Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

10

Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Hachi Komada
Character Designer: Kei

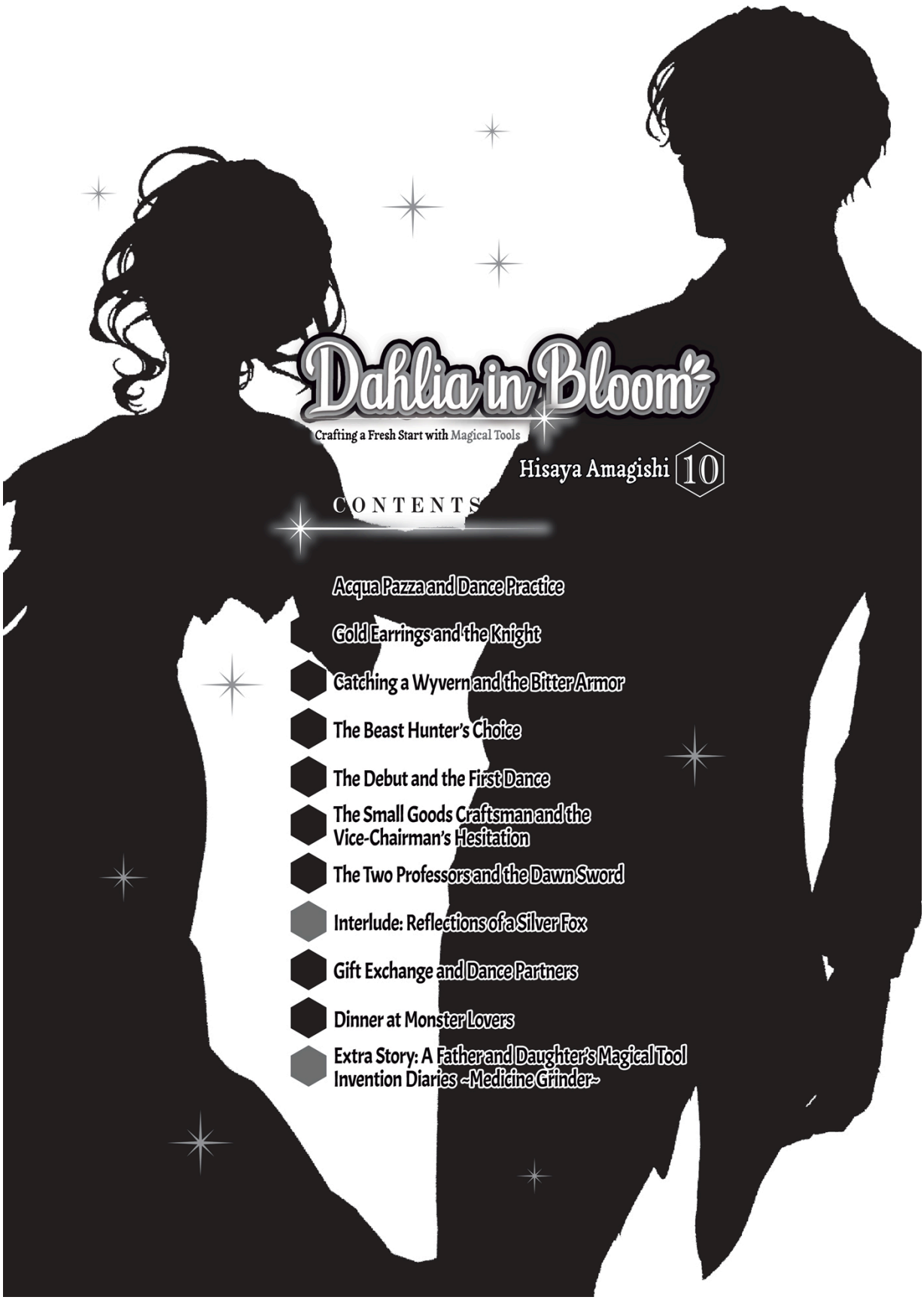



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Handsome Knight of the Order of Beast-Hunters
Volfred
Eldest Son of the Earldom Scalfarotto
Guido
Ice Spider Wand
Reincarnated Female Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia
Head Manager of the Scalfarotto Arms Works
Jonas
Nap Lantern
The Magical Sword Night Piercer


Proprietor of the Goddess's Right Eye
Oswald
Guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild
Leone
Second Daughter of the Viscountcy Goodwin
Julicia
Former Head of the Marquisate D'Orazi
Bernigi



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Acqua Pazza and Dance Practice

"I'm worried about stepping on the instructor's feet during my dance lessons..."

In her previous life, aristocratic balls had been the stuff of stories. She had never imagined she would someday have the opportunity to dance at one herself. Having been reincarnated into this world, she often compared her previous and current lives in this way. In this world, her name was Dahlia Rossetti, and she was a magical toolmaker by trade.

This world lacked electricity and electrical appliances. What it had instead were magic and magical tools. Dahlia was an artisan who created magical tools for daily life, such as lanterns illuminated by fire crystals, hot water dispensers powered by fire and water crystals, and waterproof cloth made from blue slime powder.

Despite having been reborn into this world of magic and monsters, Dahlia herself had a low magical grade and was unable to use either offensive or healing magic. Her appearance remained as plain and subdued as in her previous life, though her dark hair and eyes had been replaced by a more colorful combination of red hair and green eyes.

While her life might not have been extraordinary, she counted herself fortunate to be able to make a living as a craftsperson in a peaceful country.

"I'm sure you'll do great, Dahlia! And you can step on my feet as much as you like."

The one who spoke those encouraging though arguably odd words was Volfred Scalfarotto, or Volf. He was the fourth son of an earl, a knight in the Kingdom of Ordine's Order of Beast Hunters, and Dahlia's good friend.

He was tall and lean and had hair like black silk, a strong brow and straight nose, a sharp jawline, and glimmering golden eyes. He

was gorgeous, so much so that any portrait painted of him would surely have commanded a high price.

However, Volf was never prideful of his good looks. Ever since he was a boy, he had been the target of extreme affection from women and jealousy from men, which had severely impacted his personal relationships.

Despite the vast differences in station and upbringing between them, he and Dahlia had become friends through a series of chance encounters.

Nowadays, Volf frequently visited Dahlia's home, the Green Tower, so they could eat and drink together as well as work on developing magical tools and even magical swords. They'd recently started devoting more of their time to tools that would benefit the Order of Beast Hunters.

Occasionally, someone would ask her if she and Volf were romantically involved, but there was nothing of the sort between them.

Today, as on so many days, the two of them were in the kitchen of the Green Tower, chatting in front of a simmering stockpot that held their dinner for the evening. The conversation had turned to dancing because Dahlia was to become a baroness in the coming year, and a date had already been selected for her debut. It would be hosted by a marquisate and would take the form of a ball, which meant dancing would be required.

But for Dahlia, who had no dancing experience outside of college music classes, this was a major hurdle. She would be receiving instruction before the day of her debut, but as she'd said, she had a feeling she would step on her teacher's feet.

"If you'd like, I'll practice with you as much as I can."

"I really appreciate that, Volf."

It was a welcome offer. Perhaps she could even reinforce the tips of his shoes with an enchantment. As she contemplated that possibility, the clock ticked on.

"It should be about ready now..."

Dahlia tugged on a mitten and lifted the lid off the stockpot. A cloud of steam billowed out.

"It smells amazing!" Volf exclaimed, his golden eyes lighting up.

Dahlia used a pair of chopsticks to confirm that the food was cooked, then asked Volf to carry the stockpot to the living room. While he was doing that, she prepared the side dishes. Next, she gathered the wine and glasses, and thus began their affable dinner.

Once they had seated themselves at the table, they each gave a toast.

"Good work on another day of training. Here's to health and good fortune!"

"And good work on your enchanting today, Dahlia. To health and good fortune!"

"Today's entrée is acqua pazza. Eat it while it's hot!"

"Thanks! It looks delicious."

The entire stockpot was full of acqua pazza. For the fish, Dahlia had chosen chicken grunt. After preparing it, a process that had included removing its scales, she'd lightly grilled it, then simmered it together with diced tomatoes and vegetables, salt, garlic, basil, and clams purged of sand. For sides, she'd prepared a vegetable salad with thinly sliced cheese. She had also cut up a longish baguette and piled the slices into a basket.

A delectable scent rose from the acqua pazza, which she portioned out generously into two deep dishes. Dahlia gently pierced the flesh of the chicken grunt with her chopsticks, then took a bite. The steaming fish melted in her mouth. At first she thought it might be a bit too salty, but the more she chewed, the more the flavors came together—the subtle sweetness of the fatty fish, the savoriness of the clams, and the acidity of the tomatoes.

After savoring and swallowing her bite, she chased it with a sip of the medium-dry white wine. The tart wine filled her mouth with a crisp freshness that complemented the flavor of the acqua pazza nicely, making Dahlia want to take another bite immediately.

As she let out a sigh of satisfaction, she saw Volf was intently chewing his fish. This was a habit of his when eating something he particularly liked. Dahlia was happy to see he was enjoying tonight's meal.

Elated by that knowledge, Dahlia reached for a slice of the

baguette, split it in two, and submerged one half in her dish, letting it float down to the bottom. The crunchy crust softened as it soaked up the soup. She lifted the bread out of the bowl, taking care not to let any juices spill, and popped it into her mouth.

She closed her eyes as she relished the combination of the light, sweet baguette, which she had purchased fresh that morning, and the concentrated flavors of the chicken grunt, clams, and vegetables.

When she reopened her eyes to take another sip of wine, she saw a pair of golden eyes staring straight at her. Volf wasn't looking at her in disapproval of her manners; rather, the expression on his face was one of pure wonder.

"Volf, I know it's a little uncivil, but you should try dipping the bread in the soup. It tastes really good."

"All right, I'll try it!" he replied, an excited gleam in his eyes.

He followed her example by breaking a slice of baguette in two and placing one half in his bowl. He even pushed the bread down with his finger, determined to let it fully soak up the juices. Dahlia decided not to dwell too much on the question of whether she should be teaching the son of an earl to do something so uncouth.

Unable to lift the soaked baguette slice with his fingers, Volf scooped it up with a spoon and placed it in his mouth. The bread shouldn't have been hard anymore, but all the same, he spent a long time chewing it.

After relishing the soup-soaked bread, Volf picked up another slice of baguette with his fingers.

"Amazing. The bread is eating up the savory flavor..."

Volf was the one doing the eating, not the bread, but seeing the wistful look in his eyes, Dahlia decided not to point that out.

"There's plenty more. Have as much as you want."

"Thanks, Dahlia!"

They proceeded to polish off the rest of the wine, the stockpot of acqua pazza, and the pile of baguette slices.

After finishing their meal, Dahlia and Volf took a moment to relax and recount their days to each other.

"Training today was the usual. We ran, did our basic exercises, and sparred." But despite Volf's nonchalance, the Beast Hunters endured terribly rigorous training, which included long-distance running, push-ups, sit-ups, back exercises, and, after all that, sparring with training swords and lances.

However, all the knights seemed to be able to handle it just fine. When Dahlia had gone to observe them training, she had witnessed the knights doing push-ups in pairs, with one sitting on the other's back. That day, Volf's partner had been the younger knight Kirk. Next to him, Dorino had sat stock-still on Randolph's back. Dahlia had been impressed by the completely composed expressions on all the knights' faces, despite the heavy burdens they bore.

Remembering that time, she asked, "Did you have someone sitting on your back for push-ups today?"

Volf smiled awkwardly. "Lord Bernigi sat on my back after telling me, 'Sir, I'll be like a stone weight.' It made me pretty nervous."

"I can imagine..."

Volf was technically the senior of the two knights, but not only was Bernigi much older, he was the previous vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters and the former Marquis D'Orazi. He had retired from the squad due to a leg injury, but with the help of a magical prosthetic, he'd been able to resume serving as a knight. He was currently in the process of rejoining the Beast Hunters as a new recruit, hence his presence during training. Dahlia found herself thinking of the man's cheerful, gravelly laugh.

"Did Dorino or Randolph go through the same thing?"

Bernigi was not the only retired knight who had been able to return to active duty thanks to a prosthetic limb. Perhaps one of the others had sat on Dorino's back.

"No, since Randolph was already partnered with Dorino."

"Huh?" Dahlia sputtered in surprise. Randolph had a muscular physique and appeared quite heavy. Though she knew that Dorino could use strengthening magic, she couldn't help but worry for his safety. "And, um, he was fine?"

"He fell twice. Randolph, I mean. He said it was hard to keep his balance up top. But he got the hang of it once he started matching

the rhythm of his breathing with Dorino's."

"Well, that's good..."

So Dorino hadn't been crushed; Randolph had fallen off. These might not have been the kind of push-ups she was familiar with, but she decided to just accept that that was the way the Beast Hunters did things.

"How was your day, Dahlia?"

"I went to section two of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department to see the latest large grinder."

The other day, the knights had taste tested "green juice"—a vegetable-based beverage—at the Order of Beast Hunters' wing in the castle.

The knights had a restricted diet while on expedition, so they were constantly at risk of not getting adequate vegetables. That led to nutritional deficiencies and a lack of fiber, which in turn caused dry skin, itchiness, and issues with bowel movements.

In order to ameliorate that issue, the castle had started testing whether they could freeze large volumes of vegetable juice, which the knights could then take with them in enchanted bags. The large grinder was the magical tool that would make these large volumes of juice. The prototype that the Magical Toolmaking Department had created was enormous and powerful enough to completely pulverize the vegetables.

"It's incredible—one unit uses six wind crystals. Even making a big batch, it can produce a smooth vegetable juice that barely has any chunks in it."

As far as Dahlia could tell, it was a superior tool that did as good a job as the blenders from her previous world.

"Did Vice-Director Carmine make it?"

"He did, though since it's so large, he had the help of some other magical toolmakers as well."

Carmine Zanardi, the vice-director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, had taken charge of the prototyping process. He was a toolmaker with high magic and excellent technique. When he had shown Dahlia his plans for the large grinder, she had been deeply impressed.

"The tank is cylindrical, but the bottom is rounded to keep the fluid retention to a minimum. It uses three metal blades—their shape is ingenious. And the magical circuitry that Vice-Director Carmine designed for the wind crystals is...um, very good," Dahlia concluded abruptly as she realized she'd been about to launch into a detailed explanation. Volf was a knight. She shouldn't subject him to technical particulars that only a magical toolmaker would understand.

"I see. He sounds pretty incredible..." Volf said in a slightly more subdued tone.

Dahlia wanted to agree, but she had something else to add. "And there's Director Uros. He really is remarkable."

To Dahlia, Carmine's large grinder had appeared faultless.

But when Uros—the director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department—came to examine it, he apparently hadn't thought so. After swiftly looking back and forth between the specification document and the unit, he'd pointed out that the blades would be more resistant to breakage if they were curved, and suggested that the circuit be shortened to increase magical efficiency by a few percentage points.

Even that minuscule increase in efficiency would make a difference over an extended period of use. It was an essential consideration given that the common people's taxes supplied all the expenses that went into developing magical tools for the castle.

"I thought it was amazing how Director Uros was able to determine what needed to be improved just by looking at it!"

Dahlia noticed that Volf was watching her intently as she enthused. She realized that she had perhaps gotten carried away, but just as she was beginning to worry she'd talked too much, Volf smiled softly at her.

"Yeah, he's very talented too," he agreed.

"Yes, he is. I have no doubt they'll be able to make a wonderful grinder. I bet they'll be able to make a vegetable juice that even Captain Grato will enjoy drinking."

"I know they will. And actually, the captain drank the green juice after that meeting we had. He knows nutrition is more important

than anything on expeditions, though that fact has only recently been taken into account."

The Beast Hunters were dispatched wherever in the kingdom there were monster sightings. Expeditions often lasted for weeks on end, so the order prioritized provisions that were portable, kept for extended periods, and were inexpensive rather than flavorful or nutritionally balanced.

When he became captain of the Beast Hunters, Grato had begun working to improve the quality of their food, and just this year, he had implemented Dahlia's camp stoves. It sounded like he would be willing to supplement the squad's diet with the vegetable juice too. However, it would still take some time before the vegetable juice could pass the requirements for portability and durability.

Just as Dahlia was about to give those problems more thought, Volf continued.

"We had the new recruits try our old rations for their first meal on their first expedition."

"Rye bread and dried meat?"

"Yeah. Dried fruits too."

Such were the rations the knights had always received in the past. Dahlia remembered how Volf had complained of them around the time they'd first met.

"Most of the recruits said that stuff tasted better than they thought it would, but when we told them that was all we ate every single day, they looked shocked."

"I can understand why."

"Then, when Dorino told them that we had eaten that way for years, the captain said it was decades in his case. And that those rations taste better than the ones he had to eat initially."

"Captain Grato..."

Dahlia had heard that Grato had dedicated his family's fortune to improving the flavor of the rations. More durable foods had to sacrifice flavor; attempting to improve their taste was nothing short of impossible.

"But then another one of the older knights spoke up and said that he liked the flavor of the rye bread and dried meat, and that there

was always enough of it that he never had to go to sleep hungry. He went on to tell us more about what the old rations used to be like... He explained how the rations we have now are a result of all the hard work that's gone into improving them."

All thanks to the efforts of the knights' predecessors, Dahlia mused as Volf continued.

"After the recruits' first meal, we gave them camp stoves and told them how we came to have them. They were really grateful for the food they cooked on those—they even talked about how it'll make our expeditions pass more smoothly."

"I'm happy to hear that. As adviser to the squad, I'm always praying for everyone's safe return."

Developing those camp stoves was really worth it, Dahlia thought to herself. And without realizing she was doing so, she smiled.

Seeing the smile on the red-haired magical toolmaker's face, Volf smiled as well, though he refrained from disclosing the full extent of the praise the knights had lavished on the camp stoves.

Dahlia Rossetti, the Order of Beast Hunters' advisor—the squad had benefited greatly from her hard work and ingenuity. She had created the camp stoves, she had given her presentation on the units to the Beast Hunters without cowering before the castle's head treasurer, she continually worked on reducing the cost of the stoves, and she had the bottom of each unit stamped with her surname.

Through the older knights' appreciative remarks and Volf's highly enthusiastic explanations, new recruits came to know the value of the camp stove, and learned, too, about the Beast Hunters' earnest advisor.

Additionally, they gained a deeper understanding of Volf's adoration for her, although not one of them dared to utter a word about that.

"Thank you for inviting me here, Gabriella. I very much appreciate it."

"There's no need to be so nervous, Dahlia. This isn't a formal occasion."

Dahlia had arrived at the estate of the Viscounty Jedda early in the morning. Gabriella, the vice-guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild, had invited her here for her dance lesson. The Jeddas' estate was a bit old-fashioned, but it had beautiful natural lighting, and the rooms and hallways were furnished with warm, elegant pieces.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Chairwoman Rossetti."

The instructor, a woman Dahlia estimated to be about a dozen years older than herself, was already waiting in the spacious room. For today's lesson, the woman was dressed in a black tailcoat. The violin player, a young woman wearing a dark blue dress, was the next to greet Dahlia.

Dahlia returned their greetings, but her nerves made her voice come out at an unnaturally high pitch.

"I am told that you will be making your debut prior to receiving your peerage. You must be quite nervous," the instructor suggested.

"Yes, I am. I only know the bare minimum about dancing from college, so I'm worried I'll make a mess of everything..." Dahlia replied candidly.

The instructor smiled kindly. "You will do nothing of the sort. Even if you make an error during the first dance of your debut, your partner will take the blame."

"What?"

"You will be the one dancing in the presence of others for the very first time. Imperfection will be expected on your part, while your more experienced partner will be expected to compensate for you to the extent possible."

That's even worse! Dahlia wanted to let her head fall into her hands. Her first dance would be with Gildovan, head of the Viscountcy Diels, royal head treasurer, and guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company.

"I don't believe anyone will laugh at you when you're dancing with Lord Gildo, no matter how much you stumble," Gabriella said.

Dahlia unconsciously clenched her fists. It was true—no one who would be present at the ball was likely to mention her mistakes. But,

although they might very well laugh at her in secret after the fact, she couldn't give them any reason to laugh at Gildo.

He was already assuming a major burden by hosting her debut. She didn't want to cause him any more trouble. Furthermore, after Gildo, she would be dancing with Volf and Captain Grato. Dahlia clenched her fists even tighter. *I don't want to cause trouble for* any *of them.*

"I want to learn how to dance well enough to avoid causing anyone discomfort, so please, teach me...!"

"Certainly. Let us begin."

The instructor extended a white-gloved hand, into which Dahlia placed her own long-gloved hand.

Dahlia was currently wearing an ivory gown she had borrowed from Gabriella. It was an endearingly cute dress, with lace adorning the neck and hem. According to Gabriella, it had once been her daughter's. The hem, which flared gently as Dahlia moved, was long enough to cover her toes. If she wasn't careful, she would step on it and fall.

Dahlia kept her gaze level and walked straight ahead, making sure not to step on her hem, just like Gabriella had taught her, but even walking felt dangerous. Respect welled up inside her for all the noblewomen who could dance so elegantly in long gowns. When she reflected that she was supposed to learn to do the very same thing, the realization brought her almost to tears.

The violinist began to play a standard dance tune. Following the instructor's lead, Dahlia took her first step.

"Thank you..."

They had danced to three standard tunes three times each, taking a single break in the middle.

What Dahlia had learned from this experience was that it really had been too long since she had last danced. The instructor had complimented her on having the basics down, but since Dahlia was so rusty, she could neither keep time nor keep the width of her steps regular. Thanks to the advice the instructor had offered between songs, Dahlia had managed to learn the rest of the steps, but

nothing about her dancing was graceful. She would be receiving three more lessons. She could only hope that would be enough for her to become passably competent.

Once the instructor and the violinist left the room, Gabriella led Dahlia to the parlor, where they sat across from each other at a table. Dahlia was served fruit juice. She finally felt she could relax.

"You are a much better dancer than I expected, Dahlia."

"That's kind of you to say. But I stepped on the teacher's foot twice..."

"That's fine. Dance instructors wear shoes with steel plates in the toes. I remember stepping on *my* teacher's feet countless times."

Gabriella was trying to make her feel better, but Dahlia had stepped on the instructor's foot really hard. She seriously considered asking all the men who would be dancing with her on the day of her debut to put steel plates in their shoes, just in case.

"I assure you, there's nothing to be nervous about, Dahlia. You're not a noble yet, so instead of a debut, you can think of this as an opportunity to make and maintain connections."

"Okay..."

"I just can't wait to see the dress Lord Gildo will pick out for you. It will be a semiformal dress, so although it will be long, it shouldn't be much longer than the one you're wearing today. You should have no issues dancing in it."

"I hope you're right..."

"You'll get it with time. Just think of this as practice before you become a noble. Once you're a baroness, Lord Guido will host your official debut."

Dahlia's head swam just imagining that. She had dreamed of becoming a baroness one day, but her dreams had never included a marquis hosting her debut.

"Is there any possibility at all that my debut could be a quiet affair with just a few people?"

"Lord Guido is soon to be a marquis, and he is your guardian. He couldn't possibly put on a subdued affair for your debut."

I'd prefer *something more subdued,* Dahlia wanted to say, but perhaps that would be insulting to Guido. She wondered what her

father, Carlo, had done when he became a baron. Had he never suffered stomach pains during moments like these, or were father and daughter alike in that regard? At the very least, Dahlia suspected he had handled these events with greater aplomb than she could currently muster.

Dahlia started to put her hand to her stomach when Gabriella returned to the topic of the dress. "Considering your age and the fact you're not a debutante, your dress won't be white."

"Do all debutantes wear white dresses?"

"Typically, yes, but only until around the age of eighteen. When a woman of common birth is elevated to nobility, or if she is older than eighteen, she most often wears a colored dress."

"I see..."

Being significantly older than eighteen, Dahlia much preferred a simple, dark-hued dress that would tone down her presence—and hide any food or drink stains.

As she became distracted by thoughts of her dress, Gabriella continued, "A noble debutante generally wears a white dress, white gloves, and white shoes with a modest heel. She dances her first dance with either her father or fiancé, or, if she has neither, a brother or guarantor, who wears a black tailcoat."

It was all so wonderfully aristocratic. Just observing a ball like that sounded like an enjoyable time.

"My daughter danced with her father. If Carlo were alive, I'm sure he would dance with you. I have no doubt he's disappointed not to be able to attend with you."

"I'm not sure—I can't imagine dancing with my father... Whom did you have your first dance with, Gabriella?"

She knew that Gabriella had been born a commoner. Although she might not have been a debutante, she must've had a first dance. Dahlia assumed she had danced either with a noble guarantor, as Dahlia herself would be doing, or with her husband, Leone.

"Oswald."

"Professor Oswald?" Dahlia repeated mindlessly, surprised by Gabriella's answer.

"Yes. I had to attend a ball for work. I had a dance instructor, so I

had the basic skills, but I wanted to practice to make sure I didn't cause any offense to the client. Conveniently, I ran into Oswald in the hallway and asked him if he knew of any balls I could attend to polish my dancing. He invited me to a private ball hosted by his family, and we danced together as friends."

"Did Professor Oswald, um... Was he aware that was your first dance?" Dahlia asked hesitantly.

Gabriella grinned. "No. As we were dancing, he asked me whom I had danced my first dance with, and when I told him, 'This is my first dance,' he stepped on my foot quite hard."

Dahlia felt a sudden stab of sympathy for Oswald.

"U-Um, and what about Mr. Leone...?"

"He was my superior at the time. I asked him to be my partner for the ball—which was for a very important client—since I was having trouble finding one. And what did he provide for his commoner employee? A wastefully expensive dress."

"...Wow."

I'm not sure who to feel more sympathy for. Oswald had been in the more precarious position, while Leone had been forced to act in greater haste. Nor could Dahlia decide how much sympathy she ought to feel for Gabriella, who was smiling blithely at her.

Amid the brief lull in their conversation, there came a knock at the door. Gabriella called for whomever it was to enter, and in walked Leone. *I guess it's true what they say—speak of the devil and he doth appear.* Dahlia quickly composed her expression as best she could.

"These arrived from Lord Gildo. You ought to break them in so you don't get blisters."

"Th-Thank you..."

Leone's attendant handed her a shiny maroon box engraved with a delicate golden ivy design. Dahlia momentarily froze at the sight of such a luxurious box, but then she set it down on the table and gingerly opened it. Inside was a pair of burgundy dance shoes with a slightly high heel and ribbons tied at the ankles.

"The ribbons will ensure they don't slip off, so you won't have to worry about that," Gabriella commented.

"The heel is a bit high..."

"It's about the same as the shoes you have on now. You'll get used to them... I wonder if this means your dress will be in this color. You're going to be a baroness, but you aren't one yet, so you can't be dressed too extravagantly. It wouldn't do to show too much of your chest and back."

Dahlia took no issue with that. In fact, she would have preferred a dress that not only covered those areas but was plain and loose-fitting—something that would substantially hide her body shape—though she was aware that such a style was unlikely to be suitable for a ball.

"By the way, do you have accessories of your own you can wear? Shall I inquire about the design of the dress and loan you some jewelry that would complement it?"

"You don't need to do that, Gabriella."

"I'd prefer it if you didn't."

Dahlia's response overlapped with that of Gabriella's husband, who had taken the other seat across the table from her. Leone himself had most likely picked all of his wife's jewelry with a meticulous eye. Dahlia couldn't possibly borrow such treasured items.

"The host will provide you with jewelry. And...we wouldn't want ours to clash with anything else you may receive," Leone said.

Gabriella regarded him with catlike eyes. It seemed that some sort of silent exchange was taking place between husband and wife, so Dahlia stayed quiet until they were done.

Gabriella was the first to look away, turning her dark blue eyes to Dahlia.

"Dahlia, back to your dress. Do you remember when we visited my favorite boutique? The owner is a distant relative of Lord Gildo's. I let the couturier know your size. It was only yesterday that they responded to my inquiry, so I wasn't expecting the shoes to be ready today."

Gildo's relative, like the head treasurer himself, was a fast worker. But all this brought a new worry to Dahlia's mind.

"Um, about that... I think I may have gone up in size since the

time we went there together...”

“You haven’t changed much, as far as I can tell. Besides, adjustments will be made on the day of the ball.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your dress will be made a little oversized so that it can be sewn to fit you perfectly on the day of. You needn’t worry about that.”

“Still, I think I would like to slim down a bit, so I can fit into my own clothes...”

It would be a shame if Dahlia was no longer able to wear the outfits that she’d gotten with Gabriella at the beginning of last spring. Simply put, it would be a waste of clothes.

“Your health is more important than your figure—though I understand wanting to fit into what you already own.”

“You can simply have the same outfits made in your new size whenever you like,” Leone said with a serious face.

Gabriella smiled gracefully at him and replied, “As I said—my superior has a penchant for wasteful spending.”

Gold Earrings and the Knight

The moment the man walked into the store, the rest of the clientele fell silent and still.

He was tall, with ebony black hair and handsome features, and he instantly drew everyone's attention. Most captivating of all were his golden eyes, which glimmered in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Those eyes did not pale even in comparison to the shopkeeper's own wares, of which he was most proud.

The shopkeeper needed no introduction to this customer. Leone Jedda, his father-in-law and guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild, had sent him a letter in advance regarding Volfred Scalfarotto. There could be no question that this was he.

The shopkeeper stopped the other sales clerks from approaching Volfred, deciding that it was best he, as the proprietor, deal directly with this client.

The Earldom Scalfarotto was set to rise to a marquisate next term. Normally they would have summoned a gem dealer to their estate, but instead, this particular Scalfarotto had decided to come in person to visit his shop as a private customer.

The strikingly attractive young man was famous for being one of the Royal Order of Beast Hunters' Scarlet Armors, and for being the topic of sensational gossip among women.

The many female customers were staring at him, waiting to eavesdrop on whatever he might say. By tomorrow, the fact that Volfred had visited this shop would be the talk of the town—effectively serving as free advertising. Leone had put a great deal of thought into orchestrating this visit.

"Welcome, and thank you for your presence here today. I am Lorenz Bressan, the owner of this store."

"Thank you for the warm welcome. My name is Volfred Scalfarotto. I'm here to purchase something..."

Lorenz stepped closer to the man—who had begun, without preamble, to explain his reason for visiting—and saw that he had dark circles under his eyes. It seemed all that gossip about his active social life was true.

"Let us move to a room upstairs, Lord Scalfarotto. There, you can explain to me in greater detail exactly what it is you are looking for."

This man is attracting more attention than the jewelry on display. Lorenz had a feeling that with so many stares on him, Volfred would be too uncomfortable to find what he was looking for. He wanted to let the knight peruse his wares from the comfort of a chair. With that thought, Lorenz guided him to the second floor. They entered one of the parlor rooms, and Lorenz asked a sales clerk to prepare some tea.

He and Volfred sat across from each other at a table, whereupon he asked the haggard young man, "What may I help you find today, Lord Scalfarotto?"

In his letter, Leone had laid out three requirements for the accessory: It must be made of gold, it must be something a woman in her twenties would wear, and it must be appropriate for a marquisate. That meant Lorenz must not show Volfred anything that failed to meet those criteria. He would have to exercise caution in selecting an accessory for a woman he had never laid eyes on.

"I would like help choosing gold earrings for a woman. I haven't decided on anything else besides that. Mr. Leone recommended this shop to me, and I thought I could decide after seeing what you have."

Once he was done speaking, the black-haired man fixed Lorenz with a piercing gaze. Lorenz suspected he wasn't looking for a casual gift. He might even be judging the quality of his store.

Volfred was a scion of the Scalfarotto family. His father had been known as the Earl of Water, but lately another nickname within the family was gaining more recognition—that of the Marquis of Ice. The increasing fame of that name was due to the family's impending elevation in rank, their expanded production of ice crystals, and the soon-to-be marquis's powerful ice magic. His ability to mercilessly freeze his family's opponents had likewise become a topic of

conversation.

And here Lorenz was with one of the Scalfarottos as his customer. He wanted to make sure he did not recommend a product that wasn't to Volfred's liking. As a member of the Scalfarotto family, this young man undoubtedly had a discerning eye and exacting tastes.

Lorenz's shop offered jewelry in a wide range of prices, but each item, down to the least costly, was a work of great quality. He could show Volfred everything he had to offer and allow him to make his own judgments.

Lorenz straightened his back. "Why, certainly. We have three hundred to choose from. I can bring them out for you in groups."

"Huh? Three *hundred*?"

Volfred's golden eyes widened, then darkened. Perhaps he didn't have time to think and choose—or perhaps he was testing Lorenz as the store owner.

Lorenz noticed a shiny bracelet on the left wrist of the man's crossed arms. It was silver but had an exquisite golden sheen. Even to someone with Lorenz's trained eye for precious metals, it wasn't immediately identifiable. It might be an enchanted tool, but he detected no magical vibrations from it. He did sense, without a doubt, that it was one of a kind.

"If you would prefer, I could bring out some pieces I recommend," Lorenz suggested nervously.

"Yes, please do. I know very little about jewelry, so I would appreciate any advice..." the handsome man said in a low, pleading voice.

Lorenz would have expected Volfred to be accustomed to giving women jewelry or even receiving it himself. *Is this some sort of joke?* His judgment and taste as owner of this shop were being put to the test.

Lorenz's anxiety became all the more intense.

"Could I bother you to describe for me the recipient's hair color, eye color, complexion, features, and the type of clothing she prefers, if you please? Then I will bring out some options I believe will suit her."

"Well, let's see... Her hair is a light, soft red, and her eyes are a

brilliant emerald green... Her skin is fair with a bit of rosiness to it... She normally wears stylish dresses or two-piece outfits... But she sometimes wears work clothes too. And I'd say she usually wears clothes in neutral colors like white, dark blue, dark green, and brown."

Lorenz gathered a lot from the way the young man spoke with his eyes downcast as he carefully combed through his memories. And he was unsettled by the revelation that the woman was not a noble.

"Do you intend these earrings to be daily wear? Or are they for a formal occasion?"

"She'll be wearing the earrings at a ball for her debut. My friend is going to be receiving a barony next year, so if possible, I would like to give her something she can continue wearing in the future—when she's a baroness."

Volf spoke excitedly, as if he were talking about his own brilliant future. Lorenz couldn't help but smile.

"Receiving a peerage—certainly an auspicious occasion. In that case, it is both a present and a congratulatory gift."

"Yes, that's right. I'd like to get her something that she can wear all the time..." Volf's words trailed off, sounding almost like a prayer. The gentlest of smiles formed on his face, only to fade away as quickly as it had come.

Lorenz thought for a moment that it seemed as if the man was here to find something the woman could keep as a memento of himself in the event of his untimely demise, but he quickly shooed that morbid thought away. He had almost allowed himself to be overawed by the man's beautiful golden eyes.

Lorenz let his gaze fall, and it settled upon the man's hands, loosely folded together on the table—then, discourteous as it was, he did a double take.

Volfred had cracks in his fingernails, and the insides of his fingers and palms were riddled with blood blisters from wielding a sword. Lorenz could see that the knight had a muscular physique underneath his clothes, and that his right shoulder was sloped from bearing the burden of his sword. If it were truly the case that this man spent all his time amusing himself with women, he would not

have those hands and that body.

Ah, I see. Now Lorenz understood the cause of those dark circles under Volf's eyes. They weren't the wages of a life of debauchery. Rather, he had probably pushed himself to come here on his day off from his demanding duties as a Beast Hunter, returning from either an expedition or a day of rigorous training.

Lorenz remembered the note from his father-in-law—that the accessory must be gold, appealing to a woman in her twenties, and acceptable for a marquisate—and had a sudden realization: The recipient of these golden earrings was the young man's lover, a woman of lower social standing.

The woman must have worked herself to the bone in order to earn a barony. Even setting aside Volf's beauty, the gulf between a commoner and an earl's son was vast. He must have started all those groundless rumors himself in order to minimize any conflict for the woman he loved, and to avoid an arranged marriage with another noble for himself. Thus he was forced to refer to her only as a friend.

That also explained why Lorenz's father-in-law had written that the jewelry should be appropriate for a marquisate: It was in the hopes that the woman could one day stand by Volfred's side, bearing his surname.

"Your friend sounds like a hardworking individual. And she must be...very important to you," Lorenz suggested.

"She is...!"

Volfred nodded deeply. His boyish smile was unmistakably that of a man deeply in love.

Lorenz felt ashamed at himself, both for having thought Volfred was a client he needed to play games with and for having been preoccupied solely with making his own store look good. Volfred and the woman were simply a couple in love. The road ahead might be long and arduous, but Lorenz hoped the two would arrive at their destination.

To find the finest piece of jewelry, perfect for both this young man and the woman who would be receiving it—it was just the sort of job for him.

Lorenz did have one frustration: He suspected that all this had transpired according to his father-in-law's predictions. He had seen how prideful Lorenz had become after expanding his shop and so had sent him this young man to remind him of the heart of his business, namely care and consideration for his customers. As ever, Leone Jedda had Lorenz in the palm of his hand. He still could not compete with his father-in-law's business acumen. *It seems I, too, have a long road ahead of me.*

With a broad smile on his face, Lorenz spoke. "Lord Scalfarotto, allow me to bring you a few earrings I recommend. You may take as much time as you need and have at your disposal to make your selection."

"Phew..." Volf sighed.

He stood before the jewelry store in the Central District that the guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild had recommended to him. A few well-dressed gentlewomen were examining the rows of dazzling accessories on display in the shop window. Volf nervously stepped inside, intimidated by the boutique's high-end ambience.

Leone had written him a letter of introduction; thus, he had come without wearing his fairy glasses so that the staff would recognize him. It was no surprise, then, that the moment he entered the shop, all eyes were on him.

Mercifully, before any women could approach him, the friendly shopkeeper, Lorenz, came to greet him. Lorenz must have picked up on the fact that Volf was uneasy trying to choose something amid all these stares; much to Volf's relief, he suggested that they adjourn to another room, on the second floor. Lorenz did not look down on Volf for his ignorance of jewelry; rather, he asked him about the intended recipient, then went downstairs to fetch a few options.

While he waited for Lorenz to return, Volf sipped his tea and took a moment to breathe. He hadn't been getting much sleep lately—he'd had several restless nights in a row, with dreams he couldn't say were good or bad. And he had been agonizing over what kind of jewelry to get Dahlia.

Unable to come up with an idea no matter how hard he thought

about it, he'd gone to his older brother Guido for advice. Guido had proceeded to ask Gildo about Dahlia's dress for the ball and suggested that Volf give her matching earrings. She would be wearing a commoner's dress with a conservative neckline, so something like a pendant wouldn't stand out too much.

Guido had then handed Volf a booklet containing descriptions of all types of earrings, from the most basic to the trendiest, which had done nothing to resolve his indecision.

After yesterday's training, Randolph had visited him in his quarters, concerned about the dark circles under his eyes, and asked if there was something troubling him.

Volf had decided not to conceal anything. He'd asked Randolph's advice about the earrings for Dahlia, and after listening to Volf's account, his friend had simply suggested, "I don't know much about jewelry either, but why not just give Miss Dahlia whatever you think would look nice on her?"

"That's exactly what I'm struggling to decide..."

"I think whatever *you* think suits Miss Dahlia will be good enough."

With that advice in mind, Volf had flipped through the booklet again, trying to envision Dahlia wearing each item. His eyes came to a halt on a pair of earrings with round, translucent blue stones dangling at the ends of delicate golden chains. He imagined those stones swinging from Dahlia's ears as she danced and was suddenly reminded of something.

"Those stones sort of look like blue slimes. Maybe they would suit her..."

"Volf, while I do think that's a pretty design, you shouldn't give her a gift based on that reasoning. There's not a woman alive who'd be happy to hear that *slimes* suit her."

Volf was even less sure of his judgment now that his normally mild-mannered friend had shot down his idea so ruthlessly. His mind drifted to Idaealina, the chief researcher of the slime farm, but he shook that thought away.

Just as Volf was about to let out a groan of defeat, Randolph threw him a lifeline. "Why don't you just ask a shop clerk to show

you gold earrings for an unmarried noblewoman? Then you can choose whichever ones you like. You can't go wrong that way."

Of course. Jewelry store clerks are the experts. I can just ask them for help. Volf thanked his friend, and that night, for the first time in a while, he fell asleep with ease—only to be awoken from a dream he'd had just about enough of, starring the blue slime that had melted Dahlia's reddish-brown skirt the other day on the first floor of the Green Tower.

"That damn slime..." Volf cursed as he plunged the image down into the depths of his heart.

This morning, during free training, it occurred to Volf that if he pushed his body to the limit, fatigue would extinguish those idiotic dreams, so he asked a few of his squadmates—one the same age as him, one older knight, and one veteran who was observing their training—to spar with him.

He and the veteran fought their bout without using magic. Volf started off on a good foot, but it wasn't long before he was taught a lesson and sent tumbling spectacularly to the ground.

As a finishing blow, the veteran knight shot him a look of sympathy and said, "Volfred, don't lose hope. Your heart may be broken as many as ten times in your young life."

"I am *not* heartbroken!" he protested.

"Aha ha! That got you to loosen up."

It was only when he heard Bernigi's hearty laugh that Volf realized he was being teased. The other knights who were in the middle of their own sparring matches didn't seem to have heard the veteran's comment, but even so, Volf was deeply uncomfortable.

"When you are young, experience is life's greatest teacher. Go sort out whatever it is that's troubling you."

Volf, ashamed at himself for being unable to focus fully on his training, had followed the veteran's advice and left to take his afternoon break. After bathing and changing into clean clothes, he'd departed for the jewelry shop.

Once Volf had downed about half his tea, Lorenz returned bearing two black velvet boxes. He wore a pair of white silk gloves and held another in his hands.

"Thank you for your patience," he said. "Lord Scalfarotto, are any of these earrings to your liking?"

Lorenz carefully opened one of the boxes to reveal four pairs of clip-on earrings laid out in a row on white silk. Each was polished to a high luster.

The first pair, on the left, were shaped like small snowflakes from which long, thin chains dangled. To the right was another pair, each with a single pearl set in a goldwork stud and a second pearl at the end of a long chain. The pair next to that were oval-shaped drop earrings of delicate golden openwork. The earrings to the far right were a little larger; each was shaped like a round flower that, depending on how one looked at it, resembled a dahlia. Below each flower hung a transparent stone shaped like a teardrop.

All of them were beautiful, and Volf felt any of them would look nice on Dahlia.

"These earrings are quite attractive when worn while dancing or engaging in other forms of physical activity. I recommend that they be worn unmodified while she's still a commoner, but once she receives her barony, they can be adorned with bright gems, like these."

Lorenz opened the second velvet box. Inside was an assortment of small stones, segregated into their own little compartments. There were a variety of colors—red, yellow, green, blue, black, and white—in a variety of shapes, from disks to teardrops to spheres.

"Lord Scalfarotto, once you put these on, please feel free to pick up and examine everything to your satisfaction."

Lorenz proffered the pair of white gloves, and Volf reached for them only to start at the sight of his own hands. He must have overdone his training; the blisters on his palms and fingers had burst and bled. If he put the gloves on, he'd surely stain them.

Nobles generally made an effort to heal injuries faster than commoners did; otherwise, they were likely to be criticized, either because they'd been weak enough to get injured in the first place or because they couldn't afford potions or other treatment. But since these types of wounds were common among knights of the Order of Beast Hunters, he had unthinkingly come straight here without

seeking treatment. It would be bad manners for him to touch the earrings in this condition.

"I apologize for the state of my hands. I'll only get your gloves dirty. I will look without touching."

"Nonsense, sir. Those superb hands of yours protect the citizens of our kingdom. They are the hands of a knight."

Volf found himself at a loss for words. Now that he thought about it, the shopkeeper had yet to betray the slightest sign of hostility or envy toward him. He hadn't commented on Volf's family or his appearance. He'd simply praised Dahlia's hard work in earning a barony and praised Volf's roughened hands as those of a knight.

Even if Lorenz was merely flattering a prospective buyer, Volf was nonetheless moved. After a pause, he thanked Lorenz and put on the gloves without further protest. He then picked up one of the earrings with care and was shocked to feel how light it was. If something like this were to fall from his ear, he didn't think he would be likely to notice.

At Lorenz's suggestion, Volf gave the earring a gentle sway. The fine chain made a soft tinkling sound as it swung, and the hue of the gleaming gold changed subtly as the light hit it from different angles.

The earrings differed in shape and shine, but each was a marvel in its own way. After much indecision, he narrowed his choices down to two pairs.

"I'm having trouble deciding between this one and this one."

He had selected the snowflake earrings and the earrings with flowers shaped like dahlias. He recalled Dahlia mentioning just the other day that she liked snowflakes. As for the other pair, they might be a little on the nose, but he felt dahlia earrings would be perfect for her.



"Snowflake earrings are very much in season. They are also popular in the summertime, since they inspire a feeling of coolness. The chains can be removed and the snowflakes worn as simple studs. Once she is a baroness, she could also attach gemstones to the ends of the chains."

"I see..." Volf said in awe. He had never imagined that a single piece of jewelry could take on multiple forms. Dahlia was certain to get years of use out of them.

"As for these, the outer petals can be removed from the small flower in the middle. The teardrop stone is also removable. If worn as simple flower earrings, they won't get in the way while she is working. After she becomes a baroness, this crystal can be swapped out for her favorite colored gemstone."

So this pair was customizable as well. Volf had no doubt that the small flowers with their removable petals would be a good fit for Dahlia.

"Please, feel free to examine the stones as well."

As Volf inspected the selection of colorful gems, one in particular caught his eye. He picked it up gingerly. It was black, and though light glimmered within it, it lacked the splendor of the other gems.

Suddenly, he recalled what Leone had told him at the Merchants' Guild. Volf had agreed with his suggestion that gold jewelry would suit Dahlia better than silver. At the time, he had been thinking about how gold would complement Dahlia's red hair and green eyes, not about his own golden eyes. He thought she could do better than a color as dark as his hair.

Besides, it seemed to him that the earrings were fine as they were. Better that he wait and ask Dahlia what color she wanted rather than picking the wrong gems.

"That is black onyx, a stone that is said to protect the mind and body from wickedness and danger. Some wear it as a protective charm," Lorenz informed him.

"Do they? But black... I'm not sure such a dark color would look right on her," Volf responded as he replaced the stone in the velvet box. He noticed that blood had started to seep through his white gloves, and for some reason, he felt a terrible ache behind his eyes.

He pressed his fingers to his temples as the shopkeeper turned one of the earrings upside down.

"With the snowflake and flower earrings, it is also possible to attach a stone backing to the part that sits on the ear. Ah, I ought to say—a stone backing is a smaller gemstone on the back of the earring."

"Where it can't be seen?"

"Yes. For those whose skin is sensitive to metal, the entirety of the back part that comes in contact with the ear can be made of stone. It is also common to attach stones and other materials to the interior of accessories that double as magical tools. I should add that the stones you are currently examining can be enchanted to some extent, and frequently are—for example, with antidotal properties or magic that prevents motion sickness in carriages."

The prospect of turning these earrings into magical tools intrigued Volf. What could be more Dahlia?

"That sounds very useful. I will take the black onyx as a stone backing, then. It doesn't need to be enchanted. I'll leave that up to her."

Volf had a hunch Dahlia would want to carry out the enchantment herself. He was excited to see what she would do—and a little worried.

Much to Volf's relief, the shopkeeper explained that it would take only two days to apply the stones to the backs of the earrings. They would be finished with plenty of time to spare before Dahlia's ball.

But that wasn't the last of the choices he had to make today.

"I still can't decide between the snowflakes and the dahlia..."

"In that case, might I suggest giving her the snowflakes to wear in autumn and winter, and the flowers to wear in spring and summer?"

"Oh, that's a great idea! I'll do just that."

"If that option is outside of your budget, you may keep one set on temporary reserve for next year."

"That won't be necessary—I'll take both now."

It was a kind offer, but Volf had a respectable savings that he seldom dipped into. He wanted to give himself a pat on the back for

not having frittered away his money.

"Will you also be wanting stone backings on the flower earrings? I would recommend having both enchanted with anti-motion sickness. If you buy these two together, our establishment will cover the cost of one of the stones."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'll take the stone backings and pay full price for both."

He didn't want the store to incur the costs of attaching the black stones. More importantly, since his family was rising to a marquisate next year, he felt he *should* pay what they cost.

Then, thinking Lorenz might be able to help, Volf made an additional request. It was regarding something Randolph had expressly warned—no, kindly counseled him about.

"I think she will also need a necklace once she becomes a baroness next year, so could I ask you to recommend something that matches these earrings?"

"Certainly. I would be more than happy to suggest something suitable for both a baroness and a noblewoman," the shopkeeper replied with a nod.

What a reliable person.

"Once they're finished, could you please send both sets to this address here?"

"Lord Scalfarotto, if you don't mind me saying so, I would recommend against giving both at the same time."

"Why?"

Is there some rule against sending a woman two sets of jewelry at the same time? I never knew that. He'd hoped to give Dahlia everything at once so there would be less for him to fret about.

"I find that people take greater delight in being given a number of gifts over an extended period of time rather than all at once. You could give her the snowflake earrings for winter, the flower earrings just before spring, and then the two necklaces after she has received her barony. That way, every moment in which you give her a gift will become a lovely memory for both of you."

"Ah..."

"And most importantly, wouldn't you rather see her smile not

once but four times?”

At Lorenz’s words, Dahlia’s smile rose clear as day to Volf’s mind. He couldn’t disagree with the man.

After signing the purchase forms, Volf finally relaxed. Lorenz prepared him another cup of tea, and as he accepted it, he thanked the shopkeeper once more.

“I really appreciate all your help. This is my first time giving a gift like this...”

“There is a first time for everyone. It was my pleasure to offer you my assistance, however trivial.”

“No, you were a great help.”

“I am pleased to hear that. I know they say we are meant to learn from our own failures, but I prefer to think we should follow the advice of our predecessors so we can give the ones we cherish gifts they will enjoy.”

Lorenz’s smile was equal parts composure and kindness. Volf sensed a deep maturity radiating from the shopkeeper. Clearly, becoming an adult meant something more than getting older, and another feeling grew more intense within Volf: *I’m still such a child.*

“Yes, you’re right. Wouldn’t want to give her the wrong thing...” Volf muttered. He couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing her like that.

The shopkeeper nodded deeply. “Yes, as someone who has missed the mark before, I quite understand.”

“Huh?” Volf blurted out, surprised by Lorenz’s words. “I can’t imagine you giving someone the wrong present.”

Lorenz lowered both his gaze and his voice. “Before I knew much of the nobility, I gave my wife—well, at the time, she was merely the woman I was enamored with—a pair of earrings from my shop. But I gave them before sending her a letter or having a formal meeting with her... I was a commoner and knew nothing at the time, but that does not excuse my lack of consideration.”

“I see...”

When it came to courtship, nobles had rules. No matter the suitor’s own feelings, expressing interest in someone who was engaged or otherwise involved with a third party was a breach of

etiquette, and regardless, both parties had to undergo background checks before they began courting.

The protocol was for the suitor to begin by sending a letter to the parents or guardian of the person in question, asking to come courting; only after receiving permission could the couple progress to a face-to-face meeting.

Next, the suitor sent a letter thanking the other party for the meeting along with a bouquet. If both parties felt they were compatible, they could continue to deepen their relationship by attending tea parties and similar events together. Earrings and other pieces of jewelry were to be given later, after they had become better acquainted.

Of course, since Volf himself had never experienced a relationship of that kind, his knowledge of these matters was purely academic.

"Only after I presented my gift did I learn that it was improper to send earrings to a woman before we were even close enough to be dance partners at a ball."

It was perfectly understandable that Lorenz, as a commoner, had been ignorant of noble etiquette, but nevertheless, it was the family's decision whether or not to pardon such a faux pas.

The father of Lorenz's wife was Viscount Leone Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild. As he thought of the man's stern face, Volf asked in an undertone, "Did Mr. Leone give you a difficult time?"

"Not at all. He came to the shop later that very same day and paid for the earrings himself."

"He did...?"

How very like Leone. Still, the fact that he hadn't returned the earrings outright must have meant that his daughter reciprocated Lorenz's feelings.

"At the time, my superficial knowledge led me to believe that he was warning me not to overstep the bounds of our seller-buyer relationship, so I told him that the earrings were a gift professing my love and I could not accept his payment. He then placed the gold coins on the table and told me, 'Learn the proper order of things.' I was left still not quite grasping his meaning, but before the end of

the day, *someone* had sent me a mountain of books on both aristocratic relationships and business. The following day, I received a very long letter full of detailed advice as to how to run my business... I won't deny it irked me a bit, but it was a very valuable lesson."

"You don't say."

An even more *Leone-like move!*

In his capacity as viscount, Leone had taught his daughter's potential husband about the nobility, and in his capacity as guildmaster of the Merchants', he'd taught him how to grow as a businessman. Of course, Leone himself excelled in both respects.

Volf suddenly thought of Dahlia's father, Carlo Rossetti. He had been a capable magical toolmaker who'd earned a barony through his own efforts, and he'd raised Dahlia and guided her down the path of toolmaking. He was the one whom Dahlia had trusted the most and the one she most likely sought to emulate even now.

Volf wished he could have had the chance to meet Carlo. And that was, of course, because Carlo was the father of his dear friend, not for any other reason.

Just as Volf's thoughts were about to take an odd turn, Lorenz said, "This is only my humble opinion, but... A husband is always in competition with his wife's father. And he may have no hope of ever winning."

"No hope of winning..." Volf nodded vaguely as he took a sip of tea. He couldn't drive away the image of the person who had popped into his mind.

Volf continued chatting with Lorenz for a short while longer. Once he had drained his tea, he took his leave.

"Well, I should be off."

"Lord Scalfarotto, I thank you for your patronage. I hope you will visit us again some day."

"Thank you for all your help. Your advice, too, is much appreciated. I look forward to your help next time as well."

And I mean it. Volf stood, overwhelmed with relief that he had managed to purchase such wonderful gifts for Dahlia. He took one last look at the black onyx in the box.

A black stone attached like a shadow to a glittering golden earring—it would be the equivalent of back-embroidery for Dahlia. It didn't matter that no one else would see it. He had but one wish for the days they spent together and the days they spent apart: *I want to protect you.*



"I can't believe how sore I am..."

Dahlia grimaced as she awkwardly descended the stairs. Yesterday, at the Jeddas' estate, she had thrown her all into her dance lessons, not only so she could learn the moves but also in the hopes of slimming down her waist a trifle.

Then, this morning, as she tried to rise from bed, the soreness in her lower body had hindered her. Even after she put on her unicorn pendant and made sure it was directly in contact with her skin, the achy feeling persisted. The cragsnake fang on the back of the pendant was supposed to numb pain for a certain length of time, but it had been used up.

What concerned Dahlia more than the dull pain were her stiff movements. After some deliberation, she'd decided to take a painkiller. Her plan for today was to go to Volf's estate so they could practice dancing. She didn't want to cause him any worry.

There was still time before he arrived to pick her up, so Dahlia carefully opened the large silver box on top of her workbench. It was densely packed with a dozen short, straight rods the color of ivory. These were the kelpie wands Dahlia was currently in the middle of working on. She lifted one out of the box. It was dense and heavy—perhaps twice as heavy as a skybat bone of equivalent size, likely due to the difference in density.

There were a dozen wands; Leone had sent them as a personal delivery, not in his capacity as guildmaster of the Merchants'. In addition to the wands, his package had contained a reference book on designing magical circuitry for wands, four basic design and specification plans, and a one-page memo regarding points of caution when handling kelpie bones.

When she'd offered to pay for the additional materials, Leone had told her it was all included in the initial estimate. The guild price for enchanting ordinary swords and wands was only four gold coins apiece—by no means an exorbitant sum. In fact, it could even have been called cheap when the toolmaker or mage had as high a magical grade as Leone's. He had reduced the price to one gold coin apiece because Dahlia had agreed that Gabriella could serve as her attendant when she received her barony. Still, she couldn't help but feel he was giving her special treatment.

When she had gone to Ivano about this matter, he had simply smiled and told her, "There's nothing for you to worry about. Mr. Leone is not one to incur a loss."

"Hmm, I knew it—there's not enough surface area..."

The wands were shorter than she'd expected, and now that she was holding one, she could feel that it was slightly oblong. Her plan was to draw magical circuitry on the surface and enchant it using an ice crystal.

There were two functions she wanted to give to it so it could serve as a magical support item: first, the ability to disperse a cloud of ice crystals as a distraction; second, the ability to produce ice in the shape of a sword for intimidation and defense.

After some trial and error, she had been able to design the magical circuit itself, but there wasn't enough room on the wand to draw it. It would fit if she removed the second function, but she wanted this wand to keep the wielder, Guido, as safe as possible.

Is there any way I can fit the whole thing? As she mulled that question over, there was a knock at the door. More time had passed than she'd realized while she was thinking about the wands. Dahlia hurried to the door.

"Hi, Dahlia."

"Hello, Volf..."

On the other side of the door stood Volf, wearing an outfit that Dahlia couldn't take her eyes off of. Despite the cloak draped over his shoulders, she could see the black tailcoat, white silk shirt, black tie, and white gloves beneath. It was the perfect ensemble for

dancing, and it suited him exceptionally well—he looked like a regular Prince Charming.

Dahlia just knew that if he wore that to the ball, he would have a line of noblewomen waiting to dance with him. All of a sudden, she became nervous for the day of her debut, a fact she felt no inclination to share.

One other thing stood out to her. Although they were about to head to Volf's home, he was carrying a basket of red flowers. She wondered if he planned on stopping somewhere else on the way.

"Dahlia, that dress looks very nice on you. Is that what you're wearing for the ball?"

"No, I borrowed this from Gabriella. I'm only wearing it to practice in."

Gabriella had loaned Dahlia the ivory dress until she finished her lessons. Dahlia was a little self-conscious about it. With lace around the neck and hem, wasn't it a little too cutesy for her?

"We should leave so we have enough time for practice. I'll just grab my coat—"

"Dahlia, are you hurt?"

Dahlia had only taken a few steps when Volf stopped her. She had forgotten how sharp he was about these things.

"No, I'm not hurt. I'm fine."

"You don't need to force yourself. We can practice another day if you're out of sorts," Volf said, looking very worried.

Dahlia hastened to explain. "Really, I'm all right. I pushed myself a little during my dance lesson yesterday, so I'm just sore. And I took a painkiller, so—"

"Just sore? The pain must have been pretty bad if you had to take something for it, right?"

"No, it's nothing serious!"

As she tried to explain, Volf's expression only grew more severe.

I should have taken that painkiller earlier, she thought.

"Dahlia, I know you like to work hard, but you shouldn't overdo it. We can't have you collapsing, and the more often you pull a muscle, the likelier it is to happen again."

"No, really, it's nothing like that. I'm just sore because I'm so out

of shape these days...”

Despite her best efforts, she’d ended up making Volf worry.

Up until this past spring, Dahlia had had the freedom to walk for an hour at a time. Now, she traveled everywhere by carriage. *I’ve got to start walking up and down the tower’s steps for exercise. And around the garden. Oh, and I’ll try to eat less too.*

Having made those promises to herself, she hurriedly tried to change the topic.

“Oh! Your outfit today looks very nice too, Volf. Very regal.”

Volf’s golden eyes widened. Then he smiled bashfully and replied, “Thanks... I’m happy to hear you say that.”

Indeed, he looked so genuinely happy that Dahlia completely forgot what she’d been planning to say next. As she tried to summon the words that eluded her, Volf handed her the basket of red bougainvilleas.

“Dahlia, congratulations again on your upcoming debut.”

“Thank you...” she said as she tried, unsuccessfully, to remember what bougainvilleas signified in the language of flowers. She had a feeling they were frequently given to noblewomen in wintertime but wasn’t quite sure. Later, she would look it up in her etiquette book.

“And this is for you too.”

Next, he handed her a small item wrapped in pure white cloth. Dahlia set the basket down on her work table and accepted the object from Volf, then unwrapped the cloth to reveal a red velvet box. When she opened the lid, she saw a glimmer of gold.

It was a pair of small snowflake-shaped clip-on earrings. The gold was dazzlingly bright, and the exquisite handiwork was instantly recognizable as that of a skilled artisan.

She carefully picked up one of the earrings. The thin chain dangling from the snowflake tinkled faintly, and the gold flickered as she moved it. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Um, what are these for?” she asked.

“I was hoping you could wear them for your debut,” Volf said, his expression hardening slightly.

It struck Dahlia that the design of these earrings matched the Scalfarotto family crest, which resembled an ice crystal. Guido was

her noble guardian and Volf a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. Since both were Scalfarottos, she would probably be required to wear ceremonial jewelry like these earrings. She would have to make sure not to lose such fine articles under any circumstances.

"Thank you so much. They're beautiful. I'll make sure not to lose them so I can return them to you."

"Wait, no!" Volf objected loudly. "These are for you—they're a gift from me!"

It took a moment before his words sank in. "Huh? You, um, got these as a present...for me?" she asked haltingly.

Volf looked anxious as he explained, "The other day, when we went to the Merchants' Guild for Master Jonas's request, Mr. Leone told me about a jewelry store, so I went there to buy these for you."

"You weren't buying something for yourself?"

"Well, you know, you're the one having the debut, so I wanted to get you something to celebrate... Oh, they don't have any enchantment on them, so if you would like one, you can apply it to the stone backings."

"The stone backings?"

Volf used a fingertip to gently turn over the gold earring on Dahlia's palm.

"See here? The part that'll sit directly against your ear is black onyx."

"Black onyx..."

The same color as Volf's hair. These earrings were almost the kind of gift that a man would give his lover.

No, wait, settle down. Don't go thinking anything funny. Placing a stone between the earring and the ear was probably just a precaution for anyone who happened to have a metal allergy. Although she'd never, since arriving in this world, heard of anyone having a metal allergy, that could plausibly explain why some people avoided jewelry entirely. *Yes, that's probably what it's for.*

While Dahlia was struggling to restore order to her whirling thoughts, Volf continued, "I know it's a boring color, but black onyx is supposed to protect your mind and body from wickedness, so I

thought it'd make a good protective charm for you. The shopkeeper also said it can hold a light enchantment, so you can enchant it with anti-motion sickness if you want. Of course, if you don't like the stone, I can have it switched out with a different color."

He spoke quickly and seemed a little anxious. It was clear he had put a great deal of thought into his gift.

Jewelry shops were crawling with women. Dahlia knew that purchasing these earrings had most likely been a trial for him.

"No, it's fine—I like these stones. I'm sorry for misunderstanding. Thank you for the earrings, Volf. They're lovely."

"My pleasure," said Volf, his face finally relaxing.

In contrast, Dahlia's body language became more awkward. "So, um, I also have something for you... I only just finished it, but I thought it'd be best if I gave it to you as soon as possible," she said, then went to grab a rectangular magically sealed box from the shelf. It was a little heavy. "You mentioned you were having trouble getting enough sleep, so I made you this nap lantern. I hope you find it helpful."

Dahlia placed the box on her work table.

Volf looked uncomfortable. "Oh, no, you didn't have to do that for me... I mean, I'm sorry. For making you worry, and for all the work you had to put into this..."

"It wasn't that difficult to make. Besides, I got the moonbeam butterfly wings from Director Uros. I know how tough you have it fighting monsters. And being overly tired can make it hard to fall asleep and give you bad dreams..."

Volf had once mentioned that he still had nightmares about the day his mother died. He hadn't had them recently, but Dahlia knew what it was like to suffer from recurring nightmares—she used to dream of how she'd died in her previous life.

One time, after a nightmare woke her, she'd been unable to get back to sleep and had stayed up the rest of the night. In the hopes of both putting an end to her nightmares and improving her sleep, she'd crafted a nap lantern. She hadn't had enough time to make it pretty, but it had served its purpose. Now she hoped that this new lantern would offer Volf the same relief.

"Let me show you how it works."

The golden lantern was covered with a light-blue glass sphere. There were two switches. One turned on the normal light-emitting mode; the second turned on the sleep-inducing mode, which then turned off by itself after a certain interval. Dahlia, hoping to make the lantern more user-friendly, had reconfigured the mechanism for the switches after reading over the specification documents Leone had sent.

She had also decorated the surface of the spherical glass with numerous fiendfish scales carved into the shapes of snowflakes. When she turned on the lamp, it emitted a light blue glow and projected a snowflake pattern onto the ceiling and walls.

Volf looked around and cried out excitedly, "Snowflakes! Wow, so pretty..."

I hope this brings him good dreams and restful sleep, Dahlia thought to herself, but only time would tell.

"Try it tonight when you go to sleep."

"Thanks, Dahlia. I love it."

Satisfied by Volf's smile, Dahlia put the lamp back into its box and wrapped it in a large white cloth. The edge of that cloth was embossed with a small version of the company emblem—red flowers behind the silhouette of a black dog.

Ivano had been very adamant about making the seal black and red so that it was "immediately recognizable as belonging to the Rossetti Trading Company." Also, though she didn't mention this to Volf, the company logo was stamped on the bottom of the lantern along with the Rossetti name. Only after adding the logo had she realized it was an unnecessary touch, since this wasn't a product for sale.

"Oh, right. Dahlia, do you want to try the earrings on?"

"Good idea. I'll need a mirror..."

It wasn't often that she put on earrings, and she was worried about bending the delicate goldwork.

Just as she was about to fetch a mirror from the shelf, Volf picked up the earring between his white-gloved fingertips. "Or I could put them on for you?"

“Oh, um, please do...”

Dahlia was so surprised by Volf’s offer that, despite her reflexive assent, her body tensed up. He drew close to her side and clipped the earrings on, his fingers barely grazing her ear. His movements suggested this was actually something he had done quite a lot.

“They look great,” he said. “Are they too tight?”

“No, they’re fine, thank you.”

“Good. It used to be my job to fix my mother’s earrings for her before she went out. She normally didn’t wear them, so when she put them on herself, they’d always be uneven, and sometimes they’d fall off. She wore clip-ons, and when I told her she should just get her ears pierced, she said she was too scared... I’m not sure why I just remembered that.”

Dahlia listened as Volf spoke nostalgically of his past. She was unsurprised to learn what a thoughtful son he’d been, but with all due respect to Volf, she had to empathize with his mother when it came to the topic of piercings.

“Now for the other—”

Before Volf could finish his sentence, three loud knocks resounded through the room. Dahlia nodded at Volf, and he hurried over to open the door. Standing outside was a Scalfarotto family coachman. He’d come here with Volf to pick Dahlia up and had been waiting by the gate.

“Pardon my interruption, Lord Volfred, but the castle has sent up three red flares!”

“Got it—I’ll go right now!”

Three red flares were the signal that a monster had appeared that required more knights to assemble than were on standby at the castle. It was a rare occurrence and signified that either a swarm of monsters or one large monster had appeared.

Dahlia hugged herself, her fingers digging into her upper arms.

“Don’t worry, Dahlia. It’s probably just a green wyvern.”

“Huh?”

“There were reported sightings of it earlier. Kirk and the other knights are already preparing for an attack, and the captain is planning on wearing the wyvern armor to get close to it with his

Ash-Hand. I'm sure I won't have to do much," Volf said cheerily.

Dahlia managed to nod at him, but she knew that was unlikely to be true. Who else but a Scarlet Armor would take on the role of luring the wyvern toward the spot where the bow knights and Captain Grato lay in wait?

"Sorry, Dahlia. I'll hurry back as soon as I can, but depending on the monster and the situation, I might not make it in time for your debut. I'll be sorry to miss your big day."

"Don't worry about me. Your duty saving lives as a Beast Hunter is more important..."

In spite of her words, what she truly wished was to stop him from leaving. Never mind her debut—she didn't want him to go off on this dangerous mission. But this was his duty as a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. All she could do was pray for him to return safe and sound, so she sent him off with as bright a smile as she could manage.

"Please be careful... And come back soon, Volf."

Volf smiled and said a quick "I'll be back soon, Dahlia!" before dashing off.

As she watched his receding back, the gold chain hanging from the earring on her ear jingled softly.

Catching a Wyvern and the Bitter Armor

The Beast Hunters had followed the eastern highway to a shallow valley that ran parallel to the mountains. They hid themselves, in full suits of armor, among the towering trees.

After responding to the call to assemble at the castle two days ago, they had spent the entirety of yesterday traveling on horseback and entered the forest on foot early this morning. A cold wind blew, but the knights' heavy, dark gray cloaks and the portable warm air circulators they wore on their backs protected them from the chill.

Nevertheless, the air around a certain individual was unusually frigid.

"Damn you, wyvern... Getting in the way of our dance practice, and only days before Dahlia's debut..." the young, black-haired knight muttered darkly, glaring at his black-bladed dagger.

His frosty demeanor kept everyone at arm's length. The other knights would rather have walked right up to a monster.

"Whoa, Volf looks pissed. I think that wyvern's about to feel the Dark Lord's wrath," Dorino said, putting a hand to his forehead.

"This is no time to be feeling sympathy for a wyvern," Randolph said with a sigh.

A short distance from Volf, another group of Beast Hunters were conversing in low tones.

"I won't be surprised if Sir Volf rends the wyvern limb from limb the second it falls to the ground."

"Let's hope that's all he does. What I see is a Dark Lord who wants to turn it to dust..."

"Hey, if things are looking to go that way, we'll have to step in and stop him. The Royal Magical Toolmaking Department wants us to bring every part of the wyvern back. We can't have him damaging

the materials."

"The prospect of having to restrain Volf is scarier than the wyvern, to be honest."

A dragoon delivering a letter to neighboring Ehrlichia had been the first to spot the green wyvern that was the target of today's mission. Per his account, it was a small juvenile. Nevertheless, it had been flying above a territory containing several populated villages, so both humans and livestock were at risk, and it needed to be dealt with as quickly as possible. Fortunately, adventurers had already located the wyvern's nest.

Today, the nearby villages and coaching inns had been instructed to stay on alert, and several knights had been posted as lookouts throughout the surrounding area. Meanwhile, this select group of knights had been dispatched to slay the wyvern. Dragoons would have been more effective, but they were few and far between in Ordine. The kingdom had not yet established a system for breeding wyverns as Ehrlichia had, so they had few wyverns for dragoons to ride, nor were there plans to raise any in the near term.

Ordine prioritized its small number of dragoons for delivering messages; as a rule, they did not participate in battles against monsters. It was said that at present, trained wyverns from Ehrlichia were the single import most coveted by the Kingdom of Ordine.

"Isn't this the fourth wyvern this year? Seems like a lot."

"They're probably breeding in the mountains somewhere. And they say that when wyverns squabble over territory, the loser has to travel pretty far to find a new home."

It was rare to see wyverns in the wild and rarer still to see them in areas inhabited by humans. But this year alone, four had been sighted near highways and settlements. Their incredible strength and wide home ranges had led to heavy casualties during past conflicts. Even for the Order of Beast Hunters, they were monsters that required the utmost caution.

"Volf, that's enough. Your blade's clean," Dorino said.

"Oh, right. I was just trying to get focused..."

After hearing his friend's comment, Volf was finally able to curb his resentment toward the wyvern and return his sword to its

sheath. There were only a few days left before Dahlia's debut. Truthfully, he wanted to head back to the capital right this instant.

The worst-case scenario was that the expedition would last for an extended period of time. In preparation for that possibility, he had asked Bernigi, "If I can't make it back in time for the ball, and Dahlia looks nervous, can I count on you to say something encouraging to her?"

Bernigi had immediately agreed to Volf's juvenile request, even going so far as to pat him reassuringly on the back. The veteran knight likely would have looked after Dahlia on his own initiative, but Volf had still felt compelled to ask. He could have asked Gildo, the host of the ball, but he found the man difficult to approach, and frankly, he didn't want to. Whether it was because of the head treasurer's initial hostility toward Dahlia or because he continued to involve himself in her business, Volf just didn't have a good impression of Gildo.

Volf was also slightly bothered by the fact that Gildo was going to be Dahlia's partner for her first dance. Of course, he had no intention of voicing his feelings, since he knew that Gildo—a guarantor of her company, a supporter, and a marquis—was the optimal choice.

Bernigi and the other veteran knights—technically, the aspiring new recruits—had wanted to test their magical prostheses against this wyvern, but they had not been permitted to take part in today's mission; Captain Grato had made them stay behind at the castle on the grounds that they had yet to take their examinations. He was going to have them sit their written exam upon his return, so the new recruits had been groaning as they pored over reference books containing information about the monsters discovered since they retired from service. Volf had felt a measure of pity for them.

"By the way, Volf, how did she like the flowers?" Dorino asked, redirecting his friend's attention.

"I think she liked them. I looked them up in a book before choosing this time. Red bougainvilleas."

"...Ahhh."

Randolph was nodding. Volf took that as confirmation that he had

chosen well. He had recently made a mistake when sending flowers to the Zolas: After getting carried away when sparring with Ermelinda, Oswald's third wife, and accidentally injuring her, he'd sent her nerines as an apology and an expression of sympathy. In actuality, they conveyed the implication that the sender had shared a happy memory with the recipient and was looking forward to seeing them again soon. In other words, they were akin to a love letter. Thankfully, Oswald hadn't lodged any grievances against him, but the blunder had given Volf cause to reflect on his own ignorance.

That was why this time, he'd put a *lot* of thought into the flowers he'd brought to Dahlia. First he'd sought advice from Randolph, who had informed him that for a debut, he ought to avoid flowers that were dark in color or would not keep long. Volf had then consulted a book on noble etiquette and taken notes on which flowers were recommended as gifts for women on such occasions. Finally, he'd gone to a florist, where the bougainvilleas had caught his eye. He had asked for a bouquet in the same bright red shade as Dahlia's hair. Thinking that it would be a chore to keep changing the water in a vase during the winter, he'd asked the florist for a basket.

According to his book, bougainvilleas expressed the meaning "You are exceptionally charming." He had given them to Dahlia in the hope that they would furnish her with the confidence she needed to face her debut without anxiety. After her initial shock at receiving them, Dahlia had given him a lovely smile.

"Is it about time?"

"Seems so."

Now one of the Scarlet Armors would descend into the valley, bearing a chunk of meat fastened to a board on his back. It was veal—a wyvern's favorite. Separately, they'd also prepared a supply of blood, and other knights would use air magic to diffuse the scent and lure the wyvern in.

The knight carrying the meat would then run up the valley to where bow knights wielding Galeforce Bows and titanbows lay in wait—along with Captain Grato, clad in a black suit of armor and wielding the Ash-Hand. Perhaps Volf, as a member of the squad, was out of line for even thinking so privately, but it seemed to him to be

a rather cruel trap.

"All right, I'm the fastest, so I'll lure the wyvern!" Dorino declared.

"No, I'll do it. You may be faster, but the footing here on the valley floor is bad. It's better if I go, since I can jump while I run," Volf said, lightly tapping the sköll bracelet underneath his glove.

Dorino set his mouth in a hard line, but he quickly relented and gave an enthusiastic nod. "All right, don't let us down! Guess today's not my time to shine."

"Dorino, you may have the honor of taking the lead in dismemberment and cleanup."

"And you'll be right there with me, Randolph. Well, anyway, be careful, Volf. Don't let it carry you off this time."

"Godspeed."

"You got it. I'll be back...soon...?" Volf's voice trailed off, and he stood frozen in place. Dahlia's words to him—*"Come back soon"*—were replaying audibly in his mind.

"Wait, did someone say, 'Come back soon'...?" he whispered to himself.

Dorino must have heard; he looked at him quizzically. "Huh? Do you want us to tell you to come back safe and sound or something? What, for good luck?"

"Is that how they do it in the capital? Very well, then, Volf. Be careful, and come back soon," Randolph said.

Kirk joined in as well. "Take care, Sir Volfred! Come back soon!"

"You all sound like new brides sending off their husbands!" Dorino teased.

With his comrades' laughter behind him, Volf awkwardly left to get ready.

After watching his friend walk away, Dorino turned around. "Hey, Randolph, I've got a question for you..."

"Yes, Dorino?"

"I bought some red bougainvilleas in the red-light district not too long ago. The florist told me they mean, 'I have eyes for you alone.'"

"Some books on the language of flowers don't explain the meanings of different colors. And at any rate, no flower means just

one thing. Most have several nuances, both good and bad."

"No way—are you pulling my leg? I really had to work up the nerve to send my girl those. I hope she didn't get the wrong idea." Dorino furrowed his brow and scratched anxiously at his dark blue hair.

"Sir Dorino, I'm sure she'll be even more thrilled if you send her a card along with your flowers," his green-eyed junior told him in an upbeat tone. "That way, your intentions won't be misunderstood."

"Yeah, right. I barely passed my writing exams."

"All you need to do is write your name on a card with the specific meaning you want the flowers to impart, put it in an envelope, and there's your letter. I suggest buying a few nice stationery sets to keep on hand. They even have perfumed stationery these days, as well as inks with a bit of shimmer, so you can mix and match according to her preferences and personal colors."

"Where can I buy all that? I've never seen that kind of thing anywhere."

"I'd recommend checking out this stationery shop in the northern Central District. On the second floor, they have a lot of stationery sets and cards catering to women."

As Kirk explained in detail, other knights also began to pay attention. Not all of them turned to stare at him openly, but they were clearly listening all the same.

"You know your stuff! No wonder you have a fiancée!"

"When it comes to the ladies, *you're* the more experienced one..."

"Please, no teasing. This is all very basic," Kirk insisted with a sweetly earnest smile.

Dorino clapped the younger knight hard on the shoulder and said, "Kirk, next time we go out drinking, you gotta give all of us clueless men a lesson!"

Kirk's green eyes widened, but surrounded by other knights, all of them nodding firmly, he was in no position to refuse.

The wind shifted direction subtly. Volf stowed his dagger in his

breastplate and changed into a pair of boots that had short silver claws affixed to the soles. He almost tied the laces too tightly before quickly fixing them. Once he removed the dark gray cloak that had been concealing his conspicuous red armor, he slapped his cheeks with his hands.

He was about to begin the simple task of luring the wyvern out with the chunk of meat on his back and then letting it chase him. Standing in wait farther up the valley were four pairs of bow knights wielding Galeforce Bows, four pairs of mages, and six bow knights with reinforced titanbows. Beyond them was the captain, ready with the most powerful weapon in the squad—the magical sword Ash-Hand.

As far as Volf knew, this was the most sophisticated formation they had ever established for hunting a wyvern.

The valley floor was not only wet and slippery but covered in sand and pebbles. One little tumble was all it would take for him to become a wyvern's takeout meal once again.

But although Volf was being vigilant, fear hardly troubled him. Unlike last time, he now had the sköll bracelet that Dahlia had made for him. As long as he could feint and leap away, he was confident he would be able to escape even a wyvern.

And if he *did* get bitten, his helmet and armor, like those of all the Scarlet Armors, were currently coated in skybat meat extract. Skybat flesh was dreadfully bitter. Monsters were disinclined to take a bite of it, and even when they did, they spat it right back out. Dorino had tried chewing on a piece of skybat leather himself, and he'd complained that the bad taste had lingered in his mouth for the next two days.

It wasn't Dahlia who had created this groundbreaking coating or applied it to the armor but the toolmakers in the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department. Until recently, the department and the Order of Beast Hunters had always kept each other at arm's length. The order had decided that for their weapons and equipment needs, they would go to their own arms specialist, who would then forward the request to the department or another supplier.

Even when it came to testing out equipment, the order and the

department would often put their additional requests to one another in writing and submit them through a go-between. It was deemed the best option, since each organization had its own specific needs with respect to budget, position, sphere of responsibility, and balance of power.

On the positive side, both organizations were self-sufficient. And on the negative side, the distance between them was so great that it would have taken time to reduce it, and neither party was particularly flexible. Thus, the status quo had long remained unchanged.

In order to resolve the impasse, Vice-Director Carmine of the Toolmaking Department had proposed that from now on, in the interest of creating better equipment for the order, specialists from both organizations would be assigned to collaborate on prototypes.

The captain of the Beast Hunters and the director of the Magical Toolmaking Department had agreed immediately. Initially, it had seemed likely that there would be some difficulty in getting the arms specialist on board, but when it was explained that project leads would be given extra pay to act as all-round facilitators, the matter was settled quite nicely.

No one doubted Head Treasurer Gildo's involvement in this new arrangement—not that Volf had any complaints about that, since it did nothing but benefit the Order of Beast Hunters.

Thus, the bitter-tasting armor and mythril claws had been created. Add to those the sköll bracelet on his left wrist and the pain-numbing bracelet—borrowed from the Magical Toolmaking Department—on his right wrist, and Volf's armor was the strongest it had ever been. The board on his back had also been enchanted to be lighter, though he wished something could have been done about the smell of the bloody veal.

All he wanted was to slice the wyvern into mincemeat the moment it appeared, but unfortunately, that was beyond his current capabilities. But it wouldn't be long now before Dahlia made him a magical sword of his own, so he could be patient.

If he could just lure the wyvern out as soon as possible, they would all bring it down together and then head back to the capital.

He wanted to do whatever it took to return before Dahlia's event.

Even though he would not be her partner for her monumental first dance, he at least wanted to meet her at the Green Tower to help ease her nerves—and to be the second one to dance with her.

"I really hope I can make it back in time..."

No one heard Volf's whisper as he descended into the valley.

Behind him, high in the sky, a green figure began its approach.

At the bottom of the shallow valley was a shallow stream that could hardly be called a river. Rocks large and small were scattered about. Volf suspected the water level would not rise without a considerable amount of rain. On the banks, short grass swayed in the wind.

Volf leaped from rock to rock, making his way up the valley. He proceeded slowly to make sure the wyvern took notice of him. The valley floor was narrow, and the winding riverbed made it impossible to see far ahead of him, but he knew that the bow knights and Captain Grato should be lying in wait up ahead in one of the crevices on the mountainside. Volf's task was to lure the wyvern as close as he could to that spot.

After he took a few more hops, the smell of blood became more intense. The mages must have started using air magic to waft the scent up into the sky. Surrounded by the stench, which seemed likely to attract other monsters too, Volf aimed for another rock, slightly farther away, and jumped. He nearly slipped off, but the mythril claws on his boots caught him before he fell.

Suddenly, he heard what sounded like a birdcall. In reality, it was a whistle from a knight whose magic allowed him to see far into the distance—a signal that he had spotted the wyvern.

Keeping his face forward, Volf exhaled to settle his nerves, then slowed his pace markedly. The hunk of veal suddenly felt a little heavier. The wyvern had appeared sooner than expected, but that was actually for the better as far as he was concerned. If all went well, he could get back to Dahlia in time.

Come on, wyvern, here's your snack! Follow me. No sooner had he mentally addressed the monster than he heard the birdcall again. Twice this time, and higher in pitch, alerting Volf that the wyvern

had spotted him.

And it seemed that the smell of blood had indeed attracted other monsters and animals. He could hear them making noise all around him, but he had complete faith that the other knights would take care of them.

The cries of the animals and monsters made it hard to hear the whistles, but that didn't matter anymore. An enormous shadow had appeared on the ground beside him.

Suddenly reminded of a conversation he'd once had with Dahlia, Volf said, "Right, what was it she told me? Every part of a wyvern or a kraken can be used for something"—in other words, for enchanting materials, food, or medicine.

It was the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department that had requested they bring back the entire wyvern, but Volf wanted Dahlia to get her hands on whichever parts she desired as well. If anyone could come up with a way to cook a wyvern into a tasty dish, it was her. And despite his current predicament, the thought made the corners of his mouth lift into a smile.

This past spring, he had been carried off by a wyvern and nearly eaten. Now it was winter, and another was chasing him, but he was fantasizing about eating it. *Sheesh, it's funny how things change. So many things have changed ever since I met Dahlia—*

High in the sky, the wind howled. Volf, feeling a surge of bloodlust from overhead, boosted his strengthening magic.

"It's hooked...!"

He judged the timing by watching the shadow under his feet. As it rapidly grew larger, he poured all the magic he could into his sköll bracelet, and his body was propelled forward. It felt as if he were riding on the wind as he leaped over rocks at superhuman speed. All he needed to do now was keep running and try to get as close as he could to the bow knights and the captain.

The life-and-death game of tag between the Order of Beast Hunters and the wyvern had begun.

"You look quite spiffy, Captain Grato."

"It doesn't feel too shabby, I have to admit, though it's a bit hard to see with the helmet on."

From a crevice in the valley, Grato looked up at a sky dotted with clouds. He was currently outfitted in a helmet, full-body armor, combat boots, and gloves, all made from black wyvern leather. These were the fruits of the royal magical toolmakers' efforts.

However, Grato wasn't quite sure he could call this outfit—which made him look like a misshapen miniature wyvern—a suit of armor. There were protrusions like dorsal fins running down his back from his head to his tail. The suit even had wings, albeit small ones, not to mention a whiplike tail.

"I made it look as close as possible to a wyvern!" the toolmaker in charge of the suit's creation had told him, beaming. To Grato, it had merely looked like some entirely new species of monster.

Just as he was debating whether he should say he was too busy to try it on, Bernigi said with envy, "I wish I could have worn something like that when I was young."

Next, Gildo grinned and said, "Put the development funds to good use."

Resigned to his fate, Grato donned the suit, and his doubts about whether it could be called armor only intensified when he looked in the mirror. But it didn't feel too bad—in fact, though he couldn't imagine how this was possible, it was quite comfortable.

Firstly, it was light as a feather. Secondly, due to the quality of the construction and the variation in the durability of the leather, the equipment perfectly conformed to the movements of his body. It was, to a remarkable degree, easier to move in than the armor he normally wore.

Nonetheless, it was also very protective. It had three times the magical defensive properties of normal armor, and the back was covered in a cushioning material made of yellow slime, which would protect him from strikes, blades, and fangs.

The equipment also increased his offensive capabilities. The gloves and boots had been enchanted with wyvern claws so that anyone with reasonable physical strength could use them to smash

rocks. A knight with powerful strengthening magic might even be able to hold his own, unarmed, against a monster.

With capabilities like those, every member of the squad ought to have a set of his own. Grato imagined the entire squad lined up wearing suits just like this one— *Well, maybe not.*

Incidentally, as easy as it was to get used to the armor, it had taken them a long time to figure out what to call it. They'd started simple, with names like "Black Armor" and "Wyvern Armor." But some knights had found those suggestions to be uninspired, and so, in an attempt to inject some originality into the process, they'd moved on to absurdities like "Ebony Trap" and "Wyvern Death Knell."

Just as Grato was objecting that those names didn't even make it sound like armor, the temple priest Aroldo arrived and insisted they name it "Corazza Lucente." A few knights' eyes sparkled when they heard that, but Grato was obliged to put his foot down.

They'd been unable to arrive at a unanimous decision, and so Grato had used the magical toolmaker's assertion that this armor was a prototype, with improvements to come, as an excuse to christen it "Black No. 1." The squad had had a lot to say against that, but he'd overridden them with his authority as captain.

Now, wearing Black No. 1, Grato was waiting to ambush the wyvern with his magical sword in one hand.

"...There it is."

A dark green figure high in the sky grew steadily larger until it became identifiable as a wyvern. Two whistles were blown in succession. The bow knights on both sides of the valley were ready to move.

Volf came into view, bounding across the valley floor. He ran over the sloping riverbed, easily using the slippery rocks as footholds and adjusting his speed to keep pace with the wyvern.

Grato had been grinding his teeth, but he let his jaw unclench. Now that Volf had gotten this close, the bow knights would be able to cover him even if he fell.

He was able to catch it on the first go around. Luck must be on our side. The green wyvern, meanwhile, had exceptionally bad luck.

Grato placed his fingers on the hilt of his sword. The Ash-Hand

whirred with magical energy, as if it couldn’t wait for its moment to shine.

Human versus wyvern—what would have normally been an effortless chase had turned into interminable annoyance for one side.

The green wyvern cried out in anger. The prey fleeing right before its eyes had a chunk of exposed flesh on its back. The wyvern had never seen such an animal before and thought to make a quick meal of it, but the creature continued to keep just out of reach of its talons.

This valley was shallow, but in order for the wyvern to descend into it and then ascend again, it needed room to spread its wings as well as time. That made it dangerous to pursue the elusive prey for long. However, this wyvern had never learned that fact, having strayed from its colony at a young age.

Its talons grazed the flesh on its prey’s back, lifting the bloody meat slightly. The scent of blood was enticingly sweet. *Just a little more.* The wyvern folded its wings and glided down swiftly, its talons outstretched toward the prey—but only the chunk of flesh slid down to the ground.

“Kraw?!”

Baffled by what had just occurred, the wyvern froze and, sensing danger, attempted to return to the sky. But right at that moment, the wyvern saw it—a very small wyvern had suddenly appeared on one of the boulders in the valley. It was black and rather curious looking, but there was no mistaking its smell.

Wyverns had a strict hierarchy among their own kind, irrespective of sex. The moment two of them met, it was in their nature to battle in order to establish their rank. Mating pairs were the sole exception, and this wyvern had never before seen a more ephemeral beauty.

The black wyvern was terribly slender; quite likely it didn’t have enough to eat. Its head drooped, suggesting it was feeble. The wings on its back were so small that it seemed unlikely to be capable of flight. Even so, its skin was lustrous and enveloped in a clear, intense magical energy.

Two choices were warring in the green wyvern's heart—threaten or approach—when it felt a gust of wind from either side.

"Kya!"

The green wyvern shrieked, shocked by the stabbing heat in its wing and abdomen.

When it finally scanned its surroundings, the wyvern noticed that a swarm of small creatures had gathered. These very creatures had sometimes given it food, but on other occasions, they had chased it away. They were incomprehensible, these "humans."

The wyvern suddenly remembered something the older wyverns in its former colony had once said: Though humans were small and weak, battle with them must be avoided at all costs.

Another painful blast of wind rocked the wyvern. It was quick to defend itself, but the wing of which it had been so proud collapsed at an awkward angle. The wyvern unleashed a roar imbued with magic in the direction the wind had come from, causing numerous figures to tumble down from a clifftop overlooking the river valley.

The wyvern was advancing to crush the puny creatures beneath its feet when a single red-bodied human sprang forward wielding a flat object. *If you can move, why do you not flee?* the wyvern wondered. And at that moment, it felt a terrifying rush of bloodlust from the human.

The creature's reddish-brown eyes blazed as it unleashed a roar out of all proportion to its diminutive size and charged toward the wyvern. And though the wyvern knew that this tiny human could easily be defeated, though it charged far more slowly than a wyvern, it was nonetheless frightening.

Forgetting to be cautious of its own surroundings or anything behind the human, the wyvern brandished its talons and slammed the creature against the cliff face twice. As it did so, it felt two more painful stabs on its back and tail.

It was only then that the wyvern noticed there were deep gashes in its hide and flesh, and that the ground below it was stained with red. With its body and wings in this state, it could no longer take to the skies. But neither did it intend to give up. To cower before such puny animals was unthinkable. At the very least, it would fight one

last battle to establish its dominance over that beautiful black wyvern.

The green wyvern turned toward the black wyvern and made its move, ignoring the wounds that punctured its body.

"Looks like everyone's all right."

Grato stood atop a boulder, biding his time. He had momentarily panicked when he saw the wyvern's wind magic knock the knights from the hilltop, and again when Randolph stepped forward to protect the others only for the monster to slam him against the rock face, but his fears had been quelled at the sight of the silver-stoled priest's raised hand. That was his signal letting Grato know that everyone's injuries were treatable and not life-threatening.

Moreover, the green wyvern had already lost interest in Randolph and the other knights on the valley floor. Its eyes were trained right on Grato himself.

Wyverns were prideful creatures and tended to fight to the death. Grato wasn't sure if this wyvern had figured out he was the leader of this band of humans or if it had genuinely mistaken him for another wyvern and now wanted to engage him in battle to establish dominance.

But though the wyvern had lost a wing and been pierced by multiple arrows, the will to fight still burned in its blood. Those dark green eyes held a captivating beauty. Grato wished that instead of luring it into this trap, he could have fought against it one-on-one with nothing but his sword, though he knew all too well that that was no more than an arrogant dream.

Grato looked straight back into the wyvern's eyes and murmured, "I'm sorry..."

Almost as if the wyvern could sense what he was feeling, it let out a shriek that sent a razor-sharp gust of wind in Grato's direction. The knight did not attempt to dodge. The black armor's superior defensive properties shielded him from harm—except for one small cut underneath his right eye.

A few drops of blood seeped out of the cut, and taking that as his cue, Grato rushed forward, looking like an obsidian monster. The

flightless wings on his back flopped to and fro, and his lifeless tail bounced up and down. He was running, conscious of the knights watching him in the distance, when he felt a powerful wave of magic.

The shadow of the black wyvern intersected the green wyvern's neck, and as their roars overlapped, a flash of red light tore through the air.

"Ash-Hand!"

The magical sword whirred in response to its master's call.

"Kraw..."

The wyvern's whimper trailed off weakly. Its body crumpled, and a white trail of smoke rose from the magical sword embedded deep in its neck.

Grato pulled the sword out, stepped down from the wyvern's body, and bellowed, "Anyone who's got their hands free, help cut it up! The smell of blood may draw animals or other monsters, so stay alert!"

There were cheers and roars of "Yes, sir!" from the knights.

"Captain, you have a cut on your cheek. Here, take a potion," a middle-aged knight offered.

"No need," said Grato. "It's just a scratch."

His cut wasn't bleeding much. It would likely heal within the day without leaving a scar.

Grato took off his sweaty helmet and turned to look back at the wyvern. The knights had already started dismembering it. Some were struggling to remove the arrows, others were cutting up body parts, and still others were placing the wyvern's flesh into barrels.

He looked toward the valley and saw Randolph receiving treatment from the priest. The amount of blood on his back was concerning, but he had already recovered enough to stand.

When he saw the knight open a small jar of honey, eliciting laughter from his comrades, Grato knew he had nothing to worry about. He decided that once they returned to the capital, as compensation for today's ordeal, he would send Randolph the finest brand of honey the purveyors to the royal court had to offer.



Not far from Randolph, Volf was wiping himself off with a towel. He must have worked up quite the sweat pushing himself to leap across the valley floor like that. His face was so red, Grato half expected to see steam rising from his body.

"Volf, good work out there."

"Captain, you were amazing! I'd do anything to wear that armor someday!"

"...Is that right?"

Grato's intention had been to acknowledge one of his men for risking his life acting as bait, but instead the knight was regarding him with stars in his eyes. Volf, who loved magical swords, had apparently taken a liking to Black No. 1 as well.

"I seem to remember Lord Bernigi and the other veterans expressing interest in wearing it too," a middle-aged knight commented.

"Many of the other knights in the squad have been saying they want to try it. It looks so cool!" said Volf.

"There's also a priest who's put in a request for defensive equipment, though I let him know that will likely be difficult to acquire..." the middle-aged knight replied with a dry smirk.

Grato had a strong feeling that priest was the very same one who had tried to name the armor "Corazza Lucente." If he got his hands on his own "defensive equipment," there was no telling what sort of ludicrous name he would give it.

When Grato turned around once more, he saw that the squad was in the middle of carrying away one of the wyvern's wings and its tail. He was surprised by how large the monster had been for how young it was. It wouldn't be long before they had the materials for a second suit. *The problem is, who's going to wear it?*

"I smell a contest over Green No. 1," Grato muttered with a faraway look in his eye.

The Beast Hunter's Choice

"The people who live in the surrounding environs can finally rest easy," Vice-Captain Griswald said.

Grato nodded as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "Indeed. That wyvern could have carried off cattle and humans."

Monsters and beasts were common enough within the Kingdom of Ordine that not even villagers could afford to sit around and abstain from violence. Some hunted monsters, some laid traps, and some prepared poisoned bait.

When it came to wyverns, however, there was no simple solution. They required the combined efforts of a party of skilled adventurers or the entire Order of Beast Hunters.

Or so it was generally believed, at any rate, but this time, only one knight had been seriously injured, and he had already been healed. There were no other serious casualties.

Currently, the knights were taking turns resting. Volf was stretching out his fatigued legs. The wyvern, meanwhile, was being taken apart cheerfully yet efficiently. The knights were currently in the process of freezing the body parts, wrapping them in waterproof cloth, and testing how much could fit into the wagons. The horses, displeased with their malodorous cargo, were being appeased with apples and pears.

"At this rate, we should make it back in time for the castle's budget meeting... I'll ask for additional funds. We need to check on the highway towns and villages, so let's split the squad in two and send half home first," Grato said.

He had already changed back into his regular armor. His horse very much disliked the newly developed Black No. 1—understandably so; it was made of wyvern leather, and in preparation for use as a decoy, it had been imbued with the scent of the captive wyverns in the castle menagerie.

"Volf, you can head back with the advance guard. You have to get ready for Rossetti's celebration."

"Thank you, Captain, but Dorino and I are serving as the rear guard to give Randolph some time to rest."

The priest had already healed Randolph's injuries, but recovering from the blood loss would take time. The man himself insisted he was fine, but since he was still unsteady on his feet, it was possible that he would faint and fall from his horse or take a turn for the worse, so Grato wanted him to travel by carriage with the priest.

That being the case, the duty of protecting the rear had fallen to the Scarlet Armors Volf and Dorino. Regardless, the second group would reach the capital only half a day later, which left plenty of time before Dahlia's debut.

"Allow me to take the rear guard, then. I, too, used to be a Scarlet Armor back in the day," an older knight with blue-gray hair offered.

Volf and a middle-aged knight objected loudly at the same time.

"I can't let you do that, Sir Astorga!"

"You need to get back soon for the wedding preparations, Nicola! There's barely any time before the winter festival!"

Others were likewise nodding and expressing their agreement. But Nicola Astorga, who was to be married during the upcoming winter festival, neither looked bashful nor smiled. Instead, his gaze wavered as he said, "Well, there's not much for me to do. I'm actually finding it difficult to be at home, since both our mothers have been going absolutely mad with the wedding preparations. When it comes to women's clothes, it doesn't matter how many times I'm asked; I just don't know what looks better, and I can't tell the difference between dresses of the same color..."

Other knights were quick to commiserate.

"Sir Astorga, I can relate..."

"Women always do that. They say two things that look practically identical are different in some way..."

"Why bother asking? Even when I give it serious thought and offer an honest opinion, she hardly ever goes with *my* choice..."

"If any of you lot say things like that in front of a woman, you can

consider yourselves finished," Grato cut in brusquely.

Griswald narrowed his blue eyes and said, "Don't let it trouble you if a woman rejects your choice. We all have our own tastes. If she's deciding between two outfits, you can tell her, 'I can't pick—they both look good—so why don't you let me buy you one?' That way you'll make her mother happy too."

"The perfect solution! That's Vice-Captain Griswald for you!"

"You need deep pockets for *that* solution..."

"And a girlfriend..."

A few knights exchanged smirks, while others stared into the distance. Perfect though Griswald's stratagem might have been, the difficulty lay in carrying it out.

"Nicola, if you want to give her father some peace of mind, suggest something elegant that doesn't show much skin," Alfio advised.

"Just the sort of thing a man with four daughters would say..." Dorino muttered with an expression that made it hard to tell if he meant it as a compliment or a gibe.

But Nicola nodded and looked intently at Alfio. "I see. I didn't consider that... Sir Alfio, my fiancée's father has offered to have a formal three-piece suit and everyday clothes tailored for me, but since I rarely wear those types of clothes, I feel they would be wasted on me. How should I decline his offer?"

"Ah, a son-in-law who does not know how good he has it. You can't decline," Alfio replied mercilessly. "He who stands beside a man's daughter will soon become his own son. He wants to provide you with nice clothes to wear, no matter the damage to his own wallet. All you need to do is accept and say, 'Thank you.' And never make his daughter cry. Just think of how happy you'll be together as a family."

Nicola stood up straight and nodded. "Y-Yes, sir!"

The married knights observed that exchange with wry amusement, while the single knights, Volf included, had their lips pressed firmly shut.

Grato swept his gaze across the scene, the corners of his mouth lifting. "All right, now that you've all gotten a good lesson, break's

over. Get ready to set out. The magical toolmakers of the castle, as well as our own magical toolmaker, are awaiting their wyvern."



Half a day had passed since the Order of Beast Hunters had split up, with one half, led by Grato, heading back to the capital in advance. The second team, escorting wagons stuffed to their limit with wyvern parts, was now also on its way home.

There were few suitable places to camp in the shadow of the mountains. The knights followed the highway in search of a campsite, and it was only at nightfall that they found a grassy field to stop in.

Their plan was to make camp early so they could set out first thing the next morning. That would give them ample time to reach the capital by early evening or nighttime tomorrow.

"The wyvern's scent should deter most scavengers, but we will keep watch over the horses and carriages in three shifts tonight. Those on the first shift, take your meals first."

At Griswald's instructions, the knights set about their tasks: eating dinner, untacking and tending to the horses, or setting up tents.

Knowing they were up against a wyvern, many of the knights had been nervous about setting out on this expedition, but now, at its conclusion, everyone looked relaxed. Volf was sure the same was true of him.

Volf, Dorino, and Randolph spread waterproof cloth in a flat area and at last sat down to rest. They proceeded to grill dried fish on their camp stoves and boil water for soup.

When he'd had his fill of the comforting flavors, Volf addressed his friend. "Randolph, you should rest. Don't worry about keeping watch."

"That's all right, Volf. I feel fine now," Randolph replied casually as he blew on a steaming cup of honeyed wine. As always when trying to replenish his stamina, he'd opted for something sweet.

"Fine, my ass. I saw how red those rocks got."

"Dorino, you worry too much. I'm fine—I've been eating nutritious honey," Randolph said in typical fashion.

"Honey won't restore all that blood you lost!" Dorino retorted loudly.

Despite Randolph's assertion and his smile, his face was paler than usual, and just a little while ago, when they'd been walking, his strides had been shorter.

How can we make him understand? Volf wondered, but just then, Vice-Captain Griswald walked over.

"Randolph, listen to your fellow knights. If you think you could tell another knight who received the same injuries you did to take a night watch shift, then by all means, take it. But if you could not, then rest after you have your meal," the vice-captain advised in a calm voice.

"...I apologize, Vice-Captain. I will rest," Randolph said with a bow of his head, much to Volf's relief.

Once he was finished eating, Volf checked over his sword and other equipment, then set out to take his shift for the night watch. He sensed no animals around the carriage that held the wyvern parts—the smell alone must have been keeping them at a distance—and heard only the sounds of insects.

As a way to ward off sleepiness during their shift, Volf and the other knights chatted with their neighbors, occasionally changing positions. The night passed uneventfully until it was time for the changing of the watch. Volf was unsurprisingly exhausted after sprinting at full speed over a long distance today. He was sure he'd sleep like a rock.

"Hmm?"

The horses, along with a few sharp-eared knights, all turned toward the highway. A horse had given a neigh closer to a shriek. Either it was in great haste or it was running away from something. Volf exchanged a look with Dorino, then picked up a lantern and ran toward the highway.

"Whoa, what's going on?!" Volf asked.

A horse was collapsed on the road and foaming at the mouth. In front of it sprawled a man who had presumably been thrown from its

back. He began crawling toward the knights.

The man was dressed in outerwear and pants suited for farmwork. Though he'd been riding a horse on a winter's night, he wore no heavy coat or cloak and carried no belongings.

"Knights... Please...help..."

"Get the priest!"

Once summoned, the priest came running over and hurriedly cast healing magic on the man and his horse, after which the knights offered water to both.

Between haggard breaths, the man explained that two red bears had attacked his village, located in the mountains just off the highway. Unfortunately, most of the hunters were absent from his village and the neighboring villages; they had been unable to hunt ever since the wyvern first appeared, and the moment they received word that the Beast Hunters had slain it, they had set out with their weapons.

The bears were attacking the village's livestock, including its goats and horses. Those who could fight were shooting arrows and throwing hoes from the rooftops, while those who could not were hiding beneath the floorboards of sturdy houses. But it seemed unlikely that the villagers would be able to subdue the bears with their limited weapons.

The man, who was the son of the village chief, had slipped past the bears and gone for help. He had ridden toward a highway town until his horse could run no longer, which was when the Beast Hunters had found him.

Bear-type monsters typically did not descend from the mountains in winter. Either these two had lost some sudden territorial contest or they had fled from a stronger monster. Out of the corner of his eye, Volf glanced at the wagons loaded with wyvern parts. The timing would line up.

After hearing the man's story, Griswald was quick to make a decision. "Let's go to the village at once and slay the red bears."

Half of the Beast Hunters promptly got to work making preparations to set out. Not all the knights were going at once, since that would have required turning the carriages and wagons around

and striking their camp. Plus, some of the horses were still fatigued. There was no question of them galloping at top speed, and without food and rest, they might collapse like the villager's horse had. First, the half of the knights who were in the best shape would take on this new burden; later, the other half would relieve them.

As Volf was relacing his boots, Griswald approached him. "Volfred, we have enough manpower. Take a horse and return to the capital."

Shameful as it was, Volf hesitated before responding. "No, I'm coming as well."

In truth, he did want to return to the capital. He wanted to be by Dahlia's side, to be a source of encouragement on her stressful day. But it was Dahlia who had told him that his job as a Beast Hunter was important because he was saving lives.

Volf had once thought the job of a Beast Hunter was merely to slay monsters. But he *had* saved lives with his own hands, and in the course of his career he would save many more. Now that he realized that, he couldn't return to the capital on his own.

Griswald was right in that they had more than enough men to defeat the bears. However, with one fewer members of the Scarlet Armors, there was a chance that this mission would take a little more time than planned. In that time, a knight could die or suffer a serious injury. And that knight would be someone's family, someone's beloved, just like Volf's own departed mother or Dahlia's late father. It was his job as a Beast Hunter to prevent tragedies like that.

"Considering how late it is, we need someone with good night vision in the forefront. I will go."

Red bears were powerful and fast. The safest method to dispatch them would be for two Scarlet Armors to bait them so that the rest of the knights could launch their counterattack without the risk of both bears ganging up on them.

"Very well. Go prepare yourself, then."

"Yes, sir!"

Volf headed toward the horses. He confirmed that his spare dagger was still in his breastplate and gave it a squeeze. After muttering a name, inaudible even to his own ears, he broke into a

run.

The vice-captain watched as the tall knight left, then smiled gently. "You have truly become a full-fledged Beast Hunter, Volf."



The knights departing first were quick to assemble. The other half of the squad were entrusted with clearing the campsite and checking over the weapons and equipment.

"Randolph, I know you're not back at a hundred percent yet, but watch over the carriage, please. More bears, red or otherwise, may come down from the mountains."

"Understood, Vice-Captain. I pray for a fortunate outcome."

Though Randolph had answered Griswald exactly as he usually did, he set to chewing his lip, displeased by the idea that a Scarlet Armor such as himself would stay behind in safety. Indeed, the wyvern's smell ensured that the area around the carriage was, in a sense, the safest place he could be.

"All right, we'll be back in a bit!" Dorino, who had four daggers in the belt around his waist, clapped his friend on the shoulder. "Randolph, share some of that honey with us when we get back. Fabiola told me it tastes great on rye bread and pairs well with red wine!"

"Okay, I'll share some. Then, when we return to the castle, I'll give you one of the jars of honey that my family sent me. You can bring it to your girlfriend next time you visit her."

"Wow, so you'd give me one of your most prized possessions? Got it. That red bear is going *down*!"

The other knights laughed at Dorino's boundlessly chipper voice. But then their expressions tensed as they walked on and proceeded to mount their horses.

And so the Order of Beast Hunters split into two groups: one that would remain behind at camp, another that would travel to the village. Griswald and the villager sat together astride a sleipnir at the head of the group. Riding beside them was Volf, with Dorino behind them and the rest of the elite troop following in their train.

Their pick of the freshest horses didn't entirely make up for the fact that it was past midnight. Even with their magical lanterns turned to their brightest, the road was dark and the way ahead obscured.

The knights were impatient to move faster, but they had to keep pace with one another. It seemed they would never reach the village.

Finally, they came to a stop where a road branched off from the highway and led down into a valley.

"My village is just down this road..." the villager said with tightly clenched fists.

The man must have wanted to dash down that road, fearful for the well-being of his family and the other villagers. But not even the Order of Beast Hunters could take on a pair of red bears without preparing and strategizing.

The knights stopped their horses and inspected their equipment. Mindful of the bears' strength, those who were likely to fight them at close quarters donned helmets. But even with the possibility of a direct confrontation, neither Vice-Captain Griswald nor any of the Scarlet Armors wore helmets; instead, they prioritized visibility.

"We will split into two teams. Each will employ the same strategy: A Scarlet Armor will lure a bear toward the bow knights and mages, who will attack it at midrange. Next, the first wave of knights will advance. If you're unable to maintain your distance, engage the bears in close-range combat at your own discretion. Whichever team accomplishes the objective first, move to support the other team."

Griswald gave his orders quietly, but the knights all nodded in understanding. Now all that remained was to bring down the red bears as quickly as they could.

"Please, I beg you, save our people..."

The villager pleaded with his head bowed low and his hands clasped so tightly they were turning white.

Above the mountains, the sky began to pale.

As they entered the village's two-storied assembly hall, the chief's son swung his magical lantern around, illuminating the faces of

villagers desperately clutching their bows. At his side, a knight in armor announced that help had arrived. This was to prevent anyone from mistaking the Beast Hunters for red bears and shooting them.

Dorino and Volf ended up joining different teams.

"The left one is closer. I'll go there."

"Okay, I'll go right."

Dorino's team was the first to face one of the bears. The villagers' eyes were fixed on a large chicken coop, which, to the red bear that had descended from the mountain, was a cornucopia. The clamorous shrieks of the chickens suggested what was happening inside.

"C'mon, get outta there!"

Dorino charged into the chicken coop alone and hurled a dagger at the red bear's back. The bear let out a roar, muffled by the chicken in its mouth, and barreled toward Dorino, who ran back outside with the monster right on his heels. Its body was covered in smashed eggs, blood, and brown feathers.

"Ugh, stay away from me!" Dorino shouted with unrepressed disgust.

"We'll stop it!"

"Stone Bind!"

The bow knights shot at the red bear's legs with their greatbows, and then two mages bound its legs with earth magic.

"You two are up, Sir Milo, Kirk!"

The bow knight on the rooftop of a nearby house loosed arrows from his Galeforce Bow. The young knight at his side held no weapon, but he guided the trajectory of the arrows with magic.

Twang! A second after he heard the sound of the bowstring, Dorino saw the red bear's head and right arm drop to the ground.

"Huh?!"

"Whoa!"

Shouts of bewilderment could be heard from the villagers, who'd had their bows at the ready. It was understandable. The Galeforce Bow was a powerful enchanted weapon that simultaneously shot two arrows connected by a mythril wire. Guided by air magic, the wire had killed the red bear like an invisible blade. It was impossible

to understand what had happened without knowing the workings of the bow.

The unarmed knight and bow knight were bantering as they dropped down from the roof.

"Damn, I only meant to get its head!"

"So close, Kirk. We'll do it next time!"

It was only then that the villagers raised a celebratory cheer. Meanwhile, the red bear's body lay on the ground, its eyes wide with incomprehension.

On the opposite side of the village, Volf's team was running deeper into the cluster of homes. There, they spotted a group of villagers armed with hoes and spades about to enter what appeared to be a warehouse.

"We'll take it from here! Please step back!" Volf called out.

The men shouted back with looks of desperation.

"Knights, this bear is wounded!"

"Let us go with you! Our women and children are hiding in the cellar!"

Volf was able to gather from the men's shouts that after taking an arrow to the eye, the red bear had panicked and broken through the heavy doors of the warehouse. It might have sensed the humans hiding inside. The wooden door into the cellar had to be hoisted up by a rope, but that was no guarantee that the bear couldn't get in by brute force.

"We are knights of the Order of Beast Hunters. Please, let us handle this!"

The men responded to his plea by bowing their heads in supplication and moving back from the warehouse entrance.

"I'm going in!" Volf said as he plunged through the door alone.

The dark warehouse was in disarray. Grain was scattered all over the floor. In the back, the red bear was growling and clawing at the door to the cellar. It had already gouged a hole wide enough to fit its paw through. If the hole got any larger, the people underground would be in danger.

Volf could hear them screaming and crying. There was no time to

lose. He sprinted at the bear and swung his sword down on the monster's muscular neck. But the red bear's instincts must have kicked in. It suddenly changed its stance, and Volf's sword scored only a shallow cut on its shoulder.

The bear roared in anger and charged him. Volf made sure to lead the bear away from the cellar door, then managed to bolt outside.

"Nice, Volf! You lured it out!"

"We'll take it from here!"

Volf felt a measure of relief on hearing his comrades' voices. Now he just needed to accelerate and distance himself from the red bear so the bow knights and mages would have an opening. It was exactly when he had that thought that his right knee buckled under him.

"Volf!"

He had no idea what had happened. In the moment, he just did as he had been trained: He rolled to the side and assessed the situation. Once he confirmed that he hadn't been attacked by the red bear, he realized what the problem was.

He had exhausted his strengthening magic that afternoon while running from the wyvern, so now his knee had given out. It was his own fault for not having anticipated that.

Volf sensed the savage beast approaching him where he lay fallen. He jumped up and held his sword at the ready, but he was a second too slow. The red bear was already rearing up on its hind legs with its right arm raised. Up close, the arm was as thick as a log, and he watched as it swung down toward him.

I can't attack, it's too late to dodge, trying to defend myself with my arms will do nothing... If I get hit, it's all over.

Amid his torrent of thoughts, he thought of a woman's smiling face, but the image quickly vanished at the sound of an angry shout.

"You blockhead, don't fight it alone! Why do you think we're here?!"

Dorino burst onto the scene, running like the wind, and slashed at the red boar's flank.

The bear's hostility turned toward Dorino, and Volf was suddenly

dragged backward—a knight with red-brown hair had grabbed him by his armor.

"You're done!" the knight shouted. "You can't keep stealing all the glory—I'll have nothing to boast about to my daughters!"

"Sir Alfio! That was so cool!"

"Flatter me all you want, I'm not treating you to a drink!"

As Volf was getting dragged away, Dorino had given the red bear the slip. Sprinting, he led it past the bow knights, and they wasted no time in loosing arrows at its legs. Next, the mages cast earth magic to pin it in place.

But perhaps because this red bear was larger than the other, they were unable to kill its momentum as easily.

"Nicola! Bring a good story back to tell your fiancée!" a bow knight said as he drew the string of his greatbow back and pierced the bear's knee with an arrow.

"Appreciate it!"

The blue-eyed knight leaped forward and slashed the red bear from its chest to belly, dealing what was undoubtedly a fatal wound. Still the bear did not fall. Even as its blood cascaded to the ground, it dropped onto four legs and attempted to flee.

Everyone tensed up, but a formidable man with blue hair stepped out in front of the bear.

"The glory will be mine."

As the knights looked on, wondering whether the man was going to stab the bear with the blue longspear in his hands or with his specialty spell, Water Lance, they heard him begin chanting an unfamiliar phrase.

"Come forth, water spirit—Aqua Box!"

The blue spear in his hands glowed faintly, and then a cube of water appeared, encasing the red bear's head. The water did not fall but remained hovering in midair.

"Huh...?"

The knights as well as the spade-and hoe-wielding villagers stood frozen and dumbstruck as they watched the bear.

The red bear was the first to move. It looked as though it was attempting to roar, but as soon as it opened its mouth, it was

inundated with water. No matter how much it coughed, its head remained submerged. Its struggles were in vain.

"Cripes, it's drowning..."

"Come on, someone put it out of its misery..."

"Is it even our place to interfere? I mean, it's the vice-captain..."

While the knights were muttering to one another, the thrashing red bear fell over and went limp. The cube of water turned into a puddle and then soaked into the ground.

"I just purchased this spear, and I'm happy to see how useful its fixed magic is. Now I can finish off reptiles from afar."

As the vice-captain smiled, his azure eyes narrowed to a squint. Many of those present felt a chill.

"MMission complete!"

That spontaneous shout spurred everyone else to raise cheers of victory.



The man who'd led the Beast Hunters to the village expressed his deep appreciation for their efforts, as did his father, the chief.

"You have my deepest thanks! The Beast Hunters really are amazing..."

"I've heard tell of the Order of Beast Hunters, but now I've witnessed your strength for myself!"

In the glow of morning, a bonfire burned in the middle of the village, and magical lanterns still shone faintly. As the villagers looked on, the squad butchered the red bears. Some grilled their meat, and others stewed it.

The villagers hadn't been able to eat since the red bears had commenced their assault, and their livestock and grain supply had also suffered damage. As the Beast Hunters' wagons were already full, Griswald had decided that the red bears' meat should be used to make breakfast for everyone.

Though the red bears had raided the village while the hunters were away and had slain much of their livestock, none of the villagers had fallen victim to their attack, a fact they felt was worthy

of celebration. Moreover, they were now eating the red bears for breakfast alongside the knights of the Kingdom of Ordine's famed Order of Beast Hunters. Many of the villagers brought liquor, prepared meals, and snacks out of their homes to share, turning their breakfast into something closer to a banquet.

However, a number of people had been wounded. Volf had injured his knee. One of the bow knights had hurt his wrist shooting arrows in quick succession. One of the villagers had bruised his leg when he'd jumped for joy at their victory and fallen from a rooftop; another had sustained a back injury after stumbling in shock upon witnessing the gruesome death of one of the bears. While the Beast Hunters were butchering the red bears, someone's hand had slipped, and the knife he was using had sliced his palm open.

And lastly, a young child in the cellar had fallen down crying and suffered scraped knees. The Beast Hunters' silver-stoled priest had already healed every one of them. As it was something they rarely saw, the villagers were overwhelmed with awe at the use of such advanced healing magic.

The festive breakfast carried on, with villagers and knights alike celebrating the fact that everyone had survived the attack. By the time the sun had fully risen, the half of the Beast Hunters who had stayed behind at their camp arrived with the carriages and wagons.

After each side caught the other up to speed, one of the knights left to warn the neighboring villages to stay on alert. On their way here, the second group of knights had encountered only a merchant caravan and a carriage of the Couriers' Guild; neither party had reported seeing any animals or monsters. All they could do was pray that the other villages had also been spared from any harm.

"I will go add some more ice."

The mages began replenishing the ice in the wagons to keep the wyvern meat and hide from spoiling. The horses were being fed apples to quell their displeasure at the smell.

Volf did not partake in the revelry. After the priest healed his knee, he inhaled some bread and red wine, then went to rest in a carriage. The bow knight who had injured his wrist had just been treated and was on his way to join the celebration. He asked Volf if

he wanted to come with him, but Volf declined, his excuse being that he felt sluggish after receiving treatment.

With his eyes closed, Volf let out a sigh. “Pathetic.” He had chosen to miss Dahlia’s ball so he could save a life, only to end up in this state. He had never felt lousier.

Of course, he’d only gotten this injury because he’d been running from the wyvern yesterday afternoon, but regardless, he had ended up causing trouble for the rest of the squad. He had failed to accurately assess his own limits and failed to make the right judgment call—nothing but cause for deep regret.

Even if he mounted a horse right this instant, he wouldn’t make it back in time for the ball. And besides, he couldn’t ask for leave to return to the castle on his own. It was unfortunate that he wouldn’t be able to celebrate Dahlia’s special day with her, but once he was back, perhaps he could bring flowers to the Green Tower and congratulate her.

As he had that thought, his eyelids drooped closed.

The fatigue of the day had caught up with him at last. After nodding off for a little, he awoke at the sound of footsteps on gravel. From the small window of the carriage, he saw Griswald walking outside. Volf quickly descended from the carriage.

“Vice-Captain, I’m deeply sorry for inconveniencing everyone earlier.”

“There is nothing to apologize for. You carried out your duty as a Scarlet Armor admirably in baiting both the wyvern and the red bear, Volf.”

Volf was more surprised by the vice-captain shortening his name than by the refusal of his apology. Even as the rest of the squad had come to call him Volf, the vice-captain had continued to address him as Volfred. But it didn’t feel odd for the vice-captain to use his nickname now; rather, there was a sense of familiarity to it.

“Are you feeling well now?”

“Yes, the priest cast healing magic on my knee.”

“Sometimes we are unaware of our own physical condition. The next time we have two battles in succession like this, I will make sure to urge the entire squad to exercise caution. Now then, since

you are back on your feet, could I ask you to deliver a message? Please bring this to the knights' brigade in the castle."

The letter was already enclosed in an envelope, and in place of a wax seal was Griswald's signature in blue ink.

"You can entrust it to me, sir."

Volf accepted the letter, though he found the request strange. This was his first time being asked to act as a messenger. That was not ordinarily a job for a Scarlet Armor. Even when no messenger knights were available, it was usually a knight of smaller stature who assumed the duty, since his lighter frame would not slow the horse.

Why was Volf, tall as he was, being asked to do this? No sooner had the question occurred to him than the vice-captain continued.

"That is a document requesting aid for this village as well as reinforcements for patrols of the villages and towns along the highway. Other monsters and animals may be on the move because of the wyvern. It is an urgent message, so you will go by sleipnir. Have the priest check you over once more before you depart. That way, you won't need to be examined at the castle. After you have delivered the letter, I have one more mission for you—a mission only you can carry out."

"What is it, sir?"

Volf steeled himself. He was prepared to take on any mission if it would allow him to atone for his mistakes today. But as he was working himself up, the corners of Griswald's blue eyes crinkled in a smile.

"Congratulate the Order of Beast Hunters' advisor, Master Dahlia, on her debut. Even if you cannot make it in time for the ball, it is your duty to congratulate her. You are a guarantor of her company, and it was you who recommended the Rossetti Trading Company to the Order. Go celebrate her day, and make sure to bring her flowers."

"Thank you, Vice-Captain! At your orders. I will go to the priest now."

It was a duty he was happy to undertake. Even his steps felt lighter.

“He looks to be in good shape.”

Griswald watched with a smile as Volf’s brisk steps turned into a run. His knee seemed to be fully healed.

When Randolph and Dorino arrived in his place, the vice-captain asked the two of them to assist Volf in his preparations to leave.

Randolph led over a large, black sleipnir, the one that he himself always rode. Dorino carried a saddlebag stuffed full of food to be eaten on the road and resources in case of the unexpected: portable rations, water and potions in bottles, a wineskin, bandages, and all types of magic crystals. In his other hand, he carried Volf’s black overcoat and a helmet to shield his face from the cold wind that would assail him riding a sleipnir at a high speed in the winter.

“And how are you?” Griswald asked the sleipnir, looking it in the eyes.

The sleipnir quickly looked away and glanced over at Randolph. It was likely reluctant to have anyone but him as a rider. However, a regular horse would not be able to handle galloping all the way to the capital with Volf on its back.

“I’m going to have to ask you to go a bit above and beyond today.”

Griswald produced a slim magically sealed box from his breast pocket, then opened it, extracted a flat, green object, and held it up. Instantly, the sleipnir whipped its head around to look at him.

“Something special,” Griswald whispered.

The sleipnir’s black eyes sparkled as it whinnied. Griswald gently brought the flat, green object up to its mouth.

“Vice-Captain Griswald, what is that you’re feeding the sleipnir?” Randolph asked.

“It’s a medicinal cracker. They’re normally given for injuries, but I thought it might help the sleipnir put in some extra effort. Sleipnirs find them deliciously sweet.”

“Deliciously sweet...” Randolph repeated as he stared intently at the sleipnir’s mouth.

Griswald and Dorino smirked.

“They are not for human consumption,” Griswald informed Randolph.

"Don't even think about it, Randolph. You'll get a bellyache," Dorino added.

The medicinal cracker that the sleipnir was eating with such delight was in fact made from green slime, powdered, processed, and enchanted.

Ivano had given Griswald these crackers in the strictest confidence, and he had since become wise to their nature and effects. The squad was furnished with a certain number for use in emergencies—for example, if they had to transport an injured knight or respond quickly to monster threats. Whether Ivano had personally supplied him with these crackers because he had foreseen that something like this might happen, Griswald couldn't determine. What he did know was that Ivano was a shrewd businessman through and through; it was clear why he was Chairwoman Rossetti's right-hand man.

And now Griswald witnessed the effect of the crackers for himself. Once the sleipnir had chewed and swallowed the cracker, it neighed loudly and started digging at the ground with its front hooves.

It turned to Randolph, its usual rider, and snorted insistently, as if it were telling him to mount at once. It had always been Griswald's impression that the steed was as mild-mannered as its rider, but clearly there was another side to it.

"My friend will be riding you today, not me. Get him back to the capital safely," Randolph cooed as stroked the sleipnir's neck. "I will give you plenty of sugar cubes once I return myself."

The sleipnir gave another loud neigh and nuzzled Randolph's shoulder. Like its master, it was a lover of sweets. Griswald found himself unable to repress his smile. Meanwhile, Dorino asked him in a whisper if sleipnirs could get cavities. Griswald had never heard of such a thing.

While they were discussing the possibility, Volf returned.

"I've been given a clean bill of health. And he put it in writing!"

It seemed the silver-stoled priest had already gotten quite drunk. He had written, in letters twice as large as normal, *Checkup all clear! Aroldo.* The note was rather scant on details, but regardless, one look at Volf was enough to confirm that he had recovered.

"Volf, I know you are in a rush, but please ride safely so you don't collide with carriages or other people on the road," Griswald cautioned him.

"Yes, sir! I will be very careful."

"I fed the sleipnir two medicinal crackers, so it should be able to keep up a quick pace."

Knowing the effects of the medicinal crackers, Volf must have realized he would be able to ride swiftly to the capital while taking minimal breaks, for he couldn't stop smiling.

"I appreciate your consideration, Vice-Captain."

The black-haired man gave a deep bow and then easily leaped atop the tall sleipnir.

"Be careful, Volf!"

"Best of luck to you."

"Thanks, Dorino, Randolph! I'll go as fast as I safely can," Volf replied with a warm smile, then gripped the sleipnir's reins.

It took about a day and a half to ride to the capital on horseback, and the sun was already high in the sky. Despite the sleipnir's speed, there was little hope that Volf would make it in time for the ball, which started tomorrow evening.

But even if Volf could not be a knight protecting the flower of the ball, Griswald wanted him to be the first to congratulate Master Dahlia. The young knight had at last become a fully fledged member of the Order of Beast Hunters, and this was Griswald's modest way of commemorating the occasion.

"Now then, let us pray that the medicinal crackers do their job."

The sleipnir dashed away like a gust of wind, quickly disappearing into the distance.

A few days later, the Order of Beast Hunters would receive multiple requests for scouts along the highway. People had witnessed a jet-black sleipnir with a black shadow riding on its back.

"They breezed past as if there were no other people or carriages on the road, galloping at such high speed that it seemed they were not of this world. Some people feared the rider was a dullahan with its head still attached."

After he read those reports in his office, the vice-captain pressed

a hand to his brow for quite a while.

The Debut and the First Dance

Gildo had bidden Dahlia arrive at his estate on the morning of her debut. As a commoner, she panicked at the very idea of visiting a marquis's estate, though Ivano's presence somewhat assuaged her worries; he was accompanying her in his capacity as vice-chairman of her company and also as her attendant at the debut.

Gildo's estate in the nobles' quarter was enclosed within tall walls that concealed it from passersby. Its black roof and pearly gray walls lent it an unobtrusive, antiquated aspect. The small windows with their sturdy metal storm shutters likely served to regulate the temperature indoors.

Dahlia had little confidence that she would have been able to open the thick double-leaf front doors by herself. Although they did convey the high nobility of the inhabitants, she couldn't help but worry about what would happen in the event of a fire.

After a dizzying tour through the winding corridors and up the central staircase, Ivano and Dahlia arrived in a fairly commodious room on the third floor.

There's enough space here to enchant waterproof cloth for a carriage canopy without having to fold it. The thought came unbidden to Dahlia, and her amusement afforded her a brief respite from her nerves.

"Welcome to our home. My name is Tilnara Diels."

From Ivano, Dahlia had already learned of Gildo's wife, the Marchioness Tilnara Diels. She was shorter than Dahlia, a bit plump, and had golden-brown hair and dark brown eyes. Her dress was a blue so pale, it was almost white. She spoke in a calm manner and gave the impression of being kind and gentle. Bluntly put, she seemed to be diametrically opposite her high-strung husband.

"I am Dahlia Rossetti, chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company and advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters. I cannot thank

you enough for hosting today's event."

"Chairwoman Rossetti, please be at ease and make yourself at home. I understand, of course, why you're nervous, seeing as this is a first for you." Tilnara's pink lips curved into an elegant smile. "Why, I myself had to postpone my own debut due to a stomachache."

"Oh my... I can only imagine the strain that must have put on you."

A young noblewoman's debut was generally a much more lavish affair, with more attendees, than the ball that would be held today. Debuts conventionally took place when the debutante was still a teenager, so Tilnara's stomachache had most likely been brought on by nerves.

Even as Dahlia expressed her sympathy, the marchioness slowly drew close to her and smoothly opened her ivory folding fan over her mouth, making the flowers painted on the pleats bloom beautifully.

"I ate too many limited-offer snacks and couldn't fit into my dress, so I ingested quite a lot of medicine that, shall we say, helped to keep things moving. Unfortunately, that led directly to the postponement of my debut... The women charitably kept my father in the dark about the reason, although my mother made me spend double the time on my etiquette lessons."

Dahlia kept a serious face, resisting the urge to laugh at Tilnara's whispered story. She saw Ivano looking at the two of them curiously and suspected that he hadn't heard what the marchioness had just said, but she also didn't feel it would be her place to communicate it to him later.

"Now then, let us get you into your dress. I had such fun picking this out for you. It was exactly as if I were selecting a dress for my own daughter."

Tilnara's deep brown eyes softened as she smiled with genuine delight, and in that moment, she looked very motherly. Dahlia felt a sudden chill deep in her chest, and foolish thoughts began to fill her mind. *Did my own mother in this world ever once give thought to my clothing? Or did she just want to forget that I even existed?*

"Chairwoman Rossetti, do you mind if I call you Dahlia on this

special occasion?" Tilnara asked her gently.

Tilnara was a marchioness, a personage whom Dahlia could ordinarily never have addressed with such familiarity, but she was grateful for Tilnara's generosity, so she willingly accepted her offer. "Oh, yes! Of course you may."

"Then please call me Tilly. Yes, think of me as an aunt and make yourself comfortable. Ivano, I will have tea brought to you in the usual guest room. There are plenty of books in there for you to peruse."

"Thank you, Lady Tilly. I will happily accept that offer."

Ivano bowed and left the women to their work. It was clear that his frequent visits to Gildo's estate had put him on familiar terms with the marchioness. Dahlia sincerely wished he could share some of his confidence and social skills with her.

"Dahlia, do you prefer that your corset be looser or tighter?"

"L-Looser, please," Dahlia answered as she timidly followed Tilly into a different room.

Once inside the windowless room, Dahlia found herself suddenly undressed. She was first clothed in a sleek white silk slip, and then a white silk corset was laced on top of that.

Though she had asked for it to be loose, she felt as if the air was being squeezed out of her. Perhaps the trouble was simply that she was unaccustomed to wearing corsets.

"How does that feel? I can tighten it another fist's width."

In the face of the smiling maid, Dahlia felt she could hardly respond. *It feels like my insides are going to come out of my mouth.* When she instead feebly replied that she would prefer that the corset not be tightened any more, since she was not used to wearing one, Tilly guessed at her true meaning and loosened it by two sizes.

Thank goodness.

After the undergarments, it was at last time for Dahlia to put on her gown. The dress that Tilly had picked out for her was a rich wine red, a trifle lighter in hue than the dance shoes she had received earlier, with a flowy lace capelet in the same color that covered her

shoulders and the base of her neck. It was a very elegant design, and while modest, it did not look old-fashioned.

Dahlia stood still while the fabric was adjusted in the back. She was relieved to recall that it had been made bigger than her size, meaning there was ample fabric to take in.

While the final stitches were being put in place, Dahlia took off her corset, put her regular clothes back on, and sat down for tea with Tilly. Dahlia assumed the absence of any other guests was for her benefit, to lessen her stress. They were served a light meal and snacks, and they had what proved to be a surprisingly engaging conversation about magical tools.

They spoke about a variety of tools, from a voice amplification device that allowed patrons in the back rows of the royal opera house to hear the singers, to heaters powered by numerous fire crystals for use in large event halls, to dresses with zephyricloth inserts. Dahlia was also fascinated to learn more about the larger magical tools used in the homes of nobles, including, in this case, sprinklers that rained mist on the flower beds in the gardens.

But the most beloved magical tool used in the Diels' estate, apparently, was the heated low table. Not only the members of the Diels family but even the live-in maids had these articles in their personal rooms. As the developer of said tool, Dahlia was thrilled to hear it had been so well received.

Tilly also told Dahlia of the conflict that had arisen when a heated low table was first installed in the bedroom she shared with her husband. Gildo had brought in his paperwork to do at the table despite Tilly's efforts to dissuade him. She'd made him promise that paperwork would be banned from their bedroom on the threat of having the table removed. Only after he'd put his promise in writing and hung it up on the wall had their heated low table become a place for relaxation.

Tilly explained all this in very refined, aristocratic language, but Dahlia struggled to keep herself from spewing out her tea. She hoped she would not remember this story when next she saw Gildo.

After that entertaining tea party, the preparations for the ball began in earnest, though Dahlia's job was mainly to stand still. A

maid and couturier took care of arranging her hair and makeup as well as the finer details, such as her nails and the nape of her neck. She was given a full face of makeup in a restricted palette, and although her hair was free of any accessories, it was styled in a sleek updo.

When she looked in the mirror, she beheld a beautifully made-up face that she had never before seen attached to her own body. It made her a little self-conscious to view such an unfamiliar version of herself.

Next, she was relaced into her corset and dressed in the wine red gown. Dahlia was thankful that the dress felt lighter than it looked. So much lighter, in fact, that she wondered if it had been enchanted with weight-reduction magic.

The Diels' couturier instructed her to turn around once slowly, so Dahlia spun in place. The bottom of the dress flared out widely in a perfect circle. *This is kind of fun.*

It seemed a little plainer in style than the dresses she had seen in her past world in movies depicting aristocratic balls, but it would look very glamorous when the hem fanned out as she danced. *Clothing that is meant to be danced in*—now she understood what her friend Lucia, a couturier, had meant by those words.

Tilly smiled at her tenderly. "Dahlia, you look divine. I'm glad I took my time in choosing that gown."

"Thank you so much—it's beautiful..." Dahlia wished she could have expressed her gratitude more thoughtfully, but her nerves prevented her from coming up with any more eloquent words than those. Just how much had this dress—which was far too good for her—even cost? Dahlia hadn't any idea how she would ever repay Tilly. She would have to ask Ivano later.

"And those gold earrings are simply stunning on you," Tilly said, pointing out Dahlia's little snowflakes.

Volf, who had given her the earrings, still had not returned from his expedition. Yesterday, Dahlia had received a letter from Captain Grato explaining that the wyvern had been successfully slain, but that as a Scarlet Armor, Volf was on guard duty for the duration of the journey home.

Given his responsibilities, it wasn't an unexpected outcome. And there was no knowing how long the journey would take. All that mattered was that Volf and the other Beast Hunters were safe. Nothing could induce her to admit that she was disappointed that he wasn't here today.

When she gazed at her reflection in the large mirror, the makeup and gown made her so beautiful that she almost looked like a different person. As was said in her previous life, fine feathers made fine birds. She wished that Volf could have seen her like this—a thought that, surely, was nothing but a self-indulgent desire.

As evening fell, the guests began to arrive. The women were dressed in glamorous floor-length gowns of red, blue, or silver or else in dresses of multiple colors. The men were dressed in dapper tuxedos of black, navy, charcoal, or blue. All the attendees matched their partners' outfits in one way or another.

Dahlia had known as much already from the list of invitees, but there were also two same-sex couples among them. They, too, were dressed very stylishly, with the men wearing matching styles of tuxedos, one in blue and one in black, and the women wearing dresses in different styles but the same scarlet gradient. Lucia would have been over the moon for the chance to witness garments like these.

Dahlia would be greeting the guests in a wide-open area, similar to a corridor, between the entryway and the ballroom. She stood between Gildo and Tilly, with Ivano taking up an attendant's station diagonally behind her.

In the corridor, Dahlia exchanged greetings with the fabulous invitees as they passed before her. Most gave conventional greetings consisting of simple introductions, expressions of gratitude to Gildo for the invitation, and congratulations to Dahlia on her debut. She had memorized every name on the invite list, but she wasn't confident in her ability to match them to faces.

Among the guests filing in, she saw Merchants' Guildmaster Leone with his wife Gabriella, and behind them, Oswald and his third wife, Ermelinda. Dahlia breathed a sigh of relief at the familiar faces,

but their eyes went wide the moment they saw her, no doubt with sympathy. Seeing that, she wondered if it was obvious just how nervous she was. Or perhaps that'd noticed something odd about her appearance. Since there was no mirror around, she was unable to check.

Tilly hasn't mentioned anything, so I'd like to think I look okay. Dahlia broke into a cold sweat but managed to smile and greet them all the same.

"Phew..."

Once the procession ended, Dahlia sighed so faintly that neither Gildo nor Tilly heard it.

Unfortunately, Volf had not made it in time. An unusual custom dictated that, with the exception of her family and any party standing in for her father, only those who had exchanged this initial greeting with the debutante could dance with her at the ball. This rule was in place to protect young women and women without peerages from the opportunism of noblemen who might finagle their way in at the last moment.

Dahlia regretted that she would not be able to dance with Volf, but that was just how things had worked out. She was more worried about the fact that he and the rest of the squad still hadn't returned from their expedition.

"Grato has apparently just received an updated report. I will go inquire about it," Gildo quietly informed her before striding off. It was as if he had read the worry that was foremost in her mind.

Dahlia had heard that Grato and his wife, Dalila, were waiting in a separate room to receive news of the Order of Beast Hunters. That was presumably where Gildo was headed.

Right then, a maid rushed over and whispered something to Tilly. Dahlia barely made out the words *hair* and *bath* and guessed there was some trouble with a guest. Tilly ordered one of the Diels family guards to remain with Dahlia and then hurried down the corridor after the maid. Dahlia hoped everything was all right, but this was out of her hands.

Without necessarily intending to, Dahlia was staring after the pair when someone suddenly approached her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Chairwoman Rossetti."

A delayed guest had arrived to greet her, a young man with bright blond hair. He had a handsome, doll-like face and introduced himself as belonging to an earldom, but although he gave a familiar-sounding surname, she did not recognize his personal name.

"My father has come down with a cold, so I have come in his place. You truly are beautiful... I must thank the gods for the fortune of laying eyes on one such as yourself."

Dahlia managed to keep up with the man's conversation, but he was standing closer to her than the other guests had, and she found his flattery to be a bit excessive. Behind him stood a woman who was likely his partner for the evening. She said nothing and kept her gaze directed slightly downward, likely bored as the man's conversation with Dahlia dragged on.

Dahlia wanted to wrap it up, but she couldn't recall the right thing to say in moments like this.

"Oh, Master Dahlia, you're still here!"

Everyone in the vicinity turned at the booming voice. An elderly man in a black tailcoat was approaching her at a speed surprising for one with a prosthetic leg.

"Lord Bernigi."

"My niece's daughter is here—I'd like to introduce you to her. Ah, and Lord Gildo has already given his consent, of course."

Bernigi stood right by her side and, with a smile on his face, began speaking rapidly about his niece, who had married into a viscountcy in the north. It was as if he hadn't even noticed the young man present.

Bernigi insisted Dahlia come with him, so she simply excused herself to the young man and walked away, being mindful not to step on her dress.

The young man, left behind to watch Dahlia's receding figure, remained in the same spot. Another man approached him from behind, just as Bernigi had, and hailed him by his full name before he had a chance to introduce himself.

The young man whirled around. Standing there with a broad grin

on his face was the marquis hosting this evening's event.

"Your father has a cold? He looked the picture of health when I saw him yesterday in the castle," the marquis said, his smile never faltering.

"W-Well, it came on suddenly..." the young man mumbled vaguely.

"I see. In that case, I hope you will convey to him the following message when you return home: 'Your attendance is not required at next week's budget meeting. Please rest well. If you need additional time to recover, I will be happy to accommodate.'"

His mouth formed the shape of a smile, but those amber eyes were ice-cold.

"Y-Yes, of course," the blond young man managed to respond.

He had come here on his father's own orders. His father had made it unambiguously clear that as his proxy, he was to become acquainted with Chairwoman Rossetti. Fortunately, getting close to women was this young man's specialty. Furthermore, as the scion of an earldom, he frequently interacted with companies dealing in magical tools.

He had accepted his father's charge without much thought and brought his sister with him, thinking he could just make Chairwoman Rossetti's acquaintance tonight and then work to keep up contact with her in the future.

But the red-haired woman he'd met in the corridor had appeared very nervous, even somewhat lonely. He thought it strange, since rumors painted her as an astute businesswoman. And somehow, feeling that he couldn't simply leave her alone in the corridor, he'd found himself drawing in close and talking to her at length.

But it seemed he'd made a hash of things. Should he apologize or try to explain himself? His face turned paler and paler as he searched for the right words.

Gildo walked right past him, offering him not so much as a backward glance.

Dahlia, Bernigi, and the guard headed to a large room on the second floor in which a sofa stood against the wall. Once Gildo and his attendant joined them, Bernigi left to fetch his niece's daughter.

At the present moment, the noble guests were having hors d'oeuvres and refreshments as they chatted about their personal affairs. Dahlia would be making her debut in the ballroom a bit later.

"We have some time yet. Since these are unfamiliar circumstances for you, shall we practice matching our stride lengths?" Gildo suggested.

"Yes, please," Dahlia agreed immediately.

She stood up, faced Gildo, and placed one gloved hand on his shoulder and the other in his hand. Then, in time with the beat that his attendant clapped, they took their first step, checking to make sure they were keeping pace with one another.

Gildo perfectly matched his strides to Dahlia's, and even when she took a turn too fast, he got them back on track skillfully. Although he was supporting her with his arms, there was still some distance between their bodies.

Such were the skills of a marquis. Perhaps it was simply that he'd had been to so many dances, but whether by dint of talent or practice, his dancing could only be described as masterful.

Once they had practiced for five minutes, the duration of a short song, they parted.

"You have quite the stunned look," Gildo said with a dry laugh. Evidently, Dahlia had been wearing her surprise and admiration openly on her face.

"No, I'm just appreciative of how you were making up for my faults... When did you learn to dance, Lord Gildo?"

"I'd say you were doing just fine. And I've been dancing for as long as I can remember, but it wasn't until I was about twelve or thirteen that I became a respectable dancer. I often assisted my wife with her dancing when we were children," Gildo said, revealing just how long he and his wife had known each other.

Childhood sweethearts—how romantic.

"She had run out of partners—she stepped on their toes so often that their shoes lost their luster after a single song," Gildo continued.

“Fortunately, I myself had many pairs of shoes, and so I have been her partner ever since.”

Dahlia wished he wouldn’t joke with such a serious face; she couldn’t tell if she was supposed to laugh or not. And of course, as they were talking, who should enter the room but the woman herself. Gildo smiled at his wife with just his eyes, while Dahlia had to fight to keep her face composed.

“Lord Bernigi will be here shortly. Dahlia, there is no need to be tense. Think of today as a no-pressure practice.”

Thoughtful though Tilly’s remark was, Dahlia found it hard to accept fully. “I-I will try...”

She knew Tilly was right, but still she was powerless to calm her nerves. The opulent hall and its furnishings were unlike anything she’d ever seen before, the magical chandelier was dazzlingly bright, everyone’s outfits were resplendent, and the breathtaking nobles overflowed with confidence and grace. As a woman of common birth, she would stand out like a sore thumb in such surroundings. *If only Volf were here,* she began to think, then immediately felt ashamed of her own weak will.

Dahlia was discreetly taking several deep breaths when the door to the room opened. In came Bernigi and an adorable girl in a light blue dress. She looked to be about fourteen or fifteen and had striking features: lustrous, light brown hair, eyes the color of burnt sienna, and smooth, porcelain white skin.

“Oh, I have been so looking forward to seeing you!” the girl said, her face blossoming into a heartwarming smile.

Dahlia stepped out of the way, thinking that the girl was probably acquainted with Gildo, the host of the evening, and wanted to say hello to him. But the girl made her way slowly past Gildo and stood before Dahlia. Then, her smile deepening, she took Dahlia’s hands in her own.

“Madam Rossetti! Thank you so much for giving me the joy of walking on my own again!” the girl said with a voice full of emotion.

Unable to form a response right away, Dahlia blurted out, “What?”

As far as Dahlia knew, this was her first time meeting the girl. Try

as she might, she could recall nothing about her.

As Dahlia's eyes widened with confusion, the girl let go of her hands and lifted the hem of her skirt to her knees. "This is my magical prosthetic leg, courtesy of Lord Bernigi! Miss Lucia from the Magical Garment Factory made it look pretty for me!"

The girl had exposed a sky blue prosthetic leg. Under the knee, the leg was decorated with delicate white lace and a shiny blue satin ribbon. Around the ankle was a white rose just beginning to bloom, which sent forth its fragrance.

When Dahlia saw that beautifully adorned prosthetic leg, unconcealed by the girl's medium-length dress, she imagined her friend hard at work, her face the picture of concentration.

"It's lovely..."

"Yes, Miss Lucia did a wonderful job! Oh, please forgive me! I haven't even given you my name. I am Julicia Goodwin, second daughter of the Viscount Goodwin in the north," the girl introduced herself, a blush rising to her cheeks. "Magical prosthetic legs are marvelous things! I want to extend my gratitude to everyone involved in making them."

"Thank you very much for your kind words. Everyone involved will be happy to hear that."

"Last spring, you see, I injured my leg, and it became horribly infected... The priest was out of town, attending to a patient in a remote area, and potions weren't good enough, so I came to the capital, but there was heavy rain on the road, and it took us seven days to make it to the temple. By the time I arrived, it was too late for treatment."

"I am very sorry to hear that..."

In the capital, the abundance of temples ensured there were always priests available, but such was not the case for more far-flung regions of the kingdom. Without the healing magic of priests or mages, treating severe wounds was a challenge, all the more so if they became infected.

"And so I had a prosthetic leg made that looked like the leg I lost, but I couldn't walk on it. I couldn't return home and face everyone's pity, but neither did I have the courage to go to school while unable

to walk... I went to my family's estate in the capital and did nothing but stay in my room, feeling sorry for myself. Then one day, Lord Bernigi came and broke down my door."

"Huh?"

Hold on, couldn't he have taken a more tactful approach with a girl in such a slump? Dahlia glanced over at Bernigi, who quickly averted his red-brown eyes and pinned the blame on the door itself.

"I had no other option. The door was stuck," he explained.

Please! That is such an obvious lie.

"I tried to cling to my bed, but Lord Bernigi simply wrapped me up in my sheets and blanket, then put me under his arm and carried me right out."

Julicia was smiling, but it sounded less like he'd carried her out and more like he had kidnapped her. No matter how Dahlia tried to imagine the scene, she could only picture something on the order of a criminal act. Had he not thought of the concern that would cause to anyone who witnessed it?

"Um, weren't the others present in the estate worried about you?"

"Well, everyone cleared a path once I said, 'Out of the way—I'm going to make her walk again!'"

"I suppose that must have been persuasive..." Dahlia said before she could stop herself.

Julicia burst out laughing. "Yes, indeed. If it had been anyone besides Lord Bernigi, I think the servants would have stopped him. I insisted there was no point in going to the temple, but Lord Bernigi instead brought me to his own estate, where he told me about magical prosthetic arms and legs."

"She asked me how they could move like I told her they can when they resemble the prosthetics that already existed, and I had trouble explaining how they work..."

"When I still had difficulty understanding, Lord Bernigi let me watch him and a few guards spar. They fought so fiercely they nearly broke their swords."

Wait a second! Dahlia could understand why Julicia would want to learn more, but what she'd described didn't sound like it would have

helped to demonstrate the workings of the prostheses at all. Why had they needed to show a young girl such a fierce fight, anyway? What if they had scared her?

"Everyone fought so brilliantly—I was so impressed! I was amazed to see how easily someone could move with magical prostheses!"

"I-Is that so...?" At the sight of Julicia's sparkling eyes, Dahlia realized just how much she took after Bernigi, even considering she was his niece's daughter.

But a magical prosthetic did not guarantee that one would be able to move like Bernigi or those guards. There were a multitude of other factors, from one's natural reflexes to stamina, magic, compatibility with the prostheses itself, and time spent on rehabilitation. Still, Dahlia found it difficult to lay out those facts when Julicia was staring at her with such bright eyes.

"After that, Lord Bernigi had a magical prosthetic leg made for me and helped me with my training."

"Training?"

"Yes. I know Lord Bernigi was able to walk right away, but I am not very athletic, so on the first day, I couldn't even take a single step... Lord Bernigi laid several blankets on top of a rug for me so I could practice falling down to start with."

"Julicia here is quite the trooper. It was hard to convince her to drink a potion even when she was covered in bruises."

"Lord Bernigi, I asked you not to tell anyone that!" Julicia said, red-faced, as she tugged on his sleeve.

The elderly man apologized, holding the girl in a grandfatherly gaze.

"Anyway, after a few days of practicing, I can now walk a bit without a cane, but I still can't dance. When I heard that this occasion was for the inventor of the magic prostheses, I knew I had to come and give you my thanks."

Julicia took a step back, stood tall and without support, then lifted the hem of her light blue dress.

"Madam Dahlia Rossetti, magical toolmaker and advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters, I thank you from the bottom of my heart."

She let go of her dress and clasped her hands in front of her chest before she continued.

"I... It has always been recommended to me that I study civil service in college, but I have decided to study magical toolmaking, no matter how many times I must take the exam. I am going to study hard so that I can become established as a toolmaker and make magic prostheses!" Julicia declared, her brown eyes filled with unwavering resolve.

"...I wish you the best of luck," Dahlia choked out, unable to offer more words of encouragement than those.

"Um, Madam Rossetti... I understand this is a selfish request, but if you wouldn't mind, once I am accepted into college, could I refer to you as my senior in magical toolmaking?"

"Of course. And please, call me Dahlia."

"Thank you so much! Then please call me Julicia—no title necessary, Miss Dahlia!"

"As you wish, Julicia."

Julicia responded with a dazzling smile. Suddenly, she nearly overbalanced, but she was able to regain her footing. Upon seeing that, Bernigi looked pointedly at the maid, then bent down to bring his face level with Julicia's.

"Julicia, Master Dahlia must prepare for her debut now. Go have tea and cake in the other room, why don't you."

"Okay! Please come back to get me before Miss Dahlia's dance!"

Julicia bade them farewell with a smile and then departed with the maid. Dahlia watched the girl's unsteady gait until the door closed.

"Master Dahlia," Bernigi said, adopting a formal tone.

Dahlia turned to face him, the hem of her dress swishing as she did. "Yes?"

"Volf made a request of me. He asked, in the event that he could not be here for your debut, that I encourage you if you were feeling nervous."

"I see... I feel all right."

Dahlia appreciated that Volf had thought of her. And hearing about Julicia's aspirations had raised her own spirits. As a magical

toolmaker, she wanted to make sure not to embarrass herself at tonight's ball. No sooner had she made that promise to herself than Bernigi addressed her again.

"Master Dahlia, you have developed all manner of tools, from the zephyricloth to the camp stoves. You should feel able to face this debut with your head held high."

"Thank you for saying so, but I was only able to develop those tools thanks to the cooperation of others..." Dahlia replied, her nerves still unsettled.

Bernigi narrowed his eyes at her. "Even with all the tools you've made, when someone praises you, you always say your achievements are thanks to other people, or that you did not do the work alone..."

"Yes, but only because that's the truth. I couldn't have done any of those things alone."

"In that case, do you think yourself unworthy of a barony?"

"...I aim to make myself worthy someday."

Bernigi had seen right through her. Others had taught her, given her materials, and assisted her. There was nothing she had truly done by herself. Furthermore, she was receiving a barony because she had become an advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters, a post she had been granted for her own protection. If someone had asked her whether she was worthy of a peerage, she could not in good conscience have answered that she was.

"Goodness, you've misconstrued me entirely. Master Dahlia, can't you see how much you have given others?"

"Pardon?" Dahlia stared at Bernigi, unable to imagine what he could be referring to all of a sudden.

His maroon eyes softened. "It was *you* who came up with the idea for a magical prosthetic leg, the one who restored Julicia's ability to walk—and my own. With the older style of prosthetics, which merely resembled legs, we weren't able to walk and smile as we can now."

"Lord Bernigi..."

Bernigi's leg, the same sky blue as Julicia's, was on full display, uncovered by his shoe. The older knight took a few steps until he

was standing right in front of Dahlia. He looked larger than the day she had first met him.

"You may have had help, you may have been given materials, but that changes nothing. It was *you* who brought relief and smiles back to our family. It was *you* who brought the smiles back to the faces of the knights—myself included—who were able to return to the knighthood they had unwillingly retired from. It was *you* who straightened out the conditions for the Order of Beast Hunters, restoring comfort and smiles to those knights as well. So, Master Dahlia— No. Without the royal seal, I can do so only here, but allow me to be the first to address you by your new style."

Bernigi spread his arms wide and looked her straight in the eyes. "Be proud, Baroness Dahlia Rossetti! Beyond any possibility of doubt, you are deserving of a barony!"

With a smile as bright as a sunny day, Bernigi proclaimed those words so loudly that they echoed off the walls.

Dahlia's vision began to blur. "Lord Bernigi..." she croaked. Her nose stung.

Try as she might to hold them back, she could not—her eyes brimmed with tears, and Tilly rushed over to dab them with a handkerchief.

"You mustn't cry, Dahlia. You will cast a shadow over your beautiful face."

"I-I'm sorry..."

"Use this," said Gildo, handing his wife another handkerchief. Tilly held it up to Dahlia's nose. She took it and, no longer capable of giving thought to appearances, buried her nose in it.

Tilly placed a kind hand on her shoulder, then turned to face Bernigi.

"Lord Bernigi, how could you make a lady cry right before her debut?"

"No, I, um— I am terribly sorry!"

The sight of Bernigi so flustered stopped Dahlia's tears from overflowing and made her laugh. If she cried now and left tear tracks on her face, that would only cause trouble for others. She concentrated on steadying her breathing.

Bernigi let out a deep sigh. “If Volf were here, he would have said something to ease your nerves and make you laugh... Oh, what a boor I am.”

At those words, Volf’s smiling face rose clearly to Dahlia’s mind. Nothing gave her greater joy than knowing that her own magical tools had made people smile again.

Dahlia turned to Bernigi, who was slumped over dejectedly. She raised her voice and said, “Not at all, Lord Bernigi. Thank you very much for what you said.”

Julicia’s smile, the retired knights’ smiles, the Beast Hunters’ smiles, and Volf’s smile. On this day, she would hold all those smiles close to her heart and be proud of herself and her accomplishments.

She would hold herself with pride as she faced her debut. As the Beast Hunters’ advisor and magical toolmaker, and as Volf’s friend.

A maid retouched Dahlia’s makeup before she was to make her debut. With her face powdered and lipstick reapplied, she looked as good as new.

“The time has come.”

Gildo touched his white cuff links to confirm they were in place, then stood before Dahlia. Tilly stood at his side, and both their faces transformed, taking on the composed expressions of nobles.

“The Diels family is proud to host your debut this evening, Madam Dahlia Rossetti, magical toolmaker and advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters. We hold this humble celebration in anticipation of your acquiring a barony.”

“The Diels family prays for your continued success, Madam Dahlia Rossetti.”

In response to their standard yet weighty statements, Dahlia pushed through her unease to give her formal reply.

“I sincerely thank you and your family for hosting my debut and for providing me with this gown. Although I am yet to receive a peerage, I will devote all my efforts to the Kingdom of Ordine. I look forward to your continued guidance.”

Though Ivano had scripted her response, she sincerely did feel that both Gildo and Tilly had taken care of her. She vowed to thank

them again on another, less formal occasion.

Once they had all made their statements, Dahlia followed Gildo and Tilly out of the room. They proceeded down the hallway to the second floor, where they would descend into the great hall by the staircase. En route, she began to hear the din of the crowd below and the lilting melody played by the band.

At the top of the staircase, Tilly stepped away from Gildo's side and Dahlia took her place. From this point, Gildo would escort her down the staircase. But for some reason, Gildo halted and held Dahlia in his amber gaze. She tensed up like a frog transfixed by a snake's glare.

Then the corners of Gildo's mouth curved upward. "Normally, this would be the moment when I would flatter you by saying something such as 'You are the most beautiful flower of the evening,' but that can be dispensed with. You, advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters, shine as bright as monster thread."

"L-Lord Gildo?" She wished he wouldn't throw her a curveball like that in the midst of typical aristocratic flattery. It was bad for her heart, and she had no idea how to respond.

"Your hand, please, Chairwoman Dahlia Rossetti."

"Y-Yes, of course, Lord Gildo." At last, Dahlia placed her long-gloved right hand into Gildo's white-gloved left hand.

As they made their way toward the staircase side by side, Gildo kept his face directed at her and said, "With this remark, I am merely imitating what Lord Bernigi has already said, but I, too, am one of those whom you have made smile. I know I am rather late in doing so, but I must thank you. It is because of you that I can once again enjoy a drink with an old friend...although the amount we drink has perhaps become a problem."

"Lord Gildo..."

"Hold your chest high. If Baron Carlo Rossetti were still alive, I am sure he would be very proud of you."

Dahlia's breath caught in her throat as the unexpected mention of her father's name brought his smiling face to her mind in sharp relief. Tears threatened to well up and blur her vision once more, but she held them back as she swallowed the doubting words that had

almost spilled from her mouth.

She faced forward with a smile on her face. “Thank you. If my father were here, I am certain he would be overindulging in celebratory wine.”

Gildo froze for a beat but ultimately failed to suppress a chuckle. Dahlia felt some weight lift from her shoulders.

“Now then, let us go,” he said.

With the marquis leading the way, the two of them descended the staircase slowly, step by step, into the great hall.

The people below turned their gazes up at her and Gildo, and a hush fell over the crowd. The light of the magical chandelier that depended from the high ceiling was painfully bright. The walls were painted with vibrant murals that depicted the founding of the kingdom, but she did not have the luxury of pausing to appreciate them.

There were some familiar faces in the crowd; many curious gazes, too, were glued to her. She knew her nerves would wreak havoc on her stomach later. Nevertheless, she straightened her posture and walked with her head held high.

“Ah...”

The moment she noticed him, she let out a small sound.

She didn’t know when he had arrived, but Volf was here. He was standing inconspicuously by the wall, not far from the foot of the stairs, in an area with no other guests around. His fairy glasses helped him blend in with the crowd, but Dahlia knew it was him right away.

His black hair was damp, sweat glistened on his forehead and at his temples, and he had dark circles under his eyes. He really must have hurried to get here. Though he was visibly fatigued, Dahlia was relieved to see he had returned safely from the expedition.

Dahlia was disappointed that Volf, having arrived after the initial greetings, wouldn’t be able to dance with her tonight. Nonetheless, she was so pleased to see him back safe and sound that a smile rose unbidden to her lips. Volf gave her a wordless smile of his own when he saw her, and she knew he was offering her his sincere congratulations.

Once they made it to the bottom of the stairs, Gildo raised his right hand. The conductor nodded, and the musicians smoothly transitioned to the prelude of the first song. As the melody played, Gildo began leading her toward the dance floor—until he suddenly stopped in his tracks and slid his hand out of Dahlia's.

"My apologies. I seem to have stepped on my shoelace and broken it," Gildo announced loudly.

Dahlia looked at his feet, but not only were the laces of his glossy black leather shoes intact, they hadn't even come undone. Still, he stooped down and, using his left hand to cover his shoe, snapped his lace in half with his right.

"Huh?" Dahlia said, unable to comprehend Gildo's sudden action.

As she stood there, transfixed, Gildo rose, shoelace in hand, and let his amber gaze play over the crowd.

"Now that the song has begun, it would be inauspicious to end it prematurely. You there—dance in my place for this piece."

Gildo was looking at Volf, who froze in surprise. "Me?"

But without even waiting to hear his response, Gildo wordlessly beckoned him to hurry over. When Volf still failed to respond, Gildo took his red pocket square and pressed it against Volf's chest.

Finally, he looked squarely at Volf and said, "I, Gildovan Diels, ask that you take my place for this first song. I will change my shoes in the meantime."

As the entire crowd looked on, Volf at last assented in an overly stiff tone. "I-It would be my honor!"

The guests began murmuring among themselves, speculating whether this man with the barely combed hair and nervous, sweaty face was one of Gildo's subordinates or a member of the Diels family. In any case, Gildo, the host of the ball, had designated him to take his own place. And seeing as how a broken shoelace was an unforeseeable event, no one voiced any objections.

"Chairwoman Rossetti, will you allow me to be your dance partner?"

"Y-Yes, I would like that very much."

Dahlia took the hand Volf offered, and the two of them proceeded together to the center of the floor. Since the song had already

started, they had to rush a bit, but the conductor was able to compensate and allowed them to start their dance in time.

To the crowd, it must have appeared as though a young man of Gildo's acquaintance had happened to be in his line of sight and, though obviously nervous, had accepted the marquis's sudden request. Everyone was watching Dahlia and Volf with fond gazes.

Dahlia *was*, however, a bit embarrassed to see the wide grins on the faces of those who knew about Volf's glasses—Leone and Gabriella, Ivano, Oswald and Ermelinda, and Forto, the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild.

Besides Dahlia and Volf—the guest of honor and the one acting as the host's representative—there was only one other pair on the dance floor for the first song: the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, Marquis Grato Bartolone—the highest ranked of any of the nobles present and a close friend of Gildo's—and his wife, Dalila. Grato silently gave Dahlia and Volf a smile and nod.

Now that she was in the middle of the dance floor, Dahlia's knees began to tremble, and she realized anew how nervous she was. She and Volf hadn't practiced dancing or keeping pace with each other. What if she stepped on his feet?

With her left hand on Volf's shoulder and her right hand in his palm, she whispered, "I'm sorry, I'm wearing stilettos, so it'll probably hurt if I step on you."

"Be my guest. I am sure you are as light as a feather, Miss Rossetti," Volf replied—a dubious claim.

Though now that she thought about it, he had also told her the other day that she could step on his feet as many times as she liked. As she had then, she felt the urge to ask if he *wanted* her to step on his feet, but his tone was sincere as ever, and his green eyes—the same color as her father's—twinkled with a smile.

They were surrounded by nobles in an astoundingly grand, unfamiliar place. Her heart was beating so fast she could feel it, and she had no confidence in her dancing skills. After this song, she supposed she would be dancing the next one with Gildo. But what about the others after him? Would she be able to dance well and engage in the polite conversation that would follow?

Worries of that sort occupied her mind, but strangely enough, held in Volf's arms, she felt she could get through it all.

The two of them stepped in time to the music. Dahlia had gotten off to a slow start due to her nerves, and she was hunched over a bit, but Volf held her firm without difficulty. As they turned, the bottom of Dahlia's dark red dress bloomed like the petals of a flower, the tails of Volf's black tailcoat fluttered like a bird, and the chains of her gold earrings tinkled.

Though she had found it easier to dance with her instructor and to practice matching her stride length with Gildo's, dancing with Volf like this, right now, felt the most natural—and the most fun.

"I'm glad I get to share my first dance with you, Volf," Dahlia murmured, the words coming out before she was even aware of forming them.

Volf's green eyes half closed as he smiled. "I'm glad my first dance is with you too, Dahlia."

"What?"

"I've never danced at a ball before, so this is my first dance too."

He spoke quietly, barely moving his lips, so that no one else could pick up on what he'd said, but she heard his words clear as a bell. On his face was a radiant smile, unobscured by his fairy glasses.

They were staring into each other's eyes, much closer than when they spoke under ordinary circumstances. Looking back, it occurred to Dahlia that she'd never seen Volf's face this close up since the day they met, and she couldn't help but think, even with his fairy glasses on, how handsome he truly was—though she could just imagine the embarrassed face he'd make if she were to share that thought out loud.

In the middle of a turn, Volf whispered close to her ear, "I know I'm late, but...I'm home, Dahlia."

Dahlia's heart jumped, and in her sudden moment of fluster, she teetered on her high heels and nearly stumbled over. But before she did, the strong hand on her back immediately propped her upright, and they continued dancing as if nothing had happened.





The first song is almost over...

Once they completed their final turn, Dahlia looked up at Volf and beamed. Making sure to move her mouth as little as possible and whispering so that no one else would notice or hear, Dahlia gave her heartfelt reply: "Welcome home, Volf."

Volf grinned at her from ear to ear, and though his eyes were green, somehow, they appeared golden.



"Lord Scalfarotto, you may rest here for a while. There are servants outside the door, so please don't hesitate to ask for anything you need."

"Thank you very much for your generous hospitality, Lady Diels."

Gildo's wife, Tilnara, had shown Volf to a guest room after his dance with Dahlia. What Volf had really wanted was to stay and watch over Dahlia, but after Gildo took his place for the second dance, his stomach had growled loudly, a consequence of riding a sleipnir all the way to the capital without rest. Worse, it had happened just as he'd been about to greet Tilnara. Mortified, he'd attempted to apologize, but Tilnara had spoken before he could.

"Lord Scalfarotto, how wonderful that you made it just in the nick of time. Dahlia looked overjoyed to see you," she'd said, as happily as if she were talking about her own daughter. Volf had found himself unable to articulate an immediate response.

Tilnara had gone on to suggest that Volf retire somewhere that he could have a meal and take a rest, then guided him to this guest room.

"I will call for you when the festivities come to a close. Would you be so kind as to escort Dahlia home? Normally the responsibility would fall to us, but this is her day. I believe it would be more memorable for her to end the evening in the company of a dear friend."

"I would be happy to. I appreciate your consideration," Volf said with sincere gratitude. It was just what he'd wanted to do. And, though the very thought was rude, Volf couldn't help but wonder

how such a pleasant and friendly woman had come to be married to Gildo. *Maybe they balance each other out?*

Volf remembered something his brother Guido had once told him. It was not Gildo but Tilnara who had earned the Diels family sobriquet, "Meticulously Prepared." With consummate skill, the marchioness managed everything from household affairs to socialization with other families.

Tilnara left to return to the great hall, and in her place arrived several butlers, wheeling in silver carts to prepare his meal. Discerning that no maids were present, Volf internally sighed in relief.

There were chilled sparkling water and fruit liquor, dry white wine, colorful sandwiches, a thick steak, an aromatic soup, and both fruit and vegetable salads. After setting the food and drink on the table, the butlers told him to make himself comfortable, then left the room.

Cushions and a blanket had been laid out on the sofa, inviting him to lie down after his meal. This hospitality left nothing to be desired. He was immensely appreciative of and impressed by how quickly everything had been prepared for him.

Volf was starving. He first gratefully quenched his thirst with the sparkling water, then dug into a sandwich, but he didn't taste a thing; he was still thinking of Dahlia in the great hall. By now, she had probably finished dancing with Gildo and moved on to Captain Grato.

Volf was confident that Dahlia would have no trouble with the dancing and polite conversation. There were bound to be many men who wanted the chance to talk or dance with her, but he told himself there was nothing to worry about. She had people at her side looking out for her, like Captain Grato and Tilnara.

In any case, Randolph's sleipnir had done a spectacular job getting Volf from the expedition site to the castle. During the journey, Volf had tried to stop at a watering hole to let the sleipnir drink, but fueled by the medicinal crackers, it had actually sped up as if telling him it wasn't thirsty. Volf suspected that Randolph had told it to make haste. He made a mental note to send his friend and

the sleipnir a generous gift of sweet fruits in the coming days.

Now that he thought of it, Dahlia had also been involved in the creation of the medicinal crackers. Once again, her efforts had redounded to his benefit.

Realizing how quickly his thoughts had returned to Dahlia, Volf laughed at himself. But it was thanks to the sleipnir and those crackers that he had made it in time for her debut. Volf had slipped into the great hall and looked up at the staircase just in time to see Dahlia and Gildo make their descent.

Volf had been captivated by her beauty. Of course, he had always thought Dahlia was pretty, but tonight was different. Tonight, she was a breathtakingly beautiful gentlewoman. Her dress's dark red color stood in stunning contrast to her fair skin, and the elegant design suited her well.

Having missed the initial greetings, Volf had been well aware that aristocratic custom forbade him to dance with her. He had been sorely disappointed, but he'd consoled himself that he could still watch over her first dance with Gildo and celebrate her debut.

But then Gildo had inexplicably come to an abrupt halt. Holding up his shoelace, he'd ordered Volf to serve as Dahlia's first partner.

A noblewoman's first dance was a moment of great consequence. It was normally something she shared with her fiancé or a family member, parent, guardian, or guarantor. In this case, Volf had danced in Gildo's place as a stopgap solution to a stroke of bad luck, and Gildo himself would be dancing with Dahlia for the second song, which should prevent anyone from making coarse innuendos about the situation.

But for the life of him, Volf couldn't fathom why Gildo had asked *him* to take his place. The two of them hardly interacted. Their families belonged to the same faction, but that was all they had in common. He wondered if maybe Dahlia had been so nervous that Gildo had decided to let her dance the first song with a friend, as practice. Then he thought better of it. Dahlia hadn't seemed nervous at all; rather, she'd looked dignified. She had even been smiling, so she must have been comfortable enough.

"Maybe it was because of *me*...?"

Volf couldn’t confidently say what face he had been making at the time. Could it be that he had looked so intensely jealous that Gildo had taken pity on him? As the thought struck him, he froze with his fork stabbed into his steak.

If Gildo had arranged for Volf to dance with Dahlia out of concern for him, then he had to find some way to thank him. Whatever gift he came up with had to be just as valuable as Dahlia’s first dance. Volf didn’t think anything could possibly be enough, even if he wiped out his entire savings to buy it.

“I’ll ask Guido...”

It was shameful the way he always ran to his brother for help, but that was the only thing he could think of to do.

All that considered, Volf was genuinely happy that he and Dahlia had been able to share their first dances. He was a little bothered by the knowledge that Gildo had probably been the one to pick that gown for her, but upon reflection, he realized it had more likely been Tilnara.

When he and Dahlia had held hands to dance, he could feel her warmth even through her gloves. Her high heels had brought her face in close proximity to his. From her dainty ears had hung the gold earrings he had given her, glittering brightly. He’d felt those suited her even better than the dress.

And even though Dahlia claimed to be a bad dancer, being her partner had been unexpectedly easy. As they stepped and turned in time to the music, everyone else in the ballroom had faded into the background.

When she’d smiled at him, her face so close to his, he’d smiled back—he’d been having so much fun, he wished they could dance the next song together too. But he’d known he was probably alone in that wish.

Once the song was over, Gildo had returned, and Volf, though reluctant to relinquish his hold on Dahlia’s hand, had bowed and entrusted her to the marquis.

As he relived the scene in vivid detail, he noticed the steam wafting from the food was beginning to fade. He resumed his meal.

After the ball, he would be escorting Dahlia home; he would have

a chance to talk to her again on the carriage ride from the Diels' estate back to the Green Tower.

Though he hadn't noticed while dancing, riding a sleipnir all through the night had left him so drained that his body felt heavy. It was best that he rest now so that Dahlia wouldn't notice how tired he was. This was Dahlia's special day, so he wanted to bring her home with a smile.

Volf finished the rest of his food quickly, lay down on the sofa, and closed his eyes. Images of a woman in a wine-colored dress floated behind his eyelids.



Once the ball came to a close, Gildo, accompanied by Tilly and Dahlia, went to see off the guests.

Afterward, a Scalfarotto family carriage arrived, and Gildo entrusted Volf with seeing Dahlia home to the Green Tower. Normally, that responsibility would have fallen to the Diels family, as the hosts of the debut, but no one bothered to point that out.

Dahlia changed back into the clothes she had arrived in, politely thanked Gildo and Tilly, and then left happily with Volf and Ivano. Gildo had the impression that she looked taller and more like a baroness than she had this morning, and he found he was genuinely looking forward to the day she received her barony.

"Talk about a great night!" Grato said merrily as he sat down next to Gildo on the sofa in the drawing room.

The captain and his wife, Dalila, had stayed behind after the rest of the guests had departed. Wanting some time to chat privately, the two couples had retired to the drawing room. Gildo sent the butlers and guards to the adjoining room so that he could have a laid-back after-party with his friend and cousin. Tilly had left to touch up her makeup, but she would be back shortly.

"It was a splendid ball, Lord Gildo."

Dalila—Gildo's cousin and Grato's wife—smiled at him. Her loosely curled red hair was tied up, and her turquoise eyes were as bright as they had been when she was a child. It had been a long time since

last she'd visited his estate.

"You outdid yourself, Gildo!"

Grato's voice was loud, and Gildo purposely ignored him. But he couldn't say he didn't understand what he meant. Though this had been a modest affair, the guests had been selected with great care.

There were many people keen to make the acquaintance of the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, the up-and-coming magical toolmaker who had gained access to the castle soon after starting her business and become advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters in almost no time after that.

Therefore, Gildo had only invited those who would be beneficial for the future of her business and those who he felt would uphold decorum. Unfortunately, one family had failed to conduct themselves properly, but he would remind them of their manners the next time they met.

Regardless, Gildo couldn't suppress a smile as he thought back on the guests' reactions. When the nobles who knew Dahlia had seen her standing between himself and his wife, their expressions had gone from surprise to sympathy. They had noticed something that even Dahlia herself hadn't, but by that point, it was already too late.

Even Grato had mouthed Gildo's name in anger when they first exchanged formal greetings later that evening. Gildo had hardly been able to contain his smirk.

Dahlia was set to receive a barony, but she was still a commoner. And as such, even for her debut, her dress had to be simpler and more matte than those designed for nobles. However, it was made with the finest monster thread, making it a garment one could wear with pride even standing next to high-ranking nobles.

And Dahlia had stood between Gildo and Tilly dressed in such a gown. Typically, Gildo would have been at the front of the procession with his wife at his side, followed by Dahlia's noble guarantor, Guido—or his representative, Volf—then Dahlia, and finally Ivano, her vice-chairman.

Instead, Dahlia had stood between the head of the Diels family and his wife. Essentially, they were letting it be known that they considered Dahlia to be like a daughter to them, or someone

similarly dear to their hearts.

Ivano, for his part, had initially expressed surprise, but his face had quickly returned to its usual smile. The fact that he hadn't been rattled or even come to Gildo to inquire about it afterward demonstrated that this development fit into the vice-chairman's calculations.

"You're a good man, Gildo..."

Grato grinned as he thrust a wine glass at him. Gildo scowled. Being drunk did not give Grato a pass to spring such a comment on him.

Now was the time for them to make use of all their preparations. Did Grato even understand that? Gildo wanted to grab him by the shoulders and demand whether he was really a marquis. Once Tilly returned, he would have to confiscate Grato's wine glass and lecture him. With that thought, Gildo wordlessly accepted the glass. *This wine is quite good.*

After Volf, Dahlia had danced with Gildo, then Grato, and lastly, Bernigi. That first dance had worked wonders on her; she'd been all smiles and confidence, and she'd danced rather well, never shrinking from the crowd.

The shoelace mishap during the first song would likely be forgotten, considering the lineup of partners that had followed.

Dahlia had danced the second song with Gildo himself—the marquis hosting the ball, the royal head treasurer, and guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. Next, she had danced with Grato, another marquis and the captain of the Royal Order of Beast Hunters. To Dahlia, in her capacity as advisor to the Beast Hunters, he was also, in a manner of speaking, her superior. The events of the debut up to that point were within the guests' expectations.

However, Dahlia had proceeded to dance the fourth song with Bernigi D'Orazi, a former marquis belonging to a different faction than Gildo and Grato. It had been a while since Bernigi had attended a ball, and he had come with his sky blue prosthetic leg on display for all to see rather than covered by a long boot. Not a few of the guests watched his cheerful chatter and graceful dancing with surprise.

People would view Bernigi's presence at the ball as evidence of the influence Gildo and the Diels family held over a marquisate of a different faction.

As for Bernigi, who was thought to have retired, rumors would likely begin to spread that he was cunningly staging his comeback; not only had he made his return to the Order of Beast Hunters, he was now affiliated with the Scalfarottos' Weapons Development Team and had a connection to a family in a rival faction.

Either way, the rumors were sure to be beneficial to the Diels and D'Orazi families alike, but the most amusing thing was that this situation hadn't come about from playing with power balances; rather, it was the work of a single magical toolmaker.

Once the fourth song was over, Tilly had come to fetch Dahlia and accompany her to the room where conversation would be held. Dahlia, tired from dancing, had been offered a chair and fruit-infused water. Tilly had sat on her left and Dalila on her right.

They'd immediately begun to discuss magical tools, such as the foaming soap dispensers and heated low tables, and eventually moved on to green juice, which, in turn, had sparked a conversation about health and beauty. Dahlia had appeared uninterested in discussing beauty, but she'd had much to say about health—perhaps due to her father's early death.

According to the maid who had accompanied Gildo's wife, Dahlia had advised the women to reduce their salt and fat intake and had shared a recipe for a soup that was good for the skin and joints. At first, the noblewomen had listened in on what they found to be the eccentric commentary of a commoner who didn't have the access to the healing magic that they did, but when the topic had turned to flawless skin, shiny hair, and joint pain, their had eyes lit up, and thereafter, and they were all ears. One noblewoman had even ordered an attendant to fetch her pen and paper so she could take notes. A noblewoman's zeal for the pursuit of beauty and health was not to be underestimated.

In the end, a gaggle of married women had crowded so tightly around Dahlia that no one else had been able to give her more than a brief hello. Besides the young man during the initial greetings, no

other man had attempted to solicit Dahlia, contrary to Gildo's concerns. But on reflection, that was unsurprising. No nobleman would dream of making enemies of a group of married noblewomen.

And so, in the end, the event had exceeded—no, had *far* exceeded his expectations. Dahlia the magical toolmaker was ever unpredictable.

The most immediate problem was the clear fact that those married women were going to beg him to invite Dahlia to the next banquet or ball he held. He planned to tell them she was too busy managing her business and preparing to receive her barony, but he had a strong feeling that that wouldn't be enough to stop them from hounding him.

In any case, this debut had also functioned as a way of alerting other nobles that they should approach the Rossetti Trading Company only indirectly, through the Diels or Scalfarotto families. It meant more work for him, but he did not regret that.

In this way, he would repay his debt to her, at least in some small part. It meant more work for Tilly as well, but he had full confidence that his wife would happily use the experience as conversation material.

As his mind was wandering, he heard Grato address him again.

"Anyway, I couldn't believe you conceded the first dance. I was gobsmacked!"

"...My shoelace broke. These things happen," Gildo said, annoyed that his friend and source of said debt could make such a remark while wearing such a broad smile.

Candidly, it had caught him by surprise as well. The original plan had been for him to dance first and Volf second. It had been palpably obvious how much Dahlia had been looking forward to dancing with Volf, so Gildo had been disappointed to hear that the young man would not be returning from his expedition in time.

Nevertheless, Volf couldn't shirk his duty as a knight of the Royal Order of Beast Hunters. To make up for his absence, Gildo and his wife had decided to make sure everyone gave Dahlia extra care and attention.

But the moment she noticed Volf at the foot of the staircase,

Dahlia's face had blossomed like a flower. Gildo had been stunned by the radiance of her smile, and when he looked at Volf, he'd known at once that he absolutely must ensure that Dahlia could dance with him first.

The eyes that kept a protective watch over Dahlia, even underneath those glasses that changed their color, had blazed with a knight's inner light. And something else had blazed in them as well, something that seemed unlikely ever to fade.

However, Volf had not been present to greet Dahlia before the ball. Even if Gildo had allowed Volf to dance with Dahlia by explaining that he was a Beast Hunter and had been delayed by a mission, some gossipmongers would still have objected that it was uncouth.

Gildo could easily imagine what sorts of rumors would circulate not only about the Scalfarotto family, who had recently enjoyed a rapid ascendancy, but also about the eye-catchingly handsome Volfred Scalfarotto. And there was no telling what fools would come out of the woodwork and use those rumors to damage Dahlia's reputation.

Fortunately, Gildo could use Volf's disguise to his advantage. If he claimed that the young man was his direct subordinate, even those who cared enough to pry would be disinclined to broadcast their findings.

Having made his decision, he waited until he and Dahlia reached the bottom of the stairs, then cast strengthening magic on his fingers and broke his shoelace. His attendant hurried to find him another pair of shoes while the first song played.

In the Kingdom of Ordine, there was a saying that stepping one's shoelaces was a sign of old age. A nobleman who not only stepped on but broke his own shoelace could become the subject of discrediting rumors. But that was a small price to pay in exchange for the gift he had received last summer of being able to share a good drink with a friend again. Besides, the number of attendees was small. Tracing the source of any rumors would be a simple task.

"Gildo, you're as stubborn as ever..."

"You're being a nuisance, Grato."

Grato was slapping Gildo's shoulder. *He's drunk out of his mind.* Grato's slaps were hard and painful, just as they had been when the two were boys. Still, Gildo couldn't be bothered to make him stop. Instead, he met his cousin's eyes.

Dalila had sent one of her own maids, who was skilled at applying makeup, to assist Dahlia. Gildo assumed Tilly had gotten in touch with her to arrange that. Although they had never discussed such a plan, his wife seemed to have read his mind.

All their efforts were to thank the magical toolmaker for what she'd done to restore his friendship with Grato and reunite their two families.

As for Dalila, he knew that if he told her everything, she would smile in understanding, but he couldn't bring himself to say so out loud. On second thought, though, she probably already knew.

In response to Grato, who was draining his glass with a boyish smile on his face, Gildo exhaled a sigh. Perhaps it was even truer than he'd thought that the prosperity of a noble family was the work not of the family head but of his wife.

There was something, however, that he did want to tell his cousin.

"Dalila, thank you for everything today."

Dalila smiled, her turquoise eyes gentle. "You really are a knight, *brother*."

Gildo was left speechless. He very awkwardly cleared his throat.



"Congratulations on a successful expedition, Volf."

"Thanks, Dahlia. I'm really sorry I was late to your debut."

"I'm just glad you made it back okay. Besides, we got to dance together anyway."

With her debut over, Dahlia was now on her way home to the Green Tower in a carriage belonging to the Scalfarotto family. Ivano was with them as well, but he'd said he had overindulged in liquor and felt unwell, so he was sitting up front in the box seat.

That left Dahlia and Volf alone under the magical lantern that

illuminated the interior of the carriage, which somehow felt more confined than usual.

"You danced great, by the way. I guess you didn't need that practice with me after all."

"Only because you were covering for my mistakes, Volf. I mean it—you were really good."

"I have Lady Altea to thank for that. All that practice with her ended up being worth it. Though I haven't heard from her as much lately."

Volf was referring to the Dowager Duchess Gastoni. The more Dahlia learned about noble society, the more often she heard the dowager duchess's name—Altea Gastoni, the beauty of indeterminate age who, even after her husband's passing, retained considerable influence. She and Volf kept company as a way to deter unwanted advances. Volf had known her long before he met Dahlia.

Dahlia couldn't bring herself to ask if Volf planned to receive more dance lessons from Altea, so instead, she changed the subject.

"I heard the squad fought against the wyvern. Did that go okay?"

"Yeah, some of the guys got hurt, but our priest healed them right away. All I had to do was run while Kirk and other bow knights used the Galeforce Bows to take out the wyvern's wing, then Randolph kept the pressure on it until the captain finished it off with the Ash-Hand."

It sounded like the mission had gone off without a hitch. The Beast Hunters were truly a force to be reckoned with. They had the speed to outrun a wyvern, the mettle to stand up against it, and a powerful magical sword to kill it.

"The reason half the squad got delayed was because after we killed the wyvern, we found out that a village was under attack by two red bears. We think the wyvern chased them out of their territory."

"Two?! Did anyone get hurt?"

"Everyone was fine. The bears got to the livestock, but the villagers were okay. I botched things up big time, though. I fell in front of one of the red bears and the other knights had to save me."

"...So you fall down sometimes."

“Don’t worry, I have my comrades looking out for me.”

Dahlia went cold at the mental picture of Volf falling in front of a giant bear. But Volf was smiling cheerfully, so maybe situations like that were routine for the Beast Hunters.

“So, is everyone back at the capital now?”

“No, not yet. I was sent back early to deliver a message. The vice-captain said that since I’m a guarantor of your company, I should be here to congratulate you, even if I couldn’t make it in time for the ball. It was really considerate of him.”

“Vice-Captain Griswald...”

“I’m so glad I didn’t miss your debut.”

“Volf, you really exerted yourself to get here, didn’t you?” Dahlia asked, remembering his damp hair.

Volf shook his head. “No, I didn’t push myself at all. The sleipnir did all the work. After it ate two of those medicinal crackers, it was bursting with energy and endurance.”

“Medicinal crackers... You mean the dried green slime, right?”

A group of green slimes were hopping around inside Dahlia’s head. *Not exactly something that makes me think of a speeding sleipnir.*

“Those things are really effective. We passed four coaching inns in half a day without stopping to rest.”

“That fast...?”

It would take one to two days to travel that same distance by carriage. *To do that in half a day without rest... Just how fast were they going?*

“We ran like the wind...”

Volf had a dreamy look in his eye, but that sleipnir ride could have easily ended with him leaving this world prematurely, just as her father had.

“I’ve been underestimating what sleipnirs are capable of. They can go three to four times faster than a normal horse. The landscape around me turned into a blur, and the sleipnir didn’t slow down even when there were carriages and people in front of us—it just found openings between them and slipped through like a shadow. At one point a raccoon dog crossed our path, but the

sleipnir just leaped right over it... I was nervous at first, but it was actually able to stay in the air for a while. It felt amazing—I even started laughing."

The sleipnir sounded terrifying, but the same could also be said for Volf. Had Dahlia been riding that sleipnir, she knew she would have either burst into tears or fallen off.

"For safety's sake, I slowed it down once we reached the capital, but the sleipnir kept wanting to go faster. I had a hard time keeping it calm."

"It sounds like it was very determined..."

"Yeah. But it must have gotten too hot. It jumped into a pond as soon as we got to the castle. I was worried, but a vet examined it and said it was fine—apparently that's normal behavior for sleipnirs. The vet is going to keep an eye on it, but I'm going to check on it tomorrow anyway."

It sounded like the sleipnir was doing well for now. And it was a relief to hear that pushing itself hadn't taken a toll on its body.

"Then, after I gave my report, I was asked to let Captain Grato know that the entire squad was alive and well, so I took a castle carriage to Lord Gildo's mansion. When I asked a butler to give my message to the captain, he asked me if I wanted to attend your debut. I said I would like to get a glimpse, even from a distance, and then a maid came bolting over..."

Dahlia thought of the maid who had rushed to Tilly to tell her something during the procession of greetings before the ball. That must have been about Volf.

"Apparently, my brother had left me some clothes there just in case I did make it in time. But I was covered in mud and reeked of sweat, so, um, they offered me a bath..." Volf made a face, but before Dahlia could ask what was wrong, he continued. "When I realized the maids were about to drag me to the bath, I started resisting, so butlers came to take their place and then washed, dried, and dressed me..."

"Um... Well, that's normal for nobles, right?"

It depended on the individual, but Dahlia had heard that some nobles had their maids or butlers help them with bathing and

dressing. Since Volf was a guest, maybe that type of treatment was the norm.

"Well, I haven't had someone bathe me since primary school. But I was filthy, and there wasn't much time... And you know, getting scrubbed in the bath really clears your head."

"It does...?"

"It made me wonder if that's how nightdogs at the castle feel when they're getting bathed."

"I wonder."

In the summer, nightdogs were given baths near the Order of Beast Hunters' wing. But Dahlia had a feeling they sat still throughout the process because it felt nice, not because it cleared their heads.

"After that, I got dressed while the butlers used a dryer on my hair, but my clothes kept sticking to my skin with sweat, so it took a while... I slipped into the room right as you were walking down the stairs."

So Dahlia had noticed him just when he entered the room. His timing was very fortunate; he'd made it right before the dancing started.

"You looked really beautiful..."

"Um— Oh, yes! Lord Gildo's wife picked my gown for me. It was made with high-quality monster thread!"

"I see. It looked really nice on you."

Her dress, the fabric of which was woven monster thread dyed dark red, really was beautiful. But hearing Volf compliment her like that left her strangely unsettled.

"Lord Gildo broke his shoelace himself, didn't he?" Volf asked.

"Um, well..." She hesitated to tell him but decided that she wanted Volf to know what Gildo had done for the two of them. "Yes, he did."

"He took the trouble to do that just so I could dance with you... I really should thank him..."

"Me too, for hosting my debut..."

"Yeah, but I have no idea what sort of present to get him."

Indeed, Gildo had no lack of money or possessions. Even when

Volf and Dahlia put their heads together, coming up with something proved to be an impossible challenge.

"I can't think of anything either. Should I ask Ivano for advice?"

"Good thinking. And I'll ask my brother. Actually, he and Ivano seem to be on good terms, so maybe we can ask them both at the same time."

Dahlia had no objections to that. In the meantime, there was something else on her mind that she wanted to ask about. Volf had seemingly vanished from the great hall after their dance.

"Where did you go after we danced?"

"I was treated to a meal in a separate room. I wanted to stay and watch you dance with Lord Gildo, but Lady Tilly heard my stomach growl and insisted I go with her."

Volf explained that he had eaten his fill and then rested on a sofa until the end of the ball. Given that he'd spent all night riding a sleipnir, Dahlia was relieved to hear he had been able to get a bit of shut-eye.

"How was the rest of the ball?" Volf asked with some concern. He must have been thinking of her unstable dancing.

"After you, I danced with Lord Gildo, then Sir Grato, and finally Lord Bernigi. But I stepped on Sir Grato's foot..."

In fact, she had stepped on his foot quite hard, for which she felt tremendously sorry. Grato was an excellent dance partner, but his turns went a little too fast for her to keep up with.

"Oh, uh, I wouldn't worry about it! The captain is tough. He can take it," Volf said in an attempt to make her feel better.

"...Yeah, he was wearing iron plates in his shoes."

Grato had informed her of that with his usual smile when she apologized profusely. Although she was relieved to hear it, the fact that he'd taken such precautions had given her some pause.

"As for Lord Bernigi, his dancing was very, uh, energetic..."

"Energetic...?"

Lord Bernigi had been in high spirits even before the dance, excited at being able to attend a ball for the first time in a long while and for the opportunity to dance with Dahlia. He had expressed his good mood through his vigorous dancing.

He was good at leading, but he had moved entirely too fast. At one point, just as she'd become concerned that she'd be left behind, Bernigi had suddenly lifted her into the air and deftly spun her around, leaving her in a tizzy. She hadn't expected him to get her back on track by making her airborne.

But I suppose he is a former Beast Hunter, after all. Dahlia amended that thought—Bernigi was now officially an apprentice knight, so she should call him an *active* Beast Hunter. And she'd learned firsthand that his strength and reflexes were more than up to the task.

After their dance, loud applause had erupted around them along with praise for their dancing. The only response Dahlia had been able to muster was a dry laugh, but she didn't mention that to Volf.

She tried to gloss over some details as she recounted them to Volf, but based on the solemn nod he gave her, he must have understood what she'd left unsaid.

"After I danced with Lord Bernigi, Lady Tilly brought me to a chair to rest my feet. I spoke to several women, who were all very nice."

"Glad to hear it. What gets discussed during events like that? Dresses and the opera?"

"I don't know much about those, but no, everyone was trying to make me feel comfortable...so we talked about magical tools and food."

By the time Tilly had found Dahlia and led her away to take a break, she had been dead on her feet after her first four dances with Volf, Gildo, Grato and Bernigi. While everyone else continued their festive dancing, Dahlia conversed with other women exhausted from dancing and older women whose knees hurt.

Tilly had kindly brought up the topic of magical tools to make Dahlia feel more at ease. Other women in the vicinity had joined in on their conversation, each one commenting on foaming soap dispensers and other magical tools they used. Dahlia had been very pleased to hear their favorable reception to the soap dispensers and heated low tables.

Incidentally, it was apparently popular for noblewomen to have glass tabletops made for their heated tables. Some of the favored

designs were flowers or fairies painted on transparent or colored glass. Painting on colored glass required not only technique but also an artisan's flair. One particular glassworker had become so popular that there was a two-year wait despite her being a commoner. Dahlia had been astounded to hear that.

The ladies also mentioned that the glass tabletops paired best with white covers, but since white stained easily, it had become common practice to use waterproof cloth of a different color. Even if one were to spill wine on the covers, it wouldn't leave a stain. It was illuminating for Dahlia, the inventor of these tools, to hear about all the ways they were being used.

Next, the conversation turned to concerns about the health ailments of the ladies' family members, from husbands dozing off underneath the heated tables, to husbands and sons turning deaf ears to their warnings against drinking too much, to their daughters' rough skin and their aging parents' aching knees. It was clear that concerns about family afflicted nobles and commoners alike.

While Dahlia had been under the assumption that nobles quickly dealt with these issues with potions or healing magic, that was apparently not the case. Those methods could not be used to treat recurring symptoms or conditions that weren't serious enough to be healed.

Dahlia brought up some commoner home remedies she used, such as soups for stiff joints, green vegetable juice for digestion, and reducing one's salt and oil intake. Her intent was simply to give some advice; she knew everyone's constitution and situations were different, so she urged everyone to visit a doctor or priest for any health concerns.

After she finished summing up the conversations to Volf, his eyes widened.

"So that's what you talked about? I thought for sure you would have a line of noblemen waiting to talk to you..."

"No, nothing like that happened..."

At the end of the day, Volf was a noble too, but he didn't need to try to flatter her. That was something she had never even dreamed of, much less expected to happen in waking life.

There had been only one man whom she could say had approached her, and that had been before the ball. But that hadn't been to talk to her, just to greet her. He had come as his father's representative, so he had likely felt he had to put in the effort to greet her. Thus the number of men who had approached her was effectively zero.

Volf seemed to have picked up on the implication of her monotone reply. He smoothly changed the subject.

"I've got the day off tomorrow, so I'll bring you flowers to celebrate your debut. Is there anything else you want?"

"You don't have to do that, Volf. You already gave me these earrings."

The earrings, with their jingling chains, were still on her ears. She hadn't taken them off even when she changed from the gown back into her own dress. In order to make sure they didn't fall off, she had screwed them on tightly, and now her earlobes were throbbing. She kept that part to herself.

"How about we let ourselves sleep in and have a late lunch?" she suggested. "I could whip something up. Let's see, I have potatoes, carrots, sausages, and...rye bread and goat cheese..." Dahlia trailed off, realizing as she spoke that she probably needed to go shopping.

"Rye bread and goat cheese... That takes me back," Volf said with half-closed eyes. He still remembered the lunch they'd had by the riverbank on the day they first met.

"Okay then, we'll have that with some dried fruits and nuts."

"And I'll bring the red wine and honey. Oh, should I bring some sticks too?"

"Of course not!" Dahlia replied without thinking, and Volf burst into a boyish cackle.

Only three seasons had passed since the day they'd had rye bread with goat cheese, roasted sausages on sticks, and drunk red wine with honey. And yet they had spent so much time together that it felt natural for him to be by her side. But she couldn't take his company for granted. Dahlia knew that all too well.

Her father, who she had thought would always be there from one day to the next with a smile on his face, had passed suddenly.

Her fiancé, who she had thought she would be spending seasons and years with, had left her suddenly.

Right now, she enjoyed Volf's company—but she couldn't assume that this would last forever. That was why she wanted to make the most of their precious moments together.

"Tomorrow, let's eat rye bread with lots of goat cheese and grill on a camp stove."

"I'm already looking forward to it..." Volf said wistfully. Dahlia laughed out loud.



The pale moon cast its light on the road. Ivano was sitting in the coach seat, next to the driver, of a carriage bearing the Scalfarotto family crest. A box carriage was following at a discreet distance behind them, transporting bodyguards of the Scalfarotto family.

Volf's mother hadn't died from illness. Ivano had a general understanding of the true cause of her death—the carriage attack—that he learned from a well-connected noble friend. The carriage full of bodyguards must have been Guido's doing, to protect the carriage carrying his younger brother and Dahlia so late at night.

The two carriages came to a slow stop in front of the Green Tower. Ivano was about to open the door for Dahlia when his ears perked up. The coachman sat up straight and looked at him sharply.

Ivano dropped his voice and said, "My apologies—there is no danger. Could I trouble you to keep the carriage moving for a little while longer?"

"Is something the matter?" the coachman asked quizzically.

Without a word, Ivano opened the small window behind the box seat, which offered a view inside the carriage. The driver took a brief look, then turned back and gave Ivano a small nod. He signaled to the carriage behind them with a wave of his hand, then quietly got the horses moving again.

Ivano gently closed the small window on the laughter coming from inside. He had claimed drunkenness as a reason to sit in the box seat, and it seemed he had made the right choice. The pair

inside the carriage were leaning forward in their seats, smiling and talking, unaware that the carriage had even stopped.

They ought to have been exhausted from a debut and an expedition, and yet Ivano had never seen them so animated and having so much fun. He wanted to prolong their time together as much as he could, though he did feel a bit guilty asking the coachman and the guards tailing them to work overtime to take this detour.

"Allow me to make this up to you all later. If I am informed of everyone's preferences for alcohol and desserts, I will happily have them delivered in a few days."

"No need. It is more than enough to witness young master Volf so happy. I shall take care of properly thanking the guards."

The middle-aged coachman smiled, his eyes crinkling happily. Ivano pretended not to notice as the man looked away and then sniffed and rubbed his nose. Instead, he looked up at the night sky, at the moon beaming down at them.

"Ah, I've just had a wonderful idea."

"What is it?"

Ivano smiled conspiratorially. "Please tell Lord Guido about what we discussed. I believe he will treat you all generously."

The coachman held back for a few seconds, then let out a guffaw. He quickly tried to quiet himself to not draw the attention of the two inside the carriage.

A few days later, it became evident that the coachman had followed Ivano's suggestion. The coachman, the tailing guards, and Ivano himself each received a bottle of red wine, courtesy of the Scalfarotto family.

It was a luscious dark red wine with a golden label, and each recipient was left with the dilemma of what to do with it—*drink it, save it, or sell it?*

The Small Goods Craftsman and the Vice-Chairman's Hesitation

"Hello! Thank you for having us over."

"Hi there. Good to see you again, Dahlia."

Early one windy afternoon, Ivano arrived at the Green Tower with Fermo, a craftsman of small goods. Dahlia led them to the living room on the second floor, where she promptly served them tea.

Ivano unwrapped the cloth bundle he had brought as a thank-you gift. "Chairwoman, this is for you. It's ripe to eat."

"Thank you. Wow, it's huge!"

Dahlia's face lit up as she took the large cantaloupe. Its shell was light green; no doubt the flesh within was a rich orange color and very sweet. Carlo had once told Ivano that cantaloupe was Dahlia's favorite fruit as a child. Recalling that, he'd decided to bring one here as a gift, since they were hard to find in winter, and she seemed pleased to receive it.

Incidentally, Ivano's two daughters loved this fruit as well. He had already asked that another be delivered to his home.

"I'll go cut it now so we can share. Please, go ahead and drink your tea."

"Don't mind if I do," Fermo said. "Oh, Dahlia! What's the cylindrical tool in that blueprint?"

As an artisan himself, Fermo had a keen eye for schematics. Even now that he'd donned the fine coat of a company chairman, he retained the perspective of a craftsman.

"It's a plan for a wand. I'd actually like to ask you some questions later about its structure..."

"I'd be happy to help in any way I can. You don't mind if I take a look at this, then?"

"No, please, by all means."

Ivano kept quiet as he listened in on the exchange between the two artisans. Among other secrets of magical toolmaking, Dahlia had taught Fermo how to apply kraken tape, and which toolmaking materials he could use even with his low magical grade. In turn, Fermo had taught Dahlia the techniques for manually working and shaping metal and monster bones: how to select the right hammer or chisel, how to reduce weight by adjusting the design or by cutting, and, trickiest of all, how to round off edges. Dahlia was dexterous enough, but Fermo was clearly a league above.

It seemed to Ivano that both could probably work faster if each engaged the other's assistance for the most specialized tasks, but perhaps that was just the merchant in him speaking. When it came to discussions between craftspeople, he would hold his peace.

"Be careful, Chairwoman. That's heavy. Would you like me to carry it for you and help you cut it?"

"That's all right; I can handle it."

Cradling the cantaloupe in her arms, Dahlia headed to the kitchen with light steps. Ivano watched as she left, then addressed Fermo, who sat in the chair beside his.

"How are the interiors of your workshop and home coming along?"

"It's slow going. We've just barely gotten started on the shelves for the workshop, and we haven't even decided on curtains for the house..."

After a few bumps in the road, Fermo had successfully established the Gandolfi Company. He'd then obtained a workshop and house in the West District, where the Green Tower, too, was located. However, as the house was still under construction, Fermo wasn't planning to move until after the New Year. He explained that he was so busy with fulfilling orders for the foaming soap dispensers and atomizers that he hadn't even had the time to start preparing.

"You have a lot on your plate. Make sure you take care of yourself too. It would be a lot of trouble for us if you were to collapse."

"You couldn't have phrased that a bit more gently? And I'm fine. This is heaven compared to all the idle time I had in the spring."

At the beginning of last spring, Fermo had indeed been struggling

with inadequate work, hence the gratitude with which he welcomed his new situation. His wife, too, had returned to her trade; he had more apprentices; and in addition to his small crafts, he was now involved in making various parts for magical tools. On top of that, he had established a company of his own, bought a new workshop and home, and was soon to move, all of which had only added to his business—and Ivano was about to add even more.

"Fermo—I mean, Chairman Gandolfi."

"Why're you being so formal? Whenever you address me like that, I know it's bad news," Fermo responded without looking up from the blueprint on the table.

"I want to invite you to join a project for the Scalfarotto Arms Works next year. It will take place at Sir Volf's—that is, the Scalfarotto family's villa."

"Hey, Ivano, there's such a thing as taking a joke too far..." Fermo said coldly.

Worried he might drop his teacup, Ivano set it down on its saucer without taking a sip.

"I'm quite serious. The Gandolfi Company will be fully up and running in the New Year and ready to branch out, isn't that right? With Chairwoman Dahlia's referral, you can join without having to jump through any hoops. It would be the perfect opportunity to make yourself known."

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack, man? What's a commoner like me got to do with a workshop like that, crawling with earls and viscounts and whatnot? I craft small goods, not magical tools or weapons," Fermo replied with distaste.

Ivano flashed him a smile. "I've heard that your wife's handiwork is very popular among noblewomen. In particular, I heard it was she who made the well-regarded glass tabletop for the dowager duchess Lady Altea Gastoni's heated low table. And do I understand correctly that the wait for a colored glass tabletop with painted illustrations is two entire years?"

"Well, what can I say—she's a talented woman. But her health's still a concern, so she tells people it'll take double the time it actually does. In reality, her hands aren't *that* full. She has assistants and

help around the house now too."

"But that doesn't change the fact that she's very much in demand. Aren't you worried someone might be tempted to cut in line?"

Fermo grimaced, and he hesitated before answering. "That shouldn't be a problem. The Merchants' Guild's been helping on that front."

The fact that he couldn't definitively say no meant that he and his wife had already been on the receiving end of unreasonable requests. Although not all nobles were quite so demanding, many were prone to throwing money at this or that business, insisting that they be prioritized over other customers or demanding that the artisan make them a finer product than another family's.

Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of Leone, who was a guarantor of the Gandolfi Company, and his wife, Gabriella, things hadn't come to that. But there was no guarantee their lives would remain uncomplicated.

"Fermo, wouldn't you rather have more influence than your wife does?"

"We may compete with each other when it comes to skill, but not when it comes to power or money."

"I understand completely. But that's not what I mean."

"Then what *do* you mean?"

"I'm just thinking—suppose your wife were to clash with a noble. Wouldn't it be gallant of you to come to her rescue? And if you had that kind of influence, your apprentices would be safer too. Perhaps there wouldn't be any harm in meeting some high-ranking nobles, and perhaps it'd be wise to get some big shot in your corner sooner rather than later. Something like that."

Fermo looked at Ivano's grinning face as if he were something repugnant. In fact, he probably looked at summer mosquitoes more kindly than that.

"Ivano... *Good guys* like you are hard to find. And you've been really outdoing yourself lately..."

Ivano bobbed his head in an exaggerated manner. "Thank you kindly."

His shoulders shaking, Fermo turned his entire body toward Ivano. “You moron, I was being sarcastic! Get a clue— Ah, of course, you knew that...”

“You know me too well, Chairman Gandolfi!”

Fermo put a hand to his brow and exhaled at length. “Fine, I’ll do it. I can tell you won’t let me take any other path regardless. Just let me give your head a good smack first.”

“Not my head, please. I think I’m getting a bald spot!”

“All the better. Your scalp could use the stimulation.”

“I don’t need that kind of stimulation... But wait a tick—does that actually work?”

“According to a conversation I overheard at the barbershop, but who knows? I did hear there’s a shop in the South District that sells brushes for hitting your scalp.”

“By all means, buy one and tell me how it works.”

“Buy it yourself. I’m not the one worried about my hair.”

As Ivano continued his back-and-forth with Fermo, who was about ready to throw his hands up in exasperation, Dahlia returned bearing a large plate piled high with cut melon. In perfect synchronicity, the two men shut their mouths and picked up their teacups.

“I brought some small plates for us to use... Umm, is everything okay?” Dahlia asked uneasily. From the kitchen, she’d heard them talking loudly, but the moment she’d opened the door, they were drinking their tea in silence.

“We were just chatting about hair.”

“Ivano’s *fretting* about his hair.”

“Really? So men put a lot of thought into their hairstyles too, huh?”

Dahlia placed two small plates in front of them and transferred a few pieces of juicy, delicious-looking cantaloupe to each.

Ivano thanked her and then pierced the crisp flesh with his fork. “Carlo had the same hairstyle forever, and it seemed to work for him. And he had a thick head of hair, though he was losing some at the temples,” he commented.

"That's because he put a lot of effort into his hair."

"Oh? I never thought Carlo was one to put too much effort into his appearance," Ivano said bluntly.

Dahlia could but chuckle weakly in agreement. Carlo had often neglected to wear socks, left the top two buttons of his shirt unfastened, and draped his jacket over his shoulders rather than put his arms through the sleeves. Baron though he was, he'd often been careless and sloppy.

"But he put a lot of effort into his hair *health*. He always used a brush with wild boar bristles before shampooing in the morning and at night..."

"A wild boar bristle brush... Anything else?" Ivano asked keenly. He set down his fork and took out a black leather notepad.

"He was careful about his diet. He ate bean soup and soups with chicken or pork bone broth. He drank a lot of milk and even cooked with it... Oh, and he ate a lot of seaweed salad."

Dahlia's father had begun to complain of thinning hair when she was in college. His face had been grave, so Dahlia had recommended everything she could remember her father from her previous life doing to combat hair loss. Carlo had followed her advice as far as brushing and diet changes, but he hadn't quite listened to her when it came to his alcohol intake and his habit of working late into the night.

"Did Carlo use any special shampoos or hair products?"

"No, he used the same shampoo I did—just a regular one that doesn't have a strong fragrance. It can be found anywhere. He didn't use many hair products, but he did put on some plant-based wax when he met with other barons."

Her father had disliked overpowering smells and the sensation of grease on his hair. Dahlia was the same.

"No hair oil? Don't nobles slather that stuff on their heads?" Fermo asked.

"Right, they say it nourishes the roots of your hair and makes it grow!" Ivano added.

"I think it depends on the type of oil, but heavy oils can make your skin greasy. That's no good for your scalp or your roots, so it's

better to use it in moderation."

Hearing her explanation, Ivano froze, then slowly brought a hand to his combed-back mustard-colored hair. "A shopkeeper told me I needed to use a lot of this oil to keep my scalp from drying out. And it wasn't cheap..."

"Um, if you use too much, it can clog your follicles and do more harm than good..."

"But I've been using it every day and night! I say, Dahlia, this hair care regimen—I don't suppose it's a Rossetti family secret?"

"No, not at all. It's just common knowledge, I think. My father used to discuss all of this with his friends—with Dominic, for example."

After Carlo had given Dahlia's methods a try, Dominic from the Merchants' Guild had asked him for his recipes for bone broth soup and seaweed salad. Though she'd never heard whether the recipes had been effective for him, Dahlia recalled that Dominic had later sent her father a large tin of gourmet cookies as a thank-you.

"Ah, Dominic Kämpfer, the scrivener? Now that you mention it, he's gone completely white, but he *does* have a full head of hair..." Fermo mused.

"Maybe Carlo and Dominic never truly considered me their friend..." Ivano said, concluding his strange comment with a faraway gaze.

Fermo wordlessly patted him on the shoulder. The mood in the room was suddenly quite somber.

"Oh, um! Ivano, you're much younger than my father was, so I'm sure he thought you weren't old enough to be worried about that sort of thing yet."

"She's right, Ivano. Come on, now—you've still got a lush mane of hair." Fermo laughed and gave Ivano's head a light slap, though it made an unexpectedly loud sound. "Sorry! Hit you a little too hard there."

"It's been troubling me lately. You see, my father was balding, and my grandfather lost his hair at an early age..."

"I don't think you need to worry about it too much," Dahlia said.

Ivano leveled his navy blue gaze at her. "But Dahlia, imagine... If

your boyfriend or husband started to go bald, wouldn't it bother you?"

"Not really, as long as he was healthy. I'd only be worried if he was going bald because of illness or stress."

Whether due to age or constitution, people's hair went through all kinds of changes over the course of their lives. Dahlia doubted she would have cared if Carlo had gone completely bald. Even her father in her previous life had been somewhat lacking in hair—for example, on the top of his head—but she had never paid them much attention.

What she had cared about was his health. When he began to make a habit of coming home late from work, she'd worried he was pushing himself too hard. And when he replied to her inquiries by smiling and insisting he was fine, it had only made her worry more. Meanwhile, her father was worried about his hair. He would say that it made him look older—that he wanted to look healthy and robust.

"Now, Dahlia... What if Sir Volf were to lose his hair? You wouldn't care about that either?" Ivano asked.

"Not really. I would only be worried if it happened because of an injury or overworked nerves."

If Volf's hair began to fall out because, say, a monster had burned his scalp with acid, or because he was getting no sleep during expeditions, then that, of course, would cause her no end of concern.

But even if Volf lost his hair, he would still be the same person. In fact, since his appearance had caused him such trouble in the past, maybe going bald would actually be a boon. An image began to coalesce in Dahlia's mind, but she quickly shook it away.

"I think in general, women care more about hair..." Fermo said.

"That's probably true when it comes to hairstyles, and it also depends on the person, but, um, if it's something you're worried about, maybe you should talk to Barbara about it?" Dahlia suggested.

"Hmm, well, it's hard for me to bring up..."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Ivano.

Dahlia couldn't quite comprehend why they would ask her about

something they couldn't bear to bring up to their wives. Did people's love for one another really waver depending on the health of their hair?

In any case, if Ivano and Fermo's fundamental concern was to appear healthy, they could always wear toupees. But that was something she wanted them to realize for themselves before asking their wives.

"Okay then, let me ask you this. Would either of you feel differently about your wives if they lost *their* hair?"

"No, not a bit— Ah, I see... Sorry, stupid question," Fermo said with a smile. Dahlia was relieved to see he'd figured it out on his own.

Meanwhile, Ivano was brooding with his hand to his chin.

"First I would make certain she wasn't ill," he muttered under his breath. "Then, if it bothered her, I'd bring her to the temple or a doctor, or I'd ask Lord Guido...*and* Lord Gildo for advice, and if I still couldn't find a solution, I would find her a wig...which would mean going to a barber... Professor Oswald would undoubtedly know a lot about that..."

Dahlia's ever dependable vice-chairman, with his broad range of knowledge and connections, had instantly been able to formulate concrete plans for his wife's hypothetical problem. He'd said he was worried about his own hair, but it seemed he dealt with his problems differently from his wife's.

Without another word, Dahlia turned back toward Fermo. He happened to turn toward her at the same instant and met her gaze with an air of sheepishness.

"Dahlia, uh, care to tell me which shampoo, brush, and hair products Carlo used? I want to do what I can now. I'll make it up to you, of course."

"I'll write it all down for you. As for making it up to me, you can help me with this blueprint."

"Not a problem."

The skilled small goods craftsman picked up the blueprint. His smile narrowed his dark green eyes to a squint.

After the three finished enjoying the cantaloupe, they descended to the first floor of the Green Tower. In the workshop, Dahlia picked up a wand. It resembled a conductor's baton but was white in color.

"This is the kelpie wand."

The object in her hands was not one of the dozen wands Leone had sent her the other day—she had already used them up on enchanting practice—but rather was an additional wand she'd asked Ivano to acquire.

"So, Dahlia, the plans you showed me upstairs looked pretty simple, but what exactly are you planning?"

"I was wondering if it would be possible to make the wand hollow without reducing its durability..."

"I know that face. You're not wondering if you can or can't—you want to *make* it happen, right?"

Fermo grinned and held out a hand. Dahlia passed the wand to him, and he turned it over, examining it from every angle. The white surface gleamed blue as he moved it—a characteristic of kelpie bones.

"It's pretty thick. Why make it hollow?"

"I want to try drawing the magical circuit on both the exterior and interior..."

"Ah, for increased surface area, you mean?" Ivano was quick to understand. His experience working at the Merchants' Guild, and now with all kinds of magical tools as vice-chairman of the Rossetti Company, had made him something of an expert.

"I'll be using different materials for the final product, but I would like the magical circuitry to be twice the length of this wand."

The basic design with which Leone had supplied her was a lot simpler than she had expected. Essentially, the circuit formed a spiral. Toward the handle, the lines were widely spaced; toward the tip, they narrowed and converged. Per a note Leone had included with the design documents, the purpose of the shape was to channel and concentrate magical energy.

For Guido's wand, she planned to enchant a hati bone with an ice dragon scale. Based on her simple calculations, that type of wand should have seven times the output of a kelpie bone wand

enchanted with an ice crystal.

Accordingly, she wanted to make the magical circuitry sturdier, safer, and more powerful, but after drafting a number of designs, she'd realized none of them could possibly fit on the surface of the wand. She'd made several attempts to reduce and consolidate the circuitry, but the best she could manage was to get it down to twice the surface area of the wand.

As she was racking her brain for a solution to this seemingly insoluble problem, she'd suddenly remembered something: *In my previous life, there were electronics with double-sided circuit boards!*

Something similar existed in this world. Although her father had never taught her the technique, she owned a spellbook that explained how to draw magical circuitry in areas the toolmaker couldn't see.

She might not be equal to the task, but she was sure Leone Jedda would be. He had been her father's senior in school, and no feat seemed beyond his capabilities. It was almost a shame that he was the guildmaster of the Merchants' rather than a magical toolmaker.

"Here are my failed attempts at making the wands hollow..."

Dahlia shamefacedly plopped the box of duds down on the workbench. Three had broken in half, and two had vertical splits. One she had succeeded in hollowing out, but it had ended up too thin, too fragile, and when she'd given it a light wave, it had broken apart.

His brow furrowed, Fermo examined the failed wands one by one.

"Dahlia, did you cut straight down the bone?"

"Yes, I channeled magic into a small knife and cut in a straight line."

"The fibers of these bones are strong lengthwise. You need to move slowly and diagonally, otherwise it'll crack. Think of it as dry firewood."

So I was cutting in the wrong direction. If she had cut at an angle, the bone wouldn't have cracked so easily.

"Are the kelpie wands unusable with circuits on only one side?" Ivano asked.

From a shelf, Dahlia pulled down the large magically enchanted box that held the pile of kelpie wands she'd used for enchanting practice.

"They're not *unusable*, but this is all they can do..."

She let some magic flow through one of the wands, and a bit of white fluff drifted out of the end.

"Is that snow?"

"Calling it a snow flurry sounds nicer, but really, they're just little bits of ice..."

This was all she had to show for her efforts. Even when she channeled as much magic as she could into the wand, she could produce only these barely visible ice crystals. The wand offered no defensive or offensive capabilities. It was a harmless product, fit only for science experiments.

But the cost of materials was considerable. If all one wanted was to produce a bit of ice, one would be better off using an ice crystal. Something like this served no real purpose—

"Hey, this'd make a great swizzle stick!" said Fermo with a laugh. "Keep it on the table and you can have chilled drinks whenever you want."

Dahlia laughed. *Spoken like a man who's enthusiastic about his beverages! And he's right—it could work for that.*

"Mr. Fermo, feel free to take that home if you'd like. I made a lot while I was practicing."

"Thanks! I won't say no to that. In exchange, I'll make you a holder for them—I've got some leftover materials I can use."

"That would be great. Would you like one too, Ivano? You could make a tasty treat for your daughters by dispensing some snow on a small plate and drizzling it with honey."

It wouldn't be as fluffy as shaved ice, but the crystals would be more or less fine enough. The texture could be improved depending on how much magic went into the wand, but that would be up to the individual user.

"Thank you. I will gladly take you up on that offer. And this is for you, Chairwoman."

Ivano smiled as he swiftly produced a Merchants' Guild contract.

Why is he walking around with that?



"Why do you have this with you, Ivano?"

"Because I knew we'd need it, Chairwoman," Ivano replied with a professional smile.

Dahlia wasn't convinced, but even Fermo was nodding deeply. Clearly she couldn't count on him to back her up.

"Hmm, Mr. Leone gave me the basic plan for the circuitry, so I think his name should be on this too..." she pointed out.

"All right, then. You sign it first, and I'll get his signature later."

Her vice-chairman was certainly a fast worker. It seemed to her that he had started to take after Gildo ever since the two began spending time together. Not that she planned to tell him that.

"All right, mind if I try my hand at carving one?" Fermo asked.

"Oh, Mr. Fermo, kelpie bone is a bit difficult to cut, so..."

Dahlia had already asked so much of him, and kelpie bone was a real challenge. One either needed to use a special tool or to channel magic into a knife—something Fermo could hardly do.

"Let me show you the fruits of our labor, Dahlia."

"Pardon?"

Fermo placed his black leather work bag on the table and, with a playful glint in his dark green eyes, snapped it open, revealing five knives that gleamed bluish-white. Each had a unique edge—pointed, flat, rounded, triangular, or narrow. Next to those were an awl and a knife with a thicker blade. The handle of each knife was neatly wrapped in shiny black leather. Dahlia's breath caught in her throat as she felt herself drawn in toward the peculiar magic emanating from the blades.

"Mythril tools enchanted with hardening!" Fermo proclaimed.

"They're amazing!"

Both of their voices had risen a notch, but that was only natural. Never in her life had Dahlia used such tools as these, nor had she imagined that they were available on the market. A mythril tool enchanted with hardening could easily cut through all but the hardest materials. *Now even Fermo can work with monster materials,* she thought with a little shock.

"Um, Mr. Fermo, did you buy these because of all the magical tools I've asked for your help with...?"

"Not at all! I want to use them on materials for my own projects, and I've heard how durable they are. Besides, with these, I won't get tendinitis!"

What he said made sense, but the frantic way he said it bothered her. She was about to press him with another question when Ivano laughed.

"Careful. You'll give yourself a nasty cut if you apply too much force."

"Hey, Ivano!" Fermo growled sternly.

Dahlia turned to stare at him. "Mr. Fermo, um... Did you already cut yourself?"

"...Not a deep one. I just grazed my hand."

"If you hadn't been wearing gloves, it would've been more than a graze."

"That's irrelevant, Ivano!"

"No, it's not. If you're going to teach her, she needs her own set."

Ivano went to fetch a suitcase he'd left by the entryway. From it, he extracted a work bag very similar to Fermo's but made of red leather, which he placed in front of Dahlia and opened. It contained a set of tools that matched Fermo's in every particular but color; the handles were wrapped in red leather.

"Um, Ivano, what is this?"

"They are the latest tools used in the castle. It was cheaper to purchase two sets at once. The order took a little longer than usual due to the schedule of the toolmaker who does the hardening enchantment. I received a forty percent discount. Before coming to the Green Tower, I visited Fermo to sell him a set. At a special discount price for masters, of course."

"Was it now..." Fermo muttered.

A wave of dismay passed over Dahlia. "These *were* expensive, weren't they? I'll pay for them myself!"

"Think of it as a business expense, Chairwoman. Just promise me all your hair care secrets—and your signatures on contracts from here on!"

Dahlia wasn't sure about his logic there, but she decided to play along and sign the documents he'd brought her.

In any case, it was exciting to have new tools. Dahlia and Fermo sat down and laid their matching toolkits on the workbench. Once they'd both pulled on their work gloves, each picked up a kelpie wand.

"To make sure the opening doesn't break, put a damp towel over it right after you cut. Then you start from here and go in a spiral... Sort of like the magical circuit, actually. Right here, you can see the fibers shift to the right, so just cut along there in a clockwise rotation."

"Like this?"

Fermo clearly had a great deal of experience working with bone. Mythril tool in hand, he carved into the kelpie bone with a satisfying crisp sound. Meanwhile, Dahlia was working more hesitantly, fearful she might break the wand with the unfamiliar tool, which seemed apt to cut deeper than she intended.

As she followed Fermo's instructions, things started to come together, though when they laid out their carved bones side by side, Dahlia wanted to hide her own workmanship.

"Even a bone this solid can't be carved any more than that. And it won't give you double the surface area," Fermo said, scratching at his grizzled brown hair.

There was less surface area on the inside than the outside, besides which there was a limit to how much they could carve. Not much could be done about that.

"I wish the wand itself were a little longer. The bone I'll actually be using is even shorter than this one..."

The finished product for Guido would be made from a hati bone and enchanted with an ice dragon scale. Unfortunately, hati bones were not very long.

"You can't connect two of them together?" Fermo asked.

"No, the client wants to be able to fit the wand in his left sleeve between his wrist and his elbow—he has a wand holster in his sleeve."

"He's not going to carry it like a knight would a sword. This process would be easier if he could simply carry a larger version at his waist or back..."

Ivano was right; in the case of a larger wand, the surface area would pose no limitation, although it would be more conspicuous.

Fermo hummed pensively to himself while Dahlia looked absentmindedly at the cabinet. Something caught her eye.

"Oh, the heated table legs!" she exclaimed.

"Huh?"

"What if we make it like the heated table legs? We can put two of them together to make an extendable wand, with the outer bone being hollow to allow another bone to fit inside..."

"Ah, great idea! That's an easy way to get more surface area."

Conceptually, it was no different from the expandable police batons and pointer sticks of her previous world. Suddenly, her mind was flooded with ideas.

"And if we carve out the inner bone too, we'll have four surfaces to work with! I could fit even more into this blueprint..."

"Chairwoman, are you seriously thinking of adding even more to the circuitry...?"

"You're right; we could make the inner one hollow too. All right, let's get to work!"

"And Fermo, why are you so quick to agree...?"

Ivano looked exasperated, but during the development process, keeping up momentum was key.

Dahlia and Fermo each reached for another kelpie wand. After some time experimenting, Dahlia managed, with Fermo's guidance, to connect two sections, but in the end, she found herself staring at the result in disapproval.

"I can't collapse it again after extending it..."

When extended, the wand was a bit long; when collapsed, it was short enough to fit in the forearm of a sleeve. It wasn't as sturdy as a police baton, but it was still respectably durable.

However, when she extended it to the maximum, it became stuck in place. She let out a groan. Ivano, using his suitcase as a desktop to do paperwork on, glanced over at her.

Fermo took the connected wands from Dahlia's hands and gave them a twist.

"Ah, this is no good. If the surfaces lie entirely on top of each

other like this, they'll get stuck. They need a little more wiggle room. Instead of a circle, try to make the gap more polygonal in shape."

"I see!"

Fermo returned the wand to her. The difference wasn't immediately visible, but when she twisted it and traced her finger over it, she could feel that wiggle room. Now that she had a good idea of what to do, she got right to work making another.

"How's this?"

"No good—it's still too tight. It's harder to make coarse areas smooth than the other way around, and the more you keep working a spot, the thinner you'll make the bone. They ought to overlap in only six spots, and to get it to collapse again after extending it...you'll need to leave about this much space..."

"Understood!"

Fermo was truly a master of his craft—and a master at working with cylindrical objects. Dahlia was deeply grateful for the opportunity to watch him work as he explained his process. In just a few hours, they were able to come up with a solution to the problem she had been puzzling over for two weeks.

Finally, after some trial and error, Dahlia was able to create an extendable kelpie wand on her own. It didn't move as smoothly as the one Fermo had made, but the white wand looked quite beautiful gleaming blue under the light of the magical lantern.



It was close to dinnertime when Fermo and Ivano finally boarded their carriage. Fermo and Dahlia had become so immersed in their work that the two men had ended up staying longer than they'd meant to.

"Sorry it got so late. Hope we didn't take up too much of your time."

But in response to Fermo's apology, Ivano simply smiled and changed out his tie for a new one. Apparently, he had another meeting today with someone terribly important. "Not at all. Thank you for the instruction you gave the chairwoman today. As for

compensation—”

“Don’t worry about it. She’s teaching me all kinds of things about magical tools. Being able to use kraken tape has opened up a lot of opportunities for me. Plus, you’ve introduced me to some pretty nifty tools yourself.”

“You paid for those,” Ivano said smoothly. “So instead—”

“Stop. That’s about as much as I can take,” Fermo cut him off, his voice coming out lower than he’d meant it to.

The blond man regarded him curiously. “Is something the matter, Fermo?”

“Lately, you’ve become a bit too much like *them*, Ivano.”

There was a pause, then Ivano asked, “Have I?”

“You’re the Cerulean Crow, aren’t you? You needn’t become as pitch-black as a noble.”

“No, I wouldn’t say— That’s not possible for me yet.”

Fermo wondered if Ivano himself had even noticed that he’d said “yet.” *Damn it, I worry about this kid.*

“That’s why I told you not to run too far on your own. Push yourself to sprint and you’ll fall on your face. And I don’t like seeing people cry.”

Ivano froze for a moment, then said, “Ah, I suppose I’ve gotten ahead of myself. I wasn’t aware. Thank you.”

Though the Rossetti Trading Company had been established earlier this year, its name was already known to everyone in business circles. The man who was effectively managing the company single-handedly at last loosened his tie, which he’d tied too tightly. After a long moment of silence, he turned his dark blue eyes to Fermo.

“Thank you. I will be careful. As a friend, then, let me repay you in kind. Fermo, you mentioned how you used to clash with your previous apprentice. And now your current apprentice is quick to sulk, eh? I noticed how you were communicating earlier. That might be the reason.”

“Something wrong with the way I communicate?”

Fermo thought back on his interaction with Dahlia, but nothing stood out to him. And her attitude toward him hadn’t changed either.

"Do you often use the phrase 'no good' while working?"

"That's how artisans talk. Dahlia didn't seem to mind it."

"It can depend on the other party's tolerance as well as the nature of your relationship."

Ivano had tossed out some difficult words, and his evaluation didn't exactly click with Fermo. Still, among artisans, mutual trust was necessary to sustain the teacher-student relationship. If he wasn't building that kind of trust with his apprentices, he had a lot to reflect on.

"It's like this, Fermo. Which one of these would you be more receptive to—someone telling you, 'No good! A master ought to be a better teacher than that!' or 'Young apprentices these days may respond better to this type of instruction'?"

"Aaah..."

This time, Ivano's words were perfectly clear. Fermo knew of many loudmouthed, stubborn artisans, himself included, and he'd come to assume that a heavy-handed teaching style was the only way to make students take their craft seriously. But as Ivano would have it, soft words could be more effective than domineering, one-sided lectures.

"...Thanks for the tip. I'll keep it in mind."

"We do what we can to help each other out. Oh, and this is for you."

Ivano handed him a heavy parcel wrapped in red cloth. Fermo was about to ask what was inside when the vice-chairman continued.

"These are books on noble etiquette. Give them a read through before you go to the Scalfarottos."

"Wait just a damn minute—*all* of them?"

There were three books, each thicker than a book on structural design and heavier than a materials catalog. *Why the heck are they so big? And how long do I have to read them, anyway?*

As a dull ache spread through Fermo's head, the blue-eyed man smiled brightly and said, "To ensure that I don't fall over running alone, I ask that you walk briskly alongside me, Chairman Gandolfi."

After dropping Fermo off at his home, Ivano had taken the carriage to the estate of the Marquisate Diels in the nobles' quarter of the North District. Now he was sitting face-to-face with the marquis himself in a small drawing room.

This past summer, Gildo had invited him to an evening tea party where, instead of the light refreshments Ivano had expected, he had been served a lavish meal accompanied by expensive, top-shelf wine. Sampling that wine, Ivano had broken out into a cold sweat. Now, though he wasn't fully relaxed, he was feeling bold enough to enjoy its flavor. Perhaps this was progress.

As they conversed, Gildo was grilling fillets of freshwater fish on a camp stove with an expression of great concentration. The fish, which Ivano had brought himself, filled the room with a pleasant aroma. This particular fish was black from spring to autumn but turned a golden color from fall to winter, hence its name, treasurefish.

During the winter season, it had a savory, fatty flavor. When filleted and grilled to cook off the fat, it paired well with a dry wine. As soon as Ivano had mentioned that fact, Gildo had immediately gotten to work doing just that. The marquis truly was quick to put things into motion.

"Ivano, what were your impressions of the debut?" Gildo asked, keeping his eyes on the fillets.

Ivano swallowed the piece of cheese in his mouth without tasting it. So this, then, would be the topic of conversation over their evening tea. He was glad he hadn't been the first to bring it up.

"It was a very gratifying event for the Rossetti Trading Company. We appreciated the opportunity to meet so many different people."

Ivano had come to the Diels residence only a few days ago as Dahlia's attendant. With Volf pulled away on a sudden mission, Dahlia had been left trying desperately to mask her disappointment on top of her already strained nerves.

After entrusting her to Tilly's care, Ivano had eaten a light meal and flipped through books and other materials in this very room.

Then, once the ball started, he'd made the rounds of the guests by himself.

Dahlia had been the guest of honor, so everyone's attention had been on her. Still, Ivano was proud of how much he'd stood out. His stature was not such that he could ordinarily have attended a ball hosted by a marquis; he was a commoner with no noble relatives, not even distant ones, and his sole official title was vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company.

Nonetheless, Gildo, the royal head treasurer, had granted him permission to attend the ball; Grato, the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters, had greeted him with a smile; he and Forto, the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, had addressed one another without titles; Augusto, the vice-guildmaster of the Adventurers' Guild, had thanked him for his business; and he'd referred to Chairman Zola as Professor Oswald. As a commoner on close terms with all those luminaries, how could he not attract attention?

All over the place, nobles greeted and introduced themselves to him. He was glad he had taken that wyvern stomach medicine ahead of time.

"I'll accept your thanks, but could you be more frank?" Gildo asked as he flipped the treasurefish fillets.

Ivano decided to be candid. "The chairwoman looked beautiful. I was relieved not to hear anyone make critical comments about her. And...I was happy to see those two dance together. Thank you for *everything* you did, Lord Gildo."

At Ivano's emphasis on "everything," Gildo flipped over the fillet he had just turned.

Gildo never once turned his amber eyes toward him, but now Ivano had his answer. There was no possibility that Gildo had stepped on his own shoelaces. Of course, he knew the marquis would never willingly admit that.

Sure enough, Gildo abruptly changed the subject. "Ivano, now that you've come up in society, I'd like to ask you a question: Do you wear a defensive magical tool?"

"I have protections against poison, aphrodisiacs, sleep, and confusion. Also, your wife gave me some very effective wyvern

stomach medicine."

"Use that in moderation..."

Ivano watched as the marquis's hand reached unconsciously toward his stomach. Evidently, even Gildo took the same medicine. The royal treasury must have been busy with year-end budget reports. It was the time of year when those who worked in accounting were pushed to their limits.

Well, the same goes for me.

"You'll also be away from home more often at the year's end, won't you?" said Gildo. "For safety's sake, you'd do well to tell your family to run to a neighbor's house in the event something happens at home."

It seemed Gildo was already well-informed. Ivano's current home was one that Guido had shown him. Next door lived a married couple who worked for the Scalfarottos, one as a horse trainer and the other as an equestrian teacher.

"Yes, the house to the right of ours is inhabited by a couple in the employ of the Scalfarotto family, so there's nothing to worry—"

"The left too. There's a family backed by us living there. With your permission, I will tell them to step in should an emergency arise."

"What...?"

Ivano had been under the impression that the family to the left of him was a merchant family who had lived there for three generations. He'd heard that the shop they managed had sold horse tack for commoners since the grandfather's time.

Just the other day, he had spoken to the head of the house, who was celebrating his son's return home from Ehrlichia, where he'd been learning about horse tack. Later, the son, who had looked just like the father, had brought over some Ehrlichian crimson cattle sausages as a gift. Ivano had suspected nothing.

"...Thank you very much. I leave everything in your capable hands." If the safety of his wife and daughters was on the line, he could give no other response.

The man before him took a bite of one of the fish fillets. He had long arms indeed. He was head treasurer in the castle, well-known

for his integrity, and was said to have the character of a knight. But the head of a marquis family had to be more than that. The motto "Meticulously Prepared" did not refer solely to the quickness of his actions.

"You should have no need to worry about your family. However, I know your wife often trips in the garden, so if she is unwell—"

"She is perfectly healthy. For various reasons, my wife has trouble seeing her feet," Ivano said in one breath without further explanation.

Neither of them spoke for a solid ten seconds.

"...Well, that must be difficult," Gildo said, sliding his gaze away. It seemed this was a topic he didn't want to touch.

He's a gentleman, indeed. In his preference for breasts, Ivano was aligned with most of the Order of Beast Hunters, but he decided not to emphasize that point.

When Gildo let out a dry cough, Ivano took it on himself to change the topic. First, he needed to give a proper thank-you.

"I want to offer you my sincerest gratitude for hosting the ball and for all the consideration you showed the chairwoman. I was honored to witness for myself how deserving of the sobriquet Meticulously Prepared the Diels family is."

After Dahlia's dances at the ball, there had been some whispered comments here and there.

"Chairwoman Rossetti is quite a good dancer for this being her first ball."

"Her father was a baron. And now it's her turn—she must have benefited from a good education."

"She really is remarkable. And she bears a curious resemblance to Lady Dalila..."

"Now that you mention it, even their names are similar."

Dahlia and Grato's wife, Dalila, were both tall, redheaded women with fair complexions. Even their eyes were similar in color, with Dahlia's being green and Dalila's turquoise. That evening, they bore an even closer resemblance than usual, and this was by design; their makeup had been applied in the same manner, and their gowns were similar in style.

Only a few guests noticed that the women had been made to resemble one another, but many noticed the resemblance, and whispers began to spread.

"Could Madam Dahlia Rossetti be a distant relative of Lord Grato's wife, Lady Dalila?"

"Is that why Lady Dalila's cousin Lord Gildo is hosting her debut?"

"No, look how much attention Lord Bernigi is paying her. She must have some connection to the D'Orazis. He's here to protect her in the home of a rival faction."

Baseless though these rumors were, they could function as a hidden shield. They could instill the idea that it would be dangerous to view Dahlia lightly for being a commoner, for she had not only Gildo and Grato on her side but also Bernigi, a noble from a different faction. And if the slightest possibility existed that she was related to some noble family, everyone would know it was unwise to meddle with her or even think about drawing her into their own family.

Guido had named Volf his representative in an attempt to make their connection known, but when circumstances prevented Volf himself from attending, Gildo had swiftly come up with this alternative plan. Gildo had outlined the details, while both his wife and Grato's had taken care of the execution.

Once everything was decided, it was Ivano's turn to act. He hired gossip-birds—individuals whose job was to spread rumors discreetly—to slowly disseminate these baseless rumors in taverns where nobles visited incognito as well as in establishments frequented by wealthy merchants. All everyone involved had to do was to refrain from denying those rumors.

As he wondered whether the rumors would permeate into the New Year, Ivano sipped from his glass. The wine it held had been one of Carlo's favorites. It was a bold, dry red with a pleasing aroma.

"My wife was quite impressed," Gildo said.

"Yes, the chairwoman is quite the conversationalist."

"I don't mean impressed with *her*. From the opening of the ball to the close, you kept a professional smile on your face and never flinched from aristocratic conversation. When greeted, you gave

textbook responses, and your expression never faltered even when others condescended to you for your commoner status. My wife told me that if you weren't already employed by the Rossetti Trading Company, she would want to poach you for ourselves."

"That is very generous of her to say. I sincerely appreciate it."

Ivano thought of Gildo's wife and her gentle smile. It was difficult to imagine her saying that.

Gildo chewed and swallowed his fish, then continued. "There's one thing I forgot to mention, though. The nickname 'Meticulously Prepared' truly belongs to my wife. She is the one who handles everything regarding domestic and family affairs."

"...Is that so? Please give her my thanks."

"Tilly did say this: She could determine whether or not a family has good eyes and ears by the way they treated you. And I concur."

Gildo's wife was indeed the daughter of a marquis. Both husband and wife were terrifying.

And Ivano finally understood something. While Dahlia was being dressed and made up, he had waited in the drawing room. On the table, among the pile of books, was a piece of paper listing all the nobles who would be in attendance, with a note next to each name detailing their hobbies and personal preferences. The books had provided him with additional knowledge about those topics. The one who had prepared all those materials for him was not the marquis but his dependable wife.

Good grief. They're too much alike.

"Is the wine too bitter?" Gildo asked him.

"Not at all."

Despite his denial, Ivano was given a new glass filled with very dark amber liquid. He ruminated over Fermo's earlier words: *"Lately, you've become a bit too much like* them*, Ivano."* Indeed, he had ventured further into the world of nobles than he had ever imagined he would. And he was already in too deep to turn back now.

But at his core, he was a merchant. It just so happened that his current client was a marquis. That was all there was to it.

I have to finish this whole thing. Ivano quaffed the drink in one gulp. The amber liquid burned his throat as it went down, and a

shudder passed through him.

He turned to face Gildo and his narrowed eyes, then deliberately furrowed his brow and said, "I've just remembered something rather frightening. The other day, the chairwoman lost her temper with me for the first time."

"That's surprising. Did she find out that you take your work home to do all night?"

"No, I'm prevented from working through the night at home as much as I am at my workplace. Rather, she took a look at the company ledger and saw my salary. She had promised to increase it a while ago, but apparently, to her mind, it was still too low."

"What a thing to be scolded over..." Gildo said with an exasperated sigh. Ivano wanted to agree.

"She said the same thing last time, so I had already raised it by thirty percent. She insisted that regardless of the ownership rights of the magical tools, I deserved more due to the fact that the company profits were a result of my hard work. In fact, she suggested that we split the profits sixty-forty."

"Oho..."

"Jokingly, I asked, 'In that case, should I raise the salaries of every one of our hardworking employees?' and she replied, 'Yes! That's a wonderful idea!'"

Gildo brought his fingers to his temples. He must have accurately imagined Dahlia's gleeful response. "That sounds like a headache... Well, what did you settle on?"

"I negotiated in earnest and ended up with twice the pay I started out with. The other company employees received fifty percent increases. Furthermore, the chairwoman demanded that the company pay an additional thirty percent of our salaries—mine and the other employees'—to be set aside as pensions and paid out when we leave the company."

"If others catch wind of that, you'll soon have a long line of applicants at your door..."

No kidding. Moreover, Ivano had "negotiated" with Dahlia to *only* double his salary. He suspected that if he had asked for fifty times his pay, she would have happily agreed.

There had been a small dispute with Marcella, who had loudly exclaimed, “Dahlia, I can’t take this much! I still need to pay you back for everything else!” Even Ivano had had to persuade him to accept it.

For his part, Mena had been thrilled. He’d smiled and said, “I’ll work even harder now!” In that moment, Ivano had felt relieved, but decided not to share that with Gildo. Dahlia was starting to have a bad influence on him.

“Kindness taken to that extreme can be a terrifying thing indeed. Who knows what will be asked of you next...” Gildo placed another fillet on the grill with a frown.

Ivano nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, indeed! But allow me to share something even more frightening.”

“What’s that?”

“Our chairwoman is absolutely serious about this. Increasing our salaries is her way of thanking us for our hard work. If I asked for it, I truly believe she would split the profits with me equally.”

In fact, she would probably agree to do so with a smile. He felt he knew her well enough at this point to be certain of that.

“...The two of you are both terrifying,” Gildo said, casting him a suspicious glance.

“Why do you say that? Please, leave me out of this,” Ivano replied defensively.

“Then why don’t you take fifty percent, Ivano? As vice-chairman, you carry the company on your shoulders and seek to increase its profits, so why do you hold back when it comes to taking your fair share of all that capital?”

“Ah, well, when you put it that way...”

If Dahlia presented Ivano with a sum of money, he would have no objection to taking it. He could use it to advertise the company or even for undisclosed expenses. However, he could never have brought himself to hide something like that from Dahlia.

“It’s because you know you’re capable of doing even more than you are now. Isn’t that right, Mr. Vice-Chairman?”

“...You think too highly of me,” Ivano replied evasively, but in some strange way, he agreed.

He knew he wasn't yet deserving of that amount of money. He could still earn more profits, expand the business more, and be of even better service to his chairwoman. When that happened, he would desire a reward commensurate with his efforts. Gildo had seen right through him to the merchant's scales he bore within himself.

"On another note," Gildo said, "it seems we'll have to wait until the flowers are past their bloom before anything changes with those two."

"It's still only been three seasons. I believe it's better for them not to rush matters. Something is bound to change..."

Ivano trailed off as he considered what he knew about Dahlia and Volf's relationship from their first meeting to now. They were more innocent than primary schoolers. Certainly they were progressing more slowly than Ivano had as a teenager. Still, the problem wasn't with their pace but their ignorance of their own feelings.

"I won't say it's a bad thing for them to take their time, but there will be more families setting their sights on her. Don't you think it's about time someone drove that point home to them—or better yet, *stuck* them together?"

Gildo continued on with his headache-inducing words, but he also seemed to be enjoying himself. *So this is what a dyed-in-the-wool nobleman is like. What a nasty fellow.*

"Regardless, I think it's best to give them more time to work it out themselves..." Ivano said.

"Well, come to me should you receive any troublesome inquiries. Although, I'm sure you have plenty of people you could turn to for help before me."

"I thank you sincerely for the consideration you show the chairwoman and me, Lord Gildo."

"Now, now, I'm a guarantor of the Rossetti Trading Company. I have as much a right as any to wish for the company to be *blessed and thriving*."

The very same phrase was used when referring to growing one's family.

Gildo had spelled it out clearly for him, but this was a delicate

matter. As Ivano hesitated to respond, the amber-eyed man topped Ivano's glass with more amber liquid. The mouth under his well-groomed mustache curved into an elegant arc.

"It's time for a little more behind-the-scenes work, Mr. Vice-Chairman."

The Two Professors and the Dawn Sword

After the red sky of dusk had fully settled into night, a carriage bearing no crest stopped in front of the Green Tower.

Dahlia and Volf went outside to greet it, then raised their eyebrows in surprise. An unlikely pair descended from the carriage—a white-haired man with an impressive beard and a man with silver hair and eyes.

"I've brought an assistant. I could think of no one more qualified in fine magical circuitry."

"Apologies for surprising you at such a late hour. Mr. Leone requested I assist him in this endeavor. I hope I won't be intruding."

The one who had accompanied the Merchants' guildmaster, Leone Jedda, tonight was none other than Dahlia's magical toolmaking teacher, Oswald Zola.

Dahlia had been under the impression that the two of them were estranged due to the matter with Gabriella, but it seemed they were not on such bad terms after all.

"Mr. Leone, Professor Oswald, thank you both for being here."

With greetings out of the way, they went inside. Tonight, it would only be the four of them in the Green Tower. Magical toolmakers customarily hid advanced enchantments of this kind from outsiders. For that reason, Leone had instructed his bodyguard and attendant to stay outside of the grounds of the tower.

Dahlia had been worried that Volf wouldn't be permitted to stay either, but Leone expressed no objection to his presence. Now that she thought about it, Guido had been the one to order the sword and Jonas the wand. Both were members of the Scalfarotto family, so perhaps Volf could be considered an intermediary.

"Mr. Leone, thank you for your advice the other day. I was able to

make a great purchase thanks to your recommendation."

"I am very pleased to hear that, Lord Volfred."

"Um, if you wouldn't mind, please call me Volf. And I would be happy if we could speak on more familiar terms. The same goes for you, Lord Oswald. You've done so much for both Dahlia and me."

As a viscount, Leone customarily showed deference to Volf, the son of an earl, and even Oswald had always called Volf by his full first name. Dahlia wondered, a little guiltily, if Volf had asked them to drop the formality out of consideration for the fact that she would be benefiting from their instruction tonight.

"All right, then, Lord Volf. As guarantors of the same company, let's be at ease around each other," Leone said.

He turned to face Oswald. The silver-haired man set the large, narrow box he was carrying on the table. The exterior was covered in sand lizard leather dyed a deep crimson and embellished with a detailed pattern depicting windswept desert sands. If it weren't for its size and slender shape, it almost would have resembled a jewelry box.

"This is a one-handed sword from Išrana," Leone said.

"I am not a proficient swordsman, so would you do the honors, Sir Volf?" Oswald asked with a smile. He took a step away from Volf, then met eyes with Dahlia and nodded, so she hastily stepped back too.

"Understood. Allow me."

Volf put on a pair of white gloves and gently opened the box. Inside was a one-handed sword of moderate size. The sheath and hilt were a matching dark crimson color, and the decorative guard looked to be red-tinged obsidian. The peculiar shades reminded Dahlia of the Ash-Hand, the magical sword wielded by the Order of Beast Hunters' captain. However, this sword was more slender and had a slightly curved hilt.

With the sword in his hands, Volf took a step back from the workbench and then slowly drew the blade from its sheath. It gleamed gold under the light of the magical lantern.

This was a sword forged in Išrana. The radiant gold of the blade blended into a deep red, but the single edge was tinged with blue. It

was a mesmerizing combination of colors.

After a few moments of standing in silent wonder, Volf breathed, "What a beautiful sword..."

Dahlia had no idea what it was worth, but there was no question that it was stunning.

"The blade is mythril and crimson gold, and it's strong enough to break a griffin bone. Apparently it's the work of a renowned swordsmith known only by the cognomen of 'Dawn.'"

"Are swords like these available in the markets in Išrana?" Dahlia asked.

"No, they're quite hard to find. I was lucky to obtain this one."

At Leone's words, Dahlia broke into a sweat. In other words, they had only one attempt to enchant this sword. There was no room for failure.

Volf silently slid the sword back into its sheath and returned it to its box, then went to the shelf to grab a different sword. This one was too heavy for Dahlia to hold single-handed, but he was able to pick it up with just his fingers before slowly extracting it from its sheath.

"This is the Crimson Lotus Blade," he said.

The Crimson Lotus Blade was the sword Dahlia and Volf had created together.

Volf tugged on the tassel attached to the pommel. There was a click, and flames ran over the blade. The part closest to the hilt was yellow, which gradually changed to orange and finally red at the tip. The room was illuminated in the colorful gradation.

"The Crimson Lotus Blade, eh? An apt name..."

"It's a beautiful color that befits its name. Well done..."

As the toolmakers stared transfixed at the sword, Dahlia told them, "Um, it might have a snazzy name, but it's really just a sword-shaped lamp!" Her words came out like a confession.

In reality, the Crimson Lotus Blade was not very powerful. It just produced flames of different colors. Plus, if held for too long, it would make the holder's face and arms get too hot. Volf had commented that the sword would pair well with a drink, but it was really just a product that, after a while, made one sweat and was

likely to burn one's eyebrows off.

In an attempt to remedy that, Dahlia had redesigned the magical circuit to allow the user to control the intensity of the flames with their magic. Someone like Jonas would be able to light and extinguish the flames as well as control their size. And if Leone, who had a higher magical grade than Dahlia, were to enchant the blade, it would be capable of producing an even stronger fire.

According to Volf, Jonas's strong magic was capable of lengthening the flames in an emergency to use as an intimidation tactic. But that was the limit of this sword. No matter how much she improved on the circuitry, it could never reach the level of fire magic used by the mages who accompanied the Order of Beast Hunters. To accomplish that, she would need the high magical grade and enchantment skills of a castle magical toolmaker.

When she imagined Jonas wielding this sword, she could almost hear him say, "Here I go, turning on the emergency light!" with his composed smile.

The sword itself was good, but as a magical tool, it was disappointing. As she brooded over that thought, Volf finally extinguished the flames. But instead of immediately returning it to its sheath, he kept a hold on it.

"Are you about to show us its second form?" Leone asked.

"A second form...! No, it doesn't have one. I'm just waiting for it to cool down."

The words "second form" had apparently struck a chord with Volf. His golden eyes were shining.

But Dahlia hadn't the slightest idea what the second form of a sword-shaped room lamp could even be. *Maybe the flames could turn blue?* she considered as Volf continued his explanation to Leone.

The sheath was enchanted to keep the heat inside, but it would damage the sword to put it away while it was still hot. Therefore, in order to avoid damaging the sword, he was letting it cool down first. When they heard that, Leone and Oswald both made a face.

Feeling a little flustered, Dahlia spread out the blueprint for the magical circuitry she had designed for the one-handed sword.

"Mr. Leone, here is the magical circuit I'd like your help with."

"Let's see... So, you want this circuit to be drawn on both sides of the blade?"

"Yes. I was hoping that wouldn't be a problem, since you mentioned it's a durable blade."

Leone covered his mouth with his hand and narrowed his black eyes.

I checked over it several times, but maybe there's something wrong with it? Anxious, Dahlia glanced at Oswald, who was also frowning. He looked like a college examiner the way his silver eyes traced the circuit.

"Did you draw this yourself, Dahlia?"

"Yes, I did."

"It's quite good, but...this part at the edge here can be consolidated into one line. That will give you room to make the magic starting point a bit thicker, which will allow for faster activation, even if only by a few seconds."

"Thank you for pointing that out! I didn't notice that."

Dahlia immediately redrew the part Oswald had identified and then handed the blueprint back to him. He spent a little more time looking it up and down, gave a satisfied nod, and then turned to Leone.

After Leone took a good look at the blueprint, he turned to face Volf.

"Hmm... I have one condition. Lord Volf, I want this sword to be blood bonded to Lord Jonas. Only then will I enchant both sides. If anyone other than Jonas holds it for a length of time, they could get badly burned."

"I understand, Mr. Leone. You have my word on that. But what if Master Jonas were to pass down this sword to his child, or..."

"It will make a fine heirloom even if it no longer produces flames. And if it's that much of a concern, the enchantment can always be removed by a mage with high magic," Oswald reassured him.

Dahlia was relieved to hear that. She wanted to prioritize safety, but she also wouldn't want to decrease the long-term value of that beautiful sword.

"Where are the fire dragon's—I mean, Lord Jonas's scales?"

"Right here."

Dahlia opened up a magically sealed box, revealing a row of peculiar streamlined scales. Jonas, who was possessed by a fire dragon, had plucked these from his own arm. Dahlia recalled how painful it had looked as blood oozed from his arm.

"They hold quite a bit of magic, but do you mind if I use two of them?" Leone asked.

"Please, go ahead."

"Let's see now... I'll have to draw two circuits as mirror images, one on either side, and enchant them with these scales..." Leone muttered, his voice dropping slightly in pitch.

Dahlia was struck with sudden worry. "Um, I'm sorry to ask, but will you be all right to do this, Mr. Leone?"

"We can delay things, so there's no need to push yourself," Volf advised emphatically.

Their plan had been to work on Guido's wand right after Jonas's sword. However, since the sword needed to be enchanted on two sides, Dahlia wondered if it would be better to save the wand for another day.

Leone scratched at his white beard. "Not to worry. I have more than enough magic. My family was an earldom until my grandfather's time, so even my generation has retained a high magical grade. Though our name was besmirched when we were demoted to a viscountcy after failing to pay taxes."

"You've been very successful as the Merchants' guildmaster. I heard you've even received endorsements for promotion to earl," Volf said.

"I've always been driven by making money and never gave thought to contributing to the kingdom. Someone like me, with no honor to his name, will stay as a viscount," Leone replied flatly. He took the scales from the magically sealed box and laid them on the table.

Books on noble etiquette stressed the importance of avoiding the topic of court rank, especially when it came to demotions. Dahlia wasn't sure if she should respond to Leone or stay quiet. Before she

could decide, Oswald squinted his silver eyes at her in a smile.

"You mustn't fall for Lord Leone's jokes, you two."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Both Dahlia and Volf thought back over Leone's words to see if there was anything deceptive about them, but nothing came to mind.

"He's already busy as the Merchants' guildmaster. If he became an earl, he would become even busier, which would mean less time to spend with Gabriella. That is his true reason."

"I see..."

Volf smiled; Dahlia almost did the same. She actually wasn't sure what sort of face to make. Oswald might have just been joking to lighten the mood, but she also could see his statement being true.

As for Leone, it was unclear if he was listening or not. The guildmaster-slash-viscount had reduced the red scales to dust as if they were nothing.

"Pah, it's no laughing matter," Leone muttered.

Once he was certain that he had enough red powder, he took off his jacket, unbuttoned his cuff links, and rolled the sleeves of his white silk shirt up to his elbows.

"Lord Leone, will you not wear work gloves?" Oswald asked.

"I have no need for them. They make it harder to make adjustments."

Once he had his answer, Oswald took Leone's jacket. It looked like something he had done many times before.

"Stand back a bit. Just in case," Leone warned.

"Is the enchantment that dangerous?" Volf asked.

Leone kept his black eyes on the sword as he responded. "No. It's simply that I have poor control over my magic. I never learned it as a child. All I did was make magic crystals."

Those with compatible magic could refill exhausted magic crystals. Everyone with a certain level of magic, be they nobles or commoners, was taught how to control it from an early age. The same went for those who could use strengthening magic. This was to prevent wielders from endangering themselves or others. For

people whose magic was so high that it was outside of their family's capability to teach them, then they could learn at a school or, in some cases, at the temple. Tuition was free.

However, if Leone had been making magic crystals before even learning magic control, Dahlia could only imagine that his guardians had made him work despite knowing the dangers, or else they had been totally disinterested in his well-being and had neglected him. She kept silent as she waited for him to continue.

"I was admitted to the magical toolmaking program in college, but I wasn't able to keep up a steady output of low magic. It was Carlo who taught me how to control it."

"My father?"

But Leone was older than him. Why was my father teaching him?

"My instructor's explanations weren't getting through to me, but Carlo showed me an exercise that made things click. He bored a hole in a metal plate and had me practice channeling magic through that... It was painful."

"Ah, yes. I remember seeing club members holding their fingers in front of a smiling Carlo," Oswald said.

"Yes, because if you failed, it hurt your fingers..."

Dahlia smiled as she recalled going through the same training as a child. Volf looked puzzled, so she explained it to him.

"You're supposed to channel magic through a hole in a metal plate that's been coated in sealsilver. If you can't keep the magic flowing straight through the hole, it rebounds off the plate and hits your fingers, which hurts a bit."

When the magic recoiled, it hit one's fingers with a light snap. If one failed the exercise several times in a row, it quickly became quite painful. Sometimes, Dahlia used to get so frustrated with her inability to channel magic through what was a fairly large hole that she had stubbornly kept going until her fingers were bright red.

She had thought it was standard training for magical toolmakers, but apparently her father had made the exercise up himself. Incidentally, her father had been able to channel his magic through a hole the width of a strand of hair and then make it split apart on the other side. That level of control was still beyond Dahlia.

"You went through that training too, Dahlia?" Oswald asked.

"Yes, I did it often as a child. I remember it being painful when I made repeated mistakes."

"When you were a child...?"

The face Oswald made was hard to read. Dahlia couldn't tell if he was thinking nostalgically of the past or remembering the pain of failure.

"We don't have much time. Let's begin," Leone said.

"Dahlia, prepare yourself for the magic tremors," Oswald warned. "Sir Volf, could please stand in front of her?"

"Of course."

Magic tremors were a condition similar to motion sickness, brought on by the strong magical energy released during enchantments. The day she observed Director Uros of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department perform an enchantment, she'd been unprepared and had almost fainted. That time as well, Volf had quickly stepped in front of her to shield her.

"No, I'll be okay. I'm prepared for it this time."

She appreciated Oswald's concern, but she wouldn't be able to see Leone enchant the sword if she was standing behind Volf. She had been the one to draw up the plan for the magical circuitry. She'd asked Leone to enchant it, but if she were to be shielded behind Volf's back, that would only impede her education as a magical toolmaker. As long as she made an effort to withstand the strong magic, she was sure she wouldn't collapse.

Volf looked worried for a moment but ultimately said nothing.

"Now then, I will begin the enchantment."

Three seconds after Leone said those words, a dense magic spread over the table.

Dahlia's eyes widened in shock. Up to this point in her life, she had seen the enchantments of her father and Oswald, her college teachers and classmates, and the castle toolmakers Uros and Carmine. Each of their magic came out like a ribbon or a thread, or in the case of magical toolmakers with a lot of magic, like a rippling piece of fabric.

But the enchantment being performed in front of her now was

completely different. Between Leone's hands, which he held open above the worktable, emerged a mass of bluish-white magic. The mass absorbed the powdered scales off the tray, its color changing to a vibrant magenta.

"Flame fixing."

Leone's eyes changed from black to navy to cobalt.

Like an angry red snake, magic coursed over the one-handed sword from hilt to tip, drawing a deep crimson magical circuit as it did. It was over in the blink of an eye.

"Oswald."

His name was all he needed to hear. The silver-haired man carefully flipped the sword upside down, and Leone continued his work on the other side. The red magical energy ran over the blade, once again completing the magical circuitry in seconds.

"It's done," Leone said as if speaking to himself.

Then he brought his hands together, sending the remaining ball of magic on the table scattering in all directions. For an instant, Dahlia felt her body sway with the wave of dispersing magic.

"Dahlia, you okay?"

"I'm okay."

Volf must have noticed her digging her heels in. She thought she'd braced herself well enough, but she had nearly fallen backward. She had honestly not been expecting *this* kind of power. Dahlia swallowed her nausea and tried to appear composed. She focused her attention on Leone's hands.

"Not too shabby..." Leone said as he turned the sword over. The dark red blade glinted bluish-white.

Strangely, Dahlia didn't sense any magic from it, and neither could she see a single inch of the magical circuitry. What had happened to that circuit, which had looked so bold against the sword just a moment ago? *Maybe the enchantment failed?* Dahlia wondered, but at that moment, Leone picked up the sword in both hands, stepped back two paces, and gripped the hilt.

"Huh...?"

Two things happened at once: First, she felt a wave of magic in the air; second, red magical circuits emerged on both sides of the

blade. From those gleaming mirrored circuits burst forth vivid flames, red and yellow. They enveloped the sword, doubled, then tripled in length—until they suddenly vanished, along with the magical circuit.

Once he was done inspecting it, Leone turned his dark blue eyes to Dahlia.

"I made it so the circuit is invisible unless magic is channeled into it. That was my reason for using two scales—one for power, and the other for concealment. I can only explain it in terms of feeling, but if you send a strong blast of magic into it, you can, so to speak, push the circuit inside."

"Concealment... You can do that with fire dragon scales?"

"It's most likely a type of camouflage. Juvenile dragons can blend into their surroundings."

"Juvenile dragons..."

Dahlia started to imagine Jonas not as a dragon but as a child, then shook the image away. *That's completely different.*

But Oswald seemed to read her mind. "Though Jonas himself is an adult, he could still be classified as a juvenile based on the length of time he's been blighted and his level of magic," he said breezily.

"Master Jonas, a juvenile..." Volf muttered. She almost wanted to step on his foot. Now she was back to picturing the image she had just dispelled.

"Chairwoman Dahlia, this sword will produce quite powerful flames when Lord Jonas channels magic into it. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, I've been told he can make the flames quite large. But I also heard it wasn't on the level of what the castle mages are capable of, and that Guido should be able to stop any fires from starting."

Those were Guido's words, which she had heard through Volf.

A wrinkle formed between Leone's brows and he shifted his gaze to Volf. "Lord Volf, don't you think you neglected to inform the sword's developer of a few things?"

"I'm sorry. Since Master Jonas will be the only one using it, I just... I wasn't thinking."

Dahlia wasn't sure what they were talking about, so Volf filled her in.

"When Master Jonas channels magic into the sword, he can give the flames much more power than we can testing things out here."

"I know that, but won't the flames just go out if he swings it hard? It's not as if it's enchanted with air magic..."

"He can keep the flames going as long as he keeps putting magic into it, and he can direct them by pointing the sword. In fact, in his hand, the flames of the Crimson Lotus Blade were so strong that they scorched his own sleeve."

"Don't tell me—did he burn his hand?!" Dahlia asked in a panic.

"Someone blighted by a fire-breathing dragon won't be burned that easily," Leone reassured her.

His eyes, blue just moments ago, had reverted to their usual black. And although he had just performed advanced enchantments one right after another, he hadn't even broken a sweat.

"Is there any possibility this sword will be powerful enough to burn even Master Jonas?"

"I made it so the heat gets directed outward, and even that can be manipulated based on his handling of the sword. But no one else who uses this sword will be able to produce the power of flames that Lord Jonas can. If he goes all out with this sword, he could turn a room into a blazing inferno in seconds."

"So not even mages who specialize in fire magic can use this sword to produce even stronger flames?" Volf asked.

Oswald answered his question with another. "Lord Volf, whose scales were used to enchant this sword?"

"Master Jonas's scales... Oh!"

Volf was quick to get it, and so was Dahlia. It was only natural that he'd be compatible with a sword enchanted using his own scales.

"Lord Jonas will find this sword to feel like an extension of his own arm. In fact, I previously heard that he was reluctant to part with the Crimson Lotus Blade. Whether others with fire dragon blights will be able to wield it, I can't say. That is why I wish that he be blood bonded to it."

It would truly be a sword only for Jonas.

Leone checked to see that the blade had cooled down, then carefully sheathed it.

"Magical tools used as weapons are different from tools for daily life," he said. "They have their uses, but that largely depends on who is wielding them. Remember that."

"Yes, I will."

It was clear that she was being given a warning: She ought never to make a weapon if she didn't know who would be using it or for what purpose. *Maybe I should just stick to what I'm good at—making tools for daily living, not weapons. I do want to continue making magical swords for Volf, though.*

As Dahlia's mind churned, Oswald approached her and asked, "Dahlia, could you show me the wand as well as the plans for the magical circuit that we'll be enchanting next?"

"Yes, of course."

Volf had shifted the tray that held the one-handed sword and the scales to a shelf, so Dahlia laid out the other materials.

"This is the wand. I combined two hati bones and made them extendable, like so. Also, here is the blueprint for the magical circuit I need enchanted, and here are the ice dragon scales."

With the mythril tools, Dahlia had successfully carved the hati bones. Fermo had added the finishing touches; he'd said he was merely checking it over, but with three quick incisions, he had made it so the wand collapsed and extended with incredible smoothness. Dahlia had been so much in awe of his craftsmanship that she'd extended and contracted the wand dozens of times. No one needed to know that last part, though.

"Now this is an interesting construction. Very clever," Leone said approvingly.

Flattered by his compliment, Dahlia smiled as she laid out the two pages of blueprints. "Thank you. The wand is hollow. My idea is to draw circuits on the inside and outside," she explained.

Leone's black and Oswald's silver eyes scanned over the schematics. The silence made Dahlia strangely nervous. Even Volf was quiet.

Finally, Leone spoke. “Oswald, I’ll leave the inside to you.”

“You invited me here to act as your assistant. Are you sure you want me to draw the circuit?”

“Drawing circuits in areas I can’t see is beyond my capabilities. If I slip up, I could ruin the entire thing.”

“Very well. I will handle the interior, then.”

“We can discuss payment later—”

Dahlia cut in boldly on their whispered conversation. “Mr. Leone! I will cover Professor Oswald’s payment.”

“Will you, Dahlia?” Oswald asked. “In that case, all I ask as payment is that you teach Raulaere how to make a voice caster. As that is Carlo’s invention, it’s not an easy tool for me to teach.”

“Understood.”

Dahlia wasn’t sure if teaching Oswald’s son, Raulaere, was truly a fair trade given the complexity of the enchantment he’d be doing for her, but she vowed to do her best all the same.

“Allow me twenty minutes of rest before we enchant the wand,” Leone said. He sat down on a chair and took out a mana potion. After quaffing it, he crossed his arms and closed his eyes. His air of deep concentration suggested an artisan who did not wish to be disturbed.

Dahlia looked back at Oswald. He had taken off his glasses and was examining the blueprints in his hands. His silver eyes gradually narrowed to slits, and his mouth formed a hard curve. He seemed to be smiling, but it somehow gave Dahlia a bad feeling, and Volf likewise appeared apprehensive. She and he looked at each other, but neither said a word.

It was then that Dahlia realized something: Oswald’s magic was just sufficient to draw the circuit on the inside of the hati wand. His original purpose in coming here had been to assist Leone. It was entirely possible that he’d spent the day making magical tools for the Zola Company and had already exhausted some of the magic he’d need for this second task.

“Um, excuse me, Professor Oswald, but would you like a mana potion too?” Dahlia asked in a small voice.

The silver-haired man slowly shook his head. “No, thank you. I

was merely thinking that this will be a very rewarding circuit to draw."

Oswald turned his usual elegant smile on her. It seemed Dahlia had been fretting about nothing.

Leone rose from his chair, so Dahlia took that moment to introduce their next project, the wand. She brought out the snow flurry swizzle stick and channeled a small amount of magic into the kelpie bone. Small, round grains of ice drifted softly onto the table.

"Here's my first attempt at the wand, the snow flurry swizzle stick."

"Quite pretty..." Oswald said, his silver eyes smiling with amusement. Dahlia had to agree. It was fun to watch the white pellets tumble across the table.

"I have never combined kelpie bone with a magic ice crystal. You could even connect a series of bones to make a long staff." Oswald spoke rapidly, staring at the snow flurry swizzle stick with eyes that reminded Dahlia of his son, Raul.

"Would you like to take it home with you?" Dahlia offered.

"Is that quite all right? I'm sure you put a great deal of work into making this."

"Not at all. I learned the circuit from Mr. Leone, and the enchantment was easy enough. Kelpie bone seems to be compatible with ice crystals, but the unit variations among my prototypes make them unsuitable for sale. They're good for chilling drinks, or you could drizzle honey on top of the ice to make a frozen dessert."

Dahlia knew that both of Oswald's wives had sweet tooths. Thinking back on how much Raul had seemed to enjoy the honey jelly snack he'd eaten during their break from their lesson the other day, she suspected the same was true of him.

"A frozen dessert... My wives and son will be delighted. I will happily take it, then. I'll offer you some materials in exchange. Lord Leone, I seem to remember that Gabriella enjoys frozen desserts too, isn't that right?"

"She is fond of them, yes. Chairwoman Dahlia, would you mind? I can give you—"

"No, please you don't need to give me anything. I learned how to

make this from you, anyway, and you've been letting me use your name to decline adoption offers, so consider this as a small repayment for that," Dahlia said, remembering the note Ivano had given her.

Leone was a guarantor of her company, and they had often used his name, including on the many occasions when she'd had to decline letters sounding out the prospect of adoption or marriage. Her debt to him would only increase from here. There was no way she could accept money or gifts from him.

Leone's eyes softened, and he nodded lightly. As a way of bringing the discussion to a close, Dahlia enlisted Volf's help in setting up the hati wand on the worktable. They stood it upright on supports, and the bluish-white bone glinted silver.

"So it's two bones combined, and we're drawing a circuit on the inside and outside of each? I'm reminded of Carlo..."

Leone was muttering almost as if to himself, but his comment did not escape Dahlia's attention.

"My father did this type of enchantment?!" She had never seen or heard of her father doing such a thing.

"No... Well, I heard that Carlo's father—your grandfather—carried out internal enchantments. When we were students, Carlo grumbled about not being able to do it."

"My grandfather..."

"It is entirely likely that Carlo would have been capable of it a few years ago," Oswald commented.

"Really?"

Her father hadn't taught her anything about this kind of enchantment. She would have loved the opportunity to ask him about it in detail while he was still alive.

"Knowing how well you draw circuits at your age, I imagine you'll work out the trick in about ten years," Leone told her.

"I'm not so sure about that. Drawing a magical circuit is very different from being able to enchant one in a spot I can't see..." Dahlia said, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

Drawing a magical circuit just took planning and some calculations. As long as it was within the limits of her magical

capacity, Dahlia had no problem drawing one herself. But controlling and channeling her magic where she couldn't see it was impossible for her. Her father's spellbook explained the theory, but all she'd derived from reading it was the certainty that the task was completely outside of her capabilities. It was frustrating.

"Diligence and practice are all you need," Oswald told her with a smile.

Apparently, after her father, she needed to surpass her grandfather as well. Achieving either task seemed like it would take an eternity. If only both of them had lived longer, she could have gone to them and asked methods and tricks for enchanting. She could have learned from them as their apprentice.

From her side came a whisper full of trust and confidence. "I believe in you, Dahlia."

Volf's smile was contagious—she felt the corners of her own mouth turning up.

There was no point in sulking or getting impatient. Fortunately, she was still young by the standards of magical toolmakers. Though she was all too conscious of her inexperience, she still had time to catch up to what her father and grandfather had been capable of at their ages. If she was ambitious, then she could live long enough to someday surpass them.

"All right, then, let's begin this enchantment."

Leone gently removed the ice dragon scales, glassy and pale blue, from the magically sealed box. He placed them on the tray on the worktable and, just as he had with Jonas's scales, easily reduced them to a small mound of light blue powder.

"Stand back."

At Leone's words, all three of them stepped away from the workbench. Just as before, Leone spread his hands and produced a bluish-white ball of magic. It absorbed the powdered ice dragon scales, which seemed to melt away in an instant.

Next, Leone enveloped the hati wand in the sphere of magic, then brought his hands together as if squeezing it.

"Ice fixing," he intoned.

Dahlia again felt a wave of magic, but this time, she managed to

withstand it without losing her balance. Within the sphere of white haze, a pale blue circuit coursed over the surface of the hati wand. It trembled with a high-pitched ringing sound.

"Oswald," Leone called as he lowered his hands.

The silver-haired man approached the workbench and removed the hati wand from the stand.

"Let us switch before the magic fixes." Oswald said. "It will take me some time to do my part, so please allow me to sit while I work. Everyone else may take this time to rest."

Oswald sat down in a chair facing the workbench. He appeared entirely relaxed. Instead of putting on work gloves, he picked up the wand with his bare hands.

"This enchantment will be done according to Carlo's theory, and it will be my battle. Speak not a word of what you see here to anyone, please."

"'Battle'?" Volf repeated quizzically.

Dahlia, too, thought she might have misheard him. However, it soon became clear just how apt that word had been.

Oswald placed the remaining ice dragon scale powder into the palm of his right hand, then gave it a slow shake to combine it with his magic, producing a minute sphere of light. He squeezed his hand shut and turned it upside down.

After a few moments, a very thin stream of silver magic began to flow from between the first two fingers of his right hand.

The magic, thin as spider silk, moved toward the inside of the wand, which Oswald held in his left hand. Before entering the hollow wand, the stream began to weave together in midair, forming a fine, helical circuit that tapered toward the tip.

It wasn't only the magic that reminded Dahlia of spider silk. The intricate circuit, glimmering with silver light as it formed, looked like a beautiful web inviting its prey. The two threads of silver magic formed a single line, with the second thread layering itself over the first before it was fixed. The two layers matched perfectly in thickness, power, and placement. Then, little by little, the braided magic entered the wand.

Oswald used neither strong magic nor any flashy movements. All

the enchantment required was a consistent weaving of weak magic. Nonetheless, it left all those watching spellbound and breathless.

Dahlia felt a thrill pass through her at the precise mechanical movements of the fine threads of silver magic. This was the first time she had seen an enchantment even more intricate than those of her father, Carlo Rossetti.

It felt as if time had ceased to flow within the room when Oswald at last said quietly, "Ice fixing."

The inside of the wand glowed bluish-white for an instant before Oswald gently set it down on the tray. The last fine traces of silver magic vanished like a spider web being blown away in a breeze.



The enchantment was complete, but still no one spoke. Without a word, Oswald used a handkerchief to wipe away the sweat dripping from his temple to his cheek.

What do I do now—thank him or congratulate him on a job well done?

Before she could decide, Oswald stood up, deposited the hati wand on the workbench, and got straight to lecturing Dahlia about kelpie wands.

"Dahlia, you did a fine job planning out both magical circuits. However, with the enchantment on the kelpie bone, there are some areas where there isn't adequate fixation. That poses no issue if it's only used as a swizzle stick, but when it comes to tools that require high magic, you should try to apply two fixing spells."

"Two...? But won't the first spell keep out any more magic?"

"It's all right if some magic is repelled. The second spell will fill in gaps or areas of thinness that are not readily visible. It's better to do it than not, though some people consider the improvement to be marginal."

Filling in that difference was what made an artisan. *I've learned a valuable lesson today.* Dahlia clenched her fists, determined to try that method in the near future.

Oswald chuckled. "I suggest that you increase the magic slightly with the second spell, allow it to slide down from the top, and push it into the areas where it gets stuck. The best way to understand the principle is by practicing it over and over."

"Understood!"

Dahlia immediately noted down Oswald's advice. She wanted to get a handle on it so she could someday use it to make a magical sword for Volf. Applying two fixing spells sounded like good practice in general too.

"In any event, today was a wasted opportunity. I wish my son could have been here so this could have served as a lesson for him as well," Oswald said disappointedly.

Dahlia understood what he meant. Opportunities like this came once in a blue moon. It was especially rare to witness Leone carry out an enchantment.

Nevertheless, in the interest of keeping the development and techniques behind these tools confidential, it would have been difficult for Oswald's son to be permitted to sit in and observe.

Dahlia gave it some serious thought, then hit on an idea.

"This won't be exactly the same, but how about we create a snow flurry swizzle stick for our next lesson? We can practice working out the amount of magic we'll need to produce ice pellets of a certain size with bones of different lengths," she suggested.

She'd been inspired by remembering an exercise she'd done in one of her college magical toolmaking courses in which they'd had to adjust the strength of their enchantments in accordance to metal plates of different sizes.

"I like the sound of that," said Oswald. "What if we take the opportunity to experiment with different types of bone as well? I have a few in stock—green horse bones, sleipnir bones... Ah, unicorn might be another good option. It's said that monster bones differ in various respects depending on the region and climate they originate from. We could even compare monsters of the same species from the north and south."

"That sounds fascinating!"

When it came to making swizzle sticks, they wouldn't have to worry about danger or durability. Testing how different types of bones changed the effects or the enchantment process sounded very interesting.

She was growing excited just thinking about it, but then she felt a gaze on her. When she looked over, she saw a pair of golden eyes staring at her. They were only planning on making swizzle sticks, but apparently, that was too much for Volf the worrywart.

Oswald turned his silver eyes toward her and Volf, then laughed lightheartedly.

"How about this, then. I'll prepare several regular horse bones we can practice with."

Oswald's smile remained on his lips as he turned away from them. He grabbed the jacket hanging off the back of a chair and draped it over Leone's shoulders. As if it were the most normal thing in the world, Leone let Oswald put his arms through the sleeves,

then buttoned his cuffs himself.

"Now then," he said, "these two weapons are going to make some waves. Do you have any interest in making a name for yourself as 'Rossetti the magical weapons maker' and rising to a viscountcy or higher?"

Dahlia sensed Volf freeze in place. She kept her face professional as she responded.

"No, I do not. My vocation is creating magical tools for everyday living. I have discussed with Lord Guido and Master Jonas already about keeping the creation of these weapons confidential."

"I see. In that case, I will likewise do my part to keep your involvement a secret. Allow me to take care of that through the Merchants' Guild."

"Thank you. That would be very much appreciated."

"As for this one-handed sword, the one who supplied it to me has already consented that the enchanted version can also be made to be known as a creation of Dawn—or Fajr, as he is known in Išrana."

"That won't cause any trouble for Mr. Fajr, will it?" Dahlia asked. She knew she wouldn't want to suddenly be named the creator of a magical sword without even knowing it.

"He has already passed away. It was his wish to come to Ordine, but as a talented blacksmith, he wasn't permitted to leave the country. Apparently, he said that if one of his swords were ever enchanted in Ordine, he would want to create a 'sword that could pierce the darkness of a moonless night.'"

So even in the desert nation, there had been a blacksmith who wanted to make a magical sword. If he had been allowed to come here, then he likely would have been capable of creating a phenomenal blade that could cut down any monster, no matter how terrifying.

"And so, with this, we have completed Mr. Fajr's magical sword, the 'Night Piercer,'" Oswald said.

"The Night Piercer...!" Volf repeated. His eyes shone; it was plain that he'd immediately taken a liking to the name.

Dahlia suspected that the name the Scalfarottos would use for the sword had been decided as of this moment. She felt she should

offer a prayer of apology in the direction of the desert country where Dawn—Fajr—rested. But this one-handed sword was completely different from the Crimson Lotus Blade. Perhaps it was better that it have a different name as well. And above all, this beautiful sword truly did seem capable of cutting through a moonless night sky.

"How about we give the wand its own fitting name too?" Volf suggested.

Oswald nodded happily. "Oh yes, that sounds fun."

It seemed certain men very much enjoyed coming up with elaborate names. Speaking only for herself, Dahlia felt that something along the lines of "Multisided Enchanted Ice Wand" would be perfectly adequate, but perhaps that wasn't creative enough.

"...What about the *Ice Spider* Wand?" Leone murmured.

His voice was so quiet that Dahlia had barely heard him, but Volf and his sharp ears had no problem picking up what he said.

"The Ice Spider Wand! How cool! That's perfect for my brother!" he agreed eagerly.

Despite having been the one to propose the idea, Leone hastily tried to shoot it down. "Wait, Lord Volf! I wasn't serious! Something like the Ice Dragon Wand or the Hati Wand would be far more appropriate."

"Lord Leone, I'm not so sure about that..." said Oswald, nonplussed.

Each of the three men seemed to have his own image of the wand. Naming magical tools and weapons was never an easy task.

"Dahlia, what's your take?" Volf asked. "I think my brother would really like the name Ice Spider Wand."

"Ice Spider..."

Ice spiders were mythical monsters that were said to inhabit the frozen wastes of the north, where the ground was packed with ice. They trapped their prey in silvery webs that they spun over the ice.

At present, they were still classified as mythical; there had been no confirmed sightings. Some speculated that ice spiders remained constantly hidden beneath the ice or else were very good at concealing themselves.

One adventurer had reported that their companion had become

immobile on top of the ice and then vanished into a freezing fog. Another had heard their companion scream, but, despite a thorough search, had found only a single boot wrapped in a strand of silvery white thread. That account, detailed in a bestiary Dahlia had read, read like a ghost story.

If the spider was more than a myth, that meant there was a monster out there that a human had no hope of escaping from once they found themselves trapped in its web.

But Dahlia just wouldn't think about that at the moment; she had no plans to visit the frigid north. Instead, she thought of Guido and his profile, which brought to mind a civil official; his shiny silver hair; and his slender limbs—even more slender than Volf's—then nodded with conviction.

"I think it suits him. Ice spiders make me think of intelligence, and they don't sound as frightening as ice dragons... Oh, but does Lord Guido have any aversion to spiders or insects?"

"No, not that I know of, though he hated slugs and snails when we were kids."

Dahlia found it strange to lump spiders together with slugs, but she couldn't help but chuckle at the proof that even Guido had been a child at some point. Oswald seemed to have had the same thought; with one hand, he covered the smile playing at his lips.

As Dahlia, Oswald, and Volf conversed cheerfully, Leone, sitting across the table from them, let out a sigh. No one heard his next, nearly inaudible utterance.

"So the Ice Spider is going to share a nickname with his wand..."



"Both of their enchantments were incredible..."

"Yeah, I'm not an expert on magical tools, but that was amazing..."

Dahlia and Volf were taking a breather in the workshop after Leone and Oswald had departed.

It was late, so Dahlia poured them some sparkling water, and they lightly clinked their glasses. Although they weren't toasting with

alcohol, it still felt like a fitting celebration for the completion of the magical sword and wand. The carbonation was refreshing as the water made its way down her parched throat.

On the workbench were two carrying cases. One was the deep crimson box Leone had brought. It was an ornate item, covered in decorative sand lizard leather. Dahlia placed the magical sword Night Piercer inside, then gently closed the lid. Both the sword and its box looked well suited for Jonas.

The other case, for the Ice Spider Wand, was dark blue and accompanied by a small bag, both Fermo's handiwork. The exterior of the case was leather; the interior was lined with slippery blue silk made from monster silkworms to allow for the wand to be taken in and out easily.

The inside of the small bag was lined with cloth and cushioning material for holding fragile objects, and the exterior was leather with silver metal fittings along the edges and connecting the handle. Both case and bag were baphomet leather thrice-dyed with a blue plant-based dye.

Volf had stated, with the confidence of a younger brother, that the dark blue accessories were perfect for Guido. Dahlia hoped that each recipient would be pleased not only with the cases as well as their contents.

"Your enchantments are amazing too, Dahlia, but I guess every magical toolmaker has their own way of doing things," Volf said. He had already finished half his glass of sparkling water.

Dahlia nodded and replied, "You said it. Even I was surprised by how different their enchantments were."

"You don't say?"

"Yes, until recently, the only other times I've seen other people enchant were in college and when I watched my dad and Tobias. It's only recently that I've seen others enchant, like Professor Oswald and the magical toolmakers at the castle... It's illuminating to watch seasoned professionals at work."

After Dahlia graduated from college, she'd had few opportunities to watch other magical toolmakers at work. It would have been a different story if she'd gone to work for a large manufacturer or the

castle, where she would have been in the presence of many colleagues, but even in that type of environment, it was common for toolmakers to keep their own techniques and enchantment methods secret.

The fact that she had been able to observe Leone and Oswald's enchantments today was truly a precious opportunity, and one that she was deeply grateful for.

"Speaking of seasoned professionals, Lord Bernigi and the other veterans have officially returned to the Order of Beast Hunters as squires."

"I heard about that on the day of my debut. If they're squires, then the rest of you..."

...Must be finding it difficult to know how to treat them was how Dahlia wanted to finish that sentence, but she stopped herself. Bernigi and the other reinstated knights were surely putting their all into their duties, and naturally the same went for Volf and the other knights as well.

"Honestly, I have no idea how we're supposed to deal with them. They might be squires in name, but they *are* veterans." Volf furrowed his brow, making his distress clear to see.

"Um, do you find them difficult to talk to?" Dahlia asked. "Or are you worried about how their prosthetics will hold up during training?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just, as apprentices, they're really motivated... Their test scores when it came to monsters were pretty low, so they asked the captain to give everyone extra lessons about the difference between monsters of the past and now..."

"Extra lessons for everyone...?"

And they asked for this themselves? That is some serious dedication.

It was true that new monsters were always being discovered, and their populations and habitats changed over time. Add to that the emergence of mutant species, and it made sense that there was always new information for the squad to catch up on.

"The barrage of questions wore the captain down pretty quickly," Volf continued, "so he snagged all the Scarlet Armors, including me,

and made us tell them about the wyvern and red bears missions...”

“They sound very motivated indeed...”

Dahlia could tell by the faraway look in Volf’s eyes that the squires had had a long list of in-depth questions.

“After we answered everything, they asked us to give them a refresher on their practical skills, but since they’re all much more experienced in duels, it wasn’t a ‘refresher’ for them by any means. Our hands were tied, so we started with some basic drills, but they went all out and left the actual new recruits quaking in their boots...”

“Those poor recruits...”

“So then, the captain stopped us, saying that was enough for today, and everyone went to care for the horses.”

“The horses?”

What did they do, brush their own horses? Dahlia wondered, and Volf immediately explained.

“In the veterans’ time, the new recruits helped take care of the horses. Now we have caretakers at the stables, and when the veterans tried to clean the stables themselves, the caretakers pleaded with us to stop them.”

“I can understand why...”

It was never a good idea to do someone else’s job for them. If anything had gone wrong, the caretakers would have had to take responsibility for the veterans’ mistakes.

“And then they started cleaning the bathrooms and wiping the windows in the Order’s wing, and the cleaners burst into the vice-captain’s office...”

“Ah... I take it that was part of their duties when they were in the squad too, then.”

Dahlia knew that in the past, the Order of Beast Hunters had lacked both equipment and knights, but she’d never imagined that new recruits had done that kind of work even back then.

“When Vice-Captain Griswald put a stop to things, the veterans insisted he give them some sort of job or chore to do, so he ordered them to do a check of the training grounds. He meant for them to fix up rough patches, but they thought he meant for them to do the weeding...”

The furrow in Volf's brown deepened. The veterans must have complained when told not to do that either.

"They seemed to have decided that since there weren't many weeds and they weren't very tall, it being wintertime, it was better to just burn them, roots and all, instead of pulling them. I heard they set the fourth training ground on fire with medium-area fire magic."

"Oh, gosh..."

Their reasoning hadn't been completely irrational, but had it really been necessary to start with the most extreme measure? They certainly had burned each blade of grass down to its roots out of existence. They really were entirely too motivated.

"Some of the Second Knights' Regiment leaped out of the windows, and mages who had detected the magic came running over. There happened to be some water mages nearby, so everything turned out all right, but everyone, including the captain, was called into a conference room... They were still in there by the time I left."

"Wow..."

Dahlia couldn't help but feel a measure of sympathy for the knights—and for Captain Grato. The veterans were dedicated to a fault. It sounded like they needed someone to keep an eye on them. Whoever that chaperone ended up being, Dahlia had a feeling he would desperately need wyvern stomach medicine.

"Anyway, I'm going to go see my brother and Master Jonas about their plans. Why don't we give them their gifts together?"

"Good idea. They'll be so surprised."

Dahlia got a little giddy imagining their reactions. Then she had another idea.

"What if we give the Night Piercer to Lord Guido and the Ice Spider Wand to Master Jonas and let them exchange the gifts themselves?"

"I like that. We'll be giving the weapons to the ones who requested them. Considering the season, it'll be like they're exchanging winter festival gifts."

Exchanging gifts for the winter festival was a tradition carried out

mostly by couples, though friends and families sometimes participated as well. Dahlia thought nostalgically of how she and Irma had exchanged a hair accessory and a coffee mug when they were students.

"What's got you smiling, Dahlia?"

It seemed that at some point her happy memory had shown on her face. She told Volf about the gifts she and Irma had exchanged, and her smile soon infected him.

"That sounds like a fun time. I exchanged wine with Dorino and Randolph once, and then we all drank it together..."

That just sounded like a regular drinking party to Dahlia. The purpose of the tradition was to exchange lasting gifts to commemorate another successful year. Suddenly, she felt her earlobes throb dully.

On her ears were the shiny gold snowflake earrings Volf had given her. She had removed the long chains in advance of tonight's work, but every time she saw her reflection in a mirror or window, her eyes were drawn to the glimmer of gold.

"So do the presents we already exchanged count as winter festival gifts? You gave me these earrings, and I made you that nap lantern..."

Dahlia paused and reflected on her own words. Giving a nap lantern in exchange for earrings—essentially a home appliance in exchange for jewelry—lacked the slightest touch of romance. Not that it needed any, but she was still concerned her gift wasn't equivalent to his.

"...Oh, you're right! We *did* exchange winter festival gifts," Volf said. His golden eyes shone, and a smile illuminated his face. "That nap lantern is really great. I fall right asleep without overthinking things." His mouth suddenly flattened into a hard line. "If only it could stop me from dreaming..."

Dahlia wondered if dreams of fighting monsters were perhaps waking him, or if he was still having nightmares about the death of his mother, Vanessa. She couldn't bring herself to ask, so she instead changed the subject.

"So, uh, what are your plans for the winter festival?"

"I'll be on call at the castle starting in the evening. They try to keep mainly the unmarried knights on guard duty. I'm not doing anything that afternoon, though. What about you?"

"Nothing, really. I was thinking of doing some cleaning and cooking at home," Dahlia answered, remembering how she had always passed the New Year in her previous life.

Suddenly, Volf asked, "Dahlia, do you want to go to the winter festival together?"

"Huh...? The winter festival—together?" Dahlia repeated mindlessly.

They both fell silent for a moment.

Ordine's winter festival was famous as an event for couples or single people looking for partners. Consequently, the question "Do you want to go to the winter festival together?" was used as a way to ask someone if they wanted to start dating.

Wait, no, that's not what this is.

Volf was her friend, and he was hardly going to the winter festival to find a girlfriend. Plus, he had just said that he was going to be on duty at the castle later that evening. People also attended the festival with family and friends to browse the many food carts and stalls. Even she, as a child, had browsed the stalls in the West District with her father and Irma.

As she tried to get her swirling thoughts in order, Volf timidly opened his mouth.

"Um, maybe we could check out the food stalls? Dorino said the winter festival has exotic foods and alcohol to try."

"That sounds great! Count me in!"

"All right, winter festival food stall crawl, here we come!" Volf declared cheerily.

Dahlia smiled and nodded. If only he had mentioned the food stalls from the start, her mind wouldn't have taken that absurd leap. Still, the misunderstanding was her own fault.

After finishing his sparkling water, Volf donned his black coat and began his usual preparations for leaving the Green Tower. With familiar motions, he donned the fairy glasses Dahlia had made for him. She had already grown completely accustomed to seeing him

with green eyes similar to her father's.

"Volf, I'm sorry it's taken me so long, but I think I should make you a spare pair of those glasses soon. I've gotten used to my current magical grade now, so...let's do that together when you have time after the New Year."

"Thanks! That would be great. Oh, and I made a reservation at that restaurant that sells monster cuisine, so let's go there next week."

"Thank you for doing that. I'm looking forward to it!"

Dahlia had heard they served wyvern steak, kraken mousse, and other interesting dishes. She was very keen to try them out.

At any rate, she suddenly had many more plans for the end of the year—delivering the magical tools to Jonas and Guido, going to a restaurant to eat monster cuisine, and finally doing a food stall crawl at the winter festival. And she couldn't wait for each event.

As if speaking her thoughts aloud, the black-haired youth said, "We have so many plans. I can't wait!"



Leone and Oswald made their carriage ride home in the middle of night.

They were alone inside the small, crestless black carriage. In order to keep their visit to the Green Tower inconspicuous, their bodyguards had ridden in another carriage, which now trailed behind theirs.

Leone loosened his tie and collar. He felt the discomfort of sweat dripping down his back. Since his youth, it had been Leone's habit to coat his face in a salve that kept it free of sweat. Tonight it had come in handy for the first time in a while.

"She really is just like Carlo..." he sighed.

"Indeed. Perhaps it's true what they say about daughters resembling their fathers..."

"Circuits on two sides of a sword and four sides of a wand..."

"I truly wasn't expecting that..."

After they'd exchanged sighs, Leone smiled dryly. So Oswald had

been thinking along the same lines, then. The one-handed sword and wand had turned out to far exceed their expectations. Surely the master and servant of the Scalfarotto family would be pleased with the results.

As Leone imagined the pair using their magical tools, he prayed that neither of them would ever have to do so in an actual fight.

"But I must say, I was quite shocked to see you successfully enchant that detailed mirrored circuit in one attempt. I daresay, Lord Leone, that you've continued improving your skills even after taking down your magical toolmaker's shingle."

"It's you who's drastically improved his skills, Oswald. I never knew you could construct three-dimensional magic like that."

Witnessing Oswald's magic had stirred something in Leone. When it came to his own enchantments, all he could do was brute force things. Oswald's, meanwhile, had been intricate and delicate—a work of art.

"To be quite honest, I was barely keeping it together," Oswald admitted, averting his gaze.

Leone, too, averted his gaze and said, "To be honest, so was I."

Having made their confessions, they relaxed their wooden postures. Leone crossed his legs and leaned casually against the backrest. Oswald hunched over slightly, removed his silver-rimmed glasses, and rubbed his brow.

"That circuit was no easy thing. Not for my magic, nor for these old eyes," he said.

"And how," Leone agreed. "Carlo enjoyed making detailed circuits, but I wasn't expecting her to be so similar to him in that regard."

"Dahlia's are even *more* detailed, though she doesn't seem to know it. I was dismayed when I looked at the blueprint, but that only made her concerned for my magic."

"The impact of Carlo's teaching, no doubt. I'd wager that's a normal reaction for the Rossetti family. That said, I was surprised to hear that he had her do his metal plate exercise as a child. He was the Enchantment Devil indeed."

"Enchantment Devil" had been Carlo Rossetti's nickname among his toolmaker friends. As a student, his precise magical control,

which far exceeded his years, had amazed both his classmates and teachers. But Carlo himself would only smile and say he was nothing compared to his father and that he wished he had stronger magic.

Leone had wanted better control rather than stronger magic, while Oswald had wanted control to make up for his low magic. The three youths had been united in wanting what they didn't have.

"If Dahlia keeps that training up, she'll be just like Carlo in no time," Oswald remarked.

"She still does it?"

"I recognized that well-polished metal plate on her shelf. There was a hole in the center just a tad larger than a hair... If I had started practicing as a child, I could have saved my fingernails from a lot of pain in college..."

"I had to go to the infirmary three times because of that training. Professor Lina was very worried. She thought I had suffered from a spontaneous magical explosion."

"I have a feeling that had our seniors not been able to use healing magic, I would've gone to the infirmary dozens of times."

Before they knew it, both men fell to staring at their fingertips.

The exercise consisted of channeling one's magic through a hole in a sheet of metal coated with sealsilver. It might have sounded simple. The trick was controlling one's magic and keeping it focused in a single direction. Leone would never forget the pain of his uncontrollable magic rebounding to hit him in the fingers.

For those with strong magic, the less control they had, the more painful the recoil—and the keener the realization of their poor control.

"Through that training, you were able to go from channeling your magic through a hole the size of a cantaloupe to one smaller than a man's fist. I would say that's considerable progress, wouldn't you?"

"That's not a compliment, and you know it," Leone said with an unconcealed scowl.

Though he boasted a high magical grade, his control over it had been pathetically feeble. However, Carlo's instruction had helped Leone greatly reduce the number of magical tools he destroyed in the process of making them. That could certainly be called

considerable progress, but he was still unable to go smaller than three fingers' width.

"You didn't appear to have much trouble with the enchantment you just carried out," Oswald pointed out.

"I had no choice but to perform. She was looking at me with complete faith that I could do it, since I was Carlo's senior. Lord Volf had the same look in his eyes... How could I tell them I couldn't do it? You must have felt the same way, no?"

"Well, yes. I am Dahlia's teacher, in a sense. The words 'I can't do it' cannot be part of my vocabulary. It was only last week that I figured out that enchantment, though."

Oswald's voice was carefree, but his words were shocking. Leone scrutinized his face. It still glistened with sweat, and he had noticeable dark circles under his eyes.

"That was a bit reckless of you. What if you had failed?"

"'Failure' is not in my vocabulary either. If it turned out that I had used more magic this afternoon for work and hadn't had enough to spare this evening, then I would simply have gone to the Adventurers' Guild for more hati bones and ice dragon scales, practiced with them, and returned to the Green Tower to do the enchantment another day."

"That posturing of yours—you never cease..."

"A nobleman must always be posturing. And besides, I will be growing older than Carlo."

Leone took Oswald's words to mean "Since I will live longer than Carlo, I must devote myself to honing my skills as a magical toolmaker in order to surpass him."

When Leone failed to respond, Oswald put his silver-rimmed glasses back on and continued.

"I have no doubt Lord Guido and Lord Jonas will both be pleased with the wand. Dahlia's future is secure."

"I only hope that christening the wand with his nickname won't displease the Ice Spider."

"I'm sure he will take no issue with it if you tell him it was Sir Volf who decided on it. I'll support your claim."

"Please do."

Frankly, he would be protected by the fact that Guido was young enough to be his son. It would have been arduous indeed to quarrel about that with a man of his own generation.

"Do you intend to tell Lord Jonas who supplied you with that one-handed sword?" Oswald asked.

"It's not for me to tell. I'm sure the one who *should* tell him will, someday."

When Leone had reached out to that certain chairman from Išrana, the latter had agreed to send him the sword without a moment's delay. For the sword, which the merchant seemed to have prepared beforehand, he had charged what was undeniably too low a sum. Still, Leone had accepted it without question. He knew it all had to do with the chairman's relationship to the pair, but Leone wondered how they would feel about that. He could not honestly say.

"...Are you having fun with that?"

"Yes, I find it fascinating."

While Leone was ruminating, Oswald had started trying out the snow flurry swizzle stick he'd received from Dahlia. He was piling ice pellets on his palm with a smile on his face in spite of the cold. Leone had a strong feeling that Oswald would begin working out a way to improve on the swizzle stick the second he got home.

"I know you well. You're going to make a copy of it and test its limits until it breaks, aren't you?"

"I am of the opinion that a magical toolmaker's responsibility is to test the limits of a tool's abilities. Besides, when it comes to destroying tools, I cannot hold a candle to you, the great Demolitore."

Leone grimaced at the mention of his old nickname, which he found both nostalgic and hard to hear. "Don't call me that. It reminds me how much I had to pay to repair the wall of the school."

"Carlo and I both offered to help..."

"We seniors had our pride."

He and the other students in the Magical Tool Research Group had gotten carried away and, against their better judgment, amplified a magical tool meant for cleaning. They'd ended up

blowing a hole in the wall of the school building.

Afterward, to keep the blame from falling on their club advisor, Professor Lina, both Leone and Uros—the current director of the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, who, despite the difference in age between himself and Leone, had been in his year and classes at the time—had paid for all the damages, along with another friend who hailed from a noble family and was graduating that year. At the time, Leone had been working himself to the bone just to make ends meet, and the cost had been a painful one.

However, after that, Uros, Oswald, and their other friend had shared their materials and school supplies with Leone, always claiming they had extra or had bought too many. And eventually, they were able to sell their magical cleaning tool for use on the castle walls, so they'd made a profit in the end.

In addition to that, Carlo had substantially increased the time he spent teaching Leone to control his magic. Thanks to that, it had been quite a while before he was able to enjoy a day of pain-free hands and eyes again.

"It was you who made the anklet Ivano wears, wasn't it?" Oswald asked. "Won't you think of giving another go at working as a magical toolmaker, Demolitore?"

"It's not for me. I only make tools for close friends and family."

Leone had no intention of creating a magical tool of his own invention ever again. Nor would he make a magical tool he didn't want to make. He was much more suited to trade and keeping money in motion.

"I want to return to an earlier topic... I understand you have been declining all inquiries from the castle regarding your promotion to an earl."

"...I have no recollection of that."

"There are also rumors that half of the nobles in the capital have taken loans from Viscount Jedda."

"Those rumors have it wrong. I've only given loans to thirty-one percent of families."

Oswald raised his eyebrows, then gave a throaty chuckle. "You have impressive reach. I see now—you have no need to become an

earl."

Oswald had hit the nail on the head. Leone felt no desire to rise in rank and have input on politics. He performed his obligations as a viscount of the Kingdom of Ordine, but he refused to be asked to do anything more.

"My children can raise our family's rank if they so choose. But enough about me. We should be celebrating *your* impending promotion. To rise by two ranks on your own is a magnificent achievement, and I say that with all sincerity. Perhaps I shall amend my speech to give you the respect a viscount deserves, *Lord* Oswald?"

"That gave me chills, so I have to strongly decline. Besides, if Carlo were still alive, he would have risen in rank before me."

"Probably. Though I'm almost positive he's in the afterlife fretting about his daughter right now."

"I'm sure everything will be fine. Dahlia has people on her side, including the soon-to-be Marquis Scalfarotto and, from the opposing faction, the Marquis D'Orazi," Oswald said airily.

Leone wasn't satisfied with that, though. "Dahlia the magical toolmaker" and her company were garnering too much attention at the Merchants' Guild and the castle.

"Oswald, what will you do if someone even *higher* comes into play?"

"I still owe a debt to Carlo," Oswald replied without the slightest hesitation.

Leone narrowed his eyes at his former underclassman. Oswald had just affirmed that even if someone higher in rank than a marquis were involved, he would align himself with Dahlia.

Oswald was going to become a viscount of the kingdom. He owned his own company and he had a family. And yet he was resolute in proclaiming his intent to protect Dahlia. Those arms of Oswald's were probably longer and stronger than Leone's own by now.

When Oswald had joined the Magical Tool Research Group, he had been a handsome, intelligent young man who came from a good family with a lot of wealth. Leone had called him the "annoying

underclassman" despite being quite fond of him.

That underclassman of his used to agonize over his failed tools, yet look at him now—he was a charismatic chairman, a magical toolmaker who made tools not for the castle but for the royal family themselves, and he would be rising to a viscountcy next term as a result of his many achievements.

Having been born to prestigious and wealthy viscountcy, he knew all about nobles and their manners. His elegant smile, befitting the nickname "the Silver Fox," offered reassurance to his allies. And signaled nothing but trouble for his enemies.

Oswald quietly met Leone's gaze with his silver eyes.

"And what will you do, Lord Leone?"

"I... I've decided to protect my family."

"I see."

Oswald neither criticized nor lauded his choice. He simply nodded.

As students, they had laughed, gotten rowdy, and done a lot of foolish things together. Leone recalled those days as if they were yesterday, but now, their positions in life were separated by a vast gulf. Although their ambitions were similar, they had chosen different methods and spheres of activity.

But occasionally, as now, Leone wanted to push those differences aside and reminisce about the past. Did that desire stem from the exhilaration he felt after making two magical tools that had required a great deal of magic, or was it because they had just been in the Green Tower, Carlo's home?

The deceased did not age. Leone felt freshly aware of the fact that he would continue growing older than Carlo. Finally, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Oswald, why don't we have a drink together, like old times? You helped me with the enchantments tonight, so it'll be my treat."

"I am thrilled at the invitation, but are you quite sure? You once told me you would never drink with me again."

"...I retract that statement, *Oz*."

"Thank you, *Leo*. I would be happy to join you for a drink."

After he responded, Oswald finally loosened his tie, and his smile

softened a touch. Leone was reminded of why he'd stopped drinking with him.

"But listen, Oz. If your daughter told you she was going to give your good friend an embroidered handkerchief, you'd do anything you could to stop her, wouldn't you?"

It was a very old story by this point. When Leone's daughter was still in college, she had gone to the Zola Company and fallen in love at first sight with, of all people, Oswald. She'd embroidered a handkerchief, a gesture that, among nobles, was equivalent to declaring one's first love.

"You think so, Leo?" Oswald replied with an affected air.

Leone had a bad feeling about that mischievous glint in his silver eyes, and as it transpired, he was right to be wary, for Oswald's next words were the following:

"I personally wouldn't stop my son if he told me he was going to give Gabriella red flowers."

"Don't even joke about that!"

That annoying underclassman of his had refined himself to be even more annoying. Oswald squinted those unchanged silver eyes of his and listened with amusement as Leone scolded him.

Interlude: Reflections of a Silver Fox

The morning sun was not yet visible, but the dark blue sky was edged with pale scarlet. A carriage made its way down the nobles' quarter, its wheels clattering lightly over the road.

"I had too much to drink..."

Oswald leaned back in his seat and let out an alcohol-soaked sigh. For the first time in a while, he had drunk without restraint, as he had when he was a younger man. Leone had joined him in doing so. If Oswald told his younger self about Leone, the so-called miserly viscount, popping the cork off the next wine bottle before they had even finished the one before it, he would have dismissed it with a laugh.

Oswald worried that this overnight binge drinking session would affect his day's work, but he still didn't feel like he wanted to put on the bracelet in his inner pocket that would sober him up. It had been so long since he'd had a drink with Leo and reminisced about their school days. It wasn't just the wine he was drunk on but also the enjoyment of forgetting their noble statuses. He didn't want to sober up from that quite yet.

He closed his eyes and the clatter of the carriage wheels turned into a lullaby.

"I hope you can find a magical toolmaker to serve as your right-hand man..."

When his father had uttered those words as if speaking to himself, Oswald—a college student at the time—had nodded vaguely. Oswald had low magic for a noble, and he couldn't wield any of the four elements or use healing magic. Becoming a mage or a knight was not in his future.

Fortunately, his family was a wealthy viscountcy. When he decided to study magical toolmaking in college, his father had said this:

"I will set up a company in your name, and you can employ magical toolmakers to work for you. Establish connections with those in your magical toolmaking classes or clubs whom you get along with."

Oswald followed that advice. Once he started college, he made friends in his classes and decided to join the Magical Tool Research Group. As soon as he nervously opened the door to the clubroom, he was greeted by a voice.

"Welcome to the Magical Tool Research Group! Oh, and talk to me like you would a friend. We're not that far apart in age."

The voice belonged to a young man with bright eyes as green as spring, and he spoke with none of the authoritative air of an older student. Their introductions and Oswald's induction into the club were over with surprising quickness.

Carlo Rossetti was the type of person to turn a genuine smile to an underclassman he had just met. To Oswald, who was accustomed to aristocratic insincerity, it was very refreshing to see.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. Rossetti."

"Likewise! And call me Carlo."

"All right, then please call me Oz, Carlo."

Carlo's father was Baron Rossetti, the inventor of the famous magical lantern. As the son of that toolmaker, Carlo already had experience making magical tools and was quite skilled at enchanting.

But Carlo was never a braggart. He was cheerful and friendly and was always looking to help others who needed it. Sometimes he would get a bit wild when magical tools were involved, but even that was just one of his quirks.

As someone who'd had very few friends in primary school, Oswald felt he had found his place in college and the Magical Tool Research Group. He listened to the older students share their knowledge about magical tools and how to draw magical circuits, and he practiced making magical tools, an endeavor that was always full of excitement. He and his classmates helped one another out

with subjects they were more proficient in, exchanged notes, and had fun in their extracurriculars. During his time off, he would either go to the workshop of the magical toolmaker he apprenticed under or spend time with his new friends.

He received the attention of girls, not only those also studying magical toolmaking but throughout the entire school, with some even handing him embroidered white handkerchiefs as confessions of love. Those days, which could truly be called the springtime of his life, were fun and dazzling.

And yet Oswald felt a coldness within him. In primary school, he had been overweight and withdrawn, and he'd had few friends. His grades were good, but his classmates had made fun of his appearance behind his back. Even his first girlfriend had only confessed to him as a prank. That fake relationship had left Oswald feeling depressed.

He was able to get back on his feet with the help of his family, but he couldn't help but feel that if he were to become overweight again, all the girls flocking to him now wouldn't give him the time of day. He would always have to be mindful of his weight and take care of his appearance.

When he entered college, he had been awakened to the delight of magical toolmaking, but he knew that someone with magic as low as his had no hope of becoming an exceptional magical toolmaker. His father would establish a company for him, and Oswald would be relegated to employing skilled magical toolmakers and telling them what to make.

Bitter though he was about those two facts, he also felt there was nothing he could do about them. He accepted his future with resignation.

But then Carlo came in and turned everything on its head.

"Oz, what was the tastiest flower nectar you drank when you were a kid?" Carlo suddenly asked him one day, holding a sugar pot for tea. They were in the clubroom of the Magical Tool Research Group.

"Flower nectar?" Oswald repeated. He had no memory of ever

doing such a thing as a child.

Flowers grew in the garden of his home, or he could purchase a bouquet from a florist. As for flower nectar, that was something purchased in glass bottles. When Oswald explained as much, other noble-born students voiced their agreement.

"You've never drunk flower nectar? You just leave it all for the bees? Everyone, you're missing out!"

Oswald found Carlo's assertion absurd, but his interest was piqued. On their next free day, they decided to meet under the pretense of collecting materials for magical tools. Carlo, Oswald, and anyone else in their research group who wanted to join wandered around the Green Tower and the gates of the capital. Their mission was finding flowers to suck their nectar.

There were plenty of scarlet sage growing behind the Green Tower. Carlo's mother had kindly told them to help themselves with a smile. Oswald timidly plucked one of the red flowers and saw only a few drops of nectar at its base. Still, it had an unforgettable, delicate sweetness.

Their next stop was a meadow near the gates of the capital. They searched for wildflowers under the azure sky, plucking them and sucking their nectar as they went. Some flowers had no nectar at all, and sometimes the boys found themselves getting chased by the bees that had gotten there first.

Whenever Oswald finally found nectar to drink, he discovered that each flower had its own unique scent and flavor, each one as sweet as the last.

There were many sons of nobles among the participants, Oswald included, which meant that they had bodyguards in tow as well. Even they, stone-faced as they were at first, eventually joined them in drinking the nectar and discussing their favorite flavors.

"Rossetti, which flowers have the best tasting nectar?" one of the bodyguards asked.

"I recommend scarlet sage, honeysuckle, and milk vetch!" Carlo said with a boundlessly cheerful smile, making all the bodyguards grin as well.

Oswald had discovered that his favorite was milk vetch. It was a

lovely pink and white flower that was hard to pluck properly and held only a small amount of nectar. Yet nothing beat its mellow sweetness, which retained the scent of the flower itself.

That day, everyone stayed out until evening walking among the flowers until finally making their way back home.

For a while after that, Oswald became obsessed with nectar. Even at home, he began spreading a thin layer of honey on his bread. Sometimes he considered that he should stop, since he had made so much progress on his diet. When he had those thoughts, the honey didn't taste very sweet at all.

One time, Carlo had walked into the school restroom at the same time Oswald was there, staring at his reflection in the mirror. He weighed himself every day, but he couldn't help but think that his face looked rounder now. Unable to keep that worry to himself, he voiced it aloud.

"Carlo, do you think I've gotten softer lately?"

Carlo widened his green eyes and replied, "You've always been soft, Oz. You're nice and you hardly ever get mad. In fact, I think you could stand to relax a little more."

I was asking about my appearance, not my personality.

Oswald found himself bringing up a painful memory in spite of himself.

"Well, um, people call me the Silver Fox these days, but when I was in primary school, people called me the Gray Piglet. I was on the heavy side..."

"Really? Well, weight fluctuates, and your hair looks nice, whether you call it gray or silver."

Oswald wished he wouldn't say something like that so lightly. It made him feel small for having worried about it, and he wasn't sure if Carlo's statement made him feel embarrassed or happy.

"Carlo..." Oswald mumbled, unable to hold back his frown.

"Oh, sorry! I guess that's not such a great nickname. Silver Fox sounds much cooler than Gray Piglet!"

Carlo had apologized for the wrong thing, but for some reason, Oswald nodded anyway.

After that, Oswald stopped worrying so much about his weight.

Instead, he decided to keep himself handsome in his hairstyle, physique, and clothing with the positive outlook that befit a silver fox. Once he did, he began receiving even more embroidered handkerchiefs from the female students...and even more resentful looks from the male students.

One day, the members of the Magical Tool Research Group were gathered in the clubroom discussing their futures. Many of the noble upperclassmen already had their places of employment decided, but some also aspired to be magical toolmakers for the castle or to apprentice at a workshop. When Oswald was asked about his plans, he spoke honestly.

"I'm planning on starting a company that sells magical tools when I graduate. I'll be managing the business, and I'll find magical toolmakers to be in charge of production."

"Why wouldn't you be involved in the creation process, Oz? I bet you could even invent a new tool yourself."

When Oswald first joined the club, Carlo had told him that he could make magical tools despite his low magic. Now, he was telling him he could even invent magical tools.

"Please, be realistic, Carlo. You saw how my sea serpent hand mirror ended up, remember?"

Oswald had undertaken that project the other day. The color had been mottled, and air bubbles had marred its surface. It had no practical use at all. Somehow, Leone had been able to sell it by calling it not a magical tool but the work of an up-and-coming artist, so he had ended up breaking even.

"Control is learned with time! Enchantments come with practice! That's what my dad tells me, at least," Carlo said.

"That's a Rossetti saying if I ever heard one..." another student remarked.

Everyone in the room had to admit he was right. Carlo performed admirable enchantments, but word was they were nothing compared to what his father, Baron Rossetti, was capable of.

Improving one's magical toolmaking skills required time and consistent practice. That was all. There were no shortcuts, much to

the disappointment of the young students.

But when Oswald heard that, his eyes lit up without his even realizing it. It was late for him to start aspiring to be a magical toolmaker, but he enjoyed making tools and he did not mind practicing enchanting. In fact, he greatly enjoyed learning how to make new magical tools from his teachers and his upperclassmen.

If he continued to devote himself to practicing and churning out as many tools as he could, then perhaps even he could become a full-fledged magical toolmaker. And as Carlo suggested, the idea of owning his own company *and* inventing his own tools did have its appeal. Oswald decided to make significant changes to his life plan.

In truth, he would have liked to work with Carlo, but he couldn't bring himself to voice that aloud.

In school, Oswald devoted himself to his studies, practicing control over his magic, and making magical tools. He had a fun and rambunctious time with his friends in the Magical Tool Research Group, and he experienced many joys and sorrows in love.

Throughout that time, Carlo was there to give him advice. Whether it be about school or magical tools, romance or family, Oswald felt he could go to him for any problem he had. There were even times when Carlo asked him for advice, mainly pertaining to magic or magical tools.

At some point, Oswald felt that coldness within him had faded. His life at school had been a fulfilling time that made a lasting impression on him.

Oswald graduated one year after Carlo did.

After establishing his company at a young age, he threw himself into his roles as a chairman and a magical toolmaker. His family told him several times that he would collapse if he overworked himself and that he should give up trying to juggle two occupations. But he couldn't make himself quit. He wanted to be both.

He fell in and out of love, got married only for his marriage to fall apart, and his business went through a rough patch. After he finally invented a new magical tool, he felt his skill and magic had hit a plateau and he would never be capable of making another one. He

had a hard time doing business with nobles and nearly drowned trying to swim in their world.

Oswald experienced many high peaks and low valleys over the years. The lowest valley of all was his failed first marriage. After his wife and apprentice ran off together, taking the money from his shop with them, there came a day when Oswald thought it would be easier to end it all.

Having presumably heard about the situation from somewhere, Carlo suddenly appeared at his door. He dragged Oswald to a food stall and made him drink and vent his feelings. Then Carlo brought him home to the Green Tower, encouraging him as they went that he should make a new magical tool for his daughter, Dahlia.

With renewed motivation, Oswald made the cooling fan, and business for his company and shop began to boom as if things had reverted to normal—no, *better* than normal.

Every time he looked at a cooling fan, he thought about the fact that if Carlo hadn't come for him that day, he might have left this world for good. *I'll pay him back someday. One day, I'll be his peer as a magical toolmaker, not merely an underclassman trying to live up to his senior.*

Oswald continued to interact with Carlo in social situations, such as baronial dinners and other business-related events. However, for the past few years, it had seemed as if Carlo was avoiding him. Each time he felt that way, Oswald brushed it off as just being his imagination. They both had busy schedules, after all.

It was only now that Oswald wondered why he had never just asked Carlo about it directly when he had the chance.

The last time Oswald saw Carlo, it was at a baronial event hosted by an earl. Oswald spotted Carlo alongside a wall and called out to him.

"It's been a while, Carlo."

"Ah, Oz. Yes, that it has," Carlo replied. His face looked ashen.

"Has your work been busy?" Oswald asked worriedly. "You look a bit pale in the face."

Carlo responded with his usual wry smirk. "Just a hangover."

"Be careful about drinking too much. For your daughter's sake as

well as your own."

"I was drinking with a friend yesterday. This isn't a regular thing."

The first thought to cross Oswald's mind was *I'm jealous.* After his failed first marriage, the only time he drank with Carlo was at one of these baron parties. They had gone out to lunch after running into each other at the Merchants' Guild a few times, but they had never talked the night away. Oswald's work and home life had finally settled down recently. He wanted to spend some with Carlo talking about the good old days.

"Carlo, what do you say we—"

...have a drink together? he wanted to say, but before Oswald could finish his sentence, someone called out to Carlo. Over walked the earl who was hosting the evening's event.

"Baron Rossetti, there is someone here who would like to have a word with you in another room. You—Baron Zola, you are welcome to come if you'd like."

The event was a standing buffet, with people occasionally moving into separate rooms to have private conversations. Refusing was not an option when the earl called for you to accompany him to one of those rooms.

Before Oswald could give his consent, Carlo put up his left hand to stop him.

"Excuse me, *Chairman Zola*. It seems someone is waiting for me."

Carlo had called him Chairman Zola instead of Oz. Perhaps the person he didn't want Oswald to meet was an important client, or perhaps a woman. Oswald decided to stand down without pressing further.

"I still have a few people to say hello to, so I will wait for the next opportunity," he said.

It seemed his presence wasn't important there anyway. The earl accompanied Carlo as he made his way out of the great hall.

Suddenly, Carlo turned around and said, "Oz, look after your health, and get along with your wives!"

It wasn't like Carlo to say something so patronizing, but he spoke with his usual smile.

Carlo never returned to the great hall. In fact, Oswald never saw

him again. He was away from the capital on business, so he only heard about Carlo's passing at the end of spring.

"You're gone too soon, Carlo..."

Oswald made his overdue visit to the graveyard alone and voiced his regret aloud. But he knew there was no bringing someone back from the dead, so although he felt sorrow for his friend's death, he went about his days more or less as usual.

However, the ties that bound people together were mysterious things. One day, Volfred, the fourth son of the Scalfarotto family—a family that was one of Oswald's clients—appeared in his shop along with Carlo's daughter.

It was as though Carlo had known this would happen. Just as he'd promised, Oswald gave his daughter, Dahlia, the card to enter his magical tool shop.

Dahlia told Oswald about how Carlo had used his invention, the cooling fan, and how he had often spoken of Oswald and considered him a friend. When he heard that, Oswald felt like a load he had been carrying for years had been lifted off his chest.

Oswald maintained a relationship with Dahlia after that. He became her magical toolmaking teacher, taking over from Carlo, who had passed before her training was complete. It was something that made Oswald happy to do. He felt that he had repaid a little of his debt to Carlo.

Dahlia was a hard worker, and although she had a low magical grade, she absorbed knowledge and techniques like blotting paper. Oswald thought she might be a good influence on his son, Raulaere. And, well, she might have sparked a pining in him, but Oswald watched over the two of them with a smile.

Dahlia took flight with astonishing speed. She established a company, invented several new magical tools, gained access to the castle, became advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters, and was now in line to receive a barony.

Dahlia's explosive success made Oswald apprehensive. It was as if Carlo had been hiding his daughter.

If she joined the Royal Magical Toolmaking Department, headed by Director Uros, where she could develop everyday magical tools or

weapons for the Order of Beast Hunters, that would pose no issues. She could one day rise to a viscount, or join the Scalfarotto family, and continue honing her skills as a toolmaker all the while.

However, some toolmakers in the kingdom were expected to do more than that. Oswald did not know who those toolmakers might be, or where they were doing their secretive work. All he knew was that there were magical toolmakers who were handsomely rewarded for creating weapons to keep the kingdom safe. And he'd had to swim in noble society for some time before gleaning even that minimal information.

When Carlo was a student, he had been offered the opportunity to work as a magical toolmaker at the castle. The following year, Oswald's father had told him that the castle had expressed interest in hiring him as a toolmaker as well, so he had assumed it was a feasible path even for people with low magic but good grades.

"Magical toolmakers of the castle may be restricted by their family status and magical grade. You'll find that as someone who is the son of a viscount and has low magic, your potential there will be limited. You will find much more freedom in your own company," his father had told him. Oswald had taken his word for it and declined the offer.

But Carlo's reason for declining differed from his own.

"I turned down the offer because I wouldn't be able to make what I want to make," Carlo had told him. He avoided making eye contact, then lowered his voice and continued, as if to himself, "I don't want to make magical tools that will make it so I never enjoy a drink again..."

Carlo loved his freedom. At the time, Oswald assumed that Carlo disliked the stuffy atmosphere of the castle or that he would rather invent his own tools than ones he had no interest in, so he only gave a casual response and didn't probe further.

But now, it nagged at him. Had Carlo's sudden passing really been due to natural causes, or had it been because he refused to make magical tools that would make alcohol lose its flavor? Or had he declined an order from some high-ranking individual and subsequently been made to disappear? Those suspicions began to

take root in Oswald.

He also became suspicious of the fact that his father persuaded him not to accept an offer to be a castle magical toolmaker, but his father was no longer alive for him to ask even if he wanted to. Oswald even tried to ask Leone about Carlo's cause of death in a roundabout way, but his only response was "I have nothing to tell you about that." Oswald knew he couldn't press the viscount for any more details.

If Oswald attempted to gather the threads connected to Carlo's death, someone might notice. And should those threads lead him back to the royal family or a high-ranking noble, Oswald had no hope of holding his own against them.

But Carlo had been the one to free Oswald from his hangups about his appearance and the one who had shown him his potential as a magical toolmaker when he had been resigned to only managing a company. Carlo had been the one to save Oswald when he had been considering ending his life after his first wife left him.

Carlo was his senior, that was true, but it wasn't fair how much more he had done for Oswald than the other way around. He felt he could never completely repay him, but if his daughter, Dahlia, was ever being forced to follow a path she didn't want to take, then Oswald would become the pillar to keep her in place.

As fortune would have it, Oswald would soon be rising to the rank of viscount. If he played all his cards—his position as a viscount, a magical toolmaker who conducted business with the royal family, and chairman of the Zola Company—then he should start to see where those threads connected.

At least right now, Dahlia had the protection of the Scalfarotto family. If Dahlia could stay safe from harm as things were, then all the better. And if this was all needless worry on Oswald's part, that was just fine too. But if that wasn't true, if she wasn't safe—

Suddenly, he heard neighing horses and felt the carriage stop.

The carriage door opened, and standing on the other side was a black-haired woman—his wife, Ermelinda. She must have gotten worried when he didn't immediately descend from the carriage.

“Welcome home, dear. Are you feeling tired?”

“I drank a bit too much.”

Oswald gave his head a light shake, put on the bracelet in his inner pocket, and poured magic into it. He felt his drunkenness lessen as if being lifted out of his body.

“Mel, thank you for waiting up for me at such a late hour. But next time, please don’t trouble yourself, and get in bed. I have my nighttime guards with me.”

“I didn’t want to miss the chance to see you so late at night—or should I say, first thing in the morning,” his wife replied with a smile. Behind her, the morning sun was starting to rise. Evidently, he had stayed out all night and into the morning. It had been ages since he’d done that.

“Did anything of note happen yesterday?” Oswald asked as he exited the carriage.

“I enchanted my first ring,” Mel said with a modestly proud smile.

That was not an easy task for her as someone who possessed strong magic and had once been an advanced adventurer. It could be rather difficult for someone like that to achieve the optimal focus for enchanting a tool.

“That is wonderful to hear. You’ve been working hard.”

“I have Raul’s effective instruction to thank.”

“Raul...”

Oswald wasn’t about to feel jealous of his own son. Teaching others helped speed up his own learning process, so he of course wanted him to continue doing so. However, he wondered if perhaps Raul was better at teaching others than he himself was. He just felt a little disappointed about that.

“It’s my hope that someday, I can assist you with your work, dear...”

Oswald appreciated Mel’s intentions, but she was still young. He decided to suggest something that might be more practical for the future.

“You’re such a hard worker. I have no doubts you can become a skilled magical toolmaker if you set yourself to the task. How would you feel about having a tutor to teach you magical theory? I can

teach you when it comes to magical tools."

"I would like to learn, but I don't plan on becoming a magical toolmaker. I am your wife first and foremost, after all," she said with a smile.

Oswald smiled back at her. "And I am very happy about that."

They entered the house, ascended the stairs, and walked down the hallway. At the sight of the red glow of the morning sky outside the window, Oswald stopped. The red of the sky reminded him of the hair of Carlo's daughter.

"Dear?" Mel prodded with a small frown.

He could tell she was worried about him, and he decided to throw her a question that would worry her even more.

"What would you do if I told you there was something I wanted to do even if it should jeopardize my current social status?"

"Ms. Caterina would tell you to entrust the house and children to her, and Ms. Fiore would tell you to entrust the company to her."

He knew Ermelinda was correct in her suppositions about his other wives.

Caterina was well acquainted with the ways of nobles. She was equipped to take over full responsibility of the Zola family if the need arose, so she would be able to protect the children and make the public think that Oswald was ill or had died from illness. There were also several noble families inside and outside of the kingdom who could shield her, so he wasn't concerned about her survival.

As for Raulaere's magical toolmaking education, she would be able to reach out to some private contacts to find adept magical toolmakers to take over for Oswald. Though truthfully, as Raul's father, he did not want to yield his son's education to another.

Fiore, meanwhile, was well-versed in the ways of merchants. She would have no trouble taking over the business in Oswald's absence. Even if she faced pressure in Ordine, Oswald's younger brother owned a sister company in Ehrlichia. Merchants could choose their countries, unbound by borders.

However, Oswald still hadn't received an answer from the wife he had posed the question to.

"And you?"

"I don't want to see you get hurt, dear," she told him frankly.

He had seen this coming. "Then, would you stop me, Mel?"

"No. I would fight by your side, whether our opponents be monsters or humans. I want you to do whatever and follow whatever path you like, dear."

It was an unsurprising answer coming from a former adventurer. Oswald knew he could always count on her.

"If I go down that path and fail, I might have no choice but to retire. I will make sure you will be better taken care of first."

Oswald had already set aside enough funds for each of his wives to keep them afloat if anything were to happen to him. But he had to take the worst-case possibilities into consideration as well. It was best he set aside even more money for them.

"I have no need for that. If you retire, I will come with you. If you leave Ordine, I will become an adventurer again and hunt valuable monsters for you. You can use their materials to make magical tools so we can live freely wherever we wish. If we must be forever traveling, well, that would be fun as well."

Mel looked as if she was rather looking forward to it, but what she spoke of suggested she was ready to follow Oswald in fleeing the country and living on the run. *There's no hiding anything from my wives.*

"Was it Caterina who proposed that plan?"

Oswald had told his wives about the extent to which Carlo had saved him. His wife Caterina, who knew what noble society was like, might have picked up on his feelings and doubts.

Ermelinda smiled but offered him no answer. Oswald knew just how pitiful his own face looked in turn.

"I might not be able to protect you. That's what frightens me..." he told her.

Not only did he not know where the threads might lead, he couldn't definitively say he would not involve his wives and children. That was the one thing that scared him.

He must continue to extend his reach. He had to earn trust as a magical toolmaker to the royal family, deepen his ties with other noble families, and expand his business beyond the kingdom's

borders. As he thought of all he needed to do, he felt his wife's warm fingers against his cool cheek.

"Mel..."

Her beautiful, bright green eyes looked at him without a hint of doubt.

"Oz, there is nothing to be uncertain about. We are one, and we have been for some time."

Gift Exchange and Dance Partners

The calendars in this world, unlike those in Japan, didn't designate very auspicious days, but the weather today was unusually good.

Under the unseasonably clear blue sky, Dahlia and Volf, who had come to pick her up at the Green Tower, set foot into the Scalfarotto family villa. In his arms, Volf carried a large cloth bundle that contained the items Guido and Jonas had requested.

She had applied the principles of the Crimson Lotus Blade and the Ice Lotus Staff and, using different materials and enlisting the help of masters for the enchantments, created the magical sword Night Piercer and the Ice Spider Wand.

Dahlia and Volf were shown to a room in the back of the house. It looked like a drawing room, with its coordinated dark blue and gold color scheme and extravagant furnishings. Already there waiting for them on a three-person couch was a smiling Guido. Standing diagonally behind him was Jonas, wearing his usual attendant's uniform.

"Welcome," Guido greeted them. "Well, that might be an odd thing for me to say. This is Volf's home, after all."

"No, it's the family's home," Volf replied, already unable to repress his smile. Even his voice sounded giddy.

"Thank you for making time for us today," Dahlia said, managing to give a standard, polite greeting. It was hard for her to keep a straight face knowing what was about to come next.

"Well then, you mentioned you had an urgent matter. What is it?" Guido asked with an eager expression. He had probably guessed at their reason for coming—though only half the reason.

Volf placed the black cloth bundle on the coffee table and unwrapped it, revealing a slender, deep crimson box and a glossy dark blue bag.

"Oh, two of them?"

"There are two?"

Guido and Jonas spoke their questions aloud at exactly the same instant, glanced at each other, and then closed their mouths.

"This is the magical sword Night Piercer. Here, brother. For you to give to Master Jonas."

"And this is the Ice Spider Wand. For you, Master Jonas, to give to Lord Guido."

Just like they had planned in the carriage ride here, Volf handed the crimson box to Guido, and Dahlia handed the blue bag to Jonas.

"Thank you, Volf, Madam Rossetti."

"Master Dahlia, Lord Volf, thank you again."

Guido and Jonas accepted the items, then broke into sheepish grins.

"I can't believe we had the same idea, Jonas. I knew you and Volf were up to something..."

"Well played. I also thought you two were hiding something..."

At first, Dahlia couldn't tell if they were happy or not, but as she watched them, she couldn't stop herself from smiling. As she tried to keep her face composed, Guido stood up from the couch. He walked up to Jonas and faced him. After clearing his throat, he extended the dark crimson box to him.

"Congratulations on your barony, Jonas."

"Thank you, Lord Guido. I accept your present with gratitude."

Jonas took the box and placed it carefully on the coffee table. Then he held the blue bag in both hands and lifted it up toward Guido.

"I offer my congratulations to you on your taking over as the family head and on your rise in rank, Lord Guido."

"Thank you. I will cherish it, *Baron* Jonas."

"...I am not a baron *yet*."

Guido was grinning like a boy and Jonas, too, was smiling embarrassedly. Dahlia felt like she was witnessing an extremely rare event.

Meanwhile, Volf's face had broken into a wide grin. Dahlia was trying her best to keep her own smile down, but she had a feeling

her expression matched his.

"Please, take them out and give them a look," Volf urged them.

"I would be happy to," Jonas said, opening his box first.

He lifted the one-handed sword from Išrana, made by a respected swordsmith, out of the box. Someone as knowledgeable about weapons as Jonas would be able to tell its value at a glance.

"This sword..."

Jonas let out a long sigh, then the red-black pupil of his right eye almost turned into a vertical slit with surprise. He seemed to like it.

"Please excuse me."

Jonas removed his gloves, hefted the sword in his bare hand, and then moved to the far edge of the room. When he slowly pulled the sword from its sheath, sunlight coming through the window made the red-gold blade shine like the red morning sun. Jonas must have channeled magic into it—there was a flicker of blue light, and then flames billowed up from the blade. Their colors blended beautifully from a light red to a vibrant crimson.

The flames maintained their size for a time, then abruptly vanished.

"Marvelous... It's powerful, and the quality of the materials is top-notch. I feel like I can put even more magic into it than the last sword."

"I wrote everything you need to know about it in the manual, so please read that when you have the chance. If you don't like the color of the hilt and the sheath, that can be changed to your preference," Dahlia explained.

"No, I prefer it as is. It's a beautiful red. It reminds me of a sunrise... No, a sunset," Jonas said, staring mesmerized at the sword.

Dahlia and Volf had discussed the possibility that as an attendant, Jonas would be opposed to using such a conspicuous sword, but apparently they had had nothing to worry about. The Night Piercer, with its red sheath, suited Jonas perfectly.

He had yet to take his eyes off the sword when Guido pulled a leather case out of the blue bag and from that took out the wand.

"What a beautiful wand!" he exclaimed. His blue eyes were

transfixed on the white wand and its pale blue sheen.

Volf walked to his side and excitedly began to explain how to use it.

"You can extend the wand from here. By all means, try it."

"An extendable wand? Interesting..."

Guido immediately extended the top part of the Ice Spider Wand, his eyes sparkling like a child's. It was the same sparkle Volf had when he looked at a magical sword. Dahlia fought back the smile that was about to form on her face.

"Here is the manual. It has magical circuits on the inside and outside for a combined total of four surfaces."

"Four?! Madam Rossetti, surely that was a heavy strain on you?"

Hearing Guido say her name suddenly flustered her a bit.

"No, it wasn't me who enchanted it but Mr. Leone."

"And Chairman Zola—so he informed me, though he said nothing about this one-handed sword," Jonas said. As the one who'd requested the wand, he had already received a report of it. Only half of the report, though.

"Well, that's good, then. If anything had happened to you, Ivano would have given me an earful the next time we had tea together," Guido said. He had a serious look on his face that made Dahlia unable to laugh off what he said as a joke.

She knew that her vice-chairman did in fact have tea with Guido on occasion, but when had they gotten so close? Ivano was even acquainted with Forto, the Tailors' guildmaster, and Gildo, the royal head treasurer. Was there no limit to his social circle? She wished he would share some of his abundant people skills with her.

"Lord Guido, as a preventative measure against theft, would it be all right if I blood bonded to this sword?" Jonas proposed.

"Yes, good idea. A lot of work went into making these for us, I don't want anyone else to have them. Do you mind if we do that now, Madam Rossetti?"

"Yes, I think that would give you more peace of mind," Dahlia replied with relief. She was glad they had been the ones to bring it up first.

Leone had also spoken of blood bonding, and even the manuals

requested that the users do so. They wouldn't want their weapons to be stolen and used for nefarious purposes.

Guido pricked his finger with a needle and allowed a few drops of blood to drip onto the wand. It glowed blue, and Jonas spoke as if confirming the bonding was complete.

"Now it is officially the Ice Spider Wand."

"So it is. A fine wand, just for me."

The corners of Guido's mouth lifted almost imperceptibly as he tried to contain his joy. It seemed likely that no one else would be able to use "Ice Spider Wand" as a name.

"Now then, I will blood bond to the sword," Jonas said.

Instead of using a needle, he bit down hard on his left pinky finger. Dahlia almost let out a cry of shock but managed to stop herself.

With his expression unchanged, Jonas let the blood running from his finger drip onto the magical sword. It flowed in a rivulet down the blade of the Night Piercer. There was a quiet sizzling sound, and then the sword glowed red. Jonas waited until the light abated, then smiled with satisfaction and sheathed the blade.

Dahlia heard Volf let out a quiet sigh. It was, in a sense, a completed man-made magical sword. He was understandably captivated. Someday, Dahlia wanted to make a magical sword just for Volf that surpassed the Night Piercer, but she still had a long way to go before she was capable of that. All she could do now was devote herself to practicing her enchanting along with trial and error. But at least for now, she had successfully delivered Guido's wand and Jonas's sword.

"Lord Guido, Master Jonas, I want to offer these to you as a humble thank you for all you've done," Dahlia said.

Inside the bag she had brought with her were six snow flurry swizzle sticks, each in its own white leather case. At the very bottom of each stick's handle was a small round glass ornament painted with flowers, birds, or snowflakes. Fermo had made the leather cases, while his wife, Barbara, had made the glass ornaments.

"What charming handiwork," Guido said approvingly.

"These are snow flurry swizzle sticks. They produce small grains

of ice from the tip, so they can be used to chill drinks," Dahlia explained.

"I recommend putting honey or fruit wine on top of the ice to make a frozen treat," Volf suggested.

"Thank you. My wife and daughter will be pleased," Guido said, his blue eyes crinkling as he smiled.

Volf gave a start of realization and said, "I heard Gloria is already learning ice magic from her tutor, but can she already make ice?"

"My daughter still doesn't have great control over her magic. She freezes an entire cup, so her bodyguard is tasked with breaking up the ice."

"You freeze half a cup yourself, Lord Guido."

"Jonas..." Guido's face started to show his annoyance at his attendant's nonchalant, unwanted remark, but he quickly recovered. "My wife, daughter, and I will have our fill of frozen treats. Ah, but I'm sure you'll be sad all alone, Jonas. Why don't you join us too?"

"No, thank you. I plan on submerging myself under the heated low table with a chilled drink."

"Once again, you're going to submerge yourself under there and never come out..." Guido sighed.

A heated low table was something one sat under, not submerged oneself in, but it seemed Jonas was intent on turning into a kotatsnail—no, a *Jonasnail*.

Guido gave Jonas a bemused smirk, then turned to face Dahlia once more.

"Anyway, back to the sword and wand. These are quite impressive products you've made. The advance payment won't be enough at all. How much would the additional charges be? If there are any other materials or items you would like, I can also procure those for you instead. Please don't hesitate to ask for what you want."

"That won't be necessary. I've been paid plenty already," Dahlia said. "If anything, I would ask you to extend the same offer to the ones who did the enchantment, Lord Leone and Lord Oswald."

"Understood. I will reach out to them. But I still want to repay you somehow."

Guido swept his gaze from Volf to Dahlia, and then to Jonas.

"How about we celebrate your official debut as a baroness and my promotion to marquis with the same event? We can include Jonas's barony celebration as well, as a thank-you for this wand."

"Lord Guido..." Jonas started, his desire to dissuade Guido clear on his face. Dahlia felt similarly.

The party to celebrate Guido becoming a marquis was sure to be a large-scale event. To be celebrated at such an event, which would put her at the center of attention of so many people, sounded very stressful.

"What is it, Jonas? If you truly prefer, we can hold your celebration on a different day. But I am Madam Rossetti's noble guardian, after all, and you are the head of the Scalfarotto Arms Works. It's only natural that I host both of your celebrations. Therefore, it would be most economically efficient to combine all three of our celebrations on the same day. And with the three of us together, that would lessen the judgment we would otherwise face individually."

"Less judgment..." Dahlia murmured.

At that moment, she felt a strong sense of kinship with Guido, whom she normally felt some distance from. He was right about the arrangement being more economical, but most importantly, there would be three of them instead of one. If that could indeed reduce the amount of attention on her, then she would prefer that. She clenched her fists.

"Lord Guido, I would really appreciate it if we could make that happen...!"

"Really? That's wonderful! I'm a coward myself, so I prefer not to have too much attention on me. I will feel much more at ease with the three of us together."

"Lord Guido," Jonas said again. Guido had spoken as if things were decided before Jonas had even given his input.

But he continued as if he hadn't even heard his attendant. "Volf, since this will be the first celebration I hold as Marquis Scalfarotto, make sure you take the day off in advance. I will be escorting my wife, so you will be Madam Rossetti's partner."

"Yes, I'll make sure nothing gets in the way next time...!" Volf said, raising his voice and clenching his fists so tightly they turned white. He didn't have to get so worked up about it, but Dahlia felt a glimmer of happiness to hear him say so all the same.



"I have returned."

Volf and Dahlia had left to go out for dinner. Jonas had gone to give orders to the knights standing in the hallway to keep an eye on them, and had now stepped back into the room.

Guido was on the couch, still holding the Ice Spider Wand in his hand. It was clear just how much he liked the wand, which shared his own nickname. Though to be fair, Jonas couldn't deny that he was ready to carry his own Night Piercer back to his room to admire it all night.

"Jonas, did you happen to see what Madam Rossetti was wearing on her ears?"

"Yes, I did. Quite fine pieces of jewelry."

The gold earrings had sometimes been hidden behind her red hair, but Jonas had caught their faint gleam.

"Gold snowflake earrings. Well done, Volf. No better way to make our family's protection and Volf's presence known," Guido said.

"Only a complete fool will try to engage with Master Dahlia in more than a greeting," Jonas agreed.

"Well, doing so is what would make someone a complete fool. But anyway, it seems Volf is finally taking a step forward. Madam Rossetti was also happy to ask for us to combine our celebrations."

Jonas could tell Guido was in a chipper mood by the rapid way he spoke. He hated to put a damper on it, but he wanted Guido to open his eyes to the truth of the situation.

"I don't believe there has been any development in that area. If there had been, we would have seen it on their faces."

"I seem to remember them both looking quite gleeful just a moment ago," Guido countered.

"They were smiling about the gifts they delivered us. I suggest

you do not engage in wishful thinking when it comes to those two. Moreover, it hasn't even been a year since Master Dahlia's engagement was broken off. Announcing a new relationship too soon could invite malicious gossip."

"Gossip can be shut down. I would hate for Volf to miss this chance. In fact, we can start by squashing those rumors before they even start by—"

"Settle down, Guido," Jonas cut him off bluntly.

Normally calm and collected, as an overly doting brother, Guido's judgment tended to get clouded when it came to Volf. Such, at any rate, was the conclusion Jonas had privately arrived at concerning his master—and friend.

Guido was also a doting husband and father, but that was neither here nor there at the moment.

"But I just don't understand why Volf is dragging his feet. I feel he only needs to say the word and everything will work out..."

"I can't speak for him, but I would guess it has to do with his bad luck with women."

"Bad luck, eh... Well, I can't say I don't understand, but what man hasn't experienced bad luck with women?"

"Don't ask me that with a straight face. Actually, don't ask me about that at all without pouring me a drink first. Besides, *you've* had plenty of good luck with women."

"I do thank the gods for the good fortune of meeting my wife, but I have had my share of troubles too, you know."

Jonas didn't like the look of that glowing smile on Guido's face. As far as he remembered, the episodes Guido was referring to could not be classified as "troubles" at all. But he knew that if he followed this line of conversation, it would lead to Guido going on and on about his love for his wife, so he decided to quickly change the subject.

"By the way, Guido, the matter of my adoption still hasn't been settled."

Jonas was leaving his family, but he still hadn't found the family that would be adopting him. He wanted to put serious effort into finding one soon so as not to cause trouble for the Scalfarotto family.

"Your family will wait for you to find one. But if you don't find one

by the time you receive your barony, you can use the name of one of our branch families, so there is nothing to worry about."

"You spoke to my family?"

"I happened to run into your older brother at the castle. And—forgive me. It seemed you were hiding something, so I wondered if you were fighting with your family. I might have said something in warning to him..."

Guido slid his blue eyes away.

Jonas had a feeling Guido had done more than just give a warning. He'd thought something was odd. He hadn't heard a word from his immediate family or any relations about his removal from the family register.

This friend of his was quick to become overprotective of those close to him. Jonas was supposed to protect his master, not the other way around. Must Guido's doting nature extend even to his own servant?

"So, we're going to celebrate both our baronies with your promotion to marquis... I was hoping to lurk behind you as your shadow that day."

"That won't do, Jonas. You and Madam Rossetti both need to be prominently shown as being a part of the Scalfarotto family."

"The one who should be most prominent is you, the one becoming a marquis."

Guido was not only the new head of the family, but he was also receiving a promotion. He was about to see more of many things—more people coming for courtesy visits, more people wanting to forge connections with him, and, undoubtedly, more hassles.

"The thought of it brings me no joy..."

The light faded from Guido's blue eyes. Jonas had known him long enough to know he spoke his real feelings. Guido's true personality was that of a man who disliked being in the limelight or pomp. But that was part of a noble's duty, and once he became a marquis, he would be getting even more attention.

"Such is life," Guido sighed. "If I have to do it, I might as well make the best of it. Volf wasn't able to be by Madam Rossetti's side at her last celebration, but I won't let that happen this time. They

might not be able to dance three songs together, but I at least want them dressed in matching outfits."

Dancing three dances in a row was done with a significant other or fiancé—that didn't seem likely for them. But coordinating their outfits was certainly feasible.

"Miss Lucia of the Magical Garment Factory has assumed responsibility for making Master Dahlia's dress. Shall I reach out to her about making Volf's outfit as well?" Jonas offered.

"Yes, please. Ah, you need a partner too, Jonas. Is there anyone you'd like to invite?"

At his friend's question, Jonas gave it a thought, and suddenly, a smile of pure innocence came to mind.

"Only one young lady has asked me for a dance, but she is quite young, and I doubt her father would allow it..."

"You never informed me of that! I'm surprised to hear she's a younger woman, but I'm sure the age difference is nominal. I would be happy to put in a good word for you," Guido said with enthusiasm.

Jonas shook his head. "It won't be that easy."

Jonas was grateful that such an adorable young lady had asked him for a dance, but he also knew very well that there was no chance he would be allowed to dance with her.

"Her father must be quite protective of her. Is she a high-ranking noble, then?" Guido asked.

"Well, you could say that."

"I'm having trouble thinking of who you might be referring to... Who is this young lady with the discerning eye who has made these advances on you?"

Jonas tried his best to maintain a composed smile as he faced his curious friend and said, "I speak of Lady Gloria Scalfarotto. Do I have your permission, *father*?"

Guido said not a word, but Jonas felt a wave of cold—and painful, in fact—air against his cheek. Nonetheless he was intent on not allowing the ice-cold air to make him crack.

Guido folded his hands tightly together. "It is very much, absolutely, and without a doubt, too early for that..."

The father of the adorable five-year-old girl had responded with outright refusal, just as Jonas had anticipated he would. But the temperature in the room had dropped lower than he'd expected, and he felt a chill run down his back. Despite that, he couldn't suppress the chuckle in his throat. Guido shot him a reproachful look.

They moved on to having a drink together in celebration of their promotions.

Guido held his watered-down glass of amber liquor in his left hand and his wand in his right. Jonas used his new snow flurry swizzle stick to fill Guido's glass to the brim with ice.

"Oh, I can extend and contract it with one hand. This was well-thought-out... And the magic flows through here. That's quite interesting too..."

Guido was looking back and forth between the wand and its manual, not noticing the heap of ice in his glass. Jonas decided to give up on getting a conversation out of him and sat down in the opposite chair. He gently lifted the lid off the red box he'd shut the one-handed sword away in earlier.

Not wanting to touch the sword with a drink in his hand, he downed the dark amber liquid in his glass in one gulp. He wiped his hands well, slid his chair back, then slowly unsheathed the sword.

The Išranan sword was perfectly balanced, down to its elegant design, beautiful reddish gold color, and the occasional, unexpected blue glint. It felt startlingly familiar in his hands, which he attributed to the fact that it was enchanted with his own scales.

The Night Piercer—true to its name, it gave the illusion that it could cut through anything.

The maker of the sword, according to the manual, was "Dawn." In Išrana, the word *dawn* was "fajr." Išrana was his mother's homeland, so Jonas knew some of the language, but he was unsure if that was a common or rare name there. Regardless, he liked the sound of it.

"This will help keep me in check," Guido said happily.

Jonas looked up to see that his friend had covered the Ice Spider Wand in ice, transforming it into a shortsword. He was holding it by

the hilt, which he had also fashioned out of ice, but he didn't so much as wince from the cold.

"Guido?"

"Surprised? Magic flows through it very well, which makes shaping the ice easy. With this, I'll surely be able to hold back," Guido said with a smug face.

Jonas sighed openly. This master of his had some difficulty controlling his magic, especially when it came to restraint. But he was even worse when he fought with a sword. Normally, Jonas was always in front of him in an instant, so he felt no need to point that out to him now and burst his bubble.

"We have to thank Madam Rossetti as well. Lord Leone and Lord Oswald too," Guido continued.

"That we do. I would like to give them something worth their effort."

Considering the end products, Jonas felt their advanced payment was hardly enough. On the other hand, he doubted they would be happy to have their pockets stuffed with more gold. But neither could he easily think of gifts that they would take pleasure in.

What he truly wanted to do was tie Volf up with a red ribbon and toss him into the Green Tower, but even then, he felt the most that would happen was Dahlia making him her magical toolmaking assistant for the day. *Things never go the way you want them to.*

"I believe I can put more magic into it, but I might make a mess of the room."

His friend spoke like a child who was unable to sit still, but he couldn't blame him. Jonas was also keen to try out his sword, though he hesitated to do so indoors.

After discussing it, the two of them decided they would test the abilities of their sword and wand in the back garden.

At dusk, Jonas and Guido moved to the rear of the villa.

The ones who accompanied them looked on in wonder from a distant spot. Jonas understood their fascination. A red sword they had never seen before and a wand that was such a pale blue that it was nearly white were sure to catch the interest of both guards and

mages.

"Now then, let's see what these can do," Guido said before unsparingly pouring magic into the wand. Jonas felt a wave of magic, and then a blade of ice burst into existence.

This was a wand no longer. It had taken on the length of a longsword. If Guido made it as long as he was tall, it would be like a thin lance. He wouldn't be able to wield it inside of a carriage, but it did seem useful for quickly spearing an opponent.

"That's too long, Guido," Jonas chided.

"I'm only testing it out."

Guido tapped the blade of ice against the ground to snap off a piece. The fragment that fell to the ground showed a sharp cross section.

"I can do something quite similar to what you did with the Crimson Lotus Blade," Guido said cheerfully. He lightly swung the Ice Spider Wand, and ice sprang up around him like flower petals. "Of course, ice, unlike fire, has some weight to it."

Jonas noted that Guido was able to dispel the ice by stopping his flow of magic, and it also seemed that he had already gotten used to controlling the wand. The ice broke apart into tiny pieces and fell to the ground like scattering crystalline petals.

Jonas watched as they fell, then unsheathed the Night Piercer. He was happy to see that the blade did not pointlessly reflect light in the darkness of the evening.

As a test, Jonas held the sword up and then gave it a swing. It made a small sound as it cut through the air, but he was surprised by how light it felt. He poured magic into it—more than he had inside the room—and the blade's red flames easily flared larger.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the mages slowly step away from him with tense expressions. Perhaps *he* was the one who needed to learn how to hold back.

As Jonas admired the blend of colors in the flames, Guido opened his mouth to speak.

"You know, I'm impressed. Madam Rossetti made me a great wand that's even better than a sword."

"Guido, just so you know, a sword always beats a wand in terms

of instant attack power," Jonas replied brusquely.

"Jonas, I understand how you feel, but this wand has *four* magical circuits, inside and outside, top and bottom. It has a very short activation time. It can hardly be compared with a sword that only has circuits on two sides."

Guido produced the ice blade again and smiled. But no matter how much Guido might believe his own words, Jonas wasn't convinced. *Doesn't he realize a sword has much more surface area than a wand?*

Besides, this sword was the work of the distinguished Dawn. It had already been a fine blade, and then it had been enchanted. It was nothing like some run-of-the-mill sword. A blade made with mythril and crimson gold could never be considered inferior to a wand made of hati bone.

"Personally, I find it laughable to even compare the two," Jonas said.

"So, you're unconvinced that my wand is the better of the two?"

"Oh, for pity's sake. Fire *melts* ice."

Guido's smile fell and he leveled Jonas with a look. "And water puts out fire. There's only one way to settle this. Why don't we put it to a contest?"

"Yes, it's best I spell it out clearly to you once and for all."

"That's what you think..."

Jonas felt a cold air at his ankles that coiled its way up around him. It had been a while since he'd experienced this. Instead of replying, he unleashed his own slow surge of magic.

There was a battle-hungry glint in Guido's blue eyes, and Jonas had a feeling the same went for him. The two of them used to do this often in the past—testing their skills against each other to distract themselves from other things going on in their lives.

The surrounding mages shouted at them in fear.

"Lord Guido, Lord Jonas, please cease this!"

"Yes, you must stop! You will both get hurt!"

Apparently, the powerful vibrations of Guido and Jonas's magic had reached the mages where they were standing some distance away. Their faces were pale.

“It’s all right,” Guido assured them. “We won’t take things too far.”

“Yes, all we need is one blow. We’ll be fine.”

Specifically, all Jonas needed to do was sear through that thick, white ice with his inextinguishable flames.

“Right, I’ll make sure to hold back, but just in case, everyone should stand back a bit,” Guido advised.

He smiled at the shaken mages, who had no intention of stepping any closer, then waved his wand twice, turning it into a white longsword. He held it at the ready, with the stance of a knight. Jonas held his one-handed sword in both hands and held nothing back as he channeled magic into it.

As the two of them both poured magic into their weapons, Jonas felt a stinging pain against his forehead. Two giant flowers had bloomed from the swords—two lotuses, one made of red flames and the other of white ice. They had yet to bloom fully, but they were already more than half the size of their wielders.



Jonas felt intoxicated by the dense magical energy filling the flower. He couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from lifting.

"Have at you!"

"Come on!"

The ice and flame flowers collided with a *bang!* that made the air vibrate.

Despite his firm stance, the powerful impact threw Jonas backward. Ice showered down around him, and he was hit with a blast of hot, white smoke.

The horses in the stable began to whinny in shock and fear.

"Lord Guido! Lord Jonas!"

"Are you all right?!"

The mages had been toppled by the aftershock, but they hastily clambered to their feet and ran to them.

As one of them cast healing magic on Guido, he roared, "Whoever can use advanced healing magic, attend to Lord Guido! And someone bring Lord Jonas a high potion!"

"Yes, right away!"

Jonas and Guido had collapsed on the ground, neither able to move. Jonas's clothing, which had been enchanted with reinforcement magic, was in tatters, and white smoke rose from all over his body. But neither he nor Guido had let go of their weapons. *I suppose we'll have to call this a draw.*

"You have a...fine sword... It's quite...powerful..."

"Your wand...is very durable... It's more impressive...than I thought..."

Lying amid the clamoring mages, Jonas and Guido exchanged quiet words of praise, smiled, and closed their eyes.

The next day, in unusual fashion, Guido was absent from the mages' meeting at the castle. The reason he'd provided was that he had come down with a sudden cold. The same illness befell his attendant, so for three days, the two of them holed up in the same room to be attentively nursed back to health.

Dinner at Monster Lovers

In the nobles' quarter stood a four-story restaurant, though one would never know it was from the exterior due to its lack of a signboard. It was there that Dahlia and Volf arrived and exited their carriage. With its beautiful ivory-white brick, it looked like a very classy establishment.

"The third and fourth floor of this building belongs to Monster Lovers, a restaurant that serves monster cuisine."

"A name that would make any monster cry..."

"Yeah, I had the same thought when I first came here..."

To love monsters—but only the edible parts. Though perhaps it wasn't such an odd expression, considering the monster parts were being used as ingredients for meals. After all, Dahlia reflected as she followed Volf inside, people said they "loved" chicken or pork when talking about eating other types of meat.

An employee in a dark brown uniform greeted them at the entrance and guided them to a private room on the fourth floor. The decor was understated, with a brown color scheme, though its size felt vast to a commoner like Dahlia. She thought it would be hard to talk to one another across that large, round table, but then she saw that the tableware had been set at adjacent chairs facing the window. The gold-colored cutlery looked a bit dazzling, and she wondered at the five glasses laid out for each of them.

The server filled a glass for each of them with ice, over which he then poured a small amount of rose-colored drink. Then he informed them their food would be out shortly and left the room.

Now that they were alone in the room, Volf removed his fairy glasses.

"People mainly dine in private rooms here, since some of the dishes have strong smells. Though personally, I don't think they're as strong as the odors of grilling dried fish and meat."

Is that an apt comparison? Dahlia mused. It occurred to her, too, that dried meat and fish seemed the staples of Volf's diet. The same could be said for the rest of the Order, but she hadn't really considered the full extent of that until now.

"Should we toast with this?" Dahlia asked, inspecting the two fingers' amount of rose-colored liquid at the bottom of her glass.

Volf narrowed his golden eyes at his own drink. "Yeah, let's. This stuff doesn't taste very good, though. It's an antidote."

"An antidote...?"

"It's offered in case you don't have enough protection against poison. We should be fine with our equipment, but let's drink it just in case."

With mixed feelings, Dahlia toasted with Volf to health and good fortune. The rosy antidote was bittersweet and grainy, and it tasted a bit like cold medicine. As she cleansed her palate with the sweet white wine in her second glass, she heard a knock at the door.

"Pardon me."

The male server from earlier came in pushing a large cart. When he lifted the silver dome cloche, Dahlia had to suppress an exclamation of awe. The hors d'oeuvres looked like a small field of flowers. On top of a white plate were cured meats and cheeses shaped into white, red, and yellow roses, and vegetables plated to look like leaves.

"This is cured meat made from baphomet, crimson cattle, and horned rabbit colored with saffron."

Dahlia had braced herself, unsure what to expect from this monster cuisine, but everything on the plate looked appetizing. She and Volf both took bites of the food.

The baphomet meat was a little gamey but still nice. The crimson cattle meat was similar to cured beef, while the saffron in the horned rabbit hid any trace of pungency and brought out its exceptional flavor. The array of cheeses included both conventional cheeses and cheese made from the milk of red cattle, and each one had a rich flavor.

"More restaurants have been serving crimson cattle lately," Volf observed.

“Yes, we have received more imports since autumn. Ehrlichia is apparently planning to expand their crimson cattle farms,” the server replied with a smile. He informed them that he was from Ehrlichia and that his relatives owned a farm there.

Incidentally, crimson cattle could use strengthening magic, so it was vital that they be enclosed in metal fences, and that their caretakers have defensive equipment. Monsters indeed they were.

“This is a soup made with dried forest serpent and dried mushroom. It is said to be very nutritious and helps to relieve fatigue and give you more energy,” the server explained as he placed the steaming bowls on the table.

The soup contained forest serpent—also called the Green King—and very aromatic wild mushrooms. Among the meaty scent of the mushrooms rose another close to that of white fish. As the server had said, the soup indeed seemed very effective for relieving fatigue.

Green King Soup—Dahlia dashed away the image of a slithering green snake in her mind and dipped her spoon into the soup.

The clear, light brown broth could have been compared to that of either chicken or fish, and paired with the fragrant mushrooms, it delivered a deep flavor that was absolutely delectable. She attributed the lack of any fishiness or bitter aftertaste to excellent preparation of the ingredients.

Volf ate about half the soup before he put down his spoon. He had once mentioned that the forest serpent didn’t agree with him, so maybe he was limiting how much of it he consumed. It was possible that eating too much would give him an allergic reaction, like making him itchy. To Dahlia, the soup warmed her up and had a comforting flavor, but she made a mental note that it was probably best she didn’t serve him forest serpent dishes if he had a bad reaction to them.

After the soup, they had a small break before the server wheeled in another wagon. He lifted the dome-shaped cloche, and sitting on the plate was something that made Dahlia want to recoil in fear.

“Broiled black scorpion,” the server informed them.

“Black scorpion... Um, don’t they say that one of those can take down a thousand men?” Dahlia asked hesitantly.

"Yes, it is known as the Killer of a Thousand Men."

The server's smiling response did nothing to reassure Dahlia. She subconsciously checked to make sure she was still wearing her ring and bracelet. Her ring, given to her by Volf, had antidotal properties, while her bracelet was a work of Oswald's. She could count on both accessories' abilities to protect her from poison, so she *should* be fine.

But as it transpired, the medium-sized scorpion was only present as decoration. The inside was hollow, and what they would be eating was the white flesh in the middle of the plate, which had been formed into a round ball.

As she stared at it in fascination, she heard Volf mutter, "I guess scorpions don't have that many edible parts."

Is that really what you're worried about right now? Dahlia thought to herself, but Volf's willingness to dig in without hesitation gave her the courage to stick her fork in the lump of meat. She picked up a small amount of the meat on her fork and brought it to her mouth—and was surprised by how good it tasted.

It reminded her of shrimp but without the sweetness. It had a fresh, sophisticated seafood flavor. It would pair perfectly with plenty of black pepper and a dark ale. Now she understood why Volf liked it.

"Here is the kraken mousse."

The next plate held crusty baked buns and a side of reddish-brown mousse.

"Dahlia, this is the mousse I told you about..."

"Right, I remember."

Volf had once expressed to Dahlia his mixed feelings about this dish. Inside the light and fluffy reddish-brown mousse were thin slices of kraken. Although Volf said it wasn't his favorite, he didn't neglect to eat this dish too. Dahlia pumped herself up to try a bite.

"Oh...?"

The first thing she sensed was the smell of the sea. Some might have called it fishy, but while it was a bit peculiar, Dahlia didn't entirely dislike it. As she chewed, it finally hit her—the flavor was close to shiokara, a dish of fermented seafood viscera from her

previous world.

More salt might make the mousse more palatable. And sweet white wine wasn't the best thing to drink with it. Rather, it would go better with a crisp, dry white wine with a strong alcoholic flavor.

"Volf, I have an idea. Add a little salt to the mousse, and we should order a full-bodied, dry wine to go with it. I think you'll like it that way."

She thought she had spoken quietly, but the server, who was a short distance away from their table, soon brought them the wine she'd requested. She felt a little bad. The wine he'd brought them was a moderately priced white that she and Volf occasionally drank together. It was a young, dry wine with a robust alcoholic flavor.

Dahlia topped a baked bun with kraken mousse, added a bit of salt, and ate it. She washed it down with wine, but the fishy smell remained.

"It's the same, but it tastes better..."

Volf gave her a curious look. "Have you eaten kraken mousse before?"

"No... But it reminds me of squid or octopus."

She couldn't very well bring up shiokara. Plus, there were a surprisingly large number of people in Ordine who disliked squid and octopus for being too fishy. Chefs here made squid and octopus dishes more palatable by adding salt and spices.

Then Volf hit on a great idea. "I bet this would go well with estervino."

The server repeated the word "estervino" to himself, and the two of them finished off the kraken mousse.

The next cart was wheeled in by a middle-aged man. He had tanned golden skin, dark orange hair, and rich, dark brown eyes. He wore a white chef's coat and had his long hair tied back.

"Lord Scalfarotto, lovely miss, thank you for coming to our restaurant," he said.

Dahlia detected the hint of an Ehrlichian accent in the man's intonation. He introduced himself as the manager of Monster Lovers and announced the next dish as greencrown, which he had personally cooked. On top of the white plate with gold accents was

sautéed greencrown, with white steam billowing up from it.

Greencrown was a bright green bird with long feathers on its head that resembled a tall hat. When Dahlia had seen a picture of it in a monster encyclopedia, she'd thought it looked just like a green turaco that she had seen in a zoo in her previous life.

However, as a monster, the greencrown had some frightening aspects. When fleeing from or fighting an enemy, it could use magic to give itself a boost in speed and fly like a green arrow. It was said that they flew fast enough to pierce a tree.

"This is the bird that stabbed Dorino in the arm..." Volf whispered.

"Do you have to mention something scary like that...?" Dahlia whispered back in alarm.

She had heard about how Dorino, one of Volf's fellow knights in the Order of Beast Hunters, had been speared by a greencrown, but she wished Volf hadn't reminded her of that now.

She somehow managed to compose her face and cut into the meal with her knife. She took a bite and chewed. The texture reminded her of sautéed chicken—not overly juicy or fatty. It felt like she was eating prime chicken meat.

But after she swallowed, she realized with a start that it had a different aftertaste. It had a nutty flavor, like almonds. The delayed aromatic sweetness filled her nose. She cocked her head, caught off guard by the pleasant aftertaste.

When she looked next to her, Volf was sitting with his finger to his chin. "It tastes good after I swallow... Is the flavor improving? No, that can't be it..."

"It's very good, but I'm having trouble putting it into words..."

As the two of them praised the flavor of the dish despite being unable to explain why, the manager gave them a smile of satisfaction.

"It's a wonderful dish," Dahlia told him.

"Thank you. You cannot tell whether a monster will taste good or not based on its appearance alone. Their flavor changes depending on their habitat and their size. That is what makes cooking with them so interesting."

"I see..."

The manager explained how cooking with monsters was a difficult process that involved a lot of experimentation, but part of the fun was discovering new and surprising flavors. Dahlia could deeply relate.

"There are still many monsters I want to try cooking with," the manager said with excitement.

"Are you interested in any particular monster right now?" Volf asked, matching his energy.

"Yes, what I would like to cook most of all is a wyvern."

"Really...?"

That's a big one to choose. Although, Ehrlichia did raise wyverns, so perhaps it wasn't such an unattainable dream.

"Someday, I would like to roast a whole wyvern!"

"A *whole* wyvern?" Dahlia said in disbelief.

"The meat can be cooked well if you skin a wyvern and remove its internal organs. I think it can be done. One of these days, I will obtain a large oven and employ mages of Ordine to roast a wyvern to perfection."

The manager's dark brown eyes shone as he spoke of roasting a wyvern.

"To roast a whole wyvern, you might need the second and third floors of the building too..." Volf said, his eyes distant.

It was true that a wood-fire or magic crystal oven would hardly be enough. The manager would need the help of mages. Dahlia thought of the mages in the Order of Beast Hunters who had cooked an armored crab in a large pot that time she accompanied them on an expedition. They would surely be able to roast the wyvern well. No sooner had she finished that thought than the manager left to bring out the next dish.

After they enjoyed the sautéed greencrown, Dahlia noticed Volf staring at his empty plate. He had declined an extra portion of meat, but perhaps he hadn't had enough to eat.

"Is something wrong, Volf?"

"No, I was just thinking about when I was carried away by that wyvern. I was lucky it didn't tear me apart."

Again, please stop bringing up such scary things. Dahlia felt

convinced that Volf's nightmares did indeed involve terrifying ordeals such as fighting monsters. Feeling ill at ease, she took a sip of wine.

"It must be scary to remember that..."

"Not really—it's a happy memory. It was thanks to that happening that you found me."

"Hrk!"

Dahlia nearly choked on her wine. *What are you, an abandoned puppy that I'm fostering in the Green Tower?* she wanted to retort, but when she saw the smile on his face as he picked up his wine glass, she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

"Thank you for waiting."

If she'd ever doubted it before, the next plate the manager set in front of Dahlia would have been the one to convince her that this was indeed a monster restaurant.

On the plate was a winding vine, somewhere between black and dark gray in color. It had the appearance of seaweed. Placed in a decorative arrangement around the vine were berries that were black as pitch on the outside and red as blood on the inside.

On top of the red and black were what Dahlia assumed were yellow and green vegetables to serve as pops of color—though they didn't quite land as such. The entire plate was a burst of saturated colors.

"Devil nettle and blood orange salad," the manager announced.

"Devil nettle..." Dahlia said, furrowing her brow slightly.

Devil nettle was a monster that looked like a vine. It ensnared prey that got close to it and sucked its blood until it died. It was a frightening monster that made travelers and horses who had lost their way its victims.

There were now signs and fences up to keep that from happening, but some still fell victim to the monsters' attacks. They lived in areas scattered across the kingdom, including in the grassy fields along the highways.

The reason they hadn't been wiped out was that they were used to make an extremely effective drug for a winter epidemic that broke out once every few years. The devil nettles lost their potency four days after collection, so their colonies were protected areas.

However, this was the first time Dahlia had ever seen one served as food. Honestly, it did not look appetizing. Also, there was another thing that concerned her: What had this particular devil nettle fed on?

"This devil nettle was raised in Ehrlichia. Their breeding grounds are surrounded by hot springs to keep them from multiplying too much, and they are fed on fish and liquid nutritional supplements," the manager explained, putting Dahlia's fears to rest. She was also surprised to hear that Ehrlichia was using such cultivation methods.

Then, finally, she turned her eyes to the plate. The devil nettle was cut up to be easy to eat and already had dressing on it. She picked up a small amount of it with her fork, took a bite, and gave it a few tentative chews. It was a bit tough, and the texture reminded her of kombu. The dressing, which seemed to contain Esterland seasonings, complemented it well.

"It's like hijiki..." Dahlia began, surprised by the familiar flavor. Her hand flew to her mouth to stop herself.

The devil nettle was thicker and larger than hijiki seaweed, but it had a similar taste. She had been about to comment on the monster's similarity to the plantlike texture of that seaweed.

Dahlia continued eating, savoring the nostalgic flavor.

"This has a nice texture. It goes well with the fiendfish," Volf commented.

Like he said, the yellow and green garnishes were not vegetables, but thin slices of deep-fried fiendfish. The scales had been removed to make use of the color of the fish's skin. The light flavor of the white-fleshed fish did indeed go well with the hijiki—that is, the devil nettle.

The encircling blood oranges were also good. The fruit, black on the outside and bright red on the inside, was a local specialty from an island in Ordine's waters. With their tangy yet sweet flavor, they added a nice accent to the salad.

"They are a favorite snack of some small monsters. Some retired adventurers go to live on the island to protect blood oranges," the manager explained.

Delicious foods weren't safe from monsters or humans, it

seemed. Dahlia finished off her devil nettle and blood orange salad as she listened to the manager speak about how the monsters that ate blood oranges could also be used as ingredients.

Her glass was refilled with a sharp red wine that the manager had recommended. As she basked in the enjoyment of the meal thus far, the last cart was wheeled in.

"For dessert, we have a sponge cake made with crimson cattle butter and cockatrice eggs accompanied with a side of crimson cattle ice cream. You may top your ice cream with your choice of either honey or brandy."

On top of the plate, which was painted with large red flowers, was a triangular sponge cake on the left and a scoop of ice cream on the right. They looked delicious.

Dahlia decided to start with the sponge cake. It was a simple bright yellow sponge cake without any jam or cream. She wondered as she took another bite if the purpose of that omission was to balance the ice cream. After the initial bold sweetness, she simultaneously sensed the rich flavor of egg and pleasant aroma of butter.

It was a very dense cake, unlike the more elegant, high-class desserts she knew. She understood now why it didn't come with jam or cream.

"This ice cream is creamy and delicious. I like that it's not too sweet," Volf said. He was thoroughly enjoying his ice cream topped with plenty of brandy.

Since the ice cream wasn't very sweet, Dahlia had coated hers in honey. She decided not to think about all the calories she had consumed today.

"They were both delicious," Dahlia said after she had polished off the cake and ice cream.

The manager's eyes softened as he smiled. "I am very pleased to hear that! This last dish is on the house. I hope you enjoy."

There was one more cloche on the wagon. The manager lifted it up to reveal a red and translucent substance wobbling on a stark white plate.

"Is that...red slime?" Dahlia asked.

“So you know it! This gelatin dessert is called red slime lips.”

The manager’s smile grew wider, and Dahlia didn’t have the heart to correct him. She had genuinely thought it was a miniature red slime monster.

“I named it so since its bounciness is similar to the bounce of youthful lips.”

Dahlia suddenly felt conscious of her own lips, but she wasn’t sure she quite got what he meant. In any case, hearing the phrase “red slime lips” made Dahlia wonder where exactly a slime’s mouth was. Didn’t they expel acid from all over? While she was contemplating that unanswerable question, Volf was regarding the plate in front of him with a strange look.

“Youthful lips...”

Perhaps he, like herself, didn’t quite get it either.

As for Dahlia, her eyes were more drawn to the red of the slime than its bounciness.

“The slimes are raised in a sanitary environment, then, after they are entirely detoxified, only their safe gelatinous parts are mixed with gelatin. They are fed fresh apples, baked wheat, and butter. Doing so makes their red color fade, so a red colorant is added,” the manager explained.

Dahlia couldn’t believe this was jelly mixed with slime. It had exactly the translucency and color of a slime. Though perhaps that wasn’t surprising after all, given that slime *was* one of its ingredients.

“Well, here I go...”

Dahlia tried cutting into it with her spoon but was met with a surprising amount of resistance. She used her spoon to scrape off a small piece, then hesitantly took a bite. It was a little firmer in texture than gelatin.

But as she chewed, the jelly melted delightfully in her mouth. There was a hint of apple and something like a baked pastry. She couldn’t figure out quite what to compare the curious flavor to.



“This is really tasty...” Dahlia commented to Volf.

“Yeah, it is. It’s sort of like...apple pie flavored jelly?”

“I could see that!” she replied in agreement. This was just the type of flavor she could see herself getting hooked on.

The manager smiled and nodded as they shared their impressions.

He seemed to have other guests to attend to. He told them to sit and talk for as long as they liked, and then left the room.

Half of the red slime jelly still remained on her plate. As Dahlia was taking her time eating it, Volf posed her a question.

“I wonder if other slimes could be made into jelly?”

“That’s a good question. Green slimes like to eat plants, and birds eat them, so I think it could be possible as long as they’re processed the right way?” Dahlia answered. She could see green slime being made into something like a salad. “Blue slimes are a bit like water, and yellow slimes could be made into something like honey.”

After Dahlia imagined how red, green, blue, and yellow slimes could be made into jellies, her thoughts ended up in the same place Volf’s had, though he was the first to open his mouth.

“Black slime is the only one I can’t see being used as a food. I *hope* it never is...”

“I think it’s highly likely that black slimes would melt the chef before they could even be prepared...”

If I want something darker in color, I’ll just take coffee jelly! Much safer.

They put that frightening topic aside and moved on to something else.

“By the way, do you remember how Mr. Leone brought up the idea of magical swords having a second form?” Volf asked her.

“Yeah, I do.”

“In a way, Guido’s wand has a second form...” Volf said, his golden eyes going dreamy.

The wand’s “second form” was a simple extension, but maybe she could make a magical sword that grew longer too? Or perhaps Volf’s sword should have a different function.

“Do you want your magical sword to have a second form too?”

she asked him.

"You bet I do! Oh, but only if it wouldn't be dangerous..."

He seemed to temper his own enthusiasm, but it was clear how much he wanted it. She decided to give some serious thought to what function would be right for a magical sword and also be of use to Volf.

"Speaking of second forms, that reminds me—there's been a recent increase in monsters that have adapted to their regions. Like marsh spiders who are resistant to fire, and fangdeer who can blow out wind. Do you think slimes will ever evolve like that too?"

It was a scary thought, but monsters did what they had to in order to survive. It made sense that they would adapt to their environments.

The conversation reminded Dahlia of something else. "Idaea's slime farm had a gray slime that couldn't be classified as any known slime, so I don't think it's entirely impossible..."

"Gray slime? Could that not just be a faded black slime?"

"Hmm..."

Dahlia considered Volf's suggestion. Did slimes lose their color over time, and did that affect their unique characteristics and magic? Idaea, who was at the forefront of slime research, might be able to find the answer to those questions someday.

Incidentally, Idaea had come to Green Tower the other day and had praised Dahlia on the improved luster of the blue slime she kept at home. Dahlia credited that success to its diet of food scraps in addition to nutritional water.

"Their diet might have an impact on them too."

"Really..." Volf squinted his golden eyes and made the translucent red jelly on his spoon jiggle. "Maybe if they're fed delicious apple pie every day, we might see apple pie slimes one of these days."

Dahlia laughed and said, "When that happens, let's keep some in the tower."

Both of them imagined tasty-looking red slimes hopping and bouncing around.

After their lengthy meal was over, Dahlia and Volf left the restaurant. Outside, the moon was out and the night sky was speckled with stars.

When she boarded the carriage, Dahlia leaned back in her seat to keep pressure off her full stomach. Seated across from each other in the magical lantern-illuminated carriage, she and Volf restarted their conversation.

"The food was even better than the last time I came," Volf said.

"Everything was delicious," Dahlia agreed.

"I hope they serve kraken mousse again next time we go. Then we can try it with a dry wine from the start."

It seemed kraken mousse was becoming a favorite of Volf's despite his initial dislike. And apparently, he had already decided they were coming back.

"Did you have a favorite dish, Dahlia?"

"Hmm, it's hard to choose; they were all so good... But I think my favorites were the sautéed greencrown and the devil nettle with blood orange salad."

"The devil nettle threw me off. The taste and texture were kind of strange."

While the salad had been unusual to Volf, Dahlia had found it flavorful and the taste of hijiki very nostalgic.

But she and Volf both had another reason to thank devil nettles. They were the ingredients for winter epidemic medicine, after all.

"Devil nettles taste so good in a salad, but their medicine is so bitter," Dahlia mused aloud.

"Ah, yeah, that dark purple powdered medicine. I remember having to dissolve it in water and drinking that as a kid. It was so bitter, I had to chase it with grape juice..."

Volf's golden eyes reflected the light of the magical lantern as his mind went elsewhere.

"That's right—it was when my mother and I got sick at the same time. We slept in the same room to make sure my brothers didn't catch it, and we both drank that medicine. My fever had gone down the next day, but my mother told me to keep resting, and she read me a story about knights and monsters. Her throat was still sore the

day after that, so she stayed in that same room with me again. But that wasn't from her cold but because I had kept begging her to read to me more."

"She sounds like she was a very kind mother."

"And her selfish son forgot all about it. I only now remembered that..."

It seemed to Dahlia that he had forgotten because he had been grief-stricken over the loss of his mother, but she kept that to herself. Instead, something else came tumbling out of her mouth.

"It's nice that you remember a time with your mother."

She had spoken so quietly that she wasn't sure if Volf had heard her, but he responded with a big smile. "Yeah, I'm sure I'll never forget it again."

For a while, the only sound was that of the rattling carriage wheels, and then their conversation naturally picked back up.

"I'm still so impressed by how those medicinal crackers can make a sleipnir run so fast it's like they're flying. We're going to be bringing enough for an emergency supply starting next expedition," Volf said.

Sleipnirs that consumed medicinal crackers were able to run at a fast pace with only minimal rest. The Order had discussed the usefulness of the crackers not only for delivering messages but also for quickly transporting those with serious injuries or sudden illnesses to the capital.

After Dahlia listened to Volf give her the gist of their discussion, she added her own thoughts on the subject.

"I hear that the Adventurers' Guild is getting ready to mass-produce even more green slimes to make the medicinal crackers. But it sounds like it won't be easy, since they need enough space and windows for them to absorb sunlight."

According to Idaea's observations, green slimes grew better in direct sunlight. However, it was difficult to give green slimes as much sunlight as possible to promote their development while breeding other slimes in tandem and working within the confines of limited building space.

"Maybe the Adventurers' Guild will build a south-facing green

slime tower one of these days," Volf said.

Not a Green Tower, but a Green *Slime* Tower. That would certainly take care of the sun exposure problem. Dahlia could just imagine what sort of face Irma, who hated slimes, would make if she heard about the existence of such a building.

"The problem is," Volf continued, "sometimes other monsters go after our food during expeditions, so we have to find a way to keep them from eating the crackers."

"Like skybats, you mean?"

When Dahlia had come along on the expedition to slay an armored crab, she and the Beast Hunters had encountered the large, bat-like creatures. Dahlia had heard of them targeting small children and livestock, food that travelers carried, and even the preserved rations of the Order of Beast Hunters.

"Yeah, but skybats wouldn't be the worst. The bigger problem is if something like a wyvern came for them."

"True, it would certainly be a problem if a wyvern ate a medicinal cracker..."

A wyvern with endless stamina, ready to fight tooth and nail? *No thank you.*

As she frowned at the thought, Volf brought up an earlier topic.

"Speaking of, Ehrlichia's breeding and cultivation techniques are pretty amazing, aren't they?"

"Lucia said the same thing. She mentioned that the quality of baphomets is higher in Ehrlichia, though she insisted that Ordine was going to catch up with them soon..."

The Tailors' Guild frequently used fabrics and leathers from monsters such as monster silkworms and baphomets. According to Lucia, they were difficult materials to work with, but very durable. In the past they were only used for the clothing of the royal family and high-ranking nobles, but through cultivation efforts, their use had become much more widespread. Dahlia also used monster thread for her magical tools, so she was happy that those efforts had resulted in higher-quality materials at a more affordable price.

"Ordine is already breeding slimes, so there'll be more of those soon too. Are there any other monsters you wish we could breed

here?”

“I know it’ll never happen, but maybe kelpies...”

Dahlia had spent several days making kelpie wands over and over. If they were a little more affordable, then even commoners would be able to chill their drinks wherever they wanted. The barriers of accessibility of materials, their price, and their maintenance costs existed in this world as in her last.

“That *would* be cool. If we could ride kelpies in the squad, that’d give us an edge fighting in water,” Volf said, giving a response expected of a Beast Hunter.

His next words overlapped with Dahlia’s.

“But they have to be raised in water...”

“Taking care of them underwater sounds hard...”

The ecology of kelpies was still not entirely known. But the basic understanding was that they lived under or around water, and they couldn’t spend a long time on land. It would be difficult indeed for humans to breed them.

“What about you, Volf? Any monsters you want to breed?”

“Wyverns. That way, every expedition would be either a day trip or a single overnight trip,” Volf answered right away.

And thus the Beast Hunters will become dragoons. He was right that being able to fly would make missions easier, and wyverns themselves would also be an asset in battle. But the castle kept only a few wyverns.

“Is the castle not going to breed more wyverns?” Dahlia asked.

“The wyverns in the castle don’t have mates. The oldest wyvern is already at the age where it probably needs to retire, and the youngest is about the age of a primary schooler in human years. And I heard it’s not easy to buy them from Ehrlichia.”

“They have quite a few in Ehrlichia, don’t they?”

Ehrlichia even made wyvern jerky, after all. There had to be a substantial number of them.

“They do have a lot, but they’re reluctant to sell them. Over there, they have a dragoon squad that hunts monsters. I’m sure they want to keep enough for themselves and don’t want to hand them over to another country.”

So it sounded like the difficulty in procuring wyverns came down to a diplomatic issue.

Having said that, unlike slimes, wyverns couldn't just be captured in the forest. The day the Beast Hunters tried to snatch an egg or a hatchling was the day they would do battle with its parents or an entire flock of wyverns.

"More realistically, I'd like it if we could breed more sleipnirs and green horses," Volf went on. "But they have a harder time bonding with one another than regular horses, so even when they are introduced to a mate, it more often than not ends in failure."

Sleipnirs and green horses were monsters. They could run faster and for longer than a horse. But compared to horses, their numbers were few, and they were not easily trained. Plus, they cost a lot to purchase.

"Sleipnirs and green horses are tricky..." Dahlia said.

Volf nodded. "Yeah, they are. But I guess that's just the way it is. It's not like we expect all humans to get along with someone they just met and stay together for..." Volf trailed off, then let out two short coughs.

Dahlia clenched her jaw to keep her expression unchanged. It seemed to her that she and Volf had successfully done exactly that, but she couldn't bring herself to say it.

The day she first met Volf, they had hit it off talking about magical tools and swords and kept up a steady stream of conversation. After that, they had met again by chance in town and gone out for a meal and a drink together. Then, long story short, they became close friends.

It was the result of a series of happenstances, but they had probably become friends so quickly because they had bonded over their respective love of magical tools and magical swords. She hoped they could continue being together—but only as friends. *Not mates,* she told herself.

Actually, maybe the reason Volf had stopped himself from saying anything else was out of consideration for her. Despite getting along well with her ex-fiancé as colleagues and staying together for two years, spending their lives together just hadn't been in the cards for

them. Though she felt that was the best outcome for both of them.

"Dahlia...?" Volf said worriedly.

"I hope the Order is able to get more sleipnirs and green horses in the future," she replied with a smile, going back to the original topic.

Volf was a dear friend whom she felt she could be herself around. She prayed they could be together for as long as possible.

The magical lantern swayed in the carriage as it made its way down the path to the Green Tower.

Extra Story: A Father and Daughter's Magical Tool Invention Diaries *Medicine Grinder*

"Dad's medicine grinder should be around here somewhere..."

Dahlia was on her knees in the workshop of the tower, rummaging through the bottom shelf of the cabinet. It had been a while since she'd used it, so her memory of where she had last placed it was fuzzy.

When she had accompanied the Order of Beast Hunters on their mission to slay armored crab, the squad had given its shell to her. Enchanting leather armor with armored crab shell gave it a certain amount of heat resistance.

On the workbench behind her lay a pair of large leather mittens. Her plan for the day was to perform a light enchantment on them with powdered armored crab shell to test if she could give them heat resistance without compromising their flexibility. If she succeeded, then she would speak to Volf and Jonas about applying her method to gloves for the bow knights.

When Dahlia sat in on the Beast Hunters' training the other day, she'd observed the veteran bow knights give advice to the younger knights.

"Don't ignore your fingers there. Go get them treated."

"That's hardly necessary, Sir Milo. They're just chafed, is all. It's like getting sword calluses."

"No, it's not. Those are burns. If you don't get them healed, over time, they'll dull your sensations when you shoot."

At the older bow knight's words, the younger knight obediently went to get his fingers treated.

Dahlia had the opportunity to speak with the squad's bow knights

afterward, and she learned that those types of burns were common for them.

When they shot their titanbows while using strengthening magic, the friction on their fingers was stronger than normal. There were significant differences between individuals, but even leather gloves couldn't protect against at least some amount of chafing. It was especially common when they practiced taking multiple shots in succession. However, leather gloves to block heat were thick and tough, so they were not ideal in terms of ease of movement, and they had the additional disadvantage of reducing the sensation in the bow knights' fingers.

There were leather gloves made of monster materials that offered heat resistance as well as thin, pliant leather gloves enchanted to block heat, but they were very expensive. Not only that, but they weren't always durable. Dahlia personally felt the cost was justified for the duty of slaying monsters, but arrows took priority in the bow knights' budget, so it wasn't easy to find the funds for gloves.

Next, the oldest bow knight shared stories of his youth.

"Back in my day, I could only fit two-thirds the number of arrows in my quiver as now. On expeditions, we used to complain about what good's a bow knight without any arrows..."

Shooting with accuracy was important, but they couldn't fight without arrows. And the problem was only exacerbated when going up against multiple monsters.

It had taken time, but as the number of arrows increased, the price for one lowered. The bow knights were also furnished with more gloves, but they lacked any improvements when it came to heat resistance. It was difficult to account for all the individual needs of the knights.

However, the Order of Beast Hunters of today was different. With the help of Jonas, the Order's weapon advisor, the knights now had shock-absorption materials on the backs of their shields and armor, customized to each knight's needs. Even the bow knights had shock absorbers on the back of their gloves. Dahlia was sure that they could similarly provide heat resistant gloves customized for each knight.

Wondering what the more expensive gloves ran for, Dahlia asked Oswald about it when she went to his workshop. He told her not about gloves for bow knights but the Household Troops. A composite enchantment using fire dragon and ice dragon scales was done on unicorn leather to provide heat and cold resistance. One pair of those gloves, whose sophisticated design also ensured mobility of the fingers, cost twenty gold coins.

The materials and magic that went into creating the gloves were certainly impressive, but that price was staggering. Dahlia couldn't help but think it would be unfeasible to obtain those for the bow knights of the Order, considering how many of them there were. That was why Dahlia wanted to think of a way to provide the bow knights with heat resistant gloves at a reasonable cost.

The goal was to create a pair of gloves for everyone who wanted one that would reduce the movement and sensation of their fingers as little as possible. If she succeeded, then she could move on to thinking about how to make gloves for the winter that would have all the same benefits while also protecting them from the cold.

Fortunately, Dahlia had a decent amount of armored crab shell in her stock now from that expedition, and she should be able to keep a steady supply of them from now on. The question was if she would be able to enchant gloves while keeping them thin and flexible. Thus, she had grabbed a pair of pot-holder mittens from the kitchen to practice on.

And so, her goal right now was to take the armored crab shells, which had been made into a powder by the Adventurers' Guild, and grind them into even finer powder. It was for that task that she was searching for the medicine grinder, a magical tool her father had developed.

It was a handy tool that not only finely ground powder but also utilized an ice crystal to keep the powder from heating up. Unfortunately, according to her father, it hadn't sold very well.

"Oh, is this it?"

Dahlia pulled out a rectangular wooden box and dusted off the top. It hadn't been used for so long that the label on the bottom right had faded into illegibility. Once she finally got the lid unstuck,

she gently lifted the hemp cloth-wrapped contents from inside. When she unwrapped the cloth, she found a silver-colored cylindrical tool inside.

"This isn't the medicine grinder. It's...the horse hoof cleaner?"

At a glance, it resembled a small bucket with brushes lining the inside and a pocket on the outside for a water crystal.

"Father said this one didn't sell well either..."

Dahlia softly stroked the outside of the silver tub with her fingers. A friend of her father's had worked at a stable. Since washing an entire horse was backbreaking work, his friend had expressed a desire for a tool specifically for washing a horse's legs and hooves. That had led to the development of this tool.

This bucket-shaped container could fit one horse hoof in at a time for cleaning. Dahlia could tell that it was convenient—it was portable and it used minimal water. In fact, her father's friend had happily used it.

However, Carlo's attempts to sell it as a product had found little success. The horses were unwilling to put their feet into the contraptions, and they oftentimes kicked them away when they suddenly bolted to find something to eat.

"Carlo, you don't have the know-how and experience dealing with horses since you don't keep them yourself. You're better off not making magical tools for horses," a magical toolmaker colleague of his had told him.

And so, the horse hoof washer had become just another obscure magical tool.

"I'll have to tell him they've started selling next time I go to the cemetery," Dahlia muttered to herself.

Incidentally, this little-sold tool was seeing a boost in sales recently thanks to Ivano, who had started marketing them to nobles and those involved in equestrian competitions. Nobles craved to make their horses look exceptionally pristine and elegant, and in competitions, having even a speck of dirt on a horse's hooves was counted as a demerit.

If her father had changed his marketing and business tactics, he also might have been able to sell the tools when he had developed

them. He mainly made tools for commoners, so he probably hadn't even considered selling them to nobles.

Incidentally, despite the initial worry that the horses would send the buckets flying with their kicks, they'd figured out that if the horses were fed apples and sugar cubes while getting their hooves cleaned, they were more obedient about keeping their legs in place.

Furthermore, as a thank-you to the Diels family for hosting the ball, she had given them twenty units of elaborately decorated hoof cleaners. Dahlia hadn't been able to restrain herself from asking Ivano if that was really an adequate present, but he'd informed her that it had been Gildo's request. She'd been surprised to discover that Gildo was something of a horse enthusiast.

As she recalled that, Dahlia put the hoof cleaner back in its box and returned to her search of the cabinets. This time, she knew for sure that the medicine grinder was in the neighboring box.

It was about the same size as the box for the hoof cleaner but a little heavier. She placed it on the workbench, then opened it and took out the tool covered in hemp cloth.

The matte silver cylinder was separated into two sections. The top had a lid for the powder to go in and blades at the base for grinding the medicine, while the bottom, which supplied the driving force of the tool, housed an air crystal to move the blades and an ice crystal to keep the contents cool. It was clean, but it had a slight medicinal scent, likely belonging to whatever had last been ground in it.

"Huh? Is this a spare part?"

Dahlia's hand brushed against something hard at the edge of the hemp cloth that the tool had been wrapped in. When she unwrapped the rest of the cloth, she found a small plate.

"This is still here...?" Dahlia said as she carefully held up the white plate. Her chest tightened at the memories it brought back.

The plate, small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, was painted with the silhouette of a black dog. A small crack along the edge had been repaired with kraken tape to keep it from cutting her fingers.

It had been her favorite plate as a child. The shopkeeper at the

ceramics store had told her it was for boys, but the black dog had reminded Dahlia of her pet dog from her previous life, so she had picked this one out without even giving a glance to the plates painted with pretty flowers or cute squirrels. All her father had cared about was that she liked it, so he had bought it for her.

At one point, she had dropped it and chipped the edge, but she'd been adamant about not throwing her favorite plate away, so her father had stuck kraken tape on it.

Eventually, the small plate became the one she took her medicine from. Powdered medicine was more common than pills in Ordine, even for children. And in this world, which did not have drying agents, the powdered medicine was prone to clumping. When Dahlia was sick as a child, Carlo would crush the powder to be even finer and mix it with honey or syrup to make it go down easier.

The last time she had taken the powdered medicine was not long before her father had died, when she herself had come down with a fever. She hadn't used this dish at that time, but her father had brought her a dish of honey along with the finely powdered medicine.

She'd protested, saying she wasn't a child anymore. But maybe to him, she was his little girl whom he never stopped worrying about. It was only now that she realized that.

Dahlia remembered one more thing as she traced the kraken tape that covered the crack on the dish with her fingers. One time when she had gotten sick as a child, she had gotten their maid, Sofia, sick as well. Sofia had had to stay home for a few days to recover, so Carlo had juggled taking care of Dahlia with his own work.

One of his friends, having heard about the situation, came by to bring them lunch. He seemed worried when he saw Carlo's bed hair and Dahlia still in her pajamas in the middle of the day.

He turned to Carlo with a serious expression and said, "Carlo, don't you think it's time you gave some serious thought? Raised without a mother, in a broken home, poor thing..."

A young child at the time, Dahlia wasn't sure what the man was saying. But one thing that she did understand was that the man was pitying her for not having a mother.

“I’m not a poor thing!” she cried. Her sudden outburst effectively ended the conversation.

Now that she thought about it, she wondered if she had held her father back from the happiness of remarrying. She wished she could apologize to him, but she would have to wait until they met again in the afterlife. Until then, she would devote herself to becoming a magical toolmaker who would make him proud.

But there was something she could say for certain. She hadn’t been a pitiable child. She had been happy, even without a mother.

Together, she and her father had been a happy family.

“We weren’t broken at all, dad.”

Dahlia smiled at the small dish, then got started on getting the medicine grinder working.



“Dahlia, are you sick?”

“It’s nothing serious.”

Dahlia shook her head as she was getting things ready to make waterproof cloth. Despite what she said, she moved distractedly and her face was a little flushed. Even her voice sounded a bit hoarse.

“You look like you have a fever,” Carlo said. He put a hand to his daughter’s forehead. It was warm. “That’s a fever, all right. Take today off, and stay in bed for an entire day.”

“It’s not that bad. I’ll be fine after I take something to bring the fever down.”

“Don’t push yourself. We have time to finish the waterproof cloth order, so you just rest and get over that cold.”

“Oh, don’t fuss. It’s spring. I’ll be fine.”

“It was spring when my own father died of a cold. He said he was fine, that it wasn’t anything serious, and even upset my mother by having a nightcap before bed.”

Carlo’s father—Dahlia’s grandfather—had died in the warm springtime after aggravating a cold. Not even a month later, his mother, who had been taking care of his father, had died of the same cold. Carlo wished he could go back in time to punch himself

for taking the illnesses lightly. The thought of the same thing happening to Dahlia frightened him more than death itself.

Carlo wasn't sure what face he was making, but after she stared at him for a time, his daughter left to go to her room without any more resistance.

"Father... Okay, fine. I'll go rest in my room."

After Dahlia left, his apprentice Tobias arrived carrying wooden boxes of fabric for the waterproof cloth.

"Good morning, master."

Carlo would have strained his lower back carrying that much weight, but Tobias easily stacked the boxes along the wall and then took a look around the room.

"Where's Dahlia?"

"She has a cold. I don't want you to catch it, so we'll all take the day off from work today."

"Understood. Are you feeling all right yourself? Your face looks a bit pale..."

Tobias looked very worried, and it was then that Carlo realized that his poor condition was finally starting to show in his face.

To hide that, he plastered on a smile and said, "I drank too much last night. Ah, but if I do get laid up with a cold, I have high expectations for what a youngster like you can accomplish on his own."

Carlo had only meant to tease him, but Tobias responded seriously. "Understood. I will do my best when that time comes."

When Tobias first started coming to the Green Tower, he had been so nervous that he hadn't been able to concentrate his magic in one direction. But now, Carlo knew Tobias was capable of taking on more than thirty percent more of the work he currently did. The only reason things took as long as they did now was because they took breaks so Carlo could teach him the business side of things and tell him old stories about Tobias's father, Teo. When it came to enchantments that required uniformity, his apprentice was more or less as good as he himself was.

There was still much about magical toolmaking that he wanted to teach both his apprentices, but he was proud to say that Tobias and

Dahlia were good enough toolmakers to be able to make a living in any country that required magical tools. He was sincerely relieved that he had at least been able to do that in time.

Tobias did as he was told and left, but he soon returned. He placed a wooden box filled with soft white bread, eggs, several types of fruits, steamed chicken from a food stall, and cold medicine on the workbench. Then, in a forceful tone, he told Carlo to get plenty of rest today as well. Carlo took off his work gloves, deciding that he would do just what his apprentice advised.

Once lunchtime came around, Carlo made bread porridge for Dahlia and prepared her cold medicine. As he was doing so, he suddenly remembered the medicine grinder he'd made once upon a time.

Once, when Carlo was younger, a neighborhood doctor close in age to him had come to him for help. "Using a mortar and pestle leaves it too rough and grainy, and it takes a lot of time. Also, heating up the medicine can halve its effectiveness. If only there were a way to finely crush the medicine while keeping it cool..."

In the capital, commoners refrained from using expensive potions or visiting the temple for treatment. For colds, stomachaches, and other everyday ailments, they either went to be seen by a doctor or relied on the medicine of the Apothecaries' Guild.

Doctors also often received medicine from the guild, which they would then prescribe to patients. Sometimes they mixed their own medicines at their offices or homes, but the medicines turned out coarse, and it was a time-intensive task.

There were also times when grinding was not an option, since the friction created heat that lowered the efficacy of certain medicines.

Ideally, it would all have been left to the Apothecaries' Guild, but things got complicated when two or three medicines needed to be combined or when certain medication needed to be tailored to the individual. Most importantly, it would raise costs.

After gathering information from the doctor and several prototypes later, Carlo developed the medicine grinder. He had already made a tool for mincing food, so he was able to apply a similar technique to make the medicine grinder and finished it in no

time at all.

The result was a magical tool that could grind the medicinal powder even finer and prevent it from heating up with the use of an ice crystal. The doctor was pleased. He purchased and made use of it, and even brought it to the Apothecaries' Guild.

Unfortunately, the medicine grinder received a muted reception. At the guild, there was someone in charge of mixing medicines for individuals, and when they wanted to prevent the medicine from heating up, they had the help of ice mages who were themselves qualified in medicine. In truth, they had low trust in a tool made by a young magical toolmaker with no pharmaceutical knowledge.

In any case, they purchased a few units with the thought that they might be useful for the periodic winter epidemic. Carlo suspected that was to preserve the dignity of the doctor who had brought the grinder in.

Carlo had accepted the way things turned out, but the doctor had apologized to him for the time and effort he'd wasted developing the tool. Carlo replied that the doctor could treat him to a meal, and that it had been good practice for him. But through the years, the doctor had treated Carlo's young daughter whenever she had a cold or stomachache.

Carlo used the medicine grinder for Dahlia's medicine, so he felt it had been very much worth the effort to make it.

"Dahlia, it's time for lunch."

"Thanks. So it's already lunchtime, huh..."

Dahlia sat up in her bed. At the sight of her face, redder than it had been this morning, Carlo's worry spiked.

"Dahlia, try to eat what you can and take some cold medicine. I brought you some honey as a palate cleanser. Oh, should I make you some ice too? If you're feeling really unwell, I can go now to call the doctor—"

His daughter cut off his babbling with a lighthearted scoff. "Father, you worry too much. I told you, I'm not a kid any... *Achoo!*"

"Dahlia!" Carlo cried out in anguish.

"Jeez, if you're that worried about me, *you* should start cutting

back on drinking."

"Yeah, I'll get on that..."

"That's convincing. I mean it—I want you to live a long life."

Now he was being scolded by his daughter. His chest ached at her ungrantable wish.

"Well, yes, I don't think I want to die just yet—"

His honest remark was interrupted by a cough that no medicine could cure. A burning pain radiated through his chest, but he managed to keep his expression neutral.

But that didn't fool Dahlia. She looked right through him with her clear green eyes.

"Did you catch my cold? You should go rest too."

"No, that's not it. My study is dusty."

"You should really clean up in there. Or maybe I can do it for you?"

Carlo purposely kept stacks of scandalous picture books in his study to keep Dahlia out. He had a letter for Tobias hidden in there. It was true that he should probably clean up a bit, but that could wait for another day.

"No, I'll tidy up one of these days, so don't worry about it!"

There was nothing he needed to do right now that took precedence over taking care of his sick daughter.

"All right, I'll go make you some ice!"

"I thought I told you to rest!"

As they worried for each other's well-being, they both took the day to rest and recover.



A few days after Dahlia got over her cold, Carlo attended a baronial event after a while of not doing so. The pain in his chest was getting worse by the day, but he wanted to attend so he could see the faces of his magical toolmaker colleagues while he was still able to pretend he was fine.

Unfortunately, the event was a standing buffet. It was hard to stay on his feet, so he ended up leaning against a wall with a glass

in his hand.

It was Oswald who came over to talk to him. Ever the observant one, he could immediately tell Carlo wasn't doing so well.

I wish I could have a drink and a chat with Oswald one last time, he thought to himself just as Oswald opened his mouth.

"Carlo, what do you say we—"

But before he could hear the rest of what he had to say, Carlo heard someone else call for Baron Rossetti.

Over walked the earl hosting the baronial event. He informed Carlo that there was someone waiting to speak with him in a private room. Carlo could guess who it was—someone whom he had had a long association with.

The earl invited Oswald along as well, but Carlo put a stop to that. While he did want to share a drink with Oz one more time, he absolutely did not want him to get involved in this. His kindhearted junior might very well lay down his life to try to save him. Oswald was his good friend and valued colleague—and a magical toolmaker who was on his way to surpassing Carlo himself.

"Oz, look after your health, and get along with your wives!" Carlo said, giving Oswald a smile and a patronizing remark in place of a final farewell, then left the large hall.

The earl led Carlo down to a drawing room but did not follow him inside. Carlo walked in alone to see the person he had expected to find. His fine black three-piece suit and shiny black leather shoes complemented his black hair and black eyes.

"It has been too long, Baron Rossetti."

"Yes, it really has. I thought I would never have the pleasure of seeing you again, Lord Zanardi," Carlo said, unable to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

The other man's smile did not falter, but his eyes went cold like a serpent's. "I am not here with an offer of work. I simply thought we could have tea together."

The man glanced aside, and the attendant behind him placed a wooden box on the table and opened it. Inside was a bottle that resembled a potion bottle, except the glass was green like a high potion.

The attendant opened the bottle, poured the contents into a gold-rimmed white cup, and set it in front of Carlo. This high-quality tea cost a hefty sum of fifteen gilt silver coins per cup.

The attendant silently carried the empty box out of the room. Now that he was alone with Zanardi, with neither attendants nor bodyguards in the room, Carlo straightened his posture and said, "I thank you for the tea, but it is much too exquisite for me, and I would not be able to repay you for it. I am a commoner by birth, so I am sure if we were to hold a conversation, I would only say something to offend you, Duke Zanardi."

"I promise not to hold you accountable for anything irreverent that may be said here today. Moreover, my house is not so wanting that I would request compensation for tea."

Of course not, you're a duke. Carlo refrained from saying that comment aloud and picked up the cup without further protest. Zanardi had already given his word that he would not approach his apprentices, but he was still a man Carlo did not want to displease.

The liquid that passed down his throat had a slightly grassy flavor. He imagined this was what green slime would taste like if it were boiled, but it quickly alleviated the burning pain in his chest.

He reflexively let out a long sigh of relief, finally unburdened from the pain of hypermageia. Potions had already become like sprinkling water on a raging fire, and the painkillers sold in the pharmacy had stopped working for him.

Zanardi narrowed his eyes at him. "The hypermageia must be dreadfully painful. I have money for you, for treatment. It should be enough to give you six months without any pain," he said, suddenly doing away with the circumlocution typical of nobles.

It was a very attractive offer, but Carlo suspected he would not be able to pay the price for it.

"Are you requesting that I make a magical tool in six months?" he asked.

"No, I wouldn't ask you to do such a thing. I only ask that you share some of your expertise with my own toolmaker, Carmine."

The man's dark eyes were filled with conviction that Carlo would heed his request. When one saw glimpses of death and battled

against an unendurable pain, one might be willing to accept an invitation from the god of death himself. Perhaps there had been others like Carlo before.

But Zanardi was not necessarily a bad person. All he desired were weapons to protect the king and the peace of the kingdom. For those who stood at the top of the kingdom, that desire was justified.

As for Carlo, he had never been able to assimilate himself entirely to noble ways even after becoming a baron. He had something he wanted to protect more than the peace of Ordine.

The new knowledge that Zanardi wanted could lead him to Dahlia's heaven-blessed memories. His daughter's freedom, peace, and happiness—he would never hand those over even if it meant his death.

"Did you mean what you said about not holding me accountable for irreverence?"

"I swear it, on the Zanardi name."

"In that case, I must decline. A magical toolmaker cannot create new tools just by gaining a little knowledge. A magical toolmaker can only successfully make what he or she truly wants or desires to make."

"So, is this the end for you?"

"Even after I'm gone, the tools I have made and the apprentices I have taught will remain. My colleagues will also surely surpass me. Leaving them with knowledge and unusable ideas they have no desire for will only shackle them. I refuse to shackle those who succeed me."

He stumbled over his words, but he said everything while keeping a broad smile on his face.

He was met with silence. Those cold, snakelike eyes stared him down. Was the duke ascertaining if his words were truthful or dishonest, or was he contriving a way to make him divulge everything? If he was coming at him with no holds barred, then Carlo had no choice but to put an end to things now. And if that was the case, then he would steer things in the direction he wanted them to go, and have his last laugh as a magical toolmaker.

With that resolve, Carlo stared straight back at those dark eyes.

“Those who succeed you? Ah yes, you have that...”

Zanardi suddenly averted his gaze, and Carlo saw his face crack like a mask. What he saw underneath was the face of a tired old man. He saw nothing of the dignity of a noble or the confidence of a powerful man.

Zanardi let out a long, weighty sigh. It sounded as though he was deeply mourning the fact that he had no one to take his place after him.

The Intelligence Office protected the Kingdom of Ordine from the shadows. Carlo could not even imagine the heavy responsibility that burdened this man, who was at the top of that organization.

Carlo’s body was breaking down due to the magical tools he was making at the castle. He would have been lying if he’d said he wasn’t conflicted about that, but he no longer felt any malice or resentment.

Just as Zanardi strove to protect the kingdom, Carlo strove to protect his daughter. Since the things they had decided to protect were different, their paths did not overlap in that regard. Nevertheless, at this moment, he felt he saw a peek of who the duke truly was.

After a long silence, Zanardi reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and took out a small brown bottle.

“This is an effective painkiller. Take one pill a day, and you should be able to work without pain for two months. Just so you know, it’s not poison to keep you from talking.”

Carlo had never heard the man speak to him so plainly. And for some reason, he knew he spoke the truth.

Carlo stood and picked up the small bottle from the table.

“Thank you.”

He bowed his head, and when he straightened back up, Zanardi’s mask was back in place. He was reclined against the sofa with his long legs crossed and his fingers steepled elegantly.

“I have been able to solicit you for some time now, but unfortunately it seems our association must come to an end, Baron Carlo Rossetti.”

The words almost made Carlo's expression falter, but he managed to smile.

"It was a very long association indeed, Lord Fausto Zanardi."

It was the first time he addressed him by his first name. The corners of the man's mouth turned up.

He still wore the same sleek, black silk clothes he had the first day Carlo met him, with the practiced smile of a noble. The only thing that was different was the regret in his eyes at their parting. Or perhaps Carlo was reading too much into things.

"If you will excuse me."

Carlo bowed to Zanardi, then left the room.

The light coming through the window was already growing dim, but there was still time before he would be engulfed in darkness.

Carlo walked down the long corridor to make his way back to the Green Tower, where his daughter waited for him.


Dahlia in Bloom
Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools
10
Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Hachi Komada
Character Designer: Kei






Handsome Knight of the Order of Beast-Hunters
Volfred
Eldest Son of the Earldom Scalfarotto
Guido
Ice Spider Wand
Reincarnated Female Magical Toolmaker
Dahlia
Head Manager of the Scalfarotto Arms Works
Jonas
Nap Lantern
The Magical Sword Night Piercer


Proprietor of the Goddess's Right Eye
Oswald
Guildmaster of the Merchants' Guild
Leone
Second Daughter of the Viscountcy Goodwin
Julicia
Former Head of the Marquisate D'Orazi
Bernigi

Bonus Translation Notes

Hello and welcome to another round of premium bonus content for Volume 10 of *Dahlia in Bloom*!

Dare I say that we finally got some romantic development in this volume? For me, Volf and Dahlia's dance was the highlight of the book, and I hope it was as much of a joy to read as it was to translate. I think it's important to remember that despite this being volume 10, not that much time has passed in the story, so the slow development feels realistic and makes sense in-universe.

I want to use this bonus content to give some cultural notes that might shed some light on a few moments in the text. Dahlia often makes references to her previous life in Japan, which are filled with meaning for Japanese readers but may need more context for English readers.

Clip-On Earrings

In the very beginning of the volume, Volf goes to buy Dahlia a pair of gold earrings. Some of you may be wondering why the earrings are specifically clip-ons. We learn later when Volf shares the story about his mother that neither she nor Dahlia has pierced ears. In fact, having pierced ears actually isn't as common in Japan as it is in the West, so many people wear clip-on earrings. There are actually two different words used in Japanese to differentiate the two. There's イヤリング (*iyaringu*) for unpierced ears and ピアス (*piasu*) for pierced ears. (They're taken, as you can probably guess, from the words "earring" and "pierce").

Japanese New Year

"Nothing, really. I was thinking of doing some cleaning and

cooking at home," Dahlia answered, remembering how she had always passed the New Year in her previous life.

So, what are the New Year's customs in Japan? In the U.S., we have "spring cleaning," but this is actually done at the end of December in Japan, before the New Year, and is called *osoji*, lit. "big cleaning." People take this time to clean and declutter their homes for the coming year. The food for the New Year's feast is called *osechi-ryori,* and is made days in advance of New Year's and eaten over several days. Although many families opt to purchase *osechi-ryori* instead of making it, Dahlia's comment about cleaning and cooking for the holidays would likely call these traditions to mind.

A Very Auspicious Day

The calendars in this world, unlike those in Japan, didn't designate very auspicious days, but the weather today was unusually good.

This particular line is referring to the *Rokuyo*, a series of six days that are supposed to predict good and bad luck. The day referenced in this line is the *taian kichijitsu*, or the luckiest day among those six. The other days are *sensho* (good luck in the morning, bad luck for the rest of the day), *tomobiki* (bad luck in the daytime, and if you do run into bad luck, your friends will be involved), *senbu* (bad luck in the morning, good luck in the afternoon), *butsumetsu* (the most unlucky day), and *shakko* (luck from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. but bad luck for the rest of the day).

The system has largely fallen out of use, but some are still mindful of days like *taian* and *butsumetsu* for planning important events like weddings and funerals. (Incidentally, *taian kichijitsu* is the best day for weddings.)

The mention of *taian* here could just be a remark about the weather, but maybe it could also be seen as good luck that Jonas and Guido didn't accidentally kill each other in that chapter.

Shiokara

As she chewed, it finally hit her—the flavor was close to shiokara, a dish of fermented seafood viscera from her previous world.

In the chapter “Dinner at Monster Lovers,” Dahlia compares kraken mousse to a Japanese dish called shiokara. I added in the gloss to give a clear picture for English readers right away, but it is, as you read, essentially salted fish that’s fermented in its own guts. Nowadays, it’s most commonly made with squid (*ika no shiokara*), so it makes sense that the kraken mousse reminds Dahlia of it. It is, as you might guess, an acquired taste. It is often sold in bars along with a shot of whiskey or other strong alcohol.



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Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools Volume 10
by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by A.M. Cola Edited by Shakuzan

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