Bladefury Mel" from Oswald. That man had apparently died suddenly from a heart issue. In a sense, that was a very convenient story—Mena tried to keep his tone as light as possible when he asked about it.

"Vice-Chairman, is it true what you said earlier, about that high-ranking noble passing away from illness?"

"Yes, surely a divine punishment, I'd say," Ivano stated without so much as batting an eye. Then he went into the tower to get Dahlia.

Mena headed for the coach seat, his face turning blank as he kept his fingers over his mouth. "Vice-Chairman, are you already one of them too? I really don't get nobles… No, I don't want to get them."

His bitter mumbling reached no one's ears.

A Tour of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department

“Green vegetable juice, eh…?”

In the conference room located in the Order of Beast Hunters’ wing of the castle, Grato cast a suspicious look at the glass that had been placed in front of him. With him in the room were Dahlia and Ivano, six members of the Order of Beast Hunters, one member of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, and, for some reason, Head Treasurer Gildo. Dahlia had asked for the number of attendees so she would know how many documents she’d need to hand out, and there were two more people than she’d been told, but she didn’t ask for their names.

In front of each of them was a small glass of green vegetable juice—green drink, in other words. The drink, made mainly with leafy greens, resembling the komatsuna mustard spinach of her past life, that were commonly sold at the market, plus added seasonal vegetables and apples, had an easy-to-drink flavor with subdued bitterness. Dahlia had written down the basic recipe, but the ones who had actually made and fine-tuned the drink were the castle’s chefs. They had used a bigger, improved version of the food mincer to crush up the vegetables and apples and added a bit of water to produce a smoother drink. She had heard there was considerable demand for fruit juice within the castle too, so it was something the chefs had ample experience making.

“This seems like it would have great beneficial effects for various ailments.”

The vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, Griswald, had already emptied his glass. Now he had in his hands the documents the Rossetti Trading Company had distributed. Ivano had very tactfully and elegantly written up a report about constipation and the negative effects of vegetable deficiency. Dahlia was thankful she didn’t have to speak about it in detail out loud.

“My wife is very fond of these drinks. She tells me they are good for the skin too. The knights experience many discomforts

on expeditions, so I think I'd like to bring these with us."

It seemed Griswald was already on board. At his words, another knight with golden-brown hair leaned forward.

"It's good for your skin too? I get itchy whenever we're out on long expeditions—not athlete's foot, but I do get rashes often, so if drinking this would help with that, then sign me up."

"It's true, skin takes a beating on long expeditions. And it doesn't get a chance to heal in the spots where the armor chafes it. Though that's also because we don't have the pleasure of taking baths."

Even after they had reduced the problem of athlete's foot and sweat, itchiness and rashy skin still remained. Those were also fairly pressing problems.

"...I think humans can survive without green vegetables."

As the conversation progressed, there was a quiet, doubtful murmur, but Dahlia couldn't bring herself to respond to it.

"It's nice how this has no grassiness or bitterness to it. It makes it taste much better than the vegetable juice we get in the mess hall. I bet this would work wonders for a hangover too," Dorino stated in his cheery voice. Several other people nodded deeply at his words.

Vegetable juice was a part of commoner women's beauty routines, so it was fairly popular for that reason. It seemed others had tried the drink before too, though this was the first time Dahlia had heard of it being drunk as a hangover cure.

"Master Dahlia, what is the best way to bring this with us on expeditions?"

"Either freezing or chilling it and placing it inside something to keep it cool would be best, I think."

"Freezing... In that case, we'll be in need of ice crystals."

"It might be a good idea to separate it into daily portions and open them individually. Opening and closing them all repeatedly would be inefficient when using ice crystals. A freezer would increase your load, so I would recommend a kraken bag."

The one who made that brilliant suggestion was a man with ink black hair and indigo-gray eyes. He looked to be about a dozen years older than Dahlia. Before the start of the meeting, he had introduced himself as Carmine Zanardi, vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. As they were exchanging greetings, she'd kept to herself the thought that hearing his name brought to mind her father, Carlo. Carmine

wore a black robe over a white shirt, looking very much like a royal magical toolmaker.

"That should also keep down the expenditure of magical crystals and obviate any additional expense on sleipnirs. We should be able to cover the cost of implementing the green vegetable juice with this term's budget."

Apparently Gildo had already started calculating the estimated cost of implementing the green juice. As always, he was quick at his work. Next to him, Grato's red eyes were staring at the glass, which he still hadn't picked up.

"Captain, do you perhaps dislike vegetable juice?"

"That's...not it."

He looked disgusted. Even Dorino, who had so bravely asked that question, saw the deep crease in the captain's furrowed brow and, daring to say no more, simply closed his mouth.

"We completely eliminate the grassy flavor or bitterness, so anyone who dislikes it doesn't feel like they have to force themselves to drink it."

"Everyone has their own particular tastes, isn't that right?" Gildo said, backing up Dahlia's words, but the captain's face remained slightly grim.

When it came to food, everyone had their own preferences and inclinations. That was just the way things were.

"Captain, not to worry. If you add honey to the drink, it will take away the grassy and bitter flavor."

Randolph took out a jar of honey and, without even using a spoon, poured an ample amount into his glass—more than the one or two mouthfuls of his vegetable juice that remained. Dahlia suddenly became concerned not for Randolph's nutritional deficiencies but for the possibility that he'd develop diabetes.

"Randolph, I don't think you should pour it in like that..."

The knight with golden-brown hair teased him in a whisper. "Hey, Forest Bruin, your teeth'll rot."

"No they won't. I brush them." Randolph refuted his words with such an earnest face, it almost made Dahlia burst out laughing.

"Now that you mention it, maybe it's because I brush my teeth less regularly when we're on long expeditions, but I have more of a problem with soft gums than cavities... Well, that could just be my age."

The man who lowered his dark brown eyes was a knight who was always by Grato's side. His comment about his gums bothered Dahlia for some reason.

"Pardon, but on long expeditions, do you notice that it's hard to stop your bleeding after you get injured?"

"No, since a mage treats me or I take a potion, that doesn't happen. Could something else cause soft gums on expeditions?"

Once he said that, Dahlia realized something. This world had magic and potions, so when it came to treating injuries, they prioritized speed and cost-effectiveness. Therefore, they lacked the sense to check how long it took for injuries to stop bleeding.

"Not brushing may contribute to the problem, but if you don't eat fruits and vegetables, it can become difficult to stop your bleeding. I think I remember reading that somewhere..."

She trailed off vaguely. There was an illness that had been called scurvy in her previous life, which she was pretty sure was caused by a vitamin C deficiency. She regretted not having more detailed knowledge about it. The man probably had something different, since dried fruits were among the foods they brought on expedition, but it was still worrisome.

"Ah, the Sailor's Disease, you mean? The ocean is filled with salt, so I hear they drink apple vinegar to neutralize it. Since our expeditions occur mainly on land, we don't find ourselves surrounded by salt, so I don't believe we need to worry about that," Griswald explained brightly.

Dahlia's knowledge of scurvy and vitamin C came from her previous life. She couldn't even begin to explain that she wasn't talking about neutralizing the saltiness of the seawater with vinegar. That said, there was also the possibility that in this world, that really was the cause.

"Up in the north, where the cold makes your blood sluggish, I hear they make pickled apples and vinegared cabbage during the summer..." Gildo put a hand to his chin and ruminated.

They might have had different reasons, but it seemed the people of this world had adopted their own measures for reducing vitamin C deficiency and preventing poor health.

"We'll have the squad try them out during the midterm expedition and have them fill out a survey. How does that sound?"

"Let's do that," Grato said, nodding in agreement to the vice-captain's suggestion. Then he picked up his glass—and, despite

scowling all the while, drained it in one go. “...I drank it,” he said anticlimactically after a few seconds.

With the tension having dissipated, squad members laughed. The others present in the room also relaxed their expressions.

“I once tried one of these. Suffice it to say it didn’t agree with me. Ever since, I’ve been put off by the smell.” Grato said that with a bit of a humorless laugh, but he’d switched back to his usual expression. Then he continued, “Rossetti, where do you plan on having these produced? Or are you going to establish a new division within your company?”

“No, I thought maybe I could ask those who handle food in the castle, or maybe the manufacturer that supplies dried fruits and vegetables.”

“If you go that route, we’ll be able to bring these on expeditions sooner, but these drinks will be consistently profitable from here on out, so why don’t you take this opportunity to establish a new division?”

She was grateful for his concern, but she and Ivano had already discussed this matter thoroughly. It was beyond the Rossetti Trading Company’s means.

“Thank you for your consideration. Unfortunately, we don’t have anyone knowledgeable about vegetables, besides which they’re sold at market price. We want to buy up vegetables when they’re in season and freeze them—so we were thinking those with experience handling such matters would be most competent.”

“There is also the matter of safety. In order to prevent spoilage and foreign contaminants during transport, we can have more confidence in current affiliates and suppliers,” Ivano said, supplementing Dahlia’s explanation with further information.

The transport time was certainly a point of concern. It was best to freeze or refrigerate the drinks immediately after making them and then put them in containers to keep them cool. And naturally, she wanted to be very careful regarding foreign contaminants. It would be a problem if even an insect got into the stock during transport.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, what will you use for the grinder?”

Carmine’s question caught Dahlia off guard. She responded hastily. “If possible, I’d like to use what is already available.”

“Are you not bothered by the fibers in these drinks? I wonder

if the vegetables could be crushed even more finely.” His indigo-gray eyes intently observed the glass he tilted back and forth in his hand.

He was right—there was quite a lot of pulp remaining in the juice. Dahlia didn’t mind it, but there might be people who did. However, she was worried that if they were filtered out, the dietary fiber would be lost.

“That is a good point. In that case, would it be better to use a smaller grinder than was used this time?”

“No, I think it would be faster to create a large grinder that can pulverize the vegetables all at once. What if you used more than five wind crystals and changed the shape or number of blades?”

“Interesting…!” Dahlia was awed that he’d suggested more than five wind crystals. She herself had never made anything that used more than three. What a level to aspire to.

“Then will you be manufacturing the grinders for the Order of Beast Hunters, Chairman Rossetti?”

“No, I was hoping to request that it be done by the magical toolmaking department.”

Since he had so quickly suggested changing the size and number of blades used, it seemed Carmine was already thinking up a prototype. He could probably create one much faster than she could.

Besides, everyone had things they were or were not capable of, their different inclinations.

“There is no need to be hesitant. Our department holds you in high esteem as an adviser for the Order of Beast Hunters. We’ll prepare an area for you, and if you so require, we can furnish you with assistants as well.”

“I very much appreciate it. However, my magic is insufficient for making large-size magical tools. On my own, I have never created a magical tool that used more than three wind crystals—that is why I would like to request that it be done by the magical toolmaking department.” Thinking he was likely reluctant to ask her what grade her magic was when this was their first time meeting, Dahlia had instead told him her limit for wind crystals.

“…I see.” After that brief comment, Carmine reopened his mouth only to close it again. He was closing it so tightly that his lips curled in and were turning white.

Dahlia thought maybe he was shocked by her low magic, but

he'd already known she was a commoner from her self-introduction. In that case, the only other thing she could think of was that maybe the magical toolmaking department's schedule was too tight?

For her to throw additional work their way when they were already busy and then flee—who would do such a thing? Even if she couldn't make the tool on her own, at least involving herself in some way would have been the minimum gesture of courtesy. Remembering her workplace of her past life, where she'd worked herself to death, Dahlia tightly balled up her fists.

"Vice-Director Zanardi, if I may, could I possibly ask for your instruction in manufacturing the larger grinder?!"

At the end there, her voice suddenly turned into a shout. Everyone else in the room simultaneously turned to stare at her after her overexcited outburst. *How embarrassing.*

As for Carmine, who was diagonally across from her, he turned his indigo eyes on her and blinked twice. He looked utterly appalled. Dahlia was about to open her mouth to say, *My apologies. How very rude of me to ask such an unreasonable favor from you.* But before she could, his face broke into a smile.

"It would be my pleasure. I was just about to ask whether I might give you instruction myself, Chairwoman Rossetti."

Thus, Dahlia received Carmine's permission, meaning she would be involved in the manufacturing of the large-size grinder.

The castle's magical toolmaking department was considered the elite, the best of the best, in terms of treatment and environment for magical toolmakers. Among the students in Dahlia's magical toolmaking course in college, it had been the most coveted place of employment. Naturally, it was difficult to get hired there, as one needed grade ten magic or higher and three references even to be considered a qualified candidate. Dahlia had planned to work under her father, so she hadn't even considered it. In a place like the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, someone like her would only have gotten in the way.

However, this was a magical tool related to the health of the Order of Beast Hunters. *I'll work my hardest*, she resolved to herself.

"Chairwoman Rossetti, if you would like, why don't you come take a look at the magical toolmaking wing after the meeting?"

"As long as it wouldn't be any trouble, I would be delighted

to," she replied without hesitation. Then she gave a start. She was an adviser for the Order of Beast Hunters. What was she doing, responding without seeking the captain's permission? Shouldn't she have gotten his consent first?

"Um! With Sir Grato's permission, that is."

When she whirled around to look at him, she saw him nod while trying to hold back a laugh.

"Vice-Director Zanardi, we would also like to request that you give our Rossetti here a tour."

"Of course. I shall do so gladly."

"I'd like to ask one thing, though. You're going to show her the first and second sections of the magical toolmaking department on today's tour, right?"

"Correct. Today, the director is in the first section, so if possible, I'd like to introduce them."

"I see."

Dahlia had heard that the magical toolmaking department was split into several sections, but she didn't know the details. She was very interested to find out what sort of magical tools they were making. They hadn't even finished their conversation, but she was already getting excited.

Afterward, they resumed their discussion about the large-size grinder and decided to reconvene once they had finished a prototype. As for coordinating with the castle's affiliates and suppliers, the Order and the treasury would be taking care of that. Dahlia was relieved to hear it wouldn't become Ivano's burden.

After the meeting was over, Carmine walked up to Dahlia.

"Now then, Chairwoman Rossetti, if you and your vice-chairman would both like to follow me—"

"Actually, I need to speak with Ivano about the next delivery," said Grato. "Volf, you go with Rossetti instead as her guard."

"Yes, sir!"

"...I also have some business at the magical toolmaking department regarding the budget. I'll come with you."

Dahlia was going somewhere in the castle—a place she had never been to before. Having Volf there with her was greatly reassuring. But why was Gildo coming too? Nothing could have made them stand out more.

Right after she had that thought, she reflected on Gildo's

behavior as she'd witnessed it thus far—being a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company, he was probably just looking out for her. Both she and Volf had had a tumultuous history with their castle etiquette. They still hardly had a handle on it. Furthermore, she was a commoner. Even though she had received a tentative offer, she wasn't a baroness yet.

Although Gildo was most likely not going to explain anything to them, maybe he intended to act as their support.

"...Thank you, Lord Gildo," she told him quietly when he came to stand by her side.

Without even looking at her, he responded in a similarly quiet voice. "It's no matter. I may as well."

As always, she found it difficult to understand his kindness—but actually, maybe that type of response was itself very like Gildo. She decided simply to be grateful he was going with them.

"Chairwoman Rossetti, have you heard anything about the magical toolmaking department from anyone else?"

"No, I have not."

"The Royal Magical Toolmaking Department is divided into three sections. The first section handles the development and maintenance of magical tools related to the royal knights' weapons, armor, and so on, while the second section does the same for tools used in daily life. In the third section, magical toolmakers and alchemists conduct their own research using scholarly magical tools that don't fall under the categories pertaining to the first or second sections."

"Scholarly magical tools?"

"That is correct."

Carmine's indigo-gray eyes looked off into space.

"A means for humans to fly freely in the air, a golem that moves at a human operator's command, a device that can translate animal language, an instrument that can control the ebb and flow of the tides, research into the power source of dullahans—though not one of those projects has seen the light of day yet."

"It sounds like very dreamlike research..."

Just imagining it made Dahlia sigh. What ambitious research. A far cry from her own household magical tools, it was the type of research that would rightfully have been called the stuff of fantasy in her previous life. It all sounded exceedingly difficult, but if such tools could be made reality, then they would be

magnificent. Perhaps she would have a chance to see those fantastical magical tools in her lifetime. It was truly, truly fascinating.

While her imagination got her heart leaping, Volf called her name. “Miss Dahlia, shall we?”

Hearing him use his noble manners, something he so seldom did, made her snap back to reality. Carmine was already passing through the doors of the conference room.

“There we go.”

While everyone was on their way out of the conference room, Dorino was quickly fixing up a slightly lopsided chair. It wasn’t his job or anything, but it was a habit he had picked up at his family’s establishment.

Randolph was heading for the armory with Ivano and the vice-captain regarding a spare broad shield. The only ones remaining in the room were the captain, the senior knight, and Dorino.

Anyway, just how much does Dahlia like magical tools? he wondered. As he remembered how she’d acted a second ago, a chuckle rose up in his throat.

In anticipation of touring the magical toolmaking department, she’d listened to those stories of magical tools that could only be called wild dreams, and the look on her face had been like that of a child in front of a toy. She’d hastily donned her adviser’s robe on her way out the door. *I hope she never gets disillusioned*—that was Dorino’s genuine wish.

Grato had made sure that they would be touring the first and second sections but would leave out the third. Even Dorino knew the reason for that. “Scholarly magical tool research” was a very clever way to describe it.

Many of the apprentices employed by section three of the department were high-ranking nobles with high-grade magic, but according to the rumors, all their research was shady. There had been instances of uncontrolled magical outbursts and small fires. It had a low reputation and an equally low level of safety. The place was filled not with problem children but problem geniuses—however, since they were high-ranking nobles, there wasn’t much one could do to complain.

The captain had probably had Volf accompany Dahlia to ease her tension. So had Gildo gone along because of his status as a

marquis, and maybe to act as a shield in case of an emergency?

Before, Dorino had thought of Gildo as a pain in the neck, but recently, he hadn't been so bad, though Dorino could have done without his incomprehensible behavior and his tendency to put on airs.

"Sir Grato, are you sure you are feeling all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"If you feel like you're about to be sick, I can bring you tea or water."

"No need. It's nearly time for tea anyway."

Grato and the knight were conversing in front of the doorway. Dorino was confused by how much the knight was fussing over the captain.

It was true there were some bad green vegetable juices out there, but when Dorino thought of the meals they'd had on prior expeditions, he didn't think the juices could be much worse. Besides, Dorino distinctly remembered Grato working on a salad during a dinner with the squad.

"Captain, that vegetable juice you drank in the past, was it really that bad? Was it so bitter it nearly killed you or something?"

"Yeah, I was writhing in agony and afterward had to lock myself up in the bathroom. No matter where you're drinking, never take off your bracelet outside, Dorino."

Recruits of the Order of Beast Hunters were loaned bracelets or rings to neutralize poisons. They were instructed to wear them not only on expeditions but also when dining out in their day-to-day lives.

On paper, it was for health reasons, but for as popular as the Order of Beast Hunters were, they also received their fair share of envy. In the past, there had been incidents of people putting laxatives in drinks and food at restaurants in the capital. The bracelets and rings served as a countermeasure against things like that.

It was a matter of course for nobles to wear magical tools to protect against poisons, but for a commoner from the lower-class part of the city, they were luxury items. Dorino was grateful to have been given one.

However, it was odd that the captain would have forgotten to wear his bracelet. Moreover, for a vegetable juice to have affected him so badly as to give him diarrhea, it must have either

been made with spoiled vegetables or had some wildflowers mixed in. Where had Grato, who was from a marquis family, drunk something so foul?

“I will be careful. But Captain, where did you drink something like that?”

“...When I was still young and naive, it was served to me in a spot where I had my guard down. The drink had some herbs from the Eastern Kingdom mixed in.” Grato laughed bitterly, then looked down into his empty glass.

If it was somewhere he’d gone in his youth where he’d had his guard down, either he’d been with a woman he was comfortable around, or in the red-light district—wherever it had been, the green juice he’d drunk there had apparently affected him badly.

The medicinal herbs of the Eastern Kingdom had an extensive variety of uses, from treating colds to relieving fatigue to even acting as a source of nutrition. Dorino, trying to keep up his usual manner, laughed jovially and said, “Were those herbs a relative of the forest serpent? Captain, do you think they might have worked a little too well?”

The senior knight with the dark brown eyes rebuked him shortly. “Dorino!”

It seemed he’d gone a little too far. “Oh, it was effective. So much so that since then, I’ve barely been able to look at another green drink. That, and yes, it was probably related to the Green King.” Grato was smiling, but his usual warmth was nowhere to be seen—he turned his red eyes on Dorino like a teacher looking at a confused student. “What I was made to drink was the ‘Herb King’—a poisonous plant that burns your intestines.”

The Royal Magical Toolmaking Department wing was supposedly across the grounds from the central building that held the three towers. This was “supposedly” the case because they were going there by carriage, so Dahlia didn’t know exactly what direction they were traveling. The grounds of the castle were exceptionally expansive. Had Dahlia been by herself, she would likely have gotten lost.

“On the left is the department’s first section, and on the right is the second.”

After alighting from the carriage, Dahlia looked up at the two

buildings. Both were made of stone of the same color as the castle and were four stories tall. Perhaps because it was winter, most of the large windows were closed. Since they were frosted glass windows, it was impossible to see inside.

A crimson flag was displayed at the entryway of the first section and an azure one in front of the second section. The same crest adorned both large flags—a bird spreading its wings with the eight phases of the moon behind it. At the bird's feet were what looked like quill pens.

"Now then, let us start our tour with the first section— Oh, and Chairwoman Rossetti, Lord Scalfarotto, please call me Carmine, if you do not mind. There are others in the magical toolmaking department with the name Zanardi."

"Thank you, Vice-Director Carmine. Please call me Dahlia, then."

"Much obliged. And call me Volfred, please."

"I'm honored. Well then, everyone, let us go in."

They walked inside and found themselves in a reception area. On the other side of a marble counter, a number of staff all stood up at once and cast their gazes downward. Carmine was leading their group, and behind him was Gildo, while Dahlia and Volf brought up the rear. The polite greetings and treatment they'd received were likely born of respect for Gildo, the head treasurer and a marquis. Amid the tense atmosphere, Carmine briefly explained that their guests were from the Order of Beast Hunters and were here to tour the facilities.

Several knights were on standby next to the reception desk. This section dealt with magical tools for the royal knights, which would explain why there were a certain number of them here. They gave the visiting group a similar reception.

Despite her nerves, Dahlia went up to the second floor. Carmine stood in front of the double doors of the first room at the top of the stairs, and before he could even knock, they smoothly slid open. Dahlia's eyes widened. They were very similar in structure to the automatic doors of her past life as well as the gates of the Green Tower. She became very interested in their inner workings.

"The doors open automatically once a certain amount of weight is placed before them. It is very convenient when carrying packages and such—though they might not open for you alone, Chairwoman Dahlia."

“Oh, no, they will! No worries there!” she hastily replied to Carmine’s subtle compliment. Her fascination must have been all too evident on her face.

“They definitely wouldn’t open,” Volf whispered behind her. She wished he wouldn’t do that. She’d nearly turned around to look back at him. And besides, she had no idea how to respond to that.

“This is one of our workshops. The main focus here is on manufacturing armor. Unfortunately, even when visitors come, the researchers cannot stop their work, so I hope you’ll be understanding.”

The room they entered was a considerably spacious workshop. Some workers were wearing the robes of royal magical toolmakers, some were in white coats, and some were knights. In total, about twenty people were hard at work. Some were making liquid mixtures in preparation for enchanting, while others were casting reinforcements on shields, and so on and so forth. A few people were paying attention to the visitors, but most were completely focused on their tasks and didn’t even spare them a glance.

On top of the white tables were shields and equipment that looked like those used by the royal knights. For the most part, they weren’t the dull silver or gray equipment used by the Order of Beast Hunters but gleaming white, silver, and gold. There were even some blue suits of armor and red shields.

Dahlia’s attention was pulled toward a corner of the room where a red-colored magic shone so bright it was practically glaring. The red-haired magical toolmaker who was working on the enchantment looked to be about the same age as Dahlia.

“Over there, that toolmaker is working on enchanting a buckler with increased fire magic resistance for the household troops. After a buckler has been hardened, it’s become common to raise the resistance to two or three elements, between fire, earth, water, or air.”

“Not all four?”

“Most knights of the household troops have their own inherent magic, so a shield is not enchanted with the same element its owner wields—though I do believe that for household knights who can only use healing or strengthening magic, their bucklers are enchanted with all four types on top of the hardening enchantment.”

Hardening and resistance against all types of magic—five layers of enchantments, unbelievably. Dahlia wished Volf's armor could be enchanted like that. In fact, she wished the entire Order of Beast Hunters squad could have enchanted armor tailored to their own specific magic.

"However, it is only raised by a fixed standard. The household troops are shields for the royal family, so to speak, so the hardening is done with backline defense in mind, which makes it so that repelling attacks with the shields can put strain on the knights themselves. Also, even a few attacks with intermediate, close-range magic can break them. They take time to make, but they also break often during the troops' training, so it can actually be quite difficult to strike the right balance."

Unfortunately, that didn't seem like something that would suit the Order of Beast Hunters. They had to endure many attacks in their many battles against monsters and during long expeditions. Also, what sort of training were the household troops doing that would cause their bucklers, with all those enchantments, to break so often? Dahlia shuddered to imagine.

"I think I can enchant this leather with two layers... What I need is..."

As they walked through the room, she spotted a magical toolmaker in the back, facing the wall and muttering as he took notes with his right hand and touched a large piece of monster leather with his left. Seeing how absorbed he was in his work, Dahlia knew they shouldn't disturb him.

"That man is researching leather armor. Leather is more lightweight than metal but inferior when it comes to protection, and it can also be difficult to enchant—"

"Vice-director, leather is not inferior to metal! Any issues can be solved by either finding a better method of enchantment or obtaining higher-quality material, like dragon hide."

He seemed to have heard them. Dahlia was genuinely impressed by how the young man had turned around and spoken up so firmly.

But when she met his eyes, the man apologized, abashed. "...My sincere apologies. I was unaware you had guests with you."

His reddish-brown eyes were flitting around anxiously. Perhaps he had only heard the word "leather" and nothing else.

"Not at all; we are the ones disrupting your work," Dahlia said.

“Um, is that wyvern leather, by chance?”

“Yes, it’s from a black wyvern’s back, a little below its neck, though regrettably, it was a small specimen.”

That must have been a good part of the body to get leather from, judging from its glossiness and rich, dark color.

“It’s lovely leather. It looks very durable.”

“Yes, it is beautiful in appearance and has excellent impact resistance and magical defense properties. However, for that very reason, it requires time to process and enchant—I want to create a complete set of black wyvern armor so it can be used the next time a black wyvern or a hydra appears, but that won’t be for a while.”

A set of lightweight, durable black wyvern armor—something like that would be perfect for the Order of Beast Hunters. Dahlia didn’t want any black wyverns or hydras to show up, though.

“Speaking of wyvern, I hear it can be used to make gloves too. Do you make those as well?” Dahlia asked, thinking of gloves used for magical toolmaking. She had a feeling that gloves made of black wyvern would have an unusual texture, thicker and less pliable.

“Yes, I commonly use skin from the belly of a wyvern to make gloves for archers. They’re more flexible. I reinforce the back of the hand with metal. When I don’t want to use metal, I reinforce it with more skin from the wyvern’s back. However, the individual magic of each specimen can prevent them from affixing or connecting together very well, so it can take time to get it right.”

“I see. So even the gloves can be quite complicated to produce and fine-tune…”

That was already true of regular gloves. But gloves used for armor must be even more fickle.

Hide differed in strength and flexibility based on what part of an animal’s body it came from. Each creature’s differing magic quality and toughness likely also influenced the production process. If anything, it would be better if they could create something like a miniature wyvern using hide from a single specimen.

“It would be nice to be able to easily make a black wyvern costume.”

“A black wyvern…costume…?”

The toolmaker’s reply made Dahlia jump. She’d inadvertently let slip a reference to the monster costumes she remembered

from her past life. But in this world, while there existed face masks and headpieces, there were no costumes that covered one's entire body.

"Oh, um, what I'm trying to say is, maybe you could create a smaller version of a wyvern... I was thinking the helmet could be made of hide from a wyvern's head, and the armor on the hands and feet would be made of hide from their legs, so that it would be like wearing one whole wyvern. Though I suppose you'd have to make the stomach part of the armor out of skin from the wyvern's back, otherwise it would be too weak..."

Before she knew it, the young man's mouth was hanging open and his eyes were bulging. Surely he was flabbergasted by her nonsensical rambling. Words couldn't express how sorry she felt.

"Forgive me, I'm talking such nonsense—"

"Vice-director! Permission to use a whole black wyvern specimen!"

"...A whole one isn't possible, but check the inventory and send in a request form for the parts and quantities you require. It hasn't been long since the last delivery, so you might be in luck."

"Yes, right away! Thank you, miss! Please excuse me—I must be off!"

The young man bowed to her, and it was only then that he noticed Gildo and Volf's presence, so he bowed to them too. Then he exited the workshop nearly at a canter.

"I'm terribly sorry about that. He is very passionate about his research, but he has a tendency to ignore everything around him..."

"That equipment sounds like it would be very protective, even if a bit costly," Volf said, trying to cheer up Carmine, who looked uneasy.

The price of the black wyvern was a point of concern for Dahlia too, but if it made for stronger armor, then she wanted it by all means.

"Lord Volfred, I'd like to ask you something," Gildo said with a frown. As head treasurer, he must have had something to say about the price. "I've heard that wyverns have a strict hierarchy and engage in fights over rank whenever they cross paths."

"Yes, that is true. They are very territorial."

"Then, if a knight were to wear an entire black wyvern suit,

wouldn't that attract other wyverns?"

"Huh?" Dahlia responded before she could stop herself.

Carmine put a finger to his chin in deep thought.

Volf, however, only hesitated for a moment before responding with ease. "I think that would need some verification, but when there's a considerable size difference, they just approach to intimidate. It could make for a surprisingly good decoy, actually."

He said it so lightly, but his words pierced her heart. Wouldn't the one acting as the decoy be in enormous danger?

"Aha, so then you can subdue it when it comes down to intimidate. Right, Vice-Director Carmine, you can have that equipment made to fit the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters."

"What?!"

"If five or six archers with magical bows were to wait in ambush, I should think they'd have no difficulty taking down even a wyvern. Even if they miss their chance to fell it, luring it in close would allow Grato—I mean, the captain—to use his Ash Hand. He could scorch the wyvern, which would be injured and unable to fly."

"Oh! Doing it that way would make it more a trap than a decoy, then." Gildo's suggestion had sent her into quite the panic, but his follow-up put her at ease. It seemed like the sort of plan that had a high chance of working without much strain.

"Are the only choices to slice up the wyvern or burn it? For the sake of keeping the materials in good condition, I think I'd rather they be shot down by the magical bows," Carmine asserted as his indigo-gray eyes lit up. This man, too, was a magical toolmaker through and through.

The tour group exited the spacious workshop and moved down the hall to another room.

"This room is one I think you really ought to see, Chairwoman Dahlia—"

The room they entered was about the same size as a college classroom. On four workbenches lay several prosthetic arms and legs, and in the back were several magical toolmakers doing manufacturing work. Next to the table closest to them, a well-built, middle-aged knight and a green-haired magical toolmaker were conversing.

"I told you, I want the wind magic to be one or two levels

stronger.”

“It’s already quite strong as is. I understand your desire for more speed, but I’m not sure any more than this will—”

The anxious-looking magical toolmaker was holding a pale bluish-green prosthetic arm. The knight was missing his arm below the elbow, but his sturdy build was nonetheless very knightlike.

“If I can swing my sword faster, that makes it easier to decapitate monsters. This time, I swear I’ll cut off the head of the minotaur bastard who chewed this arm off! …Hmm?”

The knight who’d been speaking suddenly turned around and fixed his vermilion eyes on Volf.

“Well, if it isn’t Volfred! You’re even ganglier than when I last saw you.”

“Sir Goffredo, it’s been so long! I’m glad to see you looking well,” Volf responded cheerfully.

It seemed this man was one of his seniors in the Order of Beast Hunters. After introducing himself as Goffredo Goodwin and giving a standard greeting, the knight turned to Dahlia and looked at her wonderingly. Figuring that she was the only one among them whom he was meeting for the first time, Dahlia introduced herself too.

“My name is Dahlia Rossetti. I am an adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters.”

“Oh, it’s you! The one Sir Bernigi told me about! He told me many great things about you!” the knight said with animation, taking a sudden step closer to her. His intensity made Dahlia unconsciously flinch.

“I’m surprised to see you’re such a cute little lady. From what I’ve heard, I was sure you were some terrifying woman with a magical tool in one hand barking at the squad… Oh, sorry.”

Dahlia didn’t know what to say to the man, who was roaring with laughter. Just what in the world was Bernigi saying about her? She suddenly felt very ill at ease.

“Today, I am giving Chairwoman Dahlia a tour of the magical toolmaking department. May I request an explanation of this magical prosthetic arm?”

Thank goodness for Carmine, who threw her a lifeline. *What a capable middle manager*, she thought.

“I’m having this magical prosthetic from the Scalfarotto Arms Works modified to suit my needs a little better. Of course, I went

through all the proper channels. I want to return to the squad in the spring, if I can."

"This magical prosthesis was already strong enough to allow even a layperson to smash bricks. As requested, I've now enchanted it with even stronger wind magic. Whether it can be used safely is another matter entirely..."

Dahlia sympathized with the green-haired toolmaker, whose eyes were now lightless. He must have already explained the dangers and still been pestered to go through with it. Thus, he was compelled to enchant it, but if he were to add more magic, it could even become a liability issue.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure you aren't held responsible. We were all given waivers saying we're personally responsible for anything that might happen when using these, including injuries, right?" said the knight, laughing.

Suddenly, Dahlia had a headache. It sounded like the other knights with magical prostheses were doing the same thing. Perhaps she should speak with Bernigi about it as soon as possible, or even Grato. In fact, should she ask Jonas first? There were so many things to worry about.

"Everyone who wants to return to the squad has their eyes on becoming the sworn enemy of monsters. I want you to add even stronger wind magic to this magical prosthetic arm so that I can kill more of those beasts—even just one more. If you want, I can pay you out of my own pocket and bring you any materials you need."

"My point is, at present, any more enchantments than this will be too dangerous."

"I'll be the one using it, so there's no problem. All you have to do is make it."

There were numerous problems, actually. A sword made faster with wind magic was certainly more powerful. But it was also more dangerous. It would have been fine if it simply caused sore muscles, but it could also dislocate one's shoulder or tear one's back muscles. Even with the use of potions, repeated injuries like that would take a toll on one's body.

Even Volf suggested with concern, "Sir, why don't you just get used to this one first and then make adjustments to it? Maybe you'll find it suits you—"

But it was as if the knight hadn't even heard him. He just laughed Volf off. "So you're all grown up now too, eh? I

remember when people used to worry about *you*."

Dahlia bit her lip as she was reminded of a customer in her past life who had pushed her to make unreasonable modifications to a product that had only made it more dangerous. She wished the knight wasn't so insistent on sacrificing safety in the name of raising the product's performance. That went against the artisan's goal.

"Um, if I may! When you use a magical prosthesis, if your right and left sides are too unbalanced, it places more strain on your back and shoulders, which can lead to chronic pain later on."

"...Really? I didn't realize I had to consider that," said the knight, seemingly convinced, albeit dejected.

Dahlia felt relieved. The toolmaker in front of them also finally relaxed his shoulders.

"Unbalanced..." the knight muttered quietly. Then he raised his face and beamed. "So I'll cut off my inferior, slower left arm and have magical prostheses for both arms! Then I'll be unstoppable!"

"How could you say such a thing?!" Dahlia shouted in spite of herself. The man had so proudly expressed such a horrid idea.

That wasn't the reason she had created the magical prostheses. Even if the user had no reservations about cutting off a healthy limb in order to replace it with a magical prosthesis for faster attacks, their friends and family would lament the choice.

"Isn't your body precious to you, and to your family?! How could you hurt the people who care about you like that? Compensating for an injured limb with a magical tool and swapping one in for a slow arm are two entirely different things!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Dahlia, I think that's enough..." Volf said, gently pulling on her arm.

She covered her mouth with a gasp, but she couldn't take back what she'd said. Not only had she raised her voice, but she'd even said some very rude things. In this world, thanks to the existence of healing magic, there were many people who took things like injuries very lightly. Perhaps because serious injuries were common in the Order of Beast Hunters, they seemed to be especially numb to them.

No matter how much she told this knight to cherish his body, it probably wouldn't get through to him. She'd told her father the

same thing, and he hadn't listened—she'd been reminded of that, hence her frustration.

"Swapping out my slow arm…" the knight echoed quietly. Dahlia faced him to apologize, but the one who bowed their head first was the very knight before her.

"I would expect no less from the person whom Captain Grato begged on his knees to become the squad's adviser. I hope you can forgive my making light of you for being a young lady."

"Yes?" she replied, not sure where he was going with this.

The knight nodded deeply. "I am obliged for your magnanimity. It's like you said, Master Rossetti. This is a result of my lack of training. Instead of saying such foolish things about cutting my arm off, I'll train this left hand—nay, my entire body—so that it can be in balance with my magic prosthetic arm, Wind Gripper!"

Please slow down! That wasn't what I meant. Also, who came up with that name?

"The magic prosthetic arm, Wind Gripper…!"

While Dahlia was at a loss, a voice full of admiration rang out from beside her. She didn't even have to look at him to know his golden eyes were twinkling. She had wanted him to help her out of this misunderstanding, but it seemed she would have to abandon that hope.

"Volfred, I named a magical prosthetic leg 'Sky Galloper.'"

"I think both are terrific names!"

"I agree! When I came up with it, everyone loved it! Other people call theirs by the names of old sweethearts— *Ahack!*"

Dahlia pretended she hadn't heard the words he'd tried covering up with a fake cough. Users of magical tools were free to name them whatever they liked. She had no intention of inserting her opinion, so she didn't want to hear about it. In an attempt to distance herself from the pair's conversation, she looked away, whereupon she caught sight of a large bone sitting on the workbench.

"Um, is this from a green horse?"

"It is. A male's foreleg. But recently, our stock of green horse bones has been dropping, so the Order of Beast Hunters have been looking for them in graveyards."

"In graveyards…?"

"Yes, green horses move about in herds, and a certain number meet their end in a specific area. It may sound like grave

robbing, but since green horse bones take a long time to decompose after death, we've been requesting that the Order bring them back with them. It takes many years to raise them to adulthood, and they can also be used for riding, so—"

The magical toolmaker, who had been scowling at the knight, took this opportunity to explain things in detail to Dahlia. It was a more peaceful approach than capturing living green horses, but unfortunately, they couldn't apply the same method with other monsters. Other monster materials decomposed more quickly, and most monsters didn't have anything like a graveyard. There was no way for slimes, the monsters she was most familiar with, to make such a thing. Even if there was a chance that one existed, then—the thought was too terrifying, so she shut it down.

Beside her, Gildo was staring at the green horse bone with his amber eyes. Maybe he also felt a bit sorry for it.

"So the Order of Beast Hunters not only subjugate monsters, they even dig up their graves now? They really are the sworn enemies of monsters."

"L-Lord Gildo..."

He was right, but perhaps he shouldn't have worded it that way. Thankfully, he'd said it quietly, and Volf and the knight were still talking about prosthetic arms and legs, so the other magical toolmakers in the room didn't seem to have heard him. However, the toolmaker in front of them awkwardly looked away, and Carmine stifled a cough.

Dahlia couldn't very well speak up to stop Gildo, so she shot him an apprehensive look. The man continued to speak with a straight face, not cracking even the tiniest hint of a smile.

"It's much more economical that way. I hope they continue to work hard at that, for the sake of the budget."

When it came to the sworn enemies of monsters, the royal head treasurer also made the list.

They were still touring the first section. Dahlia was already feeling fatigued as they climbed to the fourth floor. After a short walk, they came to a door the color of dull silver. A magic circle was faintly engraved on its surface, but it was one unfamiliar to Dahlia. It was likely a safety measure to protect against intruders or otherwise.

They passed through the doors and entered a room about as

spacious as the previous workshop. In the back of the room, with his back to the gray wall, was a man facing a workbench. He looked to be about as old as Dahlia's father had been when he'd died or a little older. He had brown hair streaked with gray and wore a monocle over one of his vermilion eyes, which were narrowed as he inspected a white bracelet in his hand. His royal magical toolmaker's robe was unfastened in the front, simply draped over the shoulders of his white shirt. A short distance from him was a man in an attendant's uniform holding a longsword. He likely served the man as both an attendant and a guard.

On top of the workbench was a silver tray, on which were two more of the same pure white bracelets. Next to that sat a silver magically sealed box. If Dahlia had to guess, he was in the middle of enchanting the bracelets.

"Director Uros, I have visitors here with me."

"I didn't call for any…" the man responded in a low voice without even lifting his head.

Dahlia felt guilty. They had obviously disturbed him when he was busy with his work.

Gildo, however, stepped forward and spoke to him without any hesitation. "We're here without your summons. The first section of the magical toolmaking department has exceeded the budget for material costs by half."

"That—" The director of the department finally raised his face. His look of displeasure also held a hint of perplexity. "That was necessary. Prices have increased, after all."

"In that case, please submit the proper documentation with all the details. If you cannot, then the funds will be deducted from your next year's budget. Furthermore, this is the second time this has happened, so from now on, please be sure to submit a request for a supplementary budget in advance. If you fail to do so, the department's financing will be temporarily frozen."

Gildo spoke eloquently and mercilessly, as was quite typical of him. The director let out a shallow breath and set the bracelet down on the table, then turned his vermilion gaze to Carmine as if seeking his help.

"Head Treasurer Diels, I will verify those details and provide documentation in the next couple of days."

"Very well," Gildo responded in acknowledgment, then

returned to Dahlia's side.

Was the budget one of the vice-director's responsibilities? Vice-Director Carmine was a seasoned middle manager. His workload must have included much more than what he was personally in charge of. Dahlia felt no end of sympathy for him.

"Oh, and who do we have here? Who is this pretty young miss?"

The director noticed Dahlia for the first time and turned his gaze on her. His face softened into an unexpectedly kind smile. Dahlia bowed and introduced herself.

"I am Dahlia Rossetti, adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters. I apologize for interrupting your work."

"I am Uros Warlock, director of the magical toolmaking department. You can call me Uros. And next to you—is that Lord Scalfarotto?"

"I apologize for not introducing myself, since I am here as an attendant. I am Volfred Scalfarotto of the Order of Beast Hunters."

"You can call me Uros too. I owe a lot to Renato, you know."

"Mr. Uros, please feel free to call me Volfred. And, um, you know my father?" Volf seemed surprised to hear his father's name all of a sudden. His voice had risen in pitch.

"That's right. When we run out of ice crystals, he occasionally sends some out of friendship."

Gildo scowled. Volf's father was a powerful ice mage who worked in the castle. The director had said it was out of friendship, but that meant he was mixing personal and business affairs—something unacceptable from an accounting standpoint.

"I-Is that right?" Volf stiffened, and no one else said anything in response either.

"Making tools takes time, so we just can't help needing a lot of ice crystals in the summertime."

"If you are referring to the new chilling fans, we accepted all those requests. I believe you should have received more than enough ice crystals?" *Where in the world did those ice crystals and the budget for them disappear to?* While the head treasurer didn't say that in as many words, his dissatisfaction was sharply clear on his face.

Uros hurried to explain. "The crystals aren't for the staff—they're all for the magical tools. We want to test winter-use

magical tools in the summer, right? So we use ice crystals to simulate a winter environment."

"I fail to understand. Wouldn't it be more financially prudent to start later in the year?"

"Head Treasurer Diels, here in the magical toolmaking department, we often manufacture tools for winter use in advance, during the summer—"

The director and vice-director began to provide an explanation for Gildo, whose skepticism was evident on his face. It seemed the disconnect between the opinions held by development and accounting departments was the same in this world as in Dahlia's previous one. She could understand both their cases, but since their points of view had been different from the start, they were unable to reach an agreement.

"Pardon me, Lord Gildo... Magical tools may also require both a head start and safety control," Dahlia told Gildo quietly.

The treasurer turned his amber eyes to her. "By a head start, do you mean in terms of season or budgeting?"

"Both. If magical tools undergo a certain amount of testing beforehand, then it raises the likelihood that their mass production will go smoothly during their target season. Depending on the materials, getting a head start may also make it possible to stock up on them in the season when they're cheapest. The prices of materials can differ greatly depending on subjugation efforts and harvesting conditions."

The prices of materials were governed by the market. The best practice was to wait until the price was low before buying. Of course, things didn't always work out that conveniently depending on the materials.

"I see. Then what do you mean by 'safety control'?"

"The earlier magical tools undergo testing, the longer the testing period can run, which makes it easier to spot any defects. If enough preparations are laid well in advance of the season, that may also reduce the labor and costs of repairs before production. Moreover, if safety is properly ensured, then that should also decrease the likelihood of any accidents. I think, from a long-term perspective, doing it that way is *more* economical..."

Strict development timelines and delivery dates put pressure on both developers and manufacturers, which resulted in reduced morale and safety. Remembering what she knew from

her previous life, she tried to explain that to Gildo from an accounting perspective, but she ended up just saying something very banal. Gildo stared at Dahlia unblinkingly while her quiet voice trailed off into an almost inaudible whisper.

"Economical…" he said, echoing just that one word for some reason. Dahlia was unsure whether she should stop talking or say more.

"*Master Dahlia*," Gildo continued, "would you like to have tea at the treasury sometime soon? I'd like to take the time to speak with you at length."

Her strenuous explanation must have struck a chord with Gildo. No, since he'd called her "Master Dahlia," maybe he was being sarcastic. But even if it was a joke, she absolutely did not want to accept. She tried her hardest to search for the words to turn down his invitation—

"Head Treasurer Diels, Master Dahlia is a member of the Order of Beast Hunters, so please seek permission from the captain," said Volf from beside her, speaking up to save her as her guard from the Order.

"Carmine, are you going to show them section two after this?" Uros asked.

"Yes, that is the plan."

After Carmine responded with a nod, Uros stood up. Dahlia let out a sigh of relief at their perfect timing.

"Very well," said Uros. "I'll accompany you."

"Lord Uros, that delivery needs to be done by today—"

"Ah, right you are," Uros said, acknowledging what his attendant had brought to his attention, and then he sat back down on the chair. He opened up the magically sealed box and abruptly turned it upside down.

Four large scales tumbled out onto the table. They were light blue and turned translucent toward the tips. Dahlia had only ever seen those in a bestiary. They were in all likelihood ice dragon scales—even though their group was some distance from the worktable, the shimmering haze of magic was clearly visible.

"I'll be done here shortly."

Uros placed one scale in each of the three bracelets, then casually turned his palms toward them. His hands shone with pale blue magic; the second Dahlia saw that, the world shook. She felt the sensation of being thrown into ice water and her

body freezing solid as she tilted forward—

Before she realized it, Volf was standing in front of her. She put her hands on his back and tried to stabilize her breathing while she stayed standing. The chilling sensation still hadn't left her body, and she felt dizzy and nauseous.

"Mr. Uros, if you don't mind, please say something before you use strong magic—"

"I'm sorry, I didn't think it would cause magic tremors—my mistake. Miss Dahlia, if you feel unwell, you should go to the infirmary."

"I-I'm okay," Dahlia managed to respond, taking her hands off of Volf's back.

"Magic tremors" were a condition similar to motion sickness that occurred when one was shaken by sudden, strong magic, such as during enchanting.

Dahlia had heard it could also happen when crafting magical tools, but since her magic wasn't much different from her father's, she had never experienced it with him. It had happened to her several times in college, but she'd been warned ahead of time and had been able to either sit down or brace herself first, and so she hadn't been affected quite as badly as this.

Dahlia had been too fascinated by the ice dragon scales. She should have been better prepared. She looked around her to see that everyone was watching her with concern. Also, they all looked completely unaffected. In other words, they all had stronger magic than her.

Dahlia's magic was currently at grade ten. And she'd heard Volf's internal magic was at grade twelve. She didn't have to ask about Gildo and Carmine, who were a marquis and the vice-director of the magical toolmaking department, respectively.

"I apologize for causing concern. I was just admiring the ice dragon scales—I am fine now," she explained with a strained smile. Truthfully, she was still feeling slightly nauseous, but it wasn't bad enough to hinder her from walking. She didn't want everyone to worry about her even more.

"Miss Dahlia, I'm sorry. I only have one left, but I want you to take it."

Her attention was suddenly drawn to the magically sealed box on the table containing the ice dragon scales. Uros's attendant picked it up and offered it to her with incredibly polite gestures.

"I very much appreciate the thought, but this is an expensive

resource that belongs to the castle, and you might still need it for those magical tools."

The castle's resources were purchased using the taxes of the people. Perhaps she could have accepted the scales if they were for research, but not as a form of apology.

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. These are bracelets for the winter festival. They're support items for creating snow and ice, made with blue wyvern bone and ice dragon scales. Three will more than suffice."

During the winter festival at the end of the year, people constructed ice and snow sculptures all over the plazas and main roads. The ones in charge of the winter festival in the castle likely constructed them too. Though, in that case, the bracelet with ice dragon scales seemed all the more like a luxury item.

"Besides, this scale is my own possession. My youngest brother picked it up in his youth. It's fitting that I give it to you, Miss Dahlia, after all you've done for him."

She wished he wouldn't say that so lightly. She was sure ice dragon scales weren't just lying around waiting to be picked up. Also, she couldn't bring to mind who Uros's younger brother was. While she tried hard to comb through her memory, Uros just gave a slightly awkward laugh and said, "My brother is an adventurer and guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild, though I haven't seen his face in two years."

Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, Section Two

With Uros leading the way, their party left the first section of the Magical Toolmaking Department and headed for the opposite building. The structure of the second section's building closely resembled that of the first, with a similar reception desk and an area with knights waiting on standby. The moment they saw their group walk in, they stood at attention and gave them even deeper bows than the staff in the first section.

Full of nerves, Dahlia went up to the second floor, where all the doorways were sliding doors. The continuous line of sliding doors resembled the sliding screen doors of her life in Japan. They were probably for ease in bringing larger magical tools in and out of the rooms.

As they walked down the hall, they passed by magical toolmakers carrying documents and workers with large flaxen cloth bundles. Everyone seemed very busy.

"Those we just passed by were carrying heated low tables for the guardrooms," Carmine explained. "The upward-venting low tables have been especially favorably received, since the guards can stand by without having to take their shoes off. Some guardrooms don't have doors, you see."

"They don't? That sounds like it would be freezing," Dahlia responded unthinkingly.

"It is so they can rush out in cases of emergency. Although they can warm up in the lounge during their shift changes, the indoor temperature is about the same as the outdoors. This year, they'll have the heated low tables as well as the portable warm air circulators, so it seems they have a very warm winter ahead of them."

"I am glad to hear that."

It was entirely possible that the guards had previously been using magical hand warmers. They were small metal containers that held a fire crystal and were partially warming. However, for times when one wanted to warm one's entire back, a portable warm air circulator would be more convenient. It was great to

hear the guards would pass the winter warmly. Dahlia couldn't contain her smile.

"The heated low tables are more popular, but it is very easy to fall asleep under those… They are very convenient for staying overnight, though."

"Do the toolmakers work overnight?"

While she was happy they were making use of her own creation, she wondered if the castle toolmakers were so busy they had to resort to working through the night. If that was the case, she felt guilty for taking up their time with this tour.

"On rare occasions—for example, when they need to perform hourly checks on tools undergoing durability testing. As for the heated low tables that are normally used, the magical toolmakers who reside in the dormitories purchase your specification document and craft them themselves."

Dahlia would have expected nothing less of the royal toolmakers. It sounded like it was quicker for them to make their own than to purchase them. Perhaps the heated low tables would gain more interesting functions in the future. While she was thrilled by the idea, Uros made a face.

"There's a two-month wait if you request one from the Merchants' Guild. That's why they buy the specs document, but enchanting that magical circuit is tricky work. One of the staff laid it down wrong and ended up scorching the floor."

"Director, that wasn't because they made a mistake laying down the magic circuit but because they made the output too high. It was their mistake making the circuitry like that of an oven without consulting the specification document."

Any magical toolmaker would be enticed by the idea of raising the output. Dahlia understood that feeling very well. But it really had been lucky that only the floor had been burned. If it had been their legs, that would have been incredibly dangerous.

"Cooked to perfection by a low table oven…" Volf whispered in a voice so low only she could hear. She'd have a long talk with him later. Right now, it was all she could do to keep her shoulders from shaking.

"But anyway, the heated low tables sure are great. I have one in my home too. Once I get under it, it's hard to get out. Not being able to use the bathroom is a real drawback…"

"That is why I told you I did not recommend you have your dinner while sitting under it, no matter how comfortable it may

be. It is ideal to place it in your bedroom and relax under it before bed."

In front of the sliding doors, the director and vice-director of the magical toolmaking department had begun a debate over heated low tables.

"Well, I think it sounds best to fall asleep under a heated low table that has a long quilt."

"If you are going to sleep, then it would be ideal to put a miniature heated low table in your bed."

Gildo and Volf had even started to give their own theories about the tables' best possible uses, but the discussion was already one about personal preferences. In any case, it seemed all too likely that kotatsu would permeate through the magical toolmaking department as well.

Although magic hadn't existed in Dahlia's previous life, the magic of a kotatsu was felt strongly in this world as well.

"Huh? D-Director Uros..."

A magical toolmaker had noisily flung open the sliding door and was now standing there with widening eyes. The toolmaker must have been shocked to see the director, vice-director, and head treasurer standing on the other side of the door they had innocently opened.

"I've brought Madam Rossetti, adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters, here for a tour. Continue on with your work, everyone."

"I'm Dahlia Rossetti. I apologize for disrupting your work."

They entered the large room, and following Uros, Dahlia managed to introduce herself. When she did, the toolmakers inside all bowed. Inside the room were rows of pale blue blades that measured half her height. Carmine turned over one of the completed ones to show her.

"This is a part of a large ventilator fan that is planned for use in the kitchen. It will be installed directly on the walls and will be used to blow odors and heat outside so they don't stay confined in the kitchen. The ones they currently have are very loud, so the plan is to switch them out with these."

Underneath the blade was a magical circuit that looked to be for the purpose of absorbing sound. She had thought it would be a fairly large fan, but it sounded like it would be used as an extractor. The castle's kitchen made large quantities of food, so their rooms were likely stuffy with many smells and heat. It was certainly an indispensable tool for them.

“It is made out of metal, on top of which a layer of crushed monster bones is applied, along with a double layer of a liquid mixture of blue slime powder. It’s superior in strength and has excellent waterproof qualities, so it should be much more durable.”

The waterproofing effect of blue slime should keep the blades from getting dirty. That would also make cleaning the extractor much easier.

Despite her desire impelling her to inspect the blade more thoroughly, she followed Carmine to the next room.

“This is a water dispenser for horses. It dispenses a large volume of lukewarm water. Horses and sleipnirs used in ceremonies must be washed often, but in winter, cold water becomes a problem for both the horse and the washer…”

This water dispenser used five fire crystals and five water crystals. It had a sizable showerhead with larger holes to dispense a lot of lukewarm water at once. Considering the size of horses and sleipnirs, it was a satisfactory method. There were also bathtubs large enough for horses in their stables. These tools would allow for them to be bathed comfortably.

“Were they washed with cold water before now?” Volf asked curiously.

Carmine cast his indigo-gray eyes down. “The mages used to prepare the hot water to wash horses, but it overlapped with their other responsibilities, so it took up a lot of their time…”

“There’s no need to mince words. The duty of making the hot water to wash horses is unpopular among the castle mages,” Uros said, cutting off Carmine to explain the reason more clearly.

“Unpopular…? A duty is a duty,” Gildo remarked.

“I’m sure many of the people who become castle mages either want to be part of the royal knights or want to devote themselves to magical research.”

Dahlia didn’t think it was entirely unreasonable. There were surely many people who would be disappointed with being assigned work vastly different from the kind they wanted to perform. Still, what Gildo said was also true. It was a duty, and somebody had to do it.

“The horses and sleipnirs will probably be more comfortable with the water dispensers. They get anxious around people they’re unfamiliar with, and the stable hands can wash them when it’s convenient for them,” Volf spoke up quietly.

“I suppose that’s one way to look at it…”

“I’m embarrassed to say, but I don’t have much of a taste for riding horses,” said Carmine. “Do horses and sleipnirs really become that anxious around different people?”

“They each have their individual temperaments, so I can’t say this applies to all of them, but sleipnirs are wary of those with strong magic. Sometimes, it can take a while for them to get accustomed to those people. Also, both sleipnirs and horses dislike when their riders change, and they can refuse to listen to commands or even to take their meals.”

Apparently, there were a certain number of horses and sleipnirs with sensitive personalities. Volf had spent a lot of time with horses on expeditions, so he must have had experience with all types of horses.

“I see. Birds of a feather really do flock together—or in this case, horses.”

Dahlia mentally agreed with what Uros said as they exited the room. Next, they headed to the third floor. Here, too, they passed by magical toolmakers walking down the hall carrying leather boxes and silver magically sealed boxes.

“We’re coming up on winter, so we’ve been receiving many repair requests for indoor heating tools,” Carmine explained. “For example, fireplace ignition systems, water dispensers, heated chairs and sofas, et cetera. Also, we’ve started work on the magical lanterns for the end of the year. Would you like to see?”

“Yes, I would love to.”

The magical lantern was her grandfather’s invention. What were the castle’s end-of-year magical lanterns like? Would they be gorgeously decorated for the winter festival, or would they have some sort of magical effect? Her anticipation swelled as they continued down the hall, and then Carmine knocked on the door to one of the rooms.

A voice called out for them to come in, and they entered a dim room with half-closed curtains. Several small-size magical lanterns were sitting on top of a table. The lanterns were each encased in a round crystal glass. A quarter of each lantern was azure, out of which spilled flickering aqua blue and deep cyan lights, giving it a very dreamlike appearance. Dahlia was staring at them in fascination when she felt a slight heat on her left wrist. Volf took a half step in front of Dahlia, and Carmine looked

at him with a start.

“My apologies. I should have asked first. Chairwoman Dahlia, are you wearing an antihypnosis magical tool?”

“Yes, I am.”

In order to negate the hypnotic effect, the bracelet around her wrist was letting out heat. Everyone in their party, Volf included, was a noble. Carmine must have not even considered the need to confirm.

“Thank goodness—this is a magical lantern used for taking naps, called the ‘nap lantern.’ If you lift up the shade at the top, it emits a blue light and causes a hypnosis effect. Then, it can either be manually closed or, after a certain length of time, it will descend automatically and turn itself off.”

“A nap lantern?”

Dahlia knew about magic lanterns used for sleeping, but she had never heard of a nap lantern before. She wondered if its purpose was to induce sleepiness in people with insomnia so severe they couldn’t even take naps.

“Yes, it’s for civil officials’ break rooms. Apparently, they have trouble sleeping from the fatigue of settling accounts and handling various postmortems, so we have an increased demand for nap lanterns at the end of the year. Turning on one of these lanterns can make one instantly fall asleep, so it’s a treasured tool for anyone with a busy schedule.”

“You don’t say…”

What a depressing magical tool. At the words “civil officials” and “settling accounts,” she unconsciously glanced at Gildo. He quickly averted his amber eyes, then answered her question without her having to ask.

“…I don’t use them much, but they are highly effective for falling asleep. They do nothing for stomach pains, though.”

The end of the year was coming up quick. Maybe she should find some effective stomach medicine and send it to Gildo to show her gratitude. As Dahlia thought about that, Uros called out to a nearby toolmaker.

“Take out the materials for these—the moonbeam butterfly wings.”

“Yes, sir, right away.”

The toolmaker placed a large, flat, magically sealed box on the table, then gently opened it up. Underneath a sheet of glass lay several butterfly wings in shades ranging from aqua to dark

cyan. Moonbeam butterflies—they looked similar to the aurora morpho of Dahlia's previous world. The wings were the length of Dahlia's elbow to her fingertips. This was her first time seeing butterfly wings of this size. They glimmered as if sprinkled with moonlight. The effect was captivatingly beautiful.

"The scales of moonbeam butterfly wings have a strong hypnotic effect. The nap lantern is made by enchanting the crystal glass with the crystallized wings of these butterflies. It's easily influenced by fluctuations in magic, so enchanting the crystal requires a certain degree of control—"

Uros abruptly stopped talking, and the magical toolmaker at his side gave a jolt. Without even glancing at the toolmaker, the director turned the lanterns around, inspecting them.

"This one, this one... This one's no good either. They're riddled with flaws."

The toolmaker began offering excuses in a small voice. "They have all been enchanted according to standard, and there should be no issues with the hypnotic effect—"

Uros narrowed his vermilion eyes at the toolmaker. Sensing a tepid swaying of magical energy coming from him, Dahlia instinctively braced herself.

"Since when did *this* become a permissible level of quality for a royal magical toolmaker?" the director questioned in a low voice.

In response, Carmine stepped forward. "Director Uros, I'm sorry. This was due to negligent instruction on my part. I entrusted the task to the newcomers who joined last year and failed to perform the proper checks."

"The newcomers, you say? You've been very busy helping me with my work too, Vice-Director Carmine, so it's reasonable you'd let this fall by the wayside..."

Uros pushed his monocle up with one finger and smiled kindly. For some reason, it gave Dahlia chills. The director then picked up one of the nap lanterns, his smile deepening.

"I'm the one whose instruction has been negligent. Allow me to sincerely reflect and provide some educational guidance—this is the perfect opportunity to give Chairwoman Dahlia an enchantment demonstration. We can hear her valuable input."

"Oh no, Director Uros, your staff seems to be incredibly busy, so I—"

Why was he dragging her into this? If he wanted to instruct

the magical toolmakers who had just joined last year, she wished he would do that among themselves. Dahlia didn't have the magical or technical skill of a royal magical toolmaker. She wouldn't even know what input to give.

"The nap lantern is my invention, but it hasn't yet made its way out of the castle. There seem to be similar products among the populace, but I'd like to know if the hypnotic effect should be lowered and such—"

Uros turned his vermilion eyes on Dahlia as if examining her, then continued.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, since you've come all the way here, let me give you the recipe for the liquid solution and some moonbeam butterfly wings to take with you. I can give you enough to make lanterns for yourself and friends for research purposes. How does that sound?"

Truthfully, Dahlia would love to take a look at the recipe for the solution. She was very interested in finding out the composition and proportions. Moonbeam butterfly wings were also a material she was keen to try using at least once. Also, if she could manage it, she wanted to create a nap lantern to give to Ivano. She was trying her best to stop him from working overtime, but he still occasionally had dark circles under his eyes. Also, maybe she could make one for Volf too. Sleep was essential to relieve his fatigue from expeditions.

Dahlia knew all too well that Uros had her right in the palm of his hand, but as a magical toolmaker, how could she refuse?

"Thank you. If we could do so in the corner of a room where we won't disturb anyone, it would be a pleasure to observe."

"Dahlia…" Volf muttered worriedly beside her. She gave him an enthusiastic nod. They would hide themselves away as much as they could in a corner of a room and observe so that eventually, she could craft a nap lantern with her own hands.

"Well then," said Uros, "let us relocate."

They all followed the broadly smiling director out of the room and headed for the farthest room back on the third floor.

They first entered a small room with an area for making tea. The interior was furnished with a low table, sofa, and two white leather chairs. The chairs looked to be of fine quality, with four white decorative buttons on their headrests, but they were placed in a way that made Dahlia concerned they'd be a nuisance.

“Are these used for breaks?”

“Yes. I just can’t bring myself to get rid of them— Oh right, everyone, this is a shoulder pain relief chair. These buttons are made of unicorn horn, and if you open your collar and lean against them, it relieves shoulder pain. Unfortunately, mass production has been prohibited.”

“I’d think a chair that prevents stiff shoulders would be a very useful thing, though,” Gildo said, placing a finger to his chin and gazing intently at the chair.

Carmine shook his head. “While these chairs certainly hide pain just as a unicorn pendant or bracelet might do, they don’t treat the underlying problem. Some people let it worsen to the point that they have to go to a doctor or priest for help. Moreover, even though the priests can use healing magic to treat injuries, their magic is ineffective for skewed or aging bones, or bones that have experienced a lot of strain.”

“I see…”

Gildo’s face grew a touch grim. Was he reminded of something…? No, she didn’t want to ask. Also, Dahlia definitely couldn’t mention that she wore a unicorn pendant herself to relieve her stiff shoulders.

“Unicorn horn is a useful material, but many people use it incorrectly. One time, some second son tried to avoid having to get a tooth pulled that way only to end up with one cheek that looked like a hamster’s.”

“Lord Uros, perhaps saying anything more would be irreverent, so—”

“It’s fine. I didn’t say ‘His Highness,’ did I?”

Dahlia’s face muscles were not okay. She couldn’t even give a response, let alone smile—she simply continued walking forward.

Unicorn horns were undoubtedly effective for pain relief, but she’d never thought of using one for a cavity. Although, it was standard for commoners to drink a pain-numbing decoction at the dentist before having their cavities treated. Dahlia had also had some work done on a small cavity, but it had still been decently painful. For more serious cavities and wisdom tooth problems that required extra intervention, people went to the temple. Doing that was fairly expensive, though, which was why people said it made their wallets cry.

In both her prior and current worlds, dental work was

something children—and sometimes adults as well—wanted to flee from.

"The toolmakers in the workroom up ahead are crafting tools that are used in the castle, which they do for three years after joining the department. After that, they can either engage in manufacturing tools of their choosing or apply to develop a tool of their own. If they are successful, they become 'room owners.'"

"Right now, there are more people who want to invent tools and become room owners than work on manufacturing tools."

Dahlia could understand why. While it was fun to make magical tools, inventing one's own was a different type of fun. There was no doubt that the toolmakers wanted their own workspaces where they could focus on their own work.

"A room owner's salary receives a twenty percent increase, and they also get a budget for their project. It's natural to aspire to it."

The head treasurer's composed voice convinced Dahlia all the more of the appeal.

Carmine opened the sliding door and entered the room. The sound of the lively voices suddenly stopped.

"Director Uros is here, along with some visitors."

Inside were ten young magical toolmakers, half of whom seemed to be fresh out of college. The other half looked to be about Dahlia's age. Every single one of them turned their way and bowed.

Dahlia and Gildo gave a brief greeting, while Volf stayed diagonally behind her. Volf stood out much more than she did, but the gazes of the magical toolmakers were trained mainly on their boss, Uros.

"We just came from looking at the nap lanterns. I see the second-years have gone pale, eh? The lanterns were all flawless."

For reasons unknown, Uros praised them with a smile. Many of the toolmakers looked relieved, but all Dahlia felt were chills. As for Carmine, he was gently pressing two fingers to his brow.

"Since we have the honor of having guests with us here today, I'd like to give them an enchantment demonstration. Working as you normally would is fine. Prepare some additional spherical glass covers. Right, Chairwoman Dahlia, you'll be able to see better up close. You and your attendant can sit over there."

"Thank you."

"Head Treasurer Diels, why don't you sit by me? These are

costly materials, so I want you to see them used for yourself."

"It would be a pleasure."

The magical toolmakers surrounded two large workbenches and, with tense expressions, began preparing for the enchanting process. In front of them were the director and vice-director of the magical toolmaking department; the head treasurer; herself, an outsider; and Volf, a knight. There could have been no more difficult environment to work in. She couldn't help but feel for the toolmakers.

"Now then, the first step is crystallizing the moonbeam butterfly wings. Do we have any volunteers?" Carmine asked as he placed the glittery blue wings on top of the white paper covering the table. No one spoke up, likely due to nerves from the presence of their superiors and guests.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, have you ever crystallized moonbeam butterfly wings?"

"No, I have not."

"Would you like to try?" Carmine encouraged her with a smile.

She certainly wanted to, but these moonbeam butterfly wings were very large. Crystallizing one in a single go would require a suitable level of magic.

"What grade of magic is needed to crystallize these wings?"

"I think it should be no problem for grade eleven magic."

"Then I believe it would be impossible for me—my magic isn't high enough."

"What?"

Not only Carmine but the crowd of magical toolmakers all looked at her simultaneously. All the royal magical toolmakers must have very high magic. It was understandable they'd be so shocked to learn that a magical toolmaker who was an adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters would have such low magic.

"Crystallizing doesn't take much more than channeling magic, now does it? Someone who can should do it," Uros said as he brought together his pointer and middle finger and placed them on a wing. It was the same gesture she and her father both used, but the surge of strong magic changed the wing's shape instantly. When crystallized, the powdery, sand-like blue substance looked like a single breath would scatter it through the air.

"Now to demonstrate the enchantment—Carmine."

"Very well."

Carmine took a small spoonful of the crystallized wing and dropped it into a beaker filled with a liquid solution. He gave it a quick mix, then held a spherical glass in his left and the beaker in his right. He swiveled the beaker, and the now silvery blue liquid rose up smoothly and floated up into the air in the shape of a flat disk.

Dahlia held her breath and stared at the strong magic, which swayed like a shimmering haze of heat. That navy blue magic wasn't ribbon-shaped like hers or Oswald's. It enveloped the glass like a piece of cloth and then shrunk itself around it. Carmine rotated the glass once, then set it gingerly down on a metal tray.

"It's done."

"Amazing...!"

The whisper escaped Dahlia's lips before she could stop it. This was her first time witnessing a cloth-like magic that drew tight in an instant like that. She was sure that sort of enchantment required a lot of magic and high skill.

The glass sphere had been instantly dyed a deep blue. Dahlia was completely blown away by its luster and smoothness. The lanterns she'd seen in the other room had also been beautiful, but this glass had an entirely different beauty. Strong magic still remained on the surface of the glass, which had gentle waves of silver on top of the deep blue.

"Now then, everyone, enchant your own."

At Uros's words, the magical toolmakers grabbed their own spherical glass covers and liquid-filled beakers. The toolmakers displayed all types of enchantments, from ones that wrapped the glass up like a small cloth to ones that had magic flow from top to bottom like water, and others that wrapped from bottom to top like thick ribbons.



It was clear each and every one of them possessed strong magic and masterful enchanting skills—not that she would have expected anything less from the toolmakers of the castle. She was watching them, entranced, when Carmine spoke to her.

“Chairwoman Rossetti, would you like to try enchanting too? This part of the process requires less magic than crystallizing the wings.”

“Thank you. If there are extra materials, then I would love to,” she responded, balling her hand slightly.

Next to her, Volf shifted positions. He didn’t have to say anything—she knew he was worried about her. It was true that this enchantment seemed difficult for her, but everyone here was a highly skilled magical toolmaker with high magic. If she failed, then they would either be convinced of her meager magic or they would laugh about her later. If anything, she would rather them understand her level of ability first in order to lower their expectations for the future. That would make things easier.

After struggling to enchant powdered sea serpent lung with Oswald, she’d been practicing every day to make her magic more even. She wanted to believe she had made at least some progress.

With her level of magic, Dahlia was only able to raise a yarn-thick strand of the syrupy blue liquid from the beaker. She deposited the substance on the glass sphere and smoothed it out as she went. Since her magic was low, she couldn’t enchant the glass evenly all at once. Just like her father had taught her, she moved the syrupy substance like she would when making waterproof cloth—scraping away the excess and adding more to spots where there was less.

The surface of the glass looked smooth, but when she examined it while applying her magic, she could tell: the surface had very small bumps where the liquid had been repelled from the glass or would not easily adhere. Dahlia looked at the glass from different angles, found those uncovered areas, each the width of a strand of hair, and layered on the liquid solution and magic until not a single gap remained.

The toolmakers around her took not even three minutes to finish the task, but Dahlia was still enchanting even after five. Sweat was pouring from her temples down to her chin, dripping onto the lap of her dark green dress. Volf was by her side, watching but not saying a word. He merely clenched his fists

tighter and tighter on his lap. Next to Uros, Gildo had his arms crossed and was likewise silent.

"...I finished it," Dahlia said quietly, placing the spherical glass on the tray. *A uniform color and no irregularities*—so she thought, but when she looked at the other glass spheres, she gasped. Not only the spheres on her table but also those on the table next to hers were a splendid blue. Dahlia's enchanted glass was much paler. Apparently, her lack of magic was made apparent in the richness of the pigment.

She slumped over in disappointment. Had she made a complete dud?

"I'm sorry, I made a defective product..."

"Not at all. You've done a beautiful job," said Uros. "Carlo was also skilled at enchanting glass spheres."

"What?" Dahlia responded, shocked that Uros had just said her father's name out of nowhere.

He curled his lips, looking a little awkward. "I'm a bit late in mentioning this, but Carlo and I were both in the Magical Tool Research Group in college. I was older than him, so we were only together for two years."

"I'm sure my father owed a lot to you too, then."

"Oh, no. I'd say it was the other way around. I could never get kraken tape to stick, so I often had to ask him for help."

Not being able to affix kraken tape was a disadvantage to having very strong magic. Just holding it would make it coil up and stick to one's fingers, and Dahlia had seen firsthand how strong Uros's magic was when she'd watched him enchant the bracelet earlier.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, your beautiful enchantment resembles that of the master, Carlo."

"Thank you."

Even if his words were just flattery, they brightened her mood.

"You've reminded me that Carlo was always skilled at enchanting spherical surfaces, ever since his school days."

"Director Uros, when you were in college, did you craft magical tools that required enchanting spherical surfaces?"

"Yes, though I would say that in actuality, we were just practicing enchantment by making glasswork rather than magical tools. We crafted many other things too. A tool to clean the walls of buildings, a refrigerator with more doors than necessary, decorative glass flowers, a magical lantern with a

dragon—the ones that sold the most were the antidote bracelet and a hand mirror that made you look slimmer."

"You sold them too?"

Dahlia was curious about the refrigerator with more doors than necessary and the hand mirror that made one look slimmer, but she was more surprised to hear that the Research Group had sold magical tools.

"We purchased too many materials on credit and ran over our budget. We owed as many as thirty gold coins, so Leone sold our magical tools here and there."

"Mr. Leone..."

The face of the master of the Merchants' Guild rose to her mind. Perhaps his work selling tools in the Magical Tool Research Group had been what had inspired him to follow the merchant's path.

"Right, now he is Viscount Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild. At the time, he was the group's accountant and salesman."

When Dahlia had been part of the Magical Tool Research Group, there had been no "salesperson," but apparently that position had existed at one time. Also, when Dahlia had been a student, they hadn't been able to purchase materials on credit, and the only way they'd sold their magical tools to the public was at cultural festivals. It seemed things had changed over the years. Dahlia found herself eager to ask more about the past Magical Tool Research Group.

"Oh my, look at the time—if we don't return you to the Order, Captain Grato may come to get you himself. Carmine, escort them back, if you would. I have some business here."

Dahlia was running low on magic from enchanting the glass, so she was relieved to hear they would be leaving while she could still stand without wobbling on her feet.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, next time you visit, I'd like to show you other materials and enchantments. If you need to discuss anything regarding magical tools or materials, don't hesitate to contact either Carmine or myself."

"Thank you. I am deeply honored."

She was appreciative of his generous invitation, but how could she do such a thing? A commoner like her couldn't just go to the director and vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department for advice—but as if reading those thoughts of hers,

Uros continued, “I know it may sound like an empty gesture, but we have a connection through Carlo. Do you mind if I prepare a pair of work gloves for you?”

Dahlia had heard that the first gift a magical toolmaker traditionally gave their apprentice was a pair of work gloves. This was so the apprentice could learn about materials and how to work with them even before they could fully control their magic. To Uros, Dahlia was the apprentice of his junior, Carlo, and still an inexperienced magical toolmaker, which was why he was offering his counsel—he must have meant what he’d said. She was very grateful for it.

Since she also wanted help with crafting the large grinder, Dahlia responded, “Thank you, Director Uros. I am still a fledgling toolmaker, so your instruction would be greatly appreciated.”

At her words, Uros’s eyes crinkled. It seemed *this* was his real smile.

Incidentally, the first gift Dahlia had received from Carlo wasn’t a pair of work gloves. Rather, he’d given her a corner of the workshop all for herself, filled with a mountain of used-up magic stones and safe materials she could use as she pleased as well as piles of bestiaries and books on magical tools geared at beginners.

Her father had given her that corner at a very early age and had taught her everything she’d wanted to know about magical toolmaking. Although his friends had apparently told him off for spoiling her, it had been nothing but fun for her and something she was grateful she’d had.

“In that case, I’ll prepare them for you. I look forward to our next meeting, Madam Dahlia Rossetti.”

When Uros said her full name, she was reminded, just for a second, of her father. Dahlia gave a polite response in turn. Then their group left the second section of the department.



“For her to make something like this with under grade ten magic shows just how hard a worker Miss Rossetti is.”

After Dahlia and her group had left the room, one of the toolmakers picked up a glass sphere. The other spheres were a rich blue, but this one alone, which Dahlia had enchanted, was

pale in color. That must have been a result of her inability to enchant the sphere in one go with her weak magic. Nevertheless, the surface was shiny and smooth. It was by all means an admirable first attempt.

"She would have an easier time if she just raised her magic over grade twelve."

"She's the daughter of a baron, so maybe that's her limit. It might be inconsiderate to recommend she raise it further—"

"Right, I forgot. She was so familiar with those other two…"

Next to Gildo, a marquis, and Volf, the son of an earl, she had looked neither overly formal nor haughty. It was as if she had simply come here accompanied by friends with whom she spent a good deal of time.

After whispering somewhat sympathetically about Dahlia's level of magic, the toolmakers each took a look at her glass sphere.

Everyone here in the castle's magical toolmaking department had high-grade magic. One of the qualifications for becoming a royal toolmaker was to have grade ten magic or above, and from that point, they were expected to increase it by another two or three grades. There were even some people who scored well over the fifteen grades measured by the magic-measurement tool.

"It might suit Miss Rossetti better to hire a skilled mage or magical toolmaker as an assistant so she can leave the practical work to them while she facilitates the development aspects."

"Or maybe we can find that sort of partner for her—how about it, show of hands?"

"There is no way that's happening with that golden prince beside her."

While the toolmaker had worked so hard at her enchantment that sweat had poured from her brow, the handsome, black-haired man at her side had watched over her with tightly clenched fists and his mouth in a hard line. He was a lothario who strung along countless women and was even the young lover of a dowager duchess—or so the rumors went, but nothing about that description seemed to match the man who had toured the department today. Whether or not the rumors were false, and whether or not the young man had mended his ways, those two golden eyes of his had been watching over someone very dear to him.

“It really is a waste that her magic falls short.”

“With such beautiful magic, of what consequence is a numerical grade…?” Uros muttered, then realized there was a trace of mourning in his voice.

“But Director, the reason you’re giving Miss Rossetti work gloves is because you also think it’s a waste, right?”

“It’s because depending on the material, *I* might request *her* help.”

His subordinates, like Dahlia, had the entirely wrong impression. Although work gloves had become well-known as a gift one gave to one’s apprentice, they had originally held a different meaning. What a teacher gave to their apprentice symbolized their hope that their student would one day become a full-fledged artisan who would stand by their side. Originally, the gloves had been a gift one gave to a new colleague whom one would be working together with. At this particular moment, Uros found it dreadfully unfortunate that the meaning had changed with the times.

“But it would be difficult to call this a quality product, considering how pale the color is, right?”

“Even after she put so much hard work and sweat into it… It really is rough having low magic.”

“Well, there’s not much to be done about it. No matter how much passion you have, natural aptitude also plays a role.”

The fact that her sweating had been noticeable to other people while she had been enchanting meant she’d either been concentrating on exerting her magic, or she had gotten close to her limit.

For the young toolmakers of the castle, there were some things deemed inappropriate to show in front of others. Crafting tools efficiently and easily, with a composed expression, made one much more presentable—foolish ideas such as that were more or less common. Pained by those misconceptions, Uros purposely let out an undisguised sigh.

“This is precisely why you all are still fledglings,” he said.

He had the lanterns carried over to the table and, one by one, mounted the glass spheres on them. Then, he had his attendant close the curtains and raised the lanterns to their maximum brightness. The flickering, pale blue light painted billowing waves on their surroundings. Inside the room, which now resembled the bottom of the sea, Uros posed a question to his

young subordinates.

“Everyone, open your eyes and take a good look. How many of these lanterns have no light leaking out of them?”

“What…?”

At a glance, it wasn’t obvious. However, examining them from different angles, almost each and every one had gaps the width of a strand of hair from which light streamed out in fine lines. Even a sphere that initially appeared acceptable had a visible gap once viewed from a different angle. Among the row of twelve lanterns, it was more difficult to find the ones that had no holes.

“…Two.”

One was the deepest blue, Carmine’s, and the other, despite its pale color, had no faults in its spherical glass. Silver light swayed rhythmically within the soft, blue glow. The lantern, which could even be called strikingly beautiful, was none other than—

“Miss Rossetti’s—I mean, Madam Rossetti’s lantern…”

“But Chairwoman Rossetti couldn’t enchant it all at once, could she? How did she do that with her stringy magic?”

“By keeping steady control of her magic and checking the condition of the glass to make sure there weren’t any gaps in her enchantment. Her magic is weak? The color is pale? No matter how much one perspires or how long the process of trial and error, it is a thousand times more important for a toolmaker to create a *usable magical tool*, is it not?”

Uros managed to stop himself from raising his voice, then continued.

“Between a pale blue lamp that just barely passes the minimum standard of quality but has not a single hole, and a lamp that is well over the standard but would pierce the user’s eyes with a streak of light the moment they rolled over—which would you choose to place by the bedsides of your loved ones?”

“Well…”

“But we could fix that issue by painting over the holes.”

“Yes, they are easy to fix. But is that the job of a royal magical toolmaker?” he asked his subordinates bluntly.

First one, then another—then everyone lowered their heads.

“Apologies, sir…”

“We will learn from our mistakes…”

As each young toolmaker apologized, Uros felt slightly reassured. If they hadn’t grasped his point here, then he would

have had to either retrain them or think about letting people go.

"As long as you understand. Now then, each of you, go get ten glass spheres, prepare a medium-size bottle of solution, and return here."

"Pardon?"

"I am going to give a secondary lecture on enchanting curved surfaces. I really do regret that my instruction was insufficient… What? This is just a review of what you've already learned. It shouldn't take long before everyone is able to make it perfectly."

"D-Director Uros…"

"P-Perfectly…?"

The toolmakers in the room paled at his words. Shouldn't they be happy at the opportunity to polish one of their skills? As he'd expected, their education was lacking.

"Why do you all look like I've just told you someone died? I once knew a college student who could enchant curved surfaces while laughing."

"While laughing… I suppose you mean Vice-Director Carmine, aka the 'God of Enchanting,' right?"

"No, I'm talking about Baron Carlo Rossetti."

Hardly anyone was shocked to hear that name. In fact, a few even nodded.

"Chairwoman Rossetti's father…?"

"I see. So she learned how to enchant like that from her father…"

Most everyone here hailed from middle- to high-ranking noble families. They all had ample magic, and many had had home tutors from childhood. It was unthinkable that they would not have received strict instruction on magic awareness and control at school and at home.

They had repeatedly heard Dahlia's name in reference to waterproof cloth and toe socks. A magical toolmaker with exceptional creativity and capability for innovation, she had even established a company and, after a short period of time, made her way into the castle. Her father had been a baron, so she must have been a magical toolmaker with the same level of magic as them and an astute businesswoman—that was the image they'd had of her.

The person who had visited here today was a humble woman of their own generation, and perhaps even a few years younger than them. She'd been enthralled by the moonbeam butterfly

wings, her eyes had sparkled when witnessing the other toolmakers at work, and even though it was a difficult enchantment to perform with insufficient magic, she'd resolutely risen to the challenge. Paying no mind to her pouring sweat, she had focused solely on her magical tool, seriously and earnestly. And that toolmaker, whose magic was much lower than any of theirs, had produced an enchanted sphere without a single fault.

How in the world had the magical toolmaker Carlo Rossetti instilled such magical awareness and control into his daughter? From what age had he begun to train her, and what strict regimen had he put her through? The very thought made the artisans of the castle feel sympathy for the redheaded toolmaker.

They would have a long way to go to catch up to her even if the director's supplementary lesson kept them working through the night. Not a single one of them uttered a complaint as they began preparing the liquid solution.

"Excuse me, Director! Speaking of Mr. Carlo Rossetti, he was the Baron of the Water Dispensers, right? What was he like during his school days?" asked a young boy who had joined the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department this year.

"He was an amiable, free-spirited man who loved magical tools."

"Was that when he became reputed for his skill as a toolmaker?"

"Yes. His magic wasn't very strong, but he had very delicate control over it. It's really such a shame that he is no longer with us..."

Even though Carlo had been Uros's junior, he had passed on first. When Uros had heard news of his death, the first word that had come to his mind had been "shame" rather than "sad," and he'd felt sick at his own coldheartedness.

However, Carlo's skill as a magical toolmaker had been passed on to his daughter—no, his apprentice, Dahlia. That thrilled Uros. Her skills still needed polishing in some areas, but Uros could help a little with that.

"It's unfortunate. If Mr. Rossetti had become a royal magical toolmaker, maybe we would have been able to work with him."

"I'm...not too sure about that."

"True, magic level is an important part of the exams... But still, it's too bad."

At that moment, someone called for the young toolmaker, and he hastily headed off to help with the preparations.

Uros lightly stroked the shining, light blue nap lantern with his fingertips and muttered through unmoving lips, “Carlo—he is the man who turned down my invitation to be a magical toolmaker for the castle four times.”



“I apologize that things took such an unexpected turn. I know we’d planned to discuss the large grinder.”

Inside the carriage en route back to the Order of Beast Hunters’ wing, Carmine apologized to Dahlia from the seat opposite her. Gildo had already been escorted back to the administrative wing that housed the treasury, so only Dahlia, Volf, and Carmine remained inside the carriage.

“Not at all. Thank you for the tour and for the enchantment demonstration. Also, for giving me such precious materials…”

“Those were from Director Uros, so please do not worry about it.”

Carmine had arranged for her the liquid solution recipe and the crystallized moonbeam butterfly wings for the nap lanterns as well as the ice dragon scales. He’d placed them all inside a magically sealed box and tied it up with a leather thong, which Volf, sitting next to her, was holding on to.

“Regarding the large grinder,” continued Carmine, “I was thinking I wanted to use more than five wind crystals, increase the number of blades by two, and add strengthening. If I drafted up the specifications, would you look them over?”

“Yes, gladly. Um, what grade of magic will be needed for more than five wind crystals?”

“I believe roughly grade twelve or thirteen.”

In all likelihood, that level was absolutely reasonable for the magical toolmakers in the castle. Dahlia was a bit envious. She wished to someday raise her own magic to grade eleven.

Though given that she still couldn’t completely control even her grade ten magic, her father would probably have laughed at her if he were still alive.

“You mentioned before that you had never single-handedly crafted a magical tool that used more than three wind crystals, but does that mean you won’t be taking over the large hot water

dispenser?”

“That’s right, because it’s beyond my magical capabilities. I have never crafted a tool using more than two wind crystals.”

“Earlier, too, you said that your magic was insufficient to enchant the moonbeam butterfly wings, but—and pardon my rudeness—may I ask what precisely your magic grade is, so I know going forward? Oh, of course. I should go first. My magic is at grade nineteen.”

She heard Volf gasp beside her. “Nineteen…?”

However, this was no shock to Dahlia. That cloth-like magic he’d displayed earlier had not only been strong but well controlled.

Carmine wasn’t boasting. If anything, his smile was self-deprecating as he said, “A magic grade is merely a number. I belong to a ducal family, but I have neither offensive nor healing magic to speak of. I cannot even perform body strengthening. All I can use is enchantment magic.”

Suddenly, Dahlia recalled something Volf had once told her. If a noble from a viscountcy or higher was unable to use every one of the five disciplines of magic, it had a negative impact on their treatment, stature, and even their marriage prospects. That had caused Volf a lot of bitter experiences, and he belonged to an earl family. Just what sort of anguish had someone like Carmine, the son of a ducal family, experienced?

However, the enchantment he had performed earlier could be considered the absolute peak for a magical toolmaker. He had applied his strong magic to the glass sphere like a cloth, wrapping it perfectly in one try. It had been the first time Dahlia had ever witnessed an enchantment like that.

If only she could freely perform such quality enchantments, she wondered just how many more opportunities for toolmaking work would become available to her, and just how many things she could create without having to be choosy about the materials she used. Although she felt guilty about it, she couldn’t help but be envious.

Volf spoke up before she could. “Vice-Director Carmine, whatever your magic may be, I think the fact that you are working as the vice-director of the royal magical research department is amazing.” What Carmine had said must have stirred up some feelings in him.

Volf had spoken straightforwardly, in a way that was obviously

not flattery. At his words, Carmine cast his indigo-gray eyes down.

"Thank you, Lord Volfred. However, as a magical toolmaker, surely Chairwoman Dahlia, with her ingenuity, inventiveness, and capacity to perform such solid enchantments, is much more impressive. Even with her level of magic, she can craft such spectacular tools as the waterproof awnings and the Galeforce Bows."

Carmine was mistaken. The one who had enchanted the awnings that had been supplied to the castle via Orlando & Co. was either her father or Tobias. Nor had she been the one to create the Galeforce Bows that had been delivered to the Order of Beast Hunters.

"Actually, I did not make either of those. I believe either my father or his senior apprentice crafted the awnings for the castle, and the Galeforce Bows were produced by the magical toolmakers of the Scalfarotto Arms Works. My magic is only grade ten, after all."

"Really? I had been under the impression you had manufactured—"

"My magic isn't uniform enough to enchant a large awning, and as for the magical bows, I only had a hand in the development phase. My magic and my technical skills are insufficient for more than that."

Due to the size of the castle's awnings, they either had to be enchanted by a continuous, steady channel of magic or enchanted all at once with strong magic. Both methods were equally difficult for Dahlia.

As for the magical bows, saying she had "only had a hand in the development phase" had been Jonas's suggestion, but it was true. While she and Volf had created the prototype for the Galeforce Bows, the additional units delivered to the squad had been crafted by the Scalfarotto family's own magical toolmakers.

She had heard that the weapons specialists had been able to craft the bows and the shortswords with superior materials and had even improved on their form. The weapons were customized for each individual bow knight, and the bows themselves as well as the magical enchantments were now much stronger—each aspect the work of a team of first-class artisans.

Due to the bows' considerable stopping power, each was blood bonded exclusively to the knight who used it in order to

prevent accidents. The owner of the bow was also bound by a temple contract to never aim it at another person. That was to prevent them from shooting fellow knights by mistake during chaotic confrontations against monsters. She had told the squad to inform her of any accidents or defects so she could perform safety checks, but at this point, the weapons' manufacturing and customization was beyond her capabilities.

"The Scalfarottos' weapons team is filled with people of such superlative technical skill."

Volf leaned forward a little farther than Dahlia and answered Carmine with a smile. "Thank you. Everyone will be very happy to hear that you said that."

"Well then, would it be all right if I sent the proposal for the large grinder to the Green Tower in the West District in the coming days?" Carmine asked. "I hope we can discuss it next time you visit the squad."

"Yes, please do," Dahlia responded. Then something struck her as odd. She had never told Carmine her address.

"Mr. Carmine—how do you know where Dahlia lives?" Volf asked before she could.

"In the past, Lord Carlo and I spent some time together in the castle. He told me about it then. And, well, he told me I should come by the Green Tower for a drink sometime, and he would introduce me to his daughter..."

"Wha— Me?"

"I'm embarrassed to admit, but I was the one who asked. I told Lord Carlo I really wanted to meet his daughter."

Dahlia knew that her father had gone to the castle for work. However, he had never told her anything about Carmine. Either that or she had forgotten. While she was trying her best to remember, Volf once again asked her question before she had the chance.

"So even though Mr. Carlo invited you, you didn't go to visit?"

"I suddenly became busy with work, and after many months passed, I learned from others about your engagement. Naturally, I felt awkward about reaching out after that..."

"Is...that so..."

A very uncomfortable tension hung in the air. It almost sounded as if Carmine had been interested in her. That had to be impossible.

Dahlia decided to ask him point-blank, "Vice-Director Carmine,

what sort of business did you want to meet with me for?"

"Well... I was deeply impressed by your waterproof cloth. I suppose you could call me a waterproof cloth fan."

"A waterproof cloth...fan..." Volf repeated in a flat voice.

Numerous blue slimes were bouncing around inside Dahlia's head.

"I used to research leather in the hopes of achieving the same effect as your waterproof cloth. I tested out various methods, from making the leather more lightweight to strengthening it to enchanting it with various types of monster materials, but I couldn't get it water repellent enough—that was when I saw the waterproof awnings that were delivered to the castle. I felt like I'd been thunderstruck."

What had impressed Carmine were the awnings her *father* had enchanted. She knew without a doubt that the large fabric of those awnings had been enchanted uniformly from end to end, without any slips or faults, except for the double-folded edges.

"When I learned that it was Lord Carlo's daughter who had invented the waterproof cloth, I felt I just had to discuss it with you. I wondered what had inspired that spark of genius—"

"No! I am not a genius, not at all!" she cried, raising her voice as pangs of guilt pierced her chest. She had lived a life in another world and therefore had experience creating many things. She had no spark of genius.

"There is no need to be so humble. I would never have thought of using powdered slime for waterproof cloth or drying insoles. As someone who wasted so much time going through trial and error, I am very envious."

"Actually, you're mistaken. I also went through mountains of trials and errors..."

That was all she could say. She had experimented with the waterproof cloth endlessly, and she'd even dragged her father, Tobias, *and* Irma into it, causing inconvenience for all.

"How did you start on the waterproof cloth—by testing out slime powder and crystallized or powdered forms of other monsters?"

"Well, let's see, first I had to dry the slimes in order to make powdered slime."

"What? You didn't request the powder from the Adventurers' Guild?"

“Slimes weren’t readily available at the time… The adventurers destroyed the slimes’ cores when they captured them, then I would dry them and make them into powder.”

“How did you do that?”

“I left them to dry on the floors of the tower, the rooftop, and also in the yard. However, the problem with that was they would get moldy when it rained a lot.”

“Moldy… Did you run into any other problems?”

“I sometimes had to hunt for the blue slimes that tried to escape, and birds would try to eat the drying green slimes. That’s why I am grateful that the Adventurers’ Guild makes slime powder now.”

At present, powdered slime was one of the more affordably priced monster materials, but at the time, it hadn’t even been available. Dahlia really had to hand it to the Adventurers’ Guild for their work in setting up the infrastructure for mass production.

“How did you arrive at the waterproof’s cloth composition and enchantment?”

“By trying everything. Let’s see, first I combined each type of powdered slime with a liquid mixture and tested it on a small piece of cloth, then settled on blue slime. From there, I tested out several different mixtures, picked four that seemed promising, and since they all had their good and bad points, I blended them together. I tried about fifty different ratios.”

“You really did try everything…”

That was precisely right. Since her abilities were middling, she’d relied heavily on iteration in the process of developing the cloth. That was why she wanted him to stop seeking her “spark of genius.”

“What did you find to be the most difficult part of developing the waterproof cloth?”

“Hmm… It had to have been washing the cloth one hundred times in a compact washer to test its durability. That was very painful on my hands.”

“One hundred times in a compact washer…”

The compact washer was a small barrel-shaped tool that utilized water crystals; it could be operated by manually turning a handle. Dahlia had wanted to finish the durability testing as quickly as she possibly could, which had resulted in sore muscles for several days.

“Dahlia’s ingenuity is certainly admirable, but more than that, she’s passionate and a hard worker. She experiments with many different things and has even sustained burns from powdered black slime.”

“V-Volf.”

Hang on. That was the mark not of a hard worker but of a careless fool. The direction Volf had suddenly taken their conversation in sent Dahlia into a panic.

“Burned by black slime…” repeated Carmine.

“Oh, no, it’s not as if I do reckless things like that all the time! That was just an accident…”

“Ah, I’ve just remembered. Lord Carlo once said you were a magical toolmaker whom he could not take his eyes off of even for a second.”

Father, how is that *the first thing you tell someone about your own daughter?* Had he been that worried about her? No, his conversation with Carmine had probably just reminded him of her experiments with the waterproof cloth. That had to be it.

“My apologies for cutting in, but Dahlia really is a wonderful magical toolmaker. It’s true she can become very fixated when she experiments, but she always puts her all into crafting tools with other people’s needs in mind.”

As Dahlia listened to Volf’s words, waves of happiness and embarrassment washed over her. She began to open her mouth only to close it again, failing to keep her face from turning red. She racked her brain for a change in topic.

“Vice-Director Carmine! Do you mind if I ask you to elaborate on what you said about making leather more lightweight and enchanting it with monster materials?”

“I don’t mind at all. I made horse, sleipnir, deer, and wild boar leather more lightweight and enchanted those with kraken, sea serpent, desert worm, and armored crab, for example. Each attempt was either not waterproof enough or too heavy, and ultimately, I ended up with material suitable only for leather armor.”

“I think material for leather armor is a great thing too.”

“I also made a nonfoldable tent and a wagon cover that’s difficult to put up… And they’re ten times the price of your waterproof cloth…”

Carmine stared into the distance. Dahlia fully understood how he felt. Sometimes, developing magical tools led one down a

completely different path than expected. It must have also been frustrating to arrive at products that weren't exactly user-friendly but cost ten times as much as the most popular alternative.

"I have also tried enchanting leather with powdered blue slime, like waterproof cloth. However, it didn't work. It kept coming off the leather. I believe it's because leather doesn't absorb powdered slime as easily as does cloth…"

"It comes off… Could you not cut it up?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, to close up the holes on one of my coats, I took some black wyvern leather I had on hand and attached it to the back to reinforce it. Mixtures and magic easily permeate into scraps of old or unusable leather, and it's also less expensive."

She closed her mouth as soon as she had said that. What was she doing, telling a royal magical toolmaker that he should use old, worn-out leather, bound for the trash, because it was "less expensive"? He could just use brand-new leather.

Carmine had been listening to her with widened eyes, but after she finished, the corners of his mouth lifted up beautifully into a smile.

"I have a mountain of discarded leather. Chairwoman Dahlia, would you mind if I borrowed your idea and experimented with it?"

"By all means."

"Very well. I will send the results of that endeavor to the Green Tower too, then."

As soon as Carmine finished speaking, the carriage came to a halt. Volf descended first, then extended his upturned right hand to Dahlia. While she was taking extra care not to get the hem of her robe stuck in the door, Carmine smiled. Then he firmly held the other half of the door open. Dahlia thanked him and alighted from the carriage.

She was relieved to see Order of Beast Hunters' wing in front of her and to have Volf there escorting her. Behind her, Carmine muttered something that wouldn't reach her ears.

"I very much regret not visiting the Green Tower when I had the chance."

After Volf saw Dahlia home to the Green Tower, he returned to

his villa. She had invited him to dinner, but he had training with Jonas that day, so he regretfully declined. Dahlia carefully held on to a silver magically sealed box as she smiled and entered the tower.

The box, which Carmine had given to her, contained the recipe for the liquid mixture, the crystallized moonbeam butterfly wings for the nap lanterns, and the ice dragon scale. Dahlia being a woman, he hadn't handed the box directly to her but had instead given it to Volf, her guard, which had reinforced Volf's perception of him as a high-ranking noble. However, Carmine had not a shred of high-handedness. Thinking back to when he had come to repair the air conditioners in Volf's barracks, he'd held the same attitude toward his subordinates and other artisans.

Volf had been shocked to say the least by what Carmine had spoken about in the carriage on their way back to the Order of Beast Hunters' wing. If Carmine *had* gone to the Green Tower at the time, as fellow magical toolmakers, he and Dahlia might have really hit it off. Volf himself wasn't a magical toolmaker, but even just having seen Dahlia and Oswald at work, he knew that Carmine's enchantment was amazing. As far as he could tell from how much they'd enjoyed talking to each other today, it seemed like the two of them could work on developing and crafting tools together.

Maybe Dahlia's father Carlo had invited Carmine to the tower because he had foreseen that. He was a little older than Dahlia, but he was the vice-director of the castle's magical toolmaking department, a talented toolmaker, a noble, he seemed like a good person, and he admired and respected the magical tools she developed. Compared to Dahlia's ex-fiancé, he was much more—

"Apologies for my tardiness, Sir Volf."

Jonas's voice brought Volf back to reality. After dinner, Volf had been doing some practice swings behind the villa, but he'd stopped at some point.

He saw his brother and two mages following behind Jonas. Even if it was just once a week, Jonas was taking time out of his busy schedule to train him. It would be disrespectful not to give it his full attention.

"It's all right. I've also just arrived."

"Time is wasting, so let's begin at once. Could you wear armor

for today?”

“Sure thing.”

Jonas was wearing proper armor, unusually for him. It was similar in shape to Volf’s own Scarlet Armor but black in color. Jonas passed over a set of the same make of armor to Volf. He put it on quickly, then Jonas passed him a training sword.

“And use this sword, if you would.”

It was a training sword, but its heft was closer to that of a real sword. As he felt its weight, which made him think of the real battles he had experienced with the Order of Beast Hunters, Volf wondered just what sort of training they would be doing.

“Today, I would like us to engage in actual combat. We shall start with positional warfare. Volf, you will try to attack toward the side where Lord Guido is, while I will attack toward the fence wall. If either of us is overtaken, it’ll be counted as a loss.”

They had already been doing some rigorous training—was that not actual combat? Resisting the urge to ask, Volf responded in the affirmative.

Jonas’s lesson began the same as always, but after they exchanged three blows, Volf understood. Jonas’s slashes were very heavy, perhaps due to the different swords they were using. The creaking sensations he felt in his wrist and elbow reminded him of his fights against monsters. If he hadn’t been using body strengthening to parry the attacks, either his arms would have been shot or his sword would have broken.

He somehow managed to parry a heavy slash from above, then tried to direct the momentum into swinging his sword diagonally upward. But Jonas blocked Volf’s sword with his own right wrist of all things.

“Too slow. The base of a sword doesn’t cut easily, so it can be stopped by someone with scales,” Jonas said as he shifted his bracelet. Volf saw that just one scale near his wrist was broken.

If Jonas could use his arm as a shield like that, he should have no problem cutting Volf down—as that thought crossed his mind, Jonas slid past him wordlessly. *Does this count as being overtaken?* he wondered. He could do nothing but watch as Jonas continued advancing even farther ahead.

Tucked away by the wall was a cluster of flowers, once blooming but now withered in the face of the oncoming winter. The flowers had originally been either red or vermilion, their spindly, light brown stems looking like they would snap at a gust

of wind. Jonas went to stand by that spot; then, his face devoid of expression, he swung his sword and beheaded the flowers.

Fwish—the soft rustle of the withered flowers dropping to the earth stung Volf's ears.

Crumple. Jonas trampled the dried flowers, mercilessly reducing them to crushed fragments.

He uttered not a single word. Volf didn't understand why Jonas was doing such a thing. But then he returned to his previous position, so they wordlessly resumed their bout. Jonas's swings were irregular and impossible to follow, and he was able to feint instantly with a single step. Volf was superior in speed alone thanks to the sköll bracelet Dahlia had given him. He felt he was fighting with it better than before.

Hang on. With the bracelet, if Volf moved at full speed, he would probably be able to make Jonas drop his sword. With that thought, he rushed in.

Jonas repelled the stroke Volf aimed at his right arm, then his rust-colored eyes darkened.

"Is that it? I could easily kill the ones behind you at this rate."

The image of red hair overlapped the withered flowers in the back of Volf's mind—the moment he was distracted, he took a side blow to his torso.

Crack. Even though he'd cast body strengthening magic, an unpleasant sound came from inside his armor. The sharp pain was almost enough to choke his breathing.

"Ugh…!"

Volf gritted his molars and endured the pain, then regripped his sword. That attack just now had undoubtedly broken a rib.

"Do you yield?" asked a monotonous voice. Volf responded shortly with a no.

Fighting when he was in this much pain wasn't easy, and it was very unlikely he could win in this state. However, the last thing Volf wanted to do today was surrender or fall to his knees. He couldn't shake the image of those crumbled red flowers from his eyelids—thinking of the person those flowers reminded him of, he tightened his grip on his sword. For what reason was Jonas teaching him? Wasn't it because Volf wanted to be able to protect the ones he cared about?

Observe and learn.

He couldn't lose—not again.

Clenching his teeth, Volf looked up. He got a clear look at the

man’s stance and the magic flowing from him. Those rust-colored eyes were simultaneously observing him and their surroundings. His shoulders looked relaxed, as did his grip on his sword, but he seemed ready to react in any direction at a moment’s notice.

Bending his knees and raising his heels slightly—copying the parts he could and doing the parts he couldn’t copy in his own way—Volf recast body strengthening and dug his toes into the ground. He dropped his gaze briefly, then, without a moment’s hesitation, swung his sword toward Jonas’s rust-colored eyes. He felt the sensation of the tip of his sword striking flesh at almost the same moment he felt a blow strike against his side. He managed to take a few steps back and tighten his grip on his sword, but Jonas didn’t come at him with a counterattack.

“Master Jonas…”

The man stood motionless as blood oozed from a deep gash in his cheek. Soon, the dripping red reached his lips. He licked it away with his long tongue, and then his mouth split into a smile.

“Aha ha ha ha! Yes, that’s more like it!”

As he laughed gleefully, the man’s pupils turned into vertical slits. The dark red glow emanating from them was nothing human; rather, it was the light Volf would have seen in the eyes of reptilian monsters during subjugation missions.

Jonas held his sword at the ready, and hot, strong magic billowed out in waves. Volf felt his hair stand on end, and he instinctively regripped his blade. His stance had unconsciously mirrored the one he took when facing off against a monster. They were already in range of each other, so from here, the battle would be decided—

“That’s enough,” a voice said, and Volf was just able to stop himself from leaping forward. The owner of the voice, Guido, came to their side and held his palm out toward Jonas, then froze his right leg. Jonas clicked his tongue shortly but just closed his eyes and looked down, offering no resistance.

“Guido?!”

“I wanted to stop things before you were seriously hurt. Don’t take it the wrong way.”

Volf wasn’t sure which one of them Guido was talking to, but in front of the silent Jonas, he couldn’t ask.

“Can you revert, Jonas?” Guido asked.

“Of course.”

Jonas's pupils reverted back to circles, then he stomped his leg to break the ice around his knee. He frowned at the flecks of red in the shattering ice. Seeing the red cut his ice had made on Jonas's knee, Guido called out to the mages, who were standing farther away.

"Could you heal these two?"

At Guido's words, the mages came running over. They administered healing magic to Volf and a potion to Jonas. Once they were finished with their treatment, Volf walked up to Jonas.

"I'm very sorry for aiming for your eyes, Master Jonas."

"No apologies necessary. It is expected in a fight. Your swings have become faster and more difficult to read. I'd say you've improved a lot in a short period of time."

"He's almost got it. At the very least, since he made you smile, maybe he's advanced from being your student to being your junior?" Guido suggested boastfully. Jonas looked incredibly annoyed.

Jonas was already busy with being Guido's guard, and Volf was giving him even more work to do. He felt incredibly sorry for it. He was looking at Jonas, his mind filled with those thoughts, when the man's rust-colored gaze wavered—then, he let out a deep sigh.

"...No more treating you like a pampered child. From today, I won't talk to you as a student but as a junior bodyguard. When no one else is around, I'll just call you Volf. And I'll drop the formalities."

It made Volf incredibly happy that Jonas's polite speech toward him had suddenly disappeared. He responded with a broad smile.

"Thank you, Master Jonas!"

"Volf, why don't you just call him Sir Jonas? That way it'll sound more familiar yet still respectful."

Volf vacillated at his brother's suggestion. Calling Jonas "Sir" that way conveyed its own level of respect, but considering Volf was learning from Jonas, it felt most right to give him a teacher's title.

"Sir Jonas? Wouldn't Master Jonas be better, if I want to be respectful?"

"Sir Jonas, Master Jonas, Instructor Jonas, Grandmaster, O Great Teacher... What's best? Dear Brother Jonas also has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Guido, who was in high spirits, had thrown an odd choice into the mix. His blue eyes twinkled mischievously. Jonas's strained smirk quickly transformed into an unsettlingly manicured smile.

"Come to think of it, Lord Guido, haven't you had to loosen your belt lately? Let us get you some more exercise. What say you to a mock battle, swords only, no magic allowed?"

Debut Decisions and Appeal for a Provisional Magical Toolmaker

“And that’s that!”

Inside the Rossetti Trading Company’s office in the Merchants’ Guild, Dahlia signed the final parchment of the day.

“Good work, Chairwoman!” Ivano said as he took the pile of parchments from her with a smile and placed them into reddish-brown leather cases. Then he tied them up with a leather cord of the same color and fastened them tight.

Each case contained a report of their decisions regarding the development of the various materials they had created the other day when experimenting with different slimes, copies of the contract, and a letter of thanks. The addressees were Jonas, Bernigi, and Guido of the Scalfarottos’ Weapons Development Team; Augusto and Idaea of the Adventurers’ Guild; and Forto and Lucia of the Tailors’ Guild. Ivano had already hand delivered the Merchants’ guildmaster Leone his copy.

“Mena, meet up with Marcella at the carriage stop and deliver these to the Tailors’ Guild and these to the Adventurers’ Guild, please. Once you’re done with that, the two of you are free to go home.”

“Thank you. If you’d like, we could give the Scalfarottos theirs too. It’s still early.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll be delivering theirs.”

“I see. Okay then, I’m off!”

Mena said goodbye with a smile, then left the room holding the four leather cases securely in his arms. As she watched him leave, Dahlia finally relaxed. For two days straight, she’d been working solely on checking and signing documents.

Although the slime-based magical tools wouldn’t be officially sold until next spring, a lot of progress had been made.

There were the light protective fabric, the impact absorption material, and the dunaspherae made with powdered yellow slime. Each had a wide range of potential applications, such as protective vests and cloaks, bed mats, cushions, armor and prostheses linings, and so on. The plan was to give the Order of

Beast Hunters first priority to try out the tools and adopt what they deemed acceptable, and afterward the tools would be circulated among the royal knights and guards.

Moreover, they had already decided on how things should be prioritized and divided up among the developers. Lucia, head manager of the Magical Garment Factory affiliated with the Tailors' Guild, was currently developing realistic breast and shoulder pads. Once completed, those would be sent first to the Tailors' Guild.

The body heat conservation material made from powdered red slime had been entrusted to Bernigi. As of now, he was sending some to temples and district hospitals at no cost, where they were testing it out in hypothermia-prevention pads for infants and invalids. For safety, it was covered with kraken skin as well as a cloth on top of that, but that had presented an issue with the pads' breathability. It would often stick to skin and give children heat rash. At present, it was being modified by making the surface bumpy. Unfortunately, the cost was an impediment to development, so they were waiting on Idaea to increase production of the red slimes.

The Scalfarottos' magical toolmakers were working on a coolant made out of powdered blue slime. A number of samples were also being distributed to temples and local hospitals for free. They lasted longer than ice packs, so they were apparently very well regarded already. The Beast Hunters had also begun using the coolant to ice sore muscles after training. Dahlia had assumed very sore muscles could just be treated with magic, but if they did that, they wouldn't strengthen their bodies, or so Volf had told her. Dahlia wasn't sure how it worked, but building muscle definitely sounded very demanding.

As for the green slime that would be used for sleipnir feed, Guido, Bernigi, and a family that was knowledgeable about medicinal herbs would be taking the lead on that. Rather than being entrusted with part of the process, they would essentially be taking over the feed completely. However, although Dahlia thought it was great that the feed would have a positive impact on transportation, she didn't want it to be used for war. When she'd spoken to Jonas about that concern, he'd suggested she have everyone sign a temple contract, which she'd hastily declined.

Temple contracts were a way nobles made sure someone

would keep their promise, but not only were they expensive, the magic used to bind people was somewhat frightening to Dahlia. As she was thinking about that and putting away her pens, she heard a knock at the door.

"Excuse me, here is this afternoon's mail."

Ivano took the bundle of letters from the guild member and started sorting them out on the table. Apparently, the company often received letters of introduction from nobles and other trading companies, letters from new clients, sales promotions, and the like, but Dahlia never opened any of those. Today, however, on the very top of the bundle of letters was a white envelope with gold trim, which Ivano conveyed to her with two hands.

"It's from Lord Gildo…"

The striking white envelope and the address written in elegant script made it obvious who the sender was without having to check. Dahlia nervously opened the seal and read the letter, her head drooping and her shoulders slumping as she went.

"It's about my debut before I receive my barony. In two weeks, there will be a ball with twenty-four couples in attendance, and in four weeks, there will be a ball with forty couples. He wants to know which I prefer…"

"The smaller one may be a little too soon. The more guests there are, the more people will get to know you, although it'll also be harder on your nerves."

Gildo was the one hosting her debut. She couldn't very well lodge a complaint. But she couldn't help but wish there were an option that would allow her more time to prepare, and that fewer people would be attending.

"Wait, right here, it's written, 'You may decline any tea or dinner party invitations due to your busy schedule.'"

The letter was also addressed to the Rossetti Trading Company, so Dahlia handed it over to Ivano.

"Ah, he is advising you to decline tea or dinner party invitations."

If that's what he means, then he should just say that. Dahlia could never wrap her head around the veiled meanings behind nobles' words.

Maybe she would be less nervous at a women-only tea party… Dahlia decided to stifle that thought before she finished it. The

guests would all be nobles. Since Dahlia didn't know the etiquette or rules, it would be better not to attend.

"If he's hosting a ball, I'll probably have to dance too, won't I?"

"Yes. Can you dance a basic trio, Chairwoman?"

"I can, more or less. I learned it in college."

One of the required subjects in college was music. Having no ear for music, Dahlia had avoided instrumental and vocal performance, which had left dance as the only choice. Fortunately, the classic basic trio was something she had learned as a child from her maid, Sofia. The two of them had often danced it on the roof after hanging up the laundry to dry. It had just been for fun, but thanks to that, Dahlia had been able to complete her dance class without having to suffer much.

"The first song is danced with either a fiancé, a significant other, or a family member or relative—or, if debuting in another's home, the head of the family. That would be Gildo, in this case."

Dahlia couldn't even begin to imagine dancing with Gildo. All she could think was that she would likely step on his feet and have to apologize to him after the song was over.

"At a debut ball, after one dances the first song, the next two songs follow the same rules, and after that, people are free to either dance or chat with others. Lord Gildo is hosting, so he or his wife will likely facilitate the conversation after the dance. Though, since you're single, you might want to decide on who your dance partner will be ahead of time."

"Who am I supposed to ask to be my dance partner...?"

"After Lord Gildo, I would suggest Sir Volf, Lord Guido, Sir Grato, or Lord Bernigi. They're all connected to you through work. Though it depends on who is invited."

Volf would be the best to dance with—of course she would think of the easiest choice. How fainthearted could she be? She shook away the thought that came to mind and asked Ivano, "I guess I have no choice but to attend a ball for my debut?"

She'd heard that banquets and tea parties were an option too. Those seemed like they would be easier.

"I think a ball is the best way to go. Pardon my asking, Chairwoman, but is it the subtle communication that you're uncomfortable with?"

There was no need for Ivano to soften his wording. Dahlia responded honestly. "More like I'm hopeless at it... I'm not much of a conversationalist either."

“Conversation at a ball will be the shortest and most superficial. At a standing buffet dinner party, you never know who will approach you and what their status or situation will be, so it could make things awkward if you were to interact with them poorly. At a sit-down banquet or tea party, you’ll be sitting next to and conversing with the same people for an extended period, which means they’ll have plenty of time to probe you for information or even pull you into unwanted commitments.”

“Ah…” she muttered, understanding what he meant. Ivano knew the ins and outs of it all, perhaps due to all the business interactions he’d had with nobles. Or perhaps she just needed to study more. But despite all the books on noble etiquette she’d read, not one of them had mentioned anything about these sorts of situations.

“I speak with Lord Gildo on occasion, and he told me that when an inexperienced youth attends a tea party with married women, he ends up with more than just stomach pain.”

“That bad?”

“Yes. Even when Gildo was young, he would be writhing with anxiety after the end of a tea party… He said that when nobles try to figure out each other’s true intentions, men smile as they gain ground, and women smile as they come in from behind.”

What was this terrifying world? She wanted to refrain from attending any such events. It seemed impossible that a commoner like her, who couldn’t decipher the hidden meaning behind words, could even begin to follow the conversations of nobles before the ball.

“Also, the letter requests that I let them prepare my dress, but I can’t possibly let Lord Gildo do that…”

“Well, for a marquis family, there are customs to be followed, like making sure you’re not wearing the same color as his wife. Chairwoman, it’s best if you let them take care of it.”

As he responded to her with a smile, his navy blue eyes suddenly stopped on a certain part of the letter.

“What’s this? In the postscript, it says he wants to invite you to the treasury to have tea for a day.”

Why would they be drinking tea for an entire day? Her stomach would fill to bursting. Perhaps this was about how she’d told him the other day at the castle’s magical toolmaking department that buying materials ahead of time was more economical. Either that or about the cost-effectiveness of safety

control. She briefly explained as much to Ivano, and he nodded deeply.

“Ah, well…it sounds like you have no choice but to give a talk at the treasury. You can accept the dress as a lesson fee.”

“A lesson fee…?”

She wondered if that was all right, but since Gildo was hosting her debut and even giving her a dress, she couldn’t refuse. When she imagined both the day of her debut and her visit to the treasury, she unconsciously put a hand to her stomach.

“Chairwoman, this has been the most effective for me so far, so please take this.”

Her subordinate smiled broadly as he produced three packets of red powder wrapped in thin paper and placed them on the table.

“Um, what’s this?”

“A stomach medicine made of red wyvern liver. It’s expensive, but it really does the trick.”



Back in the Green Tower, Dahlia smiled happily as she looked at the surface of her workbench. That day, Carmine’s specification document on the large grinder had arrived. The points of modification were the size, the materials used, the shape and structure of the blades, and the magic circuit, which utilized five magic crystals—each proposed adjustment was perfect. The plan was for Dahlia to join in on inspecting and modifying the grinder once the prototype was complete. However, she had a feeling she wouldn’t be able to contribute much.

In addition to that, Carmine had also sent a report on the results of his experiments enchanting leather scraps with powdered blue slime in an effort to create waterproof leather. Apparently, using her method as is had resulted in issues with the leather’s durability. To remedy that, he had enlisted the help of subordinates who were experts on leather, and they had mixed together powdered yellow slime, magic tree sap, and other substances, which had kept the leather from falling apart. He had written all that down along with the combination ratio of the materials, something that should by all rights have been kept secret.

In no time at all, he had written up such a thorough specification document and produced extensive experimentation results. Not only was Carmine talented at enchantment magic, but his skill for development was also spectacular. He wrote that he would show her his results in some shape or form, which she couldn't wait to see. Though, when she thought about how he'd produced experimental results and written up this document in just a few short days, and was possibly even working on the budget in Uros's place, Dahlia became a bit worried for Carmine's health.

Also on top of the table was a long, narrow magically sealed box that she had been given as a thank-you for the other day. Its contents were divided up like a luxury candy box. There were five different colors of materials inside: white, red, blue, yellow, and green translucent, perfectly semicircular scales were arranged in the glass case. Each one was beautiful and sparkled brilliantly.

These were the processed scales of the fiendfish that inhabited the shoals of the island to the south. They had weak magic, but their color was clear of impurities, so they were used for adding color to the glass of magic lanterns or were mixed into the crystal glass of magical tools. When Dahlia had first seen the box, she had been worried it would be filled with absurdly costly materials, but these were affordable, and there wasn't a large volume. That was a relief. She couldn't help but feel giddy when she thought of everything she could use them for.

"Oh...?"

Before she had realized it, the light outside her window had turned a dark blue. Volf was coming by today, so she wanted to start warming up some soup and preparing drinks and snacks. She put away the specification document and magically sealed box on the shelf, then picked up the jar containing the blue slime that was on the floor and set it on the table so she could give it its nutritional water for the day.

Jonas had opened the jar for her the other day, but the lid was stuck yet again. When she pulled on the lid, the whole jar came up with it. The lids of wide-mouthed glass jars had holes small enough that the contained slimes couldn't escape but which let in some airflow. This jar, however, might have had a bit too much kraken tape wrapped around the opening—it was closed too tightly.

Having no other choice, Dahlia rolled up her sleeves and held

the jar steady with her left hand as she pulled on the lid with her right. After she spent ten seconds pulling as hard as she could, there was a loud *pop*! At the same time, she saw the blue slime fly out upward and to the right.

"Wait, what?!"

Dahlia thrust out her arm, knocking over the bottle of water next to her and spilling it all down her front. Unfortunately, she didn't have time to change clothes right now. She needed to catch the slime, and quick—she pulled on her work gloves and picked up the large glass jar with her left hand.

Blue slimes that were being raised in isolated, confined spaces were usually relatively slow. Even if it did happen to attack, it was unlikely to cause her any severe burns, and a hit to its core would bring it down. The silver cane her father had used to use was still in the workshop. After taking note of that in the corner of her vision, Dahlia turned back to face the blue slime. She shortened the distance between them as she herded the crawling slime toward the wall. Then she forcefully grabbed it with her gloved hand.

"And voilà!"

Having caught it on her first try, Dahlia let slip a cry of victory using a word from her previous world. She wasted no time dropping the slime back into the jar and closing it with the lid, which had been sitting on the table.

In the past, she'd failed several times to catch slimes that had run away from her. There had been times when she'd fallen and scraped her knees, and others when her father had had to kill the slime. She was very glad that she had been able to catch it before Volf arrived. If she hadn't, she'd just have caused him concern again.

Feeling relieved, Dahlia took off her gloves, hung her work clothes on the back of the chair, and stretched. She was fully aware she lacked athletic coordination and reflexes, but she felt she deserved a pat on the back for this feat. As if on cue, the doorbell rang. She instantly recognized that rhythmic ring as Volf's.

"Good evening, Dahlia."

As soon as he entered the room, carrying his customary snacks and drinks, he narrowed his golden eyes.

"Dahlia, what's that behind you?"

"What? *Ah!*"

Dahlia turned around to find that at some point, the blue slime had crawled out of its jar and was following her, likely in pursuit of the water dripping from her skirt. Maybe she hadn't closed the lid right, since she'd been rushing… Hold on, one thing at a time. She needed to catch it first.

She was turning toward the table to put on her work gloves when the blue slime hopped up and clung tightly to her auburn flared skirt. The fabric immediately began to smoke. The slime must have been hungry and secreting its corrosive fluid.

"What are you doing?!"

All you have to do is drink your water! Why are you trying to melt my skirt?

It was a thick winter skirt she'd just bought that autumn and had only worn twice. She'd wanted to dress up a little since Volf was coming over… This preposterous situation had turned her thoughts into a jumbled mess.

But if she were to move now, her skirt could get stuck to her legs and burn her. Had she been alone, she would have taken off her skirt and captured the slime while grumbling her complaints, but Volf was here now. She lifted up the hem of her skirt a bit to keep it from slapping against her legs and just stood there, unsure of what to do.

"Dahlia, want me to eliminate that slime?"

"No, um, I'm keeping it for observation!"

Although Volf's suggestion was completely understandable, she couldn't allow it. It was true that if he destroyed the slime's core, it would let go of her skirt, but it was her fault for not closing the lid right in the first place. And since she had been measuring its weight every day, she was starting to get attached to it, so she wanted to avoid killing it.

"Hmm, there are work gloves for you on that shelf over there, so it would be great if you could use those to grab the slime and put it in the jar. Then I can go get changed."

"Got it."

Volf put on the gloves right away and tried to peel the blue slime off her skirt. Blue slimes weren't very strong, and normally, their corrosive properties were also weak, so she was unprepared for what happened next.

"Eek!"

The blue slime ripped a circular patch of fabric off of the skirt, including the lining. On top of that, the corrosive liquid was

trickling down her skirt and producing smoke.

"Dahlia!"

Just when she thought the torn part of the skirt would stick to her knee, Volf flung away the blue slime and lifted up the hem of her skirt so that the part covered in acid wouldn't touch her. Dahlia hurriedly pulled the ribbon at her back, letting her skirt drop to the floor.

"Are you okay? Did you get burned?!"

"I'm okay," she responded with relief—then, taking in the situation, she froze. She either needed to go get her work clothes or thank him, but she couldn't bring herself to move. For now, she just tried desperately to pull down the hem of her sweater.

While she was in a full-blown panic, Volf immediately turned his back to her and took off his coat.

"...You should go change so you don't catch a cold. While you do that, I'll make sure to catch that thing."

"I-I'm sorry! Thank you..."

Dahlia wrapped the jacket he passed to her around her waist and held it in place as she rushed upstairs. She tripped over her own feet and nearly fell twice.

Luckily, the sweater she'd put on that day was just long enough to cover her hips, and her long winter stockings came up to above her knees. She hadn't actually exposed that much skin. Even if Volf had caught sight of her, it had only been for a second, so he would probably forget. She also hoped he hadn't noticed her red face. In any case, he had immediately turned around and handed her his jacket. He really was a gentleman. The reason he was able to act with such a cool head must have been a combination of factors: he wasn't interested in her romantically and didn't see her as a woman.

As for the blue slime, she'd have Volf transfer it to a different jar while he was here—she thought about that as she ran into her room on the third floor.

Hearing Dahlia's footsteps fading away to the third floor, Volf finally unfroze. He took a look around and saw the blue slime on the floor behind the workbench, silently eating. Volf squashed it as he grabbed it and then crammed it into the jar and closed the lid tightly until he heard it creak. The blue slime stretched itself out on the bottom of the jar, spreading out the reddish-brown

fabric as if it were a spoil of war.

"You blue slime bastard… No, look who's talking…"

He'd been about to use his intimidation, but he stopped.

Good grief. What in the world was a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters and a Scarlet Armor like himself doing letting a slime dissolve Dahlia's clothes right in front of his face? The moment he'd seen the blue slime behind Dahlia, he should have grabbed it with his bare hands and stuffed it into the jar. No, actually, he should have just used the confusion of the moment to destroy its core.



Thankfully, Dahlia hadn't been burned, but if anything had happened, he would have trampled the slime's core with all his strength. If even a single scratch had marred those beautiful, fair legs of hers... Volf froze, then covered his face with his hands and muttered quietly, "...I need to hurry up and eliminate this from my memory..."

Inside the jar, the slime was still dissolving the torn strip of Dahlia's skirt.

"...Huh? A visitor?"

Just as Volf was struggling to erase his memory, the gate bell rang. Dahlia was still changing, so she couldn't go out to greet whoever it was, but at the same time, he couldn't very well do so either. As he looked out the window, unsure of what to do, he saw a carriage belonging to the Scalfarotto family. Thinking it might be a delivery from Guido or the weapons workshop, Volf went outside.

When he opened the gate, Jonas stepped out of the carriage. The rusty-haired man didn't seem at all surprised to see him.

As if Volf's being there was the most natural thing in the world, Jonas asked him, "Lord Volf, is Master Dahlia home? I have something a bit urgent I would like to discuss with her."

"She's upstairs right now, but she should be back down shortly. Shall we wait for her together, Master Jonas?"

"If you don't mind."

The other day, Jonas had begun addressing Volf with greater familiarity, but it seemed he was going to speak to him formally while in the Green Tower. That bothered Volf a bit, but at least talking to Jonas would mean not being alone with worthless thoughts swirling around his head. With that in mind, he went back into the workshop.

"...Forgive me. I shall come on another day."

Behind Volf, Jonas stopped at the threshold of the tower, gave a shallow bow, then turned to leave. Volf was bewildered by this sudden change of heart until he caught sight of Dahlia's slime-dissolved skirt on the floor. His mind had been in such turmoil that he'd completely forgotten to put it away.

"Master Jonas! Please wait!"

Feeling even more distressed than when faced with a monster on an expedition, Volf seized Jonas's arm.

"No, it really is nothing urgent," Jonas said. "I will come back

later.”

Volf used all his strength to stop Jonas, who was trying to walk off without taking one look back. He couldn’t let him leave now. And hadn’t he just said his errand *was* urgent?

“Really, please wait! That skirt was just half eaten by the slime! Dahlia is fine!”

“She’s fine? The blue slime…ate it…?”

Jonas turned around and cast a very skeptical look at Volf, making him forget what he’d been about to say.

“Um, Dahlia’s blue slime escaped from its jar. She tried to catch it, and it jumped up and stuck to her skirt, and when I pulled it off, the skirt, well…”

He struggled through his explanation, sincerely wishing he could run away.

“…Ah, that one, with the nice color and luster,” Jonas said, his face relaxing into a bemused smirk.

“That one…?”

“When I brought Master Dahlia home from the castle, she told me she couldn’t open the slime jar. Lately, some specimens at the slime farm have also been trying to escape by dissolving the kraken tape, and the one in that jar really is spirited. Something like a tank would work better, since she could water it from outside. I can have one sent over as early as tomorrow.”

Jonas had turned into a slime expert all of a sudden. Perhaps Volf should have expected that, but he wasn’t sure if it was because Jonas was his brother’s right-hand man or because he was the head of the Scalfarotto Arms Works. Either way, Volf was simply relieved that Jonas now understood the situation. However, Jonas proceeded to turn toward him and narrow his rust-colored eyes.

“Anyway, if those are Master Dahlia’s clothes on the floor, did she get burned?”

“No, she said she was fine.”

“She wasn’t just saying that? It seems like something she’d hide so you wouldn’t worry.”

He wasn’t wrong. Dahlia did seem like the type to say she was fine when she really wasn’t. But he didn’t recall seeing any burns on those fair legs… Volf exerted all his efforts into shaking away the vivid images that were resurfacing.

“I-I think she’s okay.”

Without another word, Volf folded the skirt in half and placed

it in a metal bucket. He couldn't help but feel a little awkward just leaving it on the floor like that. Fortunately, the floor itself was undamaged; like the tower, it was made of stone, so the slime's corrosive liquid hadn't dissolved it.

"Volf, Master Dahlia isn't a knight. She's a magical toolmaker."

"Yes, I know that."

"Judging by the fact that you're not wearing your coat, I'm guessing you gave it to her, but before that, you should have made absolutely sure that she wasn't hurt if there was a chance of that. If she was even slightly hurt, you should have given her a potion and not let her walk until she calmed down. If she wanted to move, you should have carried her. Although it was just a slime, she was attacked by a monster. This could even give her nightmares. Magical toolmakers aren't used to getting hurt like knights are. And more than anything, Master Dahlia is a woman."

"I'll be more careful in the future..."

His teacher's words made him seriously reflect on his own actions. Jonas was right. Making sure Dahlia was unharmed should have been Volf's first priority.

Jonas was also right about their attitudes regarding injuries. Wasn't someone getting hurt one of Dahlia's greatest fears? He hadn't even considered how their perceptions differed as a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters and a magical toolmaker. He felt so ashamed.

"Take a potion and go check on her right now. If she's hurt, don't let her move for a while after you treat her. Stay with her until she's back to normal, and don't come back down any sooner. I'll check on the slime jar and then return another day. Really, I didn't come for anything that urgent."

"...Yes, sir."

Volf bowed to Jonas, grabbed a potion off the shelf, then went upstairs.

After Jonas watched Volf ascend the stairs, he approached the large jar that housed the blue slime. For whatever reason, whether it was comfortable living in the Green Tower or was just responding positively to the amount of water it was receiving, this slime was richer in color and glossier than the ones at the Scalfarottos' estate.

The blue slime in the jar had spread out the auburn skirt as if it were a trophy, but as Jonas watched, the slime rolled it up and

hid it inside its body—not that its translucent body did much to conceal the fabric.

“I seem to have come here at a bad time…”

The blue slime before him now had evidently acted in a very unexpected way. At first, Jonas had been convinced he’d come at an extremely inopportune moment and so had been ready to turn around and leave, but seeing that Volf had lost his presence of mind for a different reason had convinced him otherwise.

The other day during their training, after Jonas had cut down those withered, red flowers, Volf had finally come at him with murderous intent. That bloodlust, directed at him for the first time, had sent a sharp ache across his forehead. Despite Volf’s flustered response just now, maybe he had begun to understand his own feelings a little.

The rest was up to Master Dahlia. Judging by the smile on her face when she was with Volf, there seemed to be more than enough reason for hope. However, she and Jonas were colleagues, and he was indebted to her for his title, so he couldn’t remark on it.

Jonas checked the size of the jar and considered how large the tank should be. It was probably best that he consult with Idaea, since there was the possibility the slime would split in the future.

It was then that Volf returned. “Master Jonas, Dahlia is back. She said she really is fine and that you can come on up to the second floor!” he called from the top of the staircase.

Seeing his boyish smile, Jonas realized… *Stay by Master Dahlia’s side for the rest of today*—he’d thought he’d made that abundantly clear with his words earlier, but it was as if the message hadn’t gotten through to Volf at all.

Really, just how dense could that student of his be?

No, perhaps Jonas hadn’t expressed himself correctly. Or perhaps he still had a lot to teach him.

“I’ll be right there,” he responded. Then he looked back at the jar. “Say, blue thing.”

As if it knew Jonas was speaking to it, the slime, which had been dissolving the reddish-brown fabric, stopped moving. Jonas’s rust-colored eyes softened, and he said with a sigh, “The next time those two are here alone, could you try jumping out again?”

In her room, Dahlia slid on a pair of thick, dark green, wide-leg pants and then layered an apron on top. The blue slime's escape had thrown her for a loop, and now it was about time for dinner. She hurried down to the second floor, where she ran into Volf coming upstairs with a potion. She was nearly sent into another panic, but Volf looked straight at her and asked worriedly if she'd been burned. When she assured him she really was unharmed, he looked incredibly relieved. Volf was such a worrywart. Then he told her that Jonas had come to call on her, and they decided they would talk on the second floor.

"Master Dahlia, I apologize for failing to give you advance notice."

Jonas entered the second-floor living room and gave her a polite bow. She offered him a seat on the sofa, and he sat down on the edge. He couldn't have known what had just transpired, but when their eyes met, she somehow felt nervous.

"I'll go prepare the drinks..."

"There's no need to trouble yourself. I'm sorry for springing this matter on you, but an acquaintance in the castle's magical toolmaking department told me that you obtained an ice dragon scale from Director Uros."

"Yes, I did."

Director Uros had said that Volf's father often lent him ice crystals. Perhaps the news had traveled that way from Guido to Jonas.

"May I inquire if you already have an intended use for that scale?"

"No, nothing specific. Do you need it?"

Dahlia had only thought about checking its hardness and other properties; she hadn't decided on what to use it for yet. She kept it to herself that she had been thinking it might be useful for making a fridge that consumed fewer magic crystals, or a strong chilling fan. Jonas, being possessed by a fire dragon, wielded fire magic. Dahlia figured he might want to use the scale for a neutralizing effect.

"Yes. If it's not too much trouble, I was wondering if I could request that you use it to make an Ice Lotus Staff."

"An Ice Lotus Staff...?" she echoed, her eyes widening at Jonas's sudden request.

“This is for Guido, isn’t it?” Volf asked.

“That is correct. If it proves feasible, I would like to give Lord Guido a staff that produces ice to commemorate his becoming a marquis. I’m always on the receiving end of gifts and have never been able to return the favor, so I thought I could take this opportunity to do so… I am able to pay you fifty gold coins in advance, and if that proves insufficient, I would just need time to come up with more.”

Master and servant had had exactly the same idea. As a matter of fact, Guido had already requested through Volf that she make another Crimson Lotus Blade for Jonas. The brothers were currently searching for a blade to serve as the foundation, unbeknownst to Jonas. Dahlia exchanged a brief glance with Volf and resolved to keep quiet about that.

“Hmm… If I could make it, I would, but I have no experience enchanting staffs. Also, if you want it to have offensive capabilities, that will require a lot of magic. I don’t believe I have enough.”

The rods and staffs used by mages were generally crafted by the mages themselves or by alchemists. Magical toolmakers did not craft them very often due to issues of magical compatibility and the fact that the work required quite a lot of magic.

“Well, regarding that, consider it a smaller version of the Crimson Lotus Blade rather than a staff meant to conjure offensive magic. It is a gift, so it’s not my desire that it have that much offensive capability.”

A simple commemorative gift seemed doable for Dahlia. But there was one problem.

“In that case, I can do it, but with ice crystals, it won’t shine. I’ll only be able to make something that produces small bits of ice, so it might look a bit plain…”

The Crimson Lotus Blade was a beautiful sword. But even incorporating the ice dragon scale, an Ice Lotus Staff of Dahlia’s creation would only produce ice crystals or maybe a large chunk of ice. It wouldn’t look as ostentatious as the Crimson Lotus Blade.

“Yes, that should be sufficient. As long as it’s a staff made with an ice dragon scale, then it will make for a topic of conversation on the day he receives his title.”

“I see. I suppose that’s another thing to consider…”

“Besides, if it can produce ice crystals, then Lord Guido could

turn those into ice shards by supplementing it with his magic. Those could be used as a distraction while I get in front of him. And it would be great if the staff itself could be physically solid enough to block an attack…”

“Then what if he could use the staff to produce a shield of ice? It wouldn’t last long, since it is ice, but maybe it could deflect one or two attacks.”

An ice dragon scale should enable the staff to produce a decent size block of ice. Dahlia had heard that Guido’s magic was strong, so he should be able to make that happen. While she was pondering that, Volf faced Jonas and asked, “Master Jonas, can’t Guido produce an ice wall?”

“That is true, Lord Volf, but if he did so in a carriage, he would freeze not just his assailants but even his guards. If we could scale things down to only distracting attackers, that would be preferable.”

“What? He can create enough ice to freeze even his guards?”

“Yes, and even I have almost been a victim of it. I was able to jump out of range just in time, but I was nearly frozen…”

Jonas looked away with a painful, distant gaze. Dahlia felt a little uneasy. It almost seemed like this staff was actually meant to protect Guido’s guards. Guido’s own offensive capabilities were apparently even more powerful than the ice dragon scale.

“…Oh, so then, what happened to the people who attacked him?” she asked before she could stop herself. She found herself confused about whether she should sympathize with the assailants.

Jonas looked at her, his eyes squinting as he smiled.

“I quickly melted the ice away with fire magic, so it was no problem.”

So after getting frozen, they had been scorched with flames. The image itself was frightening enough. At her side, Volf was silent. He was probably imagining the same thing.

“Master Dahlia, I fully understand this is a selfish request I am making of you, but would you please consider?”

“Consider this a request from me too,” said Volf. “And I can find whatever materials you’ll need…”

Dahlia owed a lot to Jonas, but also to Guido for being her noble guarantor. On top of that, Guido was Volf’s older brother. Dahlia decided to accept with the mindset that she was repaying their favor.

“Okay. I make no promises that it will turn out well, but as long as you are all right with that…”

“I thank you kindly. I do not mind that this is a trial run. Please just inform me if you need funds. I can supply you with them immediately. Lord Guido has given me permission to use whatever is in the workshop, so please feel free to take anything that suits your purposes. And if there is anything you need to have sent for, do not hesitate to say so.”

Dahlia thought it over. She could use a part of the chilling fan’s magical circuitry for the Ice Lotus Staff. However, the staff wouldn’t offer as much surface area to work with as a sword, so it might be difficult to lay the circuitry down. And the number one problem was the material for the body of the staff.

“I’m not sure what to use for the staff itself…”

“I’ve heard wood and monster bones are often used for staffs… What about a branch of the World Tree?”

“Lord Volf, while that is a well-known example, a branch from the World Tree wouldn’t be compatible with ice magic.”

A branch of the World Tree, with its plentiful magic, would make the perfect material for the staff. But the World Tree was, well, a tree. Dahlia had read that it was difficult to enchant it with fire or ice magic due to issues of compatibility.

“If I use a monster’s bone, then I should pick one from a monster that has strong magic and magic resistance.”

The first monster that came to mind was the ice dragon. But of course, obtaining one of its bones wouldn’t be easy. Another monster with strong ice or water magic, then—Dahlia was digging through her memories when Jonas said quietly, “A monster’s bone… Could you use a pseudodragon bone? Though I am not sure if it would be thick or long enough…”

Wait. Why had he looked at his own leg when he’d said that?

“Absolutely not!”

“Out of the question!”

She and Volf shouted at the same time, and Jonas stifled a laugh. Apparently, he’d only been teasing.

“Um, I was thinking a sea serpent bone, but that might not be durable enough. What sorts of monster bones are commonly used for magical tools?” Volf asked, changing the subject while Jonas was still trying to make the corners of his mouth settle down.

“The ones I see the most often are unicorn or perhaps kelpie

bones?” suggested Jonas.

“Unicorns aren’t very compatible with ice magic, and while kelpies are compatible with both ice and water magic, they have low resistance to other types…”

Were there no monsters that suited all their needs? Of the monsters that the others suggested and that she herself could remember, none were unusable, but every one presented some point of concern. Dahlia was trying to think of something when she suddenly remembered a page from the spellbook her father had left her.

“A hati bone would have both high physical and magical resistance, and it should be compatible with both water and ice magic.”

The hati was a monster similar to a sköll. However, while a sköll was a jet-black, wolflike monster with strong wind magic, a hati was pure white and possessed ice in addition to wind magic. Skölls were seldom seen, but there were even fewer confirmed sightings of a hati.

“A hati bone… Yes, I believe there were two small bones in the workshop’s storage.”

“Really…?” Dahlia muttered in surprise. She was sure they were incredibly rare. The Scalfarotto family had proved once again how powerful and influential they were. However, even with the material secured, there was a bigger problem. “Hati bone really is a great material, but it’s said to consume magic, so I don’t have enough to enchant it. It would have to be someone who can enchant with grade fourteen magic or above…”

Even enchanting the sköll fang had made her faint. And she knew from the description in the spellbook that enchanting the hati bone would be impossible for her. Dahlia wasn’t sure how her father, who had under grade fourteen magic, had known about hati bones. Had he learned from her grandfather? Had her grandfather even had that much magic?

Dahlia was also curious to know who had double underlined in red ink the words “grade fourteen or above”—her father or his senior apprentice?

“What if you wrote up the specifications and another person performed the enchantment? Or, if you would prefer not to, you can use a different material.”

“Not at all. That sounds like a great solution if we can make it work.”

There should be magical toolmakers at the Scalfarotto Arms Works who possessed more than grade fourteen magic and were much older than Dahlia. It would be much easier if they could request that one of them perform the enchantment.

“If we ask someone from the Scalfarotto Arms Works or the castle, they would very likely tell Lord Guido about it…”

Jonas evidently wanted the staff to be a surprise present. But if they excluded those toolmakers, Dahlia couldn’t think of any who had over grade fourteen magic and extensive experience at enchanting. Neither could Volf, it seemed. He was deep in thought but offered no suggestions.

“This may be an expensive option, but I’d like to consult with someone who could serve as a provisional magical toolmaker.”

“A provisional magical toolmaker?”

Did distinguished mages occasionally undertake magical toolmaking work? As Dahlia was wondering about that, Jonas lifted his right arm and exposed the bracelet that concealed his blight.

“I refer to the man who made me this bracelet—Lord Leone Jedda.”



“Lord Gildo sent over a tentative list of attendees for the ball. The invitation letters will likely be delivered tomorrow.”

In the Rossetti Trading Company’s office at the Merchants’ Guild, Ivano handed Dahlia a sheet of stationery on which were listed the names of twenty-three couples, all nobles ranging from marquises to barons. The reason Gildo’s list was a little short was because Dahlia’s name was not included.

“Sending an invitation two weeks in advance? That doesn’t give much time for a response.”

“These sorts of invitations don’t require replies. He confirms in advance whether they will attend or not and then sends the invitations later. Though high-ranking nobles may be recognized by their faces alone, the invitation serves as an identification of sorts for when you arrive.”

“Really? How long has Lord Gildo been planning this?”

“I’m guessing for over a month. But he regularly holds these sorts of events, so don’t worry about it too much,” Ivano said with a smile. Dahlia took the letter from him and looked it over

with Volf, who had come to visit, it being his day off. This went without saying, but everyone listed was a noble, and she didn't recognize a majority of the names.

Today, Volf was sitting next to Ivano, diagonally across from Dahlia, instead of next to her like he usually did. Dahlia figured he had chosen that seat because she'd had documents spread out in front of her when he'd arrived. Also, he'd mentioned nothing about the blue slime incident from the other day. A true gentleman.

"I think Lord Gildo is really being accommodating of you. Sir Grato, Mr. Leone, Mr. Augusto, Professor Oswald, and Forto are going to be there with their wives, which means you'll know over ten people."

"That's good to hear..."

Dahlia sighed with relief. She was still nervous, but it was very reassuring to know there would be people she was familiar with.

Volf had picked up on something. "So Ivano, you're calling him Forto even at work now?"

Ivano gave a strained laugh. "Yes. He gave me permission to call him by his first name alone, but I felt a little awkward doing so at the Tailors' Guild, so I called him Mr. Forto there. Then he told me to stop doing that because it was disturbing, so I just gave in..."

"You two seem to be getting along well..."

When Dahlia had first heard Ivano address Forto, the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild and a viscount, without a title, she'd been worried he'd be reprimanded for disrespect. Not that she had room to talk, seeing as she also called Volf by his first name. She'd accepted it after hearing that it was permissible if the noble was the one to propose it and both parties considered each other close friends.

Dahlia was sure that apart from Leone and Gabriella, guildmaster and vice-guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild, respectively, Forto was the first noble Ivano had grown close to. Other than him, she also knew that he often had tea with Volf's older brother Guido and dinner with Gildo, the head treasurer. All of this was surely the result of Ivano's personality.

"Something like that. He's a bad drunk, you know, despite how he may seem. When he came over last week, we spent all night drinking, then got into a bit of a spat..."

"Huh? Mr. Forto picked a fight with you?"

“He did. He said he’s been busy lately and hasn’t had time to design clothes. When I told him he could be working on designs instead of drinking with me, he got upset at me.”

“Ivano, that might’ve been a bit harsh…”

Even if it had been a hard truth, it might not have been the best thing to say, as Volf suggested.

“Incidentally, Sir Bernigi will be accompanied not by his wife but by a young lady from a branch family. She’s been living in the north and is planning to enroll in college next year. He said he wants her to observe and become accustomed to the nobles of the royal capital.”

Dahlia wished she could have had the opportunity to privately observe and become accustomed to nobles and balls. The first ball she would be attending was her own debut, where she would be the center of attention. That was not good for her stomach. Fortunately, thanks to the wyvern medicine Ivano had given her, she didn’t feel any pain at the moment.

“Anyway, Chairwoman, I was thinking your partner should be your noble guardian, Lord Guido, but he has other obligations that day, so he suggested Sir Volf go in his place. Oh, and to avoid any trouble, Lord Gildo will be listing Lord Guido’s name until the day of. Lord Gildo has already given his approval, so what do you say, Sir Volf?”

“Oh, of course. I’d be happy to.”

“Thank you…”

Dahlia felt genuinely relieved when she heard Ivano’s explanation and saw Volf’s smile. She knew it would be rude to admit, but this would be much less nerve-racking than being escorted by Guido.

“Okay then, I think you two will dance the second song together, so please make sure you practice.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Dahlia and Volf sputtered in unison. Ivano grinned, his smile reaching all the way to his navy blue eyes.

“You’ll dance the first song with Lord Gildo, the host, right? So the second song would ordinarily be danced with Guido, your noble guarantor, but instead you’ll dance with his stand-in, Sir Volf.”

“I see. So that’s how it works…” Volf responded, deep in thought. One would have never guessed who was the noble

here.

“Chairwoman, will you be all right on the dancing front?”

“Yes, I went to Gabriella for advice, so I’ll be taking dance lessons…”

Dahlia had gone to Gabriella for advice immediately after giving Gildo her answer about her debut. Gabriella had told Dahlia she would introduce her to the teacher who was giving dance lessons to her daughter, and now Dahlia was scheduled to meet with that teacher four times over the next couple of weeks. She hoped that would be enough to get her up to snuff.

“If Madam Gabriella vouches for this instructor, then you should be in good hands. I’m sure they’ll teach you the preliminary greetings and how to properly hold a conversation too.”

“I’ll do my best…”

Dahlia had to practice her etiquette and conversational skills in addition to dancing. She also needed to learn all the pleasantries she would have to exchange with her partner before and after a dance. Although she’d read books about the topic, there was a limit to how far theory alone could take her.

“Ah, so you need to think about all that during a dance…”

Volf seemed to have just realized that too. He cast his golden eyes downward and pressed a hand against his forehead. Volf had said that he was unaccustomed to aristocratic conversation, having spent most of his life as a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. Also, many noblewomen, albeit married ones, would be attending. This event would most likely be very taxing on him.

“Um, Volf, if this is too much to ask—”

“No, I just need to buckle down and learn…!”

“You two will be fine. If anything happens, Lord Gildo, Sir Grato, and everyone else in attendance can help you out. As for the third dance, I think you can ask Sir Grato or one of the others. They should all be experienced dancers.”

Ivano was probably right, but she couldn’t get too careless even with people she knew. Dancing with anyone was bound to make her nervous. What if she stepped on their feet?

“I can also dance a basic trio, more or less, so just let me know if you need a partner to practice with. Though I’m a beginner, so I won’t be able to walk you through everything.”

Dahlia was surprised to hear Ivano could dance. He was ever her capable, skilled employee.

“Wait, I’ll be your—I mean, I also need to get better at dancing, so I can be your practice partner,” Volf rushed in to add. As she’d expected, he must have been nervous about attending a ball held by a marquis family. Considering they would be dancing together the day of, she did want to practice dancing with him.

“Then if you don’t mind, could we please practice together?”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best not to hold you back...!”

They looked at each other, their expressions full of firm resolve and tragic bravery. They were talking about dancing, but there was no sense of elegance involved.

“Chairwoman, Sir Volf, isn’t it about time for you to go? Don’t you need to discuss something with Mr. Leone?”

Ivano’s voice made Dahlia start. She had scheduled a meeting with Leone so she could bring him Jonas’s letter requesting his services as a provisional magical toolmaker.

“I do. I’ll head over to the guildmaster’s office.”

As the guildmaster, Leone was very busy. She checked once again to make sure the letter was still in her bag, hoping he would be amenable to their request. Meanwhile, Volf was fastening the top button of his shirt. Then the two of them left the room, both slightly nervous.

Ivano, who’d stayed behind in the office, took his black leather notepad out of his inner coat pocket. His boss’s debut was all set. It would be held at the Marquisate Diels. With Gildo as the host, the event was sure to go perfectly. Many supporters of the Rossetti Trading Company would be in attendance, and Ivano had also procured information about most of the other noble guests, so at the moment, there seemed to be nothing to worry about.

“Now then, everything’s gone well so far...”

Just as Guido had proposed, Volf would be Dahlia’s partner for her debut. The two of them had naturally agreed to that arrangement, but now the question was whether it would serve as an impetus...

The elder brother had brilliantly cleared away the obstructions as if using earth magic to lay down a wide-open road, but now it was up to the younger brother to take advantage of that.

The moment Ivano had suggested himself as a dance practice partner, Volf had practically jumped in to volunteer.

Also, Ivano didn’t know what had happened, but Volf had seemed strangely determined to avoid eye contact with Dahlia today. And he’d been sitting next to Ivano instead of in his usual spot at Dahlia’s side, but it hadn’t seemed as if they’d had a fight. Whether Dahlia herself was acting fidgety for the same reason or because of her debut, Ivano hadn’t the faintest idea. He hoped this was a sign of the scales tipping, but he’d better leave that unsaid.

Besides, he had work to do as vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company. Ivano was also going to be attending Dahlia’s debut, and there was no doubt in his mind that the nobles in attendance would be calling on him as well. Whether or not that would be beneficial to him was beside the point. When a merchant was onstage, he had an obligation to work the situation to his advantage.

“All right, I have a lot of work to do too—making others dance is a lot more fun than dancing myself.”



Dahlia and Volf were sitting on the sofa across from Leone in the Merchants’ guildmaster’s office. After scanning the letter, which his attendant had opened for him, Leone addressed Dahlia.

“A request from Lord Jonas, eh? I charge money even for close associates, and my work doesn’t come cheap.”

“Yes, that’s reasonable, considering it’s going to be a demanding enchantment. Could you provide an estimate?”

Enchanting a hati bone with an ice dragon scale—it was a procedure that could only be carried out by someone with high magic. Of course it would be expensive.

“If you provide all the materials and the plan for the magical circuit, then I will charge forty gold coins for the enchantment itself.”

“Understood. I look forward to working together, then.”

“Given the expense, do you need to test my skill?”

“That won’t be necessary. I was told you were the one who made Master Jonas’s bracelet.”

“That’s true, I did. That was ten years ago now…”

Leone deeply furrowed his brow. Instead of looking proud, he seemed not to want to remember it. A tool like that required

high magic, so it must have been challenging to craft.

Leone gave a light shake of the head and then tapped the table twice with his pointer finger.

“…Right. If you designate Gabriella as your female attendant for when you accept your barony next year, I’ll do the work for one gold coin.”

“Female attendant?”

“Yes. When you receive your title, you’re to enter the hall with either a family member who already belongs to the nobility or with a close friend of the same sex. I want an excuse to give her a new dress, so it would be splendid if you could ask her after the new year.”

That was quite a reason to request that she choose Gabriella. But Dahlia didn’t have a female attendant yet, nor had she made any preparations for one.

“I would really appreciate that, but…couldn’t you just give her a dress for a ball or some other routine event?”

“She won’t let me have new dresses prepared for balls held by old friends. She says she already has too many and it’d just be a waste. She won’t let me give her shoes or fine jewelry either. But I’m sure she’ll consent to be your attendant when you receive your title, so I want to use this chance to give her a new set of everything.”

His wife was refusing to let him get her new dresses and shoes, so he was lowering the cost of his work in order to have an excuse to lavish her with gifts—it wasn’t the sort of thing Dahlia heard every day. Next to her, Volf couldn’t even muster a response.

Dahlia was reminded of something Ivano had once said with a faraway gaze: “A husband who loves in excess causes trouble for his wife.” Now she knew what he had been talking about.

“Okay. I will ask her after the new year…”

“Right, and keep it a secret from her for a while. I want to examine a few contenders before the year’s end.”

“Okay…”

Gabriella was very perceptive. Dahlia would really have to work hard not to let anything slip.

“…If Gabriella questions you about it, just tell her I instructed you to keep it a secret.”

“Um, am I that easy to read?”

She couldn’t hold back her question when she saw Leone

furtively look away from her.

"...Maybe."

"Dahlia...we all have our own strengths and weaknesses."

These two were merciless. She wished they could have at least tried to sugarcoat it a bit. Even the straight-faced attendant standing behind Leone had quickly looked away the moment she'd met his eyes. Dahlia vowed to search for a book that detailed how to maintain a composed expression or a magical tool that she could use for the purpose.

"By the way, I heard you'll be debuting at Lord Gildo's home in two weeks. I'm sure you're busy preparing for that. Can we save the enchanting for after that's done?"

Dahlia was fully on board with Leone changing the subject.

"Yes, that should be fine," she said.

"Do you already have the ice dragon scales and hati bones?"

"I do. I have one ice dragon scale and two short hati bones. Do you need a spare scale to use as a test?"

"I used ice dragon scales many dozens of times in my youth, so no. I won't botch it."

He answered her lightly, but Dahlia wondered just what sort of enchantments he'd done to have used ice dragon scales "dozens of times."

"Um, do you mind if I ask what you used them to enchant?"

"I enchanted shields, armor, and shoes with heat resistance. It was equipment used for volcano exploration."

Dahlia had never seen or even heard of volcano exploration equipment.

Leone must have had over grade fourteen magic. When he and her father had been in college, they'd been in the same magical toolmaking courses and had been colleagues in the Magical Tool Research Group. Frankly, it was a huge loss to the magical toolmaking world that Leone had become the guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild. Although Dahlia knew he was doing great work as guildmaster, if he had continued as a toolmaker, she could have sought his instruction. Suddenly, she found herself staring intently at his face.

"Listen, I'm not a magical toolmaker. I just accept work from time to time. Even when I took magical toolmaking courses in addition to my civil service courses, the reason was to make money."

Leone had read her like a book. Not that she wanted to admit

it.

“Still, I think it’s amazing that you can craft tools with such strong magic.”

For Dahlia, they were enchantments she couldn’t perform, tools she couldn’t craft. Along with her admiration, she felt considerable envy. Maybe Volf felt the same way about being unable to outwardly express magic.

“Amazing, you say…? In the past, I’ve crafted things I didn’t want to. Just to make a living.”

“What…?”

“Remember this. For a magical toolmaker to craft a tool they don’t want to—it’s hell.”

Dahlia thought she saw a flash of darkness cross Leone’s black eyes. As she was struggling to respond, he let his gaze drop to the letter once more.

“Don’t you want to be able to enchant a staff?”

“I would love to, but I don’t have enough magic.”

“It doesn’t have to be the staff for Guido specifically. Since you’ll already have drawn up the plan for the circuit, you can try it out with different materials. I’ll have some basic plans for staff circuits and a dozen kelpie bone staffs delivered to the tower. You won’t have much space to draw a magical circuit on a staff. You can practice using ice crystals. Then, on the day I enchant Guido’s staff, I’ll teach you as I go.”

“Are you, um, sure that’s all right?”

“I wasn’t very good at enchanting small magical circuits, so Carlo taught me during our time in the Magical Tool Research Group. It’s thanks to him that I can do it decently enough now.”

Leone took off his gold bracelet and showed Dahlia the inner surface, which was inlaid with five gems and engraved with a magical circuit. She could tell there was strong magic coursing through the well-laid circuitry, but the moment he put the bracelet back on, she could no longer perceive it. It must have had a concealment effect.

“Wow…”

“That’s amazing…”

She and Volf could only offer words of admiration. It was no less amazing an enchantment than the one on the bracelet Oswald had crafted for her to wear.

“If the circuit is any smaller than this, I’ll hire an assistant. Send me the plans once you have them ready.”

“I will. Um, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to accept this request.”

They were asking him to perform magical toolmaking, which wasn’t even his main line of work, during a time of the year that was incredibly busy. Furthermore, the work was highly difficult and had to be done without Guido’s knowledge. Not only that, but Leone was reducing his fee and even using this as an opportunity to teach Dahlia. She felt very guilty about the entire arrangement.

“I’m getting something out of this too, so don’t think too much of it. On another note—I also received a letter from someone else, requesting a durable sword that’s resistant to heat, doesn’t have an enchantment, and is easy to handle. Lord Volfred, are you here today for the same thing?”

“That’s correct. That letter was from my brother, wasn’t it?”

Leone looked at Volf, then raised the corners of his mouth.

“A one-handed sword made of mythril and crimson gold just came in from Išrana. Enchanting it with a fire dragon scale will take high magic and skill. The sender also requested that I provide my assistance if it’s needed.”

Master and attendant had thought alike every step of the way. And it seemed that this sword would require her to enlist the help of yet another magical toolmaker.

“If you tell me your price, I’ll take care of it,” Volf said.

Leone narrowed his black eyes at him and said, “I don’t give two quotes in one visit. My daughter’s in-laws deal with precious metals, so instead, I want you to purchase an accessory from their shop.”

Volf briefly considered the prospect, then acquiesced. “An accessory? Well…okay.”

He didn’t have any piercings, he avoided wearing rings since they affected his grip on his sword, and he was unlikely to part with his sköll bracelet. If he was to buy something new, it would probably be a set of cufflinks or a lapel pin—while she was reflecting on the possibilities, she noticed Leone’s black eyes were fixed on her.

Was she supposed to buy something from the shop too? Just as she was about to open her mouth, Leone looked back at Volf and leaned forward slightly.

“I think gold would be better than silver. What do you think, Lord Volfred?”

“Oh… Yes! I agree!” Volf said, smiling broadly as he nodded in agreement.

Dahlia had to agree: he *would* look better in gold than silver. Though even a gold accessory might dull in comparison to his beautiful golden eyes. She didn’t know what he would end up purchasing, but she privately hoped he could find something he liked.

The idea that she herself would receive the gold accessory later on never crossed her mind.



Leone let out a shallow sigh as he watched the smiling pair leave his office. Volf had caught on to his suggestion of a gold accessory, but the same couldn’t be said for Dahlia. He’d wanted to suggest they go look at the accessories together, but it was perhaps too early for that.

At any rate, those two were the last people he would have expected to come to him with a magical toolmaking job. A staff for Guido and a one-handed sword for Jonas. The staff would be made of hati bone and enchanted with an ice dragon scale, while the sword would be mythril and crimson gold and enchanted with a fire dragon scale—one that had been plucked from the recipient himself.

It was an interesting job, one that would allow Leone to use a combination of rare materials. The sort of job that any magical toolmaker would get excited over. He knew of a certain green-eyed toolmaker who would have jumped on this opportunity if he could have. As he thought of that man, Leone closed his eyes under the guise of rubbing his brow.

Carlo Rossetti, Dahlia’s father, the magical toolmaker with the same bright green eyes as her… He had been Leone’s underclassman in college and a close friend. He’d been deeply passionate about magical toolmaking, and he’d exhibited impressively precise, delicate control over his magic when it came to enchanting.

Although Leone had also pursued magical toolmaking courses, he hadn’t shared Carlo’s passion. The reason Leone had joined the Magical Tool Research Group had been to make magical tools he could sell, or to find an artisan to make them while he acted as a go-between, all in order to defray his living

expenses.

Even though he came from a viscount family, their lack of money had spelled their decline, so he'd turned his back on his worthless father and busied himself with raising money. He had studied both civil service and magical toolmaking, and when the school day was over, he would head to work, after which he'd attend the Magical Tool Research Group as a way to blow off steam.

However, it seemed he'd been blessed with good friendships. The friends he'd made at the research group had offered him their help, but they'd never ridiculed him or overly pitied him. In exchange for them teaching him how to wield and control his magic, he taught them about buying in bulk and haggling with shops.

They'd laughed over stupid stories, gotten angry with each other when one of them went overboard with a magical tool experiment, and chatted excitedly about their crushes. For Leone, his days in the Magical Tool Research Group had become some of his few fond memories of youth.

After graduation, Leone had become very busy running around in the three hats he wore as a merchant, a member of the Merchants' Guild, and an occasional magical toolmaker. During that period, when he'd been unable to spend much time with his friends, he'd remained closest to Carlo. After all, as a toolmaker, the man had frequented the Merchants' Guild. Carlo had even introduced Leone to the love of his life, which had been the luckiest thing to ever happen to him.

As thanks for introducing him to Gabriella, Leone had tried to give Carlo a branch of the World Tree and a desert dragon's fang, but the toolmaker had vehemently declined, even though he'd once specifically mentioned that they were materials he'd wanted to see for quite some time. When Leone had told him he didn't want their friendship to become unbalanced, Carlo had told him that friendships didn't always require perfectly equal give-and-take.

"If it really bothers you, then let's just say you owe me one! If I ever need anything, I'll come to you, Leo!" So Carlo had said, but Leone had been able to tell full well from his smile that he intended to leave that debt uncollected. These types of friendships were normal to Carlo, a commoner, which allowed him to be carefree with his kindness—at least, that was the

reasoning Leone had come up with.

But even when Carlo became a baron, it was as if nothing about him had changed. He helped out his fellow magical toolmakers, intervened when there was trouble with a vendor even if there was no benefit to himself, and gave advice to others who needed it in the Merchants' Guild. When it was obvious he was being taken advantage of by some of those parties, Leone would step in to put a stop to things. He sometimes even had to scold Carlo for being too nice.

Despite that, the man persisted, occasionally becoming embroiled in conflicts and occasionally suffering a loss. Within the Merchants' Guild, Leone kept an eye on him and started reaching out with support whenever it seemed like he needed help. Leone never told Carlo how relieved he was when he started coming to him for advice *before* getting in trouble.

Behind his back, people used to call Leone a cold-blooded, miserly viscount who valued gold over people and his own self-interest over all else. Then, before he knew it, he found he'd become highly respected and popular as the guildmaster of the Merchants'. When the former guildmaster and his seniors spoke highly of him at a nobles' meeting, honestly, it was hard for him to accept.

Having earned a good reputation as the Merchants' guildmaster, Leone began to receive more invitations to the castle to give his opinion, and he was also asked to sit in on business dealings with other nations more often.

There were no issues with entrusting the Merchants' Guild to his wife Gabriella, who had become the vice-guildmaster. She was very capable and enjoyed the trust of the other guild members and merchants, although it was very unfortunate that the two of them were spending less time together.

Even though the two of them were busier than ever, Carlo remained the same as ever.

Almost ten years ago now, the head of a certain viscount family was voicing his complaints to the receptionist of the Merchants' Guild. He was upset that there had been a delay in the process of sorting packages from a neighboring country. The receptionist had given the viscount a standard explanation: the packages had been delivered late due to the ships being delayed by a storm, and now the cargo had all arrived at once during a

long spell of rain, which had further delayed their sorting, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Perhaps because the viscount was frustrated that he couldn't accept his package, he started accusing the receptionist of being rude and demanded their name. The receptionist being scolded was a commoner. They hesitated to give their name, likely thinking that it could cause them trouble in the future if the head of a viscount family knew their name for this reason. That was when Carlo slid into the scene.

"It's good to see you again, Viscount! Oh, were you in the middle of a conversation? My apologies. I just saw you over here, so I'd thought I'd come say hello—"

As Carlo artfully forced himself between them, the viscount knitted his brow. "You. Name yourself."

"My name is Carlo Rossetti. I met you once before at a nobles' meeting."

Although Carlo was a baron, his name was well-known for his having invented the water dispenser. The viscount returned his greeting, then Carlo started inquiring about the situation. When he heard that the viscount's urgent shipment had yet to be sorted, and that he took issue with the receptionist's explanation, Carlo nodded twice.

"I'm sure it's a very important package. It would be great if they could identify the contents of a package from the outside, but precious cargo is wrapped in cloth, making it difficult to know what's inside."

Packages sent by sea were first packed into regulation boxes before being loaded onto ships at the port. When it rained, the addition of a rainproof cloth over the cargo obscured the written labels on the outsides of the boxes. Carlo wasn't lying when he said they couldn't determine the contents of precious cargo right away.

"This unending rain has got everyone in a lather. The guild has been inundated with inquiries, so of course the receptionist's explanation is going to sound impersonal. I have a feeling that a viscount coming and asking them a direct question at this time just made them a bit nervous."

Carlo flipped the receptionist's attitude to being one of nervousness toward the viscount. When he heard that, the viscount's indignant expression softened.

"I am so glad I ran into you. Could I borrow some of your time

until these packages are sorted out? I'm no expert on the fine wine that nobles prefer, but I do know a good spot or two to enjoy an ale. Perhaps we can chat about it."

Many of the guild members present were unsurprised that Carlo had steered the conversation toward alcohol, but the viscount accepted that invitation, then returned late that afternoon with his face red from drink. He'd apparently even thanked the guild staff and claimed his package in a good mood.

Unfortunately, at the time, Leone had been away at a neighboring country with a diplomat. He heard the whole story from Ivano, who had just been about to deal with the situation when Carlo beat him to it. He'd laughed and said that he'd gotten a front-row seat to a lesson in how to kick someone out with a smile.

As for the viscount, apparently he had twice invited Gabriella to dine with him, knowing Leone was away. Now, however, he was no longer the head of a viscount family, nor did he live in the royal capital, so he wasn't someone Leone thought about particularly often.

"A staff that freezes and a sword that burns, hmm...?"

Guido and Jonas. Each was both a recipient and sender, and each was trying to give the other a present without him learning of it in advance. It was a funny turn of events.

Leone had a connection with them already, from crafting Jonas's illusionment bracelet—the bracelet he'd made to hide the man's fire dragon scales. Having retired from being a magical toolmaker, Leone had planned not to take on work anymore. However, it was his friend and head of the Scalfarotto family, Renato, who had requested it of him, so he'd accepted the job off the record.

This time, he wasn't making a bracelet but weapons. As far as he could judge from the contents of the letter and what Dahlia had told him, he should be able to manage the enchantment, but drawing the fine magical circuit would be impossible for him.

When he thought of the silver-haired man he could go to for help, Leone grimaced. He had no intention of remaining on bad terms with the man indefinitely, but at the moment, there was still some distance between them.

No, perhaps he should take this opportunity to reach out to him. They should be able to help each other out in times of need.

Leone placed his clenched fist on top of his desk as a memory resurfaced.

"Leo, make sure you treasure Gabriella and your family. And yourself too."

That day, Carlo had surprised him by paying him a visit in his office, and the two of them had had tea. Those were the words Carlo had uttered out of the blue when they had drained their cups. Right before that, Leone had been talking about the guild staff working overtime, so he'd thought that was what had spurred Carlo's comment. Leone had responded perfunctorily that he knew that, his mind preoccupied with thoughts of a meeting he had the next day. The younger man had spoken with his usual airy tone and bright smile—but still, why had Leone failed to notice?

Those were the last words Carlo had ever said to him.

When Leone had heard Carlo had collapsed at the foot of the stairs inside the guild and passed away right there, he'd thought it was some sick joke. Even when he'd seen Carlo's name engraved on his tombstone, he couldn't help but think that at any second the toolmaker would cheerfully call out "Leo!" from behind him.

Carlo was a college friend with whom Leone had stayed reasonably close even after they'd joined the adult world and become work colleagues, a fact he was proud of. In his last few years, Carlo had been busy with training his apprentices, resulting in the two of them talking less often, but Leone had figured that was just how things went as years passed.

But a while after Carlo died, Leone was bothered by the nagging feeling that at some point, the artisan had started putting distance between the two of them. With the man's sudden death weighing on his mind, Leone started to look into things. It was then that he received a succinct answer from his family. "He raised his magic excessively with potions," it said.

Leone remembered how Carlo had always wanted higher magic, ever since his school days. But he couldn't imagine that the man would do something so foolish as to increase it in a way that would result in his leaving his precious daughter alone.

Even if it had happened due to some mistake, Carlo could have come to him for help. He might not have been able to save him, but he could have helped prolong his life. It seemed inconceivable that Carlo hadn't considered that. The fact that he

hadn’t said a word despite that must have meant he didn’t trust Leone… No, that couldn’t be it.

Carlo had, without a doubt, trusted Leone and his friends from the Magical Tool Research Group. The reason Carlo hadn’t come to him must have been in an effort not to get him involved in *something*.

In that case, just who was it that Carlo hadn’t wanted Leone, the head of a viscount family, involved with? He could only think of two possibilities: a high-ranking noble, or someone in the upper echelons of the royal government. Those types of people often desired excellent magical toolmakers to use as pawns. If someone had already gotten their claws into Carlo, then there would have been nothing Leone could have done.

But evidently, their connection was still alive and well. Carlo’s daughter, Dahlia, had blossomed as a magical toolmaker and a company chairwoman. On top of that, she still hadn’t reached her peak bloom, evidenced by her growing connections with the various guilds and the Order of Beast Hunters.

That same woman had now come to him with a request to make magical tools of weapons. If his skill and renown were useful for creating dangerous tools, then fine. The sooner Dahlia joined the Scalfarotto family, the better, but until then, the least Leone could do was act as her shelter from the rain. Leone had been vexed at the fact that he’d been unable to repay his debt to his junior for introducing him to Gabriella. It wasn’t a bad idea to repay his daughter instead.

In any case—Dahlia was becoming more and more like Carlo. Her eyes lit up at the sight of magical tools and materials, she threw her all into development, oblivious to profit, weak to her own passion. If Ivano hadn’t become her right-hand man, Leone might have found himself in that dangerous position.

Carlo had been a man who was good at helping others but terrible at accepting help from others. Leone stared at the empty sofa and muttered inaudibly, “Carlo… Your daughter has become just like you. In ways I prefer she wouldn’t.”

Boiled Gyoza and Ice

Dahlia returned to the Green Tower with Volf. When they walked into the workshop on the first floor, Volf's gaze drifted toward the wall.

"The slime's jar has turned into a glass case."

The blue slime was in a square glass case about twice the size of its previous jar. The tank's sturdiness was certified; it was apparently strong enough that it wouldn't break even if Dahlia were to stand on it.

"That's right. This way I can water the slime with a dropper from the outside, so I don't have to open the lid."

"Did Master Jonas rehouse the slime?"

"No, Ms. Idaea came and did it for me."

"And that, um, went okay?"

Dahlia was thankful that he avoided saying anything specific and looked away as he asked. Just remembering the blue slime's escape left her feeling all sorts of embarrassed.

"Yes. Ms. Idaea must have been using body strengthening, since she easily opened the jar and grabbed the blue slime with one hand to move it over. The slime also behaved itself. It didn't move at all."

"I'm glad it went well. I guess because she's used to handling slimes?"

"It jumped around so much with me, so maybe it has a sense for people?"

The two of them both turned to look at the case. The blue slime seemed to be enjoying its new, larger home; it was flattening out its round form right in the middle of it. Inside its body, along with its core, was some other faint red object.

"It's still holding on to it…?"

"On to what?"

"Well, inside the slime, that red thing, that's…"

"No, it's not! That's the skin of an apple I fed it this morning!" Dahlia said, her voice rising a few more decibels than she'd meant it to.

That red strip wasn't a piece of her skirt from the other day. It truly was the apple skin she'd given it that morning. Dahlia had

theorized that the reason it had melted her skirt was because it wasn't satisfied with just water—so she had started slowly introducing scraps of vegetables and fruits into its diet.

Besides, slime's corrosive liquid was surprisingly strong, strong enough to consume what it put in its body in a day. But it wasn't as if Volf was familiar with slime ecology, so she could see how he would misunderstand.

"Umm, right! We were talking about dancing!" Dahlia said, purposefully making her voice cheerful as she changed the subject.

Volf also gave a light cough and said, "Y-Yeah, that's right."

"If we want enough room to dance, we'll have to either go to the garden or the rooftop."

Due to the tower's staircase, there wasn't much floor space. The rooftop and garden were spacious, but both were outdoors, and it was a bit cold this time of year.

"Dance practice, just the two of us... Hmm, maybe we should have a third party here to watch."

"Oh, you're right. We can't watch ourselves dancing, so we won't know if we're doing it correctly..."

She thought dancing in the tower would be fine if they were just trying to get in sync with each other, but the two of them wouldn't be able to check their posture. They should probably have someone else who would be able to observe them. She agreed with Volf, who seemed to have the same thoughts.

"I can ask someone to watch at my house. We can set something up whenever works with your schedule."

"In that case, I'll start by taking one or two lessons with the teacher Gabriella introduced me to. Hmm, since you dance with Lady Altea, you must have the hang of it, right?"

"Yeah, sort of. Though I haven't been seeing her very often lately."

Ever since the early summer of this year, Volf had been coming to the Green Tower when both their schedules allowed it. As a result, he'd had fewer opportunities to dance with Altea. However, compared to Dahlia, who hadn't danced one bit since graduating college, it was all too clear who the better dancer was.

"Right, so then I'll practice a little beforehand. I wish I could tell you that means we can take it easy today, but we're having gyoza for dinner, so I'll need to ask your help with filling and

wrapping them."

"Gladly. This time I won't fill them up so much that they burst."

They chatted as they walked up to the second floor, where, on top of the heated low table, Dahlia had left out a silver box and a sketchbook.

"Is that a magically sealed box? You got a new magical tool in there or something?"

"No, they're fiendfish scales. Vice-Director Carmine sent them to me."

Dahlia opened the lid of the box to show him. The translucent half-moon scales—white, red, blue, yellow, and green—glittered inside the glass case. She'd been thinking of ways to use them and had left them on the table.

"...They look like jewels."

Each scale was sparkly and beautiful. They really did resemble gemstones.

"They do. I think they'd look very pretty on a magical lamp or the back of a hand mirror."

A magical lantern shade made with the fiendfish scales and frosted glass would surely give off a soft, colorful light. As for the back of a hand mirror, they would look great arranged as small flower designs embedded in a black background. As her imagination started to run wild, Volf made an odd expression.

"Volf, are you feeling unwell? Are you tired?"

"No, not really—"

"Please rest. Don't push yourself. I can make these by myself anyway."

"I'm fine. It's just, I didn't sleep great last night—um, the barracks can get rowdy at night."

Everyone living in the barracks was unmarried, which likely led to the occasional loud night. The fatigue from being unable to fall asleep with all that noise must have been catching up to Volf.

Then she suddenly remembered something. Maybe she could craft one of those nap lanterns they made in the castle for Volf. Fortunately, she had Uros's recipe for the solution as well as the moonbeam butterfly wings. Uros had even told her she should feel free to make one for herself or a friend for research purposes.

Christmas didn't exist in this world, but during the winter festival, people did exchange gifts with family, lovers, and close

friends. Common gifts for friends included embroidered handkerchiefs, gloves, and hair bands, but Dahlia was a magical toolmaker. Maybe she could make the nap lantern in secret and give it to Volf—noticing herself almost crack a smile at the sudden idea, she suppressed it immediately. She wanted to keep this a secret until the day she gave it to Volf, to surprise him. From here on out would be a constant battle against her own facial muscles.

"Okay then, let's get dinner started. I've already made the filling for the gyoza, so just help me wrap them."

Volf accompanied Dahlia into the kitchen.

"These wrappers are thinner."

Volf held both a very thin wrapper and a normal gyoza wrapper in his hands, looking very perplexed.

"That's right! Today we're making boiled gyoza."

"Boiled gyoza...? So what's with the two different wrappers?"

"This one's going in soup, and this one's going to be the main dish."

"So we're having boiled gyoza with boiled gyoza?"

Dahlia chuckled at Volf's widening eyes. She knew exactly what she was doing.

"Yes. It's a boiled gyoza day."

There were two bowls of different fillings, with each filling going into a different type of wrapper. On a related note, Dahlia had purchased the wheat dough wrappers at a grocer in the Central District. They were a bit large, but they came in both square and circular shapes, which was just what she needed.

The two of them got to work filling and wrapping the gyoza, chatting as they went. They filled the heaping piles of wrappers with the ingredients, making sure not to overstuff them, and then set them down on a tray. After working diligently for a while, they ended up filling two large trays with dumplings, then returned to the living room.

On top of the heated low table were two compact magical stoves. They placed a pot of hot water on one and a pot of soup on the other to heat up. They placed the trays next to the stoves, brought out the premade snacks and drinks, and with that, their dinner preparations were complete.

"This is rye whiskey, but it's a brand that's supposedly not too bitter. Marcella gave it to me."

Marcella had received several bottles from a distant relative, but he'd recently started cutting back on alcohol, so he'd shared it with Dahlia. For some reason, she found it difficult to bring up that Marcella had said Volf would probably like the flavor, so she kept quiet about that.

Today had been busy, which had left her both a bit tired and thirsty. Since they were having drinks before dinner, she made their first drinks with just one cube of ice each and thinned them with a good amount of water.

"To not utterly failing at dancing. Cheers."

Volf responded to her self-deprecating toast with a smile. "You'll be fine, I know it. To the growth of the Rossetti Trading Company. Cheers."

This was Dahlia's first time drinking rye whiskey, so she wasn't sure if she'd watered it down too much. She took a sip and let the drink sit, her mouth filling with its crisp flavor. There was a peculiar strength and bitterness that she attributed to a distinctive flavor of rye. After she swallowed the drink, she let out a sigh, along with the whiskey's soft, fragrant scent.

"This is delicious..." Volf said, his golden eyes narrowing as he inspected the whiskey bottle. It seemed Marcella had been right on the mark. Dahlia decided that after dinner, she'd forgo diluting it with water and add in a good amount of ice instead.

The pots started audibly bubbling, so they decided it was time to eat.

The gyoza in the pot on the right were filled with minced chicken and a good amount of lightly steamed, blended vegetables and wrapped in the regular gyoza wrappers. They'd been boiled and would be eaten with a variety of dipping sauces.

The gyoza in the pot on the right were filled with minced pork and finely chopped spring onion, and they were made with the thin wrappers and would be eaten with the miso-flavored soup. She'd explained to Volf that both forms were boiled gyoza, but the one on the left was closer to miso wonton soup from her previous life.

First, the two of them brought their chopsticks down on the boiled chicken gyoza. Dahlia had prepared an array of sauces and toppings they could pick from, including grated ginger, ground sesame, diced tomatoes seasoned with salt and pepper, vinegar, savory oil, and fish sauce. She'd chosen a fresh and lean cut of chicken. Concerned that the meat might turn out dry,

she'd added minced cabbage and chives and a bit of starch. There was no need to worry about overeating a bit. It was a healthy dish she'd made with her recent waistline in mind.

Dahlia split open a gyoza, added a bit of the grated ginger on top where the white steam was escaping, then took a bite. As the heat filled her mouth, so did the simple flavors of the chicken and vegetables. She chewed, trying to cool down the piping hot dumpling as she did, and the ginger came in with extra flavor. The simplicity of these tastes was something she'd never tire of. She could see herself eating very many of these.

Volf ate his first gyoza without adding anything on top. He closed his eyes and chewed deliberately, which was his usual way of enjoying delicious food. She had to guess the gyoza was to his liking. But Dahlia had a theory. In order to test it out, she filled a deep bowl with the gyoza and soup from the pot on the left, then surreptitiously slid it in front of Volf.

"Regular gyoza are tasty, but they're delicious boiled too..."

"They sure are. Why don't you try the ones in the soup now?"

For the filling, Dahlia had chosen fatty pork and onions that had a fair bit of sharpness to them. She'd made the soup stock by adding together the green parts of the spring onions, leftover vegetables, and some pork fat, then finished it off with some miso. The plump gyoza floating on top of the soup were visually appealing in themselves. The small size of the wonton-shaped gyoza meant Dahlia could easily pop a whole delectable piece in her mouth. When she bit into the gyoza, her mouth was flooded with savory juices and the sweetness of the fat.

Next she sampled the soup. It had come out pretty well and had a slightly strong miso flavor. She had a feeling Volf would prefer these over the chicken ones. Wanting to know if her guess was correct, she furtively looked at Volf. Uncharacteristically, he was gulping the gyoza down, barely pausing to chew. Once he'd finished eating all the gyoza, he picked up his bowl with both hands and drank the remaining soup. He exhaled wordlessly, then slid his glistening golden eyes over to look at her.

"This is a trap..." he said.

What a thing to accuse someone of. Wasn't it a crime to trap someone with food?

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Now I'll never be able to leave the Green Tower..."

By all rights, a trap to ensnare Volf would have to be

something very large and sturdy. But if he could be trapped with miso soup and boiled gyoza instead, that was a much cheaper way to do it. While Volf had a hand over his forehead and eyes in anguish, Dahlia poured another hefty serving of soup and gyoza into his bowl.

“I look forward to your valuable labor assisting me with crafting magical tools. I’ll feed you three square meals a day.”

“Wow, you can’t beat those wages…!” Volf responded with a straight face, making Dahlia burst out laughing.

But what she asked next came as a shock to herself as well.

“Volf, how much longer are you going to serve as a Scarlet Armor?”

“I haven’t decided, but most people stay on until they’re about thirty or thirty-five years old.”

“…I suppose it’s a difficult job to keep up for long.”

“My seniors say they start to feel it taking a toll on their knees and shoulders. I also get warned that my knees’ll fail me early since I’m always jumping and leaping around.”



In that case, you should eat plenty of soup with chicken gristle— she was just about to tell him that, then stopped herself. If Volf started having issues with his knee joints, then wouldn't he retire earlier from his dangerous work as a Scarlet Armor, and from the Order of Beast Hunters? If that happened, then he'd stop going out on expeditions, and he'd stay in the capital, where they'd be able to see each other whenever they wanted…

"Dahlia?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm sorry, I think the whiskey has gone to my head…"

It seemed that because she'd started drinking on an empty stomach, even that small amount of alcohol was already having an effect. Still, even though she was tipsy, that had been a terribly thoughtless thing to imagine. She knew full well Volf's talent as a knight and how seriously he took his duty—she was probably just anxious about her debut, causing her to think selfishly.

"Are you sure *you're* not too tired? You've been pretty busy lately."

"I'm fine. I make sure to get my rest. Okay, let's eat up before it gets cold!"

Dahlia didn't want Volf to worry. She answered him with a smile, then filled her own bowl with an ample serving of gyoza.

Soon after, each and every one of the gyoza that had been piled high on the trays made its way into the pair's stomachs.

After the two of them had eaten more than their fill of gyoza, they relaxed over some drinks. The alcohol had become a little too lukewarm. Adding ice wouldn't chill it immediately, and as the ice changed the temperature of the alcohol, it also changed the flavor—so Dahlia reflected as she poured the drink over ice and stirred it up. She almost wished she could enchant the stirrer itself with ice magic to help chill the drink faster.

"Something on your mind?" Volf asked.

"I was just thinking, since it takes time for ice to cool down a drink, it'd be great if I could add ice magic to the stirrer to help chill the alcohol faster. But considering the price of the materials for the stick and what I'd need to enchant it with, it would cost too much to be a very profitable product…"

"I bet you could make it work if you marketed it to nobles."

The aristocracy's sense of money was certainly leagues away

from commoners'. They might actually view such a thing as a novelty. Besides, even if she just made it as a test product, the two of them could at least make use of it.

"What if you chill the glass itself?"

"That's a possibility. Actually, my father once tried doing that and ended up freezing the entire contents of a cup. Though I think he had just drunkenly stuck an ice crystal in it."

"Well…can't drink it that way until it melts, huh?"

She decided not to tell him about how her father had returned home with bright red, nearly frostbitten hands, and she'd given him a potion without saying a word. She didn't want Volf to see this as an example of the apple not falling far from the tree.

"There *is* a magical tool known as a cooling tray. Have you ever used one, Volf?"

"Oh yeah, you mean the one that looks like a deep tray with indentations to put cups in?"

"Yes, that's the one. It's a magical tool that's a tray with an ice crystal inside. It cools the glasses from underneath."

"We had one of those in the squad, but since everyone drinks at a fast pace, the alcohol was always gone before it could be chilled. It's been put away and never used again since then…"

"So then what do you use to chill your drinks?"

"We fill a big tub with water, use an ice crystal to fill it with ice, and then stick the bottles of alcohol in there. But sometimes that's still not enough."

"I think I'm getting a better understanding of the squad's alcohol consumption…"

Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised. This was the Order of Beast Hunters, after all. When it came to drinking, they were all kingsnakes and sea serpents. A cooling tray would do nothing for them.

"Right," said Volf, "speaking of ice, do you like ice crystal patterns?"

"I do. How about you?"

"Yeah, they're pretty. When I was a kid, my mother used to draw ice crystals with magic on the glass of windows, and I'd stare at them until they melted."

Volf had his gaze cast slightly downward as he recalled those moments from his childhood. Those ice crystals must have been a cherished memory of his. The two of them were silent for a

while. A drop of water from the glass moistened her fingers.

"So, Dahlia, are you nervous about your debut?"

"I am. Honestly, I really don't want to be the center of attention... I'm just not suited for it..."

"I'll be honest too. I want to wear my glasses to the ball if I can. I want to stay away from the other women, and I don't want to cause any additional problems for you..."

The two of them held nothing back as they spoke.

Volf would undoubtedly stand out more than her. And there was the chance that other women would hassle him.

"I'm sorry for dragging you into this, Volf."

"Don't be. This is a debut for me too, in a way. I've always avoided balls and banquets, so I was just thinking it was probably time for me to learn how these things go."

Volf was a member of the nobility, and his brother Guido was soon to become a marquis. There were probably many things he had to prepare for. In any case, Dahlia was very happy that she'd be taking her first step toward getting her barony with Volf at her side.

"Then, this is a bit like *our* debut, isn't it?"

"...Our debut..."

After a few seconds of silence, there was a loud clattering sound. The last bit of ice in the pail had melted and dropped to the bottom.

"Oh, we've run out of ice. I'll go get more. Keep drinking without me, Volf."

"Sure, thanks."

As he watched Dahlia head toward the kitchen, Volf drained the rest of his glass. He then caught sight of the silver magically sealed box that had been moved to a shelf along the wall, which contained the gemlike fiendfish scales, courtesy of Carmine.

When Dahlia had opened up the box, he'd thought they looked like jewels meant for placing in a bracelet, and before he knew it, he'd found himself searching for Carmine's colors—ink black and indigo gray. Neither was present, but even if they had been, he doubted Dahlia would have caught on to the feelings they would have expressed.

Also, what Dahlia had said earlier. Among nobles, calling something "our debut" had the strong implication of announcing an engagement. He hadn't been able to bring himself to point

that out to her. Although he knew that wasn't what Dahlia had intended to say at all, her unfamiliarity with the language of nobles was a very dangerous thing. Thankfully it was just him she'd said it to, but what if she said it to someone who would take it the wrong way?

He'd run away from aristocratic society, but now he had to learn its ways—not only because he wanted to protect her but also because he wanted to be able to support her in any way he could. Also, he wanted to learn about magical tools, so he could better understand what she spoke about. Then, maybe he would someday be able to help her craft her tools, by her side...

"And I'd get three square meals a day... Oh hell, I'm way too drunk!" the black-haired young man cried, chastising himself as he flopped face down onto the table.

Slime-Formed Boots and Squires

Under a sparse cover of clouds, Dahlia and Marcella, her bodyguard for the day, arrived at the second section of the castle's magical toolmaking department. That day, most of the squad members, including Volf, were at the training grounds carrying out a joint practice maneuver with the Second Knights' Regiment. Apparently, some members of the Second Regiment had even started accompanying the Order on subjugation missions. In the past, a hydra had appeared on the nation's border, so perhaps their training also doubled as preparation for times of crisis.

"Why, if it isn't Master Dahlia and Marcella!"

A familiar voice called to them on their way to the meeting room. Briskly walking down the hallway toward them in full armor was Bernigi. Following behind him were the middle-aged knight Dahlia had met the other day in the department and an unfamiliar white-haired knight. Before Dahlia could even say hello, Bernigi tapped on his combat boot.

"Take a gander at this prototype Lord Carmine made for me—a slime-formed boot. He made it to my size, and it's so light and easy to move in!"

The shiny, dark gray boot was completely seamless. It reminded Dahlia of the synthetic leather boots from her previous life. Carmine had written her a letter informing her that he'd completed the prototype, but she was surprised to see they were already so functional. He wasn't the vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department for nothing.

"Excuse me, if I may have a word—"

Before Bernigi could continue, the white-haired knight pushed his way in front of him. He was an old man who was quite slender but towering and broad-shouldered. A deep scar, perhaps a remnant from a fight with a monster, ran from his forehead over his closed left eye and down to his cheek. His one scarless azure eye was trained on Dahlia. Just as she thought maybe she should introduce herself first, the knight knelt before her on his left knee.

"My name is Leonzio Lanza. Master Rossetti, you have my

deepest gratitude."

Dahlia had no idea why this man whom she'd just met was thanking her. Just as she was about to ask, the man's gaze softened.

"I'd been lamenting the fact that I would never be able to wield my lance again, but thanks to this prosthetic arm, Wind Gripper, these hands can hold it once again. And—for the first time, I was able to hold my grandchild."

He clenched his sky-blue prosthetic hand, then opened it up. That mechanism was the result of the cooperation between the Scalfarotto Arms Works and the castle's magical toolmakers and artisans. She wanted nothing more than for everyone involved to see the broad smile on the face of the knight before her.

"I am so glad to hear that. I only had a helping role in its production, so I very much encourage you to tell that to the magical toolmakers and artisans in charge of making it. I think they would be happy to hear it."

"I see. Then I will make sure to tell each and every one. And to express my gratitude to everyone, with this old body of mine, I will extinguish all those years of uselessness by serving as a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, where I will fight against monsters until my dying breath!"

Hold on, please don't start talking about dying while fighting monsters. Hadn't the man *just* been talking about finally being able to hold his grandchild? Dahlia was fretting over how to dissuade him when Bernigi tugged on his white beard.

"I'd like to return to the squad, but that hinges on Grato letting me take the test..."

"Oh, there's a test?"

"Many a knight wishes to return to the squad, you see. Since we've retired once already, we may need to start by retaking the enlistment exam. And even if we're exempt from the exam, we have to join as squires for six months after reenlisting."

"A squire...?"

Dahlia wondered if he'd meant a *mentor* role, but she didn't want to correct him.

"As long as I don't have to take the written test, I'm golden!" Goffredo, wearing his magical prosthetic arm, laughed just as boisterously as he had when she'd first met him.

Volf had told Dahlia that a knight's marks from their college chivalric studies made up half the score for the pen-and-paper

test for the Order of Beast Hunters. The other half of the score was measured by testing their knowledge of the kingdom's laws, geography, and monsters. Recently, more monster variants had started appearing in the Kingdom of Ordine, so she wondered if they would be added to the exam. It sounded hard to keep up with remembering them all.

"Eh? Why don't you just ask one of the current squad members to teach you if you need help with the written exam?" asked Bernigi.

"Can't I just ask Grato?"

Was it good or bad that none of the Order of Beast Hunters were accompanying her today? She was seriously worried for Captain Grato's position as captain. Dahlia looked behind her and saw Marcella also looking a little solemn.

Come to think of it, Marcella had told her how he used to receive bad marks during dictation exercises in primary school due to his poor handwriting. That reminded Dahlia of the time when she'd skipped a row on her answer sheet during a written exam, and another time when she'd realized too late that she'd crafted the wrong magical tool during her practical exam. Everyone had one or two bad memories of taking an exam—or ten, or twenty. She was certain of that.

A long while later, what the squad members of the Order of Beast Hunters had to say about Bernigi and the other knights could be summed up like so: "Squires, my ass!"

"Welcome, Chairwoman Rossetti! What a pleasure to have you here!"

As soon as Dahlia entered the conference room, a young man with reddish-brown eyes came running up to her. He was the toolmaker she'd met during her prior visit to the first section of the department, the one who'd been working on leather.

"I was told you would be visiting us today, so I got the black wyvern armor all ready to show you!"

Dahlia wasn't sure if the piece of equipment on display by the wall could actually be called armor. The knights that had followed her in from the hallway were also raising their eyebrows at it. It was a complete set with a helmet, full body armor, and boots, all made of sturdy-looking, thick black leather. But its appearance gave rise to her uncertainty whether it could really be called armor.

It loosely resembled a wyvern, but what was the purpose of those spikes running from the head all the way down the back? Also, she could understand the small wings, which she could only assume were decorative, but wouldn't that long, jagged tail get in the way of fighting? Not to mention, people might step on it.

"As you suggested, I tried using as much of a black wyvern as I could and altering it as little as possible! It's decently strong, and it has a fairly formidable look to it too, don't you think?"

"Y-Yes, it certainly does..." she responded, keeping her face in check as she answered the toolmaker, who was grinning from ear to ear. She wasn't about to tell him that it didn't look like armor but rather exactly like the monster costumes of her previous life.

"The armor of this age is remarkably cutting edge! This looks magnificent!" Bernigi cried, evidently enthused. After receiving permission from the toolmaker, he touched the shoulders and the wings on the back to get a closer look.

"You certainly don't see something like this every day..."

The azure-eyed knight's words and facial expression were impossible to read. Naturally, it wasn't an easy thing to describe.

"The armor has considerably strong reinforcement magic applied, but I made the gloves and shoes especially durable. I heard there are some who dislike or feel it a hindrance in battle when enchantments are applied at the fingertips, so I used wyvern claws to enchant the backs of the gloves and the toes of the boots. They're strong enough to break through rock!"

The equipment had both high defensive and offensive capabilities. *If he improved the tail to make it easier to move around in and dyed it red, maybe the Scarlet Armors could wear it? No, that still leaves a good chance it would attract a wyvern, so never mind.*

"Unfortunately, Captain Grato has been too busy to try it on yet... I truly believe this will be effective in luring other wyverns."

Apparently, the toolmaker had taken Gildo's suggestion the other day and run with it, making the armor in Grato's size. The magical toolmaker before her sounded very disappointed, but Dahlia understood the captain's feelings. Putting this on to act as bait was the last thing she would volunteer to do.

"Now this is a great, powerful piece of armor. I'd try it on if it were my size," remarked Goffredo.

"We don't have the captain's Ash Hand, so we wouldn't be able

to intercept the wyvern, though," Leonzio pointed out.

"Think a magical tool could be made into a sword like the Ash Hand? Or no, I need to train my body so that I can fell a wyvern myself..."

The two knights with prosthetic arms discussed armor, swords, and themselves. If only Volf were here, he could have joined in their discourse on magical swords. Unfortunately, it was beyond Dahlia's capabilities to create a real magical sword—that was to say, a magical tool with strong magic like the Ash Hand. Despite her best attempts at the Crimson Lotus Blade she'd made for Volf, the sword she'd enchanted merely gave off an illumination effect with fire magic. The sword she was making next, for Jonas, would actually be enchanted by Leone, guildmaster of the Merchants, who was much more suited to the task.

Dahlia wanted to make a more powerful magical sword for Volf's sake, but that was still a distant dream for someone with her knowledge and magical power. There wasn't much she could do but continue devoting herself to growing as a magical toolmaker.

Suddenly, she realized that Marcella, her attendant-slash-bodyguard, had been standing silently behind her this whole time. She turned around to look at him. This was his first visit to the Royal Magical Toolmaking wing, and he was surrounded by people he didn't know. Surely he was nervous. But when she turned to look at him, he was staring intently at the black leather armor. His maroon eyes were fixed on Bernigi, who had a very serious expression as he stretched out the long tail to inspect it.

"Umm... So, Marcella, what do you think?" she asked him to the side.

He responded with a smile and a voice he couldn't quite keep at the level of a whisper. "I've never seen anything cooler...um, ma'am!"

"Thank you all for coming here today."

While they were viewing the black wyvern armor, Carmine entered the room.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, these are the slime-formed shoes I told you about the other day. They are made of scrap leather, a mixture of blue and yellow slime, and various liquid solutions."

On top of the table sat a pair of dark gray combat boots as

well as leather of the same color that hadn't been turned into shoes yet.

"Please, feel free to pick it up and examine it," Carmine said with a smile. Dahlia decided to do just that.

She touched a boot with her fingers, and though the surface was a bit coarse, there were no bumps. It had a leathery sheen, and besides the sole of the boot, she saw no other evidence of seams. When she picked it up, it was surprisingly light. It had to have been half the weight of the Order of Beast Hunters' combat boots. Then, she flipped it over and, upon doing so, found the sole was the only part similar to a regular shoe.

"It has excellent waterproof properties, and it even offers some protection against fire. It returns to its shape easily even when warped, and it won't crack as often as leather normally does."

"It's amazing! The squad will be ecstatic to have water-repellent boots that are this light," Dahlia exclaimed.

"I appreciate you saying so. Their durability and rate of deterioration are still under review, but some squad members have been using them during training. They are also being tested to see how they hold up to repeated washings. Although, the increased waterproof properties have made it so the insides get stuffy, so the use of drying insoles is a must."

Dahlia's drying insoles would probably come to be sold as a set with these boots. She could just imagine Ivano's smile.

"Here is a summary of materials used and their proportions. That's a copy, so please feel free to keep it."

The thick stack of papers described all the experimental results in fine detail. How many different ratios of different materials had he tested? Dahlia had done her fair share of experimenting with different ratios when developing magical tools, but never to this extent. This level was probably normal for the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. It was fascinating to read about the ratios of powdered slime and the composition of the liquid mixtures used.

"Regrettably, with using scrap leather, we don't know what monster all the leather originally came from, so we cannot exactly say the boots are all uniform..." the magical toolmaker said disappointedly as he picked up the leather.

"Right now, we have no choice but to let the lower standard serve as a baseline," Carmine said, taking out a sheet of paper.

Listed on the paper were figures regarding the strength of the shoes. Dahlia didn't know what kind of strength they required to be functional, but there looked to be a ten percent difference. The fact that she'd thought they were strong enough illustrated her ignorance of combat boots.

"Well, I think this boot is a fine product. It's light and keeps the water out. And it fits like a glove," Bernigi said. He tapped the heel of his boot against the floor, making the people in the room smile at the light sound.

"That's because they're wholecut boots customized for the wearer, so they shouldn't slip off as often as the others."

"Personally, I like my shoes to be a little roomier. My feet usually swell on expeditions," said Goffredo.

"They swell, you say...? Then ideally we would take your measurements from when they're swollen."

"What if you measure them in the evening, and also wear thick socks when you're getting them fitted?"

"Ah, very good. Let's consider if we can adjust the fit with the insoles as well."

Fitting well and swelling were two very important points to consider. Carmine noted down all the knights' suggestions as they gave them.

"If they're durable, the entire squad'll want them, but I'm sure these boots are expensive, aren't they?"

"How much do the current boots cost? I'm afraid I'm uninformed, as I never paid much attention to the price..."

"Grato said the regular ones run up to as much as eight gilt silver. The ones for people who need larger sizes or alterations cost a bit more," the azure-eyed knight said, answering Carmine's question. Expectedly, they didn't run cheap. But for shoes made of thick leather and enchanted to raise their durability, it was only reasonable.

"How long does one pair of shoes last?"

"That entirely depends on the person, but when I was in the Scarlet Armors, a pair would last me a year. Even if they got torn up or soaked with water, I'd have them repaired and keep using them."

"Back in my youth, the soles of my shoes kept falling off from kicking monsters. My seniors would get mad and tell me to fight in a way that didn't cost so much to repair."

Bernigi laughed as he recounted a memory so heartbreaking

that Dahlia sincerely wished that the knights did not have to fight with the budget in addition to risking their lives fighting monsters. The Rossetti Trading Company provided a number of magical tools to the squad, so perhaps they should review their prices.

"Um, regarding the cost—"

"Then I'd like to discuss—"

The moment she spoke up, so did Carmine. She turned to him to find he was already looking at her with his indigo-gray eyes opened wide.

"Master Dahlia, Lord Carmine, I appreciate the thought, but there's no need to worry about the costs. I hear the squad got a surplus budget in the fall. Besides, the Order of Beast Hunters have always had a fair amount of freedom in using the monsters they fell, and lately they've been bringing more materials back."

"Sir Bernigi is right. I heard they made out pretty well with the carriage full of forest serpents they brought back. Those work pretty good for treating an old man's shoulder pain..."

"When I was talking to the squad, some people started drooling the moment I mentioned forest serpent. I suppose it's time for even the Green King to fall from its throne."

Dahlia was relieved to hear it. The squad members had mentioned that forest serpent went great with sweet sauce. Dahlia had also once tried adding dried forest serpent Volf had given her into soup, which had added a nice richness to the flavor. It really was too bad for the serpents, but apparently they were starting to become a luxury food item.

"By the way, Lord Carmine, how much will these new boots actually run for?"

"Perhaps about half the price. They can be made with scrap leather, which brings down the cost of materials. Also, if we make the shoes in the same pattern and then train the department's toolmakers, the enchantment and processing shouldn't take much time. It depends on the durability and feedback from the wearers, but if all goes well, we can transfer the process out of the current workshop and bring it in-house."

"What...?"

Something in Carmine's eloquent explanation bothered Dahlia. She couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling.

"Excuse me, Vice-Director Carmine, won't you be working on the development and manufacturing as collaborators?"

“Oh, of course, since the idea came from you, you will be named as a developer, and you will be duly compensated—”

“Oh, there’s no need for that, since I only provided the suggestion. What I meant was, won’t you be working with the workshop that currently makes the boots?”

“But why? If we can move everything within the castle, it will shorten the delivery time and bring down costs. Isn’t that better for the Order of Beast Hunters?”

Carmine gave her a very curious look. The others kept silent. As an adviser to the Order of Beast Hunters, Dahlia probably shouldn’t have been prioritizing the needs of the shoemakers, but she’d made up her mind to say her piece.

“I believe it would cause many problems for the workshop currently in charge of making the shoes if they were to suddenly lose work.”

In order to manufacture durable boots for the Order of Beast Hunters, they needed artisans who knew the ins and outs of processing and sewing leather. Moreover, a workshop doing regular business with the castle was sure to have a fair number of artisans.

Their families and the people connected to the workshop had livelihoods they needed to sustain. She couldn’t bear to have that all be taken from them unexpectedly for the convenience of those above them. Also, they had to take into account the artisans’ technical skill.

“I think artisans who have been making shoes for so long can give their opinion on the leather used for the slime-formed shoes and how it compares to what they usually use. Maybe they can even come up with other shapes or ways to improve the shoes at the time of production. Experienced artisans have cultivated years of knowledge and skill. I think it would be a huge loss if they were forced to cease using those skills. Wouldn’t working in collaboration with those artisans serve to produce an even better product?”

An artisan specializing in one task would find it difficult to apply those skills to other work. Also, it was near impossible to restore that acquired technique after taking a long break from it. Even with the help of specification documents, there was a high chance their skills would never return to the level required of an artisan.

Dahlia wanted them to make use of the artisans’ knowledge

and skills in manufacturing the slime-formed leather and shoes, and to continue their business with the workshop—she tried her best to explain that to Carmine and everyone else in the room. Unfortunately, no one spoke up in agreement. They simply stared at her. Perhaps they thought she was being naive, or perhaps she hadn't explained herself clearly. Her nervousness refused to dissipate even after she finished speaking.

Then Carmine spoke up. "Chairwoman Dahlia, thank you for your valuable input. I was so eager to start development that I overlooked that very important point…"

"I apologize. Since this project utilizes leather, about which I'm knowledgeable, I became conceited. I will try to put away my pride and learn from others…"

"No, um, hold on…"

Carmine had thanked her, and now the leather specialist was apologizing. Was Carmine thanking her for pointing out he hadn't taken into account the workshop workers' livelihoods, and was the leather expert saying he would consult with the shoemakers? No, she felt like there was another nuance to their words.

As her confusion intensified, Bernigi nodded deeply. "In order to create the best possible product, we must seek instruction from those wise in their trade, regardless of status or position in business…? I see. What an admirable way of thinking."

Wait a minute, I don't recall saying anything so profound. Her thought *had* been to suggest getting input from the artisans and working with them, and to make it so they wouldn't lose their work—Dahlia struggled to organize all the thoughts swimming in her head, then said, "No, I just, I thought if everyone could give their input, we'd have more colleagues to work with…"

"Colleagues—I see. Let's invite the artisans from the shoemaker workshop to discuss the slime-formed leather. Afterward, all involved parties can give their input as equals, and then we can work on manufacturing the shoes together."

Carmine had summed things up perfectly. Dahlia smiled. His words seemed to spread, and one by one, everyone's expressions relaxed, and the conversation turned back to shoes and armor. At some point, they decided on when to invite the shoemakers to discuss everything together. Dahlia was certain this was the way to ensure quality boots for the Order of Beast Hunters.

Interlude: The Shoemaker’s Workshop and the Goddess of the Artisans

“Master!”

An apprentice burst through the doors of the workshop as if they could not open fast enough.

“What is it this time? Is the price of leather up again? Or did one of the workers throw out their backs?”

The D’Alessio Workshop had been the main manufacturer of combat boots for the royal knights and Order of Beast Hunters since the time of the shoemaker’s great-grandfather. But recently, unfortunate news had been coming in nonstop: the cost of leather was rising, artisans were collapsing to meet impossible deadlines, and some workshops had been forced to shutter their doors after becoming subcontractors for larger companies. These were the stories heard time and time again.

Beautiful shoes sold well, and big companies and ateliers threw their weight around—perhaps that was just the way of the times. As the shoemaker reflected on that, his winded apprentice finally continued.

“S-Somebody came from the castle with a letter addressed to you! The messenger is waiting outside…”

“Right, I’ll go now.”

As he headed for the front door of the workshop, he wiped his grease-stained fingers with a towel. Outside, an envoy in a black suit was holding a red cloth, on which lay a large envelope.

“My apologies for disturbing your work. I’ve come to deliver a letter to Sansol D’Alessio from the royal Order of Beast Hunters and the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. Your reply is requested.”

“Thank you for your trouble. I will read it now.”

The elegant, white, gold-bordered envelope bore no resemblance to the usual purchase orders he received. Sansol stood up straight and accepted the envelope with both hands. The letter was jointly signed by Captain Grato Bartolone of the Order of Beast Hunters and Vice-Director Carmine Zanardi of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. Penned along with those

distinguished names was an invitation to the castle.

The letter requested that he choose a date agreeable to him out of three provided, but he suspected a meeting with two members of the nobility who held high positions even by the castle's standards would hold nothing agreeable for a common shoemaker. He'd been prepared for this to happen eventually, though it had come earlier than he'd expected. Sansol composed his expression as best he could and gave his reply to the black-suited envoy.

"I gratefully accept this invitation to the castle. I will come at the earliest date."

The envoy repeated his words back to him to confirm, then left after giving a customary farewell.

"Master, um, did something happen?" his apprentice asked with concern as Sansol watched the envoy leave.

"Nothing you need to worry about. I was just summoned to the castle."

"The castle? Is it about our shoes? Don't tell me—was there something wrong with the shoes I sewed the other day?"

"Of course not. I checked everything, didn't I? I won't know what they have to say until I go there. I'll need to go rent some clothes..."

As he spoke, Sansol looked up at the old sign above the door to the workshop. Reflected in his deep green eyes were the faded words "D'Alessio Workshop" and the logo of lace-up boots. He'd looked up at that sign countless times since he was a child. Now, he would most likely be the one to take it down. The thought of it sent a stinging pain deep into his chest.

Sansol had spent a lot of time in the workshop ever since his youth. Not only his father and grandfather but all the artisans were masters of their craft. For someone whose dream was to become a shoemaker, it was a privileged environment to be raised in. However, the wish that he hadn't been born into a family of shoemakers had crossed his mind dozens—no, hundreds of times.

When it came to shoemaking, *especially* when it came to making boots for the Order of Beast Hunters, the number of steps involved in making a single pair were many. After making up the wooden molds for the squad, he drew up the paper pattern, then reproduced the pattern onto leather, taking into

account the parts, size, and thickness of the leather. Next came cutting the leather, sewing the upper, assembling the shape, and attaching the sole. That was the process in a nutshell, but making the wooden mold, tanning the leather until it was uniform, and polishing the finished product required a lot of skill.

Moreover, it wasn't simply a matter of making the shoes. He also needed to make adjustments based on the squad members' fighting styles and their own preferences. Changes had to be made to the wooden mold, the sizing had to be checked with a trial shoe, stiffeners needed to be applied to the leather, and imperfections had to be mended as much as possible—Sansol had had to memorize each and every step of the process.

Due to his poor memory, it had been quite the struggle for him. He'd been scolded constantly and struggled to remember ever being told he'd done a good job. Everything he'd made had either been defective or had needed to be redone. However, this was to be expected. The D'Alessio Workshop did not allow for any shoddy or slapdash work.

The combat boots for the squad members who risked their life fighting monsters had to be perfect. If the boots didn't fit perfectly or there was the slightest tear in a seam, it could spell disaster.

The shoes were also worn through at a shocking rate. After a long expedition, the squad brought back a mountain of shoes that needed repairs. The shoemakers worked meticulously as they made and repaired pair after pair of shoes. Every day was the same.

As a child, Sansol couldn't stand the predictable monotony. *I'll find another line of work. There's plenty to do in the capital*, he began to think to himself.

One day, he and his father went out to do some shopping, which didn't happen often. A road they were about to cross was flooded with people where a long funeral procession was passing through the crowd. On the side of the carriages was the image of a dragon behind two crossed blades—the emblem of the Order of Beast Hunters.

It was a mass funeral procession for knights of the Order. More than ten black coffins surrounded by flowers were borne atop the long line of carriages that passed by. Following behind the procession were horses of the Order and the carriages of the

bereaved families. Most of the carriages had their windows shut, but if they were open, they showed only people with handkerchiefs to their eyes or hands covering their faces. In the last carriage, Sansol briefly caught sight of a mother clutching an innocently laughing baby to her chest. The baby was even younger than Sansol's youngest relative.

Members of the squad who died in battle against monsters often suffered severe injuries; thus, many of the coffins were nailed shut so that not even the families of the deceased could see their faces. He heard some men nearby talking about how most of the time, their corpses never even made it back from expedition.

After the carriages passed by, there followed a long line of people carrying flowers. Some were crying, some were expressing their gratitude aloud, and some were saying prayers for the deceased. A roar of voices resounded like a rain shower. Voices of the villagers who had been saved from the red bears that had attacked them; of the people whose town had been taken back from a gang of goblins; of children whose parents had been devoured by sea serpents, now slain; of parents whose sons had been frozen in ice by bicorns and left in their nests, but who had now been given a proper burial—all feats done by the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters.

Sansol and his father stayed until after the last person in the procession passed by in front of them and the crowd dispersed. His father was silent. Sansol couldn't bring himself to say anything.

Even though Sansol had heard stories of the Order of Beast Hunters and of monsters, their experience had always been far removed from his own. It wasn't something he could see or hear personally. Even that day didn't make him feel any closer to it. But what he'd seen, what he'd heard that day—he abhorred it. Still, it was thanks to that experience that he saw the path he should follow as thick as a shoelace.

The coffins on the carriages, the trailing funeral procession, the line of people carrying flowers—Sansol wanted to reduce those numbers even by one. In order to do that, he wanted to make sturdy boots that would protect the feet of the Order of Beast Hunters.

Sansol couldn't face monsters himself, but this was the beginning of his modest battle. As clumsy as he was, it wasn't

until he was twenty-nine years old that he finally became accustomed to all 250 steps of shoemaking. Then, a dozen or so years later, Sansol took over as the head of the D'Alessio Workshop. The first year he became the head shoemaker, Sansol brought everyone in the workshop to see the Order of Beast Hunters' funeral procession.

Now, after many days that had passed unchanging, he was headed for the castle. That morning, his wife was unsparing as she looked over his appearance, chiding him for his hair, combed only twice, his untrimmed beard, and his crooked collar.

"It's not every day you get to go to the castle. Make sure you take a good look around. I'll see you when you get home."

"Right. See you soon."

Sansol wore a suit he'd rented from a shop. He felt at odds with the finely woven dark gray outfit.

"Pops—I mean, master! I shined these for you."

The leather shoes were a pair he wore for special occasions, ones he'd made himself. They were made of crimson cattle leather that had been thrice dyed dark brown. He was confident that the glossy pair of shoes were comparable to something a noble would wear. The one who had polished them so he could almost see himself in them was his own son—no, his senior apprentice.

"Thanks. I'll go show them off at the castle!"

Sansol raised a hand in farewell and then boarded the carriage with a smile. His body rocked along with the movements of the carriage, and eventually, he passed under the massive stone gates of the castle. He was then guided to the meeting room in the Order of Beast Hunters' wing.

How many years had passed since he'd last been here? The last time must have been when his late father had brought him here to introduce him as the next head of the workshop. The room hadn't changed, but this time, his heart wasn't pounding nearly as fast as it had back then.

Sansol hadn't been able to bring his own apprentice—the next head of the D'Alessio Workshop—to the Order of Beast Hunters' wing.

"Welcome to the Order of Beast Hunters. It's been a while, Mr. D'Alessio. Thanks for all you've done for us."

Captain Bartolone, the exalted "Sorcerer of Ash" who reduced

monsters to cinders with his magical sword, had thanked him for his efforts. Sansol responded that the compliment was undeserved, but he was unable to look straight into the reddish eyes of the man sitting across from him.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, Carmine Zanardi."

Following the vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, he was also introduced to the same department's leather specialist and a clerk from the Order of Beast Hunters. From the aromatic tea that was served, he was able to divine that he wasn't here because they were displeased with their shoe delivery, but the tea might as well have been flavorless for how much he could taste of it.

"The reason you've been summoned here today is to discuss some new combat boots."

On top of the table were a sample of tanned leather and a pair of shiny boots. They were combat boots for the Order of Beast Hunters. Next, he was given a document. Sansol scowled as he read it.

Slime-formed shoes—boots made by combining scrap leather and slime, then enchanted with magic.

Is this a joke? Using scrap leather to make the shoes for the Order of Beast Hunters? If they wanted to lower costs, there was a right and wrong way to do it. However, after reading through the document and holding the boots in his hands, his anger disappeared. The shoes were lighter than the current ones, and they could be made heavier by adding metal if so desired, in addition to which the slime-infused leather was water repellent. The shoes were great at absorbing shock and they didn't require much in terms of maintenance. He'd thought the scrap leather had been a cost-reduction measure, but considering the method and the enchantments required, a single pair might even cost more.

Instead, the reason for the change was simply to create shoes with the squad members' safety and comfort in mind. That point, he could understand. Compared to his great-grandfather's generation, the current knights in the Order of Beast Hunters had larger builds and also bigger shoe sizes. Although that upped the amount of leather and sewing materials used, he kept the cost of the shoes as low as possible, but his effort was not always recognized. Still, he'd come this far without sacrificing his

pride as a toolmaker. Though this was disappointing, he had no regrets. These new shoes should make expeditions and combat easier for the squad. Personally, he wasn't too keen on the shape of the reinforced metal at the tip of the shoe—but it seemed the time for change had come.

Vice-Director Zanardi stood up and said frankly, "Mr. D'Alessio, I must apologize."

This is the part where he tells me they're going to cease doing business with us. Sansol calmly awaited the vice-director's next words.

"Due to my shortsightedness, I had the notion that if we could bring the production of the combat boots into the castle, we would be able to reduce the business we do with your workshop. If production within the castle proved feasible, then we'd be able to reduce the delivery time as well as the costs."

"Huh…?" Sansol sputtered inanely, not having expected that the conversation would take this turn.

Wasn't it only reasonable for the castle to want to reduce costs and delivery times? He could understand why Carmine would apologize for reducing the business the castle did with the D'Alessio Workshop, or even ceasing it completely, but he just could not wrap his head around why Carmine had called himself shortsighted. It would be impossible for Sansol's workshop to make shoes that could be called magical tools anyway. While he was unable to form a response, Carmine kept his indigo-gray eyes homed in on him.

"The Order of Beast Hunters has an adviser on magical tools, Madam Dahlia Rossetti. She strongly advised that we develop and manufacture these shoes in cooperation with the workshop that currently makes the boots for the squad."

"Develop and manufacture…in cooperation…with my workshop?"

"Precisely. Her reasoning was that artisans with years of experience have cultivated a wealth of knowledge and expertise, and it would be a monumental loss for them to toss aside all that technical skill. She advised that a better product could be made if the shoes were manufactured in cooperation with seasoned artisans."

Sansol opened his mouth to respond, but his voice wouldn't come out. For generations, the artisans of the workshop had diligently and conscientiously poured all their knowledge and

skill into making shoes for the Order of Beast Hunters. There was someone out there who recognized that. Oh, how happy that made him!

"I think she is absolutely right," Carmine continued. "Up to now, I've been satisfied with reading old specification documents and not looking beyond the castle. Even though I have knowledge of and experience with magical tools, that doesn't hold true for shoes and leather. Thus, I would like to ask the assistance of everyone at the D'Alessio Workshop."

Sansol was startled by Carmine's plea. Even if their lives had followed different trajectories, were they not the same? He'd always selected excellent leather to make sturdy shoes, but he had never tried to create entirely new designs.

"Vice-Director Zanardi, I am the one who has been shortsighted. I have always aimed to make durable shoes, but I have never been able to improve on them any other way... Just say the word; we are at your command. All of us at the D'Alessio Workshop will do what we can to assist."

Carmine shook his head.

"You misunderstand. We would like you, as equals, to be our colleagues in the simple effort to make a better pair of shoes."

Sansol accepted with full enthusiasm.

After the meeting, Captain Grato of the Order of Beast Hunters smiled as he handed Sansol a permit to come and go freely from the castle. Seeing that his name was already on the permit, Sansol found himself so choked up that it was all he could do to offer a word of thanks.

The following day, everyone involved in the production was to assemble in an office at the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. Representing the D'Alessio Workshop were Sansol and his senior apprentice; representing the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department were Vice-Director Carmine, the leather specialist magical toolmaker, and arms artisans specialized in working with defensive materials. Everyone was very excited to be there.

After their initial briefing, they gathered the opinions of the Order of Beast Hunters' squad members, thinking that first they should get the opinions of those who would actually be wearing the shoes.

"I like shoes that are light and easy to walk in! And I'd really

appreciate a pair that's properly waterproof."

"I want mine to be sturdy. I don't want my kicks to get weaker, so I need boots that are as heavy as the ones I have now."

"I'd like a pair of boots that protect my legs from impact. I'm getting to be the age where my knees start to hurt..."

Everyone had their own preferences when it came to their shoes. It became unmanageable, and they came to the conclusion that they would have to accommodate all of the requests to a certain extent and make adjustments individually.

The toolmakers from the castle and shoemakers from the workshop differed in status and background, so at first, they were all very cautious. However, people grew more and more accustomed to each other the more time they spent together. The shoemakers shared their knowledge of shoes and leather, while the toolmakers shared their own knowledge of magical tools and enchantment magic. Though each side had a slew of questions for the other, they all were answered eventually as they spent day in and day out working on the shoes.

Once, during the last of a series of meetings, a heated argument broke out regarding the thickness, strength, cushioning, and enchantment of the soles. There were points both shoemakers and magical toolmakers were unwilling to concede, bringing things to a standstill. However, once they understood the differences in each other's points of view, they came up with many interesting ideas. It was after the all-nighter debate that they became close enough to be on a first-name basis, an outcome that was only to be expected.

The development of the Order of Beast Hunters' new combat boots progressed steadily—they combined the regular leather and the slime-made leather to make the boots even more lightweight and waterproof, and better at absorbing impact; they came up with a way to sew the boots to ensure they were easy to move in but also durable; and they strengthened their durability with more enchantments.

While that was going on, Sansol was finally able to meet the Order of Beast Hunters' adviser: Dahlia Rossetti—an up-and-coming magical toolmaker and a shrewd businesswoman who had been able to form a connection with the castle through the company she had only just founded. That was what he had heard about her, so he had already formed an image of her as a stern-looking woman.

But when she greeted him with a smile, her nervousness clear on her face, he could see she was a kind, humble woman. Although she would be receiving her barony, she was still a commoner. As far as he could tell, nothing about her suggested that she'd be able to voice her opinions to the higher-ups in the castle. She seemed so at odds with what he'd heard of her, but once they began talking about their work, he was convinced.

When Sansol began on the subject of the metal toe cap and its frictional wear, the young woman's initial nervousness was nowhere to be seen as she hunched forward to take notes. When the leather expert magical toolmaker followed up with his explanation of the enchantment, the adviser's eyes lit up as she asked question after question. She asked her questions rapidly, the brightness in her eyes changing unbelievably. But what never changed was the passion that was evident behind them.

As far as Sansol had been concerned, nobles and others from well-to-do families had nothing in common with him. It seemed, however, that he had been mistaken. Every person in this room had the passion of an artisan. They loved crafting and had a childlike fixation on their work. Sansol was passionate about shoes and leather; that much was true of his current and past selves. Everyone shared that passion, only with magical tools or leather or monster materials swapped in for shoes. Finally, Sansol felt like he could relax.

In the room at the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, across from Carmine, Sansol resolved to speak up.

"Mr. Carmine, I'd like to ask you about something."

They had just had a meeting, and everyone was celebrating the fact that they were one step closer to officially mass-producing the new and improved combat boots. So when Sansol spoke up sounding serious, everyone turned to look at him at once.

"Do you happen to know the shoe size of the Order of Beast Hunters' adviser, Chairwoman Rossetti?"

"I'm afraid I do not, but you may be able to find out from the Order."

Carmine cast him a questioning look, and Sansol gave up on trying to hide his intentions.

"Would it be all right if I gave Chairwoman Rossetti a prototype—no, a finished pair of shoes? My workshop will cover the costs, of course."

“Ah yes, I think she would be thrilled. We will cover the costs on our end. You don’t mind, do you, Director Uros?”

“Not at all. Try to pick a color that would suit Rossetti, instead of black.”

Before Sansol knew it, the director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department had started attending the meetings and joining in on the production of the boots. Now the man had agreed with his proposal. Sansol decided that for the time being, he would set aside his worry about the director’s real job being left unattended to.

“Then I’ll get working on the leather! I’ll use a high ratio of wyvern leather. I’ll ask you to handle the sorting and designating the thickness. After that, we can discuss the color and the dye. I want to secure the leather materials immediately, so, Vice-Director Carmine…”

“You have my permission. If you find something suitable in storage, feel free to request it.”

“I’ll be right back!”

No sooner had the leather-loving toolmaker responded than Sansol found himself watching his back as he hurried away. That toolmaker was an incredibly driven young man. Sansol would have to keep up.

“In that case, my artisans will take care of the sorting and the cutting, and I’ll take care of the sewing and attaching the sole.”

“Oh, no fair, pops—I mean, master! Let me sew too, please!”

He heard a pleading voice at his side and felt a tug at his jacket sleeve. It seemed they would have to discuss how they’d divide up the work back in the workshop. Though he certainly wasn’t going to let anyone else get the first stitch in.

“Then I will handle the enchantment—”

As soon as Carmine started to speak, a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“Let me enchant the sole. You can enchant the rest of the shoe, Carmine.”

“…Very well, Director Uros,” the vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department responded somewhat resignedly.

What sort of relationship do these two have to have that sort of back-and-forth? Sansol wondered as he swallowed his laugh.

As a magical toolmaker, Chairwoman Rossetti was unlikely ever to experience combat, and yet she was about to have a pair

of highly sophisticated boots. He wanted her to have the culmination of his—no, *all* of their best efforts. As he thought that, in the end, he could no longer hold back his laugh—and before he knew it, they were all laughing together like friends.

When the following spring approached, the Order of Beast Hunters would receive a delivery of combat boots, as well as a pair of beautiful crimson boots. Right between where the sole was sewn to the rest of the shoe, Sansol had engraved in tiny letters the words “Goddess of the Artisans”—a secret only known among the manufacturers.

A Nap Lantern for a Friend

Yesterday, Dahlia had heard about how the slime-formed boots were coming along in the castle's magical toolmaking department. They would be jointly developed and produced with the D'Alessio Workshop, which had long made the boots for the Order of Beast Hunters. They would also be properly compensated as technical experts, which was a relief to hear.

She had also had a pleasant interaction with the head manager of the D'Alessio Workshop, Sansol. He was well-versed not only in leather but also metal, and his explanation of abrasion seemed as though it might prove instructive in making magical swords as well.

After they discussed the shoes, Dahlia was shown the prototype for the large grinder. Its blades moved powerfully and efficiently to produce a smooth vegetable juice. It could have held its own against the food processors from Dahlia's previous life. Carmine's safety measures were also perfect. The grinder wouldn't start unless the lid was closed, and a warning to remove the unit containing the wind crystal power source during cleaning and transport was engraved on the body of the grinder itself. Also, to prevent any injury while cleaning the mixing blades, the grinder came with special leather gloves and a brush made out of giant boar hair. The leather gloves and the brush were the joint ideas of the leather specialist toolmaker and the manager of the shoemaking workshop.

Dahlia admired Carmine for saying he'd learned a lot from the D'Alessio Workshop about leather, pelt, and metal reinforcements. She thought it was wonderful how open he was to learning from others regardless of their status or position. It made her want to emulate the same attitude.

Having seen such a quality magical tool, Dahlia felt a fire had been lit under her to create her own. That night, unable to sleep, she laid out some sketch paper. With a pen in one hand, she started planning out the nap lantern she'd decided to give to Volf as a gift.

She would make the base of the lantern as beautiful a gold color as she could manage, and for the lantern's shade, she'd

pick a curved glass that was smooth to the touch. Maybe she could even use the fiendfish scales she'd received from Carmine on the shade.

Cutting colored glass into a specific shape was painstaking work, but she also didn't want to use a tool to just cut it up into a bunch of small pieces. She didn't want to have someone else do the work either, so she would just have to work on it bit by bit every day.

Her idea was to carve the white fiendfish scales into snowflakes and apply them to the shade. That way, when the lamp was turned on, the soft light would project snowflakes onto the ceiling and walls. Enchanting the lamp with the moonbeam butterfly wings' hypnotic effect would give it a pale blue color. A snowflake pattern would go together perfectly with that blue light, reminiscent of a winter sky. As the ideas came to her, she opened the magically sealed box. Inside, the crystallized moonbeam butterfly wings were glowing light blue.

I'll do my best to enchant this lamp for Volf so he can have a restful sleep in which he doesn't have to relive any childhood nightmares. Like being cradled in a mother's arms, drifting into gentle sleep—suddenly, Dahlia realized she was clenching her fists.

"This won't go well if I strain myself... Oh, maybe I should make one for myself first."

Dahlia had made a nap lantern for the first time the other day at the castle. Though hers had unfortunately been the only pale blue lantern amid everyone else's beautiful, rich blues, at least she had been able to complete it. Having only made a lantern once before, though, she was a little worried about making one for Volf. Fortunately, she had enough moonbeam butterfly wings to make several nap lanterns, and even if she failed with all of them, she could purchase more herself from a supplier.

I'll make a nap lantern with the same style and enchantment as the one for Volf, to match—no, I mean, it's not like I'm making them as a matching pair, I'm just making them the same way, so they'll just end up matching— Dahlia put a stop to her thoughts, which were transforming into excuses, and turned her mind toward something else.

"Should I add some decoration to the handle too? Maybe I can use father's lantern as a reference."

Having suddenly remembered it, Dahlia dug out the fairy

glass lantern her father had used until he'd died. The small, gold-colored lantern was light enough to be easily carried with one hand. The handle was decorated with a beautiful metal engraving of a butterfly and vines.

Her father had mainly made magical lanterns for practical use, so this lantern must have been something special. Maybe he'd made it for her mother, or maybe he'd made it with her in mind. Either way, Dahlia had no means of finding out.

It had been a while since the lantern had been used, so just in case, Dahlia replaced the fire crystal. Then, she gently twisted the knob, and the lantern emitted a soft glow. Once she'd enjoyed enough of the pale, rainbow-colored light, she turned the knob of the fairy glass lantern up a notch more. When she did, a circle appeared in midair next to the lantern.

Inside the circle, she could see a clear blue sky and a colorful field of flowers. The flowers were all dahlia, large and blooming, with white butterflies playfully fluttering around them. When she looked closely, she even saw some white clouds starting to float by in the blue sky.

Dahlia unconsciously let out a long sigh as she gazed at the scene. She still couldn't perform the enchantment to create this floating image that emerged next to the lantern. The scene was so vivid that she felt she could even hear the sound of the flowers rustling in the wind. Unlike her previous world, this world had no machinery that could record video. So then how had her father enchanted such a clear, stable image? As she thought of the delicate enchantment her father must've performed for this lantern, she keenly felt just how skilled he'd been as a magical toolmaker. Perhaps her path to reaching that level of skill was just an endless road.

The spellbook Tobias had copied down for her detailed the method for making fairy glass lanterns. Although she was sure Tobias had copied her father's words exactly, underneath the explanation on how to make the lantern, written in big, red letters, were the words "Enchant it right!" If her father had intended for that to clue her in on anything, he'd made a serious error. If he were still alive, she would have called him out for his vague directions and asked him to show her how to enchant it.

"I guess it's hopeless..."

Even though she was happy to have the spellbook her father had composed, what she felt even more strongly was the wish

that he could have taught her himself.

When she was a child, she hadn't known what this image was. She'd just thought it was a picture of a make-believe place. But this landscape seemed to be a real place—a field of dahlia in a coaching inn town outside of the capital. There was an illustration she'd seen in an information book that resembled the fairy glass lantern's image.

A dahliya—it was spelled differently than her name, but it referred to the same flower. One flower was a dahliya, but a cluster of them growing together were called dahlia. She'd sometimes wondered why she'd been named Dahlia and not Dahliya, seeing as she was just one person, but apparently, her father had wished for her not to live on her own but surrounded by others.

Although she used to think her name didn't suit her, recently, she felt she had grown a bit closer to it. All her dear friends, her numerous colleagues, and the seniors and teachers she could always count on—she wasn't alone anymore. Her many connections were the reason she was able to live happily. The unfortunate part was that she'd never be able to tell that to her father, or to her parents from her previous life.

Despite being named Dahlia, she had never gone to see a field of dahlia flowers. She knew where the place in the book was. It was in a stage station town barely half a day's ride by horse from the capital. It wasn't so far away. In the light of the fairy glass lantern, Dahlia whispered to the swaying flowers, "I'd like to see a dahlia field someday..."

Dahlia flowers bloomed in the summer. Maybe next year, she could invite Volf to go with her. He was always happy to accompany her, so she felt like he would agree to come along, though she did feel a little embarrassed about inviting him to see a field of flowers named after herself. As she thought about that, she suddenly remembered something.



“Volf probably wouldn’t have that much fun seeing dahlia flowers. He said he’d get bored walking around a pretty flower garden…”

As she recalled one of their previous conversations, Dahlia looked to the bookshelf.

“It’s a stage station town, so maybe there’s somewhere to get a good bite to eat, or to buy some interesting food and alcohol. I bet a tourism book would have suggestions for what to do.”

The books and encyclopedias she had on plants didn’t contain that type of information. If they were to take a trip out there, she’d want them to enjoy many delicious foods and bring back souvenirs.

I guess our next stop together will be a bookshop in the city.

Smiling, Dahlia began planning out their next trip.

Even for those two who attached more importance to food and drink than flowers, was it only a matter of time until their love blossomed? The light of the lantern continued to flicker as if beckoning them to the flower garden.

Extra Story: A Father and Daughter’s Magical Tool Invention Diaries ~The Food Mincer~

“Ouch…”

“What’s wrong, Dahlia?!”

When Carlo heard his daughter’s voice from the kitchen, he dropped the silverware he was setting on the table in the living room and ran over to her.

“I just cut myself a little slicing the carrots. It’s nothing serious.”

A tiny drop of blood oozed from his daughter’s pointer finger. Carlo immediately headed for the stairs.

“I’ll go get a potion!”

“Father, that’s too much! It’s a waste of a potion!”

“It’s not a waste! What if the cut gets worse?”

“I’ll just wrap a cloth around it, and by tomorrow it’ll be good as new. I’d rather use the cost of the potion to go out to eat together instead.”

“R-Right… Okay…”

Carlo could do nothing but nod. His daughter knew just what to say to sway him.

Then he remembered a magical tool of his own invention called the food mincer, which he’d put away because Dahlia had said she didn’t want to use it before she’d learned how to use knives. He went to get it out of its box in the workshop. When he returned to the kitchen, he confiscated the knife from Dahlia, who had resumed preparing dinner. Today, they would take turns being the chef.

“I’ll cut the carrots…with this! The food mincer!”

“Oh, I remember that thing! The thing I wasn’t using so I could learn how to use knives—the food mincer!”

I wish you’d remember it as one of your father’s exemplary magical tools.

The food mincer consisted of just a small glass bowl and a lid. At a glance, it could even have been mistaken for a simple storage container. The difference was that on the inside of the lid

was a magical circuit, which connected to metal blades resembling the sickles used to cut grass. Carlo removed the lid, and Dahlia peered inside with brimming curiosity.

"Father, did someone ask you to make this?"

"No—I made it thinking a friend who owned a stall could use it. But it ended up taking me a long time to finish."

"Oh, wow. So you made it to help your friend..."

His daughter sounded so moved that he felt he should clarify.

"Well, I owed him."

"Ah..."

Should I have kept quiet? He felt like his daughter had just lost some respect for him.

"All right, let's get cutting!"

He placed large chunks of carrots into the bowl and closed the lid. The food mincer was powered by wind stones, and with just the turn of a dial, the blades began to spin. In a flash, the carrots were finely cut, and he put them in the pot to be cooked in soup. Next up after the carrots were potatoes. They were already peeled, so he just chopped them into large chunks before putting them in the mincer. It was satisfying to see the vegetables reduced to small pieces so quickly. Dahlia was glued to his side, her green eyes twinkling. Even though he wasn't using a knife, she was a little too close to him.

"Father, this is so convenient! I'll definitely start using this from now on!"

His daughter was all smiles as she turned to him. He always loved to see her smile. *Being able to see her smile is the reason I became a magical toolmaker*—such a thought would occur only to someone who was indeed a doting, spoiling father. Not that he had any intention of changing.

"Can I take a look? Father, where does this magical circuit start from?"

"Oh, sure thing. If you take this off this part of the lid, you can see where the circuit starts..."

From the moment the soup started to simmer to the end of their meal, he gave his daughter a lesson on the mincer.

"I see... I think I get it now, father!"

After dinner, his daughter attempted to fill the mincer to its maximum capacity, thinking to test the limits of its operation time. He kept quiet about that even as his back broke out in a light sweat. *This is how you treat a magical tool made by your own*

father?

He understood it was her curiosity as a magical toolmaker and not her concern for the tool's functionality and durability that had led her to do that—but he felt like his daughter had another artisan inside of her. And one who could become very lost in her work. If Carlo ever shared that thought with anyone else, he knew just what they would say.

Dahlia is just like you, Carlo.

Carlo had first started work on the food mincer when he was in college. Its intended purpose had been to allow his friend to chop up meat and vegetables at his food stall. It was a secret to everyone, including Dahlia, that the friend in question was none other than Leone Jedda of the Merchants' Guild.

Even while Leone had been busy with both the civil official and magical toolmaking courses in college, he'd also worked some jobs. One of those jobs had been manning a food stall. Carlo had wondered why a viscount like him would need to do that, but Leone had evasively told him that nobles had their urgent expenses to deal with too.

One day, Carlo spotted Leone, who was soon to graduate, in an unexpected place. It was in the capital's South District. Leone, with a different name and hair color, was running a crespelle stand. When Carlo happened to catch sight of him, he tried to pass by as if he hadn't noticed. Unfortunately, Leone wasn't fooled by his amateur acting and stopped him.

"Take it. Forget you saw me," he whispered, expressionless. He took a hot crespelle, wrapped it in a leaf, and forced it into Carlo's hands.

The crespelle was filled with finely chopped sautéed meat and vegetables, seasoned simply with salt and pepper, and held together in a wrapper a little thicker than a crepe. The different fillings in the crispy crespelle seemed to be uneven in size—still, it was tasty.

Carlo had a hunch this wasn't Leone's first time working the stall, judging by how at home he looked grilling the crespelle. The people working the stand next to him called him "Neo" and spoke to him about the soaring prices of ingredients as if he were any other commoner.

Carlo felt like he couldn't just leave, so he observed the stall from a distance. Leone seemed very mature in the way he was handling guests with a customer-service smile. The man was

vastly different from himself, wandering around in a sulky mood because he wasn't able to enchant like his magical toolmaker father.

After a while, there came a surge of people. A large port was situated in the South District; a group of ships must have just arrived. The stands became busy with customers, but while the other stands had two or three people working, Leone was by himself. On top of that, it seemed he was running out of filling, and his panic started to show on his face.

"Mr. Neo, you can put that crespelle on my tab!"

Carlo had slipped into the stall behind Leone before he noticed. At his request, Carlo washed his hands with the water in a basin and then helped cut the food. The greens were easy, but he couldn't cut the carrots quite small enough, and the huge pile of onions made him cry. The two of them cut, sautéed, and cooked as fast as they could, and the finished crespelles practically flew out of the stall.

A few dizzying hours later, they had used up all their ingredients and closed the stall for the day. With his work complete, Leone wheeled the stall to a nearby private residence, where he changed clothes and turned his hair back to its original color. Then, as compensation for Carlo's help, Leone handed him one silver.

As they walked, the dim light of the dusk making it difficult to make out each other's faces, Leone began to speak in halting sentences.

He spoke about how his younger sister was sick and he was working to pay for her treatment. He had learned that his family couldn't be relied on when he, although the son of the head of the family, had been unable to even call for a carriage. Fortunately, his sister was recovering well, and as long as Leone found a job after graduation, he could continue paying for her treatment. Carlo was relieved to hear that. For the first time, Carlo understood why Leo had always seemed so grown up.

Still, it seemed that right now, in the days leading up to his graduation, Leone didn't have a lot of spare money, so Carlo tried to return his silver coin. Leone pretended to take it back, then flicked Carlo's forehead with his finger.

"Remember this, Carlo. Nobles don't offer anything for free."

Despite how Leone looked, or how he acted, he was a member of the nobility. Carlo couldn't help but admire Leone in

that moment, though he never admitted it to him aloud.

Even after returning home to the Green Tower, Carlo couldn't stop thinking about his time behind the stall. The task that had required the most effort had been cutting the ingredients for the filling, since there were so many different types. *Maybe they could be chopped up in a bowl with spinning blades. It would need a lid to make sure nothing flew out*—after hitting upon that idea, Carlo drew up a plan, constructed the parts, and decided to use a wind crystal to make it move.

However, making the prototype proved to be a monumental challenge. The lid would fly off from the vibrations of the spinning blades, the two blades would break, the tool would fail to cut the ingredients well, and when it did seem like it had actually cut the ingredients, it turned out it had only cut what was in the middle and left big pieces along the sides. With that having failed, he raised the output, which resulted in an instantly liquefied onion. He cleaned up the workshop with tears in his eyes and drew up a new magical circuit.

Things weren't going well, so he ended up working on it for a long time, with breaks for college exams. Once, his father asked him if he wanted his help, but he declined. His father would never view him as an adult if he accepted.

One day, while he was struggling to modify the blades, his father started polishing a grass-cutting sickle right across from him, even though it was the dead of winter. He had a larger sickle for cutting tall grass and a smaller one for cutting short grass—his taciturn father spared hardly a word even in moments of teaching. Or maybe he was just trying to help his son, who'd refused his help, save some face.

Carlo made three differently sized blades, changed the shape of the bowl, and redrew the magical circuit. Finally, the magical tool he dubbed the food mincer was complete. Unfortunately, he'd completed it long after he'd graduated from college, but with the finished product in hand, he went to see Leone.

"I came to pay off my tab!"

So saying, he handed Leone the food mincer, and the man looked completely flabbergasted. Carlo was celebrating internally that he had successfully surprised his senior when Leone said, his face serious, "Carlo, leave the sales to me."

At the time, Leone was already a staff member at the Merchants' Guild. *Maybe this will be a bonus to his job*—with that

thought, Carlo agreed. After making him write up a specification document on the spot, Leone swiftly drew up the royalties and commercial contracts, then immediately submitted them to the guild. Then, Leone got right into putting the tools on the market, and Carlo devoted himself solely to making them.

The tool was sold extensively, first to food stall workers, then to businesses related to food preparation, then even for domestic use. Before he knew it, Carlo was the one making an unexpectedly large profit. However, he never got the chance to thank Leone. When he tried, his senior cut him off with a smile and said, “No need to thank me. It’s only fair compensation, and you overpaid your tab anyway.”

If only the story had ended happily for everyone, but it wasn’t over yet.

Carlo had a good friend who was the successor of a large company—Teodoro Orlando. His good friend mourned the fact that Carlo had entrusted the food mincer to Leone, and he snatched his contract from him to read it.

“Hmm, this *is* an appropriate sum…”

The man sighed and nodded, his profile already that of a proper merchant. Even Teodoro was more grown up than him. Carlo was starting to feel he was lagging behind.

Afterward, Teodoro would always moan about the same thing whenever they drank together: “I wanted to be the one to handle the first magical tool you registered!”

“Carlo, you’re having sugar with your tea today?” Gabriella asked him quizzically. They were in the vice-guildmaster’s office at the Merchants’ Guild.

“…Yeah. It just feels like that kind of day.”

His reply came a beat late. Honestly, he hoped the sugar would help his brain work a little. Even though he was sitting on the sofa, he felt slightly dizzy. It seemed he wasn’t in good shape that day.

He’d run into Gabriella in the hallway and coaxed her into having tea, and since she happened to have a free moment, she’d invited him into her office. It had been a while since they’d sat across from each other at this low table and had tea. They

weren't completely alone, however; a guard was standing inconspicuously inside the room as well. Gabriella had said that at first, she didn't feel comfortable having a guard with her around the clock, but now she seemed to pay him no mind.

Carlo had met Gabriella before Leone had. Leone, buried in work, had been seeking to hire someone who could write up documents. Carlo had introduced him to Gabriella, who was a scribe. Him being a noble and her being a commoner had presented an obstacle, but the two of them had overcome—or perhaps more accurately, demolished that obstacle and gotten married, and their marriage was still going strong. A part of Carlo was happy for and jealous of them, but another, smaller part of him found them a little blinding.

Be that as it may, as he looked at her glamorous navy blue silk dress, the dark blue earrings swaying from her ears, the silver necklace studded with sparkling blue jewels—all presumably gifts from Leone—he felt they looked a bit heavy.

Gabriella looks entirely natural as a viscount's wife—the moment he thought that, the woman herself let out a sigh.

"Leone is still in Ehrlichia. Though he complained all the way out the door."

Leone had left for the neighboring country the day before yesterday. Apparently, he was acting as an adviser to the Kingdom of Ordine's diplomats. Leone had strong business connections both domestically and internationally, so the government must have been counting on his help. He'd only expected to accompany the diplomats once or twice, but now the trips he'd made numbered in the double digits. The man was very unhappy about spending less time with Gabriella. It seemed the prospects of career advancement and even more piles of money held no appeal for a man so devoted to his wife.

However, Carlo was glad Leone was away today. If he'd been here, he would surely have picked up on how out of sorts Carlo felt. This body of his was breaking down as a result of raising his magic too much, and he had his doubts about just how long he could continue pretending nothing was the matter. Knowing he couldn't let this chance slip by, Carlo had flagged Gabriella down to talk.

"Do you remember what I said when I referred you to Leo as a scribe? About how you could return the favor later?"

"Yes, I do. The debt we owe you for introducing us to each

other. We would have told everyone about what you had done for us if you hadn't forbidden me to do so."

"I didn't want to become a matchmaking service," he said, laughing in spite of himself.

When Leone and Gabriella had been engaged, people had begun asking her how their relationship had started. Carlo had begged her in a hushed whisper, "I can't have people start coming to me for help marrying rich, so please, keep quiet about this until I die!" He'd meant every word he'd said, but it seemed that Gabriella had interpreted his request as a matter of modesty. He remembered that when he'd been invited to their wedding reception, he'd been placed at a table with all nobles and had pleaded with all his might to be seated somewhere else.

"About that debt—if Dahlia ever needs help as a magical toolmaker or a woman, please give her advice. And if she ends up not needing anything, keep this a secret for the rest of your life."

"Carlo, has something happened? If you're in any trouble, tell me at once."

Nothing gets past her. Those navy blue eyes of hers were staring right at him, but he couldn't very well answer her. Leone was his senior and his friend, and Gabriella was Leone's wife and colleague. The two of them had children of their own, whom they loved dearly. They had even more people they needed to protect than he did.

Carlo exerted the utmost effort to rearrange his expression and replied cheerily, "Thing is, since I don't have a wife around, I figure there are some things Dahlia can't easily ask me about. And there's a lot I can't teach her about too."

"If that's what you meant, then you could have left out the 'magical toolmaker' part. Could you not phrase things as if you're about to die?"

She held nothing back, as if she still didn't quite believe him. In her gaze, he saw worry seeping through. He realized that with the passing of time, she had become a good friend to him too.

"No, I still mean that part about helping her as a toolmaker. She's skilled, but like me, she has no sense for business or profit."

"You're not boasting about that, are you? That's why I keep telling you to establish a company. I told you I can help walk you through the business and accounting side of things."

“There’s no need; Orlando & Co. handles my magical tools. It would just be a bigger bother for me to have more to deal with.”

“Well, I suppose Ireneo of Orlando & Co. has become capable in his own right…”

The eldest son of Carlo’s good friend still wasn’t a merchant capable of contesting with Gabriella. Teodoro had said he wanted to train Ireneo for another ten years, but then the man had abruptly left this world. *It won’t be long before I follow after him, so please look after Dahlia*—he hoped Gabriella could forgive him for being unable to say that.

His trembling fingertips almost lost their grip on his teacup, but he managed to keep hold of it with both hands, then poured the liquid down his throat.

“Knowing my Dahlia, she’ll pay you back for anything you do for her!” he said, forcing out a smile. All the while, he wished the Jeddas’ debt could remain unpaid.

Gabriella briefly raised her eyebrows, then broke into a broad smile and said, “I’m sure she will. Dahlia is just like you, Carlo.”

“Mr. Carlo!”

Carlo was on his way back to the Green Tower when a familiar voice called out to him at the Merchants’ Guild carriage stop. He turned around to see his friend, Dominic, out of breath. He must have caught sight of him and come running over. Dominic came up right next to him and whispered, “Carlo, you have to come with me today!”

Dominic was about a dozen years older than Carlo, but he was one of his best friends. The man was a scrivener; he oversaw, verified, and certified all types of government agreements and business contracts. His position meant he needed to put impartiality above all else, so except when meeting as friends, they always referred to each other with titles.

So for Dominic to drop his title at the carriage stop of the Merchants’ Guild meant that something must have happened. Either that, or Dominic suspected Carlo’s poor health since he kept turning down his dinner invitations. While Carlo braced himself for that possibility, Dominic smiled brightly.

“My grandchildren’s portraits are finally done!” he said, unable to keep his voice down. Carlo assumed the man would want to

speak at length about his grandchildren over drinks, so it looked like he would be having a second chat with a friend today. Carlo decided to visit Dominic's home for the first time in a long while.

Before he'd become a scrivener, Dominic had lived near the Green Tower. Since they'd known each other as neighbors, Dominic would sometimes tutor Carlo at home when he got bad marks on a test. When he'd entered the scrivener's agency as an apprentice, Carlo's father had become one of his guarantors.

Dominic was a smart, kind, and considerate neighbor—for an only child like Carlo, he was akin to an older brother. The two of them had rekindled their friendship when Carlo started spending time in the Merchants' Guild, and it was then that they had discovered they had similar tastes when it came to food and drink. They were both following in their fathers' footsteps, so they would often vent to each other about feeling unable to surpass them. It was funny how perfectly they understood each other's troubles and gripes even though they were in different lines of work.

Dominic's father had become a scrivener when he was young, but the demanding work had resulted in his early death. That was why, even though the two both had the same taste in drink, Dominic always made sure to warn Carlo against drinking too much. He was happy even being scolded, though. It was like having his neighborhood older brother back.

"Look, Carlo! Aren't they just adorable?!"

That former neighborly older brother of his was now a white-haired elderly gentleman. His smile reached all the way to his eyes as he looked at the small portraits.

"They sure are cute... Makes me want a portrait of my own to put up."

Laid out on the table were three pictures of five children, ranging in age from an adorable baby to a young child. These were Dominic's grandchildren.

The two men enjoyed food and wine as Dominic spoke proudly and at length about his daughters and grandchildren. After several glasses of wine, Carlo was passed a glass of water. He was being sobered up, signaling the start of a serious conversation. Dominic looked at him with his deep green eyes.

"Carlo, Dahlia is an adult now. Isn't it time you tell her about her mother?" he asked. Dominic knew more or less what had happened with Carlo's wife, Teresa.

“No, I don’t plan on telling her. After all, she’s never had, and never will have, a relationship with her.”

“But if the Lambertis ever reach out to Dahlia, it might confuse her.”

“That won’t happen. That family completely cut ties with us. There’s no record of us being a family in the city’s registry.”

His marriage to Teresa had been expunged from the records. In the field for Dahlia’s mother’s name was a blank space. The ones responsible for erasing their past together were Teresa’s family, the Earldom Lamberti. Even though they had done so to protect their own family, by extension, it also served to protect Dahlia.

“Besides, if Dahlia did know everything, then she might go to the Lambertis for help if I or a close friend were ever in trouble. Even at the cost of her own well-being.”

“Carlo, what do you mean by that?” Dominic asked, his voice growing severe. Carlo wished he could cry and lay bare everything to his “older brother,” but there was something else that it was imperative he talk about.

“Dominic, can you promise not to tell a soul what I’m about to say?”

“...Sure. You have my word as your friend.”

“I think Dahlia might be heaven-blessed.”

“Heaven-blessed? Are you sure that’s not your pride as a father talking?”

Considering his past behavior, Carlo couldn’t blame the man for asking, but this time was different.

“I suspect Dahlia might’ve already known about something like the dryer. Before she could read, she would draw things. Metal birds flying through the air, boats sailing through water without sails, a building with people riding on moving floors—those types of things don’t even exist in fairy tales, and she would try to explain to me how they worked.”

“She probably just got that from you. Didn’t you give her piles of books about magical tools and monsters as soon as she was old enough to read?”

“I wish this was just me being biased as her father. But what if that’s not it?”

“I’ll bite. If Dahlia really is heaven-blessed, then the kingdom will take good care of her. That’s precisely why you don’t need to worry even if the Lambertis reach out to her.”

The same thought had occurred to Carlo before. But he was tormented by the fear that he might lose his daughter. That trumped all other thoughts.

“Dominic, do you know what sorts of lives the heaven-blessed have led in this kingdom?”

“Do you mean marrying and being adopted into nobility? I understand you don’t want to let go of Dahlia, but…”

Carlo had become a baron of the Kingdom of Ordine. He was on the lowest rung as far as nobility went, but he’d been able to do some digging into the records on those referred to as heaven-blessed.

“There was a person whose wind magic was so strong, they were able to fly freely in the air. They ended up being snatched away by a monster while on a knights’ training expedition. It was a wyvern that had never been spotted before in the area at any point that year.”

“Well, that’s— I mean, accidents happen, right?”

“A woman with high magical ability in all four elements became the fourth wife of a high noble’s son after graduating college. She died before she got the chance to see her own family again, leaving behind three children. The person who invented the compass—that well-known tool that points sailors in the right direction on the water—went out to sea, never to return. Among an entire fleet, only his ship was attacked by a kraken.”

Few people had ever been called heaven-blessed, and there were even fewer records of any of them living peaceful lives. Among those that could be said to have lived happy lives were those who belonged to the families of high-ranking nobles, worked in the castle, and contributed to the kingdom—but who could say definitively that their lives were truly happy?

Dominic was at a loss for words. Across from him, Carlo continued in a lowered voice, “Dominic, I could let someone die if it meant protecting Dahlia. But if Dahlia were to be told a magical tool she made could help someone, then I know she would even create something dangerous. That’s why I’ve only taught her how to make magical tools for use in daily life. I put a stop to her developing anything I thought seemed dangerous. But it looks like even the waterproof cloth, which I thought was safe, has become so widespread.”

“Carlo, the reason you went through Orlando & Co. for

everything regarding Dahlia's waterproof cloth…"

"Yeah, it was so Orlando & Co. could be a shelter for her. If anything dangerous happens in the future, I can even send her to Ehrlichia or Išrana. I trained my two apprentices well enough that they'll never go hungry. They can live anywhere a magical lantern can be lit."

"If you think she'll be in *that* much danger, then maybe you should have Dahlia stay away from magical tools. She's about to get married, so couldn't you just have her stay home?"

"Dahlia loves crafting and magical tools more than anything. I can't—no, *no one* can take that away from her."

His daughter had always been fascinated with magical tools, ever since she was a young child. As a fellow artisan and magical toolmaker, he understood her feelings. To deprive them of crafting was to deprive a bird of its wings. And although he hadn't deprived her of it, he *had* pinned down one of her wings.

"I want Dahlia to live a peaceful, happy life—not as someone who's heaven-blessed but as a simple magical toolmaker—even if it means curtailing the talent she's been gifted with. I know that wish of mine probably makes me a very selfish father, and a terrible teacher."

As a father, he was powerless to completely shield her from harm. As a magical toolmaker, he'd suppressed his apprentice's potential and sheltered her from others, behavior that was unforgivable on the part of a teacher. He had been well aware of all of that, yet he hadn't relented.

"Okay, I get it. I won't comment any more on it. But…"

Even though Dominic had just said he wouldn't comment further, his friend was probably about to tell him some painful truth. Despite his gentle, reserved appearance, he had quite the sharp tongue. Carlo braced himself, but Dominic's deep green eyes softened as he looked at him.

"Carlo, you are the finest father there is. I guarantee that."

"…I wish that were true."

Carlo turned his face away as he felt a stinging behind his eyes. After rubbing his nose to hide his embarrassment, he finally put his request into words.

"Dominic, I'm counting on you. If Dahlia's ever in trouble, I want you to help her."

"Don't be stupid, Carlo. There's an order to things, and I'm older than you are. Help her yourself."

Hearing Dominic's response, Carlo felt a catch in his throat.

I won't be able to. That's why I came to you, a friend I can rely on.

But if he were to say that, he knew he couldn't discount the possibility of Dominic involving nobles in the matter. He was a man who cared deeply for his friends. That was why Carlo didn't want to tell him too much.

"Still, I'm asking you to do this for me. Look—isn't it natural for the father of a bride-to-be to feel a little forlorn?"

"Well, sure… All right. In the unlikely event—I mean, the *very, very* unlikely event something happens to you, I will be there for her."

Dominic had five daughters, and before each of their weddings, he'd gotten very sentimental. They'd all married into families within the capital, and his eldest daughter even lived in the same district as him. Nowadays, he was worried about his grandchildren getting married. He was as prone to haste as he was to worry. However, when Carlo looked at his grandchildren's portraits, he understood a little. He'd never be able to have portraits drawn for his own grandchildren.

The portraits looked a little blurry—he rubbed his brow, and Dominic asked, "Carlo, are you feeling unwell?"

"My eyes are just getting bad. Old age, you know. I'm having trouble seeing this cute portrait clearly…"

"Take all the time you need to look at it. What do you say to another bottle of wine?"

"Let's have a sweet red this time."

"Coming right up. I've got just the thing!"

A dark burgundy wine was poured into his glass.

He and his friend laughed as they made a toast, and he said a prayer as he took a sip.

I've been blessed with good friendships and colleagues, and a spouse. I hope for the same for Dahlia—not to bloom as a solitary flower, but to bloom eternally with the people by her side.

The red wine was entirely tasteless.


Dahlia in Bloom
Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools
9
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Employee of the Rossetti Trading Company
Mezzena
Vice-Chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company
Ivano
Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory
Lucia
Dahlia's Childhood Friend and Hairstylist
Irma
Reincarnated Female Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia
Handsome Knight of the Order of Beast Hunters
Volfred
Employee of the Rossetti Trading Company
Marcella


"IT'S SO PRETTY..."
OFF
Crimson Lotus Blade



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by Hisaya Amagishi

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