Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

Side Stories



Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Shima
Character Designer: Kei, Hachi Komada


Dahlia in Bloom
Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools
Side Stories
Hisaya Amagishi
Illustrator: Shima
Character Designer: Kei, Hachi Komada

Dahlia in Bloom

Crafting a Fresh Start with Magical Tools

Side Stories

Hisaya Amagishi

CONTENTS

Tales of the Order of Beast Hunters

- *prologue* The Order of Beast Hunters' Toast
- Dorino the Knight and His Golden-Eyed Friend
- The Order of Beast Hunters and the Purple Bicorns
- Randolph the Knight and the White Baphomet
- The Assistant Manager of the Black Cauldron and the Two Customers
- Randolph the Knight and Apple Pie
- Gismondo of the Order of Beast Hunters and Egg Dishes
- What the Knights of the Order of Beast Hunters Count on Sleepless Nights

Tales of Merchants and Artisans

- *prologue* The Merchants' Guildmaster and Vice-Guildmaster
- Ivano the Apprentice Merchant and the Silver Bracelet
- Fermo the Apprentice Craftsman and the Small Silver Box
- The Vice-Chairman's Abacus

Tales of the Kingdom's Nobles

- *prologue* The Marquises' Matching Handkerchiefs
- Tilly the Marquis's Daughter and the Shooting Star
- The Engagement of Gildo, Son of a Marquis
- The Marriage of Grato, Son of a Marquis
- The Dowager Duchess Altea's Lessons on Nobility
- Bad Company and Dried Barracuda

Tales of Friends

- *prologue* Teatime with a Magical Toolmaker and a Couturier
- The Hairstylist Irma's Father and the Couriers' Guild Courier
- The Couturier Lucia and the Orange Muffins
- Lunch with Lucia, Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory
- Lucia the Couturier and Almond Cookies

Tales of the Scalfarotto Family

- *prologue* Love Letters of Master and Servant
- The Scalfarotto Family's Knight and the Written Report
- Jonas the Bodyguard's Hot Night
- The Fourth Scalfarotto Son and Bath Salts

Tales of the Kingdom's Students

- *prologue* Knights and Stationery
- Oswald the Student and Gray and Silver
- Raul the Student and the White Embroidered Handkerchief
- Magical Toolmaking Department Classmates
- Carlo the Magical Toolmaker and Dahlia the Student
- *epilogue* The Letter with the Floral Watermark



Tales of the Order of Beast Hunters

Prologue: The Order of Beast Hunters' Toast

"Cheers to a successful mission, and to more good fortune to come!"

"Cheers to more good fortune!"

The sound of clinking glasses mingled with cheery voices. Encircling the round tables, quenching their thirst with ale and wine, were the knights of the Kingdom of Ordine's Order of Beast Hunters. Their latest mission had taken them from dusk till dawn to complete, and traces of fatigue were evident on their faces.

The assistant manager, who wore a black vest, set some dishes down on the table with a smile. "Welcome to the Black Cauldron! Here are our most popular dishes of this season—seafood and veggie skewers. We've got them grilled or deep-fried. They're hot off the fryers and grills, so be careful!"

More servers followed suit, bringing the same dishes to the other tables.

The Black Cauldron was a restaurant located in the southern part of the capital. As its name suggested, it was a three-story building made of black brick, which gave it the appearance of a large black cauldron. The restaurant was known for its wide selection of flavorful dishes. Since the assistant manager was a former knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, the Black Cauldron was one of the restaurants the knights frequented.

A knight sitting close by picked up a small plate with two grilled skewers, still piping hot, and offered it to Dahlia. “Master Dahlia, have some grilled kraken if you’d like!”

“Thank you very much.”

Krakens looked like giant octopuses, but their flavor was very close to squid. They were fascinating creatures, despite being monsters.

Squid skewers had existed in her previous life as well, but not kraken skewers. It was a habit of hers to compare her previous world to this one, for she was a reincarnator. Her name was Dahlia Rossetti, and she was a magical toolmaker by profession. As an artisan, she mainly created magical tools similar to the daily household appliances of her previous life.

Not only that, but she was also an advisor to the Order of Beast Hunters and the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, which conducted business with the squad—hence why the knights called her “Master Dahlia.” Until last spring, she had been plugging along as an ordinary magical toolmaker, but a series of coincidences and fateful connections had led her to this position.

“Dahlia, do you want a prawn-and-asparagus skewer too?”

“Thank you, I’ll try it after I eat these. Would you like a grilled kraken skewer too, Volf?”

“Thanks. I’ll take this one, then.”

Next to her was the very man who was the source of those connections: Volfred Scalfarotto, otherwise known as Volf. The handsome man picked up the grilled kraken with a smile. He was the fourth son of the Earldom Scalfarotto, a family well-known throughout the kingdom, and was one of the Order of Beast Hunters’ Scarlet Armors—knights who served in the dangerous vanguard and rearguard positions.

He was tall and lean, with hair as glossy black as a raven’s feathers. He had features so beautiful that it was said no sculptor could hope to replicate them, and his golden eyes captivated the attention of everyone around. His beauty had earned him the title of the city’s hottest heartthrob—or a fallen angel—but for Volf himself, his good looks were a burden that brought him nothing but trouble

when it came to women.

After a few chance encounters, Volf and Dahlia had become close friends, and now they had even become colleagues. *Sometimes, the people you meet lead to things you'd never expect,* Dahlia thought as she savored her kraken. Once she had finished it, the assistant manager and servers returned with more platters.

"And here is our signature dish, the roast chicken. Pair it with your choice of sauce!"

"Now this is what I've been waiting for!"

"This looks delicious!"

The knights cheered at the sight of the steaming roast chickens that were placed at each table. On the platters, the whole roasted chickens had been cut into bite-size pieces, the skins a deep golden brown and the inside filled with juicy goodness. Of the two sauces available to them, one was a spicy-looking red sauce with hot peppers, and the other was a lemon zest sauce.

"Dahlia, you want the lemon sauce, right?" Volf asked as he placed two pieces of chicken on a plate.

"Yes. And you'll have the pepper sauce?"

Volf and Dahlia had become such good drinking and eating buddies that they knew each other's tastes to the letter.

As they savored their food, the knights started discussing the monsters they had slain that day.

"Anyway, those giant rats today were so big, I'm not sure if we can actually call them rats."

"You said it. Even a cat would've turned tail and fled."

Today, their target had been the giant rats that had shown up in warehouses by the harbor. About a dozen knights and adventurers had cooperated to get rid of them.

Giant rats were a type of monster. They had dark gray fur and short fangs, and they were three to four times the size of an ordinary rat. Though they were called "giant," Dahlia's bestiary described them as being the size of kittens.

Their fangs could be used to enchant magical tools with hardening, but the effect wasn't very powerful. If anything, the rats were more often used for clothing materials. Their soft pelts were a

popular choice in making gloves and slippers.

Dahlia, who had never seen a giant rat in person, asked curiously, "Just how big were they?"

"My job was driving the rats out, but the one I saw was about the size of a cat," Volf said.

His friend Randolph added, "The warehouse I went to had one that was nearly the size of a nightdog."

"Oh yeah, that one was *definitely* too big to be called a rat!" Dorino, another friend, followed up. "I had to do a double take."

Nightdogs were about the size of the German shepherds of Dahlia's previous life. She couldn't blame a cat who'd run away from a rat that size. She'd want to do the same. As she shuddered at the thought, Volf continued his explanation.

"Giant rats can get pretty big depending on what they eat, but the ones today were a special case. They had apparently been eating monster materials in the warehouses. They were clever enough to evade all the traps set out for them until now, so they went unnoticed."

"They were only found when the wooden storage crates were checked after there was a roof leak in one of the warehouses. It was lucky."

"It's a good thing they were found before they started multiplying like, well, rats."

If it hadn't been for that leak, then rats the size of German shepherds would have continued steadily multiplying. That was a terrifying thought.

There was one other thing Dahlia was curious about.

"What sort of monster materials were the giant rats eating?" she asked.

"They were eating shed kingsnake skins."

The one who answered her question was the priest sitting at the other table. He had come along on today's mission as a healer in case anyone got bitten. Thankfully, he hadn't had to perform his duties this time around.

"Shed kingsnake skins...?"

Kingsnakes were large serpent monsters that inhabited deserts.

They were mostly imported from the desert nation of Išrana. Those shed skins were indispensable materials for magical tools. Dahlia herself often used them for the wicks of magical lanterns. But it was her first time hearing that giant rats ate them.

"They must have been hard to chew," she commented.

"I don't doubt it," Volf said. "Kingsnakes are tough, and I'm sure their shed skins are too. Giant rats must have strong jaws."

"Come to think of it, I heard some unicorn horns and waterproof cloth that were meant for export had been gnawed on a bit too," said another knight.

"No choice but to wipe them out," Volf stated, and the other knights nodded.

It certainly was painful to hear about such premium goods as unicorn horns being gnawed on. And waterproof cloth was unusable with holes in it.

"The rats were only found in two warehouses, but I hear they're going to have nightdogs regularly patrolling from now on."

Some households in Dahlia's neighborhoods owned cats to keep rats out of their granaries. Maybe nightdogs were the only effective way to deal with giant rats.

The conversation moved on to other aspects of the day's mission, such as the steel wire nets the knights had used to capture the rats, and the nightdogs that had worked alongside them. Dahlia listened to their stories with rapt interest.

A short time later, Randolph—not one of the restaurant servers—came over with plates.

"Miss Dahlia, Volf, would you like some apple pie? It's *packed* with apples and very tasty."

"Thank you."

On top of the plate he handed to her sat a generous slice of pie. The moment she took it, she noticed it had some heft to it. From the cross section, she could see the pie was stuffed with golden apple filling—Randolph was right about that. It looked like it would be very satisfying.

To Volf, Randolph handed a slice about half the size of Dahlia's. It

was probably just the right size for him; he wasn't overly fond of sweets. Dahlia, however, was happy to take the large slice.

The filling wasn't too sweet, and the apple flavor came through strongly. The crust that enveloped it was perfectly baked, with some slightly charred parts that actually added a delightful crunchy texture.

"The apples have a really nice flavor. It's absolutely delicious," she commented.

"It's not too sweet—just how I like it," Volf added.

"I'm happy to hear that," Randolph said as he picked up a slice of his own. His chestnut brown eyes narrowed in a smile.

Beside him, Dorino cocked his head to the side as he munched. "Oh yeah, this reminds me of something that showed up on a college exam. What was it again—'The sweetest apple pie is the one that was eaten with your first love'?"

Dorino's sudden topic change made Randolph cough and Volf choke. Dahlia wordlessly continued chewing and waited for the conversation to continue.

"It's a saying, right? It was one of the Ehrlichian language dictation questions."

"Oh yeah, that showed up on my exam too. I remember it because I thought it was such an odd thing to show up on a test."

A few older knights at the other table joined in.

"Forgive my ignorance, but that saying was not on the priests' exam. What does it mean?"

"Father Aroldo, please don't call yourself ignorant. This is only known within the small world of college classes. Let's see, it means...you recall the memories of your youth more fondly, or something like that."

"How poignant..." Aroldo, clad in a black robe that hid his priestly clothes, breathed a sigh that carried the scent of alcohol.

"At the time, I wondered what it was supposed to teach us college students with all our big dreams. But I wonder how the students today interpret that saying?"

"Huh? I don't think I learned that saying when I was in college..." said a young knight with green hair, his eyes taking on the faraway

gaze of someone combing through his memories. “Did you, Sir Volf?”

“Yeah, I remember doing a dictation of that. What about when you were in school, Dahlia?”

“I don’t think I ever learned that.” She couldn’t remember it, so it was possible that the Ehrlichian language textbook had changed right between Volf’s school days and her own.

“Either you had a different textbook, or that saying fell out of fashion in Ehrlichia,” Volf speculated. “The fact they don’t teach it anymore really makes me feel like part of a different generation.”

“Speaking of old-fashioned sayings, here’s another one,” said a middle-aged knight. “‘Flowers and love letters are sent in haste, but replies ought to be given late.’”

He was met with puzzled head tilts from the other knights.

“‘Flowers and love letters are sent in haste, but replies ought to be given late...’? I’ve never heard that before. What does it mean?”

“Good women were snatched up quick, so if a man was interested in someone, he was told to make his move right away. Meanwhile, the ladies were told to really scrutinize a man’s family and background before giving a response. In the old days, it was the trend for men to be the first ones to declare their intentions by sending women flowers and love letters.”

“Interesting. Nowadays, it doesn’t matter who sends love letters or confesses.”

“Yeah. When I was in college, girls were more assertive and would often send handkerchiefs expressing their love...”

As the times changed, so too did aphorisms and the ways people professed their love.

The topic seamlessly turned into reminiscing about college.

“I always got failing marks on my geography tests,” someone remarked. “My teacher used to worry that even if I got accepted into the Order of Beast Hunters, I wouldn’t be able to get to where I needed to go.”

“But sir, you’re always leading the way on expeditions. You must’ve really studied hard to overcome that weakness!”

“Nah, I just learned the paths and terrain in person after I joined the squad. Once my life depended on it, I was finally able to map

things out in my head."

Being able to find one's way around was a crucial skill for a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters.

"Yeah, there's a lot you can't get a grasp on from just classroom learning."

"Definitely. There's too much of a gap between what's written about monsters in textbooks and actual, real-life monsters. Take marsh spiders—the fact that they spit water wasn't covered in any textbooks."

"I know! Once I started going on actual subjugation missions, I found out there are a lot of mutant strains too. Hey, Kirk, how were the monster textbooks when you were in college? Did they mention that there were more mutant strains or anything?"

"No, they just said that there were rare cases of mutant monsters," Kirk replied. "But we run into them all the time on missions, don't we? And a lot of them are really no picnic to deal with."

It sounded like it was about time for the monster textbooks to be revised.

"But anyway, the apple pie you eat with your first love is the sweetest, huh? I can't say I don't understand, now that I'm the age that I am. The first love letter I received, our first meal together, our first opera—even as I grow more forgetful, those memories remain clear in my mind..." said an older knight. He was speaking to himself, and yet his words resounded through the room.

"I will go request more desserts."

Randolph's chair scraped loudly against the floor as he got up and left the room. As a sweets lover, he probably wanted dessert in place of an after dinner drink. As Dahlia considered that, Dorino exhaled deeply.

"Love letters! Oh, how sweet! Not that I can relate!"

"Chin up, Dorino. I would always be willing to introduce you to a marriage partner," one of the more seasoned knights offered.

Dorino smiled at him and replied, "Thank you, but I want to marry for love."

"The stars in the night sky may be nice, but so are flowers close

at hand."

Dahlia had just finished her slice of apple pie when Kirk brought a bottle of red wine to their table. As he poured some into her glass, his eyes met Dahlia's.

"Master Dahlia, do you have any love letter stories to share?" Kirk asked, smoothly including her in the conversation.

But nothing came to mind. "No, I've never received or written one..."

When she thought back on it, she realized that, even though she'd once been engaged, she had never once written or been given a love letter. The only things she and her ex-fiancé had exchanged were specification documents, design plans, and order forms for magical tools. As she recalled that, she found herself staring pensively into space.

Between her previous and current worlds, she had lived over forty years total, with not a single love letter to show for it. At this point, should she assume that she was simply wired for bad luck in love?

She'd begun pondering the possibility when Dorino, having successfully escaped from discussing arranged marriage, turned the conversation to the person sitting beside her.

"Volf, you probably got piles of love letters when you were in school, right?"

"...Yeah, sort of," Volf responded, not a hint of bragging or joy in his voice. Dahlia couldn't help but feel sympathetic.

While it might have sounded nice to be so desirable, Volf had been the object of many women's affections and had received countless excessive expressions of love, which had incurred the jealousy of other men, and as a result, he'd ended up alone and friendless. Dahlia was sure that among the love letters he'd received, many had left him with a heavy heart.

"You lived in the dorms in college, right? I bet you got letters sent to your room every day."

"No, actually, my mail was reviewed by my family, so I only received the important stuff."

"Don't tell me—did you get more letters than you could read in a day?"

“No, nothing like that—one time, there was a razor hidden inside a letter, and I cut my finger so deeply I had to drink a potion. My family decided to manage my mail after that...”

“Jeez... Sounds painful...”

Being bombarded not only with love letters but even hate mail stuffed with razors was enough to make anyone terrified of letters.

A hush fell over the room, and an older knight tried to change the subject with a question. “Volf, haven’t you gotten at least one love letter that made you happy or made you want to write a reply?”

“I’ve never been happy to receive one, and I’ve never written a reply to one,” Volf stated plainly.

“I feel for you in more ways than one...” The older knight sighed.

“Volf, does your family still check your mail for you?”

“Yes. The only mail I open at the barracks is from my family or Dahlia.”

“Hrk...!” Dahlia choked out a cough. She didn’t want to hear her name brought up in this context. She’d never put something as dangerous as a razor in a letter to a friend, and she even took extra care not to write anything that could be taken as rude. But suddenly, she realized something.

She included many things in her letters to Volf that she wouldn’t want anyone else to read. Among other things, she routinely asked him, the son of an earl, if he wanted meat or fish for dinner, or if he wanted to accompany her to the market first to get ideas for what to cook.

In fact, the same probably went for him. In his letters to her, he mentioned, for example, wanting her to keep some space open in the refrigerator for meat he had bought and was bringing over, or invited her to dine at the Black Cauldron to try their new menu items. Nothing aristocratic in the least.

As Dahlia mulled over the contents of their letters to each other, she became convinced of their passion—she refused to call it gluttony—for food and drink.

But she tried her best to pretend she hadn’t heard anything and moistened her dried lips with wine.

“Gaaah! Look, I know your personality and situation and all, but I

gotta say something. I want to get a real, proper love letter! Gods, I'm jealenvious!"

"Don't make up weird words, Dorino!"

Thankfully, Dorino had broken the tense silence that had fallen on the gathering, and more knights began to chime in.

"I hope one of these days you get a love letter that makes you happy, Sir Volf!"

"Volf, I will pray that someday, you'll receive the kind of love letter that you'll want to treasure and save in a box."

"I don't think that day will ever come..." Volf said.

He was sure to receive more love letters in the years to come, but seeing how the man himself had no desire for a romantic connection, it seemed unlikely that he would receive such a letter—one that would bring him joy.

As for Dahlia herself, she felt she had no talent for writing love letters.

Kirk moved on to the next table, where he asked, with eyes shining, "Sir Alfio, tell us about your love letters!"

The middle-aged knight next to him said, his face impassive, "Love letters...? My wife has told me that she's kept every single one of the letters I've written her."

"Of course, as a memento and record of your love!"

"Wow, I didn't think we'd hear Sir Alfio get so sentimental about his wife!"

Alfio was a long-serving knight with four daughters. Dahlia thought admiringly that he and his wife must have a strong relationship. But then the man continued.

"No, she said that if I ever did anything bad, she'd let my daughters read them. In my youthful enthusiasm, I had written her hundreds of passionate letters, you see... I have no intention of doing anything bad, but if those letters ever see the light of day, I think I'd have to abscond."

At first, Dahlia thought he was joking, but when she noticed the faraway look in his eyes, she wasn't sure she should laugh. Everyone else's smiles had frozen on their faces.

"H-Hundreds of letters? That's quite something..."

"My wife has said that she'll have them all buried with her inside her coffin when she dies. That is why I must outlive her at all costs..."

"A coffin filled with love letters! I knew it, that's love!" Kirk exclaimed, his face the picture of innocence. He was truly a good-natured knight.

Barely stopping a beat, he poured red wine for Aroldo, who was sitting next to Alfio.

"Father Aroldo, have you ever received—" Kirk paused, seeming unsure of whether it was appropriate to ask this sort of question of a priest in the temple service, and simply filled Aroldo's glass without finishing.

"Yes, I receive many. Men and women of all ages send letters thanking me for healing them and expressing their love to the gods!" the silver-stoled priest declared with a broad smile.

Amid peals of laughter, Dorino looked up to see Randolph returning to the room with a large platter in each hand.

"Randolph, what's on those platters?"

"Apple pie, and this one is a berry tart."

Both platters looked fairly heavy, so Dorino helped Randolph distribute the desserts to each table.

"Randolph, you really need to be mindful of cavities," Dorino warned him.

"I always take care to brush my teeth properly," Randolph replied with a small frown. He always seemed to get a little defensive about that.

After serving the pie and tart to everyone who wanted a piece, Randolph took one slice of each, Dorino took a slice of tart, and they both sat back down in their seats.

Volf and Dahlia, who had previously been sitting across from them, were now listening intently to the conversation between some older knights at the next table over. It sounded like they were discussing skölls, which were rare, elusive monsters. The pair looked very much like a knight and magical toolmaker as they asked many questions about the monster's characteristics and magical power,

and took notes on how to procure materials from them for use in magical tools.

Keeping his eyes on the pair, Dorino turned to his friend and asked, "Hey, Randolph. Have you ever written a love letter?"

Randolph, his eyes slightly red from alcohol—or so Dorino guessed—suddenly froze.

"...As a boy, yes. A silly child's letter."

They were still young; it wasn't that long ago that Randolph had been just a boy, but his expression was that of someone digging up distant memories. Perhaps those memories were associated with the one with whom he'd shared his first apple pie.

"Randolph, have you ever thought of writing her another letter to start something up?"

"No," he said shortly, then took a bite of apple pie.

As his friend chewed silently, Dorino popped a berry into his mouth with his fork. The berry, which had looked like a scarlet jewel, tasted surprisingly tart.

As Dorino's mouth puckered at the sourness, Randolph muttered, "'A first love, lovely as a flower, will never blossom fully.' That's another Ehrlichian saying."

"Aha, I gotcha. I remember my first crush on a girl ending with my heart smashed to pieces too."

Dorino's first love as a young boy had gone nowhere, and subsequent crushes hadn't been long-lasting either. The person he yearned after now was as distant as the stars in the night sky. Still, he was hopelessly unable to move past his feelings for her.

"What about you, Dorino? Do you not write love letters?"

"Not so much. I prefer bringing flowers or candy."

Even if Dorino couldn't have her, he could at least go to see her. He was satisfied with that for now.

Randolph gave a shallow nod, then started in on his berry tart.

"Mind if I cut in here?"

"Sir Gismondo! Go right ahead!"

Gismondo came over to sit down in an open seat. He was the bodyguard who was always at Grato's side, and he was one of the senior members of the Order of Beast Hunters. It was rare for him to

make an appearance at an outing where Grato himself was absent. Dorino couldn't help but look around for the captain.

"Captain Grato has gone to stay with a friend tonight. He told me he didn't need a bodyguard and that I should go out for a drink."

The man had picked up on his question without him having to even ask it. Dorino scratched his head bashfully as the assistant manager of the restaurant came over with a bottle of wine.

"Sir Gismondo! It's been too long!"

"Nice place you've got here, Samuel. I was just marveling at how popular it seems to be."

"Thank you kindly. And where is Captain Grato today?"

Apparently the assistant manager was wondering the same thing Dorino had been. Gismondo repeated his answer with a dry smile. "He is not with me today. He's probably drinking with a good friend at the moment."

As he listened attentively to Gismondo, the assistant manager opened the bottle of wine and poured a glass. "I heard the Order of Beast Hunters gained plenty of new recruits this year."

"That's true. Though we still don't know how many of them will stick around."

Samuel lowered his voice slightly and began, "I apologize for causing trouble for you when I left—"

"What're you saying? You're still working as hard as you ever did," Gismondo cut him off with a laugh. He picked up the wine bottle. "Care to share a drink, Mr. Assistant Manager?"

"Gladly."

Samuel sat on the edge of a chair and accepted the glass Gismondo poured for him.

He didn't look like a knight anymore; he looked every inch the assistant manager of a restaurant. Dorino turned around to face the friendly young knight who was sitting right behind him at the other table.

"Ruche, been spending much time with your girlfriend lately?"

"Yeah, I see her on my days off, and sometimes I escort her home."

"Man, it must be nice working in the same place. You get to see

her every day."

"Yeah, but I miss her on expeditions," Ruche said with a grin. His girlfriend worked in the castle in the Order of Beast Hunters' wing. His romance, like Dorino's, had originally been one-sided. Dorino felt a little bitter about that, but it was outweighed by his happiness for Ruche. He clapped the young knight on the shoulder and put a glass in his hand, which he then filled to the brim with wine. Ruche smiled widely as he brought the glass to his lips.

When Dorino turned back and took a look around his own table, he saw there was one person with an empty glass. He extended the bottle toward the priest.

"Father Aroldo, you don't know of any magic that can help speed up a romance that's taking forever to go anywhere, do you?" he asked as he poured the wine.

The priest briefly glanced at another table. Sitting there were a black-haired knight and a red-haired magical toolmaker. Dorino couldn't make out their conversation, but the way they seemed to be enjoying themselves made them look even closer than sweethearts —more like family. And yet they both obstinately insisted that they were just friends. Why? Of course, if that was what they both preferred, there was nothing wrong with it, but Volf had finally been able to start smiling genuinely, and Dorino wished even more happiness for his friend.

The silver-stoled priest lifted his glass and said, with a serious expression, "Let us pray."

Dorino the Knight and His Golden-Eyed Friend

"I can't believe I passed..."

Dorino, clad in his uniform, was participating in the entrance ceremony for the chivalry school within the Kingdom of Ordine's royal college.

The auditorium was unduly spacious. The ages of the new students varied, and female students composed twenty to thirty percent of the group. Children of nobles were numerous. While a certain number of commoners did enroll in the chivalric track, most of them were children of families who served nobles, had learned how to wield a sword and bow from a young age, or had excellent command of strengthening magic.

The entrance exam for the college chivalric studies track was considerably difficult and included a practical component in addition to a pen and paper test. Anyone who couldn't prepare for it properly was at a serious disadvantage.

Dorino hadn't sufficiently prepared for the exam while he was in primary school. After all, he had originally aspired to be a city guard.

The school for city guards was separate from the chivalric college track, and students spent three to four years in specialized study. The instruction taught one everything needed to uphold the safety of the capital, from self-defense to arrest techniques, horseback riding to fighting in a team, and geography to the Ehrlichian language.

However, Dorino's teacher encouraged him to just try for the college chivalry school since he had high magic for a commoner and could wield ice magic. His teacher explained that even if he did not become a knight, his studies would not go to waste, for studying chivalry would open up more employment opportunities and improve

his odds of earning a better salary. Thus, Dorino decided to place chivalry as his first choice and the city guard school as his second.

To prepare for the written exam, he spent three months answering practice questions at school, and his teacher carefully coached him for the interview. As for the practical exam, he had no experience using a sword or lance, so he chose hand-to-hand combat; he had been taking lessons ever since he'd first aspired to become a city guard, so it wasn't very difficult for him.

During the actual college examination, he was only required to run ten laps around the large schoolyard, and he was able to maintain a decent pace by using strengthening magic. For the written exam, he started with the questions he felt most certain about answering and wrote as much as he could.

He wasn't confident about his performance in any component of the exam, but he'd gotten through the first stage. At a later date, he moved on to the next stage, which included the practical exam and the interview.

The hand-to-hand combat exam was conducted by a burly man who towered over Dorino. The examiner told him to come at him with everything he had, so Dorino went for a surprise attack to the backs of his knees and sent him tumbling to the ground. They grappled with each other, but once Dorino was brought down on his back, he assumed he'd probably failed.

Next came the interview. It started with general questions, then he was asked what he wanted to study in school, and, just as his teacher had taught him, Dorino responded that he wanted to learn how to protect people.

The examiner looked at him and asked, "Who do you think is most responsible for keeping the citizens safe?"

He wasn't prepared to answer that question. His teacher had never brought it up.

He had a faint idea that the right answer was likely the king of Ordine. However, if he was being honest, Dorino didn't feel as if he were protected by the royal family, whom he'd never even seen.

As the image of knights in bloodstained armor rose to his mind, he answered instinctively, "The Order of Beast Hunters."

The children of the lower city looked up to the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters. In his neighborhood, it was rare to catch sight of the knights, but bards sang dramatized tales of their heroic feats.

Nevertheless, Dorino knew those dramatizations weren't the truth.

Once, when he'd gone to make a delivery near the capital's western gate, he had seen the Order of Beast Hunters returning from a mission. All of the townsfolk around the gate had been cheering for joy and praising the Order of Beast Hunters for their efforts.

But it was not a procession of glorious knights that Dorino saw passing by that day. He saw two enormous red bear carcasses being transported on cart. He saw horses with frightened looks in their eyes, breathing heavily as they pulled mud-streaked carriages, bloody bandages visible from the windows. Riding the horses were knights in blood-splattered armor. They had dark rings under their eyes, but they still managed to smile at the crowd. Dorino couldn't think of any group of people stronger than those knights, nor of anyone who did more to protect the populace.

"They put their lives on the line to protect the people... Though of course, the king is the one whose governance keeps us safe."

After hearing that response, the examiner who'd asked the question narrowed his eyes into slits, and the other examiner grimaced and looked down. Dorino had caught himself at the end and mended his answer, but he had a feeling he'd failed for sure.

"Mr. Dorino Barti, that will be all for your interview."

"Thank you very much."

He'd definitely failed.

The city guard school exam was a week later. If he failed that too, he'd have to talk to his teacher about other employment options. Preoccupied by that thought, he had placed a hand on the door when the examiner called out to him.

"Mr. Barti, you still have some time before matriculation, so be sure to study up on your Ehrlichian, particularly your spelling."

"Oh, yes! I will!"

After giving that flustered response, Dorino bowed and left the room. He realized then that he had somehow managed to pass.

The days following the interview were hectic with preparations for graduation and enrollment.

All of that led up to today, when he was participating in the entrance ceremony for the chivalry school. No matter how many times he wondered how he'd managed to get accepted, he couldn't figure it out. But for him, a commoner from the lower city, to be accepted into the chivalric courses was something he should be grateful and happy about.

Once the long ceremonial address and speeches of the entrance ceremony were over, the students all headed to separate classrooms, where their homeroom teachers would explain their class schedules and the next steps. First-year students were required to take fundamental subjects, so their classes were already set in stone.

Many of the other students around him looked to be sons of noble families. Dorino had a feeling it would be rough going trying to find someone he could talk to easily.

Dorino headed in the direction of the classroom, feeling slightly uncomfortable in his stiffly starched uniform.

"Welcome, Class Two of the chivalry school!"

The homeroom teacher, whom he found waiting for him with a smile, was the hand-to-hand combat examiner.

Dorino's days at college were a lot easier than he had prepared himself for.

At first, he and his classmates formed loose-knit groups along class lines, but whether because of the wearisome exams or the training that left them all muddy, they came to naturally form groups based on whom they got along with, regardless of rank.

There were some people who kept their distance from Dorino once they found out he was a commoner, the son of a family that owned a diner in the lower city, and unable to properly wield a sword or lance. But he had other people he could speak affably with, and he got an even better reception once people learned he could

use ice magic.

Even among nobles and mages, few people possessed the ability to use ice magic. Dorino took advantage of that by adding small chunks of ice to everyone's drinks during summer and wrapping ice in handkerchiefs for injuries that weren't severe enough to warrant the use of a potion. As a result, he received snacks and class notes, and he was able to make passing friendships.

Twice, he overused his ice magic to the point of exhausting himself completely and had to be treated in the infirmary. That, he mentioned to no one.

When he entered his second year, Dorino had the choice between training to use a sword, lance, or bow. Like most students, Dorino chose the sword. He had joined a voluntary sword-training club as a first-year student, but he'd only learned the basics there. While it was fun to exchange blows with others, he just couldn't get the hang of it, and he felt demoralized after every training session.

During the first three months of training, all of the classes participated together, so a crowd of students streamed out to the grounds. There, Dorino noticed everyone's gazes shift in the same direction. They were looking at a tall young man. He had glossy black hair and a very handsome face, but most striking of all—suspiciously striking, in fact—were his golden eyes.

Even though he wore the same training uniform as everyone else, it looked far better on him. Dorino wasn't surprised to see a few smiley female students walking up to the young man to chat with him.

"That guy with golden eyes—isn't that Volfred Scalfarotto?"

"Yeah, the so-called heartbreaker... I hear he's the worst."

As Dorino listened to the male students muttering to each other, he was further convinced that the golden-eyed boy was someone he had nothing in common with and would never associate with.

Sword training turned out to be surprisingly fun. Perhaps Dorino's time in the sword practice club had proved fruitful; the instructor praised him on how quickly he was improving. He replied that he thrived on positive feedback, and though he was joking, it was true

that he was now able to last longer when sparring with his peers.

Nevertheless, he had no hope of rivaling the students who had set their sights on becoming knights since childhood. His arms were often left tingling after less than stellar attempts at parrying.

They alternated sparring partners during practice, so he had now crossed training swords with Volfred several times. The boy was markedly strong, but he held nothing back even when going up against Dorino and his subpar skills. The two never exchanged a single word during their bouts, however.

Each time Dorino saw him, Volfred's eyes—those golden eyes that were so adored by the girls—were devoid of any passion and simply looked to Dorino like golden glass beads. They reflected the people around him on their surfaces, but that was all. It was like those eyes weren't looking at anyone.

Later on, they were separated into groups based on skill level for their sword practice sessions, so Dorino stopped sparring with the more advanced Volfred, but although they had no connection to each other, Dorino occasionally heard rumors about Volfred. Rumors that he'd harshly turned down a girl who had bravely professed her love to him; that he'd told another that he might consider a relationship if it was just for fun and wouldn't lead to marriage; that he'd put his hands on someone else's girlfriend. From a distance, the young man seemed indifferent to the accumulating rumors.

Also, Dorino had never heard of anyone calling out Volfred's behavior to his face. Nearly everyone in the capital had heard of the Earldom Scalfarotto; they were the family responsible for the circulation of water crystals in the kingdom. Their name was even written in history books. A friend of Dorino's told him that in all likelihood, no one wanted to start a quarrel with Volf's family.

Several times, Dorino spotted Volfred doing practice swings at the edge of the school grounds, but then a female student would approach the young man, and Volf would move away without saying anything.

Even in moments like those, Volf's eyes looked like golden glass beads.

From his third year onward, Dorino became very busy.

It took everything he had to keep up with his classes, which had become more difficult, and he spent his free time practicing strengthening magic and swordsmanship. In addition to that, he'd begun taking water and ice magic classes.

Dorino had prioritized sword training and taken only the minimum number of magic-related classes. But when he ended up in the infirmary for the third time that summer, having once again exhausted his ice magic, the doctor sold him out to—no, referred him for instruction to an older teacher proficient in water and ice magic.

In primary school, his ice magic had been judged too weak to chill a room, let alone a warehouse, but repeatedly adding ice to his friends' glasses had proved an effective means of strengthening it. The white-haired instructor—Professor Lanza—praised his ice magic skill and gave him private lessons after school. The teacher was very thorough and made things easy to understand.

Few students took the regular, specialized ice magic classes, but most of them had high magic—in other words, they were nobles—so the way they were taught was different. As a commoner, he was grateful to be given low-pressure lessons where he wouldn't be ridiculed.

Some students complained that it was unfair that Dorino received one-on-one lessons with Professor Lanza, but Dorino would laugh them off and say it was only because his ice magic was so poor that he couldn't qualify for the regular classes. Dorino found that as the years went by, he'd become better at forcing a smile and laughing things off.

As the students in his class became upperclassmen, the time came for nobles and commoners alike to choose from the many paths available to them. The most popular route was to become a royal knight, but there was a high barrier to entry. The other options included becoming a border guard, a guard in any of a number of territories, a knight employed by nobility, a private guard, an adventurer, a mercenary, and so on and so forth.

Some of the students who'd entered college at the same time as

Dorino had already ventured down their respective paths. Some had graduated early due to having excellent skills in both military and literary arts, some had graduated a year early because of family or work, some had had to repeat a year, and some had quit school for one reason or another.

One day, during Dorino's private after-school lessons, Professor Lanza made an absurd suggestion.

"Dorino, after you graduate, why don't you join the royal knights?"

He had never given it any thought, but when he heard more about it, he was nearly convinced.

Dorino had decided that after he graduated, he would not return home to the lower city. His older brother was getting married, so their home would soon be more crowded. Well, there were other reasons too, but regardless, he didn't want to be a burden on his family.

If he joined the royal knights, he would be given his own private room in the barracks and three square meals every day. He could take a bath whenever he wanted, someone else would take care of his cleaning and laundry, and his salary would be much higher than that of a guard. He wouldn't find better working conditions anywhere else.

Luck and momentum had guided him along the path to chivalry school. Dorino decided to take on the challenge.

From then on, Dorino threw himself into studying, sword training, and magic day in and day out. He spent his days in diligent study, barely experiencing his youth. Some friends laughed at him, some cheered him on, and some made fun of him behind his back.

When he held in his hands the black, cylindrical leather case containing a scroll of parchment sealed with golden wax, he felt he must have used up his entire lifetime supply of luck.

Dorino requested to be assigned to the royal knights' Order of Beast Hunters. It came with the highest salary while also being the least competitive as well as the most dangerous.

Dorino had no lofty expectations for himself, like thinking he

would be able to protect the citizens of the kingdom from monsters. He just wanted to test how much stronger he, as weak and inept in sword and magic as he was, could become.

"Welcome to the Order of Beast Hunters."

Upon entering the waiting room before the enlistment ceremony, Dorino was greeted by one of the examiners who had been present during his chivalry exams.

Apparently, the captain and vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters were occasionally present during the exams. Professor Lanza hadn't specifically urged him to join the Order of Beast Hunters or anything, but Dorino felt someone might have pulled some strings to bring him here.

One day, as the new recruits practiced horseback riding, Dorino spotted a familiar black-haired man pulling a horse along. He decided he might as well greet him.

"It's been a while, Sir Scalfarotto."

"Forgive me, but have we met before?" the man replied with a smile that looked pasted on.

What a jerk, Dorino thought, and from then on, they kept up a superficial relationship, interacting only during training.

Now that they were in the same squad, Dorino was given an involuntary up-close view of Volfred's popularity. The man didn't even bother taking the letters that women tried to pass him. He ignored anyone who called out to him. When girls tried to confess their love to him in the hallways, he didn't even wait until they were done; he just cut them off, saying he was in a hurry, and left them there to cry alone.

At the time, Dorino judged him to be a pompous ass who could've stood to consider the feelings of others no matter how much of a bother it was to him. But since Volfred wasn't his friend, it wasn't his place to comment, so he kept those thoughts to himself.

Eventually, Dorino got fed up with women asking him to introduce them and pass their love letters on to "Sir Volfred" just because they were both in the Order of Beast Hunters. Not wanting to get involved, he declined their requests. Dorino couldn't deny that he also felt envious of Volfred. The man was blessed with noble lineage,

good looks, and superior sword skills.

It was only after a considerable length of time that Dorino started to realize there was something suspicious about the rumors regarding Volfred.

At some point, Dorino had moved rooms in the barracks and ended up next to Volfred's, so whether he liked it or not, he got a sense for the other knight's comings and goings.

Like himself, Volfred lived at the barracks and seldom went back home. He only left in the evenings to eat or drink with the other knights, and in his spare time, he either ran laps around the training grounds or practiced his sword swings. At all other times, he stayed in his room.

He wasn't swayed by any woman's attempts to woo him, that much was true, but neither did he attempt to invite them out himself. Occasionally he would go visit the Dowager Duchess Gastoni, but he never seemed particularly happy about it, almost as if he were just being summoned there.

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place for Dorino when Volfred caught a terrible cold and simply stayed in his room the entire time. He didn't call for a single person. He didn't go to the infirmary, didn't send for a doctor, and didn't even ask anyone else in the barracks for help.

Dorino watched a red-faced Volfred stumble back and forth between his room and the bathroom. Unable to endure the sounds of his ceaseless coughing fits, Dorino took it upon himself to call for the doctor and ask for some bread pudding and apple juice from the mess hall to bring to Volfred.

The next day, after Volfred had recovered, he thanked Dorino and handed him a silver coin. Dorino bristled and told him off, explaining that at times like this, you didn't thank a comrade with money but by buying him a drink.

With a solemn nod, Volfred simply said, "All right."

Later, once Volfred was back to one hundred percent health, Dorino took him out on the town. Volfred's handsomeness proved effective for picking up women, but Dorino was amused by the man's strange sulkiness, so they went drinking—just the two of

them. For some reason, Volfred was very happy about treating Dorino to a drink.

After that outing, the two of them started talking more and more often. And the more they talked, the clearer it became that all those rumors circulating about Volfred were downright lies. The man was smart but also somewhat childish. Although fully capable of resigning himself to hardship, he was inflexible and stubborn about the strangest things.

Volf, as Dorino came to call him, was just an ordinary man who liked alcohol and magical swords.

In short order, he went from being an apprentice to a fresh recruit to a Scarlet Armor. His strength earned him the nickname of the "Black Reaper," and Dorino followed in his footsteps.

Randolph, the second son of an earl, was also a Scarlet Armor. He was a taciturn man, sparing with his words, but his indomitably powerful arms made him proficient in using heavy longswords and large shields. The more experienced knights among the Scarlet Armors were even stronger.

Dorino was surely the weakest of them all. He swallowed down his impatience and resentment and focused on training.

Whenever he headed out to train on his own, Volf and Randolph started accompanying him for some reason. Without invitation, they would join him in his activities, and the three began conversing more often. They started to make each other laugh more often too, and finally he felt like they had become friends.

But maybe Dorino was the only one who felt that way.

One time, on the way back from an expedition, Volf hid that he'd been injured and was actively bleeding as he rode on horseback to keep a lookout for monsters. Dorino, who had a less serious injury, was resting comfortably in a carriage. They made it back to the castle and took off their armor, and when Dorino caught sight of Volf's red-stained back and pale face, he snapped.

"You idiot! We're friends, aren't we?! At least tell me when you're hurt!"

"Sorry..." Volf said, bowing his head like a scolded puppy.

Come on, you're the Black Reaper, not the Black Puppy Dog,

Dorino scoffed in his mind.

"Dorino..."

Randolph came over and tugged lightly on his sleeve, looking like a bear cub who'd lost his way.

You're as big as a bear, man. Stop acting like a little cub!

Exasperated beyond words, Dorino grabbed Volf by the arm and dragged him to the infirmary. Randolph followed silently.

From that point onward, Dorino decided to take all the diffidence he felt toward these two—because they were the sons of earls, because they were nobles, because they were stronger knights than him—and throw it away.

But, he wondered, what did everyone, including himself, even see in Volf? His glimmering golden eyes were certainly pretty to look at, but they were like glass marbles—toys for a lonely child. Not wanting to hurt others, and at the same time not wanting to hurt himself, his eyes held a certain fragility, as if they might break at any moment.

But it seemed Dorino would not be able to turn those glass beads into real gold himself. Sometimes, he would think he had caught a glimpse of Volf's true self only for him to paste on a smile once more. They fought together, went out drinking and shot the breeze with each other, but still, Dorino felt there was a wall between them that just wouldn't fall.

Some people might wave away Volf's behavior, saying that being stubborn and putting up a bold front was simply what men did, but Dorino found it heartbreaking.

Even today, as they sat drinking beneath the magical lantern of a tavern, Volf's smile didn't reach his eyes. As everyone around him was chatting animatedly about the women they were interested in, his downcast golden eyes reflected only his glass of ale.

Ugh, damn it! Where's the Goddess of Lucre or a holy maiden when you need one? Hell, I'll even take a ditzy witch at this point.

If he needed some golden holly, he'd go find some. If he needed a silver rose, then he'd make one. If Volf needed to be kissed to break some curse, then Dorino and Randolph would hold him down. One way or another, he'd turn his friend's glass bead eyes into real gold.

The Order of Beast Hunters and the Purple Bicorns

Early one summer, after thirty knights of the Order of Beast Hunters had successfully completed a mission to dispatch purple bicorns, they moved to a watering hole. The surrounding area was flat and open, with ample space to tether their horses, making it the optimal spot to set up camp.

From here, they could reach the city by nightfall if they kept their horses moving at a brisk pace. Normally, they would already have been making their way back home at this time. Tonight, however, they would be camping here and making their return home early in the morning. The reason for that was that all the knights had sustained heavy mental and spiritual anguish.

"Curse those stupid bicorns!"

"Perish, purple bicorns! Who do you think you are...?!"

"Those bastards were stubborn to the end..."

The knights were sitting on sheets of waterproof cloth spread out on the ground, their expressions dark.

Usually, after a mission, they would have a meal to soothe their fatigue, but instead, voices of anger, malice, and grief were heard all throughout the camp.

"Well, I can't say I don't understand..." Vice-Captain Griswald sighed.

"Yes, they had to deal with purple bicorns, after all..." an older knight responded as he handed the vice-captain a wineskin.

Purple bicorns were a mutant strain of bicorns. They weren't much better at fighting than the regular black bicorns, but they had nastier dispositions. They created illusions that made them look like their attackers' loved ones, and consequently, most of the knights had seen the purple bicorns as their own wives, children, kin, and

lovers.

On top of that, purple bicorns had high resistance against magic, so long-range spells weren't very effective against them. Eventually, the knights had had to resort to close physical combat, and slicing through loved ones with swords or shooting them with arrows had dampened their spirits considerably. It was for this reason that everyone abhorred missions to cull purple bicorns.

"Thank you all for your hard work defeating those bicorns."

"Tomorrow, all we have to do is get back home. Feel free to drink up all the alcohol we brought. If you have anything on your mind, now's the time to spill it all out and then forget it! Anything said here today will not leave this camp, and that's an order! Speech over! Cheers!"

"Cheers!" the knights roared in response.

They all raised their wineskins in response to the toast, which had neither made mention of the success of the day's mission nor wished for good fortune in the days to come. Absent were the cheer and sense of relief normally present after a job well done.

"I never thought the day would come that I'd point a bow at my own wife..."

"Don't even start—all you shot was a horse!"

"I'm a failure of a royal knight. Once I saw my kids, I couldn't aim my magic right. Pathetic..."

"I'm sure the bicorns' illusions messed with your perception of where they were. Don't sweat it. Here, take a swig of this—"

Without anyone making the decision to do so, the group split into those who were despondent and those who were chipper enough to offer them support.

Dried meats and fruits were spread across the waterproof cloth the knights were sitting on, but today, the alcohol seemed to be disappearing faster than the food.

"Whoa..." Dorino said in awe after doling out wineskins and sitting back down in his spot. Next to him, Volf was holding his wineskin in both hands and noisily sucking down the white wine inside. There was already an emptied wineskin lying in front of him. Volf's golden eyes were so vacant that Dorino didn't even bother

trying to talk to him. The last time they'd had to fight purple bicorns, Volf had said he'd only seen the bicorns, but it seemed this time he'd seen *someone* important to him.

Sitting across from them was Randolph, who had stacked a pile of dried fruits in the palm of his hand and was now stuffing his face with them. He took a swig of wine and chewed. After gulping everything down, he let out such a desolate sigh that Dorino asked him outright, "So, Randolph, out with it. Who'd you see?"

"...No comment."

Another fellow knight decided to chime in teasingly, "Randolph, you'll feel better if you just let it all out. Promise."

Dorino saw Randolph's fingers tighten on the wineskin.

"...No, I won't," Randolph muttered bitterly.

The knight who'd poked fun at him refrained from saying anything else.

"Well, you know, sometimes people see someone who they don't want to talk about, right? It's not always a family member—sometimes it's someone who's left your life or has passed away," another knight said as he offered Randolph some dried meat. Randolph thanked the knight and then focused solely on chewing the jerky, as if glad for a reason to stay silent.

Dorino glanced away and spotted a young knight sitting on the other side of the sheet with one hand over his eyes. The youth still didn't have a wineskin in his hand.

"You okay? If you don't feel good, you should lie down—"

"I didn't see my fiancée's face but my first love's. I feel so guilty, I don't think I can face her..."

"Drink! And forget everything!" Dorino said forcefully as he shoved a wineskin into the knight's hands.

"Damn it, looks like today's gonna be a rough one... Hmm?"

At the edge of the waterproof sheet was a knight staring off into the gathering dusk. Dorino had sensed earlier that he and this knight had something in common.

What Dorino had seen in place of the bicorn was Fabiola, the most popular beauty at the House of Twilight in the red-light district. Dorino loved her so deeply that she even graced his dreams. Still, he

knew he couldn't have her, and he accepted that.

When that knight had faced the bicorn, Dorino had heard him mutter, "What do I do? I see the maid I always see in the Order's wing..."

While Dorino's love would likely never be realized, this fellow might have a better chance at his.

"Ruche! Let's find out that maid's name once we get back, all right?"

Ruche jolted at the sound of his name being called.

"Oh, but she's so cute, I'm sure she has a boyfriend already..."

"Come on, enough of that. Look, how about tomorrow, you buy her a bouquet of flowers and go talk to her?"

"O-Out of the blue? What if that makes her dislike me?!"

Judging from the knight's sudden flustered reaction, he already had deep feelings for the woman.

"Well, wouldn't you regret it if some other guy confessed to her first? Or if her family arranged a marriage for her?"

"That's the worst thing that could possibly happen..."

"By the way, what's this maid look like?"

"She's not very tall, and she has shoulder-length dark blue hair, almost black, that she ties in a ponytail..."

Knowing that she worked in the Order of Beast Hunters wing, Dorino had a good idea of who this maid was, but he'd never spoken with her except to exchange polite greetings.

"Was it love at first sight?" he asked Ruche.

"Yeah. Also, she's always nice to everyone, and even when I come back from training all covered in mud, she greets me just the same with that beautiful voice of hers... Once, she asked me if I was all right when I came back injured from a mission... And she has an adorable smile..."

"Aaah, I gotcha."

It was more than love at first sight; the man was obviously head over heels in love with her.

Dorino handed Ruche a wineskin and clapped him on the shoulder. He wanted to offer him some words of encouragement, tell him that things would work out, but just at that moment, he heard

an odd sound nearby.

His black-haired friend had just slurped down the last drop of his second wineskin.

"Volf, do you need one or maybe even two more skins of white wine?"

"I want red..."

"I'll get it for you. Eat this until I get back."

Dorino handed Volf some nuts, which his friend started eating without protest. He nearly looked like a squirrel the way he held the nuts in both hands as he munched on them. But Dorino wouldn't have felt right teasing him about it.

Looks like there are a lot of people here today who need to be taken care of, Dorino thought with a dry smirk as he headed to get more wineskins.

After Dorino left, a graying knight approached Ruche with a slice of rye bread topped with cheese.

"Ruche, eat this so you don't get sick."

"Thank you..."

Rucheroyce, the young knight who'd been talking about the maid, obediently accepted the bread. The older knight was right. If he kept drinking without eating anything, he'd get sick. The image of the maid and her beautiful smile still refused to disappear from the backs of his eyelids.

"So, about what you were saying before—"

"I'm terribly embarrassed. You overheard that, sir?"

"I've got sharp ears. Anyway, about that maid..." The older knight slid in close and whispered right by Ruche's ear, "Is she the short one with black hair that looks blue in certain light? She has a few freckles on either side of her nose and a beauty mark on the right side of her mouth?"

Ruche's eyes went wide.

"Sir, how do you know all that...?"

The knight was already married and quite a few years older than Ruche was. He found it very unlikely that they would both be in love with the same woman, but he suddenly felt a wave of anxiety.

"Relax, she's my niece. I'm also the guarantor who got her a job at the castle," the knight said, flashing him a smile. He'd seen right through him.

Ruche froze. "I'm sorry! Um, I swear, I'm not thinking of toying with her feelings or anything...!"

"Yeah, based on what I heard, I understand. My niece is unmarried and lives with her family, and she's single. I don't mind introducing you to her, but before that... Are you okay with lizards? It's sort of a big one..."

"Lizards...? I don't really feel strongly about them either way..." Ruche answered with a tilt of his head. He had no idea how they had jumped from talking about the maid to lizards.

"Well, that's good. You see, Maidoula—oh, that's my niece's name—Maidoula has a pet lizard she loves to bits. It's on the large side... And one of her conditions for marriage is that she be able to bring her lizard with her. And that seems to have put off possible suitors. She's had some offers of marriage, but none of them have worked out. Incidentally, you might want to make a decision *after* you see the lizard."

This was Ruche's only chance. He didn't care if the lizard was bigger than a horse.

Ruche clenched his fists tightly and made his plea. "Please introduce me to Miss Maidoula, sir!"

A few days later, Ruche and the older knight went to visit the home of a baron.

Maidoula, the woman of his dreams, wore a violet dress that matched the color of her eyes and welcomed him with a smile. This was Ruche's first time seeing her wearing something other than her maid uniform. She looked so lovely that even if nothing came of this meeting, he felt it had been worth mustering up the courage to come here.

As they had tea together, he was introduced to her family members, and then to her pet lizard. It was dark gray with a blue tongue, and its name was "Treasure." It was considerably large, about two-thirds of Ruche's height. The lizard skittered right up to

him with a threatening flick of its blue tongue, but since it did no actual harm, Ruche smiled it off.

Ruche didn't dislike reptiles, and compared to the monsters he'd fought as a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, Treasure was quite cute. More than anything, it was his dear Maidoula's guard dog—that is, her guard *lizard*. In fact, Ruche respected it for having always been there to protect her. As he was thinking that, Treasure flopped down by his feet and stayed there for the remainder of tea time.



After that meeting, Ruche was given permission to court Maidoula.

Maidoula cherished Treasure—unsurprisingly, given its name. When Ruche heard that the lizard slept in her bedroom at night, he secretly felt a little jealous.

Whenever he met with Maidoula, they fed the lizard and took walks in the garden together, and over time, Treasure became very attached to Ruche.

Once, Treasure grabbed onto Ruche from behind and gave him a light nibble, but Maidoula—whom he had started calling by the pet name "Maid"—became unusually incensed, causing the dark gray lizard to curl up into a tight ball in repentance. Ruche felt a little sorry for it.

It was only some time later that Ruche learned that for lizards of Treasure's species, biting was a form of courtship behavior.

Even more time would pass before he told Maid about that fact, and she, blushing deeply, pretended to bite him, whereupon he sprinted as fast as he could to buy an engagement bracelet.

Randolph the Knight and the White Baphomet

Randolph Goodwin was staring up at a strip of clouds floating in the azure sky above the castle training grounds. The white clouds reminded him of when he used to shear sheep in his school days.

In Ehrlichia, sheep were shorn before the intense heat of summer. Called the land of herders, Ehrlichia had plentiful flocks. On the pretext of school excursions, students of a certain age joined the labor force shearing those sheep. As a noble, Randolph could have elected to abstain, but he'd been happy to participate. He enjoyed stroking the sheep's soft, fluffy wool and seeing how stretchy it was.

Each sheep showcased its own personality as it was being shorn. Some were docile the entire time, some struggled at first but eventually gave in, and some never gave up trying to escape throughout the whole process. A few students ended up getting kicked or rammed. However, the sheep Randolph took care of never exhibited any wild behavior.

Thinking he might be an intimidating figure, big as he was, Randolph would get down on his knees, lower his gaze, and gently explain to the sheep that he was going to shear it. Then he would pet it softly and work diligently with the special shears and razors.

During the process, he would get covered in dirt, and the oil from the wool would fully coat his fingers, but he still found it fun. Even now, as the scent of grass caught on a breeze, he could vividly remember shearing sheep with his classmates. He wondered if maybe he would have made a better shepherd than a knight.

Ever since he returned to the Kingdom of Ordine and the capital and joined the Order of Beast Hunters as a knight, he'd had no opportunities to even admire sheep, much less shear them.

Recently, he'd started thinking about taking a trip to a sheep farm

outside the capital one of these days. He wouldn't even mind so much if the other knights found out that he liked animals with shaggy fur.

"Huh? What's that?"

One of his friends, who was taking a break beside him, pointed toward the edge of the training grounds.

"A sheep?"

"Looks like it..."

Who knew where it came from, but at the edge of the training grounds, a white sheep was trotting over with even steps. It was a young ewe. Her wool had a nice sheen, and her round, red-tinged black eyes were adorable.

Her golden horns, still short and straight, gleamed in the sunlight. Randolph knew from that distinctive glimmer that she was no ordinary sheep.

"That's a baphomet," he said.

"Guh! What's a baphomet doing here...?"

Randolph couldn't blame his friend for being so shocked. Baphomets might look cute, but they were sheeplike monsters that could use strengthening magic and had exceptionally powerful legs. Their wool was softer than sheep's, so they felt very smooth to the touch. Some farms in Ehrlichia raised them, and Randolph himself had gone to see them. Considering they were monsters, their wool was amazingly white and soft.

As he was watching the baphomet in fascination, the ewe suddenly stopped in her tracks. She stared intently at him with her round, black eyes. He felt bad, thinking she was likely frightened by his size. But maybe she would allow him to touch her white wool, even just for a little?

"Come here, girl."

Randolph dropped to his knees and held up his palms to show her he held neither a weapon nor a capture net. The pure white baphomet proceeded to trot over to him.

"Hey, Randolph! That's a baphomet! You're in for a world of hurt if you get kicked!" another friend called out.

"Randolph, you'd better not get close to it..."

“It’s all right,” Randolph assured the other knights. “I know how to handle sheep. Could you stay back for now? I don’t want to frighten her.”

His friends reluctantly stepped back, and the baphomet kept trotting along until she was in arm’s reach.

“Lady Baphomet, you have such lovely wool. Do you mind if I pet you?”

Sometimes meaning could be conveyed even if the words themselves were not understood. The baphomet’s eyes grew wide, but since she had stopped moving, Randolph extended his hand below her eye level, then gently stroked her from her shoulder to her back. Her soft wool was well groomed, and she felt warm. Her hooves were also nicely trimmed and shiny. Randolph couldn’t help but smile as he saw the baphomet’s eyes soften happily.

“May I pick you up?” he asked.

The baphomet extended her right foreleg in consent, so Randolph nimbly scooped her up. She was lighter than her shaggy wool made her look. She was also pleasantly warm.

He found it incredibly sweet the way she stared fixedly at him with her round eyes. She was a very smart, well-behaved baphomet.

“Stop, baphomet!”

“Damn you, farm animal! Or, um, castle animal?”

Several members of the royal guard came running over, out of breath.

Was that really the way to treat such an adorable, docile sheep? Of course she would flee them in fear with all their loud yelling and chasing after her.

“Baa baaa...” the baphomet bleated timidly from Randolph’s arms. He gently squeezed her.

“It’s all right. I’ll talk to them.”

The guards gave a start the moment they saw Randolph. He wished they wouldn’t look so wary of him. It wasn’t as if he had forcefully captured her or planned on cooking her for dinner.

“Thank you for catching it! We were told the baphomet escaped from the enclosure of section three of the magical toolmaking department, so we came out to capture it.”

The third section of the magical toolmaking department was dedicated to the scholarly research of magical tools. They did not aim to develop magical tools that were helpful in everyday life—like the ones Dahlia developed for the Order of Beast Hunters—but tools that sounded like wild dreams.

There were rumors that the division had been set up as a place to send difficult individuals, like high-ranking nobles who had high magic but weren't cut out to work as mages or civil officials; regardless, it had nothing to do with Randolph.

He worried that the third section was raising baphomets out of mere curiosity, but they were at least taking very good care of them. This ewe's wool had a healthy sheen, suggesting she was being washed and brushed regularly. She probably had a specially assigned caretaker.

"Your coat is nice and glossy. They must be taking good care of you over there, yes?"

"Baaa."

It seemed she was being treated well. Maybe she had only fled because she wasn't getting enough exercise in her confined enclosure.

"Baphomets are very cautious creatures," Randolph told the guards. "Don't you think chasing after her and shouting will just make her run faster?"

"Yes... But last time, this baphomet entered a wyvern's lair, which caused a big fuss..." the guard said hesitatingly.

Randolph now understood the guards' reaction. For a wyvern to have such a delicious treat delivered right to its doorstep would certainly cause some big problems. It was unthinkable to let such a cute creature as this ewe become a snack for a wyvern. No wonder the guards had wanted to capture her as quickly as possible.

Randolph decided to ask a follow-up question that had been on his mind. "Does this baphomet have a name?"

"Let's see... I'm pretty sure it's Flanc de Flanc."

"Flanc de Flanc—white of white. That's a good name for you."

"Baaa."

The baphomet in Randolph's arms bleated softly. She must have

liked her name.

"Flanc de Flanc, you mustn't go near wyverns. They're dangerous."

"Baaa."

He didn't know if she understood him, but she sounded as adorable as she looked. He stroked her head, and she squinted her black eyes happily.

Randolph wished they could stay like this, but the guards had a job to do. Flanc de Flanc had to be returned to the magical toolmaking department.

"Flanc de Flanc looks scared, so please be gentle with her."

"Yes! We will!"

Reluctantly and with great care, Randolph set the baphomet on the ground.

One of the guards put a collar with a cord around Flanc de Flanc's neck, and she obediently followed them as they led her away. She turned around toward Randolph once. Her round eyes looked a little sad.

"I wish I could have kept you in the barracks..." he muttered softly, even though he knew that could never happen.

His two friends patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"Baaa."

With a solid collar and cord made of steel wire around her neck, the captured baphomet looked up at the sky and let out a small bleat.

In the wild, baphomets lived in flocks, but there were only two of them in this land. The other baphomet was very timid and, although a male, lacked the pluck to expand his territory.

The other day, Flanc de Flanc had decided it was up to her to explore their environs and jumped the fence of their enclosure. However, after walking a short distance, she had come to a wyvern's lair, which was *not* a suitable place to extend her territory. Just as that thought had occurred to her, she'd been recaptured by the humans.

The humans here seemed to only want the baphomets for their

wool, so they fed them well and kept them groomed. The nearby wyvern was, like herself, being fed by humans.

It seemed as though both the wyvern and the baphomets were being included in the humans' flock. And if this was a flock, then surely, somewhere within their territory, there must be a strong mate for her—or maybe even a friend who'd understand her? With that thought, she jumped the fence again.

That day, she met the very person she was looking for. He understood her. He had a strong, warm body and an open and kind heart. There was also a loneliness in his eyes. But unfortunately, they were different species.

The young baphomet made a vow. She would come to see this person again someday. Even though he could not be her mate, and even though they could not speak to each other, she wanted to be his friend.

Flanc de Flanc let out a sharp exhale as she dug her hooves into the dirt.

The white baphomet continued to break out of her enclosure. Whenever Randolph saw Flanc de Flanc come running toward him, he would greet her with a smile and wait with her until the castle guards came for her. Sometimes the baphomet would send one of the brawny guards to the floor with a powerful kick.

Still, Randolph treated her like a little lamb, speaking to her in gentle tones. People started calling him the "Baphomet Whisperer" behind his back.

It wasn't long before the castle guards started going to the Order of Beast Hunters to ask where Randolph was whenever the baphomet escaped. And soon after that, Randolph began carrying the baphomet directly to the third section of the magical toolmaking department himself...after spending some time with her.

The Assistant Manager of the Black Cauldron and the Two Customers

Even on a street lined with numerous establishments, the Black Cauldron was particularly eye-catching as a black brick three-story building with a black roof.

There was no signboard; rather, the words "The Black Cauldron" were painted in white letters on its wall so that they would be visible from afar. Its selling points were its delicious cuisine and the variety of dishes offered. Thankfully, it was a fairly popular restaurant, so business was good.

"Good work today. See you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow, Assistant Manager Samuel!"

Once the final members of the staff had finished cleaning the restaurant and left for the night, Samuel locked the door. He'd already checked that everything was locked up, but today, he decided to spend a little more time in the restaurant alone.

Samuel was the assistant manager of the place. The manager was his wife's father. When he'd gone to his wife's family to ask for their blessing to marry her, her father had made his conditions clear: quit the Order of Beast Hunters and take over the Black Cauldron.

"I understand how important being a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters is to you. However, I do not want my daughter to take a husband who could pass on to the other side at any moment."

He'd stated it resolutely. The man's correct, balled up into fists on his lap, were shaking.

At the time, Samuel's wife had told him not to pay her father any mind, and that she didn't need her father's permission to marry him. But when she spoke frankly, she did seem to wish he would get a

safer job.

After half a year of deliberation, Samuel had resolved to put down his sword.

When he'd returned to his wife's home a second time, her father had lowered his head in a deep, deep bow, which Samuel had returned.

The day he announced he was leaving the squad to get married, the captain and vice-captain both offered him words of congratulations. His friends in the squad smiled and expressed their jealousy. They congratulated him on the security that came with marrying into a family that owned a large restaurant and asked if they could get discounts when they came by for a drink.

His own family was very happy to hear he was getting married and leaving the squad. It was only a few years ago that his family had congratulated him on becoming a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, which they'd called an honorable occupation.

No one blamed Samuel for leaving after serving less than ten years. But there was one person who said it was a shame he was leaving.

After his farewell party, which the squad called his "kick-out party," Samuel left the Order with a smile.

"Evening. Been a while."

Samuel didn't recognize the man who'd spoken to him in the restaurant.

"Welcome, er... That *is* you, isn't it, Volf?"

"Yeah, it's me. Any room in the back today?"

It had taken Samuel a beat to recognize the man as Volf. He was impressed by how well Volf's enchanted glasses disguised his appearance. His now green eyes were less conspicuous than his natural golden ones, but they also made him look kinder, and in the end, he was still handsome.

Unlike Samuel, who'd grown a bit pudgy and soft, Volf's lean physique hadn't changed, and even his complexion looked more radiant. Not only that, but he was a skilled swordsman of the Scarlet Armors and had the courage to go up against monsters. This man

had been excessively blessed.

As Samuel started to lead him to a private room in the back, he met eyes with a redheaded woman standing behind Volf. She gave him a slight bow. Her kind eyes were the same green color as Volf's when disguised by the glasses.

Volf had never brought a woman to the Black Cauldron before. *No, scratch that.* Volf had never brought a woman anywhere—not of his own free will. Samuel didn't count the times that a woman had homed in on Volf, professed her love for him, or clung to his side.

Once the pair was settled in the private room, he brought them food and drink. Since he and Volf had once been comrades in the squad, he brought the dishes himself instead of leaving it to another employee.

When he tested the waters by referring to the woman as Volf's younger sister, Volf promptly told him he was mistaken.

It seemed he had found a good woman at last.

Volf came from an earldom, so the redheaded woman was probably a noble or the daughter of a prominent merchant family. Samuel was worried about whether the food would be to her liking, but she seemed to delight in everything that came her way.

Occasionally, he would hear a peal of laughter from the other end of the hallway, and he felt relieved they were enjoying themselves.

"These are on the house. Black pepper crackers for you, Volf, and for you, miss, crimson cattle cheesecake."

When he brought over black pepper crackers for Volf—one of his favorites—and a cute pink cheesecake that was popular among women, matching delighted expressions rose to both their faces. It seemed he'd been right on the money with his recommendations.

"Thank you very much. Please come to the Black Cauldron again!"

The two of them had taken their time and stayed in the restaurant until late at night. They left the establishment with smiles on their faces.

Until then, Samuel hadn't known Volf was capable of such a gentle smile.

As he saw them off, Samuel was grinning too.

More guests came and went, and at last the time came for the restaurant to close for the night.

After bustling about tidying and cleaning, and then seeing the employees off, Samuel closed the restaurant. Weariness came over him, but he didn't feel it was in his own best interest to go home right away tonight. His wife was very perceptive. He had a feeling she would guess something was wrong and fret.

Samuel brought out his favorite brand of liquor and poured about three shots into a small glass without adding water or ice—he wanted the bitterness of the liquor to dilute his memories.

A lot of knights had quit the Order of Beast Hunters, just as he had. Some couldn't take the life-and-death battles and long expeditions, some married or assumed leadership of their families, and some left for physical or mental reasons.

The squad had a tacit agreement not to try to stop anyone from leaving. The best thing to do was to send them off with a smile. Samuel thought that was for the best as well.

But Volf—and only Volf—had told him it was a shame he was quitting the squad. At his farewell party, Volf had walked over to him to pour him a drink and quietly said, "Samuel, it's a real shame to see you go, but take care."

He and Volf had joined the squad the same year, but they weren't close enough that he could've called them friends. They hadn't even spoken that many times. It was more than likely that Volf had said those words without thinking too deeply about them.

Volf was the son of an earl and one of the Scarlet Armors, who served on the very front lines of the squad. He marched forward to cut down any monster without a shred of hesitation; he was a courageous and valiant knight.

Volf, who never seemed to let anyone close, was someone whom Samuel had always looked up to. Still, they were unquestionably comrades, and he was happy to know that Volf had felt the same way. And even though the memory of those words pained him, he didn't want to forget them.

"Do I have regrets...?"

Regrets about leaving the Order of Beast Hunters, giving up on knighthood, putting down his sword—would these feelings, which smoldered inside him, ever go away completely?

He'd made his decision, which had led him to where he was now. How pathetic to regret it at this late date.

Alone, Samuel let out a sigh that was heard by no one. The undiluted amber liquid in his glass would be mercilessly bitter. Once he drank it, he would go straight home, where his wife was waiting. Tomorrow, he had to return to run the Black Cauldron as its assistant manager. He, who still lacked so much knowledge of business and cuisine. Instead of helping his father-in-law, he was far more often the one asking him for help.

His father-in-law had been the one to give the Black Cauldron its name. He'd explained that he wanted to immerse the customers in a happiness that would make them melt.

Samuel had made the decision to take over this establishment in order to live with his wife. The next time the knights of the Order of Beast Hunters came, he'd melt the contents of their wallets with exceptional food and drink. And by doing so, he would melt away the harshness of the expeditions and the fatigue of fighting monsters, even if just by a fraction.

The next time Volf came with that red-haired woman, he'd serve them milk pudding in a heart-shaped bowl, and top it liberally with red rose syrup. And once they were finished eating, he would tell them it was an Ehrlichian wedding dish. What sort of face would Volf make when he told him that?

Samuel downed the three mouthfuls of liquor. The aftertaste was subtly sweet.

Randolph the Knight and Apple Pie

On his day off after an expedition with the Order of Beast Hunters, Randolph visited the capital's Central District. His destination was a café famous for its freshly baked pastries. Their least busy time was after morning tea and before lunch—so a certain green-haired woman had told him. The other day, he had visited this very café with Dahlia, the Order's advisor, and Lucia, a couturier, after bumping into them on the street.

As a man, Randolph had never felt free to declare his love for sweets before, but those two women had told him in no uncertain terms that he was allowed to like what he liked, and that having a preference for sweets had nothing to do with one's gender. They had readily relieved all the pressure he felt to uphold his image as a man, a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters, and an aristocrat.

Regardless, he felt he still needed to pluck up his courage before he'd be comfortable going into the café alone.

"Welcome!" a female employee greeted him with a smile. She asked if he was alone, and when he nodded, he was surprised by how promptly she led him to a table by the window. He'd worried about whether it was all right for him to take a four-person table all for himself, but as he had been told, the café wasn't very busy at all at this time. The only other patrons were people who, like himself, had come here alone, plus a few couples and pairs of friends.

"Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have an apple pie and milk tea... And a profiterole and caramel pudding."

"Wonderful. I'll have those out for you in a moment."

He'd hesitated for a moment but ultimately decided to order everything he wanted.

His heart was thrumming in his chest, but he settled into his chair and opened the book he'd brought. It was the latest edition of

Monster Ecology, written by an Ehrlichian researcher.

Along the border between Ordine and Ehrlichia stood a vast forest. Since it stretched across both countries, it didn't have an official name, but just like those who lived in the vicinity, Randolph called it the Great Border Forest.

Most travelers made use of a road that circumvented the woods and toxic bogs with their many monsters. But there were also numerous people who entered the Great Border Forest and lost their way, never to emerge again.

Situated in front of the forest was the Earldom Goodwin—Randolph's family—who protected the kingdom's territory from monsters. Randolph hadn't returned home once since coming to the capital, but it had been a long time since there had been any significant threat from the monsters or disputes at the border.

"Here are your milk tea, profiterole, and caramel pudding. The apple pie needs a little more time to bake, but it will be out shortly."

Randolph thanked the server and took a sip of his milk tea. It was hotter than he was expecting. He soothed his slightly burnt tongue with water, picked up the profiterole, and took a large, uninhibited bite. A younger knight in the Order of Beast Hunters had told him that in cafés in the capital, profiteroles did not need to be eaten with a knife and fork. When Randolph heard that, he'd started eating them with his hands, just like he had when he was with the squad.

The flavors of the slightly salty pastry shell and sweet custard filling blended together superbly. As he ate, the custard cream threatened to spill out the other side, a testament to just how generously the pastry had been filled. But of course, Randolph wanted to eat the crust and custard at the same time. He shifted the pastry about ninety degrees and carefully took a bite.

With eyes closed, he was savoring the scrumptious balance of flavors when he heard a few other customers also order profiteroles—the ones at this café were famously delicious.

Next, he ate the caramel pudding. The caramel sauce was well browned, just the right level of burnt, and tasted great. It had a pleasant bittersweet flavor that contrasted nicely on top of the custard.

Before he'd entered the café, he'd been a little worried about how people might perceive him, but apparently that had been a pointless concern. No one laughed at him or whispered about him. Everyone else was focused on ordering their own dishes, looking through the menu, or talking among themselves.

Although, as he knew, enjoying delicious foods *did* demand one's full attention.

As that thought put Randolph more at ease, the server returned with his next dessert on a silver tray.

"Here's your freshly baked apple pie. Please enjoy!"

Randolph thanked the smiling server and asked for a café au lait. As he looked at the still-steaming apple pie, he thought of his time living in Ehrlichia.

In his youth, Randolph had attended school in Ehrlichia as an exchange student—or, as such children were sometimes called, a "hostage exchange student."

Ehrlichia, like Ordine, had an earldom responsible for protecting its borderlands from the monsters of the forest. Though separated by the border, the two earldoms often had to cooperate with each other. If monsters on one side of the forest were driven over the border, the resulting disputes could, with one false step, spark a war between the nations.

Therefore, it was imperative that both Ordine and Ehrlichia did everything possible to maintain amicable relations. Many noble families established good-faith partnerships across national lines through intermarriage—or by entrusting their children to the other side. And that was exactly what had happened to him as the second son of Earl Goodwin.

So even though this arrangement was labeled a "hostage exchange," Randolph himself had never really felt that way about it. His own mother was from Ehrlichia. From the time he was a small child, she had explained to him that he would be studying there, so he had learned the language and customs beforehand.

While he'd felt a little anxious about going abroad, the earldom family that looked after him were all very nice people. The only difficulty he endured once he arrived in Ehrlichia was not being able

to eat sweets anymore.

In Ehrlichia, if a man admitted to liking sweets, he was laughed at. Grown men were expected to prefer salty dried meat paired with strong, bitter liquor and spicy foods. Meanwhile, grown women were expected to favor sweet foods and partake of alcohol only rarely. That was the norm there, a fact that devastated Randolph when he learned it.

That trend was evident at the dinner table, where men's and women's dishes differed in portion size and contents. Randolph hated being served plates of black pepper crackers, salted butter cookies, or nuts in place of a sweet dessert. He found his only solace in adding a large amount of sugar to his coffee and tea.

During his time in Ehrlichia, the second daughter of the earl he was staying with once brought him to a café that also served pastries.

Despite it being as large a shop as the one he was in now, it didn't have a wide variety of desserts. Still, it was a pristine and cozy café. Before the two of them settled into their private room, the girl told the butler and maid who had accompanied them that they should take a table of their own and have tea as well. Her reasoning was that they all deserved to relax a bit, and no one objected.

The girl ordered apple pie and milk tea, while Randolph ordered black pepper crackers and coffee. After the server brought their dishes and left the room, the girl asked Randolph to switch seats with her.

"...The truth is, I actually don't like sweets..."

"...You know, I don't like salty foods either..."

In that moment, their interests aligned perfectly.

When he asked her to explain, the girl told him that she liked spicy cuisine and foods with strong, salty flavors. Everyone scolded her for being unladylike just because she added extra spice to her meals, she complained with a pout.

As he ate the thin slice of apple pie, the girl munched on the black pepper crackers that she clutched in both hands. Their eyes met, and they both let out giggles.

From then on, the two of them hid their preferences from the

world while sharing them in secret with each other. Occasionally, they would return to visit the café, bringing with them the butler, who liked desserts, and the maid, who liked salty crackers. It was a happy time for all of them.

One day, a friend of Randolph's gave him some dried meat, which he then placed in an envelope and slipped inside a book to send to the girl, thinking it was just the sort of thing she'd like. The next day, she passed him a note that said in a fine hand, "The book got greasy, so next time, wrap it in wax paper." Randolph felt terribly guilty about that.

Another time, during afternoon tea, the girl took the small pastry she'd been served and tried to sneak it to Randolph. Unfortunately, her hand slipped, and the pastry plunged into his cup, splashing tea all over his jacket. The following day, she sent him a box containing a large jar of very sweet honey by way of apology. Every day, he would eat a spoonful of that honey and think of the girl's smile.

Randolph had closed a tight lid on those memories from his school days.

After he returned to Ordine and then left his family's domain, Randolph never looked back on his past. He let all his experiences of childhood and his days as a student slip from his memory and lived his life solely as a knight of the Order of Beast Hunters.

He was certainly proud of being a royal knight and a Scarlet Armor, but he liked sweets and was not fond of strong liquor. He liked fuzzy animals and hated moths. It had taken him until recently to decide that he didn't want to hide his true self anymore.

At some point, he worked up the courage to tell a friend that he liked sweets, only for the friend to reply that he'd long known that. Randolph was ridiculously relieved. In fact, as it turned out, the whole squad was already well aware of his fondness for pastries, and that knowledge had spread to the mess hall and barracks.

It was amazing how readily everyone accepted him. Not a single person maliciously teased him. Rather, the mess hall cooks started to pile extra fruits and sweet pastries on his plates, and his friends started sharing their desserts with him.

Not only that, but more of his comrades in the royal knights had come to like sweets as much as he did. Recently, they had started going to cafés and food stalls together for a sweet treat, a pastime they told the others was a good way to unwind.

Randolph had also become less concerned about people staring at him when he ate. If someone said a man like him shouldn't be eating sweets, then they were well within their rights to have that opinion. But that was all it was—their opinion. He was happy the way he was. And it was comforting to be able to feel that way about himself.

Randolph suppressed the grin playing at the corners of his mouth as he took a bite of the fresh-baked pie. The apple filling was still hot, its flavor sweet and tart. Eating this pie was true joy.

There was a good chance he would never see that girl from Ehrlichia again, but he prayed that right now, she was free to enjoy the black pepper crackers she so loved, and that she was happy—

The dusting of cinnamon on top of the apple pie had a slightly bitter taste.

Gismondo of the Order of Beast Hunters and Egg Dishes

"Two slices of bacon, two eggs, and one piece of cheese per person. Come get it yourselves!"

The sound of the man's voice as he distributed the provisions was louder than the calls of the birds flying in the blue sky.

The knights of the Order of Beast Hunters began to fill their plates with food from the cold storage case. There were, just as the man had said, two slices of bacon, two raw eggs, and one small piece of orange cheese for each of them.

It had taken them half a day's ride beyond the capital to reach their destination. They had finished dispatching the monsters last night, so today, they would have breakfast, then return home upon confirming that the highway was clear.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning..."

The knights took their food, some with cheerful smiles, others still showing signs of fatigue from their nighttime watch. Everyone brought their plates to their own camp stoves to cook their breakfasts themselves.

"I think I'll make a cheese omelet with bacon today."

"Sounds fancy. I'm going to add the cheese to a soup and make some bacon and eggs on the side. How about you, Kirk?"

"I'm making scrambled eggs, crunchy bacon, and cheesy bread!"

Near Gismondo, some younger knights had started laying out their breakfast plans. Their familiarity with the stoves was reflected in their relaxed smiles.

Among them was one man who had a hand pressed to his jaw as he boiled water.

"You all right, Randolph? Your cheek looks swollen."

"It's nothing serious... My jaw hurts a little, so I think I'll put everything into a soup and dip my bread in that to soften it."

"Like hell it hurts a little. You took a hit from that giant boar yesterday, didn't you?"

The boar had been the target of yesterday's mission. It wasn't exceptionally large for its species, but what with the way it had galloped around the field, it had taken the knights some time to fell. In the end, Randolph had stopped it with his broad shield, but the giant boar had pushed the shield back with its snout, hitting him in the jaw.

Randolph was a broad shield wielder within the Scarlet Armors. But even with his thick metal shield in front of him, colliding with powerful monsters sometimes left him with nasty injuries, including broken bones.

However, on expeditions, potions and healing magic were precious resources, so physical injuries and wounds often went untreated until they returned to the castle. Gismondo assumed that was why Randolph hadn't sought healing, but there were limits to what he should have to endure.

Their only plan for today was returning to the capital, and the journey would not take long. As Gismondo was about to urge Randolph to get treated, a few other knights beat him to it.

"Randolph, you should really get that checked out."

"Sir Randolph, it looks like your neck is swollen too."

"My neck is fine," Randolph insisted. "It's always this thick."

"Gah, no, it's definitely not! It's swollen! That's why I told you to drink a potion or ask Father Aroldo to heal you yesterday!"

"Did I hear my name?"

Aroldo the priest came briskly walking over, holding a pot in one hand. Even though he had been traveling with them in the forest, his white robes and silver stole were immaculate.

Even as he accompanied them on board a shaking, jolting carriage, his expression had remained bright and sunny. Last night, while drinking copiously with Grato, the priest had expressed his joy at not having to sleep at the temple, and to Gismondo's surprise, it had sounded like he actually meant it.

“Father Aroldo, could you please take a look at Randolph?” Gismondo asked.

The priest smiled and nodded. “Of course, Sir Gismondo. That is precisely what I am here for.”

Aroldo walked up to Randolph and carefully examined the man’s jaw, behind his ears, and down his neck.

“You mustn’t ignore things like this, Sir Randolph. You’re swelling up, and your muscles are injured as well. You must have been in a lot of pain last night.”

“I’m fine. It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

A knight with dark blue hair muttered in a low voice, “Hey, Randolph. Let’s have a talk later...”

Randolph turned away from the man, but then his expression contorted and froze. It looked as though the simple act of moving his neck had sent a shooting pain down it. Although he didn’t cry out, his chestnut eyes swam with tears.

The surrounding knights started shouting all at once.

“I knew you were in a lot of pain!”

“Please let the priest heal you, Sir Randolph!”

As the large man appeared to shrink, Aroldo began chanting. A white light spread out from his right hand while his left still gripped his pot. Gismondo had heard that healing magic required a great deal of concentration, but it seemed it was a snap job for this priest.

“Do you feel better, Sir Randolph?”

“Thank you, Father Aroldo. The pain is completely gone now.”

Randolph stretched his neck side to side and then lowered his head. It seemed he really was completely healed.

“See what I mean, Randolph? You really can’t be pushing yourself like that.”

“Sir, you shouldn’t put yourself through so much pain. Next time, seek treatment right away.”

“I’m all right—don’t worry about me. Oh, right, now I can make a honeyed omelet for breakfast.”

“Well, when you’re done eating, we’ll have our talk...”

There was that low mutter again. It seemed Randolph wouldn’t be able to wriggle out of that. Gismondo turned away from him and

checked on the pot of water he was boiling for Grato. It still wasn't hot enough to brew coffee with.

Beyond the slender column of steam, he saw the knights start digging into their breakfasts. They were smiling and lively, and while they hadn't completely dropped their guards, there was an atmosphere of congeniality.

Gismondo couldn't believe how much mornings after an expedition had changed. He thought about his own experiences from when he was younger and compared them to the present.

In the past, they'd had to rely solely on naturally available water to ease their thirst. Now, thanks to their supply of water crystals, they had potable water everywhere they went. They used to have only damp, smelly rags to wipe their faces clean with, and now they were able to use their abundant water supply to thoroughly wash their faces and hands. They could even shave and brush their teeth.

The barely chewable rye loaves they'd had to endure in the past had been replaced with soft, tasty bread. The salted dried meat, which had only increased their thirst, was now on par with the dried meat served in taverns. The dried fruits weren't moldy and bitter but nice and sweet.

Things had changed even more once they'd introduced the camp stoves this past summer. On short expeditions, instead of jerky for breakfast, they had delicious bacon and eggs. They could enjoy hot coffee and steaming soups.

As they approached colder weather, being able to have hot meals in the morning like this was a blessing. One day, while using the camp stove, Grato had grumbled about how he wished they'd had them years ago.

"They say that listing all the things you didn't have back in the day is a sign of old age," Gismondo had cheerily told the captain, who was two years older than him.

Grato Bartolone was the captain of the royal Order of Beast Hunters, the head of the Marquisate Bartolone, and the master Gismondo had spent his adult life protecting.

Gismondo's family had served the Bartolones as bodyguards for

generations. His father had served the family head before Grato, and Gismondo had grown up expecting that he, too, would serve one of the Bartolones upon becoming a knight himself.

He'd earned good marks in primary school, and once it was decided that he would be studying chivalry in college, the head of the Bartolone family assigned him to his eldest son, Grato.

Gismondo's father was over the moon that his son would be guarding the next family head, and Gismondo had no authority to refuse. Given the choice, however, he would have preferred to be assigned to the younger son, reputedly the "epitome of a civil servant," and not the "no-good, sword-obsessed" older son.

At the time, many people within the Bartolone family were speculating that the younger brother would be the one to succeed to his father's title. Grato was a skilled swordsman, but his grades in college left much to be desired, as did his personal conduct. He would skip class, get into fights, and disobey his father. Gismondo felt less like a bodyguard and more like the caretaker of an unruly child.

And his first impression of Grato could hardly have been worse.

"I don't need a bodyguard," Grato had said with an unpleasant sneer. "But if I have to have one, then let's have a bout."

Together, they went out onto the grounds of the Bartolone estate and sparred with practice swords. Grato was strong, but Gismondo had also gone through strict training with his father and older brother ever since he was a child, so he managed to keep pace with him.

"Not bad for a kid!" Grato exclaimed with a loud laugh, and regardless of how he felt about it, Gismondo officially became his bodyguard. It wasn't until later that he wondered why he hadn't thought to hold back during their bout.

From the next day onward, his life as Grato's bodyguard was nothing but trouble.

As he'd heard, Grato was a poor student and even struggled with reading. When teaching him the basic subjects orally, Gismondo had to do everything he could to seize his attention; outside of lessons, he pacified his master with sword practice in moderation, with

Gismondo or Grato's friend, Gildo—now the head treasurer—acting as his sparring partner.

The troubles didn't end with academics. Grato kept him on his toes at home too. As a college student, Grato was prone to emotional outbursts; once, he quarreled so badly with his father that he was threatened with disinheritance. And then there was the time when Gismondo, Gildo, and Gildo's own bodyguard had to go looking for Grato after he ran away from home.

When Gismondo heard that Grato had even gotten into a fistfight with Gildo at school, all he could do was cradle his head in his hands.

When Grato broke a bone in a fight, Gismondo lent him his shoulder to lean on and hailed him to the temple. When he was poisoned by a woman in the red-light district, he carried him on his back to a priest with strong healing magic.

Each time, he wished the man would stop acting up, but he couldn't bring himself to neglect him. Most everyone who knew Grato felt confident that he would never inherit the family with his bad behavior.

But then Grato was the one to receive the Bartolone family's magical sword after its owner, his grandfather, passed away. Named the Ash-Hand, it had been passed down through their family for generations. Only those with Bartolone blood could wield the sword; those who could wield it properly were even scarcer.

Only those with strong, unwavering will as well as powerful fire and strengthening magic could acquire command over the sword. And the only one in the family who could wield the Ash-Hand at will was Grato.

One day, Grato made a request to his father: "I will take the Ash-Hand and join the Order of Beast Hunters. Please appoint my brother as your successor."

A family meeting was convened, at which all the assembled relatives vehemently opposed Grato's request.

It was impermissible that the Bartolone family's Ash-Hand should be used against monsters. Furthermore, the Order of Beast Hunters was not the sort of assignment that could easily be finagled simply

because someone wanted it. And what if he were to get hurt? All were unanimous in telling him he needed to clean up his act, resume his studies to become a family head, and properly protect the marquisate. Gismondo worried that Grato would blow his top at any moment, but instead, he began to make an earnest, if clumsy, case for himself.

"When a friend and I went on a long ride outside the capital, we saw the Order of Beast Hunters fighting against a mutant giant boar. The beast's hide was so thick that the knights' swords had trouble piercing it, and even after someone managed to land a cutting blow, the boar stayed on its feet for some time. A single slash from the Ash-Hand can burn a beast from within, so I believe it would be very effective against large monsters like that."

Grato spoke with urgency, but in a civil tone, without raising his voice. Every year, in the lands belonging to one of his aristocratic friends, the monsters inflicted a great deal of damage on the orchards, and the resulting unreliability of the fruit harvests had, in turn, led to a lack of successors and even human casualties. Farms far away from the capital faced increasing damage from monsters, and thus, grain and vegetable prices crept upward. Many people had turned to working in the red-light district as a way to compensate for the damage the monsters caused.

Gismondo spent practically all of his time with Grato, so he ought to have seen and heard everything his master so poignantly described, but somehow none of it had caught his notice aroused his concern. In fact, he realized then, he'd also been viewing Grato as the heir to a marquisate and nothing more.

The discussion about who would be the next head of family and what would become of the magical sword failed to reach a conclusion. In the end, the crucial decisions were postponed to the next meeting.

Several more such discussions were convened, each of which left the matter unsettled, until one day, Grato's brother, who was two years younger than himself, finally participated upon request.

"Brother, I would like for you to join the Order of Beast Hunters."

No doubt he wanted to be supportive of his older brother. As

Gismondo listened to that high voice, as yet unchanged by maturity, his heart ached.

But the younger Bartolone brother continued in a tone of absolute certainty.

"Once you succeed father, I will take over all the practical affairs that pertain to a family head. You can leave that responsibility to me. But brother, please marry a woman with strong fire magic as soon as possible. Have many children together, and raise them with the aptitude and desire to become knights. That way, you will increase the likelihood that they, too, will be able to wield the Ash-Hand."

"Wait, think of the sacrifice you'll be making!"

While Grato was said to be a mirror image of his father, his younger brother resembled their mother. He had gleaming blond hair, red eyes, and a kind, gentle face—a face that now displayed the same graceful smile his mother would have worn had she been present.

"I will not be making any sacrifices. I will be gaining the real power of a family head. And this course will be more beneficial to the Bartolone family as a whole. If we continue to confine ourselves to managing our mines and sending our young people to serve the castle as knights and civil officials, our family will remain stagnant. Even during this time of peace, what would gain more renown than for the next head of the marquisate to take the family heirloom, the Ash-Hand, and risk his life fighting monsters in the Order of Beast Hunters?"

All present were left speechless.

Watching him make a proposal like that at such a young age, Gismondo couldn't help but think that *he* had what it took to be a marquis.

The youth continued, his composed smile looking out of place on his childish features.

"Please be sure not to leave us until your children can master the Ash-Hand, brother."

At that moment, Gismondo felt grateful that he hadn't been assigned to be the younger brother's bodyguard.

And so, Grato received permission from his father to join the Order of Beast Hunters.

First, however, he needed to pass the royal knights' examination. They were not so lenient as to admit someone simply due to his family's rank.

Although Grato required no training in the sword, he was sorely in need of practice for the written exam. He had declared with the firmest resolution that he would join the Order of Beast Hunters; were he to fail the exam, he would be a laughingstock. He needed to do everything he could to prepare in time.

When he finally returned from his father's study, Gismondo was piling stacks of reference books on his desk. The application to take the test had required the signature of the Marquis Bartolone, so Grato had gone to get that.

Watching Gismondo preparing everything so they could jump right into studying for the exam, Grato suddenly bowed his head to his bodyguard.

"I'm sorry, Gis. I've really put you through it. Since I'll be joining the Order of Beast Hunters, I want you to stay here with the family as a Bartolone household knight."

"Huh?"

Gismondo had heard his words perfectly clear, but his heart refused to accept them.

"I talked to my father. He promised that once I graduate, he will make sure you remain in the family as a bodyguard and receive a position of some standing... Oh, and if you happen to have dreams of joining the First Knight's Regiment or something, I think that could be arranged too."

Grato had totally misinterpreted the reason for his bodyguard's silence, and Gismondo was filled with displeasure. He'd finally come to terms with being Grato's bodyguard; he didn't want to hear anything about changing paths now. Hadn't he been a hard worker? Indeed, he was confident that no other bodyguard had ever worked as hard as he did.

"Lord Grato, you frequently oversleep, you overeat and need

stomach medicine, you doze off after drinking, you never put away your training swords, and you're always getting into fights. Well, I will admit you've been doing less of that lately, but don't you think if you drink with the young knights of the Order of Beast Hunters, there's a possibility you'll start fights with them?"

"I'll... I'll try not to..."

He spoke with hesitation and, moreover, refused to look Gismondo in the eye. *He's hopeless.*

"I can't trust that you will at all, so I'll be going with you."

"I appreciate the thought, but don't. The Order of Beast Hunters is dangerous. I don't want to drag you along due to my selfishness..."

Gismondo's displeasure snapped to anger. Didn't Grato know how much trouble he'd already dragged him into? Even if his one hundred selfish deeds increased to two hundred, what difference did it make?

"Are you worried because you think I'm weak? I may be two years younger than you, but I can still hold my own against you."

"No, I don't think you're weak at all! I actually think you're very capable. But you're smart. You could find a safer job to—"

"Are you a fool, Lord Grato? You are, aren't you? You always manage to get at least one dictation wrong for every page you do, you forget appointments, all words of caution go in one ear and out the other, you have fistfights with Lord Gildo while using strengthening magic, you fall for the tricks of malicious women, and you make good women cry!"

"G-Gis?"

Grato looked genuinely shocked. His eyes widened as he stared at Gismondo. *Go ahead and hate me for my disrespect. Your anger can't compare my burning rage.*

"It seems you have forgotten, so let me make this very clear for you. I, Gismondo Caffi, am bodyguard to you, Grato Bartolone. I have protected you thus far, and I have no intention of quitting at this point. I will go with you, whether you will be slaying monsters or entering their very nests."

"Gis..." A tear slid down Grato's cheek, and he immediately turned

away. “Sorry... Thanks...” he said in a small voice.

Rather than reply, Gismondo handed him a handkerchief over his shoulder. The gesture came naturally to him as one who often performed the duties of a servant.

Then Gismondo wiped his own eyes with his sleeve.

“Gis... You might regret this.”

“I already made peace with that a long time ago.”

He’d felt plenty of regret in just his first year as a bodyguard. There might be more regrets in the offing, but there was no avoiding that. After all, he was Grato Bartolone’s bodyguard.

When at last Grato steadied his breathing, he turned around once more and held his hand out. Gismondo took it.

“Thank you, my knight.”

“Of course, my lord.”

They restrained themselves as they shook hands, but then they burst into laughter at exactly the same moment, laughing so hard their stomachs hurt.

As he listened to Grato’s laughter, Gismondo realized that he actually quite liked his smile.

Grato and Gismondo both passed the examination to become royal knights.

Grato’s private tutors breathed deep sighs of relief, but Gismondo felt he also deserved some praise for helping Grato study from morning to night.

However, Gildo, who had aspired to be a royal knight alongside them, ended up in the royal treasury department. Later, Gismondo heard that the Diels family had received a request from the king, which they could not decline. Grato appeared as frustrated over Gildo’s absence as if he’d been the one made to go to the treasury.

Once it was decided that Grato and Gismondo would be assigned to the Order of Beast Hunters, Gismondo’s father summoned him home.

Gismondo was already living at Grato’s family estate and was constantly at his side, so he rarely made visits back home. After a long time without doing so, he sat with his family around the dinner

table and drank with his father and brother. Together, they celebrated his admission to the royal knights and talked late into the night. Just as Gismondo was about to turn in, his father called out to stop him.

"Gismondo, if he should ever need it, you must act as Lord Grato's shield."

"Yes, of course I will," Gismondo replied immediately.

His father scrutinized him for a time before finally continuing. "I, too, am a bodyguard for the Bartolone family, so I am obligated to tell you that. But, as your father, I want to know if you are truly happy being Lord Grato's—"

"I thank the heavens for giving me a good master," he said, interrupting the old man with a strained smile. Gismondo had no need for a father's counsel. Nor did he have any desire to utter a son's feeble complaints. He was Grato's bodyguard now, full stop.

Wordlessly, his father went to his side and gave him two hard pats on his left shoulder. It was a gesture knights used to encourage each other. This time, the smile that Gismondo gave his father was sincere.

Thus began their days as royal knights in the Order of Beast Hunters.

Grato told Gismondo that while they were with the squad, he ought to act not as his bodyguard but as any other knight. Gismondo decided he would pretend to obey that order but would take action should he deem Grato to be in real danger.

The life-and-death battles against monsters, the harsh conditions on expeditions—Gismondo had heard it all many times, but the reality was so much worse than he'd imagined.

Monsters were not the only enemies they fought on expedition. They were also battling fatigue, empty stomachs, and the heat and cold. Worst of all was when friends and colleagues who had been there one day were gone the next. Many knights found the anguish too great to bear and quit the squad.

Despite all of that, Grato never expressed any discontent. From the moment he joined the squad, the man changed. His habit of

running away from his problems, which had caused Gismondo so much grief over the years, had vanished without a trace.

That said, Grato trained dawn to dusk to get a better handle on the Ash-Hand, only to collapse from exhaustion; lost to the older knights in a bout and drowned his sorrows until he passed out; and cried his eyes out over lost comrades, so he was still a bit of a handful.

Grato wanted to become a Scarlet Armor but was ultimately unable. Yet still he would use the fact that he had a magical sword as an excuse to jump into dangerous fights. And naturally, keeping up with him was Gismondo's job.

Grato pushed himself too far and acted recklessly, but at least he seemed to have luck on his side. Once, the two of them even found themselves pinned under a giant cyclops but still managed to survive.

A more seasoned knight of the Scarlet Armors laughed and told them, "Seriously, you two are like Scarlet Armors—but without the scarlet armor!"

As the years passed, they battled against monsters—and experienced their fair share of both wins and losses.

On one expedition, as night was closing in on them, they were forced to retreat upon discovering that the goblins they were meant to dispatch numbered far more than the report had indicated.

At their feet lay the bodies of fallen knights, one of whom had been Gismondo's friend in college. He had taken an arrow to the eye and hadn't been healed in time. Gismondo dearly wished he could carry the body back with them, but there were also many wounded who would be eaten if they were left behind. He understood that, but he still couldn't help but want—

"Ash-Hand!" Grato roared angrily. He pierced the sword through their unmoving comrade and kept the magical blade burning until the fallen knight turned to white ash. Gismondo wasted no time—he wrapped a handful of the hot ash in a handkerchief.

Then all that was left to do was run like mad.

Waiting for them upon their return from that life-threatening mission were the higher-ups at the castle, ready to reprimand them.

They excoriated the squad for losing to mere goblins, for letting monsters slip away to wreak more havoc elsewhere, and for suffering such a pitiful defeat despite the hefty budget spent on them. *Then you go out there and fight!* Gismondo wanted to bellow at them.

As soon as his injuries were healed, Gismondo went straight to his friend's family to deliver his ashes. He'd been prepared for them to yell at him or punch him, but instead they thanked him. His friend's father, a former knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, expressed his gratitude to be able to bury his son.

Without saying a word in response, Gismondo simply bowed his head low, then departed. From there, he headed directly to the tavern where the squad often went. There was nowhere else he felt he could go.

"Gis, there you are!"

After he'd finished one glass, Grato walked in with the rest of the squad. Together, they talked about the comrades they'd lost, they shed tears, they cursed the goblins and the higher-ups at the castle alike. Before he knew it, the glass in his hand was replaced with a liquor bottle, and some knights had collapsed over the tables.

Meanwhile, Grato stood up.

"We need more mages or priests, anyone who can use strong healing magic, to come with us on expeditions! Otherwise, we need to bring enough potions and high potions! If we can do that, then we'll lose fewer comrades! And one day, the squad won't have to say goodbye to anyone at all!"

Grato, speaking passionately with a liquor bottle in one hand, looked like a beacon light.

One of the Scarlet Armors laughed and said, "That's some dream you've got there, Grato, but it's a good one. Make it come true someday."

On the next expedition, during a battle against a wyvern, that knight was carried away. After a desperate search, all they found was his scarlet suit of armor, covered in blood.

"Gis, you all right?"

"Yes, nothing to worry about."

The day they lost that Scarlet Armor, the squad returned to the tavern only to find that the food and ale had no taste.

Gismondo could still recall what it had felt like to wash the knight's red armor. It had been horribly battered, but he had washed it in the hopes that even a small part of it could take the place of the man's ashes. Bits of bloody flesh had stuck to his fingers, and he had no idea if they were from the monster or the knight himself, nor could he distinguish between the red of his blood and the red of the armor.

What the hell am I—are we—doing?

He tried to harden his heart whenever a comrade died, but he had his limits. He wanted to run away and forget everything. Knowing he couldn't do that, he downed his ale faster than he ever had.

"If only we had bows that could shoot arrows farther..." a bow knight said bitterly.

"You think a better bow would be enough to take down a wyvern?" Gismondo shot back.

"Gis?"

"You think better weapons will give you a chance against big monsters? Better horses mean a successful expedition? While we're out there risking our lives slaying monsters, the royal knights and mages stay safe in the castle."

"Well... That's just what we have to do," the bow knight protested. "To protect the king, the capital, and the kingdom."

Gismondo knew that already. If defenses around the capital and castle weakened, someone might target the king himself or the kingdom's lands. And in the worst case, that could spell the downfall of the Kingdom of Ordine itself. But today, for some reason, knowing those facts wasn't enough to restrain Gismondo's tirade.

"That's still not enough to justify all the blame we get. We risk our lives in terrible conditions, and we get no acknowledgment, just criticism for being a waste of money. A better idea would be if all the royal knights and mages took turns fighting monsters, or better yet, the all-powerful royal family—"

“Gis, enough!” Grato cried.

“Gismondo, open this up first. Then we’ll hear what you have to say,” said the oldest knight on the squad, handing him a bottle of amber-colored liquor.

That night, for the first time in his life, Gismondo drank himself into a stupor.

“...Hmm?”

When he came to, his field of vision was rocking side to side. Someone must have been carrying him on their back. As he lay against the person’s wide shoulders, he was shocked to see dark gray hair.

“Lord Grato... Stop, please... I can walk...”

“Request denied. We’d only waste time.”

They were inside the castle and heading toward the barracks. Once Gismondo judged that this was a safe enough place that Grato didn’t require his services as a bodyguard, he realized that he would not have even been able to walk straight.

Why was Grato carrying him? Why hadn’t he woken him back at the tavern and given him something to sober him up? As the swaying of his vision kept his mind in a daze, his innermost feelings escaped, uninhibited.

“How long...are we going to keep this up...?”

If Grato quit, then so could he.

It was only after he said those words aloud that Gismondo realized how cowardly they were.

“I’m going to change things. I swear it,” Grato said quietly, halting in his tracks. “I’m going to become the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters. Then I’ll change everything. And I want you to stay with me, Gis.”

It was a foolish and absurd declaration, but at least he wasn’t asking him to move on from being his bodyguard. And for that, Gismondo was deeply grateful.

“I don’t have much choice...do I? Seeing as...I’m your bodyguard...”

Grato started walking again. And even though Gismondo was on his back, he felt he could see his master’s smile.

Following Grato's efforts to reorganize the squad, he was promoted to vice-captain before finally rising to captain.

Grato had never been good at anything but wielding a sword. He struggled reading documents, which meant he had trouble preparing properly for meetings. Gismondo helped him in every way he could.

However, Grato's promotion to captain wasn't the end but the beginning. There was very little he could change even with a captain's authority, it was hard to procure funds, and no matter what choices he made, there was always someone with a word of criticism.

Grato used his family's influence to increase the squad's supply of food, potions, and good horses. With his capable younger brother at the helm, the Bartolone family had amassed enormous wealth, which his brother then funneled into the Order of Beast Hunters via charitable donations.

That plan produced good results for many years—fewer knights died and conditions on expeditions improved. The king of Ordine personally praised Grato, the official head of the Bartolone family.

From then on, those who worked in the castle completely changed their tune about Grato and applauded his efforts. The Bartolone family gained renown throughout the capital and the kingdom as a whole.

Grato remained the same as he ever was. The captain of the Order was not required to take part in expeditions. If he wanted, he could have limited himself to scanning over reports in the Beast Hunters' wing of the castle. In fact, given that he occupied a command role, his own safety was prioritized over that of his squad. Nevertheless, Grato continued to accompany them on expeditions, took down large monsters with the Ash-Hand, and then returned to the capital to attend meetings and take care of paperwork.

When Grato's hair started falling out, Gismondo had to drag him to a doctor. When Grato pulled him aside and (after whispering a plea that he'd keep it a secret) asked him if he knew any good hair growth tonics, Gismondo felt himself go weak.

The second time Grato suffered stomach pain so intense that he

vomited blood, Gismondo begged him to retire from the squad. Grato laughed him off as usual and said, "I'm fine. Just drank too much."

He often called his friend Gildo stubborn, but from Gismondo's point of view, it was Grato who was by far the more stubborn of the two.

But perhaps it was that stubbornness that had brought him so far. *I'm going to change things. I swear it*—true to his words, he had made it so the knights in the squad could laugh together under the bright blue sky.

Gismondo had to admit that at first, he had felt becoming Grato's bodyguard was a stroke of bad luck. But now, he was prouder of his master than of anyone else in the world, and proud as well to be his guard.

Should the need ever arise, Gismondo would happily sacrifice himself for Grato. He wouldn't feel a shred of regret if that was what it took to protect his master. But the day he expressed that thought to Grato, he was sure the man would grab his collar with both hands and chew him out.

"Oh, blast," Gismondo muttered to himself.

The water in the pot had already come to a boil while he was distracted.

As Gismondo switched off the camp stove, he felt a small stab of frustration. He had urged Grato three times to patch things up with Gildo, but he never could get Grato to agree to it. Meanwhile, in one short season, Master Dahlia had been able to restore their bonds of friendship. The capable toolmaker had drawn the estranged friends back together as easily as she had connected the magical circuitry for the camp stoves.

In the many years Gismondo had spent by Grato's side, he'd never been able to do that. Though of course, far outweighing his frustration was a feeling of deep appreciation. *Now, how should I thank her for that?* The man the squad called the Black Reaper stuck by Master Dahlia's side like a nightdog. Gismondo wished to present him with a bracelet set with red jewels, but he feared the effect that

would have on the squad's fighting power.

One way or another, though, time would eventually solve all... *Probably.*

"How did it go, Captain?"

Grato had been brushing a black horse in a spot beside their campsite where Gismondo could see him clearly. Yesterday, the horse had been showing signs of fatigue, so Grato had consulted with a specialist.

"Seems his knees aren't doing too well," Grato said. "He's been with us a while, so I guess I've been pushing him for too long."

The horse was well loved, but age-related injuries could be fatal. The captain sadly explained that he'd soon have to retire the horse from expeditions.

In an attempt to change the subject, Gismondo poured coffee into a cup and asked, "What would you like for breakfast? Shall I fry some bacon and eggs?"

"Don't worry, I have my own camp stove, so I can make my own breakfast. Go ahead and make something for yourself."

Gismondo thought for a second that he should advise Grato against that but then decided not to. It would be faster that way. Grato *was* better off making his own meal.

"...Very well," Gismondo acquiesced. "Be my guest."

He placed a plate of uncooked bacon and eggs in front of Grato, next to his coffee cup, then turned to his own camp stove. *I'll make scrambled eggs, plus cheese and bacon toast on rye bread.*

As Gismondo planned his meal, Grato delicately picked up an egg. Then, with a look of pure determination, he struck it against the edge of his pot.

"On the menu for today, we have sunny-side up eggs... Damn it!"

It seemed the captain of the Order of Beast Hunters would also be having scrambled eggs for breakfast.

What the Knights of the Order of Beast Hunters Count on Sleepless Nights

"One sheep, two sheep..."

"What's with the sheep, Volf?" Dorino whispered to his friend.

"It's something Dahlia recommended to me. When you can't sleep, you should count sheep," Volf replied. Even in the dark, Dorino could sense his smile.

Recently, it felt like forty percent of what Volf talked about involved Dahlia. That could have been Dorino's imagination, though.

"Volf, are these sheep shorn or unshorn?" Randolph asked.

"And why does that matter?" Dorino scoffed.

It was the dead of night. In the midst of the Beast Hunters' campsite, inside their tent, wrapped in blankets, Volf, Dorino, and Randolph were talking. After completing their mission, they'd received some supplies from a town along the road. In addition to warm bread, they were given tea cookies, which they had happily enjoyed after dinner. And since they had tea cookies, they had tried to make tea. Unfortunately, they'd steeped the leaves too long, ending up with a hopelessly bitter brew.

After tea, they followed their usual routine of drinking from their wineskins, then brushed their teeth and went to bed. Or that had been the intention, at least, but the three of them had tossed and turned, and though it was now the middle of the night, they were all lying awake inside their tent amid the dim moonlight that slipped through the flap.

They all knew what had caused their problem.

"It's the tea keeping us up..." Randolph murmured.

Dorino was sure that Dahlia would have told them they'd had too

much caffeine.

The knights had set up camp in a clearing with ample space to tie up their horses. Even with the three of them talking aloud, the people in the next closest tent wouldn't be able to hear them.

As they were struggling to come up with some way to get to sleep, Volf had started counting sheep.

Randolph gave a small grumble. "Well, now I'm unable to sleep because I don't know how long the sheep's wool is. How about we count something without fur? For example, one blue slime, two red slimes..."

"Gaaah!" Dorino cried. "Now I'm seeing a bunch of colors when I close my eyes! It's keeping me up!"

Dorino couldn't fall asleep despite his tiredness, and now he had a ridiculous image dancing in his mind, which only made him more alert. It was a vicious cycle.

"Well then, how about counting black slimes?" Randolph proposed. "You'll see black when you close your eyes. That might make it easier."

"Randolph, enough with the slimes. It makes me want to put *them* to sleep..." Volf muttered, his voice chilling.

"Whoa, Volf. You sound scary."

Even as knights in the Order of Beast Hunters, as far as Dorino knew, none of them had any reason to harbor a personal grudge against slimes. Had Volf had a bad experience with them? At least on the expeditions they'd been on together, Dorino couldn't remember ever having a life-or-death struggle against the creatures.

"All right then, no animals or monsters. Why don't we try inanimate objects?" Randolph suggested, providing a fairly reasonable solution.

Dorino nodded and began counting the first thing that came to mind. "One sword, two swords... No, this won't work. I feel like I'm on the job..."

He'd imagined the sword he'd wielded earlier that day and started reflecting on his performance in battle. But even as Dorino grimaced to himself, Volf seemed to be having fun muttering his own choice of inanimate object.

“One magical sword, two magical swords, three magical swords... Aah, this feels promising.”

The glee in his voice was suspicious for several reasons. Dorino didn’t even want to imagine what he was thinking about and wished he’d stop. Also, he was pretty sure magical swords would only keep Volf awake.

Dorino sighed in exasperation, and Randolph asked, “Why are swords the first things you two think of when it comes to inanimate objects? How would that help you sleep?”

“Okay then, what are you counting, Randolph?” Dorino countered. “What’s something that makes you fall asleep easily?”

“...One glass jar, two glass jars...”

“Let me guess, they’re filled with honey? Hey, don’t look so shocked! You’re so predictable!”

Dorino had clearly seen Randolph’s look of genuine surprise in the sliver of moonlight that fell through the opening of the tent. The three knights fell into laughter.

The tent flap fluttered open, and they heard the voice of an older knight ask, “And what’s got you three up and cackling in the middle of the night?”

“I’m sorry, are we being loud?” Dorino asked apologetically.

“No, I couldn’t hear you from my tent. I’m just on my way back from relieving myself. I thought you might’ve been having some sort of argument.”

Dorino explained that they were trying out counting different things to help them fall asleep.

The older knight snorted out a laugh. “Jeez... What are you, kids? Just think of your girlfriend or your crush. If you’re lucky, she’ll show up in your dreams.”

“Right you are...”

The knight took his leave, and the three friends closed their eyes once again.

After a while, Dorino heard the relaxed, regular breathing of a sleeping man. It seemed Randolph had successfully embarked for the land of dreams. From his other side, he heard the faintest murmur—Volf talking in his sleep.

"...Dahlia..."

Dorino wasn't surprised to hear that at all, but then Volf continued.

"...One Dahlia... Two Dahlias... Three..."

His sleepy grin turned into a frown as a deep crease appeared on his brow. Dorino had to hold back a laugh.

Just what is he dreaming about? Despite being an unwilling spectator, Dorino had no intention of waking him. Those eyes of Volf's, which had been glass beads for so long, had finally become glittering gold.

Maybe what his friend had needed wasn't the wish-granting golden holly or silver rose sung about in operas but a simple pair of fairy glasses. Not the Goddess of Lucre or the Silver Witch but a red-haired magical toolmaker.

Right now, the golden eyes hidden behind his lids likely saw that woman looking back at him with various expressions. Hopefully, that dream would inspire Volf to do a little reflection.

As for himself, Dorino decided to picture the smile of the woman he cherished as he tried to go to sleep.



Tales of Merchants and Artisans

Prologue: The Merchants' Guildmaster and Vice-Guildmaster

"I am loath to leave you, my dear..."

"You'll only be gone for two weeks or so."

"That's far too long! Why, it's over half a month. Such a separation is more than I can bear..."

One might have expected those passionate words from a newlywed. But the one who had uttered them was a man with a striking gray beard: Leone Jedda, guildmaster of the Merchants' and head of the Viscountcy Jedda.

"It's your job, dear. There's nothing you can do," Gabriella, vice-guildmaster and wife of Leone, responded with a graceful smile.

Ivano, who had come to the vice-guildmaster's office to go over some paperwork, was trying to look anywhere but at the couple. *Should I even be here right now? Or should I try to slip out?* The moment he shifted his toe, Leone grabbed Gabriella's hand and called her by her pet name.

"So be it. I'm off, then. I'll finish up as quickly as I can and return to you, my Gabby."

"Don't rush, and come home safe, Leo."

"My dearest wife, take care while I'm away."

Leone pressed his lips firmly against the back of his wife's hand, then turned to Ivano with a frown.

"Ivano, while I'm gone, take care of business with the Scalfarottos."

"Yes, rest assured that I will," Ivano replied. "Have a safe trip."

Ivano, a former employee of the Merchants' Guild, was now the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company. Normally, he did not do work for the guild, but Leone permitted him to assist with business between the guild and the Scalfarotto family. That way, Ivano could learn how to interact with nobles, make connections of his own, and also provide Leone with some help.

Leone turned back once to take a final longing, tearful look at Gabriella.

Ivano had heard that Leone's dark, nearly black eyes had been dark blue in his youth. He hadn't known the couple at the time, but he had a feeling their relationship hadn't changed much since then.

"I will return as fast as I can," Leone said. He pressed his lips into a hard line and then finally left the room.

Ivano and Gabriella watched as Leone's reluctantly receding figure passed through the doorway.

"Madam Gabriella, are you sure you don't want to go see him off at the carriage stop?"

"Quite sure. Oh, even there, he'll go on and on about not wanting to leave, and then he'll stare at me from the carriage window until he's out of sight."

Ivano could understand why she wouldn't want the staff to see the guildmaster debase himself like that. That said, Leone was well-known as a doting husband, so it wasn't as if anyone in the guild would be surprised.

"This marks the third year," Ivano commented. "They must place a great deal of confidence in Mr. Leone."

"Yes, he declined twice, but this time he was asked in the name of the king."

"Ah, yes, that hardly leaves him much room to decline..."

Having Leone Jedda to negotiate business transactions with other nations was a great boon for Ordine. He possessed the knowledge and money sense of both a noble and a merchant, and he had memorized all the leading exports and revenue streams of each nation.

Some were demanding that he be elevated from a viscount to an earl and appointed to a position in which he would be directly

involved with foreign diplomacy. But Leone had declined on the grounds that he already had a job as the guildmaster of the Merchants', that he was not suited to be an earl, and that he was too old to take on that kind of work.

Any noble would have been honored to obtain a position in His Majesty's government and be elevated from a viscount to an earl. Leone, meanwhile, had written a pro forma denial letter and muttered unpleasantly, "The busier I am, the less time I get to spend with Gabriella."

Ivano had known the man for a long time, so he knew that those were his sincere feelings on the matter. Personally, Ivano also prided himself on being quite the devoted husband, but there was no comparing himself to Leone. In fact, he didn't *want* that comparison.

"Mr. Leone must love you very much..." Ivano murmured without thinking.

But Gabriella readily affirmed his words. "Yes, that he does."

Gabriella showed no embarrassment, but neither did she wave his words away lightly, which was proof of the depth of Leone's devotion.

"Madam Gabriella, Mr. Leone hasn't ever made you feel insecure in your relationship, has he?"

He'd meant it jokingly, but Gabriella responded with a straight face. "No. When we got married, he signed a temple contract compelling him to be faithful to me."

"What? A temple contract?"

Ivano knew that it wasn't uncommon for nobles to enter contracts of that type given the importance of lineage to the aristocracy, so he assumed that must be the reason.

Gabriella continued. "He told me it was because he did not want me to have even one shred of doubt about his love for me."

"I see, so it was a romantic gesture..."

It was very much the sort of thing Leone would do, but Ivano found it highly unlikely that Gabriella would ever have doubted his love in the first place.

But what about the vice-guildmaster? Had Leone begged her to sign a temple contract in turn? While Ivano had no intention of

asking her that question, it must have shown on his face anyhow.

Gabriella looked away from him and said quietly, "I signed a contract too. He didn't ask me to, but I felt if I performed the same gesture, he would settle down a bit. Instead, he was overjoyed—it only worsened his clinginess."

All over the world and all throughout history, there have existed many words to describe love, but nothing—not *passion*, *infatuation*, or *devotion*—said it all quite like *clinginess*. And Gabriella's answer made Ivano feel just a bit of sympathy for Leone.

"I can't say I have seen anyone make such a troubled expression when talking about her husband's love," he said.

"Ivano, don't you believe human beings have their limits?"

Unable to deny that, Ivano replied with only a smirk. In the sixteen years that he'd known the couple, Leone's adoration for Gabriella had never faded. He expressed his love at every opportunity and never tried to hide his affection for her from others. Not once had he shown a hint of embarrassment or restraint. He still bought her bouquets or expensive jewelry weekly. And despite Gabriella's cold reception of his excessive gestures, he gave no indication of changing his ways anytime soon.

"If you wouldn't mind taking a look over these, please," Ivano requested, at last handing her the paperwork he had brought for her perusal. She quickly scanned over it and signed her name at the bottom. Her elegant script could have come right out of a copybook.

Gabriella was of common birth and had once worked as a scribe, a job that included making clean copies of documents. However, somewhere along the line, she had taken a wrong turn—her words—and she'd first become Leone's secretary, then a staff member of the merchant's guild, and at last a viscount's wife.

A marriage between a commoner and a noble was, even when talent and love were involved, a difficult road to go down. Ivano wished he could request that Gabriella give his boss, Dahlia, a lesson on just how to navigate that road, but he felt it was perhaps not his place.

"There, that should do it," Gabriella said.

"Thank you very much. Ah, one of our employees has gone to

purchase some profiteroles from a reputable shop. Shall I bring you some?”

“I appreciate the thought, but I will have to decline.”

Gabriella had paused for a beat before answering, and in that space, Ivano felt concerned. It was unusual for her to turn down such an offer.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking, but are you unwell?”

“No, I am perfectly fine. But when my husband is away, I like to take the opportunity to watch what I eat.”

Was she worried about her figure or fitting into her dresses? Perhaps, despite what she said, she did want to stay beautiful for Leone. But no sooner had the thought occurred to him than Gabriella continued.

“I must be mindful of my health in order to outlive him. If I go first and he takes it upon himself to follow after me, that will cause a lot of trouble for everyone else.”

Ivano sincerely wished she were joking, but her dark blue eyes were as still as two ponds. Faced with that determined expression, he could think of only one thing to say.

“I pray you both will live long, healthy lives.”

“Thank you, Ivano. I will endeavor to do just that.”

As Gabriella put the paperwork back in order, the dark blue stones on her bracelet gleamed.

Ivano the Apprentice Merchant and the Silver Bracelet

Life was truly unpredictable.

Everything that Ivano had taken for granted had suddenly slipped right out of his grasp.

The bloodred sky of dusk was turning to night as he walked along the road, his head hidden in the hood of his robe. Soon his surroundings would be bathed in a darkness that would make his face indiscernible to others. All he had to do was make it to the station, board a carriage for the capital, and escape from this town he'd been born and raised in.

In only ten days, he had lost his family, his home, and his job as an apprentice merchant.

The owner of a company for which his father was the guarantor had skipped town after accruing a hefty debt. His father had closed down his business, sold off all his assets, and then poisoned himself as well as Ivano's mother and sickly younger sister. The debt that remained behind had been paid off by relatives who had once received help from his father, so no one had come to collect even a single copper coin from Ivano.

The day before his father died, he had struck Ivano's name off of the family business.

Ivano had known about the company going bankrupt. In fact, he had been opposed to his father becoming a guarantor in the first place, but he had insisted on the grounds that the owner was a personal friend. After the bankruptcy, a number of companies had ceased doing business with the Mercadante company as well.

But Ivano's father had assured him that he had friends to connect him to more business and that it would all work out. And like a fool, Ivano had believed him. He hadn't noticed that his mother had been

hiding the company ledger from him for over a month. Nor had he noticed what lay behind his father's smile when he handed him some spending money and told him he could stay out all night.

At the time, Ivano was focused solely on his happy relationship with his girlfriend and was blind to all else. The next morning, when he returned from a night out with her, he found his life in pieces. His parents had poisoned themselves, but not before poisoning his invalid sister.

Ivano had no memory of the funeral. But he did remember that when someone made a biting remark that "Mercadante was a failure of a businessman," it was not he who had delivered the punch but a friend of his father's.

After the funeral, Ivano's uncle gave him what little money he had to offer and urged him to leave for the capital. Ivano didn't need to be told twice. Even though he'd been raised in this town, people were merciless in how they gossiped about the son left behind in the aftermath of a family suicide. And he had no desire to be any more of a burden on his uncle's family.

Ivano gave most of what he had, his uncle's money included, to his girlfriend. It was a gesture of apology toward her and her family, the Badoers.

Yesterday, having made the decision to move to the capital, Ivano had broken up with his girlfriend, Loretta.

"Your family is here; your job is here," he told her. "I have nothing. There's no reason for you to come with me."

No matter how many times he tried to convince her, she refused to listen. She insisted that she was going to come with him to the city, where they could both look for work. She was so earnest in her resolve that Ivano gave up trying to persuade her. And he was disgusted at the part of himself that wanted to entertain her offer.

So he pretended to consider it, and while she was at work, he went to her house. Her mother came out onto the front doorstep, and there, he bowed his head low as he explained that he no longer wanted to be a burden on Loretta or the Badoer family, that he was leaving town today on his own, and that he was sorry for the pain he was causing Loretta. He left a leather satchel of money on the

step at her mother's feet and turned to go. She called his name several times, but he ran off without a backward glance.

In his possession, he had only enough silver coins to pay for a one-way trip to the capital and a few nights' stay at inns along the way. What he'd left with Loretta hardly sufficed as an apology, but it was all he had to give.

He was unable to let go of his love for her, but neither could he bring himself to write her a letter telling her to forget him and find another man to live happily with. Still, he was sure that leaving her behind was better than dragging her to the capital with him to live a life of needless hardship.

Ivano had dreamed of becoming a merchant. He'd wanted to be the kind who had an eye for profit but dealt in quality products and made others happy even as he earned his own gold. And he had wanted to make Loretta his wife and spend his life with her.

Where had his father, the one who'd taught him the ropes, gone wrong? Had he misread the market, had he been too compassionate, had he lost out to competition?

Why hadn't he asked Ivano to help him pay off the debt, no matter how long it might have taken them? No, why hadn't he asked him to die together with his family? Why had he been the only one spared from the poison, and why had his father left him a letter asking him to live on without them?

None of it made any sense to Ivano. But he refused to follow his family. Once he made it to the capital, he would do whatever job he could get to stay alive.

But never again would he be a merchant.

When he approached the station, the sight of a large carriage drawn by a sleipnir made Ivano's steps feel heavy. A compulsion came over him to take one last look at the townscape and burn it into his memory but stopped himself. Doing so would only make it harder to leave.

The face of his lover flashed into his mind, and he shook the image away before finally heading into the station's waiting room.

"Oh, there you are, Ivano! Took you long enough."

"Huh?!" he yelped. *Wait, what? Why is Loretta here?*

His silver-haired girlfriend, with whom he'd had a tearful parting just yesterday, was standing before him, smiling brightly. At her feet sat four large leather suitcases, and the large cloth bag slung over her back threatened to capsize her tiny frame.

"Loretta, what are you doing here?! And why do you have suitcases?"

"I packed everything I thought we might need in the city. My parents kept giving me stuff to pack, so I ended up bringing a lot... My dad kept telling me it's better to cook in a pot I'm used to, so he forced me to pack that too. It's *really* heavy."

Loretta lowered the cloth bag to the floor and gave an embarrassed laugh.

As understanding dawned on Ivano, he found himself unable to look away from her. With her parents' approval, she was planning on coming with him. He was overjoyed and grateful, but he couldn't let her go through with it. He didn't want to bring her any unhappiness.

Scraping together what little willpower he had left, Ivano resolved to turn her away. "Loretta, it makes me so happy that you want to come with me. But I have no family and no support and not a copper coin to my name. I don't want you to have to endure—"

"*I'll* be your family now!" Loretta cried without hesitation. For a moment, Ivano forgot to breathe as he stared back at the pale blue eyes she had fixed on him. "I'll be your family, and I'll stay by your side, forever!"

"Loretta..."

He was shocked and at a loss for what to do but happy nevertheless—and he couldn't find his voice. While his mind was reeling with confusion, Loretta thrust a bracelet onto his wrist.

"I'm glad the stones were ready in time," she said.

His wrist was now adorned with a shiny engagement bracelet. It was silver and set with blue moonstones, and it was absolutely dazzling. Ivano used his other hand to rub his stinging eyes and struggled to steady his breathing.

"...You won't say no, will you? It would be such a waste of this bracelet..." Loretta murmured. His lack of a response had apparently

dealt a blow to her confidence.

His gentle, sweet, sunny Loretta—she normally wasn't so headstrong and unyielding. He thought of how much courage it must have taken her to come all the way here. *Aah, I love her—forever and always, with all my heart.*

"Thank you..." Ivano managed to get out. "Once we're in the capital, I'll make a lot of money and get you an engagement ring with the largest jewels I can find, I promise...!"

Once he finally formed an answer, she leaped into his arms. He squeezed her back as hard as he could, and the room erupted into applause and cries of congratulations and well-wishes. Suddenly remembering they were in the waiting room of the carriage stop, he felt incredibly embarrassed.

But he wasn't going to let go of Loretta. Not anymore.



"These suitcases are going to be a pain to carry."

"I know you can do it, *dear husband*..."

"What?! I mean, right! Of course, *I'll* carry them for you."

For a moment, they laughed bashfully together, then Ivano wiped Loretta's tears away with a handkerchief. Quite suddenly, he became painfully aware of the onlookers' gazes—some simply amused but others envious or curious.

They would likely be traveling with these people in the same carriage to the next coaching inn, and possibly even past that. They might tease them or try poking into their business. Either way, it would be difficult for both of them to pretend to be asleep through all that.

"Um... Ladies and gentlemen, would you all please begin to board the carriage...?"

Ivano felt a pang of guilt for the station attendant's sake.

Sixteen years had passed, and Ivano was now happily living in the capital with his beloved wife and adorable daughters. He had been fortunate enough to get a job at the Merchants' Guild and build a stable life for his family.

As it transpired, the "very heavy pot" that Loretta's father had forced her to bring had contained a stash of gold and silver coins.

His father-in-law must have anticipated the pressure Ivano would soon feel to find a job—any job—that would ensure he could provide Loretta with a decent life. It was thanks to his generous gift that the two had been able to rent a room and take their time searching for work.

Applying to the Merchants' Guild, which offered the most ideal conditions for Ivano, had been a true test of his courage. He'd never thought in a million years that he—someone without a noble or prominent merchant guarantor—would be able to pass the examination.

Once he became an employee of the guild, he put his nose to the grindstone. But although he worked as hard as he could, there were times when others got fed up with him for not knowing what they considered to be basic facts.

The other staff members had all studied civil service in college or had attended commerce school. Many, too, were of noble birth or were otherwise connected to the aristocracy. Ivano was skilled in arithmetic and accounting but lacked knowledge of mercantile law and business within the capital. And he knew nearly nothing about nobles.

Well aware that such information was crucial for him to do his job, he did not gainsay others when they pointed out his ignorance. Instead, he bowed his head to his superiors and respectfully asked for their help, and despite some grumbled complaints, they taught him what he needed to know.

Gabriella encouraged him to enroll in the same commerce school she had attended. In order to fill in the gaps in his knowledge, he began self-studying the moment his workday was over, then went straight to night classes.

He had aspired to be a merchant from childhood, and learning about business was one of his deepest joys. The more knowledge he acquired about his trade, the more he enjoyed working at the Merchants' Guild.

"Mr. Badoer, do you have a moment to chat?"

As he was a commoner with no factional ties, the merchants seemed to find him easy to talk to, and he, in turn, found that his experience at his father's company had prepared him to converse smoothly with them. And so, before he was even aware of it, merchants began coming to Ivano not just to chat or vent their complaints but to consult him on official matters.

And if he couldn't provide them with solutions, they could always go to Gabriella for help. Not only did she have a wealth of trade knowledge, but she had a wide network of connections and knew just how to handle business affairs. Merchants approached her not as Viscount Jedda's wife, not even as the guildmaster's wife, but as "Vice-Guildmaster Gabriella."

Since Ivano had given up on being a merchant, he privately decided that his goal as an employee of the guild was to be like Gabriella, and in pursuit of that goal, he continued studying diligently. When he found out a few years later that people were

calling him "Gabriella's apprentice," all he could do was laugh.

While the job had its difficulties, he was happy with his occupation and the workplace he'd been blessed with. He was content to work under Leone and Gabriella's direction for as long as he could and live peacefully in the capital with his wife and children. At least, that was what he'd thought.

Early one evening in spring, Ivano returned home and announced to his wife, "I'm thinking I'll quit the Merchants' Guild and go to work for the Rossetti Trading Company."

When a man with a wife and two children declared he was quitting his stable job to work for some unknown company, one might expect his wife to try to stop him or bombard him with questions. While Ivano had confidence that his wife would understand, he couldn't help but feel a little unsure.

But when he told her, Loretta's pale blue eyes lit up, and a smile brightened her face.

"Congratulations, Ivano! You're going to be a merchant again!"

You're going to be a merchant again—those words stirred something in Ivano.

Before they came to the capital, when they were still in the courting stage, Ivano had once told her as follows: "I don't necessarily want to take over my father's business. I want to deal in quality products and make money while making others happy. That's the kind of merchant I want to be."

After coming to the capital, he had never brought it up again.

As an employee of the guild, he had counseled other merchants while suppressing his own passion for business. But that hadn't been enough to fool his wife. He was no match for her insight.

"Thanks, Loretta. I won't let you down."

In one short moment, his hope turned into resolve. He would be a merchant. He would once again play his part on the stage of commerce. He was confident the magical tools that Dahlia Rossetti created would bring smiles to people's faces.

Ivano decided that he would support Chairwoman Rossetti, daughter of Carlo, by taking on the role of vice-chairman and

handling the business side of things, no matter how difficult the path might be.

He balled his hands into tight fists, and his wife's eyes swam with tears as she said, "I'm so happy for you, Ivano. Your dream is coming true..."

"Thank you, Loretta. So much..."

After sixteen years, Ivano had learned to control his tears. But when he hugged Loretta tightly to him—

Suddenly, he heard the pitter-patter of footsteps running down the hall.

"Welcome home, daddy!"

"Welcome, papa!"

His daughters reached their hands up to him, their navy blue eyes —same color as his own—sparkling with delight. They were getting big. It was only a matter of time before he would have trouble holding one of them in each arm. But today, he scooped them up to greet them.

"I'm home, Irina, Loanne!"

He heard his daughters laugh gleefully on either side of him.

"Let's celebrate. I won't stop you from drinking as much as you want," his wife said with a soft smile. On her left wrist was a bracelet of gleaming gold with large, navy blue stones. After he'd given it to her, she'd told him that it would take some time to get used to the weight.

Fermo the Apprentice Craftsman and the Small Silver Box

"Well, what do you know, you've gotten to the point where you can make something worth selling. I think it's about time I send you back home," the gray-haired, gray-bearded master artisan said with a smile.

Fermo was training to be an artisan specializing in small goods. The craftsman to whom he was apprenticed had also taught Fermo's father, meaning he had taught two generations of Gandolfis.

The arrangement was that once Fermo's master acknowledged him as a fully fledged artisan, he was to return to his family's workshop, the Gandolfi Workshop, and work there with his father. This was precisely the verdict Fermo had been waiting for, and yet he was not the least bit happy about it.

On the workbench was a lusterless silver cube. It was a small box made of sheet metal, and its sole function was having a lid that could open and close. Suitable for storing accessories, medicines, or small items, it was a product that was commonly found in the Kingdom of Ordine.

As usual, after Fermo had completed it, his master had checked it over. As he did every time, Fermo had readied himself for criticism, but instead of finding fault with the item, his master had deemed it acceptable.

His master then handed him a bag of cookies he himself had received from a client and told him that he was done for the day. Fermo simply nodded and said, "Yes, sir."

Apprentices were often required to make this same small silver box as a test of their abilities. Doing so called upon all of the basic skills that a small goods artisan would need and so was considered a reliable marker of progress.

And Fermo did indeed feel that the box he'd made today was a huge improvement on the ones he'd made when he was first starting out. However, when his master took the box that he'd made himself down from the shelf and set it next to Fermo's, the difference was striking. The shine of the silver, the roundness of the edges, the smooth mechanism of the lid—it exceeded his in every aspect.

Fermo's father had taught him from the age of four to fourteen, and his master had done the same for another four years after that. Fourteen years of training, and this was the best he could do? The thought made him grind his teeth in frustration.

Even though his master said he would soon be ready to go home, Fermo just couldn't see how that was possible. Perhaps he'd judged Fermo had no more potential for growth. He felt deeply disappointed in himself.

Once Fermo finished tidying up the workshop, he trudged outside. The sun was about to set, and a summer breeze enveloped him in its warm embrace as it blew past him. He walked for a few minutes until he came to a bridge that crossed over a narrow river. It was one of his favorite spots to cool off from the heat.

Today, however, he found the bridge already occupied. A young woman was gazing down at the flowing river. Her lilac hair, artlessly tied back in a loose updo, was coming undone; a few stray strands of hair spilled out onto the nape of her fair neck, the muscles of which were lean and well-defined. Her exquisite profile made her look like the subject of a fine portrait.

As the woman held the railing of the bridge and stared into the water below, a teardrop slid down her cheek.

It was a beautiful scene, but Fermo felt obligated to intrude on it. He searched for the right words and came up short, only for his feet to take a step forward without him willing it.

"Hi there," he said. "Nice day, don't you think?"

The sky above was cloudy and gray. *Way to sound suspicious,* he thought to himself.

The woman roughly rubbed her wet cheek with the back of her hand and then looked straight at him. Fermo found her clear,

periwinkle eyes to be quite charming.

"Do you need something?" she snapped.

Though her answer was curt, Fermo found that he actually liked her direct, self-assured manner. *Wait, don't get distracted,* he told himself. Unsure of what to say next, he opened his mouth only to close it again. Instead, he opened the bag of cookies he had with him and held it out to her.

"Want some?" he offered.

"Huh?"

"Well, people get bad thoughts in their heads when they're hungry, right? So I figured you might feel better once you got something in your stomach..."

Having given voice to his nonsensical impulse, Fermo extended the bag of cookies closer to the woman. Her eyes went wide.

"Did you see me?" she asked.

"See what?"

"Do you feel sorry for me? Because you saw me crying? I'm not going to jump, you know. It's too shallow here."

"I didn't think you were gonna. I mean, you're more likely to bang your head on the bottom before you drown."

"Well, you're not wrong," the woman said with a bitter laugh before reaching out for the bag of cookies. "Oh, and I *will* take one of those. Thanks."

The two of them leaned their backs against the railing and nibbled their cookies.

"You weren't going to bring these to your family or anything?" the woman asked.

"I'm an apprentice craftsman," Fermo told her. "I only go home once a month."

"Looks like we have that much in common. I'm an apprentice glassmaker," the woman said, her expression softening a bit as she chewed on her cookie.

So we're both artisans.

"Apprentice artisans cry rivers of tears" was a common saying in Ordine. Many apprentices were lonely as a result of having to leave their families to live in their masters' workshops, or else they faced

difficulties getting along with their masters and colleagues. Fortunately, Fermo was close to home, and while his master and the senior apprentice were strict, they were not unreasonable, so his experience wasn't quite so bad.

"Is your work giving you trouble?" he asked the woman.

"No, the opposite. My seniors keep telling me not to push myself too hard. I can't use strengthening magic, so I can't carry many boxes of glass or even move the boxes of fire crystals, and the others have to pick up my slack. It just makes me feel a little pathetic is all."

So she'd been crying over her physical limitations, then. Without strengthening magic, there was only so much one could achieve through training.

"Carrying things has nothing to do with how good you are at glassmaking," Fermo said. "You can help out in other ways, like cleaning and so forth. And if you really wanna carry stuff, then you can just make two trips."

"Well, sure. But I'm also slow at cutting glass..."

"Is there a task you're good at or that you like doing?"

"I think I'm pretty good at painting. I've gotten to the point that I can paint something good enough to sell. And I like putting together stained glass."

"Okay then, get better at painting and stained glass, and you can practice glass cutting by just doing it over and over. If you still don't get better at it, then ask someone else to cut for you, and keep practicing what you're good at. We've all got things we're good at and things we're not so good at."

The woman gave him an astonished look, which made her features appear younger. And quite cute. Fermo had blurted his advice out, only meaning to encourage a fellow artisan, but perhaps he had made her feel worse.

Before that worry had taken hold of him, however, the woman's face broke into a smile, and she exclaimed, "Thanks! That makes me feel *much* better!"

"Oh, well, I'm glad you feel better, but... I mean, it's not like I have a right to give you advice..." Fermo said, scratching his head as

he spoke. He thought of the silver box he'd made earlier.

"What? Is your master a real taskmaster or something?"

"No, he's great. It's just that I don't have any talent. I made a box out of metal, and he told me I'm qualified enough to go back to my folks."

"If he thinks you're qualified, isn't that a good thing?"

"No, you see, it wasn't as polished as the one my master made, and the edges weren't as rounded. And the bottom wasn't totally level either. It was a lumpy mess."

"Come, now, you can't compare yourself to a professional craftsman. He's got so many more years under his belt."

It was true that Fermo didn't have as many years of experience, but that didn't explain why his master would send him back home when the gap in their skills was so great.

"If I'd really shown any promise, then wouldn't he have wanted me to stay in his workshop so I could get to his level? But he told me to go home. That means he doesn't think I can get any better."

"Ah... That could be..." the woman conceded, her periwinkle eyes looking both perplexed and sympathetic.

"Oh, sorry," said Fermo. "I shouldn't be complaining about this to you."

"It's okay—you listened to my problems. But if you're not happy with your own skill, then why don't you talk to your master about it? Ask him to keep teaching you until you improve."

"He's already done so much for me. I can't ask him for more."

"My master says that since he made us his apprentices, we have to become full-fledged artisans, no matter how many years it takes..."

The woman trailed off into a cough. Her throat must have been dry from eating cookies with nothing to drink. Fermo was feeling a bit thirsty himself.

He looked at the woman, who was looking right back at him with some concern. Wanting a pretext to continue their conversation, Fermo did something he'd never done before—he asked a woman out.

"Want to go and have tea or something?"

Her response was immediate. “Sure, that sounds nice. How about we go to my place? It’s not far, and we can save some money.”

“Ah, yeah... That’d be great.”

Apprentices did not earn high wages. Fermo didn’t mind, since he earned enough to feed himself, and his master furnished him with his tools and textbooks, but tea at a nice café would have been a bit expensive.

Still, he couldn’t help but worry about this woman’s apparent lack of caution. He wasn’t sure if she was always this way, but didn’t she think it was a little risky inviting home a man she’d just met? Fermo had to acknowledge the irony that he, the one who had extended the invitation to tea, was the one now worried about her acceptance of it.

“All right, my grandpa’s house is just over there. Let’s go!”

Fermo followed the woman back down the way he’d come. After a short walk, they stopped in front of a house next to the workshop —his master’s house.

“Oh, I haven’t introduced myself yet, have I?” the woman said. “My name is Barbara Agazzi.”

Agazzi. Fermo was well familiar with that surname. It was the name of the workshop he was apprenticing at and his master’s surname as well. He remembered now that the man had boasted about having a beautiful, charming, sweet-natured granddaughter. She and Barbara were, without a doubt, one and the same.

“I’m Fermo Gandolfi. I’m an apprentice of the Agazzi Workshop next door...”

“Oh, you’re grandpa’s apprentice! What an amazing coincidence. Well, we can’t just have tea now. You have to stay for dinner!” the woman said with a delighted smile.

Fermo readied himself. Nothing had ever felt heavier than the door to his master’s home did in that moment.

Barbara strode into the house, announcing that she was back with a friend for a visit. Or rather, she announced that his master’s “darling, precious granddaughter” had arrived with a man.

Once he heard that, Fermo’s master came rushing out of the back

of the house and exclaimed, “Barbara, what’s this about a male friend?!”

Once he caught sight of Fermo, whom he’d just seen at the workshop, he opened his eyes wide in surprise, and then, without uttering a sound, narrowed them as if inspecting a product for defects.

“Oh, hi, grandpa!” Barbara greeted him. “We got to talking on the road and were having such a nice time that I decided to bring him over. He’s your apprentice, right? Oh, Fermo, sit here. I’ll bring out the tea.”

While Barbara was making tea, Fermo sat down at the living room table, right across from his master.

“You got to talking on the road...? Fermo, I wouldn’t have taken you for the kind of man who picks up women on the side of the road,” his master said reproachfully.

Fermo straightened his back and answered as though giving a confession. “...No, sir, this was the first time in my life I have ever gone up to a woman and tried to talk to her.” There would have been no point in pretending otherwise.

“That right? Well... I’ll admit you have a good eye...”

The air was heavy. And thin.

“You’ve never met Barbara before, have you?” his master asked. “The other apprentices know her, but since you go back home to your family on your breaks, you must’ve never crossed paths with her...”

There were only a few days that apprentices had to themselves—the summer festival, the winter festival, and a two-day break once a month. It sounded like Barbara came to see her grandfather when Fermo went back to visit his family. That would explain why he had never met her before.

“Hrm... He’s got an inflexible personality, but he’s a straight shooter and he’s good at his craft. Plus, he’s in good health, doesn’t chase after women, doesn’t gamble, and he’s frugal. He’s an heir to the Gandolfi Workshop and comes from a good family. And he lives close by... Well, I suppose he gets passing marks...”

His master was muttering to himself. He looked even more

terrifying than when he was scolding Fermo for poor craftsmanship.

"Fermo," he told him, "I know I just told you you're nearly a full-fledged craftsman, but I take it back."

"Huh?"

"You've improved enough that you have no problem making sellable products, and it seems your family's workshop is busy and could use your help, so I thought I could send you back early to finish your education under your old man, but now I've changed my mind."

Well, now Fermo knew his master's honest evaluation of him and why he'd wanted to send him back home, but apparently that was not happening anymore. He felt equal parts pleased and anxious, his emotions locked in perfect balance.

"Thinking of the future," his master continued, "when you've become an established artisan, you'll need to be capable enough to make sure your wife and kids never want for anything. At the very least, I need to train you to be better than me..."

As his master spoke, a fire blazed in his deep violet eyes. Fermo felt his forehead break into a sweat. The idea of having to "at the very least" surpass his master was nothing short of absurd. And what did he mean when he spoke of "thinking of the future"? Fermo couldn't bring himself to ask. What he did understand was that starting tomorrow, his master's instruction was, without a doubt, going to be much stricter than it had been thus far.

"Tea's ready!" Barbara announced, entering the room with a tray of teacups. "Grandpa, I just heard you say something about training Fermo to be even better than you. Is that because he's your star apprentice?"

"Huh? Star apprentice?" Fermo repeated in surprise. He'd never heard his master use that phrase before.

"Grandpa was bragging about a new, really talented apprentice. He said that he was going to stop taking on apprentices because his joints were starting to give him trouble, but once he saw the trinket box that young man brought, he decided to accept him as his apprentice on the spot. That must have been you, Fermo."

Four years ago, Fermo's father had encouraged him to join the

Agazzi Workshop, and so Fermo had come here by himself with a small silver box that he'd created. At the time, his master had taken the box with barely a greeting and immediately started finding fault with every part of it, saying the pieces weren't connected well, the bottom wasn't flat, and the surface was bumpy.

He had been about to give up all hope of an apprenticeship when the old man told him brusquely, "Fermo, pack your things and come to the workshop starting tomorrow."

Now, his master said noncommittally, "Hrm, well, I might have said something like that..."

His master picked up his steaming cup of tea but did not take a sip. Fermo examined his face, but his master refused to meet his eyes.

"You said he showed promise and that you wanted him to surpass you, so why are you sending him back home? Are your joints getting worse, grandpa?"

"No, I am perfectly fine! I just heard his family's workshop was busy, so I wanted to send him back home once he'd improved a decent amount. But now I've changed my mind. I've decided I should teach him myself so he can be better than even me one day. Are you up for the task, Fermo?"

"That's great, Fermo!" Barbara cheered.

"Yes, I deeply appreciate the opportunity..."

Fermo could tell by the look in his master's eyes that he was saying to him, *Don't let our four years together turn out to have been in vain. Just nod and say yes.*

"That's right—I can see you becoming something like a grandson, so keep working hard, Fermo!"

"Yes, sir!"

Master and apprentice alike were half desperate, but neither one could say anything else in front of Barbara, who was grinning broadly.

At some point, they switched from tea to alcohol, and Fermo ended up staying for dinner. He was on guard for a drunken confrontation with his master, but instead, the old man and his wife shared heartwarming stories from Barbara's childhood. It ended up

being a priceless experience.

From that day onward, Fermo worked his hardest to get a handle on his master's strict instruction and to meet his high expectations. And despite the pity others felt for him, Fermo never grumbled or complained about his treatment.

Barbara occasionally paid a visit to his master's home, and they became a source of encouragement and comfort to one another as they both worked hard to hone their crafts. In a way, they fueled each other's ambitions to become full-fledged artisans, neither one wanting to be outdone by the other.

Fermo would not return home to the Gandolfi Workshop until three years later. And it would be another six months before he made the woman with the lilac hair his wife. But that is a story for another time.

The Vice-Chairman's Abacus

"How did our chairwoman do it yet again? How did she manage to make such an effective pitch to the former marquis...?"

Ivano, vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company, was at his wits' end at the sight of the envelope in his hand.

He was in the room at the Merchants' Guild that the company was renting as an office. His desk was piled high with other letters, but the one he held required special attention.

The stark white envelope was sealed with exquisite red wax, dusted with silver, and stamped with a crest bearing a broadsword. An attendant in a dark gray three-piece suit had come to the office to hand-deliver the letter, along with a dark brown leather bag. The attendant had informed him that the bag contained payment for a number of portable warm air circulators, but instead of the silver coins Ivano had expected, the bag contained gleaming gold.

The sender was Bernigi D'Orazi, the former head of the Marquisate D'Orazi and former vice-captain of the royal Order of Beast Hunters. In the letter, Bernigi expressed his deep gratitude for the portable warm air circulator Dahlia had given him when he was shaking from cold during the expedition on which he had accompanied them. He also included a request to purchase additional portable warm air circulators for his family.

The flowing script was written in a black ink that took on a reddish-brown tinge when seen from a certain angle. It was a special type of ink that prevented forgery—just the sort of thing a noble would own.

"I'm still out of my depth..." Ivano muttered to himself. He let out a shallow sigh. He had worked for the Jeddas at the Merchants' Guild for a long time. After some ups and downs, he had become friends with the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, Forto. And he had won the favor of two marquises—Grato, captain of the Order of

Beast Hunters, and Head Treasurer Gildo. But none of them had ever insisted that he strictly abide by aristocratic standards of decorum. In other words, it was as if they had continually turned a blind eye to his unrefined manners.

However, the former Marquis D'Orazi would not offer him the same leniency. The Marquisate D'Orazi had been established from the founding of Ordine and continued to produce many knights and mages.

Bernigi's wife, nicknamed "All-Prepared," was a kindly woman who counseled others on a variety of matters, and the extent of her personal connections was well-known in aristocratic society. That nickname had been passed down to the current Marchioness D'Orazi.

Ivano was most concerned about a certain one of the company's employees. Marcella—employee of the Rossetti Trading Company and knight of the Scalfarotto family—was the biological son of Bernardi D'Orazi, Bernigi's youngest son. The moment Ivano saw the D'Orazi name on the envelope, he'd assumed the contents would have to do with Marcella, but as it transpired, there was nothing about him in the letter.

If his meeting Dahlia had been a coincidence, it had certainly been a miraculous one. And yet Ivano had the sneaking suspicion that a certain blue-eyed ice spider was weaving his web around all of them.

An unseasonable chill ran through Ivano as he thought of Guido's unreadable smile. He still did not feel confident enough to consider the man someone he could share a drink with.

Nevertheless, as the company continued to grow, it was essential that he interact with nobles. And while he was running up those stairs, out of breath from struggling to keep up, the company chairwoman was not just leaping over steps but taking whole flights of stairs at a bound.

But he had decided to stay by her side, so he would follow wherever she led.

There was a knock at the door. Dahlia entered and greeted him

cheerfully.

"Good morning, Ivano."

"Good morning, Chairwoman. We've received several letters, but I'd like to direct your attention to this one first."

Dahlia's green eyes widened when she saw the wax-sealed envelope and the dark brown leather bag.

"Gold coins! But why? I'm sure I told Lord D'Orazi how much the portable air circulators are worth..." she said.

Ivano let out a chuckle. She was flustered at the excessive sum when she should have been worried about something else entirely.

Mena had mentioned losing some weight recently. Ivano had made a mental note to furnish him with some stronger stomach medicine. As for Marcella, Ivano had decided he would not be the one to bring up family matters. Certainly, he would do whatever he could if Marcella came to him for advice on his own initiative, but if he wasn't ready to be open about it, that was just as well.

Though considering he was training as a knight and serving as Dahlia's bodyguard while his wife was pregnant with twins—yes, Ivano decided, he would provide the man with some much-needed stomach medicine as well.

"How should we return the amount he overpaid by?" Dahlia asked with a frown.

"His overpayment is an expression of gratitude, and we should accept it as such. Instead, since he is requesting additional portable warm air circulators, I figured we could include a few extra," Ivano replied as he slid the beads of his abacus. He heard Dahlia breathe a sigh of relief.

She could probably use stronger stomach medicine too, even if her worries lie elsewhere, Ivano thought. It was then that he noticed the large bag she was carrying.

"Chairwoman, that's quite a large shopping bag you have. If it's too heavy, you should let Mena carry it."

"No, it's not. I'm planning to go shopping for embroidery floss with Lucia on my way home today."

Ivano's ears perked up, and a connection formed in his mind—noblewomen and embroidery. Was she perhaps going to embroider a

handkerchief to profess her love for someone? A faint hope arose within him until Dahlia handed him a piece of paper.

"You see, I'm thinking of making this the company emblem. What do you think?"

Drawn on the paper was a design of a black dog superimposed upon a red flower. It would have been obvious to anyone which two people the symbol represented.

Ivano held the paper up, nodded, and said, "I can't imagine a better emblem!"

This was proof enough that Volf would someday quit the Order of Beast Hunters, join their company, and stay by Dahlia's side. Could spring have finally sprung for these two? Ivano's face almost blossomed into a grin, but then his ever unpredictable chairwoman continued.

"I originally thought of this design to stitch onto the back of Volf's undershirts. It's meant to be a wish for his safe return from expeditions."

"...A wish for his safe return? Is that right..."

He chided himself for jumping to conclusions. Nothing had changed between Dahlia and Volf.

And yet he couldn't help but notice that the bag she held was quite large considering it was simply meant to hold embroidery floss. Just how many shirts was she planning on embroidering? Though he already knew the answer, Ivano decided to ask for confirmation.

"Chairwoman, what is the magical tool you most want to complete right now?"

"A magical sword for Volf. Oh! But I'm being very careful about safety and confidentiality, and I'm consulting with Lord Guido every step of the way!"

I know you're worried, but please let me do this—her earnest wish was plain to see, so Ivano nodded.

"Do your best, for Sir Volf."

"I will!" Dahlia responded with a gentle yet determined smile.

If he'd truly prioritized her safety above all else, Ivano should probably have told her to abandon her quest to make a sword. Even though she was consulting with Guido, there was no way to

guarantee her safety.

But Ivano had already decided not to stop her. His only job as vice-chairman was to help the chairwoman progress down whatever path she decided on. And if Dahlia and Volf's relationship grew stronger and deeper as a result, all the better. Although, as a merchant, he *was* interested in quick and predictable profits...

His voice barely audible, Ivano mused, "Now, is there any way to speed up the process of Sir Volf joining our company...?"

Unfortunately, that was not something that could be calculated on the vice-chairman's abacus.

Tales of the Kingdom's Nobles

Prologue: The Marquises' Matching Handkerchiefs

"Grato, the total figure on this document is wrong."

Looking displeased, Grato's friend waltzed into his office in the Order of Beast Hunters' wing in the castle. It was currently afternoon tea time. The maid started preparing extra tea before Grato had a chance to ask her to.

"Sorry for the trouble, Gildo."

The correct total was written down on a separate piece of paper that also indicated the location of his mistake, so all he needed to do was revise that one spot. Usually, he would receive paperwork back with a note that simply said there was something wrong with it, so this was quite a big help.

"Gis, if you don't mind."

"Certainly."

Gismondo, his bodyguard and attendant, took the document without question. His handwriting was neater and easier to read, so Grato often asked him to take care of cleaning up and revising documents. Moreover, if he were to do it himself, it would take three times as long.

"Wait, Grato," Gildo interrupted. "Aren't you going to double-check it?"

"As if you would make a mistake."

All he'd said was the truth, but Gildo fidgeted uncomfortably in his chair.

As they waited for Gismondo to make the correction and let the

ink dry, Grato and Gildo sat and had tea.

"How about we go for a drink sometime soon?" Grato asked.

"Yes... I will be free two days from now. The first phase of the port expansion plan should be done by then."

Over the years, more ships had started making use of the harbor in the South District of the capital. The need for expansion had first come up several years ago, but progress had stalled due to the need to secure land and a construction budget.

Eventually, it was decided that instead of using land available in the capital, they would expand the port by employing a veritable army of earth mages to fill in the bay. However, the estimated cost had gone up as a result.

Even though Gildo was the head treasurer, he normally did not have to be involved in every budget estimation. However, Grato suspected his overachieving friend was reviewing the finest particulars of this project.

"Don't overwork yourself, Gildo."

"You needn't tell me twice," Gildo replied. He took two sugar cubes—something he did not usually do. They made a little splash as they sank into his tea. A droplet landed on his finger, so he fished a handkerchief out of his pocket. It was white and embroidered with his name and a blue bird, a blessing for his good health and fortune. Grato knew who had embroidered it without asking—undoubtedly, Gildo's wife.

"Very nice embroidery job," Grato commented. "Lady Tilly has outdone herself."

"This handkerchief is actually quite old."

Gildo examined the embroidery as if he could tell its age by the design, then gently returned it to his pocket.

"I assume she's gotten too busy to do embroidery lately?" Grato asked.

"She certainly is busy, but she did give me an embroidered handkerchief just last month."

"Heh. Well, isn't she a smitten kitten," Grato teased.

Gildo had lifted his tea cup to his lips, but instead of taking a sip, he said, "I seem to remember you yourself having a mountain of

handkerchiefs from Dalila."

Grato nearly spilled his tea. "...Well, I suppose."

As Gildo said, that "mountain" of handkerchiefs—that is to say, all the handkerchiefs he owned, though he didn't know the exact number—had been embroidered by Grato's wife, Dalila.

She had begun to give him handkerchiefs when they were first engaged and continued through their marriage. They were beautifully embroidered with all different kinds of designs, including their family crest, flowers, and animals. The thread colors varied—sometimes red to evoke her hair, bright green for her eyes, blue to wish for his health, green for safety, and so on.

However, instead of Grato's name or even the Bartolone family name, Dalila embroidered her own into each and every one. It had been Grato's own wish that she do so. If anything were to happen to him on a mission, he was determined to die with one of those handkerchiefs close at hand. He'd never said so aloud, but he had a feeling that both Dalila and his old friend here knew that.

"Apparently, Tilly and Dalila were exchanging letters even while the two of us were not speaking to each other," Gildo explained. "Embroidery designs are a shared interest of theirs."

Grato and Gildo had gone a long time refusing to socialize in private, though, as marquises belonging to the same faction, they occasionally had to interact in official capacities. Meanwhile, their wives had apparently kept up this clandestine correspondence.

Thankfully, the men had been able to restore their severed ties and were now on good enough terms to go out drinking together like old times.

Grato's wife had been very pleased about that, but she'd also expressed her concern about how much more money he would be spending on alcohol.

"My wife has been cautioning me not to drink too much these days..." Grato grumbled.

"What a coincidence—so has mine," Gildo said.

He kept such a straight face when he said it that Grato could hardly stop his laugh from escaping and had to set the teacup he'd been about to drink from back onto its saucer. As he took out a

handkerchief to wipe the tea from his lips, the embroidered design caught his eye. It was the exact same blue bird that was embroidered on Gildo's handkerchief.

How odd, for both their wives to embroider the exact same blessing—

"Oh look, you two are matching," his bodyguard pointed out with a broad grin. Grato and Gildo both coughed dryly in response.

Tilly the Marquis's Daughter and the Shooting Star

"Gods above, please grant my wish..."

Wishing upon a shooting star would make one's wish come true—or so Tilnara had read in a picture book. She tried her best to stay up late and prayed as hard as she could to the night sky outside her window.

"Please, make me skinny, or if that's not possible, please make me beautiful. At the very least, please make my hair a pretty blonde color...!"

When she woke up the next morning, eyes red from lack of sleep, Tilnara leaped out of bed to look in the mirror.

None of her wishes had come true. Reflected back in her large, full-length mirror was a round-cheeked, stocky child who had curly brown hair with golden undertones and dark brown eyes.

So many young noble girls were as lithe as fairies, yet she looked like a little bear cub. Whenever there was a gathering of relatives, she was always the heaviest little girl there.

When she cried to her nanny that she wanted to be skinnier, her nanny told her, "Young ladies are not fat. You simply inherited your father's robust, knightly build. You should be proud of how strong you are, Lady Tilnara."

It was true that Tilnara rarely got sick, and she could use her own magic to heal any minor injuries she sustained. But that was irrelevant.

After that disappointing morning, Tilnara spent the rest of the day exhaling deep sighs. She was at another family's estate to attend a children's social gathering. Tilnara hated these sorts of events. She was told that these gatherings, which she had to attend from the age of six until her debut, were "an opportunity for the children of

close families to become friends."

The children would gather in a sunlit hall where they would drink tea and eat pastries in a prim and proper way as they made conversation. Sometimes, they would practice dancing under the watchful eyes of their instructors.

However, they were not free to play around like children. If they made too much noise, they would be admonished, and if they acted out, they would be sent to another room or sent home. These social events were not fun gatherings for the children; rather, they were held for the purpose of establishing amicable relationships among the future leadership of the faction.

There was one more reason. Among nobles, it was common for marriages to happen between distant relatives or individuals in the same faction. Still, marriages that were solely contractual in nature tended to present certain difficulties.

These gatherings functioned as a way to prevent such problems by allowing each child to meet a variety of potential marriage candidates, giving parents the opportunity to assess their compatibility, and facilitating introductions between various families. But Tilnara would not come to find all of that out for a long, long time.

In any case, together with her female chaperone, she set foot into the house of the marquis who was hosting that day's children's social.

After the hosting family gave a standard address, Tilnara went inside a spacious room filled with beautiful white furniture and was guided to sit at a table. There, she sipped her tea—carefully not making a sound—and ate fruit cake with a knife and fork. She was so concerned about having proper table manners that she could scarcely taste anything.

The blonde girl sitting next to her was friendly and spoke to her, but Tilnara struggled to keep up with the conversation. The girl spoke about the best times to view flowers and about events that were being held that month in the capital—all things that were unfamiliar to Tilnara, but she tried her best to listen to what the girl said.

After tea and cake, the children practiced their dancing in the adjoining hall. This was Tilnara's second time attending a dance, but none of the boys her age offered to dance with her. Of course not. Last time, she'd stepped on her dance partners' feet repeatedly. The blond boy had groaned quietly and had to stop dancing a few times, but he hadn't voiced any complaints. The silver-haired boy had furrowed his brow in pain, but he hadn't said anything to her either. However, his attendant had covertly whispered to him that his shoes had been stepped on so many times that they were losing their shine and that he needed to change into a new pair. The two had then left the room, the boy limping somewhat, suggesting that she might have even injured him.

Tilnara apologized profusely, but the boy only responded with a perfectly polite "Please do not worry about it" without even meeting her eyes. She felt terribly guilty and frustrated.

Having resolved that this time, she would not cause anyone trouble, Tilnara clung to the side of the grand room. As she stood hunched over against the wall, she saw a shadow pass over the sunlight at her feet.

"Hello, Lady Ravel. It is a pleasure to see you. May I have this dance to commemorate the occasion?"

A young boy with shiny blond hair and amber eyes held out his hand to her. He was tall, with slender limbs.

He looked to be about four years older than Tilnara and much more grown up than the other children. She recognized him as someone she had greeted many times before. He was Gildovan Diels, the eldest son of the marquis who was hosting this event. It was likely a custom that the men of the hosting family invited any girl without a partner to dance.

But when she looked at the boy's feet, she saw he was wearing the glossiest pair of black leather shoes she had ever seen—and she paled.

"Thank you, Lord Diels. But, um, I am still learning how to dance, and I am very poor at it, so I know I will be a terrible partner," Tilnara explained in a rush.

The boy narrowed his eyes slightly. "Has someone told you that

you are a terrible dance partner?”

“No, but I really am awful! I step on the boys’ feet so much their shoes lose their shine, so no one will dance with me now...”

As she spoke, she felt sorrier and sorrier for herself until she couldn’t even raise her head.

“This gathering is also a space for children to practice their dancing. Would you like to practice with me?”

“P-Please and thank you...” Tilnara replied, placing her fingers into the palm of Gildovan’s hand.

They began dancing, but Tilnara’s nerves caused her to step on Gildovan’s shoes six times. Even though the song they danced to was the one she had practiced the most. Gildovan never grimaced in pain, but his shoes ended up horribly scuffed.

“I’m sorry!” Tilnara cried.

“That’s all right. It is only to be expected during practice.”

“But your poor shoes... I wish I could use healing magic on them...” she muttered without thinking. For the first time, Gildovan looked down—and then laughed softly. He was so gentle and mature, Tilnara couldn’t think of what to say to him.

“That would be a very economical solution, but fortunately, I have many other pairs of shoes. More importantly, would you like to dance to another song?”

Inviting one’s partner to dance a second song was essentially a formal offer of friendship. However, since this was a children’s social gathering, and the dancing was meant as practice, his invitation likely did not hold that meaning.

Despite her nerves, Tilnara thanked him, and the pair danced to another song, after which Gildovan’s shoes were in an even sorrier state.

From then on, each time she attended a social gathering, Gildovan danced two songs with her. Tilnara tried to practice on her own to get to the point where she wouldn’t step on his feet, but she still had a long way to go.

The following year, she managed to improve enough that she didn’t once step on his feet while dancing, and other boys began asking her to dance again.

But even when those boys asked her with their formal smiles if she wanted to dance a second song, for some reason, she felt unable to dance beyond the first. Though he had an impassive face and rarely smiled, she always had much more fun dancing with Gildovan.

Around the time she was eleven years old, Tilnara had a sudden growth spurt. Her robust build remained unchanged, but others began commenting on how she was starting to look more womanly, and she began receiving more attention from the boys. A part of her was happy about it, but another part found it a bit ludicrous.

By that point, Gildovan had aged out of the children's social gatherings, but he would send her bouquets of flowers on the days the events were held. Tilnara's father told her the boy was probably just being courteous, since his family often hosted those events, and she took his word for it.

They had no reason to meet privately, and Tilnara found that she missed seeing him. There was a possibility they would meet again when she made her debut, but he would likely have a fiancée by then. He was the eldest son of Marquis Diels and next in line for the title. A slow ache started to build deep inside her chest, which Tilnara forcefully quashed.

Tilnara herself had also begun receiving offers of marriage. Her parents would not tell her from whom, but Tilnara felt a certain sense of resolve and resignation regarding her prospective marriage partner. She possessed neither the sort of beauty that could make someone fall in love with her at first sight nor remarkably powerful magic. She had three brothers, so she wasn't even in a position of inheritance.

Therefore, she would likely be married off to someone who deemed her family the best option politically or who wanted Tilnara's healing magic passed on to their children. And as the daughter of a marquis, she would do as was asked of her.

One day around the start of the New Year, Tilnara's father summoned her into his office. She entered to find him holding a

gold-trimmed white envelope, his expression grave.

Once Tilnara sank into the sofa beside her mother, he finally spoke. "I have a letter from Marquis Diels proposing an engagement between you and Gildovan. But I believe it's much too soon—"

"I accept!" Tilnara exclaimed. Her voice came out automatically. She only noticed after the fact that she had jumped up from the sofa, behavior that most certainly did not befit a young noblewoman.

Her outburst took her father aback; his dark brown eyes went wide. "But it *is* too soon, isn't it? You needn't accept if you don't feel ready. Marriage is for life. You should think long and hard about—"

"We mustn't let such a good match slip away!" her mother cut in. "Surely marrying into another marquisate would be the best thing for Tilly."

Tilnara was shocked to witness her usually quiet mother speak up so emphatically.

Her father brooded silently for a while. He looked at his wife, then at Tilnara, who was still standing, then smiled gently. "Very well. Tomorrow, I will reply in acceptance. Tilly, if you have a change of heart, let me know tomorrow by morning tea..."

Tilnara had absolutely no plans of doing so, but she did feel a bit sorry for her father.

It was only after she stepped out into the hallway with her mother that she realized that what had happened hadn't been a dream but real life. She was gripped with a feeling of fear that contended with her joy. Gildovan, while still a boy, was already such a gentleman. He was at the top of his class in college, had exceptional swordsmanship on par with a knight's, and was going to be the next head of the Marquisate Diels. Wouldn't it simply be an inconvenience to him to have a wife as comparatively mediocre as her? She was sure she would only be a disappointment to him.

She had begun to feel as if she were trudging through sand when her mother suddenly called her name. "Tilly. I would like to discuss some things with you, as your mother. In here, please."

Tilnara assented and followed her mother. They went into the inner room of her mother's personal suite. Not even a single maid

accompanied them.

Tilnara and her mother sat down across from each other at a table. Her mother fixed her with her blue eyes.

"Tilly, you and Gildovan are a perfect match when it comes to noble rank and age. If you are insecure about your appearance, all you need to do is put in a bit of effort to be more equal to him in that regard. Your school marks could also be a bit higher, but I'm sure you'll have no trouble with that."

Her mother had seen right through her. Tilnara couldn't imagine how she would manage to do all that, but she made a firm vow to herself that she would strive to do what her mother encouraged her to do.

Her mother's next words, however, caught her off guard. "If you marry Gildovan, you will one day become Marchioness Diels. When that happens, it is not your beauty nor your grades that will matter but your ability to protect the family and manage the household as the marchioness."

"Protect the family and manage the household...?" Tilnara repeated. She couldn't envision what that meant. Her mother was a marchioness herself, but Tilnara had never given thought to the type of work she did.

"Together with your husband, the marquis—and sometimes acting on his behalf—you will have to manage the household finances, social engagements, and any crises the family might face. Be they matters involving relatives, factions, or work, you will always have to be one step ahead, prepared for anything."

"One step ahead...? That sounds difficult."

"And being Marchioness Diels will be much more difficult than my position. The Marquisate Diels has been a family of knights for generations, and they place heavy importance on tradition and decorum. They are a far cry from our own family. They may look down on you for your youth, and they may even do things like serve you muddy water instead of wine. You might have to force yourself to smile when you wish to cry. If you prefer a more peaceful future, then you are free to choose another life."

Just a moment ago, her mother had told her father that they

should proceed with the engagement. Had she really been against it this whole time? Tilnara anxiously searched her mother's face and instantly got her answer. The shadow that had passed over her mother's blue eyes was concern for her daughter.

It was clear that her mother had gone through many struggles upon becoming a marchioness. She was likely going through them even now, since Tilnara's father had taken over from her grandfather only two years ago.

It was not that her mother was against her marrying Gildovan; rather, she was making sure that her daughter was ready to go down that same path that she had.

"Even if it will be difficult, I still want to marry Lord Gildovan..." Tilnara said, her voice quavering despite her efforts to keep it steady.

"I know you've had feelings for him for a long time, Tilly. But this engagement is first and foremost a way to join our families together, and Gildovan may not share your feelings. You will be given the title of his wife, yes, but he may direct his affections toward a second wife or someone else. Despite all of that, can you still vow to stay by his side and endeavor in your role as the Marchioness Diels?"

Tilnara knew that a marriage between two nobles was really a marriage between their families, and that mutual love and affection were not always a part of that arrangement. While it was true that it would make her happy if Gildovan reciprocated her feelings, she knew that even if he never did, she would have no regrets standing by his side as his wife.

"Yes, I can make that vow, mother." This time, her voice did not shake.

"Very well, *Tilnara*. From now on, I will treat you as a future marchioness. I still have my shortcomings, but I will teach you everything I know. I will request the help of your grandmother as well. It is now your job to do everything you can to fully prepare yourself to become the wife of a marquis."

Gone was her mother's kind face, replaced with the controlled smile of a marchioness. From that day forth, Tilnara's mother stopped calling her by her nickname, Tilly.

Tilnara's education to become the wife of a marquis, which began the following day, entailed much more effort than she had imagined. In addition to her regular studies, she now had a great deal to learn and memorize: impeccable manners and dancing, politics and economics, noble factions and family structures, affairs of all other families and who they associated with, and crisis management and self-defense.

It shocked Tilnara to learn that her mild-mannered mother had mastered every one of these points. And even her grandmother, who Tilnara had thought was only interested in tea parties and the opera, had a wide circle of dependable friends, abundant knowledge, and an intelligence network of nobles. Tilnara gained a deep respect for both of them.

After their engagement was made official, Gildovan and his father paid a visit to Tilnara's home. Under the watchful eyes of Tilnara's parents and older brothers, Gildovan handed her a bouquet of pink flowers.

Next, they exchanged gold engagement bracelets. The two had never done anything romantic together, like whispering sweet nothings or professing their love to each other. They had never even gone out on a date. But what Tilnara thought of in that moment were the dances they had shared, clear as day in her mind.

"I look forward to a lifetime together as husband and wife," Gildovan said.

"Y-Yes, and I as well."

They shared a gloveless handshake. His hand was very warm.

Once that shiny gold bracelet found its place on Tilnara's wrist, it never came off. It was set with beautiful yellow sapphires that Tilnara admired late into the night in her bedroom under the light of a magical lantern.

Even with their engagement settled, they were still too busy to meet more than two or three times a month for tea or luncheons. When they could not meet, Gildovan sent her flowers that were currently in season and a handwritten card.

On the few occasions they did meet, Gildovan did not smile

much. There were still no whispered sweet nothings; they merely caught each other up on recent affairs. The cards he sent were written as if to a friend. There was nothing romantic about them at all.

However, without fail, he sent a fresh bouquet of flowers before the ones decorating her room wilted, and she treasured all of the cards that accompanied them.

She shared the first dance of her debutante ball with Gildovan. They danced for three songs, and she did not step on his glossy leather shoes a single time.

The day after her debut, he sent her a bouquet of bright red roses and a card, the contents of which were sweeter than candy.

The next time they met, and forever after, Gildovan called her "Tilly," and she called him "Gildo."

One night, Tilnara woke suddenly and looked outside her window to see a shooting star crossing the night sky.

This time, instead of a wish, Tilnara murmured a vow. "Gods above, I no longer want you to make me thin or beautiful. Instead, I am going to make every effort to be someone worthy of him, so I can stay by his side, forever."

The Engagement of Gildo, Son of a Marquis

Gildo had just completed his daily morning training session when his father said to him, "Gildo, it's about time you started thinking about marriage."

"It's a bit soon for that, I think," he replied shortly, wiping the sweat off his face with a towel.

High-ranking nobles tended to be engaged and married quite young, but Gildo didn't see why he couldn't wait until he had come of age. After all, his father was healthy, and he had younger brothers. There should have been no concerns about the family line abruptly coming to an end.

Gildo's priorities right now were studying, learning how to be the next marquis, and training to be a knight. He had no time to spare for anything else. The little time he did have to himself he spent either sparring with his friends or eating—or reining in his troublemaking best friend whenever he did something foolish.

"You will not be able to handle all the duties of a family head by yourself," his father said. "It would be wise to find a wife who is suited to those duties, and to start searching for her sooner rather than later."

"You are still the family head, father, and will be for some time to come. Besides, I am currently training to be a royal knight."

"There is no one at school who has caught your attention?"

"No, there is not."

Gildo had received handkerchiefs and love letters from other students, and each time, he had responded by thanking them but letting them know he could not return their affection. He did not want to give them any false hope. The only time he'd accepted one of those gifts was when the girl had insisted he take it, but he was

left feeling guilty afterward.

Gildo was going to be a marquis. When it came to choosing a marriage partner, the union of their two families would take precedence above all else. There would be no room for the passion and romance those girls desired.

Some of them had told him they would even be happy being his second or third wives, but Gildo wished they wouldn't suggest something like that even in jest. The very notion of having multiple wives wasn't in his nature.

"What about Lady Tilnara Ravel? The one your grandmother recommended."

"Lady Tilnara?" Gildo repeated with a start.

Gildo used to send a bouquet of flowers to each of the young girls he danced with at the social events for noble children as a matter of courtesy. It was a gift he gave as the son of the hosting family and future marquis.

Normally, an older representative would send a thank-you note back, but there had been one little girl who had written him a letter in her own clumsy handwriting. That little girl had been Tilnara Ravel, the only noble girl with whom Gildo had danced two songs each time they met at one of those events.

Gildo had sent flowers to several houses, and since the dancing had been purely for practice, no one placed much importance on the number of songs one child danced with another. Nonetheless, it seemed his grandmother had taken it to mean something.

"Our families are of the same noble rank, and her magic grade is also a good match for yours. I hear that she is a sincere, hardworking young lady. She is still a bit young and pudgy, but I'm sure she will grow into her looks someday."

"Someday? I would say she is lovely enough already."

Gildo never had patience for this sort of talk. Girls had to be slim and delicate to be considered beautiful, and boys had to be tall and muscular to be considered handsome. Such fixed ideals were common among nobles, but Gildo found them distasteful. Though he himself was tall now, he had been short and scrawny as a child, unable to put on weight no matter how much he ate. He had often

been told he looked like a girl, which became a source of great dismay for him.

Once, during a sparring session, his friend had laughed away his worries by telling him it didn't matter if he was big or small—all that mattered was that he was good with a sword. When Gildo heard that, he'd felt like a weight had been lifted from him.

"Gildo?"

"Faces and bodies change with age. No one is spared from that. What matters above all else is a person's character."

His grandmother, who had once been so beautiful she was called the White Rose of the Kingdom, was now an old woman with magnificent white hair. She might not have been as gorgeous as she once was, but her presence and grace surpassed even those of Gildo's mother.

A pretty face would twist and turn ugly the moment its mouth disparaged or scorned others. Gildo had no respect for anyone, no matter how stunningly beautiful, who changed their attitude and personality depending on whom they were speaking with. Unfortunately, as the heir to a marquisate, he had been well acquainted with such people ever since he was a young child.

"Now I remember—you danced with her at those children's social gatherings, didn't you? What was your impression of her?" his father asked.

Gildo's memories of that time resurfaced immediately. "Yes, I did. She was not a very good dancer, but she gave it her best effort. She was kind enough to apologize for stepping on my shoes and expressed concern for my toes. The second time I danced with her, she had improved considerably."

"Oh, that's—"

"I sent flowers to everyone I danced with, but Lady Tilnara was the only one who wrote her own thank-you letter from the start. With each thank-you card she sent afterward, her handwriting became neater and her sentences more well-formed."

"I-Isn't that something..."

"When we ate pastries together, her movements were elegant and refined. She was able to discern that I was not fond of anything

too sweet without my having to tell her, and she offered me cookies that were less sweet than the others. Also, despite her youth, she thoughtfully urged me to drink tea to make sure I did not choke—"

"Yes, I think I understand now," his father interrupted him with a smile. "I will send a letter to her family."

Gildo felt annoyed. He hadn't finished yet. Then he realized his father meant to sound out her family about an engagement. He hadn't expected it to happen so soon.

"I will say," his father continued, "she has three older brothers and she is the only daughter. I doubt her family will want to part with her anytime soon."

"...Do you think they will decline?"

Gildo knew he was a difficult person to like. He was inflexible and had no sense of humor. Even at school, he was well aware that behind his back, other students said he was unapproachable and suffocating to be around. He had tried to practice his friendly smile in the mirror, but even his friends had shuddered and called it creepy.

"There is a chance they'll say it's too early, but they should consider you a good match for her. If they *do* decline because they think it too early, then we can try again next year. But"—his father's expression became that of a marquis—"if you decide to marry her, she must be your first wife. Once you've made your decision, you cannot renege on it."

Gildo had tensed up in anticipation of his father's answer, but it had turned out to be nothing serious at all. "That will not be a problem. Like you, father, I plan to spend the rest of my life with one woman. I am not an only child, so I don't believe there is any concern with the family having an adequate line of successors."

"I know I'm encouraging you to go with Tilnara, but... Just in case, would you like to take a look at the other candidates' profiles? There are four."

"No thank you. If I don't know their names, it won't put undue strain on our current relationships."

If he had no intention of pursuing a marriage with any of them, then it was best that neither party knew.

"Understood. Let us proceed, then," his father said, standing up to leave.

"Father," Gildo called out to stop him before he knew what he was doing. "Um... If they decline, please don't press them to accept. I don't wish to cause Lady Tilnara any discomfort," he finished quietly.

His father nodded, then resumed his exit. As Gildo watched him leave, he reflected on himself. As an heir to a marquisate and a royal knight in training, Gildo had disciplined himself to never be swayed by a passing fancy.

He and Tilnara had still been children when they'd met, so he had never seen her as a potential romantic partner. He had thought that it would be nice to one day spend his life with someone as hardworking as her... But at some point, he realized, he'd begun to wish he could walk through life with Tilnara herself.

A few days later, his father told him in an uncharacteristically excited tone, "It's all settled, Gildo!"

At first, Gildo didn't understand what he was talking about. When his father continued that he meant Tilnara had accepted his offer of engagement, Gildo stood there shocked for ten long seconds.

Finally, he managed to thank his father and then briskly shut himself into his room. There, he looked in his mirror. His face, at first full of doubt, morphed into a subtle smile. He looked ridiculous.

That night, the entire family sat down for dinner together. Once his father had enough drink in him, he told the whole table that he'd expressed not only to Tilnara's parents but also her grandparents how excited the Diels were about welcoming her into their family, adding that Gildo was so taken with his bride-to-be that he was fretting about being too pushy and alienating her. When he heard that, Gildo wanted to dig a hole and bury himself in it.

The two marquises, Gildo's father and Tilnara's, had jumped right into discussing and drawing up an engagement contract. The contract stipulated that they would wait to officially announce that he and Tilnara were engaged and she was to become his first wife until after her debut, and that if some problem should arise before then, the families would discuss and come to a mutual agreement

before ending the engagement. Gildo had looked over the contract himself and found no faults with it.

The next day, a gem dealer who often did business with his family came with a large selection of bracelets and stones. Those present for the consultation were Gildo, his parents, and his grandparents.

Selecting Tilnara's engagement bracelet, which would become her marriage bracelet after their union was formalized, was easy enough: Gildo chose a gold bracelet to match his hair color.

Selecting the color of the stones was more difficult. Gildo's eyes were an amber color between deep yellow and orange. Unfortunately, amber scratched easily. Sphene was a gemstone with a rich yellow color, but it shone greenish when turned. The gem dealer had two fire opals that were reminiscent of amber, but both looked more reddish in certain lights. Additionally, Gildo's mother rejected the option of citrine, its color a mixture of yellow and orange, for being closer to his father's eye color than his own.

With each jewel box that was opened, Gildo's indecisiveness only grew. His father and grandfather did nothing but grunt unhelpfully and offered no words of advice.

When the gem dealer opened the final box, his grandmother pointed at one of the jewels inside and said, "This one here. This is your color, Gildo."

"Perhaps, yes..."

Gildo nodded at the rich yellow sapphire. It was cut into a beautiful shape. It would surely make for a beautiful gift. And he knew it would look very nice on Tilnara. Though on second thought, perhaps the gem was too beautiful to be given as a representation of himself...

"Gildo, a couple works to refine one another. I know this gem will suit you both," his white-haired grandmother said, having seen through his feelings, before giving him a stunning smile.

After the engagement was made official, Gildo and his father visited the Ravels' estate, and from that day forward, a bracelet set with deep yellow sapphires adorned Tilly's wrist, and a bracelet set

with dark andradite garnets adorned Gildo's.

Although they were engaged, that did not change the fact that both Gildo and Tilnara were still students. Their studies kept them busy, which meant they were unable to meet with each other at leisure.

The few times a month they did meet up for tea or a luncheon, Gildo felt self-conscious of their age difference and had trouble thinking of a suitable topic for conversation. As a result, they ended up discussing their studies and giving each other updates on their day-to-day lives.

One day, Grato asked him teasingly, "So, Gildo, having another romantic tea party with Lady Tilnara tomorrow?"

Gildo responded with a straight face. "We may be engaged, but I am bearing her age in mind. Our tea parties are merely an opportunity for us to update each other on the events of our lives."

"Still, as her fiancé, I'm sure you've given her flowers, or complimented her, or at least sent her a nice card... Gods, don't tell me you don't even do that?"

Usually Gildo was the one to feel exasperated with Grato, but now the roles had reversed. That gave Gildo pause. It was true, he was her fiancé, but she didn't yet seem to have reached the age at which whispering honeyed words into her ear would have been appropriate. Not that he could imagine himself doing something like that anyway.

After some deliberation, Gildo decided to head to a shop to pick out some flowers and a card to send to Tilnara. On the card, he praised her for being such a hard worker and expressed his wish to continue improving his own skills—and once again, his message to her became a simple life update. He did, however, make sure to note down in his schedule when to send her another bouquet before this one wilted.

The next time Grato asked him about his fiancée, he explained what he'd done, and his friend gave him an even more exasperated expression than before but said nothing.

When Tilnara debuted at sixteen years old, Gildo was so

entranced by how she looked in her white ball gown that it took him a moment to compliment her appearance. Despite his delay, Tilnara graced him with her usual smile.

As her fiancé, Gildo was the one to dance with her for her first dance. The next three dances they shared together felt shorter than a single song.

Back home, Gildo faced a stack of cards on the desk in his room. He had already decided that the first bouquet of flowers he sent after her debut would be red roses, but he was struggling with what to write on the card.

As he was anguishing, Grato came to celebrate.

"Gildo, congratulations on your official engagement to Lady Tilnara! I brought wine!" Grato's eyes flitted over to Gildo's desk, and he continued flatly, "Seriously? You're addressing the letter to 'Lady Tilnara'? You should be writing 'My beloved sweetheart' or calling her by her pet name. That's what my brother does."

"Don't expose your brother's private life so lightly. What is it that *you* do?"

"I don't bother with writing cards. It's much faster to bring over flowers," Grato told him bluntly. Gildo had to admit it fit his character.

"Is your engagement going to be made official soon too?" Gildo asked him.

"Nope. The girl I mentioned before got engaged to my brother."

"Grato..."

"It's all right. The important part is that their marriage will unite our families. Besides, I'm too busy with the Beast Hunters. I don't have time to get married."

Grato had told him about the young woman he'd been forced to meet whenever he returned from an expedition. He'd said that they had nothing to talk about and he'd asked his brother for help, but perhaps his true intention had been to nudge his brother into taking over as the family head.

As a result of that encounter, Grato's brother and that young woman had ended up becoming engaged. A very aristocratic settlement.

While Gildo searched for what to say, Grato picked up one of the cards and said, "So, Lady Tilnara is finally a woman! Now this is where even you, straitlaced as you are, should ham the letter up with something sweet and sentimental. That juxtaposition with how you usually are will have her falling for you in no time..."

"Oh, shut up! I should've known better than to expect anything remotely clever would come out of your mouth!"

After some loud back-and-forth, they ended up opening the bottle that Grato had brought and sharing it. It was a red wine with slightly bitter notes.

"It's gotten late..."

After Grato left, Gildo turned back to his desk. Thanks to his friend's remarks, he found himself struggling even harder than before to think of what to write. How did one go about writing something sweet in the first place? Sugared words weren't something that came to his mind readily.

And how could he make her fall for him by acting differently from himself? He could understand why being unpredictable could make someone fresh and exciting, but he hadn't a clue how to go about such a thing.

Besides, love and trust were things that were built up over time.

Even arriving at that thought, he still could not think of what to write. All night he wrote, wrote, and rewrote letters until he was left with forty useless cards at the break of dawn. He had reached his limit of sweet words.

"To the one I hold most dear, please henceforth call me Gildo."

The next day, she sent him a card in reply, similarly asking him to call her "Tilly."

The Marriage of Grato, Son of a Marquis

"I asked my brother if he wanted to become the next marquis instead, but he said no," Grato grumbled.

"Grato, how many times are you going to bring that up?" Gildo sighed.

It's me who should be sighing, Grato thought to himself. Only a short time had passed since he joined the Order of Beast Hunters, but the number of monsters that had reared their heads this year had kept him even busier than he'd anticipated.

His younger brother had learned his responsibilities as the next Marquis Bartolone inside and out. All things that Grato could never learn to do so well. The family would be just fine even without him around. And yet his brother refused to assume the title of marquis. He had asserted that Grato, who could wield the magical sword Ash-Hand, was far better suited to the role.

That made it difficult for Grato to find a marriage partner. It was highly likely that the one to inherit the Ash-Hand would be one of Grato's children or grandchildren. Therefore, the woman he married must possess fire magic and a fairly high magical grade.

Moreover, Grato's younger brother would have authority to act on his behalf as the marquis, but they would be working in concert, not in competition, to protect the family. To make that work, Grato's wife had to be from the same faction as well.

Also, since he was a Beast Hunter, his wife would be left waiting anxiously for him to return safe from expeditions. It was a difficult thing to ask of anyone and only compounded the unfavorable conditions he offered to any potential bride. Although, had he been handsome beyond compare and renowned as a virtuous knight, maybe he would have found someone willing.

In his youth, Grato had earned himself quite the reputation as a problem child; his actions as a schoolboy couldn't have been further away from those of an upstanding young man. He hated studying, picked fights, and generally misbehaved. And to top it all off, he had once run away from home and immersed himself in the red-light district.

Rumors floated around that he only wanted to join the Order of Beast Hunters because neither the First nor the Second Knights' Regiment would let him in. Grato denied those rumors, but he doubted that anyone believed him. He was unreliable, and even if he did make some woman his wife, there was a chance he would perish on a mission and leave her a young widow. No matter how he considered it, he was confident he was at the top of every family's list of men they did *not* want to give their daughters away to.

"This must be making things hard for your brother as well. He hasn't voiced any complaints?" Gildo asked.

"No, but he did say that unless something changes, he'll just pick someone for me at random..."

Grato thought of his brother's perfectly formed aristocratic smile, then shuddered.

"If anyone could do such a thing, it would be your brother..." Gildo agreed, his eyes going distant.

Grato's younger brother was very competent in the ways of nobility, so there was a strong possibility that he would be able to find a woman who would agree to marry even his wastrel older brother.

Grato wanted to make some poor, unlucky woman his wife as much as he wanted a woman who was enamored with his own brother—that is, not at all. He sighed, and at that moment, a woman with red hair walked into the room.

"Brother, Lord Grato, would you two like some tea?" she asked.

"Thank you, Lady Dalila. That would be great," Grato said with a smile.

The red-haired, green-eyed young woman was Dalila Leithead and, although she referred to him as "brother," was actually cousin to Gildo. She had come into his family at the age of ten, so they

were more like siblings; she still lived with Gildo's parents and younger brother.

Dalila's mother had been born to the Diels family and was the younger sister of Gildo's father. She had married into a family of a different faction and died young, of a sudden illness. One day she was fine, and the next she was gone.

She had married for love, becoming her husband's second wife, despite opposition from both factions. The public had exalted their love marriage, a sentiment that wasn't shared among noble society.

A contract had been established ahead of time stating that upon her death, her children would keep their last name and would be taken in by her family if they were still not of age. The Diels family had carried out that plan and raised Dalila as their own.

Grato knew all about that sad story, but he sensed no trace of melancholy in Dalila's nature, which he attributed to how lovingly she had been raised by the Diels family.

However, due to her family's factional ties and as well as concerns for her safety, Dalila was still not engaged. He'd heard there had been discussions of marrying her to a faraway earl or a wealthy merchant who was also a baron, but Grato had refrained from asking her about it. It would have been inconsiderate to do so. Though, if he was honest, there was also a part of him that simply did not want to know.

Grato's younger brother had once suggested that he make Dalila his own wife. Grato had shaken his head and told him, with a laugh, "I'm afraid of what Gildo would do to me. Never bring it up again."

Grato often visited Gildo at his family's estate, so he viewed Dalila as Gildo's little sister and one of his own few female friends. In other words, she was a woman that he never, ever wanted to hurt.

She had overcome her sadness and heartbreak and stood proudly as a young noblewoman. He knew a suitable husband was just around the corner for her. She did not deserve the suffering that being married to him would cause her.

"For you, Lord Grato."

"Thank you."

In every particular—aroma, strength, and heat—the tea was

brewed exactly to his liking. Grato knew of no other woman who could brew tea as well as Dalila.

"Lady Dalila, you truly know how to make the most delicious tea. I'm jealous that Gildo gets the pleasure of drinking this everyday," Grato said.

His friend knit his brows. *Well, I guess he likes the tea Tilnara makes the best,* Grato thought.

After he savored his tea, he set his cup back down on its saucer. When he raised his gaze once more, Dalila had fixed him with her bright eyes.

"If it would please you, I could make you tea every morning," she said.

"I would love that."

After he gave a genuine and immediate response, he clamped his mouth shut.

"...Grato... Dalila...!" Gildo growled, his voice like a rumble of thunder.

Grato could hardly blame him. He had messed up. Terribly so. Even he, hopeless as he was at acting like a noble, knew what those words meant in an aristocratic sense. The phrase "I will make you tea every morning" expressed the wish to live together, as husband and wife. When he should have laughed at Dalila's rare joke, he had unthinkingly responded in earnest.

"Dalila, don't you think that's a little too far for a joke?" Gildo chided her.

"I meant it seriously," she replied with ease.

Grato and Gildo were both left speechless.

Gildo coughed awkwardly and then shot a stern glare his way. "And you, Grato? Were you joking or serious?"

Grato paused before responding, "I know I'm a poor match for her, but I would like to, if it would be allowed."

He fully expected Gildo to shout at him and voice his vehement disapproval. Maybe he would even punch him. He had given his response prepared for that outcome, but what followed was a long silence.

"Discuss it among yourselves. If you both decide to proceed, I

will speak to my parents about it."

Gildo rose from his chair and exited the room, and his bodyguard followed after him, leaving Grato and Dalila alone in the room. It all happened so suddenly, Grato was unable to speak.

Without saying a word, Dalila refilled Grato's teacup. The tea was as delectable as ever.

"Um... Are you sure you would want to marry *me*, Lady Dalila?"

"I was the one who proposed the idea."

She said it so easily, Grato found himself breathless.

"If you're doing this out of some consideration for me or Gildo or the relationship between our families, just know you don't need to do that," Grato said. "And I also hope you're not doing this because you feel any pity for me."

"Do you mean to say that you accepted my proposal in jest?"

"No, I did respond impulsively, but I meant it. I couldn't ask for a better match."

Dalila had a complicated position within the faction, but she possessed fire magic and had a high magical grade. In college, she had studied civil service instead of magic, but she had been a diligent student who earned good marks. As far as Grato knew, she was a warm, gentle young lady who was perfect in every way.

However, she was too good for him, and he'd been certain that Gildo would never allow it, so Grato had repressed any feelings for her. The truth of the matter was that he knew he was a lousy deal for Dalila. And he felt he needed to make that clear to her now.

"I may be the next Marquis Bartolone, but only in name. I plan on staying with the Order of Beast Hunters even after getting married, which means I'll be away from home often, and you'll be left alone."

"That is quite all right."

"I was a terrible student, I spent all my time fooling around doing whatever I wanted, and I even ran away from home. And, um, I became infatuated with a woman from the red-light district."

"I am aware of all that."

Dalila stared at Grato, her green-eyed gaze calm. The one who had dragged Grato back home had been none other than Gildo. It should have come as no surprise that Dalila already knew the tale.

"And, well, as a Beast Hunter, there's a chance that I will meet an untimely end. I'll make the necessary arrangements so that in that event, you'll have enough money, and you can remarry whoever you want..."

"There's no need for that. In the event of your passing, I will be fully content to live as a widow. But I would like to request that you do not take a second wife."

She is a noble after all. I suppose she wants her own child to be the heir, Grato thought, but a second later, Dalila gave her actual reason.

"You mustn't make *two* women cry."

"Ah, right, I see. I never really considered having a second wife anyway, so that's fine with me."

"Now I would like to say a few things too."

"Of course. Tell me anything."

Grato sat up straight, ready for her to tell him that she only wanted to marry him in order to leave the Diels family, or that she had some personal issue of her own.

"My mother left me her wealth, but it is not enough to provide a dowry appropriate for a marquisate. I don't wish for the Diels family to have to supplement the sum with their own money. Would you be all right with that?"

"Who needs a dowry? I can provide everything we need."

"My father's side being part of a different faction might cause some problems for you. And due to my mother's wish that I come here upon her passing, I haven't seen my father in a very long time. I plan to only go to my father's family to inform them that I am getting married and request that we have minimal interaction going forward."

Her family's factional ties certainly were an issue, but as long as they did not interact with each other, it would be easy enough to protect Dalila.

"That's fine," Grato replied. "Your true family is the Diels family anyway, right?"

"...Yes, you're right."

The reason Gildo had Dalila call her brother despite the fact that

they were cousins was probably to reduce any judgmental comments that might come her way. He protected her like a true older brother.

If Grato married Dalila, that might complicate factional politics. He might very well face some opposition from his own family. Regardless, he would take over from Gildo to do everything he could to protect Dalila.

He made his choice.

Never in his life had Grato ever felt the need to act presentable, but now, he decided to muster all his energy to do just that. He kept his breath steady as he walked over to Dalila and then got down on one knee.

"Lady Dalila, I can't promise I will make you happy, but know that I will make every effort to. Will you marry me?"

He held his palm out to her, and she placed her hand in his unhesitatingly.

"Yes, gladly. And there's no need for you to *make* me happy."

"Wha?" he said in a voice that sounded doltish even to himself.

"My longtime one-sided love is finally being reciprocated. I already am happy."

She flashed him a brilliant smile, and that was the moment Grato knew he'd fallen in love.



Afterward, they went into the hallway, where his friend was waiting for them wearing a deep frown. Grato bowed his head to him, and Gildo informed them he would fulfill his promise.

As soon as Grato was back home, he stuffed a carriage full of red roses and sent it off to Dalila. Then he went straight to his parents and younger brother and begged them to pay a visit to Gildo's family as soon as possible, which they agreed to.

As their engagement proceeded, Grato was surprised by the lack of opposition from the rest of the Bartolone family. Their meeting with the family of Dalila's father was also quick and by the book. Their engagement was settled without a hitch, and it was only later that he found out that had all been his brother's doing.

Next came the wedding preparations.

The day after they picked a wedding date, Gildo told him without a trace of humor, "If you make Dalila cry, I will hunt you down and kill you."

Grato was a bit taken aback by the threat but didn't have it in him to give a retort. Considering his character and his past deeds, he probably deserved that.

"I don't plan on it, Gildo," he said before hopping onto his horse.

They were currently at the far end of the castle's carriage stop. Armor-clad knights of the Order of Beast Hunters were starting to assemble. Grato had wanted to send Dalila flowers to celebrate the selection of their wedding date, but he had been thwarted by the Green King. That was another name for forest serpents, which were giant snakelike monsters.

It was a name that struck fear in all. Although it was rare to come across a Green King along the highway or in the woods, those unfortunate enough to encounter one had no choice but to abandon all cargo and horses, then pray to the gods that the serpent spared their lives.

A Green King had eaten a farm cow along the highway—swallowed it whole—so the squad was headed there to dispatch it.

Forest serpents had tremendously strong jaws, and they were swift. Many knights on the squad had sustained injuries from such a beast, and some had even lost their lives to it.

With his magical sword at his waist, Grato gripped his horse's reins tight.

"Grato," Gildo called out to him again. "I will never forgive you if you leave Dalila behind to go off on your own."

He meant going off on his own to the afterlife. Seeing the worry in his friend's amber eyes, Grato replied with a laugh, "Don't you worry. I promised Dalila I'd take her to the opera, on a horseback ride, and to tea parties. I'm just going to burn that pesky snake to a crisp and come right back."

"Be sure that you do."

Grato was about to thank Gildo for taking time away from his job at the castle's treasury to come all the way here to see him off, but then he changed his mind. Instead, he decided one of his usual casual remarks would suffice.

"Well, I'm off. Give Dalila my best, brother dearest!"

"Grato! *Never* call me that again!" Gildo roared angrily, making Grato's horse whinny with fright.

"Fine, have it your way," Grato said, laughing as he spurred the horse to join the line of other knights.

Grato wondered if he'd gone a little too far with his teasing, but then he saw Gildo's expression soften into an almost imperceptible smirk.

As his horse broke into a trot, Grato whispered to Dalila, though she was not there to hear it, "I'll be back soon."

Waiting for him here was the promise of an opera, a romantic horseback ride, and the best-tasting tea in the world. He had no choice but to return.

"And I would really rather not be killed by a friend," Grato muttered to himself. He thought he heard the magical sword at his waist whir in agreement.

The Dowager Duchess Altea's Lessons on Nobility

"I must thank the Goddess of Fortune for the pleasure of meeting such a beautiful woman as yourself...?"

"That won't do, Volfred."

Altea smiled graciously at the black-haired man sitting with her in the guest room of her estate. His word choice was fine, but he'd ended his sentence as a question, making it sound a bit odd.

"...This is difficult," the man mumbled. His confusion was clear on his face.

The man's name was Volfred Scalfarotto. He was the only son of a good friend of hers, and he had become both her conversation partner and student.

For today's lesson, she was teaching him how to greet and converse with someone he was meeting for the first time, including phrases and expressions used by nobles that were not found in textbooks. Volfred had not received this type of education from his own family.

This was now his third conversation lesson, and they were still covering the basics. It was common for nobles to hold one another to commitments made unintentionally, so Altea planned to instill in Volfred an awareness of the weight his words held.

In the dim sunlight, Volfred was peering at his notes with a small crease in his brow. His gorgeous countenance strikingly resembled that of his mother, Altea's good friend Vanessa Scalfarotto.

Not long ago, Altea had sent Volfred a letter expressing her wish to share memories of Vanessa together, and Volf, after sending his response, had come to visit her at her estate.

Altea hadn't attempted to contact him until after he'd graduated from college, and she had been fully prepared to cease any further

contact if he chose to ignore her letter. There wasn't anything she particularly desired from Volfred. She merely wanted to see him now that he'd become a knight like her friend.

The afternoon he had arrived at her estate for tea with just the two of them, she had discovered that he looked even more like Vanessa than she had heard. His black hair; his beautiful features, which would have been impossible to capture in a painting; the dignified way he carried himself; the slight hesitancy in his gaze—Vanessa showed through every part of him.

Altea had found herself near tears, but she'd forced herself to smile and said, "You look so like your mother."

Volfred had responded with a masklike smile. It was the same smile that Vanessa—or Vivi, as Altea had called the knight—turned toward those whom she felt she couldn't let her guard down around.

Altea and Vanessa had met as children in primary school. It was common for daughters of duchies to not attend primary school. Conventionally, they were tutored at home in the interest of their safety and faster-paced learning. It was also considered appropriate that they form friendships with those of the same standing at events such as familial or factional gatherings.

Altea, however, had attended primary school because she strongly wanted to. It had been her own humble yet earnest wish to make friends with whom she could talk as herself and who did not view her as just the daughter of a duke.

Altea was not in her family's line of succession, so she had a feeling her father had granted her wish because he'd deemed it best for her to learn how to interact with others as early as possible. He'd told her that getting to know commoners and nobles of different ranks would be a valuable experience for her as someone who might one day marry into a high-ranked noble house or even the royal family. He did, however, place some guards around the school to secretly watch over her.

In class, she sat next to Vanessa, the daughter of a baron. She was a very cute girl with glossy black hair. Vanessa, who aspired to be a knight like her father, refused to uphold the expectations that were placed upon young ladies of the aristocracy, such as femininity,

nobility, and discretion, but strangely enough, Altea got along well with her.

The two girls learned, talked, and laughed together, and before Altea knew it, she found that she had more fun spending time with Vanessa than anyone else. They became so close that they called each other simply "Vivi" and "Altea," with no regard for court rank or family names.

Altea believed that Vanessa, too, must have enjoyed the time they spent together. She was someone who wore her heart on her sleeve. No matter how much she tried to hide how she felt, Altea could always read her like a book.

In college, Vivi chose to pursue chivalric studies, while Altea pursued mage studies. After they'd grown up together, the thought that they might drift apart frightened Altea, so right before she entered college, she asked her father to assign Vivi to be her bodyguard.

Her father discussed that request with Vivi's family, and they consented—though perhaps it would have been more accurate to say they followed an order. A barony was not in a position to refuse a request from a duchy.

Altea had used her family's influence over Vivi's family to keep her firmly by her side. But even when Altea confessed everything to her friend, she'd only laughed and said, "Thank you for giving me a good job."

And so, as Altea had desired, Vivi offered her sword to Altea. It was the happiest time in Altea's life. Vivi was a very important person to her; she was her bodyguard and her best friend whom she loved deeply.

There was nothing romantic between them, however. That sort of future together would never have been possible for them. Altea was of ducal stock and had magical power that was said to rival that of the royal family. Her duty was to marry someone with whom a union would be beneficial to the kingdom and her family, and then give birth to his children.

If she made one false step, Vivi could be taken away from her. That much she knew. Besides, although Vivi loved her as a friend,

Altea knew she couldn't be her one and only. But as long as Vivi stayed by her as her knight, Altea felt she could endure anything, no matter whom she married.

Eventually, Altea came of age and married Duke Gastoni, and Vivi accompanied her to her new home. Altea felt that her friend's presence would give her the strength to overcome any doubts and anxiety she had about her marriage and the education she had to receive as a duke's wife.

And yet, all of a sudden, Vivi herself was taken away by that "water earl," Renato Scalfarotto, though in truth, Vivi had told Altea that Renato was the only man whose hand she could hold without her skin crawling. Still, Altea had half a mind to scold that man for stealing away someone else's bodyguard.

Despite how she felt about it, Altea offered her best wishes for Vivi's freedom and happiness and watched as her friend became the third wife of Earl Scalfarotto.

The next time Altea saw Vivi, after her marriage, she was holding a little babe in her arms—Volfred.

"I know this child will be a strong knight someday!" Vivi said, beaming. She looked radiantly happy.

Unfortunately, Vivi died before she could watch her son become a knight. Their family was attacked by bandits en route to their domain. Vivi died an honorable death, fighting to protect Renato's first wife and heir.

Dame Vanessa fought as a knight to the very end.

The announcement of her death was related to Altea as if it were a heroic tale, and as she listened, her face remained stoic to the very end.

Altea refused to believe Vivi could have met her end at the hands of mere bandits. Had someone, some *family*, ordered that she be killed?

She returned to her room and ordered everyone out. In the next ten seconds, she smashed every single article of furniture to pieces with her wind magic. No one reproached her for it. Not her husband, the maids, or the guards.

Not long after, her husband began the process of gathering information. What he found out was that the attack had been ordered due to a conflict over the order of succession in the Scalfarotto family. He received news that Renato had stormed out of his estate in a rage with his mages in tow, and that an abrupt change in the leadership of his second wife's family had followed.

If Altea hadn't heard that Renato had already taken vengeance, then she would have found the perpetrators herself and used the wind magic she possessed to tear them to shreds. But Renato had taken care of everything himself. There was nothing more for Altea to do.

Altea attended Vivi's funeral service, but she couldn't bring herself to look at her friend, turned to ash. She lowered her black veil and dropped her gaze, unable to watch her friend's final moments.

There was no undoing what had already happened, yet Altea wondered to this day where she had gone wrong.

"Lady Altea, what part was wrong?" Volfred asked, his golden eyes wavering with confusion.

"Your words, tone, and eye contact, I would say."

Volfred stared at her in silence, but she felt she could practically hear his internal groan of complaint. He truly was exactly like Vivi in every way. He was like a puppy dog. She could only imagine how hard it was for him to wade in noble society.

Noblemen had to compliment women when they first met. The words he'd said earlier—*I must thank the Goddess of Fortune for the pleasure of meeting such a lovely woman as yourself*—adhered to that rule. They were slightly modified from the textbook but still perfectly acceptable. However, there were several issues with his greeting, and when spoken by such a dashing young man, it presented even more dangers.

"I wonder," Altea began, "if a man like you were to refer to a noble lady as 'such a beautiful woman,' might she not mistakenly believe you were expressing an interest in her?"

"I would hope that she wouldn't."

"And if you say you must thank the Goddess of Fortune, then she

might also take that to mean you view her as someone special, someone whom you are so happy to see that you must say a prayer to the goddess herself."

"I would also like to avoid that, absolutely so."

So cold, and to some poor young lady he hasn't even met, Altea thought. But Volfred was brilliant, just as Vivi had been. It was only natural for someone to build up a habit of acting coldly toward members of the opposite sex—and sometimes even the same sex—after having had their fair share of trouble with them.

Altea remembered her and Vivi's time in school together. Vivi had received many love letters from not only men but also women, and she had hated the experience of having to turn them down. It had given her so much trouble that at some point, Altea had taken on the task of fending off her admirers. She could still remember how her heart had ached when Vivi had thanked her with an innocent smile.

"Then you should only express your gratitude to the Goddess of Fortune when speaking to someone you find truly special," she advised him.

"I understand... Though I don't foresee ever meeting someone like that..." Volfred muttered vaguely before letting out a shallow sigh. He was even more the eternal bachelor than Altea had initially thought.

She'd been thinking of offering her help in introducing him to someone he had his eye on, but it seemed he wasn't interested in that at all. It was plain as day that he regarded the opposite sex as nothing but trouble. Yet another characteristic that he shared with Vivi.

"If you are speaking with a woman of the same rank or lower, you should say, 'It is a pleasure to meet you.' If she is of higher rank, then 'It is an honor to make such an acquaintance.' After that, you may move on to something like 'You look lovely in that red dress' or 'Those earrings look very comely on you.' When you smile, make sure you smile at every man and woman present. Since you are tall, you needn't make eye contact—just look at their foreheads."

"All right."

“Additionally, finish your greeting strong. Don’t let it slip into a question. It is more important to appear sincere than to actually mean what you say, so don’t forget to watch your tone.”

“I will be careful.”

The diligent way he took notes was different from Vivi. Perhaps he was actually a quick learner.

“There really is so much to remember when it comes to how nobles speak...” Volfred said with a sigh.

Altea couldn’t help but laugh. “Your mother used to say exactly the same thing.”

“My mother?” Volf asked in surprise.

“Yes. And she would look very annoyed when saying it.”

At her response, Volfred let out a small chuckle. It wasn’t one of his polite, fake laughs but a bashful, boyish laugh. It was clear he enjoyed hearing stories about his mother.

“This is only the beginning,” Altea told him. “There is still much you should learn, about phraseology, dancing, and escorting.”

“Thank you for your time. I will do my best...” Volfred said with a distant look on his face that mirrored his mother’s in times past.

Altea could see his sword calluses on the fingers in which he held his notes. She was reminded of Vivi, holding her palm out to her and boasting that her calluses were proof of a knight’s hard work.

The day after Vivi was cremated, Renato had come to visit Altea alone. When he’d presented to her Vivi’s battered sword and a lock of her black hair, she had dissolved into a mess of tears. Wordlessly, she had accepted the items. She had the sword repaired and sent back to Renato with the message that he should give it to Vivi’s son should he become a knight and wish to have it.

It was said that knights who died protecting those they loved continued to protect them from beyond the grave. Altea prayed that Volfred had the strong protection of the knight Vanessa Scalfarotto.

She wondered if Vivi’s sword had found its way into his hands yet or if he was keeping it as a memento of his mother rather than using it. As someone who had enjoyed the protection of that sword but been unable to watch its owner’s final moments, she didn’t have the right to ask.

“Volfred, we have some delicious venison on the menu for tonight.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Altea frequently asked Volfred to accompany her home from soirees or dine with her, and sometimes, he spent the night at her estate. She told him it was a good way to keep women off of him, but it also functioned as a way to reduce the number of people targeting him or trying to drag him into their families.

The title of “Dowager Duchess Gastoni” came with its perks, but there was a chance that their arrangement alone would not be enough to keep unwanted offers away from him. If he wanted her to take a more aggressive approach, he only needed to say the word. Many times, she had considered arranging a suitable match for him and doing everything within her power to protect him. He was Vivi’s son, after all. But no sooner had the thought occurred to her than Vivi’s words would ring in her ears.

“Whenever Volf takes a tumble, I wait for him to stand back up on his own, no matter how hard it is to watch...”

Altea felt the same way about her own sons. She would leave this world long before them. Helping them more than was necessary would only make her beloved sons weak. A sturdy cage offered safety but kept wings from growing strong. It was probably best for Altea not to meddle any further. Instead, she would simply watch over Vivi’s son, the child her dear friend had loved more than anything in this world.

But if he should ever ask for her help, then she would gladly extend a hand. Fortunately, she was the woman whom people called “witch,” and these days her hands were much more capable than they had been in the past.

“Volfred, should you ever find yourself in need of any help, please come to me.”

That much should be fine, right, Vivi?

Bad Company and Dried Barracuda

"I think this side is done!" Grato announced as he began to flip over the dried fish on the camp stove.

Gildo poured chilled estervino into wide-mouthed cups and set them down in front of the two of them.

"I think it still needs more time," Gildo said, and it seemed he was right. Grato wordlessly flipped the fish on the silver spatula back onto the side it had been on.

The Rossetti Trading Company had already supplied the Order of Beast Hunters with numerous camp stoves, but today, Ivano had sent over another with a message that they had managed to make a lighter version and wanted the knights' opinions of it.

In addition to the dried barracuda, Grato had also brought medium-dry estervino chilled with ice crystals. The man was undeniably sly.

Before returning home from the castle, Grato had stopped by his office in the treasury department without giving any advance notice. When Gildo told him he still had work to do, his friend had obediently gone to recline on the sofa in front of his desk. Unable to relax knowing that Grato was there waiting for him, Gildo had decided that his paperwork could be left for tomorrow. As he had been about to set down his pen, the deputy head treasurer had come into his office, seen Grato, and snatched away Gildo's paperwork with a smile.

Gildo was then whisked away to Grato's estate, which brought them to this moment: grilling dried barracuda in a small room with the windows open. There were no attendants or maids in the room with them. They were drinking together just as they had in their youth, comfortable and at ease.

"First, let's have a toast. Cheers to being done with work for the day!" said Grato.

“Cheers to going back to work tomorrow,” Gildo replied. They toasted, the thick cups making a dull sound as they touched. He felt the cool glass against his lips before the even colder estervino flowed smoothly down his throat. The alcohol’s crisp, medium-dry flavor lingered in his mouth for a while.

Gildo was savoring the taste, which seemed to melt away the fatigue of the day, when Grato opened his mouth again. “We ran into a forest serpent on our last expedition, but the squad stopped me from killing it...”

“Did they want you to yield that honor to the younger knights?”

“No, they said I would ruin it and Rossetti wouldn’t be able to use it for materials. They claimed if I used the Ash-Hand on it, I’d reduce its heart to ash.”

A forest serpent, or as it was also known, a Green King. The image of the giant green snake surfaced in the back of Gildo’s mind as he reflexively gave a response that was all too characteristic of a treasurer.

“The heart of a forest serpent, you say? Yes, that would fetch quite the high price...”

“It’s for our magical toolmaker to use for research purposes. Trust me, I’m not going to sell it on the black market.”

“I wasn’t concerned you would.”

Even if the Order did such a thing, that red-haired toolmaker wouldn’t touch a single copper coin. He wondered if he would be capable of the same restraint but kept his speculation to himself.

“Anyway,” Grato continued, “after we harvested the heart, I used the Ash-Hand to turn the forest serpent meat into jerky. There was a lot of it, so it took some effort.”

“You used the Ash-Hand to make jerky...?” Gildo repeated. He stared in shock at his friend, who grinned back at him.

“Don’t worry. It worked just fine—I only charred the meat a little!” Grato said, as if it were something to be proud of.

When Grato had first joined the Order of Beast Hunters, he still hadn’t had complete mastery over the Ash-Hand. Gildo had heard many stories of Grato being unable to control the heat of his sword and consequently burning monsters from which valuable materials

could have been salvaged to unusable crisps. There had also been an incident in which Grato had gone all out to save a friend from a wyvern's clutches and nearly burned down a forest.

That was not where Gildo's worry lay presently, however; Grato now had full mastery over his blade. Rather, Gildo was distressed that his friend had used the magical sword that was tied to the Bartolone family's bloodline and was even considered one of the treasures of Ordine to make *serpent jerky*. What exactly did Grato get up to on those missions of his?

"I made plenty, so you can take some home with you. And I've got some sweet sauce that goes perfect with it—you should take that too. Oh, but it also goes well with a salt, pepper, and garlic sauce!"

Gildo got the point: The Green King jerky was delicious. Still, he couldn't help but picture the green serpent trying to slither away in fear. As he rubbed his brow, he heard the sound of the barracuda's fat sizzling on the stove. The aroma seemed to enhance the flavor of the estervino he was sipping.

Suddenly, Grato changed the subject. "You know, I've been thinking, it would be great if I could adopt Rossetti..."

Now that was something Gildo could agree with. Still holding his cup, he replied, "Yes, I think you would be a good candidate to adopt her."

"So you also think a barony isn't good enough for her?"

"She would have to be a viscountess at the very least."

Dahlia Rossetti's father was a baron, but now that he had passed away, Dahlia herself was a commoner. The Scalfarotto family would soon be elevated from an earldom to a marquisate. Even if a barony were conferred upon Dahlia, she would still be three ranks away from a marquisate. In general, marriages between nobles were considered acceptable when they were no more than two ranks apart. Still more, Rossetti had no noble family members she could rely on. She had no contact with her mother's family, and there was no one left on her father's side.

There was no concern about her professional endeavors, since the Merchants' guildmaster, Viscount Jedda, was a guarantor for her

company. However, when it came to connubial matters, being a viscountess herself would certainly give her better ground to stand on.

Grato was the head of the Marquisate Bartolone. If he adopted Dahlia Rossetti and she became Dahlia Bartolone, and after that Dahlia Scalfarotto, then that would take care of the problem.

"You're right. If Rossetti had a viscountcy, then she would be able to expand her business, and as the Order's advisor, maybe she would have more opportunities to make even better magical tools for us..."

"Hmm...?" Only then did Gildo finally realize that he and Grato were not on the same page after all. "What? I was entirely under the impression that you wanted to adopt her so she could marry Lord Volfred."

"Ah, right. I think it's still too soon for that. The reason I want to adopt her is, well, because of that *spirit* of hers."

"Well, I can't say I don't understand..." Gildo admitted. He was reminded of her presentation of the camp stoves. Even being a commoner, she had faced him, a marquis, without showing any cowardice.

Perhaps it would be amusing to have a daughter like her. They could talk all they wanted about accounting and numbers at dinner parties. That was another thought that he would keep to himself.

"I believe she and Volfred met this past spring," Grato said. "I'm sure they'll get there at their own pace."

"Their pace is too slow. You ought to tell him to hurry up and make a move if he's set on her. Before someone else swoops in." Gildo drained his cup, and once he was done, he saw Grato peering at him with his red eyes.

"What is it? If you want me to refill my cup, then you'll have to finish what you have left first."

"I suppose a man who moves as fast as you would see things differently..."

"What are you insinuating, Grato?"

"Nothing. I'm just admiring your point of view as a man who approached a girl of six years old and then made her his fiancée at

eleven."

At the sudden mention of his wife, Tilly, Gildo responded calmly and factually. "For your information, I met my wife at a children's social mixer when I myself was ten years old. We became engaged when I was fifteen, before I was even of age, so it was really an arrangement decided by our families."

Grato was not wrong that Gildo had met his wife when she was very young, but Gildo's family had hosted those events, and therefore, he had met all the children who attended them. And besides, Grato had attended those mixers as well. Although, his bad behavior meant he'd only attended every other one, and after a time, every third one.

Furthermore, Gildo and Tilly only officially became engaged once she debuted at sixteen years old, the age of majority in Ordine. At that time, Gildo had been twenty years old. They weren't that young by the standards of noble marriages.

Though there really was no point in putting on an act in front of Grato. He had seen Gildo throughout the entirety of his long engagement and witnessed, among other things, how much research he'd done into the language of flowers before sending Tilly bouquets, how quickly he'd given her a bracelet, how much thought he'd put into topics he could discuss with someone so much younger than him, and how much he'd agonized over what to write in his letters to her.

"I seem to remember you had a lot of offers," Grato said. "You were the one who told me you chose Lady Tilly out of all the others. And I remember you were quite popular in college, what with all those girls telling you they'd be fine being your second wife."

"They weren't serious."

Gildo had received some handkerchiefs and letters in college, but the same could be said for his friend. In fact, Grato had been approached with gifts much more often than he had.

Moreover, when it came to being popular at school, the one who sprang to mind was a certain silver fox in the same year as them—Oswald, now chairman of the Zola Company, who had then been studying magical toolmaking. Gildo had heard that whenever the

man received a handkerchief, he'd had to fold a card inside it with the sender's name so he wouldn't forget where it had come from.

Though to be fair, Oswald was a bit of an exception, so much so that it would have been meaningless to compare themselves to him.

"You know, I don't think you ever told me why you chose Lady Tilly..." Grato said in wonder.

Gildo coughed lightly. He didn't feel it was the sort of thing that needed to be expressly said, but neither did he feel the need to hide it from his current bad company. He responded honestly, "She was the only girl I knew at the time whom I ever thought I would want to make my wife. Nothing more, nothing less."

Once he gave his answer, Grato's red eyes went wide. "Gildo, are you saying you'd fallen in love with— Gah! There's smoke coming from the stove!"

"You idiot, it's on fire! Put it out!"

Grato extinguished the fire on the stove and then opened the windows wider to let the smoke out. The sight of them making such a racket over the burned barracuda in the smoky room wasn't something Gildo wanted his subordinates or his children to ever see.

Are we still acting this way at our age? Gildo wondered. *Though it is funny that even after all these years of no contact, nothing has changed between us.*

When they finally sat back down, Gildo used his fork to tear a strip of edible meat off of the torched barracuda and ate it alongside his estervino.

Not bad.

Tales of Friends

Prologue: Tea Time with a Magical Toolmaker and a Couturier

"I've got a pile of marriage and adoption letters on my table now. It's ridiculous," Lucia huffed.

Dahlia and her friend were sitting across from each other in the living room of her home, the Green Tower, and drinking tea.

Lucia was here today to help Dahlia assemble an outfit for her visit to the castle. They had already laid out her clothes, but they had yet to decide on her hairstyle, shoes, and accessories. Dahlia had asked Lucia, who was a couturier, for her expertise to help her look as much like an advisor of the Order of Beast Hunters as she could.

After Lucia had jotted down her ideas for Dahlia's outfit, they'd taken a break, and Lucia had brewed the tea she'd brought over—a slightly tart herbal tea that was said to clear up one's skin. It smelled of raspberries.

In the raspberry-scented room, the topic had turned to marriage and adoption offers.

"Sounds like you're getting quite a lot," Dahlia said sympathetically.

"You must be too, right?"

"Only at first, not so much anymore. If anything, we get more business-related mail these days, from vendors wanting to sell our products or advertising their own materials for us to buy. Ivano takes care of those."

Thankfully, Dahlia's noble guardian was Guido, Volf's older brother

and the future Marquis Scalfarotto. Ever since he'd begun fielding letters offering Dahlia marriage or adoption, none had made it to her desk. Ivano was typically the one to take care of matters related to the company, while she received reports only when necessary.

"Mr. Forto is going to start handling my letters, so I think things will quiet down for me in a bit too," Lucia said. "Some of my coworkers at the factory have told me that if the marriage offers get too annoying, one way to ward them off is to get a fake fiancé."

"A what?"

"It's something nobles do. They'll privately decide how long the engagement will last, and once that time period is over, they'll announce they're breaking it off. Some people use it as a way to avoid getting marriage proposals when they want to focus on their studies or job."

"I've never heard of that before."

"For example, let's say someone graduates college and wants to work as a civil official in the castle. If they got an engagement offer from a higher-ranked noble, it'd be pretty hard to turn that down, right? So instead, they have a fake fiancé until they can find work. Once they get a job at the castle, they now have a good reason to turn down any engagement offer. But I guess they might still be asked to become someone's second wife or husband, so the method isn't foolproof."

"That makes sense..."

Dahlia was the one who was receiving a barony, but Lucia was much better versed in the ways of nobles. The Tailors' Guild often did business with nobles, so she must have learned quite a lot about them there.

"I'd rather not live a life I don't want. The more options the better!" Lucia said brightly.

Dahlia responded with a deep nod. "This tea smells amazing, by the way."

"And it's good for your skin. I've been getting fewer pimples, and the shopkeeper said it helps sunburns fade faster too. Though I wouldn't know about that. I don't think I'll be getting as much sun this summer as I did last summer."

"Are you saying you've been so busy that you're working overtime into the evenings?"

If Lucia was working overtime, it was because the factory was busy with the toe socks, drying insoles, and zephyricloth that Dahlia had requested they make.

But Lucia shook her head. "No, that's not why. Last year, I had a part-time job ironing clothes at a laundry. My workbench was right in front of a huge window, so I got really sunburnt."

In addition to making socks and gloves in her family's workshop, Lucia used to work various part-time jobs. Dahlia suspected that was how her friend had polished her interpersonal skills so well.

Lucia continued. "Oh yeah, my old iron was heavy and hard to use, but my new one is lighter and slides more easily. What's changed about them?"

The clothes irons of this world were magical tools. Magical circuitry was drawn inside of their metal casing and powered with fire crystals. Conveniently, they were cordless and could be used for a long time.

"A lot of the casings are being made with thinner, lighter metal now. And the part that comes into contact with the fabric is now being enchanted with powdered giant ants," Dahlia explained.

"Huh? You mean those black soleplates are enchanted with ants?" Lucia asked, her eyes wide.

If the plate of her iron was black, then it had indeed likely been made using giant ants. Dahlia supposed that the general public wasn't aware of what sorts of materials went into making even commonly used magical tools.

"The new irons at the Magical Garment Factory are the best!" Lucia raved. "They spray water *and* blow out steam."

"That's the newest model, the three-in-one iron."

In addition to using fire crystals to provide a hot press function, the latest irons used water crystals for a spray function and wind crystals for steam. Dahlia had just recently seen them for herself at a magical tool shop and had been deeply impressed.

Although this world lacked electricity, it had magic crystals. An artisan's inclination to add various functions to tools was the same in

this world as in her last.

"One of the factory workers saw the newest model and said that at some point, there'll be a magical tool that can do the ironing without needing a human to move it."

"An iron that can move on its own...? If the iron just needs to move in one direction, I could see that being possible using wind crystals. But ironing clothes takes some care and attention."

"True, it'd be hard for the iron to smooth out wrinkles properly if it could only move in one direction. And you need to apply different levels of pressure in different spots when ironing clothes. Maybe it'd be useful for sheets..." Lucia put a finger to her chin and tilted her head. "But then the iron would be like a monster. Since it could move around on its own."

"...Ah, right."

Dahlia's mind was filled with images of the spinning robot vacuum cleaners of her previous life. She was sure that if Lucia were ever to see one of those, she'd call it a "cleaning machine monster."

Still, Dahlia earnestly wished there were sensors that could detect distance in this world. The existence of that technology would open up more possibilities for making self-moving magical tools, though she wasn't sure what kind of monster materials could be used to achieve that.

As she was pondering that, Lucia said, "Dahlia, magical tools are fine, but please don't make any scary monsters."

"Oh, Lucia. I can't make *monsters*. Still, I promise I won't make anything scary," Dahlia replied with a smile. While monster parts could be used as materials for magical tools, monsters couldn't be made with magical tools.

Some time later, after having brought socks, drying insoles, and zephyricloth to the Magical Garment Factory, Dahlia also brought them her heated tables and low tables. The rugs, quilt covers, and cushions needed for those would not only swamp the Magical Garment Factory with work but also the entire Tailors' Guild.

Come winter, a portion of couturiers started to claim that just hearing the name "Rossetti Trading Company" was enough to fill

them with fear.

The Hairstylist Irma's Father and the Couriers' Guild Courier

"Um, mom, dad, there's someone I'd like you to meet..."

Those were the last words a father ever wanted to hear from his daughter.

They had just finished dinner and were about to clean up when Irma said those words to him with a serious look on her face. His wife's eyes widened. This must have been unexpected for her too.

"Sis, are you bringing home a boyfriend?"

"Wait, what? Is he coming here to ask for your hand in marriage or something?"

His sons' eyes lit up as they asked their questions, still holding on to the dishes they were in the middle of putting away.

Hang on, when did Irma get a boyfriend? She hardly even has any male friends, he thought as he narrowed his eyes slightly at his daughter. He saw that her fists were clenched so tightly they were turning white and her mouth was set in a hard line. She seemed serious.

"Who do you want us to meet?" he asked her.

"Um, a guy...who's a friend..." Irma said evasively, as if she found it difficult to admit that he was in fact her boyfriend.

"Sis, if you're bringing him home, then he's gotta be your *boyfriend*, right?"

"No, he's not. We haven't even held hands."

Irma's response gave him some peace of mind. It sounded as though they really were just friends for now.

"Irma, you know you're free to date. You're an adult now, and you're officially a hairstylist. If you've found someone who you feel is marriage material, you shouldn't be shy about bringing him home," his wife said, destroying that moment of peace he'd felt.

She was right that Irma was at a marriageable age, but that was neither here nor there. In this day and age, many in the capital might have called him old-fashioned, but he wanted any male friends of Irma's to be hardworking, reliable men. Double or triple that for her marriage partner.

"So then, is your guy friend only coming over to hang out?" one of his sons asked.

"Um, well, I *do* want to date. This man, I mean," Irma said.

"Well then, why don't you try going out sometime? You could even go on a group date."

"He said he can't date me until he gets my family's permission. That's why I want mom and dad to meet him."

That set off an alarm bell in his head, so he asked, "What's his deal? Is he a noble?"

The custom of seeking a family's permission to court someone was more typical of nobles than of commoners and was usually done when marriage was on the table.

"No, he's not a noble. His name is Marcella Nuvolari. He's an employee of the Couriers' Guild, he's tall, and levelheaded, and..."

As his daughter went on to give a lengthy if halting account of what she admired about the man, he realized that she was so infatuated with him that she became blind to everything else around her as she spoke. This was a dangerous situation.

His wife was smiling happily, and his sons were looking at their older sister like she was some sort of oddity. No one stopped Irma from talking.

"Love is something you fall into. Like a sleipnir without its reins, a ship without its helm..." He himself was fully aware of that, so he couldn't say he didn't understand his daughter's feelings.

He had discussed this once before with his childhood friend Carlo. If he sternly admonished his daughter or objected to this relationship without hearing her side, then he would only succeed in pushing her away. There was even a possibility that the worst would happen: she would say something like "You don't get it, dad!" or "We're going to live together!" and then move out. That was the last thing he wanted to happen.

Before making any snap judgments, he should listen to what she had to say, ask about the man's background, and then meet him. If Marcella turned out to be a scoundrel, then he could either point out his flaws to her without outright telling her he was opposed to him or think of a way to get the man to back off.

He had done accounting work for retail shops and craftspeople for a number of years, so he had some pull with others. First, he would start by looking into just who this Marcella Nuvolari was.

"All right, Irma. Since he works, ask him what day's convenient for him after two weeks from now."

"Thanks, dad!"

Irma's face bloomed into a smile that sent a prickling pain through his chest.

"...That about sums up what I know about Mr. Nuvolari. He seems like a good man."

Dominic Kämpfer had met with him in a private room on the second floor of an eating establishment to talk. The two had done a good deal of business in the past. Dominic was older than himself, but through their long association, they had come to be on good terms and occasionally had lunch together.

As a scrivener for the Merchants' Guild, Dominic often handled matters involving the Couriers' Guild. He was close with someone else who worked at that guild, so he had asked that friend about the courier named Marcella Nuvolari.

Here was what he'd found out: Marcella was a little older than Irma. He was fit and healthy, which allowed him to stay active at work. He was seen as a reliable employee among the guild's other couriers. As for education, he had only completed primary school, but he was well on his way to a managerial position. He lived with his parents and younger brothers and had a good reputation among his neighbors as well.

He had no history of criminal behavior. Once, he had been taken to the city guards for getting into a fight, but that was because he had thwarted a kidnapping attempt with his own two fists. At the time, Marcella had been mistakenly identified as the perpetrator, and

the child had been crying too hard to say otherwise. He had been taken to the city guard station, and after confirming the facts, he'd been released. It sounded like a terrible situation to be in.

"From what you've said, he sounds like a decent fellow. So why is he still single?" Irma's father asked Dominic.

"Yes, normally, you know, good things sell out quick." Dominic stroked his white beard and laughed awkwardly. He was referring to a saying in Ordine that implied those with good prospects tended to have no trouble finding marriage partners, which meant one should be wary of those left unmarried, since they might be so because of some personal flaw.

It also wasn't uncommon in this kingdom for people to elect not to get married, whether they voluntarily remained single or practiced free love with multiple partners. He worried for his daughter if Marcella fell into either one of those categories.

"This might come across as rude, but I suspect the reason might lie in his appearance," Dominic continued. "He is a large man, so he comes across as a bit intimidating or threatening. Although, I have heard that people think his recent haircut makes him much handsomer."

"He got a haircut...? I see."

He thought he had a good idea of how Marcella and his daughter had met. Irma had probably been the one to cut his hair. Either he had been a customer at her salon or he had sat as a model.

He decided he would be patient and wait for Irma to bring it up herself. "Was there anything else that stood out to you?"

Dominic put a hand to his chin and looked down. "Yes... It seems he has a tendency to give up too quickly when it comes to his own happiness."

"That doesn't sound too good." He didn't want his daughter to be with a man who would throw in the towel like that.

Dominic drank the rest of his coffee before responding. "You'll be meeting him, won't you? I think it's best you form your own opinion of him then."

It seemed he would have to rely on his own judgment when the time came. He thanked Dominic, picked up the bill for their food,

and stood to leave.

Two weeks and two days later, he, his wife, and Irma waited for the man to arrive at their house. His two sons had wanted to be present as well, but he'd told them the adults needed to talk first and sent them off to do their respective work.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Marcella Nuvolari."

The front door of the house looked as though it had shrunk. Marcella was much taller and broader than he himself was, and he could tell at a glance that the man was not only large but well trained. His facial features did come across as a bit unfriendly. Dressed as he was in a starched white shirt that looked new and brown trousers, it was obvious he had put effort into his appearance.

When he saw the man walk down the hall with his right arm and leg out at the same time, he knew Marcella was just as nervous as himself.

At the end of the hallway, the family's gray-and-black tabby cat poked its head out and hissed loudly. Its fur puffed up threateningly at the man in what was likely an attempt to protect Irma. She had been the one to rescue the cat from the streets.

"Marcella, I'm so sorry! I don't know what's gotten into that cat!"

"It's okay—it's my fault. I was delivering boxes of cat deterrent herbs yesterday. I must still smell like them... I thought I had washed it off thoroughly, so I'm sorry about that."

"You're staying in here today!" Irma cried as she seized the cat and shut it in the kitchen. Separated from everyone else, it began to mew sadly.

He knew that couriers delivered many different types of items. But the family cat disliked him? Strike one.

The four of them finally moved into the living room and sat down at the table to talk.

"Mr. Nuvolari, how did you and Irma meet?" he asked.

"Dad, we met because the model whose hair I was supposed to cut for my exam had to cancel, but luckily I found Marcella walking down the street and asked if he could sit in instead!"

"...Yes, what Irma said."

Waiting for his daughter to answer before saying anything? Strike two.

Perhaps Marcella wasn't the talkative type. Regardless, it seemed he'd guessed correctly that they had bonded when Irma cut Marcella's hair. He wished her scissors had cut that bond as well.

"Irma mentioned you wanted our permission to date. Does that mean you're thinking of marrying her?"

"D-Dad! Don't just bring up marriage out of nowhere!" Irma cried shrilly. But he thought it was a natural question to ask when someone was seeking permission to date. He only wanted to clear that up first.

"Yes, I am," the man replied promptly, fixing him and his wife with his reddish-brown eyes.

His daughter turned a bright shade of red. It was hard to watch; he looked away.

Marcella continued. "I came here today to get permission to date Irma, but before that, there is something I need to tell you about myself. Irma already knows, but I've decided that if her parents oppose our relationship, I am ready to walk away."

How could he let a man who was ready to give up from the start be with his daughter? That irked him. However, although Dominic hadn't mentioned anything of the short, perhaps the man was thinking about changing careers or wanted to start a business in a foreign country.

With that in mind, he nodded and said, "All right, then, let's hear it."

"The parents whom I live with now are actually my uncle and aunt. My birth mother worked in the red-light district and died in childbirth. I do not know who my father is."

Despite the heavy topic, Marcella spoke with a strong voice. It was difficult to find the words to respond with.

Marcella paid no mind to the silence and continued. He explained matter-of-factly how his aunt and uncle had taken him in and raised him without telling him he was adopted.

After joining the Couriers' Guild, he had nearly lost his life in a

carriage accident, but as a result, his magic had undergone a dramatic late blooming. Marcella's magical grade, which he kept secret from others, was fourteen. That meant there was a twelve-grade difference between his magic and Irma's, which was a grade two. Should they marry, they might not be able to have children together.

He couldn't for the life of him understand why this man was speaking so candidly to the parents of a woman who wasn't even his girlfriend. It seemed no one else knew about his situation, so if Marcella hadn't said anything to them, then they would never have known either.

As for his magical grade being fourteen, that would have been considered typical for the son of an earl or even a marquis. If Irma's parents happened to tip off a noble family, then Marcella would be in danger of them "taking him in."

But in fact, with magic that powerful, he had another, more positive opportunity too: any noble family or wealthy merchant would happily adopt him and supply him with a wife or lover.

"With a magical grade like that, have you never given any thought to being adopted by or working for a noble family?"

"Heck no—I mean, no, sir. I am a commoner and an employee of the Couriers' Guild. And that's all I ever want to be," Marcella said with an unwavering voice.

He decided to press him further. "Why tell us such a heavy secret, Mr. Nuvolari?"

Was he looking for sympathy, or did he intend to use this information to threaten them in some way? Since his daughter was involved in all this, he wanted to thoroughly scrutinize Marcella's character.

"Because you are Irma's parents," Marcella answered. "It's my wish to make Irma happy, so I don't want us to live together if her parents are against it."

"I would live with you even if they were against it!" Irma asserted.

"Irma, please understand," Marcella told her. "I don't think our feelings for each other are enough for us to be happy together."

Dominic's words suddenly came to mind: *"He has a tendency to give up quickly on his own happiness."* Marcella's words seemed to echo that statement almost exactly.

"Irma, you deserve a man who your friends and family accept and support. And now that I say that aloud, I realize that can't be me..."

Good grief, he really does give up easily. Could he give this type of man his permission to be with his darling daughter?

"Then we can stay friends! We can just have tea and talk—we don't have to get married or even date," Irma said.

"Are you really okay with being Mr. Nuvolari's friend, even if you can't marry him or have children with him? Can you be sure that you'll never regret it?" His wife cast that challenge at her daughter's feet mercilessly.

"Yes, I can! As long as we can spend time together, that's enough for me. After all, I plan on improving as a hairstylist and opening my own shop!" Irma replied firmly, her tone matching Marcella's from a moment ago.

Darn it all, we raised her too well. She doesn't need protecting anymore.

"Mr. Nuvolari, listen," he said, speaking plainly. "You said you wanted to make Irma happy, didn't you?"

Marcella nodded without hesitation. "Yes, I do."

"Well, see, you're already starting off on the wrong foot."

"Dad!"

"Our Irma is a full-grown adult with her own vocation. She's not some frail little girl who needs someone else to make her happy."

Marcella opened his mouth and began to apologize, but he wasn't going to let the man have the floor.

"The two of you can find happiness *together*. If you can aspire to do that, then I give you my permission to date with the intention of getting married."

"Oh, dad, thank you!"

"Thank you, sir...!"

Across the table, Irma and Marcella clasped each other's hands. He wouldn't have gotten upset if they had embraced each other, but

he didn’t bother saying so aloud.

After a few short seconds, they let go of each other with a start, both their faces turning red. Seeing them like that made him uncomfortable.

He turned to look at his wife. In contrast with the cheerful grin on her face, he saw that her hands, on her lap, were clenching her skirt tight. Her light blue eyes were tearing up slightly. She looked back at him, and they smiled gently at each other.



He turned his gaze back to the other side of the table, where the young couple sat frozen on their chairs, and cleared his throat.

"Is it all right if I just call you Marcella? I'm sure you were very nervous coming here, but let's talk more at ease now."

"Yes, I wouldn't mind that. And, well... I was just anxious that you might be uneasy seeing someone as scary-looking as me come into your home."

"You're not scary, Marcella! You're handsome! People say my dad looks like a grouch, but he's just an intellectual! He's actually a big softie!"

As a father, he had mixed feelings about that description of him. He wasn't sure how to respond. His wife chuckled but predictably said nothing to the contrary. It seemed he had to dig his own escape route.

"Marcella, since you're here, why don't you stay for dinner? Allow me to show off my cooking skills."

"Huh? You cook, sir?"

"Oh, did I not tell you? My mom and dad both cook. My mom's specialty is stews, and my dad is an expert at sautéing."

Marcella looked at him and his wife in admiration. "That's so cool! I always end up burning the food I try to sauté."

"You two stay here and have tea. Dear, let's go into the kitchen," his wife said, patting him a bit sharply on the shoulder.

"Yes, let's," he agreed. "Oh, should we pick up a few things at the store first?"

"That's a good idea. Our boys will be coming back for dinner too, so we should make a little extra."

They turned their backs on the young couple and headed into the kitchen.

That evening, they broke their personal record for the number of plates they fit on their dinner table.

"I'm home!"

The final person to arrive that night was one of the two sons. When he came in the door, his eyes widened in shock at all the plates on the side tables and even on the shelves.

He was slightly taken aback by the man with maroon eyes sitting next to his father, but he greeted him all the same. The man was a little scary-looking, but he had a kind smile. Next to him sat his sister, grinning wide. It appeared that the two had been given permission to date. He let out a sigh of relief.

However, he wasn't sure what in the world their green-eyed cat was up to in the corner of the room. It kept glancing over at the table every now and then. A plate of the cat's favorite food—steamed fish fillet—was left ignored on the ground in front of it. His sister was the cat's favorite person, but it wasn't at her feet or even meowing for her attention as it usually was. Occasionally, the cat glanced at Marcella and let out a long breath.

The family cat wasn't one to be this on guard toward guests in their home. The boy walked over to check on the cat, petting it all over, but he didn't feel anything out of the ordinary. There was a possibility the cat had an injury where he couldn't see or even an illness.

"Maybe I should bring you to the vet tomorrow," he told the cat.

The cat shot him a look, thumped its tail on the floor, and then started eating the steamed fish.

The green-eyed cat fell into a terrible slump, thinking that the man who came to visit would take Irma away. However, the next time Marcella came, he won the cat over with tasty treats and gentle pats.

He gave the cat plenty of delicious food, spent a long time petting it, and never scolded it. Soon, the cat began spending less time with Irma after she came home from work. It became very close to Marcella and monopolized his lap. Irma had some complicated feelings about that, but she kept them to herself.

The Couturier Lucia and the Orange Muffins

"Lucia, can you tell me what kind of clothes will make me look skinny...?" Lucia's chestnut-haired friend asked in a quiet voice. It had been a while since they had sat down together like this.

They were friends from primary school, and it had been six months since they had last met up. Lucia had been working at the Magical Garment Factory one day when her friend had stopped by with a delivery of pastries. They'd decided to have a meal together two days later when they both had time off from work.

Now, they were sitting together in a café in the capital's Central District, but the girl hadn't ordered any of her favorite dishes, like an omelet or a muffin, but only a vegetable salad. Lucia knew her friend had a sweet tooth, but she hadn't even put sugar in her tea.

"Clothes to make you look skinny? But Romina, it's not like you're overweight."

Romina had always had a round face and soft features, but she wasn't fat. Today, she wore a tight, navy blue shirt and a black skirt made of heavyweight fabric. It made her appear stiff and looked a bit hot for summer. Lucia wasn't sure what had happened. In the past, Romina had always worn pale colors and airy, lightweight outfits.

Lucia decided to directly ask what she was thinking. "Do you think you need to change sizes?"

Right now, Lucia was worried that she herself might need to do that, but Romina shook her head.

"No, that's not it. I just want to look skinnier..." Romina, who was usually so well-spoken, mumbled through her words. She sipped her tea, clearly not liking how it tasted without sugar.

"Does your boyfriend prefer thin women?" Lucia ventured.

Romina choked on her tea. *Sounds like I'm right,* Lucia thought.

"He's not my boyfriend! He's my coworker at the bakery!" Romina blurted. She wiped her face and then let out a deep sigh.

Romina, with dreams of being a pastry chef, had started working at a bakery after graduating from primary school. When they had met two days ago in the lobby of the Tailors' Guild, Romina had told her that the shop had recently started putting the decorative cookies she made up for sale.

"Okay then, what's the connection between your coworker and wanting clothes that make you look skinnier?" Lucia asked.

"Yesterday, he invited me to try out the pastries at another bakery next week to see what we can learn from them. The uniform I wear at work hides my body shape, and I don't want to look fat in my regular clothes, but I also don't think this type of outfit looks good on me... So that's why I wanted to ask you for advice..."

Romina's normally bright chestnut eyes were filled with uncertainty. It was obvious from what she said that she had strong feelings for her coworker.

"I appreciate you wanting to ask me for advice. If all you want to do is look slimmer, that's easy. I'd recommend wearing a straight-line dress that goes down below your knees in black, dark blue, or dark brown. Add a pair of high heels in the same color and wear a light-colored jacket on top, something in white or ivory, and leave it unbuttoned in the front. An outfit like that will make you look sleek and tall."

"Thanks, Lucia! I'd like to go shopping right after we're done eating. Could you help me pick something out?" Romina asked enthusiastically.

Lucia stared steadily back at her. "The thing is, whether or not that outfit will suit you is a whole other story."

"Huh?"

"That kind of outfit is good to wear to work or for the occasional times when you want to change up your image. The important question is whether you'll actually like wearing it. Or the outfit you're wearing now, for that matter."

Romina looked away and said, "I'm an adult. I figured it was

about time I started wearing clothes like these...”

Lucia silently started eating her orange muffin. As she savored the mildly sweet flavor and the hint of bitterness that came from the orange peel, Romina opened her mouth to speak again.

“I borrowed these clothes from my older sister, thinking they would help me look slimmer, but I guess they don’t work for me after all...”

“I think it could work if you styled your hair in an updo, applied a full face of makeup, and carried a pen and paper.”

“You can just tell me honestly that it doesn’t suit me. What I really like to wear are bright, comfortable clothes that I can eat a lot and laugh in, but those make me look big...” Romina said with a small pout.

“Did your coworker say that he likes thin women?” Lucia asked.

“No, not directly. But we had a dinner party with all the bakery employees, and I overheard the guys talking about how they like women who are slender and look like they need protection...”

“Romina, you shouldn’t assume that your coworker’s taste in women is the same as what you overheard his friends talking about.”

Oftentimes, people smiled along with what others were saying simply because they preferred to not offer an opposing opinion.

Among Lucia’s own coworkers, everyone had differing opinions that they mostly kept to themselves. Some wanted partners who were taller than them, others were more attracted to a muscular physique than a handsome face, and still others preferred that their partners wear black leather shoes without socks. It was something Lucia discovered from attending drinking parties and comparing them to personal interactions.

“I understand wanting to change things about yourself to fit your crush’s preference. I’m sure I would feel the same way if I liked someone. But no matter what you do, after the two of you have been seeing each other for a while, he’ll know what you look like, and eventually, he’ll come to know your true self too. Wouldn’t it make things worse later on if he fell for you under false pretenses?”

“Ah...”

It would be more painful if they were to start dating only for him

to tell her that he was disappointed that she wasn't who he thought she was. Of course, Lucia had never experienced that before, so she wasn't sure if that was completely accurate.

"I get what you're saying... You're right. I wouldn't want him to think I'd misled him..." Romina nodded deeply. "Thanks again. I'm glad I asked you for help. You always give good relationship advice."

For some reason, when they were still in school, Lucia's friends had often come to her for relationship advice. They seemed to find her easy to talk to about those sorts of matters. She was happy to be a help to her friends, but she herself had never had a sweetheart.

Even though it felt a little preposterous for her to be considered an authority on relationships, Lucia smiled back at Romina and said, "All right, let's eat our fill and then go find you a cute date outfit!"

"D-Date...?" Romina stammered, flustered.

Lucia placed the second orange muffin, which she hadn't touched yet, in front of her friend. Orange muffins were a favorite dessert for both of them.

"...Right, it might not be a date, but let's do it! Help me pick out a good outfit!" Romina said with a smile, her chestnut eyes as clear and bright as Lucia remembered them to be.

They ordered a few more dishes, and once they were finished eating, they went to shop around at a few boutiques. After some meticulous selection, they settled on a flowy, pale lemon yellow sweater, a baby blue flare skirt, and a pair of comfortable ivory lace-up shoes. It was an adorable, chic outfit, and most importantly, it had Romina written all over it.

"This'll de-emphasize your waist, so you can eat as much as you want!"

Relieved that her friend had returned to being the sweets-loving pastry chef she knew and loved, Lucia prayed everything worked out for her and her crush.

At the start of autumn, Romina sent a box of one dozen freshly baked orange muffins to Lucia's house.

Romina had sent her a letter over the summer saying that her date had been a success and that they had made plans to go on

another one. Lucia smiled, thinking these muffins were a thank-you for her help, as she read the message card that had come in the box.

"This spring, I'd like to ask for your consultation regarding my wedding dress..." she read aloud. "Spring? That's so soon..."

Romina and her coworker-turned-fiancé had baked the beautiful orange muffins together. As Lucia contemplated the bitterness of the orange peels, she couldn't help but feel another type of bitterness as well.

But Lucia was a clothier. Designing clothes was her calling. So until spring, she decided to sketch out as many ideas as she could for outfits that would suit Romina, from gowns to dresses to casual wear. She liked the idea of secretly making an adorable everyday outfit to give to Romina as a gift.

For now, she decided not to dwell on the lack of her own springtime on the horizon.

Later that day, she shared the box of orange muffins with her family. They were deliciously sweet.

Lunch with Lucia, Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory

It was morning tea time, and the pale sunlight was shining on the door of the Tailors' Guild stockroom.

The young man in charge of managing the fabrics stood in the hallway and took a deep breath. He was expecting a petite, green-haired woman to come striding down this hallway at any moment. He gripped the sample book in his hands tighter as his nerves refused to settle down.

The woman's name was Lucia Fano. She had lustrous green hair and deep blue eyes. And although she was small, there was nothing delicate about her.

His first impression of her had been that she was kind of cute but nothing more than that. But after consulting her on fabrics, working together, and hearing her interactions with other people, he had learned otherwise. Despite her soft, adorable features, she was a pragmatic young woman of steady character who spoke seriously when it came to clothing, was quick with her work, and never let anyone's insulting remarks dishearten her. And he had been shocked to learn that she was one year older than him.

He wanted to talk to her more, but he had never been able to take that first step.

There were two individuals who were always hanging around Lucia. The first was Fortunato, who was both the Tailors' guildmaster and head of the Viscountcy Luini. The second was the assistant manager of the Magical Garment Factory, Dante. Formerly the head of monster materials, he was renowned for being a sharp and capable couturier, and he was the second son of Viscount Cassini. From the manager's own position as the son of a baron, both men were as bright as stars.

First thing this morning, the guildmaster had gone to the castle, and Dante, who was usually by his side, had accompanied him. With the two of them out of the picture, there was nothing stopping him from speaking to Lucia. If he let this opportunity slip away, he might never get another chance to talk to her. That fear acted as the push he needed.

And so, with a book of fabric samples in hand, he had followed Lucia to the stockroom, where she was searching for buttons.

The door opened, and Lucia came out holding a small, white paper box, which he assumed contained the buttons she'd been looking for. A gorgeous blonde woman walked out with her. She also worked at the Magical Garment Factory and often assisted Lucia with various tasks.

"I'm so glad I found silver-lipped pearl oyster buttons here! Look how pretty they are!"

"That they are, chief. And they're just the right size."

"Oh, Mr. Reinecke!" Lucia said when she saw him. "Did you need to talk to me about something regarding fabric? Are you low on stock or—"

"No, nothing like that. Actually, Head Manager Fano, I was wondering if, um, you would like to have lunch with me? I'd like a chance to talk to you about something."

Reinecke had never invited a girl out to lunch like this before. His voice sounded impossibly high in his own ears. He'd asked his question using every bit of courage he had, but he suspected his attempt had fallen flat.

Sure enough, Lucia's blue eyes went very wide. Conversely, the lavender-blue eyes of the woman next to her narrowed at him.

"Thank you so much for the invitation. Um..."

Lucia started by thanking him, but he had a feeling she was just trying to think of a way to turn him down. Her gaze froze on the fabric samples in his hands.

"We're having crespelles from a stall for lunch at the factory. Why don't you join us there?"

"Thank you, I'd be delighted to," he replied.

He was a bit surprised that they were ordering from a food stall,

but he didn’t want to pass up any opportunity with her, no matter how small. At lunchtime, he would be paying a visit to the Magical Garment Factory.

Right before lunch, Reinecke arrived at the Magical Garment Factory. The blonde woman from earlier came out to greet him.

“We’ve been waiting for you,” she said, though he was almost certain she hadn’t been looking forward to him coming at all. They exchanged polite greetings, and then he followed her inside.

They arrived at a room in which round tables were topped with plates holding many different varieties of crespelle. There were crespelles filled with meat, seafood, cheese, and candied fruits. The delectable scent made his stomach growl. He offered to pay for his share of the meal, but the blonde woman flatly refused to accept any money.

Someone he assumed was one of the factory employees asked him, “Mr. Reinecke, would you like tea or coffee?”

“Coffee, please,” he said, gratefully accepting a cup.

“Okay, everyone, let’s eat!” someone announced.

“Oh, I don’t know where to start...” another said indecisively.

“I’m taking one of each!” cried another.

Reinecke felt a little bit like an intruder, but once everyone filled their plates with crespelles and began to eat, he found himself surrounded by cheerful, friendly voices.

Diagonally across from him sat Lucia, who was asking him question after question about fabric, and he dutifully answered each and every one.

“Mr. Reinecke, monster fabrics are sometimes dyed using materials from different monsters, right? Do those dyes still degrade in quality over time?”

“They do degrade, depending on the dye. Light and temperature also affect their longevity, so a lot of care is put into how they’re stored. Also, in order to keep the color from fading, the dye is often mixed right before it’s meant to be used. Especially if the dye has been enchanted.”

“Interesting! I heard that monster dyes make fabric more

durable. Does that mean they need to be cut with mythril scissors?”

“Yes. Though scissors made entirely of mythril are expensive, so mythril is often applied just to the cutting edges of the blades. And depending on the fabric, sometimes sealsilver is applied to the scissors.”

As he answered, Lucia immediately began taking notes.

“Do you use those same scissors to cut fabric?”

“Yes, but I mainly do so when testing out scissors on a fabric or when there aren’t enough dedicated cutters to finish a task. There is a unique feel to each fabric and a specific way of cutting it, so it can be quite difficult.”

“I know exactly what you mean! It’s almost like seeing double. Sometimes even when I’m touching the fabric, I can’t tell exactly where I need to cut...” a woman said very empathetically. It was the blonde woman who had been treating him coldly until now.

“Um, Mr. Reinecke, I’d also like to ask you about monster fabric...” someone else said.

“What would you like to know?”

Before he knew it, not only Lucia but others around him began engaging him in conversation.

Unlike at the Tailors’ Guild, the employees here didn’t seem to uphold any sort of hierarchy based on familial or professional status. He was surprised by how much he enjoyed chatting with everyone about clothes and fabric without any reservations.

He was having so much fun that lunch was over in what felt like no time at all.

“Thank you very much for accommodating my sudden request to have lunch together,” Reinecke said, thinking that he could segue immediately into asking Lucia if she wanted to meet again in the future. As always, the blonde woman was right by Lucia’s side.

“Head Manager Fano,” he continued, “if it would suit you, could we find another chance to talk?”

“I don’t mind, but we should do something soon. Do you mind meeting me here?” Lucia asked with a sunny smile.

He knew what her words meant underneath the surface: *We’ve only had lunch together once, so get over your little crush and stop*

disrupting my work.

Although she looked young—even somewhat childlike—she was older than him. *And* she was the manager of the Magical Garment Factory. Her firmness shouldn't have come as a surprise. As a man one year younger than her, he had expected things to end up this way. But he still felt he wouldn't be satisfied until he cast one last line of hope.

"Very well. I'll be off, then... But actually, Head Manager Fano, what I wanted was the chance to be by your side."

He didn't know yet whether his feelings were of love or yearning; he only knew that he enjoyed spending time with her so much that he wanted to always be by her side, where he could talk to her. The reason he'd spoken in the past tense was because his modicum of self-respect forbade him to stubbornly cling to her.

"That'd be great, Mr. Reinecke! I'll talk to Mr. Forto about getting you transferred to the Magical Garment Factory!" Lucia said.

At her stunningly bright smile, his mind went blank. "Pardon...?"

"I'm so glad you said something now! Ever since we started working with zephyricloth, we've been looking for fabric experts. Mr. Forto told me I could refer anyone we knew from the Tailors' Guild who I consider to be a good fit. But of course, everyone is busy with their own work, so I feel guilty asking them to transfer to the Magical Garment Factory..."

"O-Oh, yes..."

No, that's not what I meant!

Well, wait. If Lucia regarded him so highly, then maybe his chances were better than zero. He hoped there was a hair's breadth or even two hairs' breadth of a chance for him.

Lucia's next words brought an abrupt halt to his racing thoughts. "You'll receive a slightly higher salary. One thing, though. Like you heard during lunch, we work together without worrying about expressing our opinions to each other, which might come across as rude to nobles. I hope you can understand."

He reflected back on the lunch and found that he hadn't been bothered by the way anyone was speaking at all. In fact, it had been very enjoyable and exciting to talk freely about garments, which he'd

never felt able to do at the Tailors' Guild. On top of that, he personally had a keen interest in zephyricloth and had previously inquired about it in detail. Even without Lucia as part of the equation, working at the factory sounded like a good opportunity.

"Having an expert in fabric like you here will make things at the factory even more fun!" Lucia said candidly, her gaze earnest. The blueness of her eyes reminded him of nemophila flowers.

He felt as if her eyes were tiny petals that had been floating around up until this point and had now stabbed him through the heart. This, he supposed, was the true beginning.

"Please allow me to work to the best of my ability as an employee of the Magical Garment Factory. It would be a pleasure to work for you, Head Manager Fano."

That evening, Lucia went to the guildmaster, Forto, to tell him she wanted Reinecke to work at the factory.

The next day, when the guildmaster came to Reinecke to propose that he transfer to the factory, the smile on his face was just a touch frightening.

Lucia the Couturier and Almond Cookies

"We sent our second big delivery of zephyricloth to the Order of Beast Hunters today!"

"Lucia, I'm sorry you keep having to work under a time crunch—"

Lucia cut off her friend's attempt to apologize with a smile. "Apologies not necessary, Dahlia! The work is fun *and* brings us a lot of profit." She handed Dahlia a bag of almond cookies that she had purchased from a bakery near the Magical Garment Factory.

On her way back home from work today, Lucia had asked the carriage driver to stop by the Green Tower. Dahlia had been worried about the rush order of zephyricloth, so Lucia had wanted to let her know it had been a success and bring her the bag of cookies.

Unfortunately, they were both under the constraints of tight schedules, so the most Lucia had time for was to hand Dahlia the cookies while they stood outside the tower for a quick chat.

"We also have more employees now! A fabric expert transferred over from the Tailors' Guild, and he's been reviewing our production process and giving us input on how to better store the zephyricloth. Nothing beats having someone around who seriously knows their stuff."

"I'm glad to hear it, Lucia."

Ever since Reinecke joined the Magical Garment Factory, the production and management of zephyricloth had become much more consistent. He was also very knowledgeable about monster dyes. Lucia hoped she had the chance to introduce him to Dahlia someday.

In addition to zephyricloth, Lucia had something personal she wanted to tell Dahlia about.

"Guess what? I've saved up a fifth of my goal for opening up my own store!"

"Wow, that's amazing! All your hard work is paying off."

In a few short months, Lucia's savings had increased considerably. If she kept this up, then she'd reach her target amount in just a few years. Her dream of owning her own atelier and boutique, which she'd been told was just a pipe dream, was starting to become a reality. However, this achievement wasn't solely hers to claim. She also had Dahlia, her colleagues, and all of the clients who had come to her for clothes to thank.

"I owe it all to you and so many others. Plus, you've been working much harder than me. It's only a matter of time before the Rossetti Trading Company gets a big old building of its own."

"I'm not sure how we'd even make use of an entire big building. We only have four employees."

According to the gossip floating around the capital, the chairwoman of the Rossetti Trading Company, a business that had rapidly achieved numerous milestones, was a shrewd up-and-coming magical toolmaker. But Lucia knew her friend to be just an honest, hardworking toolmaker.

Lucia had a feeling that Dahlia was in the middle of working on something now too. That oversized shirt she was wearing had likely belonged to her father. It didn't look particularly bad on her, but lately Dahlia had been having a regular guest in the tower—a certain black-haired, golden-eyed knight of the Order of Beast Hunters. Dahlia should have some cute clothes to wear at home too. Maybe Lucia could make something and give it to her as a gift. As she considered the possibilities, she remembered something that Dahlia had been wanting.

"Hey, Dahlia, now's the perfect opportunity to buy all those materials you wanted as a present to yourself for working so hard. Didn't you say you wanted wind dragon scales or leaves and branches from the World Tree?"

"Air magic enchantments using wind dragon scales... And a branch or leaf of the World Tree for reinforcement... Hmm, yeah. I'll think about it."

Dahlia looked off into the distance with a glint in her eye. *I knew she wanted them.* Lucia had a feeling the Green Tower's stock of

monster materials would grow before long. New materials would be a great way for Dahlia to broaden her scope of work and get a boost of motivation—although if her friend was going to be drying any slimes or many-legged insect monsters at the Green Tower, then Lucia would only be meeting with her outside.

From behind her, she heard a horse whinny. Her carriage was stopped on the road. She shouldn't let it wait there for too long. After saying goodbye to Dahlia with a smile, she returned to the carriage.

Waiting inside the carriage was Forto's attendant and bodyguard, Lotta. Under Forto's orders, he had been escorting Lucia on her way home from work.

After he closed the doors of the carriage, he silently sat down across from her. His face was as impassive as ever, but when his dark gray eyes turned to look at her, she decided to ask about something that had popped into her mind.

"Lotta, is there anything you want right now?"

"Anything that I want...?" he repeated quizzically. His face turned serious as he began to give it some thought. Evidently, he couldn't think of anything off the top of his head.

At that moment, Lucia's stomach growled quietly. Her face turned red as she took out the paper bag of almond cookies she'd bought to bring home and noisily opened it.

"I guess I'm hungry for dinner! Here, Lotta, try some!"

She offered him the opened bag, and after a moment of hesitation, he took one cookie.

"Thank you very much."

As Lucia brought a cookie to her mouth, he did the same, though his movements looked a little awkward and stiff.

"Lotta, do you not like almond cookies? Or have you never had one before?" she asked.

The other day, when they'd had a dinner party at the Magical Garment Factory, she'd learned that Lotta had never had much interest in food. She wondered if maybe he had never eaten almond cookies before either.

"I have had some, a long time ago. But sweets cause cavities."

"You can prevent that by just brushing your teeth. And if you do happen to get a cavity, you should be fine as long as you get it taken care of at the dentist sooner rather than later. These days, they have really effective painkillers."

"A dentist... Pain-relief medicines are not very effective on people with bicorn blights."

Lucia had learned not long ago that Lotta was blighted by a bicorn, but she hadn't realized it had that effect.

"Huh? Then how did you get your cavities treated last time?"

"Lord Forto and two knights held me down..."

For a fleeting moment, Lotta's pupils flattened, and Lucia saw a look of anguish flash across his face such as she had never seen on him before. She couldn't imagine how terrible it must have been to get his cavities treated without any pain relief.

"Th-That must have been very hard for you..." she said sympathetically.

"Ever since then, I have avoided eating sweet foods as much as I can."

"Eating sweets isn't the only thing that gives you cavities, though, so it's still a good idea to brush your teeth after eating... Oh, you know what, they've just come out with some new toothbrushes and toothpaste. I heard the ones made with soft horsehair are really popular. What do you use, Lotta?"

"I use a toothbrush made with bicorn hair, and I use whatever toothpaste is provided in my room."

Those types of toothbrushes were very high-quality, but Lucia wondered what it was like for someone with a bicorn blight to use one. Or maybe it was just the right sort of toothbrush for Lotta to use?

As she was puzzling over that, Lotta brought his hand to his chin and said, "Head Manager Lucia, I thought of something that I would like. A better tasting toothpaste."

After that day, Lucia asked around about a good toothpaste and settled on an effective product made with pearl powder that had a nice mint flavor and scent.

When she gave it to Lotta as a thank-you for escorting her on her carriage rides home, he accepted it with both hands, as if it were an item that commanded deep respect.

The next day, Lucia asked Lotta what he thought of the toothpaste, and he smiled widely to show off his white teeth. Understanding that meant he liked it, Lucia smiled back just as wide.



Lotta rarely expressed his emotions with his face, so his smiling ear to ear at the head manager of the Magical Garment Factory attracted a lot of attention. And the happy smile Lucia gave him in return didn’t go unnoticed either.

Those smiles caused not a small number of people to come to some wrong conclusions, but the pair were oblivious to that.

Tales of the Scalfarotto Family

Prologue: Love Letters of Master and Servant

"My wife has embroidered a new handkerchief for me, and I am trying to think of what I could give her in return," Guido, his expression pensive, told Jonas.

Jonas had joined Guido in his office in the Scalfarotto family estate. In his master's hand was a white handkerchief embroidered with blue roses and his wife's name.

"Might I suggest giving her flowers along with a selection of unique confections?"

"Unique confections? Ah, yes. This is perfect timing. I can consult with Ivano when we meet next. Maybe he can recommend a popular confectionery in the lower city."

Jonas's shoulders tensed at the mention of a name that he had been hearing more frequently as of late.

Ivano Mercadante, the vice-chairman of the Rossetti Trading Company. Although a commoner, the man spent a lot of his time not only at the Earldom Scalfarotto's estate but at the Marquisate Diels. He was even permitted to call Marquis Diels by his first name, Gildo. On top of that, he was now close enough with the guildmaster of the Tailors' Guild, Viscount Fortunato Luini, that the viscount even called him a friend.

Jonas understood that Guido had a vested interest in the Rossetti Trading Company, but still, as his bodyguard, it was his duty to keep a watchful eye on anyone who became close to his master.

However, when it came to Ivano's superior—Chairwoman Dahlia

Rossetti—more than caution, it was bewilderment and concern that Jonas felt.

Jonas owed Dahlia a debt of gratitude; she was the reason he was soon to receive a barony. He wished there were some way he could repay her, but he could think of nothing. The woman desired nothing. In fact, he knew that she was unlikely to readily accept repayment at all. He had heard of debt evasion, but he had never heard of someone evading repayment of a debt of gratitude. The only thing he comprehended about that incomprehensible woman was that she was full of determination.

And although Jonas was teaching Volf, who was fond of and wanted to protect Dahlia, how to be a bodyguard, he was not the right man to teach him about romance.

Guido continued. "Ivano recently told me that these days, commoners have come to favor love letters over direct confessions. They prefer the fact that love letters can be kept as mementos."

"That is only in the best-case scenario. Sometimes love letters are refused outright."

When he met Guido's gaze, his master turned away.

"Can you fault me for that? I had no time to spend on romance, and I assumed my father would decide everything for me anyway."

As a student, Guido had turned down most of the love letters and handkerchiefs that were offered to him. As Guido's attendant, Jonas had stood behind him and witnessed him drop his gaze and respond with some iteration of "My youth and inexperience prevents me from returning your feelings" many, many times.

When the other party insisted Guido take their gift, he would respond with a warm but contrived smile.

"What was it you always said before you made your escape? 'If I accept, it may only make it harder for you to move on, but I will never forget this moment.'"

"That's a perfectly considerate, aristocratic response. Besides, it would have been too much trouble to copy down their names and addresses to send them flowers in return," Guido retorted, taking advantage of the fact that the two of them were alone in his office to speak bluntly.

Jonas let out a shallow sigh, feeling a bit of pity for all the girls who had nervously offered their love letters to Guido. "You don't even remember everyone who tried to give you letters and handkerchiefs, do you? That was how many there were."

His master paused before answering. "The experiences we have when we're young all turn into sweet memories."

Guido might have thought he could dodge the question with a pretty phrase, but Jonas could tell he truly did not remember at all.

"If you ever find yourself at a banquet or elsewhere and a lady wishes to wax nostalgic, you need only ask my assistance. I have everything written down in my journal."

"You keep a journal...?"

"It's where I keep a daily record of my work."

Although he had never once mentioned having one, Jonas did in fact keep a journal. He used it as a log to keep track of events and where they happened, not as a space to spill his heart out.

"Just one question. How long have you been keeping it? Did you write down when my wife and I went to our first opera together and what I gave her as a gift?"

That was not one question but three. His master appeared composed, but asking questions in short succession like that was a habit of Guido's when he was feeling flustered.

"I started around the time I was fourteen or fifteen. I mainly wrote on the days I accompanied you as your guard."

"Let me borrow it. I'd like to read about all the days I've spent with my wife."

Guido looked sincere as he said so. Even though he was renowned as the Marquis of Ice, he was endlessly sentimental when it came to his wife.

"I record personal matters as well, so no, you cannot borrow it. If you can wait a few days, I'll write up a summary of events relevant to your memories with your wife."

"All right," Guido acquiesced with a nod, and Jonas saw something of Volf in that gesture.

Jonas didn't want Guido to have to wait in anticipation for him to finish. He should write up that summary as quickly as he could,

which meant he would be working overtime in his room tonight.

Transcribing was tedious work, but it was his only choice. His journal contained entries detailing his condition after being blighted, including details he did not want Guido to read: his bouts of fever, coughing up blood, writhing all night from the pain in his arm, itchy scales, and molting.

"By the way, Jonas... You didn't turn away handkerchiefs offered to you to accommodate me, did you? I feel guilty that you felt the need to follow my lead. Perhaps if you had accepted them, you would have found a match."

Guido sounded apologetic, so Jonas made a point of smirking before he said, "Guido, I'm sorry to hear you've felt guilty over that, but I *did* accept one."

"Well, this is the first I'm hearing of it. When was that?"

"Just before I turned sixteen."

"Really now? I have no memory of you sending anyone red roses. Did you send back a bouquet of flowers in assorted colors?"

When one received a handkerchief as a profession of love, responding with a gift of red roses meant that one shared the giver's feelings, but a bouquet of mixed flowers expressed a simple thank-you while also letting the giver know their attraction was not reciprocated.

"No, I did not—"

Jonas paused as he remembered that he had in fact not sent anything in return.

And could he expect Guido to believe his story? That he had received a handkerchief with blue embroidery from a little girl with green hair whom he had met by chance in a back alleyway? Though he did have proof that the memory hadn't been a daydream: He still had that handkerchief stored in the back of his closet.

"Well, that was a bit rude," Guido pointed out. "What family was the young lady from?"

"I did not ask her name or family name."

"Jonas, don't you think it's a bit cruel to accept a handkerchief and not even ask her name?"

Jonas wouldn't deny that. He himself wished he had at least

asked for the girl's name. But there was nothing to be done about that now.

"There wasn't time for either of us to give our names."

"Jonas..."

He wasn't sure what Guido was imagining, but he wished he would cut it out with the sad look.

Fed up with this conversation and wanting it to end, Jonas reached for some paperwork, but Guido called his name again.

"Jonas, if you should ever meet her again, make sure you ask for her name."

"I certainly will."

In truth, they had already introduced themselves to each other in a professional setting. But that was something he did not want to tell even his close friend. He did not want Guido to read too much into the situation.

Jonas composed his face and then continued, "If I am ever blessed with such an opportunity, I would like to express my thanks to her."

The Scalfarotto Family's Knight and the Written Report

"I'd say around fifteen, or no, twelve or thirteen years old..."

"Come on, nowadays even primary school kids hold hands on dates. Right?"

"Don't ask me. You're going to make me mess up my handwriting."

As the knight moved his dip pen across the page, trying to avoid taking part in the conversation, one of his colleagues began removing his concealed weapons.

Instead of longswords, his colleague carried two shortswords up his sleeves, a buckler and four throwing knives under his shirt, and two throwing knives in his boots. Just a moment ago, he himself had been equipped in a similar fashion.

As a bodyguard employed by the Scalfarotto family, his duty that day had been guarding the family's fourth son, Volfred, as a precaution should he run into any trouble while he was out and about.

"I really didn't expect Lord Volfred to notice us... Lord Guido really let us have it. He's scary when he's mad," the other knight said.

The knight and his partners had been tailing Volfred down a road by the port when a staggering drunk ran into them. While they had avoided a direct collision, the knight's concealed buckler had been pushed slightly out of place and clashed audibly against his throwing knives.

It was just their luck. But also, perhaps Volfred had been on high alert that night because of the important companion he'd been walking with.

The moment Volfred turned a corner, he had picked up the

redheaded woman at his side and jumped up into the night sky. Volfred had leaped so high it had been as if he had wings, and unable to follow after him, the knight and his colleagues had lost him completely.

Afterward, they had split up and gone ahead to the Green Tower and the barracks area, respectively, to confirm that both Dahlia and Volf had arrived home safely. Only then had the knights finally returned to the Scalfarotto residence. The experience had left the first knight, who was now completing his report, weak in the knees.

"I'm sure it'll be fine. We might have just helped move their relationship along... Gods, I hope so, or it's our heads on the chopping block!"

As he continued neatly writing, he smirked at his colleague's unsettling remark. A report wasn't the place to put down his personal feelings. All he needed to provide was a straightforward list of who was involved, where they had gone, and what they had done.

But he did know one thing—his master, Lord Guido, would be pleased with this report. Volfred Scalfarotto and the red-haired magical toolmaker had gone on an outing that had looked suspiciously like a date.

It had been a while since the knight had spent such a long time watching over Volfred, who had left home to serve in the dangerous role of a Scarlet Armor in the Order of Beast Hunters. As he watched the young man and the green-eyed woman walking together in the capital's Southern District, he'd been reminded of what Volfred was like as a child.

The first time he'd met Volfred, it had been when the boy's mother, Lady Vanessa, was still alive.

The knight had only been working for the Scalfarotto family for two years at that point. He had been stationed as a guard on the grounds where Vanessa was putting Volfred through a training regimen that seemed far too intense for a child. Since they were training right in front of him, he frequently felt the urge to rush over and help the child up when he tumbled to the bare earth. The boy

neither cried nor stayed on the ground. He stood up, covered in dirt, and faced his mother.

The knight questioned the necessity of subjecting the son of an earl, much less one's own small child, to such harsh training, even if the intention was to put him on the path to knighthood. But as he watched with deep concern, an older knight came over to update him on a security matter, and then added in a whisper, "Lord Volfred can't outwardly express his magic apart from using strengthening magic. That training is necessary so he can learn to protect himself."

All three of Volfred's older brothers could use magic. His oldest brother, Guido, was already especially adept at ice magic. He would certainly be capable of protecting himself should the need ever arise. But Volfred was unable to do that.

The knight finally understood why, at the end of every training session, Vanessa hugged Volfred tight.

As a new recruit whose only job was to stand and watch over the grounds, his interactions with Vanessa and Volfred were limited to simple greetings. However, once and only once, after one of their training sessions, Volfred came over to talk to him.

"Tomorrow we're going to our family's lands, and I'll be riding on a horse with Guido and my mother!" The young boy's golden eyes were bright and shining, and his smile was like that of an angel.

The knight smiled back as he said, "I hope you all have a wonderful time, Lord Volfred."

"Thank you!"

The boy then took his mother's hand, and they walked back to the house.

That was the last time the knight saw those two together.

The next day, en route to their dominion, the family's caravan was attacked, and Vanessa lost her life fighting against the bandits.

The second eldest son, Fabio, set out on a long journey and died along the way. The boy's bodyguard subsequently committed suicide, and his mother, Earl Scalfarotto's second wife, left the home in mourning.

When Volfred returned from the temple, he was like a stranger with a familiar face. Not a shred of the young boy's innocence or

cheerfulness remained. His golden eyes were dull and flat. It was heart-wrenching to see.

Soon after, the boy was sent to live at the second residence, so the knight rarely saw him anymore.

Many new recruits had died alongside Lady Vanessa and her bodyguards. Several things had seemed suspicious about the whole incident. For example, with so many knights, how had the party gotten overwhelmed by mere bandits? One of the senior knights had told him, "Accept the facts you've been told and don't pry any further," and he had obeyed that order. The other knights had done the same.

Today was the first time since that day that he'd seen Volfred give a genuine smile.

The knight had recognized the young man's face immediately, even with the glasses that disguised his golden eyes as green. He'd wondered what was so funny about whatever Volfred and the woman were talking about. The two of them had looked more like children laughing together than lovers. He knew that was not the sort of detail he should write down, but maybe when he handed Guido his report, he could just tell him then that Volfred had been smiling happily.

As the corners of his own mouth started to lift, one of his colleagues, who had just changed back into his knight's uniform, caught him off guard with a comment.

"But they weren't even linking arms. She was just holding on to his sleeve... They looked so sweet and innocent."

"I wish I had what they have..."

"Quiet, you two! Are you trying to make sure I never finish this report?"

His shoulders trembled at the memory, and he hastily moved his pen away from the paper. A blot of ink fell like a teardrop onto the desk. That was close. He'd almost had to start writing it all over again.

"But you think so too, right? It's kind of incredible how they don't seem the least bit strange acting that way at their age..."

“Yeah, I wonder where *my* innocence went...”

“I mean it, cut it out... I’ll never finish this damn thing...” the knight grumbled, putting a hand to his brow in a show of annoyance.

His eyes stung as he thought of Volfred’s smile. It seemed this report would take him more time to finish than he’d originally assumed.

Jonas the Bodyguard's Hot Night

"Jonas, take this with you for your date tonight," Guido said, handing him an object wrapped in red cloth.

Jonas took it, and the contents made a swishing sound, like it was filled with liquid. He guessed it was a bottle of alcohol.

"Thank you, Lord Guido. I will return by tomorrow morning."

"I won't be leaving the estate in the morning, so you can return in the afternoon if you wish. Have a good night. Or should I say, a *hot* night?" Guido said with a playful smirk.

The autumn night would indeed be long. Back in his own room, Jonas changed into comfortable clothing and grabbed a hooded cloak. All he needed to do now was hop onto a sleipnir and ride outside of the capital.

Jonas couldn't help but feel hurried. He *did* have a date. That is, he was going to meet with a woman at an agreed upon time and place.

Jonas rode out of the capital and followed the western highway onto a narrower road. He arrived at a mansion enclosed in a tall iron fence, the home of a baroness who had once been the wife of a viscount.

She was about a dozen years older than Jonas and had served as a royal knight in her youth. A few years ago, she had separated from her husband and come to live in this mansion. She remained here, neither returning to her family nor making appearances in high society. Once a year, she visited her ex-husband's dominion to see her children.

There were rumors in noble society that the woman suffered from an untreatable illness. Whenever she traveled, she wore a long-sleeved, full-length dress, gloves, and a veil that concealed her face.

Jonas rode through the gates and left his sleipnir at the deserted stable. He walked right through the unlocked front door and

proceeded to the back of the mansion.

"You've kept me waiting, Jonas," a woman complained in a low, husky voice.

Jonas couldn't suppress a smirk as he replied, "Please forgive me, Lady Orchidea."

They had only agreed that he would arrive tonight around dinnertime. They hadn't set a specific time, but apparently he had arrived later than she would have liked.

As soon as Jonas sat down at the table, he was served a thick slab of red meat on a large platter. He opened up a bottle of dry wine. He suspected that Guido had given him an exceptionally fine bottle of wine, so he would save that for later.

The table was bare of any flowers or candles, but the light of the full moon that streamed through the window was bright enough to make the bottle of wine cast a shadow. Although, since the two of them could both see well in the dark, a lack of light would have posed no issue.

"Let us finish our meal quickly," Orchidea said. Her lips, bright red even though she wore no lipstick, parted in a smile.

Her hair was a dark green that could almost have been mistaken for black. Her hands weren't slender and delicate like those of a noblewoman; her skin was rough, and she had the muscular arms of a swordswoman. Were she sitting under sunlight, Jonas knew the greenish shade of her skin would have been visible even underneath her black dress.

But most telling of all were her peculiarly reflective, greenish-yellow, almond-shaped eyes. They made it obvious at a glance that the woman was blighted, and she bore an even closer resemblance to a monster than Jonas did. The faint of heart might well run away screaming at the sight of her.

Jonas knew that whenever Orchidea left her estate or met with guests, she had to wear her veil and gloves the entire time. But he had requested that she wear neither when they were alone together.

"Let us toast. It has been so long since we've had the chance to meet," Jonas said. Orchidea responded only with a throaty laugh.

They clinked glasses in the room devoid of candlelight and then

sank their teeth into their bloody steaks. They ate without talking and drained their glasses as quickly as they ate.

Once she was finished with her meal, Orchidea briskly strode out of the room and outside. Jonas removed his coat, hung it on the back of his chair, picked up the potion and sword he'd brought with him, and followed after her.

The grounds were large in comparison to her smaller-than-average mansion, but they were empty of both flowers and plants. The ground under their feet was only bare, solid earth.

"Shall we begin?" Orchidea asked.

"It would be my— Agh!"

A streak of silver crossed his vision. If he'd stepped back half a second late, she would have gotten both his eyes. *What an impatient woman.*

"I was hoping for a bit more of a prelude," Jonas quipped as he swung his sword down to her right. He only managed to cut the hem of her dress, and in turn, he saw a blade coming right at him, glinting in the moonlight. He parried it and then swung at her again.

"You've already kept me waiting long enough!" Orchidea snarled.

"And for that I am sorry!" he shot back.

The clanging sound of their swords sang out loud and clear.

In the past, Orchidea had always sent him tumbling to the ground as soon as they began, but now he was finally able to dance with her on more equal footing. The fact that they were both blighted meant they could slash at each other without holding anything back. It was nothing but fun.

Jonas had no notion of how Orchidea spent her time from day to day, and he had never told her about his own daily life either. He had no interest in knowing if anyone else visited her here. As long as they never crossed paths, it wasn't any concern of his.

Orchidea simply sent him a letter listing the days she was free, he sent a letter back stating which days worked with his schedule, and then he met her here at her mansion to cross swords.

Orchidea's sword skills far surpassed his own, she had extensive fighting experience, and above all, she showed him the true power of a blight. Faster than any human could, Orchidea leaped up high,

as if she had wings, then swung her sword down from overhead.

He tried to parry her attack, but she overpowered him, and her sword swung down to shatter the scales on his right shoulder, then continued its downward trajectory and slashed hotly against his left cheek. The gush of blood felt cool against his cheek, and pain soon followed it.

As blood dripped down his cheek, the woman's red lips broke into a wide smile.

"Aha ha ha ha!" she cackled gleefully, and in her laugh he recognized the giant praying mantis that was her blight.

Blighted individuals were sometimes called cursed. More often than not, troublesome characteristics of the monsters that had blighted them showed through in their appearances and dispositions. Those blighted by a giant praying mantis felt the impulse to fight members of the opposite sex, especially those they had a fondness for. While they had enough self-control to stop before killing their partners, the desire to see them covered in blood was a disturbing side effect.

But Orchidea, like Jonas, had refused to have her blight lifted. Ever since being blighted by a fire dragon, Jonas had found that fewer foods suited his palate, and his body had become more susceptible to cold.

However, those changes were not enough for him to want to let go of the power he'd gained. He had a feeling Orchidea felt the same about her own blight. Even though her appearance and personality had changed, she wanted to hold on to the power it gave her.

"Ugh!"

Orchidea had left a deep cut on his right wrist. He managed to hold on to his sword and brought his left hand over to grasp it. He swung his sword up to the left as forcefully as he could and was met with resistance.

He had torn Orchidea's dress, from above her knee diagonally down her leg, offering a glimpse of her bloodied skin. With no change in her expression, she cut away the fabric below her knee. He had succeeded only in furnishing her with greater ease of

movement.



"I'll make sure to wear a shorter dress next time."

"Please do."

Jonas drank half the potion he'd placed by his scabbard, then passed the rest to Orchidea. She emptied the bottle in one gulp and then handed it back to him.

The wound on Jonas's right shoulder closed up and the gash on Orchidea's thigh disappeared. That was their cue to restart their bout. They rushed at each other, their clashing swords stained in each other's blood yet still crying out for more.

Now he understood what Guido meant. It was indeed a hot night. Orchidea could find a release for her fiery impulse for combat, while Jonas could learn from her instruction until his own hot blood spilled.

Not enough, not enough, it's not nearly enough. I must get stronger. Much, much stronger.

The strength he desired was far above him, farther than he could see, far beyond that blue above him.

The moon in the night sky smiled down on the pair as they exchanged blows with their swords.

After they were done sparring, their swords left chipped and dull, they went back inside Orchidea's mansion.

Though he had drunk a potion earlier, his new wounds were just as deep. He planned to share the alcohol Guido had given him with Orchidea, then drink another potion when he was back at the Scalfarotto estate.

With that thought, he unwrapped the red cloth bundle on top of the table, revealing a wooden box.

When he opened the lid, he saw Orchidea flash a smile at him from across the table. "You have a very good master, Jonas."

Guido had anticipated everything, it seemed. Inside the box was not a bottle of alcohol but a high potion. If he and Orchidea drank this, then they could fight one more bout.

"Would you like to serve him alongside me?"

"A tempting offer, but no."

Jonas split the high potion into two glasses, and they made another toast. The grassy flavor was usually unpleasant to his

blighted tongue, but today, he found he didn't mind it so much.

When he looked at Orchidea's eyes, alight with amusement, he saw his own amused face reflected in them.

The night showed no indication of cooling down.

The Fourth Scalfarotto Son and Bath Salts

"It's a bit chilly today, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure is."

Volf was donning a jacket as he responded to Dahlia's observation. He always felt that the time he spent in the Green Tower passed too quickly.

As Volf placed a hand against the door, the front entryway was dark without the light of a magical lantern. From here, he would return to the castle barracks. Tomorrow morning he had early training.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Dahlia muttered to herself. She walked over to a shelf and then came back holding a small glass jar filled with green and white sand. It was too light in color to be powdered green slime, and it looked more grainy than powdery.

He wondered if it was some sort of substandard product she couldn't make proper use of, but Dahlia soon answered his unspoken question.

"This is some green rose bath salt that Lucia gave me. It has a really nice scent. I thought you might like it."

"Thanks. I'll give it a try."

He was glad that he hadn't asked her if it was powdered green slime.

"It'll really warm you up," Dahlia told him with a smile.

Volf thought back on his dinner with Dahlia as he settled back in his room at the castle barracks. He took the glass jar out of his coat pocket and gave it a shake. The gritty texture reminded him of table salt.

When he opened the lid, he was hit with a sweet, invigorating

fragrance that made him think of roses blooming in spring.

He was also hit with a memory of the garden of his family's main estate—these bath salts smelled just like the white roses that grew there. When he and his brothers used to run around that garden, the scent had carried on the wind.

Out of a boyish curiosity, Volf had once sniffed every single flower in that garden and ended up getting chased around by the bees that had been collecting nectar. His second oldest brother, Fabio, had picked him up and sprinted them both away to safety. At the time, Volf had been unaware of the danger the bees posed and had innocently thought his brother was playing a game with him.

"I completely forgot about that..." he murmured to himself.

After Volf's mother died during the attack on their family, he had gone to live in the second villa alone. He had tried as hard as he could to not think about or keep in contact with his estranged family. At some point, he must have closed a lid on all his happy memories too.

As the light scent of the bath salts filled his room, the pleasant memories of his youth came flooding back one by one.

He remembered his oldest brother, Guido, showing him his pony, and how he'd looked forward to going riding with him.

He remembered sitting on Fabio's lap and listening to him read to him about honeybees from a page in an insect reference book.

He remembered sitting on the back of a nightdog with his third oldest brother, Eraldo, and falling over before it even started running.

He had so many memories of laughing with his brothers. Why had he forgotten them until now? They might have been silly, childish memories, but they were important to him. He felt like he wanted to talk to Dahlia about this the next time he went to the Green Tower.

Since she had gone out of her way to give him the bath salts, he wanted to use them while he soaked in the bath. However, the large bath in the barracks was for communal use. He couldn't very well dump bath salts into it.

Another option would be going back to the villa tomorrow to take

a bath there, but he decided against it.

The large bath at the villa was drawn and readied with the Scalfarotto family's own bath salts. If he asked the servants there to forgo adding them for the day, they might worry that he disliked the scent. In order to assure them that wasn't the case, he would have to tell them about Dahlia's gift—something he'd rather not do.

After some deliberation, he decided to go into one of the shower rooms at the very end of the barracks' bathroom. Shower rooms were for individual use, so he wouldn't bother anyone else here.

Volf filled a washbasin with water and then added a small amount of the green rose bath salts to it. By rationing them out like this, he could enjoy the fragrance more than once. Although he couldn't submerge himself in the scented water, he splashed it on himself with his hands, and then, when he was finished, dumped the water over his head. He could enjoy soaking in a tub of the stuff some other time.

Once he was back relaxing in his room, he heard a knock at the door.

He answered, and Dorino poked his head in through the door. "Volf, I bought some pastries in the lower city. Want some? We're in Randolph's room."

"Sure, sounds great. I've got some extra dried fish, so I'll bring that over too."

Volf had started grabbing tin cans of dried fish from his shelf when Dorino sniffed the air and said, "Huh? Something smells good. Are you wearing perfume or something?"

"No, I just tried out some bath salts in the shower. Here, Dahlia gave this to me," Volf explained, picking up the small jar.

Maybe adding the bath salts to a small basin of water had made the fragrance too concentrated. He'd thought he'd washed the scent off, but apparently it was still lingering.

Dorino nodded. "Gotcha. So, that means right now, you smell like Dahlia."

"I... I didn't think of it like that..."

It made sense now that he'd heard it. He was using the same

bath salts that she did, after all. But why did knowing that fluster him so much?

"All right, let's go! Let's drink and play the confession game!" said Dorino.

Volf wasn't sure if Dorino could tell what he was feeling or not, but his friend's face broke into a wide grin.

Tales of the Kingdom's Students

Prologue: Knights and Stationery

"Sir Volf, do you mind if we stop by one more store? I'd like to buy some stationery too."

"Sure thing, Kirk."

The vice-captain of the Order of Beast Hunters and an older recruit had gone above and beyond during training that day and successfully used water magic in a medium-wide area in conjunction with powerful earth magic. Consequently, afternoon training had been canceled so the damage they'd done to the training grounds could be cleaned up.

Since he didn't want to bother Dahlia while she was working, Volf had decided to accept Kirk's request that he accompany him to the shopping district.

Kirk wanted to buy a new shaving razor; he had dropped his old one and chipped the blade. In the shop, he had indecisively compared several razors before finally settling on the same model that Volf used.

They planned to have dinner and drinks at their usual restaurant with Dorino and a few other knights. Volf had suggested they head back to the barracks beforehand, and that was when Kirk had made his additional request.

For Volf, the mention of stationery brought to mind the contents of his desk drawer. He was starting to run low on the stationery he used to write to Dahlia, so he was in need of a new set too.

He and Kirk entered a general store in the nobles' quarter and went up to the second floor. There they encountered a crowd of

female customers, but thanks to his fairy glasses, Volf didn't feel tense as he passed them by.

The first section they came to had a wide selection of colorful papers, envelopes, cards, and ink. Volf almost sighed at the sheer number of products that blanketed the wall.

"There are so many to choose from..." he said in awe.

Kirk, who was standing before a shelf of writing paper, turned and smiled at him. "Why don't you buy something too, Sir Volf? People enjoy being sent letters on pretty stationery. My handwriting is awful, so I always write on paper that has a nice watermark or design to make up for that."

"I never thought of that. You write letters to your fiancée, right?"

"I do. I prepare a letter before we set out on expedition, then send it as soon as I'm back at the castle to let her know when I'm coming home so we can set up a day to meet. And I also send her flowers and a card explaining what the flowers mean fairly often."

"Gotcha..."

Volf made a mental note. He normally wrote Dahlia a letter after he returned from expeditions and had settled in a bit, but maybe it would be better to prepare a letter beforehand. That would probably make it easier to find a day they were both free to meet.

It was important to note that Kirk was sending a letter to let his *fiancée*, who was essentially his family, know when he would be home. Volf was only notifying a *friend* of his return. There was a fundamental difference between those two, but that distinction didn't cross Volf's mind.

"Sir Volf, I'm sure you received celebratory cards and things like that when you were a student, didn't you? Not just love letters."

"My older brother sent me one when I joined the royal knights. And when I graduated from college, um, I got a bit of an odd card..." Volf's eyes glazed over as he thought back on that time.

Kirk clenched his fists. "Go on, tell me! I'll listen to whatever it is you have to say, no matter how dreadful. I'm prepared."

"Oh, no, it's nothing you need to prepare yourself for. There was just a single line that said, 'After graduation, let us become white ash in the same resting place.'"

“So ‘Let’s be buried together in the family grave’? That’s quite intense. And you accepted that card?”

“Well, it was given to me along with a congratulatory card from my teacher...”

“That was from your teacher?!” Kirk cried out in a tone of mingled shock and distress.

In a hasty effort to calm him down, Volf explained that since he had received the card after graduation, there was no harm done. Still, Kirk was regarding him with an expression of deep sympathy. Volf searched frantically through his memories and came up with a slightly more lighthearted anecdote to share.

“Oh, my brother actually sent me a really nice card recently! It had our family crest embossed in silver on white paper, and his initials were printed in an ornate script. The ink was blue-black with a bit of silver.”

The card, which had accompanied a bottle of wine and salted butter cookies, had stated, “Share these with your friends at the barracks.” As instructed, Volf had shared the tasty gifts with Dorino and Randolph, and put Guido’s card away for safekeeping, separate from Dahlia’s letters.

“That sounds very nice. I feel like black and gold ink would be just right for you.”

“Huh?”

“I think it adds a nice personal touch when someone writes a letter or a card using ink in their colors. That way, when your recipient reads your letter, they’ll see that hint of gold in the black ink and be reminded of you.”

Dahlia, seeing a glimmer of gold in the black ink as she read his letter—that didn’t sound like such a bad idea. But he also felt a little embarrassed at the thought of going so far as to do something like that.

“Sir Volf, I’d recommend something like this, or this, or... Oh! This one has a bit of a shimmer to it!”

Kirk had started picking out black and gold ink for Volf, as if he’d already made the decision to use it. But maybe that was perfectly normal, and it was Volf who was overthinking things.

There were many kinds of black ink, including ones that had undertones of blue or green, and even ones that had gold or silver flecks in varying amounts. After a few moments of indecision, Volf picked out a black ink that contained a modest admixture of gold flecks.

"Now you just need some writing paper! And I need to find a nice set for myself."

Volf and Kirk moved down the line of shelves. Even if Volf wasn't sending Dahlia love letters, perhaps she would enjoy receiving letters on fancy paper.

He remembered that the last time they'd been to the Black Cauldron, she'd mentioned that she had never received or written a love letter. Volf found it hard to believe that someone as pretty and good-natured as Dahlia had never been given a love letter or been asked out by a college friend before she was engaged to that other magical toolmaker. *All the men around her must have been blind or clueless or—*

"Sir, is something wrong?"

"No, nothing's wrong! Um, there are just so many options..."

Volf dispelled his runaway thoughts and picked out some writing paper.

Kirk watched as the black-haired knight scrutinized the stationery. Volf's sharp gaze wasn't much different from when he was trying to anticipate a monster's movements. Even his handsome features only made him appear more intimidating.

Kirk was sure that the other knight was currently thinking of a certain red-haired magical toolmaker. But no matter how obvious it was, the man himself had no self-awareness on that point. Kirk had always found that odd, but as he'd learned more about Volf, he'd begun to understand.

Kirk was the son of Viscount Leonardi.

For generations, the House of Leonardi had been one of two families that defended the capital's walls. They managed inspections and repairs, and dealt as needed with any problems that arose. Day

after day, Kirk's father led a company of strong knights and earth mages around the perimeter of the capital on foot or by carriage.

Although the city was safe, that safety did not extend to the expansive area surrounding its walls. Monsters and beasts made frequent appearances as their company was patrolling or repairing sections of the wall.

Included among their responsibilities were the upkeep and safety of the area around the walls. Trees that grew too close to the walls were cut down, and rocks were destroyed.

There had even been times when thieves had dug inconspicuous footholds into the castle walls in preparation to infiltrate the interior. Guarding the walls was a duty that required the utmost unflagging vigilance.

Kirk's father, Viscount Leonardi, had once been a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. Many members of the Leonardi family joined the Beast Hunters for a period of time in order to learn how to fight against monsters and to hone their skills as knights. Kirk's father had joined after graduating college and stayed until a year before he took over as the family head.

He and his younger brother, Kirk's uncle, were strong and valiant knights. Sometimes they would drag a bear home on a horse-drawn wagon or carry multiple horned rabbits on their shoulders to be cooked for their evening stew. Ever since he was a child, Kirk had revered his father and uncle as well as all the knights in their family who protected the kingdom's walls.

Kirk, meanwhile, was incapable of using strengthening magic. What he did have was the ability to wield wind magic, like his mother, and an above average memory—but that was it. He couldn't even lift the broadsword that his father easily swung around.

Kirk's family had always been protective of him. They even went so far as to coddle him, his mother especially. Though he was now the eldest son, he'd actually had two older brothers, but both had died soon after they were born. For that reason, his family had become overwrought with worry whenever he caught a mild cold or suffered even the smallest injury.

"When I grow up, I wanna be a knight."

When Kirk expressed that wish, his family smiled at him, but in their eyes, he could see that they wanted him to abandon his dream. They tried to steer him away from the path of knighthood in roundabout ways. They suggested he should be a mage, since he possessed strong wind magic, or a civil servant, since he had a clever mind. It would be good to work at the castle, and taking over as the head of the family was also an important job.

However, there was one person who never expressed any doubt about his dream.

"You'll make a great knight someday, Kirk!"

It was Marialuna, his childhood friend and the girl who would eventually become his fiancée.

"But it might be hard for me, since I can't use strengthening magic..."

"Even so, you have magic and a dream. You can become a brave, magic-wielding knight who protects Ordine with all he's got."

Marialuna's eyes were shining bright as she told him that, and Kirk offered his sword to her on the spot. They were little children at the time, not even in primary school. The sword in his hands was wooden, he barely remembered the right etiquette and words, and their only witness was a nightdog in the garden, and yet he made a vow to be Marialuna's knight for as long as he lived.

By the time Kirk learned, a few years later, that true mage knights needed both strengthening and offensive magic, he was already committed to his path. He tempered his body, honed his swordsmanship, refined his wind magic, and routinely accompanied the knights on their circuits of the walls in order to learn more about that duty as well. On patrol, he lent a hand in any way he could and carried out every order his father gave.

As time went on, his family members, who had been so concerned for him, accepted his choice to become a knight. They began to say that Kirk would eventually inherit the family title and become a defender of the kingdom's walls.

Nevertheless, his choice to join the royal Order of Beast Hunters caused them concern. Some even objected outright.

His father alone spoke up in support of his wish. "Kirk, as the

future head of this family, go learn as much as you can from the Beast Hunters."

And so Kirk became a Beast Hunter.

Once Kirk was a member of the squad he'd been so eager to join, he found out just how strong the other knights were. They did not cower in the face of terrifying monsters but bravely faced them head-on.

Of all his new comrades, the one who stood out the most to him was a Scarlet Armor with black hair and golden eyes: Volfred Scalfarotto, the son of the famous Earl of Ice.

He had earned the nickname Black Reaper for his valor slaying beasts on the front line, and he was exquisitely handsome to boot; he turned the heads of many a passing woman in the castle. Kirk himself had been asked more than twice to convey a love letter to him. Each time, Kirk had politely replied that the women should hand their letters to Volf themselves.

In truth, Kirk was a bit jealous of all the adoration Volf received. It was only after he witnessed Volf decline a love letter that Kirk addressed the senior knight for the first time, confronting him and telling him off for not being nicer to the woman.

Volf explained that his family had instructed him not to accept any letters personally in the fear that he would be hurt or dragged into some dispute. Sometimes, the letters contained not only simple confessions of love but also dangerous objects. Kirk had been imagining that the women's infatuation with Volf was cute and harmless, but in fact, it sometimes ventured into something more horrific. Kirk felt deeply ashamed for making assumptions.

After that, Kirk began turning to Volf for advice about wind magic and sword fighting. The more the two talked, the more Kirk realized Volf was a nice and interesting guy. Eventually, Kirk became known as the junior knight who spent a lot of time around Volf.

Today was no exception. Volf had accompanied him, hopping from one store to another. As they stood in front of the shelf of stationery, Kirk glanced at Volf's profile just as the senior knight turned and met his gaze.

“Kirk, did someone teach you about letters?”

“My father instructed me on how many letters to send, and my mother instructed me on the composition.”

“Your father?”

“That’s right. My father always says, ‘When it comes to love, dedication is key.’”

“Dedication is key?” Volf parroted.

Kirk smiled and explained. “Yes. Before my parents married, my mother often went to a certain bookshop. Every time my father happened to meet her there, he would give her a single flower and a card wishing her happiness. He never knew when he would see her again, and they couldn’t have long conversations in the store, so he would always have a flower ready before going. He told me he bought more flowers than he succeeded in giving her.”

Kirk’s mother was the youngest daughter of a marquis, and his father was the heir to a viscountcy and a knight in the Order of Beast Hunters. To his father, his mother was like a flower out of reach. Accepting the possibility that his feelings would not be returned, he had courteously greeted her and given her the flower and card every single time he saw her.

That went on for two years. His mother’s family opposed their relationship, and when she eloped with his father, they disowned her.

Once Kirk concluded his brief synopsis, Volf said, with sincere admiration, “That sounds like something right out of an opera...”

Though Kirk agreed with the sentiment, embarrassment compelled him to return to the topic of stationery.

“Have you found something you like, Sir Volf?”

“What do you think of this?”

“Big polka dots...?”

The paper was covered in large red and light blue polka dots. The design was a little childish, but Kirk decided not to give voice to that opinion.

“Isn’t it cute? It makes me think of slimes.”

“...I guess there’s no accounting for taste.”

Kirk was confident that when it came to love letters, he should *not* let Volf pick whatever he wanted.

“What about something like this?”

Kirk pointed out white writing paper with a foil feather design. It was a style of stationery that was currently in fashion.

Volf’s eyes widened in surprise as he read aloud from the information card. “‘I want to fly to you’... That’s what feathers mean?”

But that was something he should have learned as a college student—no, a primary school student.

“Have you never been given a letter with a feather motif?” Kirk asked him.

“Probably not. At least, I don’t think so...”

It was plain that none of the love letters Volf had received thus far held the slightest fascination for him.

“What sort of paper does Master Dahlia write to you on?”

“She’s never sent me a letter on patterned paper.”

It was equally plain that Volf remembered every single letter that Dahlia had sent him.

“Oh, this might be good too. It’s very Dahlia,” Volf said. He had grabbed a set of cute stationery illustrated with red pom-pom dahlia flowers. This one was a bit childish too.

“Don’t you think it’s a little uninspired to send Master Dahlia stationery with dahlia flowers on it?”

“But...it’s pretty.”

“Sir Volf, think about it. Would you want to be sent a letter on stationery that had ice crystals on it?”

“If it was Dahlia who sent it, I wouldn’t be bothered one bit by what kind of paper it was on.”

Kirk was about to insist that he obviously would be bothered, but when he saw Volf’s innocent smile, he instead tried to reason with him using the conversational skills he had cultivated while learning how to be a family head.

“I think women feel a little differently about such matters. You want to make Master Dahlia happy, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do...”

“Something like this would be just the kind of thing a young woman like Dahlia would enjoy.”

Kirk showed Volf stationery with a beautiful floral watermark. Roses were considered the standard for love letters, but Kirk made sure to stand in front of the informational card explaining that this stationery was meant to convey the sender's hidden feelings toward the recipient.

"Oh, this one is scented."

Volf had turned to look at a stationery set with the same design. As this set was in a paper bag, he asked the shopkeeper to open it.

"It smells so nice..."

The soft, sweet scent of roses wafted from the paper. Volf nodded, looking pleased with his choice.

"Yeah, this is the right one for Dahlia. I hope she likes it..."

Volf's whisper sounded almost like a prayer, and Kirk felt moved by the sincerity in the older knight's voice. *In this area,* I'm *the more experienced one,* Kirk thought to himself.

So, before the shopkeeper could provide any unnecessary explanations about the stationery, Kirk smiled at Volf and said brightly, "What a great choice, Sir Volf! Let's head back to the barracks right now so you can use it to write a letter!"

Another implication of perfumed stationery was that the fragrance conveyed feelings the sender had thus far left unsaid.

And with that, Kirk had succeeded in getting Volf to purchase paper used for love letters.

Oswald the Student and Gray and Silver

"Sorry, Oz. I lost a game," said the girl whom Oswald had called his girlfriend until now.

They were only six months shy of graduating primary school and had been dating for about a month. Today they'd had plans to go to a café in the Central District together after class until she said what she did.

"What game?" he asked.

"Umm, well... Whoever drew the short straw had to confess to you," the girl explained in a small voice, casting her lovely reddish-brown eyes to the ground.

Things were starting to make sense. He had heard that some students liked to pull mean pranks like that. Someone would falsely declare their love to an unattractive member of the opposite sex just to see their reaction. It was cruel.

When the girl had confessed to Oswald, even he had initially doubted her sincerity, but afterward, they had chatted, had tea, and gone shopping in the city with her friends so often that he'd thought he had somehow lucked into a good relationship.

"I meant to tell you and apologize right away. But you looked like you were having a lot of fun, so..."

Before she could finish, he heard a few chuckles from behind her.

Looking on were a noble boy and girl—friends of his girlfriend's who had joined the two of them in walking around the city. In their eyes, he saw malice and disdain.

I get it now. For the past month, he had been their jester.

His fake girlfriend was the third daughter of a viscount. The young man behind her was the heir to a marquisate, and the young lady next to him was the daughter of a baron but also had blood ties

to a viscountcy.

In comparison, Oswald, who was the third son of a viscount and had weak magic, was the "short straw."

He knew that if he caused a scene here, it would only cause trouble for his family. Though he was far from adulthood, even he was aware that in the eyes of other nobles, he was a nobody.

But Oswald set his personal feelings aside and instead expressed gratitude in the aristocratic manner that his grandmother had drilled into him. "Thank you very much for giving someone like me the honor of being your boyfriend."

Then he turned to leave.

"Wait!"

He felt something grab his sleeve. When he turned around, he saw a pair of reddish-brown eyes looking up at him tearfully.

"Oz! I'm really sorry, honest!"

She was the first girl he'd had tea with, the first girl he'd gone out to lunch with. He owned a golden brown pen that matched the color of her hair, and he had given her a silver-colored pen. He had been over the moon.

Their relationship had only lasted a month, but in that time, they had made many memories together. Now those memories had been tainted.

"Please call me Zola from now on."

It was his stubbornness that kept his forced smile from crumbling.

Oswald was born to the Viscountcy Zola, a family known for producing mages.

Everyone in his immediate family—his two mothers, both born to earldoms; his older siblings; his younger brother; and, of course, his father—possessed quite strong magic. Oswald was the only one with a low magical grade, and to make matters worse, he could neither wield any of the four types of elemental magic nor use healing magic.

His birth mother was his father's first wife, but she had died from an illness shortly after giving birth to Oswald. Oswald himself had

been feeble and often bedridden as a small child. It was thanks to his grandmother's consistent instruction that he had been enrolled in primary school despite his frailty.

"It's no matter that you cannot use magic. You have a good head on your shoulders, so your book smarts can be your weapon."

While his older siblings pursued mage studies, Oswald decided to study magical toolmaking. In primary school, his marks in his general studies were always among the top five, but as a Zola, he stubbornly refused to pursue civil service studies.

Neither his father nor either of his mothers tried to stop him from studying magical toolmaking. If his grandmother had still been alive, she might have made an effort to dissuade him, but she had passed away the year prior from pneumonia.

"I'm home."

"Welcome home, Lord Oswald."

After changing out of his uniform, Oswald told the maids that he was tired and going to rest, and that he did not need dinner. He then locked his door and lay down on his bed.

"Maybe I'll stop going to school..."

He had been accepted into the college magical toolmaking program and would be attending next semester. Since he already completed enough credits to graduate, he had just enrolled in a geography course out of personal interest, plus a few classes that he'd thought he could take with his now former girlfriend.

He didn't want the ones who had deceived him to think he was running away like a coward, but things would not end well if he became emotional and further soured his relationship with them.

The memory of the girl's confession was still clear in his mind. He had been reading in the library when she came up to him, her doe eyes wide as she said, "What a big book! What are you reading?"

She didn't laugh when he showed her the title was *For an Aspiring Adventurer*.

A month ago, she had asked him if he wanted to get matching pens with her.

It was a question that, under the surface, functioned as a way of asking someone to start a relationship. When he'd asked her if he

had misheard, she'd repeated her question in a whisper, and that had been the awkward yet definite start of their courtship.

It had taken a long time for them to choose pens for each other, and he remembered the shopkeeper warmly smiling at them as they made their selections. In the library, they had picked out books that each hoped the other might like. They had even gone to a café in the Central District together, chaperoned by a maid. He had tried to look mature by not adding sugar to his coffee. It had been very bitter.

He thought that they had been having fun together talking about school, their studies, and books, but apparently that had only been him. He fondly remembered her gentle smile and the way she became flustered when she burst out laughing. It would be hard to forget that.

His good memory, which had helped him learn Ehrlichian so easily, was being needlessly active in this instance.

He wished he could paint over all his memories of the girl—whether in white or black, he did not care—but perhaps that was impossible for one as gray as himself. *The gray piglet.* He knew that was what people called him behind his back.

Oswald rose sluggishly from his bed and stood in front of his full-length mirror.

"No wonder they call me that..."

He saw himself reflected in the mirror. He saw his slightly wavy gray hair and dull gray eyes. He also saw his short stature, round face, and thick, fleshy limbs.

Although he was healthy now, he lagged behind the other students when they ran long-distance for gym class, and he was hopeless at any exercise more intense than dancing. Since he had been feeble as a child, he'd been prohibited from exercising, and only food with the highest nutritional density had ever been presented to him. His grandmother had doted on him and given him a good education, but he felt she had coddled him when it came to his health.

And he had let her coddle him, and now he disliked what he saw in the mirror.

Had he been slimmer, would he have not been teased?

Had he been smarter, would he have seen through this hurtful yet obvious prank?

Had he been just a little handsomer, could he have avoided this entire ordeal?

Suddenly, his reflection began to blur until he could no longer see himself, and that night, the gray-haired boy cried his eyes out.

"Lord Oswald, are you awake?"

The next morning, Oswald leaped to his feet at the sound of a maid knocking at his door and calling for him.

When he saw himself in the mirror, he gasped. His eyes were bright red and his face was puffy and swollen. Anyone could tell that he had been crying.

He coughed a few times and answered through the door, "I don't feel very well. I'll be staying home today."

"You don't? Shall I call for the doctor?"

"No, that's okay. It's nothing serious."

The maid asked a few more questions before leaving, but he managed to keep her out of his room. Still, he wanted to splash his face with cool water, so he would need to leave to use the bathroom. As he pondered what to do, someone rapped sharply on his door.

"Lord Oswald! Are you all right? I'm sorry, but please let me take a look at you!"

Drat. It was Donatella, the maid who used to wait on his grandmother.

At his grandmother's request, she had looked after him a lot as well. He had forgotten that whenever he had fallen ill as a child, Donatella had been beside herself with worry.

"I'm all right! There's nothing to worry about!" he replied through the door, aware that insisting he wasn't sick would ruin his plans to stay home.

"Oh, no. You must really be ill. I will tell your father and get a key to your room—"

Do I not get a say in who enters my room? he thought as he

cracked the door by three inches. Standing there was the tall, thickset maid.

"Um... I'm fine, I just want to be alone..."

Donatella's face crumpled when she saw him. "Oh, little Oz...!"

It was very embarrassing to hear her refer to him by the pet name she had used when he was a child.

"Everyone, please return to your posts. It seems Lord Oswald has caught a cold. I will attend to him."

Oswald heard the sound of several maids and butlers, who had apparently been standing on the other side of the door, taking their leave.

Once they were gone, Donatella said in a low voice, "I will draw a bath for you in the white room. Your fever seems to have come down, so would you like to freshen up in there?"

"...Yes, that sounds fine."

The white room was a single-occupancy guest room with a small bathroom attached, primarily used, upon request, by guests who had mobility issues or were elderly.

It was also the room Oswald often stayed in when he was sick and didn't want to go back and forth from his room to the bathroom —for example, when he was suffering from intense nausea or other stomach troubles. Donatella used to carry him there when he couldn't walk straight from fever.

"I will make sure the hallway is clear. Let us go, Lord Oswald," she said.

Although she had reverted to calling him "Lord Oswald," she was still protecting him, just as she had done when he was a child.

After he moved to the white room, Oswald took a long bath. He cooled his face off with water, but his eyes were still puffy and would likely remain so for the entire day. Once he changed into the pair of pajamas that had been set out for him, he let out a sigh and went back into the room.

"Lord Oswald, please lie down in bed."

Oswald did as told and lay in the bed. The maid came in pushing a cart of food, then adjusted his bedside table to the height of his

bed so he could eat while reclining against a pillow. Even though he wasn't sick, he was brokenhearted, so he followed all of her instructions.

Bread pudding, milk, an omelet, salad, and cut fruits were laid out on the table. It was a colorful and pretty assortment, but Oswald just didn't have an appetite. He tried a bite of bread pudding but was unable to taste any of its usual sweetness.

"Is it unappetizing?" Donatella asked.

"No, I think my cold is affecting my taste."

He forced himself to bring the spoonful of bread pudding to his mouth. A memory of his grandmother, smiling and telling him to eat a lot so he would grow big and strong, suddenly washed over him. But eating hadn't made him strong. It had just made him as round as a piglet, weak as ever and ugly. As soon as he had that thought, a powerful wave of nausea swept over him.

Oswald set his spoon down and wiped his face roughly with a napkin.

"Please take this food away. I can't stomach it right now."

"...Lord Oswald, won't you tell me what's troubling you?"

Donatella's green eyes were filled with worry. Oswald opened his mouth to speak, then shut it again. He couldn't tell her. It was all too pathetic. Besides, even if he did tell her, there was nothing she could do. He didn't want to bother her with something so unpleasant.

After a pause, he said, "I'm just a little tired. I'm sure I'll feel better after a rest."

"Would you like to stay here for a few days until you do?"

"Yes, I would."

Thank goodness, he thought. This way, no one else would see his puffy, miserable face.

"Oh, and little Oz, I have a request to make."

"What is it, Donatella?"

"Do you mind if I stay here with you, to attend to you as you recover from your cold?"

"I suppose I don't mind..."

"It's my old age. My hip has been bothering me. Will you let me rest here with you, with the excuse that I'm taking care of you?"

Donatella looked serious, and Oswald found himself unable to answer right away. The maid was younger than his grandmother, but her black hair was mostly gray now. Despite her age, though, she still walked with a brisk step.

He divined that she was just coming up with any excuse she could to look after him away from prying eyes.

"Yes, please do so," he told her, a small smile finally forming on his face.

Oswald remained in the white room for three days. The entire time, he could barely taste his food, as if he really did have a cold. Because of that, he ate half of what he normally did and only drank water. Since he had a lot of time on his hands, he read many books about adventurers and magical toolmaking. Donatella read Ehrlichian books aloud, translating the contents for him as she went.

Every time Oswald thought about what had happened at school, he felt a pang in his heart. But by the morning of the fourth day, he had recovered enough to want to have breakfast with his family.

"Good morning, everyone. I apologize for the worry I've caused," he said when they were gathered in the dining room.

Normally, everyone was too busy to sit down to breakfast together, but today, his parents, his oldest brother, and, for some reason, his married older sister were present.

"Are you sure you're well enough to join us, Oswald?"

"Oswald, how are you feeling?"

In response to his parents' questions, Oswald gave an uneasy smile and assured them he was all right. It had been over a year and a half since he'd last been laid up in bed, but it seemed they had been concerned that he had relapsed into his prior fragile health. He felt a pang of guilt.

Breakfast began in silence. A maid almost served him his usual orange juice, but he asked to have water instead. His appetite still hadn't returned. When he took a bite of food, he could barely detect any flavor.

"Still not better yet, are you, Oz?" his brother asked.

"I'm fine. I've just been lying in bed for so long, I don't have

much of an appetite."

His brother had inherited pale blue eyes from his mother. Now he cast them downward. Oswald felt the urge to ask his brother if *he* was all right. He felt anxious on the rare occasions when his brother's usual smile was nowhere to be seen.

Unable to bear the silence, Oswald decided to turn the conversation to his sister. "It's been a while since you came home. How is your husband's family?"

"Everyone is quite well. I would like it if you came to visit me there someday, Oswald."

It sounded like his sister, with her lustrous silver hair, was living well with the family she had married into. Feeling drawn in by her comforting and familiar smile, Oswald ended up conversing exclusively with his sister until the end of breakfast. He hadn't finished even half of any of his dishes.

Shortly after breakfast, Oswald was summoned into his father's study. Seeing as he hadn't said if he was going to school yet, he assumed his father was going to insist he visit the temple, where some of the priests acted as doctors. At this rate, his fake illness would be exposed. Although, knowing his father, he probably already knew Oswald was malingering and had summoned him to give him a lecture.

By the time he was sitting across the coffee table from his father in his study, Oswald was so nervous that he had a headache.

"Oswald, something happened at school, didn't it?"

"...Yes."

So news of the incident had already reached his ears.

Now that Oswald thought about it, other students who had been passing by in the courtyard must have overheard them. Rumors must have spread from there and made it to his family. When the realization hit him, he turned pale.

"Tell me what happened exactly as you remember it."

Seeing the sharp gleam in his father's silver eyes, Oswald knew there was no point in trying to hide anything from him.

Regardless, he couldn't bring himself to recount every single detail. He told his father about the girl's false profession of love,

their monthlong relationship, and her apology. He explained that he suspected the girl had only tricked him like that because higher-ranking nobles had forced her to do their bidding.

Once he finished, his father's pursed lips were white and his eyes had dimmed to a dark gray—such were the colors his father turned when he was furious.

Thinking that his father's ire was directed toward him for embarrassing the family, he bowed his head and said, "I apologize for bringing shame to the Zola family name."

"You've done nothing wrong," his father stated emphatically.

Oswald's eyes went wide.

"They may be primary school students, but they aren't little children who don't know right from wrong. They took their teasing too far. I will have a word with her family, and with the families of the ones who put the girl up to it as well."

"Please don't do that, father!"

He didn't want his father to stir up trouble with a higher-ranking family on his behalf. What if they retaliated against the Zolas? Who knew what impact this might have on his brother's work or his sister's new family.

"Why not? Considering what they put you through, you have every right to be angry."

He racked his brain for any reason he could think of to keep his father from raising a complaint with the other families. "No, I know she said she only confessed because she had lost a game, but in exchange, I received a free lesson on how to date a girl. I'm completely fine!"

"Oswald, you need not fear that we will suffer reprisals. Our family is stronger than that. And as your father, I cannot allow anyone to get away with doing something that has reduced you to such a haggard state."

His father's voice was low as he spoke. Oswald appreciated his concern, but it didn't help his cause. He racked his brain further—then thought of his plump reflection in the mirror.

"Father, I'm not haggard. I'm just trying to lose weight!"

"You are?"

"Yes. I'll be entering college soon, so, um, I wanted to slim down a little and maybe look less plain..."

The truth was that Oswald wanted to be handsomer, but he couldn't bring himself to come right out and tell his father that. He felt a little pathetic being so evasive.

Oswald had gray hair and gray eyes. His father had silver hair and silver eyes. Their hues were similar, but for a man in his forties, his father was dashingly handsome. Oswald had lost count of how many times someone had expressed surprise that he was the son of Viscount Zola, but he was sure it was well into the dozens.

"...I understand. But stop trying to reduce your weight on your own. You'll only hurt yourself. I'll call for a specialist."

"Th-Thank you."

His path of retreat had been immediately blocked. Although he did have intentions of losing weight, now he would have no choice but to be serious about it. He hoped he could make at least a little progress, but it seemed like such a long road.

"I'm sorry. If I had known this was a concern for you, I would have called for one sooner. Your grandmother wanted— Well, she was worried that you might die if you became bedridden again and weren't a healthy weight, so she made me promise not to make you lose weight before you were fifteen."

"It's okay. I appreciate the concern. But I'm healthy now."

So his excess weight really had been a byproduct of his grandmother's worry for him. When he was younger, he had often gotten fevers that confined him to bed for extended periods. All his life, he had been cherished and protected.

"Um... Could you please refrain from speaking with the other families, father?" Oswald asked timidly.

His father nodded. "Yes, I will. However, this will get around, and their families will weed out the problem on their own."

"What do you mean?"

"When others hear about what happened, any respectable family will try to rectify the situation as soon as possible. Otherwise, people will think of that girl as someone who toys with men's hearts, and if the instigators become family heads, then there is a possibility that

they will be abandoned by their branch families and subordinates. No family wants that to happen."

"So even if you don't say anything to their families, they'll be reprimanded anyway...?" Oswald asked quietly. He regretted ever falling for such a childish prank.

His father cleared his throat. "There is nothing about any of this that you should feel sorry for. Let's conclude this discussion now, shall we?"

"Yes, father. Thank you for your time."

After thanking his father, Oswald got up to leave. When he placed his hand on the doorknob, his father softly called his name.

"Oswald, do you still have feelings for this girl?"

"No, father," Oswald responded flatly. Without a backward glance, he walked out the door.

Ten seconds after the door to Viscount Zola's study was closed, three people emerged from the adjoining room.

"How dare they treat our little brother like that? They went way too far!"

"Worrying about the family even when he has done nothing wrong... Oz is such a sweet boy..."

"While I admire his commitment to his family, we will have to do something about his taste in women."

Viscount Zola's son managed to keep his voice steady, but his shaking fists betrayed his anger. His daughter appeared to have been moved to tears, the handkerchief she was clutching already torn into quarters. His wife's habitual smile had vanished, her face that of an expressionless doll.

They were looking to him, the head of the Zola family, for coolheaded judgment and action.

Instead, he held nothing back. "No one who has hurt my son goes unpunished..."

His son was the first to reply. "I don't understand why this happened to Oz in the first place. He's studious and earns excellent grades. He's a model student."

"Fools who judge others based solely on their appearance are a

dime a dozen, brother. Oswald is mild-mannered and heavyset. I'm sure that painted him as a target," his daughter said with a scowl. She was most likely correct.

"And that is precisely why I kept trying to tell mother to let Oswald lose a little weight! But she was convinced he would die if he fell ill again...even though I made sure to call for a priest whenever he felt the slightest bit unwell," his wife added. Although she was not Oswald's birth mother, she had always looked after him as if he were her own son.

However, it was Oswald's grandmother who had stayed constantly by his side, caring for him and educating him. As a result, the two had formed a close bond, but his relationship with the rest of the family was more reserved.

"But why didn't he tell you what had happened right away, father?" his daughter asked.

"He explained why during the discussion we just had. He didn't want to cause trouble for the family, and he was even concerned about the effect our response would have on the ones who did this to him... He's too softhearted."

Perhaps he's not suited for noble life, Viscount Zola thought in his heart. Right at that moment, he heard a knock at the door.

He answered, and Donatella entered his study wearing her maid uniform.

"Pardon my intrusion. I have those documents for you." Donatella handed him a thick sheaf of papers. It had only taken her three days to get everything he needed.

The four family members sat on the couch and took turns reading through the stack. As time went on, silence fell, and a shadow seemed to stretch across their faces.

The documents summarized the findings gathered by the Zolas' own intelligence network as well as information they had received from other families.

The girl who had started the fake relationship with Oswald was from a viscountcy. The boy who had presumably ordered her to do so was the eldest son of a marquis and next in the line of succession. Viscount Zola had known that much since the day after

the incident. But there was more.

The girl was the daughter of a maid and had been raised in the viscountcy's lands in the countryside, in consequence of which she had a slight accent. She had moved to the city to attend primary school but had made few to no friends and had felt out of place among the other noble girls.

Likely because she had no one else to call a friend, she had spent a great deal of time with another girl, who was from a baronial family. That girl had been the one laughing with the marquis boy when the false confessor had apologized to Oswald.

The conclusion was simple. The first girl had been manipulated into acting as an accomplice in the prank, the second girl had been a willing accomplice, and the boy was the main culprit. Viscount Zola had planned to take any breach of etiquette on Oswald's part into consideration when he decided how to approach this issue, but that was unneeded.

Oswald had been targeted because of his grades. In the most recent posting of overall academic scores, the student who had ranked first was a boy from another marquis family, Oswald had placed second, and a marquis's daughter had placed third. In fourth was the boy in question. Oswald had received the highest score on an examination essay for an elective history class, while the other boy had received the second-highest score.

The boy had gone around school complaining about how "Oswald Zola needs to learn his place" and how he couldn't believe "that gray piglet" had bested him. He had refused to listen to his friends when they tried to tell him to let it go. Meanwhile, the girl from the barony had given him her abject attention.

The simple and painfully obvious fact was that the boy had been jealous of Oswald. It was too ludicrous to even laugh about.

"...That boy lacks the character to become a marquis," his wife said with ice in her voice. As someone born to an earldom, she had a stricter view when it came to these matters than himself.

"He is a year older than Oswald. He abused his family status and ordered a girl from a branch family to entangle another student in a web of spite. You are right to say he has no character." He turned to

his son and daughter and asked, “What would you two do if you found yourselves in a similar situation—if you felt jealous of someone younger and lower in rank than yourselves?”

“Hmm... I think I would study harder and make an earnest effort to raise my grades. I might even ask for a private tutor. And if I still fell behind, then I would feel a great deal of respect for the other student and celebrate their achievements,” his son replied.

“I would become that student’s friend and ask them to teach me their study methods. If they were a competent tutor, my studies would improve, and either way, the more friends I have, the better,” his daughter explained.

“You are both correct. Now, about this eldest son of a marquis—his mother is the marquis’s second wife. The boy has a brother two years younger than him who is the son of his father’s first wife, and their grades are about equal. He also has a younger sister, the daughter of his father’s first wife.”

The documents listed their names, ages, friends, and additional information in detail.

“So, how should we proceed?” his wife asked, her crimson-painted lips curving into an aristocratic smile.

Their son and then daughter answered without hesitation.

“An individual from the first wife’s family is in the Mages’ Corps with me. I can invite him out for a meal and get to know him better. Oh, and I can invite a few other friends of mine from the castle and we can all partake in a fair amount of fine wine. Alcohol keeps a conversation flowing, and getting deeply drunk tends to make a person reveal some inner complaints.”

“The first wife’s younger sister and I have many mutual friends, so I will undoubtedly have the opportunity to attend a tea party where she is present. In the company of friends, you never know what will spill out.”

His children had grown up exceptionally well. He could rely on them for now.

“Well then, I will do my part as well. I will pay a visit to my parents’ home,” his wife said.

“Take a bottle of your mother’s favorite white wine from the

cellar. Feel free to take one of the ones I've been saving for special occasions."

His wife, son, and daughter left the room with smiles on their faces. As a father, his next task was to find a doctor who specialized in weight loss. As well as one other thing.

"Donatella, that was a job well done."

"Thank you for your kind words, my lord."

"I have something more to ask of you. A request, not an order. I'd like you to postpone your planned retirement next year. Stay until Oswald graduates from college. I will increase your salary."

"I accept, my lord."

Viscount Zola was thankful to hear that Donatella, a reliable spy for the family and his mother's direct subordinate, would be staying with the Zolas for a while longer. A few days ago, she had spoken to him of wanting to retire due to her age, but she was skilled at what she did. He wanted to keep her with them as long as possible.

"My lord, I have one request to make on my own behalf."

"Yes?"

"I propose we spin a story that Lord Oswald was not deceived but accepted the girl's confession out of pity for her situation. That the girl is simply a fool, and the other two are mean-spirited and unworthy of being nobles. We can feed that story to the gossip-birds."

Gossip-birds were people who were paid to disseminate information in taverns and other establishments. Donatella was proposing to not only spread this story among noble society but to all corners of the capital. *Interesting. That's not a bad thought.*

"Very well. I leave that up to your discretion, Donatella."

When Donatella had been by his mother's side, she had always been calm and collected in any situation. Even when thieves appeared, she would dispatch them without a word.

Viscount Zola was confident that Donatella would be able to follow through on any instructions he gave her. In fact, since this matter involved Oswald—whom his mother, Donatella's mistress, had been very fond of—he had no doubt she would be even more efficient than usual.

"At once, my lord," Donatella replied.

Viscount Zola turned away as she swiftly left the room, then looked down at the documents once more. *Now, where should I start?* he thought. As he brooded, he could not hear Donatella's mutter on the other side of the door.

"Anyone who makes Oz cry should perish..."

The next day, a male doctor specializing in weight loss arrived at the house for Oswald. The doctor was very trim and fit, lending credence to his ability.

He began by examining Oswald's eating habits. Oswald had begun to eat only half of the food he was served, and he had fully expected the doctor would make him further reduce his intake. However, to his surprise, the doctor instead recommended that he eat a bit more than he had been.

The doctor decided on a somewhat restricted diet consisting of steamed vegetables, chicken fillets, grilled red meat, and half of his usual servings of bread and potatoes. He would have to abstain from sweets, so he stopped consuming candy and fruit juice, and no longer added sugar to his tea.

As for exercise, it was decided that he should get his body accustomed to the changes first and embark upon a proper exercise regimen only after he had lost some weight.

Oswald began taking slow walks in the garden every day, except on rainy days, when he instead strode up and down the corridors inside. However, he became so embarrassed running into the maids all the time that one day, he decided to pace his room instead. Once boredom set in, he started reading a book about magical tools as he walked—only to run headfirst into a wall. Donatella came flying in, much to his embarrassment.

"If you insist on doing that, you should go into a room with no furniture, keep your right hand on the wall, and hold the book in your left hand."

Taking her advice, Oswald found an empty room to do exactly that. He became so engrossed in his book that before long, he was reeling with dizziness. As the room spun around him, Donatella

pulled him by the hand back to his own room. That event had been even *more* embarrassing.

Every morning and every night, Oswald stood on a scale and recorded his weight. He was pleased whenever it went down, but if he lost too much at once, the doctor made him increase his food intake. His face must have betrayed his disappointment, because the doctor proceeded to explain how rapid weight loss had harmful effects on health.

When he felt hungry, he drank water with a squeeze of lemon and skipped any scenes involving food in whatever book he happened to be reading. In the more difficult moments, he ate in his room instead of the dining room.

At a certain point, Oswald's weight refused to budge any further. If he just lost a little more weight, his face would be slimmer and his arms and legs would be easier to move around. As discouragement set in, his doctor told him that they would start running outside together.

After just one lap around the grounds, Oswald was out of breath, but his doctor hadn't even broken a sweat. Still, Oswald stubbornly made himself run three laps, and as a reward, he was given a small slice of cheesecake. He cut it into sixteenths and ate one piece at a time; that cheesecake tasted better than any he'd ever had before.

His siblings also supported him in his weight loss. His oldest brother brought him some dried anchovies, which were supposed to help reduce the feeling of hunger when chewed on. They chatted as they chewed on the anchovies and drank unsweetened tea, both scrunching up their noses at the strong fishy smell.

Oswald's older sister brought him seven types of hair treatments, and after he tested each one, she dried his hair and inspected the results. Soon, his hair became shiny and sleek, but he felt like the process could have given him a *real* cold. He was also a little concerned that his sister was spending too much time at home, away from her husband's family.

Oswald's second oldest brother bought him a medicine that was currently trendy among women in the capital—a laxative that could be taken continually. Before Oswald got a chance to try it, his

mother confiscated the package and explained in no small detail the dangers to his health. When she began hounding his brother with questions about the woman who had recommended the product to him, Oswald quietly slipped out of the room to give them space.

Oswald diligently followed every method he could to lose weight. Instead of sitting down while reading or studying, he stood and used a shelf as a desk. He asked that a portion of his meal be set aside so he could eat it later when he was having hunger pains. And eventually, although he had never before been able to do a single push-up, he became capable of twenty, and then thirty.

He ran day and night with his doctor, and at some point he realized that he was no longer getting out of breath and his legs felt lighter. Before long, he stopped counting how many laps he was running and instead decided on a length of time to run for.

One evening, his knees began to hurt terribly. His doctor diagnosed him with growing pains, and although he was glad to be getting taller, the nagging pain kept him awake at night. Donatella brought him a towel that had been wrung out in hot water and laid it across his knees, bringing him a fresh one as needed. Thanks to the heat, he was finally able to fall asleep.

But even when the pain persisted into the next day, he only let her lay one hot towel over his knees, after which he feigned a complete recovery. Donatella's fingers were bright red.

For four and a half months, Oswald never left the grounds of his home as he endeavored to lose weight with the help of his family.

With little time left before college, Oswald needed a uniform tailored.

"L-Lord Oswald?" The couturier who had come to take his measurements froze in surprise at the sight of him.

Oswald felt a flicker of joy at the couturier's reaction. He had lost over a third of his starting weight, and all his old clothes hung loose on him now. The excess fat had dropped from his round features, revealing the contours of his face. He had been surprised to realize how much he resembled his father.

His eyes, which had always looked heavy and sleepy, had taken

on an elegant almond shape. Even his vision seemed to have opened, and he saw for the first time that his eyes were not gray but silver.

"Oswald, what do you think of this dark blue?"

"I believe this lighter blue would look good on you as well, but what do you think?"

Although his father and mother spoke as though soliciting his opinion, they ended up buying both of the two suits he tried on. He told his parents that since he was still growing, he only needed the bare minimum, but they didn't listen to what he had to say.

Once his dark blue suit was finished and he put it on, he was immediately dragged to a barbershop by his brother.

"Give him this haircut, please," his brother told the barber.

"Brother, don't be ridiculous!" Oswald yelped.

His brother had brought, wrapped in cloth, a portrait of their silver-haired, silver-eyed great-grandfather, a respectable aristocrat known as the Silver Fox. He had been a fine figure of a man, with four wives and sixteen children. When a kraken had appeared in the sea near the capital, he had used his powerful ice magic to freeze the surface of the water, creating a platform for the knights to stand on and fight.

What was his brother thinking, taking down the portrait of their ancestor from their father's study?

"Well, I think you look a lot like him, Oz," his brother said. "And mother said this style would work really well with your hair type."

"But was it really necessary to bring his portrait all the way here...?"

"Seeing a picture is easier than me having to explain it, right?"

His brother had directed that question at the barber, who nodded with a stiff smile. Oswald felt his respect for his brother drop substantially. Regardless, he wouldn't mind having the same hairstyle as his great-grandfather.

When he came back home from the barbershop, his mother brought him a pair of silver-rimmed glasses.

"These are just what you need. They will help inspire self-confidence."

"Glasses?"

Oswald failed to see how. If the glasses had been a magical tool that allowed him to see into the distance, that would have been useful, but regular glasses? In spite of his reservations, Oswald put them on. They had already been adjusted to his size.

"Your eyes tend to get shifty when you're nervous. These glasses will help cover that up. If you look down for a moment when you're anxious, it will simply look like you are thinking deeply about something. And your eyesight is a little poor anyway, so I think it's a good idea for you to start wearing them now that you are entering college. Practice smiling with them in the mirror."

"You want me to practice smiling?"

"That's right. Facial muscles are a noble's weapon. You must exercise them before starting college."

Oswald thought that sounded like an enormously tedious weapon, but regardless, he thanked his mother, then left to scrutinize his face in the mirror.

As he did so, he realized he was no good at smiling. He would cover the mirror with a cloth, make a face, and then remove the cloth. More often than not, the expression he saw was not the one he had meant to make. The next morning, he awoke to very sore cheek muscles.

The day that pain finally faded, his mother summoned him. She inspected his clothes meticulously, and for some reason, she changed out his white pocket square for a light blue one.

"There, that should do it. Oswald, come back even more refined."

"Pardon?" Oswald asked, not quite understanding.

He heard his sister call out, "Oz! I've come to fetch you!"

Giving him neither explanation nor room for debate, his married sister whisked him off to a gathering of her friends—young married noblewomen who were in the midst of a tea party. Dazzled and disoriented by their beauty and glamour, he focused all his efforts on making sure he did nothing to offend them. However, all the women present were very good conversationalists. Each of them, when her turn came to talk, offered a broad range of interesting topics, and they listened equally well, with skillfully placed responses. They even

carefully explained to him the appropriate responses he could give in turn.

Although his head swam from the women's loveliness and high expectations of his conduct, he deeply respected their communication skills and the consideration they showed him. Oswald attended several more tea parties, where he trained his own conversational skills, facial muscles, and stomach.

When next his father summoned him, he realized that his family was taking turns helping him.

"Oswald, to celebrate your enrollment into college, put on a suit and go see the opera. Here are your tickets."

His father handed him two tickets, indicating that he was to invite a young lady to go with him. *I can't believe he's making me do all the work.*

Since the tickets were for a matinee, the person he invited did not have to be a girlfriend. But Oswald did not have any female friends either. He supposed maybe his mother or sister could introduce him to a girl, but he also felt that was not what his father wanted him to do. His thoughts were thrown into turmoil as he struggled to come up with a suitable partner, but then someone came to mind.

With his spending money, Oswald bought a bouquet of flowers in various colors, which he handed to Donatella when she came to bring him his tea.

"Ms. Donatella, would you like to attend the opera with me the day after tomorrow?"

Donatella stood stock-still with the tea tray in her hands for several seconds. He wondered if perhaps she felt sorry for him that he had no one else to invite. She responded with a perfectly polite, aristocratic thank-you.

On the day of the opera, Donatella appeared dressed in a silver-gray gown. Gorgeously made up, and with her hair dyed entirely black, she looked younger and lovelier than ever. The day after he had invited Donatella, his mother had apparently arranged everything for her, hiring a beautician to come on the day of the opera. His mother's judgment had been flawless every step of the

way.

They arrived at the opera house in the Central District, where they would be watching the opera titled *Tell Me, What is Love?* Every part of it enthralled Oswald, from the amazing songs to the charming and lovely singers and the spectacular sets.

The end of the opera was a bit intense, and he was relieved when the sound of applause covered up his shocked exclamation.

On the carriage ride home, Donatella told him that she was going to keep the flowers and the gown, explaining that she wanted to dry the flowers and be buried in the gown. He wished she wouldn't make such an inauspicious remark.

When he told her she should go to the opera again with her significant other, she smiled and told him that she had none, and that her first love had been so wonderful that anyone else paled in comparison.

"Can I ask what your first love was like?"

"A strong, kind individual who was fiercely devoted to family," Donatella said, the corners of her eye softening as she smiled.

For some reason, Oswald thought of his grandmother.

The day before the college entrance ceremony, his entire family, save for his older sister, sat down for dinner. The menu for the evening had been chosen to accommodate his diet, with a main course of steamed chicken drizzled with an orange sauce served alongside generous portions of cooked vegetables.

At the table, they discussed current affairs—the Order of Beast Hunters had recently collaborated with the knights of Ehrlichia to dispatch a wyvern that had appeared on the border between the two countries—as well as lighter matters, such as how much of a bother the new model of compact magical lanterns were. When there was a lull in the conversation, his parents explained what had happened to the students involved in the false confession.

The family of the girl who had pretended to confess to him had come to them with an apology, which they had declined to accept, stating that the children were merely in the same class and there was no proof that they had been involved in a relationship. This was

to save both Oswald and the girl from malicious talk, since, although they were primary school students, this incident had still involved two members of the opposite sex.

The girl would be studying civil service in college, and after graduation, she would return to the countryside where she had been raised. There she would help her father, the lord of the land. For a noble, it was a perfectly normal path to take. Oswald felt relieved for her sake.

His parents also made sure he understood that once in college, he was not to associate or have any contact with her, though as it was, he had no such plans.

The family of the eldest son of the marquis had also come to apologize, but his parents had informed them that since there had been no relationship between Oswald and the girl, there was nothing to apologize for. This had been to prevent a conflict between their families.

However, the boy's family must have heard differently from their own sources.

The boy's grandfather, the former marquis, had been terribly bothered to learn what had happened. He had said that the boy hadn't been the type of person to do such a thing when he'd been living in their dominion, and that living in the capital must have had a bad influence on him. He insisted that the boy take a break from the city and return to their dominion for a period of two years, during which his grandfather would take it upon himself to reeducate him. The grandfather came in person to the capital to bring the boy back with him.

Oswald had an inkling that the boy had become exhausted from academic competition. If so, then maybe the best thing for him would be to take it easy for a while on his family land with their many cows.

Lastly, the barony also offered their apology for their daughter's behavior, but Oswald's parents had replied that they didn't even know who she was. Since Oswald's parents had denied the relationship to both the marquisate and viscountcy, the other girl was effectively nothing but an onlooker.

Instead of college, the girl would be going to commerce school in Ehrlichia. Oswald fretted that she had been exiled on his account, but his parents explained that her family's company was currently expanding their market in Ehrlichia, so their plan was for her to work at one of their branch stores.

"It would be worse if people knew her as a girl who made the son of a marquis lose his head—worse than if they knew about her treatment of you. It's safer for her to leave than to stay in Ordine," his brother told him without meeting his gaze, and Oswald took his word for it.

From there, his family gave him no space to think about those three but immediately moved on to peppering him with questions about whether he was going to join any clubs in college, who he was going to choose to be his magical toolmaking mentor, and whether there was anything he wanted in celebration of his entering college.

His older brothers invited him to browse some magical tool shops, and he happily consented.

He and his younger brother, who was entering primary school, made plans to go out and buy candy together. While he was happy to have an outing planned with his adorable little brother, he would have to exercise restraint when buying candy for himself.

His sister informed him of when the next tea party would be held. He wished he could decline, but he had a feeling he had no say in the matter.

The evening around the dinner table with his family proved to be a genuinely enjoyable time for Oswald.

Yesterday's downpour, which had lasted well into the night, dispersed and gave way to a beautiful, sunny day for the college entrance ceremony.

Before Oswald stepped down from the carriage, he adjusted his silver-rimmed glasses with a slightly shaking hand. He took a deep breath, exited the carriage, then straightened his back and walked forward. Here and there, he felt eyes on him, but no one came up to talk to him. His heartbeat quickened its pace.

After walking for a bit, he saw a familiar young lady who had sat

next to him in many of their elective classes in primary school. Oswald stood up straight and gave her a smile that he had practiced many times over.

"Good morning, Lady Chiesa. You have grown even more beautiful since last I saw you."

The young lady widened her eyes slightly.

"Huh?" she said in surprise. She quickly recovered with a composed smile and a greeting of her own. "I am honored to be addressed by someone as splendid as yourself."

She had uttered a line used by nobles when speaking to someone whose name they did not know or did not remember.

"I am Oswald Zola. It's been half a year since last we saw each other, so it's understandable that you've forgotten who I am."

"...I only failed to recognize you right away because of your glasses, Lord Zola. Your uniform suits you well. You look very nice."

A brilliant save by a young lady from an earldom to blame her lapse on his glasses.

"I look forward to being your classmate again. It was worth enrolling in the magical toolmaking department just for the chance to view you from afar, Lady Chiesa."

"Oh, come now..." she replied, her violet eyes half closing in a smile.

Oswald was the son of a viscount, and though he had low magic, the two were in the same magical toolmaking program. He had also placed second in the entrance examination scores, and he looked handsomer now.

As he wondered whether the Oswald Zola he had now become was worthier of being her school friend, she smiled at him and said, "There is no need for you to view me from afar. Please, sit next to me in class. And call me Concetta, Oswald."

"I would be happy to, Concetta."

He had readily been given permission to refer to her familiarly. It seemed his school life here would prove to be more fun than his time in primary school.

"Concetta!" a girl's voice called out. "There you are."

"Hello, Miss Goodwin," Oswald greeted her. "I see you've grown

your hair out. It looks very comely on you."

"Huh...? Oh, Zola, is that you?! I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you..."

"I have lost some weight. Perhaps that has made me less noticeable as well?"

"Hee hee! No, no. You look very handsome!"

Miss Goodwin was Concetta's good friend and Oswald's classmate. Her red hair, which had been short six months ago, had grown a bit. It made him realize just how much time had passed, though he felt he had undergone the more drastic transformation.

Afterward, several other people approached Oswald to say hello, and each time, he responded politely in turn. It was very convenient how he didn't have to initiate any conversation as he had in primary school.

"Excuse me! Oswald!" a voice suddenly called out to him. He knew who it was by her voice alone, but he intentionally took his time to turn around and face her. As he had thought, it was the girl with reddish-brown eyes, but he didn't bother to greet her by her first or last name.

"Um, Zola, I wanted to tell you I'm truly—"

He wouldn't hear her apology. It had been stressed to him that he was not to have contact with her in school, and he was sure she had been told the same. This girl, whose eyes were moist with tears, had never been his girlfriend. She was just the person who had given him, a boy who had dreamed of romance, the motivation to reflect on himself.

"Oh, what an honor to be approached by someone as lovely as yourself," he said, using the expression for a stranger and giving her a well-practiced aristocratic smile.

At his unfamiliar response, the girl's reddish-brown eyes grew wide, and no other words passed through her pale pink lips.

Concetta, astutely catching on to the situation, tugged at his sleeve and said sweetly, "Oswald, shall we get moving? We shouldn't be late to the ceremony."

All around him, other girls began to pipe up as well.

"Yes, there will be a crowd, so we'd best get inside as soon as possible, Lord Zola."

“Oh, I hope I’m in the same magical toolmaking classes as Zola!”

“I hope so too.”

“That would be nice. Well then, let’s go,” Oswald said, stepping forward surrounded by the crowd of girls.

Unlike the last time he had walked away from her, the girl who had falsely confessed to him didn’t try to grab onto his sleeve. There was a moment when he almost turned around, but he kept his gaze fixed sharply ahead. But he was well aware he was only blinded by false love and the joy of being with female friends. True love was different. Love was something more beautiful, more wonderful—

One day, he wanted to find that true and undeniable love for himself.



The crowd of new college students walked beneath the bright sunlight, wrapped in the gently blowing breeze.

The student who stood out most remarkably was a handsome lad with silver hair and silver eyes. He was slender but not frail looking; rather, he strode gracefully forward as if he were on a stage.

"No way—is that Zola?!" one boy said as he saw him pass.

The girl next to him took a look. "Is it? He looks much better. They used to call him the gray piglet..."

His gray hair and eyes were now a shiny silver, and his round face had been chiseled into sleek planes. It was hard to believe his well-toned physique had not always been that way. Above all, his smile was as elegant as any noble's. Although they had known him for years in primary school, it was as if he were a different person.

"If he's a gray piglet, then we must be the brown mouse and the red mole. People are going to rush over to the magical toolmaking department just to get a look at him."

"Yes, starting with me," the girl replied. "Although the magical toolmaking department is a bit far from the civil service department."

"You serious? Well, on second thought, maybe a drawing of him could sell well..."

As the boy let out a high-pitched hum, his classmates stared at him.

The silver-haired boy patiently responded with a kind smile to each and every person who came up to talk to him, and yet another girl joined the circle.

From that day on, no one ever called Oswald Zola a gray piglet again. Oswald, who drew many a gaze and became the topic of many a conversation, would go on to thrive in college, surrounded by gorgeous women and his eccentric research group friends.

In time, he would amass an entire collection of handkerchiefs and receive a new nickname, born of jealousy: *the Silver Fox*.

Raul the Student and the White Embroidered Handkerchief

"Um, Lord Zola, please accept this!"

A blonde girl Raul only knew by face held out a white handkerchief to him with both hands. All he remembered about her was that she was a younger primary school student.

"Thank you very much, but I am as yet too immature to return your feelings."

"That's all right, as long as you take it..."

Raul thought the girl was actually quite cute with her cheeks flushed red and her fingers trembling with nerves. But he found her cute in the way he might have found a small child or a baby animal cute. He had no romantic interest in her.

"Very well. Then I will gratefully accept it."

When Raul took the handkerchief with a smile, he noticed there was a small card underneath it.

Without another word, the girl scurried away from him. She ran toward a blonde woman with similar facial features, who bowed to him. It seemed they were customers of the store.

He was currently in the Goddess's Right Eye, a magical tool shop in the capital that catered to nobles. The owner was Oswald, Raul's father and chairman of the Zola Company. Raul often came by the store to look at real magical tools and to listen to his father explain his wares.

Raul waited for the girl and her mother to leave before moving a foot.

"Lord Raulere, Oswald has finished with his business, so he has asked us to join him for tea— Oh? Is that an embroidered handkerchief?"

A beautiful black-haired woman stepped toward him—Ermelinda,

his father's third wife. At her smile, Raul nodded nonchalantly.

"It seems so."

This was not the first time he had received something of the sort. During his time as a primary student, three other girls had given him handkerchiefs, which made this the fourth. However, it inspired no excitement in him.

Among nobles, an embroidered white handkerchief bore the meaning "You are my first love." It held deep value, and if one did not have a significant other or a fiancée, the polite thing to do was accept it—which did not, however, imply that one wanted to start a relationship.

If the recipient already had a significant other or fiancée, if they didn't intend to marry at all, or if they simply had no interest whatsoever in the giver, it was acceptable to refuse. But remembering how his mother had taught him that he should not carelessly hurt someone who had bravely confessed her feelings for him, he had decided to take the handkerchief.

However, a girl had once gotten the wrong idea after Raul accepted her second handkerchief, and her father had ended up presenting himself at the Zola home to discuss a betrothal. It was for this reason that Raul had decided, in this case, to tack on the standard rejection phrase: "I am as yet too immature to return your feelings."

He had been taught to do so by his father. Apparently, during his younger years, his father had received many handkerchiefs and, as such, knew a thing or two about how to handle them.

"Shall I fetch you a leather case or glass holder?" Ermelinda offered.

"No thank you, a paper envelope is fine."

Raul planned to put the envelope away in a box with the other handkerchiefs.

Suddenly, he remembered something his father had once told him: "It's best to think ahead and note down who you received the handkerchief from. As a courtesy, you should also send a bouquet of flowers in an array of colors to her house."

Realizing he didn't even know the girl's name, Raul decided to

take a look at the card that she had given to him along with the handkerchief. A rose was embossed on the front, and on the back was a short phrase and the girl's name. *To the one I love. Dahliya Goodwin.*

Raul let out a strangled noise. His knees nearly buckled, and he took a staggering step backward. In his mind rose the image of a certain red-haired magical toolmaker and her beautiful smile.

If only that girl had changed two letters of her first name and had a different last name—no, her name wasn't the issue, it was the fact that she wasn't who I wanted—no again, that sort of thinking is discourteous to both of them. The circuitry in his brain had gone momentarily erratic.

He had a few choice words he wanted to say. Never before had he felt such resentment over a simple coincidence.

"Lord Raulere, are you all right?! Do you feel faint?"

Ermelinda put an arm around his shoulders for support, and he dropped the card right in front of her. The large black letters stood out starkly against the white card. They both froze for a few seconds until Raul wordlessly picked it up from the floor and stuffed it into his pocket along with the handkerchief.

Ermelinda looked down, a deep furrow between her brows. Raul wasn't sure what sort of face he should make, or even what sort of face he was currently making.

An expression of discomfiture crossed her features, and when she finally spoke, it was in a voice filled with bewilderment. "Lord Raulere... Um, you will find another, I'm sure of that..."

He knew she grasped the reason behind his reaction, and it was too embarrassing to bear. Nevertheless, he also knew that she was genuinely concerned for him.

To Raul, Ermelinda was his father's wife. From a noble's perspective, she was one of his mothers. Raul, however, just couldn't see her as a mother. She was closer in age to him than his father.

As for his father, Raul had been avoiding him until just recently. Rumors about his father had spread among Raul's classmates: that he'd engaged in wild affairs before he married, that he'd driven away his first wife with his cruelty, and that he was a toolmaker with weak

magic who owed his professional success to his family's power and status. Raul had believed all those rumors without even taking the time to discuss them with his parents, in addition to which he had formed his own foolish assumptions about his father.

It was Dahlia Rossetti who had taught him just what a capable toolmaker his father really was. At first, he'd assumed she was merely flattering his father, but she had earnestly expressed the awe in which she held "Oswald the magical toolmaker." After coming to another mistaken conclusion, Raul had proceeded to ask her if she and his father intended to wed—a rude question for which he chastised himself even remembering it now.

Come to think of it, his first meeting with Dahlia had gone worse than that. Why, *why* had he had to be sucking the nectar from the scarlet sages in the garden? He must've looked like such a child. Dahlia had kindly joined him in sucking the nectar, but just thinking about it was embarrassing. Although, if that hadn't happened, then he wouldn't have met Dahlia.

In any case, he couldn't get that strange coincidence out of his head.

"Um... Scorpio might be a bit strong, but how about I bring you some honeyed pear wine?" Ermelinda asked, her sprout green eyes wavering with hesitation as she looked at him.

He appreciated her concern for him, but she really shouldn't have been offering alcohol to someone who wasn't of legal age. He wasn't even sixteen yet. Although he couldn't deny that he was in the state of mind to want a drink.

"Scorpio, please. Since I'm not of age yet, I'll just sniff it...Mother Mel."

"What...?" Ermelinda tilted her head so stiffly it looked as though her neck was in need of oiling. "Wh-What did you just call me, Lord Raulere?"

One time, his mother, who was his father's first wife, had told him, "When you feel ready, you should call them Mother Fiore and Mother Mel."

He had thought that day would never come, but Ermelinda had been witness to so many of his shameful moments, and despite his

attempts to avoid her, she genuinely cared about him. There was no more denying that she was his family.

Even though their relationship wasn't perfect, Raul resolved that from this day forward, he would call Ermelinda his mother.

"You can just call me Raul, Mother Mel. I'm sure it's a lot of effort to be so polite with family."

"R-Raul..."

She said his name quietly as she took both his hands in hers. Tears began to spill from her eyes, and she opened her mouth to speak, then closed it without a word and simply looked at him. Raul, too, was at a loss for what to say.

"Mel, Raul, the tea is getting cold."

Hearing his name called, Raul turned around to see his father coming down from the second floor. Apparently, they were late for tea.

When his father saw the two of them, he cried out, "Has something happened?!"

His face stricken with worry, Oswald ran down the stairs, slipping on the final step.

"Oz!"

"Father!"

Trying to explain anything to his father, who had fallen to the floor, was a monumental challenge.

Magical Toolmaking Department Classmates

Being admitted into Ordine's royal college was, for a noble, considered a matter of course. But if one proceeded to express the desire to study magical toolmaking, one might get odd looks and vague comments about how that was a stable profession and a practical choice for the future.

Magical toolmaking studies were regarded as less difficult than mage studies; most of those who chose to pursue toolmaking either had too little magic to become mages or alchemists—at least, not useful ones—or were unable to wield any of the four elements or healing magic.

Regardless, in the Kingdom of Ordine, where magic crystals and magical tools were so much a part of everyday life, magical toolmakers never went hungry.

Today, Davide, the eldest son of the Viscountcy Aldini, had decided that he would study magical toolmaking.

When he went into his father's study and told him he would not be pursuing mage studies but magical toolmaking in college, his father didn't say a word for five seconds.

His father then asked for his reasoning, and he responded, "My younger brother will study magic. He should take over the family. I wish to pursue magical toolmaking, my true calling. Please grant me permission to leave the family."

After ten more seconds of silence, his father gave his consent. It was the obvious decision for Davide—so obvious that it was odd that his father hadn't said anything about it before he reached college age. Davide wondered if his father had been waiting for him to bring it up first.

His brother, who was one year younger than him, had more

powerful magic and received better grades in school. He and Davide had the same mother, so they got along reasonably well, but there had been disputes within the family over who would take on the title of viscount. And if anything were to befall that brother, Davide's next youngest brother also had a higher magical grade than him. That was why Davide had decided that it was best that he, as the eldest son, announce his intention to leave the family as soon as possible.

Next, he went to report his decision to his mother, who apologized for not having birthed him with stronger magic.

In response, Davide clenched his fists and insisted, "This has nothing to do with my magic. I *like* making magical tools! I want to make a living as a magical toolmaker!"

His mother only smirked and said, "Davide, you have no talent for acting."

There was no fooling her.

Later, when he went to his brother's room to tell him his news, his brother punched him as hard as he could.

"Punch me back, brother!" he commanded him. Davide feigned a punch and then hugged him tightly instead. His brother burst into tears.

None of his family members were at fault. Davide was just unlucky.

A few days later, Davide passed the examination to study magical toolmaking. He moved into the college dormitory the first day he could. The room was small and cramped, but it was a relief to be alone.

The instructor had his magical toolmaking class sit in alphabetical order by first name without separating them by gender.

Next to Davide sat a red-haired girl named Dahlia Rossetti. She was one year younger than him but tall for her age. Her father was Baron Rossetti, the magical toolmaker famous for inventing the hot water dispenser.

Dahlia was quick at arithmetic and had neat handwriting, but she stumbled over her Ehrlichian pronunciation and was always dead last among the girls when doing middle-distance running during physical

education.

To Davide, she seemed like a mild-mannered, slightly scatterbrained girl, and he was sure he wasn't the only one who thought so. Their interactions were limited to saying hello and occasionally exchanging small talk.

As the seasons changed, their basic education classes and magical tool curriculum were supplemented with hands-on training. Their first assignment was to coat a small, round mirror with powder made from the wings of a bug-type monster called an argent firefly.

In order to enchant the mirror, they had to coat it with a solution of the powder and then channel a small amount of magic into it. The finished product was a hand mirror that glowed faintly and was visible even in dark spaces.

It was a simple magical tool, suitable for beginners, as making it did not require much magic. Or at any rate, so the textbook claimed. But spreading the powdered argent firefly mixture from the center of the small mirror to the edges took a lot more effort than Davide had imagined.

Other students were also having trouble. Since they could only coat the mirrors with one layer of the mixture, many turned out streaky, bumpy, or uneven in thickness between the center and outer edges. There were also some students who were unable to enchant uniformly, resulting in mirrors that could not be seen in the dark or were only bright in the middle.

Meanwhile, Dahlia turned in three mirrors, each one coated uniformly. As a finishing touch, she had painted black rims around the glass, after which she carefully used a handkerchief to wipe away the paint staining her slender fingers. She had finished with over half the allotted time to spare.

Their instructor held up Dahlia's work. The mirror was crystal clear, and even in the pale shadows under a desk, it emitted a faint glow.

"Miss Rossetti, you did a very good job on all three of these mirrors. I daresay they're good enough to sell," the young teacher praised her.

Dahlia thanked the teacher with a smile. She had been the first to

finish and had made no fewer than three mirrors all on her own. She had regulated her magic and coated the mirrors with consummate skill. And during their first hands-on lesson, no less.

Most students were a ball of nerves or excitement for their first lesson or else were fraught with worry over the possibility of making mistakes. Some were determined to make a living as magical toolmakers because, unable to become mages, it was their only choice. Other students, who had some experience working in their families' workshops, were irritated at not being able to perform as well as Dahlia.

"Miss Rossetti, did you learn magical toolmaking from your father?" asked another student, a boy with blue hair.

"Yes, I did."

"It's no wonder you're so good, then. You're not like the rest of us who are starting from zero."

Dahlia stared blankly at the boy, oblivious to the hidden thorn in his words. The young teacher must not have noticed either, for she didn't say anything.

Davide had failed at his first attempt and had only just managed to coat his second mirror right before the end of class. When he saw its rippled surface, he could but hang his head.

"I could've made one too if both my father and grandfather were magical toolmakers."

"I'm sure it was easy for her because she's done it so many times already."

By break time, envy for the red-haired girl had spread like a plague. Davide knew his classmates were just making things up, but he couldn't say a word against them.

Dahlia herself kept her mouth closed, neither retorting nor protesting what they had said.

After that day, Dahlia had trouble fitting in with the other students. No one was avoiding her outright, and they greeted her in class as they always had. However, whenever she successfully made a magical tool during their lessons—other students also succeeded in making them, but since Dahlia's tools were the best, it was hard for

her not to stand out—some of the male students would comment loudly about how *of course* she'd done well considering she'd learned from her father.

Davide wanted to tell them to cut it out. Enchanting was difficult work. Even if someone was taught how to perform an enchantment, doing it on their own still required significant effort.

Despite how he felt, he lacked the courage to speak up. All he could do was clench his fists as he sat in the seat beside her.

As the days passed, Dahlia became quieter and quieter. She had never been much of a talker, but Davide couldn't help but worry. One day, she came to school pale-faced and didn't even eat lunch. For the entire class period, Davide debated saying something to her.

When she headed to the school gates to go home, he followed her at a distance. His plan was to talk to her where there were few people about. But once they reached the school gate, Davide saw a man waiting there with green eyes similar to Dahlia's. Davide assumed that was her father, Baron Carlo Rossetti.

"How do you feel, Dahlia? You shouldn't have forced yourself to come."

"I feel awful. Let's go home..."

"That's why I told you not to go to school today. Stay home tomorrow. Come, give me your bag. The carriage is waiting."

"Thanks, dad..."

When Dahlia's father took the bag from his daughter, who was unsteady on her feet, he suddenly met eyes with Davide.

"Who's that?" he asked.

"Huh?"

Dahlia turned around and looked surprised to see him.

Davide hurriedly introduced himself to Carlo. "My name is Davide Aldini. I am Dahlia's classmate. It is an honor to meet you, Baron Rossetti."

"That is very kind of you to say. I am Dahlia's father, Carlo Rossetti," Dahlia's father replied, squinting slightly and lifting the corners of his mouth.

Davide knew at once that Carlo was not smiling at him but sizing him up. He himself had never said anything rude to Dahlia, but as a

noble's son, he was guilty of not defending her against their classmates' malicious remarks. Any father would be angry about that.

In that tense atmosphere, Dahlia asked him curiously, "Are you going home too, Aldini?"

He felt conflicted for a moment as he stared into her clear green eyes, but then he decided to answer honestly. "No, I was just worried... I wanted to ask if you were okay."

He'd never realized things had gotten this bad. As he thought about what to do next—either apologize for not helping her or encourage her to talk to the teacher—Dahlia smiled brightly at him.

"Thanks for worrying about me. But I'm fine."

"But you shouldn't have to go through this alone. It's best if you talk to someone."

"Oh, I don't need to go to the doctor or anything. I just ate some undercooked fish yesterday... I thought it'd be fine..."

"O-Oh... How unfortunate..."

He had been worried over nothing. Nothing at all.

As a headache began to take hold of Davide, Carlo cleared his throat and said, "Thank you for accompanying Dahlia to the gates. Well, let's be off, Dahlia. I don't want to keep the coachman waiting too long."

"Okay. See you tomorrow, Aldini."

"See you tomorrow, Rossetti. And, um, I hope you feel better..."

After an awkward goodbye, Davide watched the father-and-daughter pair as they walked away. Carlo turned back once, and the look in his eye was a little frightening. Davide was more convinced than ever that Dahlia's talent at enchantments really was the result of strict training from her father.

"Good morning, Aldini."

The next day, Dahlia came to school like normal. As they exchanged hellos, Davide was relieved to see the color had returned to her face.

For their lesson that day, they were to enchant a small piece of cloth with powder of horned rabbit fur in order to improve the

texture of the cloth. The powder was so fine that the slightest disturbance would send it flying into the air. And despite numerous warnings from the instructor to be careful, some students went into coughing fits as clouds of powder rose around them.

Dahlia kept the movement of her powder to a minimum; not once did she cause it to scatter into the air. And of course, she was the quickest to complete her enchantment, and with flawless results. She never deliberately underperformed in order to pacify their classmates, nor did she ever slow herself down. She simply and matter-of-factly completed the assignments. It was then that Davide realized she was already a magical toolmaker.

The reason that there seemed to be such a large gap between Dahlia and her classmates was that the rest of them acted too much like children. Dahlia ignored their childish jealousy and never lowered herself to their level. She was an independent magical toolmaker who completed her tasks efficiently without being swayed by others. When Davide thought of her that way, things began to make sense.

Now I see. It doesn't matter what other people say. As someone who also aspired to be an independent magical toolmaker, Davide made up his mind to talk to Dahlia.

"Miss Rossetti, I'm struggling to get an even texture. Could you show me what I'm doing wrong?"

Dahlia's eyes widened, but then she nodded and took a serious look at his enchantment.

"Let's see... Since you have higher magic than me, I think you'd be better off applying and enchanting all of the powder at once instead of splitting it up into smaller portions. Also, instead of folding the fabric into quarters, it's better if you roll it up like a tube and start enchanting from the edge..." she said. She was the type to speak more rapidly when explaining things.

Davide tried her method, and it worked like a charm. Her instruction had been even more precise and easy to understand than the instructor's.

I won't be surprised if the teacher gets jealous of Dahlia too.

But no sooner had he had the thought than the teacher appeared

beside them with a smile.

"That's a very straightforward way to put it! Miss Rossetti, if you've finished helping Mr. Aldini, would you mind explaining the process to other students? Mr. Aldini, please feel free to assist the others as well once you're done with your enchantment!"

The teacher wasn't jealous in the slightest—she placed student progress above all else. Davide felt ashamed for doubting her even for a moment.

"I guess some things are hard to do even when following the textbook," Davide observed.

"Everyone's magic is different, both in terms of potency and how it flows," Dahlia explained. "I think it's best to start by following the textbook's instructions, then keep trying things out until you find the way that works for you."

At first, everyone was either timid or oddly guarded as they listened to Dahlia and Davide. Whenever Davide found himself unable to explain something, Dahlia willingly jumped in to help.

With someone else guiding them through each step, the students were able to understand what they needed to work on and easily finish the task. Some successfully enchanted the fabric just by changing the amount of powder they were using or by letting out a strong surge of magic all at once.

"Oh, I did it! I was using the wrong amount of powder!"

"I could be wrong, but I think I've got the hang of it!"

The students who had grasped the method began helping the others around them, so that in no time at all, everyone had completed the assignment.

By the end of the lesson, although some clumsiness still remained in the students' technique, the teacher was overjoyed at everyone's progress.

From that day onward, none of their classmates made any more comments about Dahlia. But rather than letting their approval go to her head, Dahlia remained her same old self.

As for the rest of their classmates, Davide wasn't sure if it would be more accurate to say they changed or simply returned to

normalcy. More students began talking to Dahlia, and more than a few apologized to her in private. Some began walking with her between classes. And when she struggled with the mid-distance running during physical education, the girls who had already finished cheered her on. Davide noticed that Dahlia herself seemed to be smiling more often.

The ones who had changed the most were the male students. They began greeting her, something they'd never done in the past, and they talked to her more often, including about magical tools.

A boy who sat in front of her during their Ehrlichian lessons patiently helped her with her pronunciation. Even the blue-haired boy, who had been the most ruthless in his disparagement of Dahlia, gave her high-grade tea leaves. He explained that it was what they drank at his family's workshop, and that they just so happened to have an entire tin left over. *Left over, my foot. You idiot,* Davide thought.

Davide's ears would prick up anytime he heard another student mention her name.

"You know, Rossetti is actually pretty interesting once you get to know her. Dating another magical toolmaker doesn't sound like a bad idea..."

"You've gotta talk to her first. Besides, doesn't she hate you?"

"We *have* been talking. I included an apology letter with the tea I gave her... But yeah, I should ask her out."

When Davide overheard that conversation in the changing room after physical education, his heart gave a lurch. How stupid he was for not noticing his own feelings sooner. Determined not to waste any more time, he approached the other two boys.

"Sorry, but can you let me ask Rossetti out first? I've been talking to her for longer."

"...Fine. But only because you sit next to her," the blue-haired boy said with an unreadable expression.

Davide wasn't sure what he meant by that, but he thought maybe he was not such a bad person after all.

After stewing over it for the entirety of the next day, Davide

approached Dahlia before she departed school in the afternoon.

"Miss Rossetti, some friends and I are going to that new café in the Central District tomorrow. Care to join?"

He paused to gather his courage and then told her the name of the café. With its cute desserts, it was popular among women and had already gained the reputation of the city's newest date spot. Anticipating that Dahlia, as the daughter of a baron, might prefer to avoid a one-on-one date with him, Davide had asked a couple friends to accompany them.

"I'm sorry, Aldini. I'm about to go to that very café with my dad right now. But thank you for the invitation," Dahlia replied with a smile, then strode quickly out of the classroom.

Davide slumped, and his blue-haired classmate came over to pat him on the shoulder.

"Best give up. There's no way either of us is getting over that hurdle."

Claiming she was going with her father to the café where he'd invited her on a date. In terms of aristocratic rejections, it was second to none. In other words, she could only date someone chosen by her father.

In that case, the only solution would have been to have his family reach out to Baron Rossetti—an impossible task for someone who intended to leave his family to live as a commoner and hadn't even embarked upon his own career yet.

His blue-haired classmate was the second son of a baron. Although he had been accepted as an apprentice at a toolmaking workshop, he still had a long way to go before he was an established professional. He, too, lacked the qualities to go to Baron Rossetti and ask to court his daughter.

Moreover, Dahlia had thanked Davide for the invitation, which was essentially a way of saying they could still be friends, and that there would be no ill will between them. In short, it hadn't been a complete rejection, which was almost worse.

Although, perhaps that meant he still had a chance. Davide was still an inch shorter than Dahlia. Once he surpassed her in height and started his career, could he be permitted to ask her out one

more time?

"I already know what the answer will be without even having to ask. Davide, how about the two of us go out for dinner tomorrow to commiserate?"

"Sounds good. I know just the place."

In the end, Davide and the blue-haired boy became good friends.

Davide enjoyed the rest of his time in school. He was grateful that Dahlia's behavior toward him hadn't changed after he asked her out and that they were able to continue speaking normally.

During lessons, Dahlia shared her tips for enchanting, and those who grasped the technique helped other students. When Dahlia didn't know how to perform an enchantment, students whose families owned magical tool workshops would find out the method and share what they'd learned with the class.

The instructor's explanations also became easier to understand, and before long, they had gained the reputation of a class full of excellent students led by a talented teacher, much to their amusement.

As the years passed, the classmates began spending more time apart due to the demands of their coursework. Whether they were working toward becoming magical tool researchers, striving to graduate early because they'd found a toolmaker or workshop owner to apprentice under, or seeking employment at a retail shop, everyone was doing what needed to be done to follow their own paths.

Since Davide and Dahlia still took the same basic classes, they continued to see each other fairly often. They shared notes when studying for exams, she gave him advice on his toolmaking skills, and he marked her Ehrlichian vocabulary cards with pronunciation and other important notes in red ink.

And so the days passed with their friendship staying the same. The other students who had been in their first class had received recognition for their capabilities. Many of them were set to graduate a year or six months earlier than was typical.

Davide and Dahlia both completed their coursework half a year

early as well. The graduation ceremony would be held at a later date, but they no longer had to attend classes.

Their final magic studies class today essentially marked their graduation. When Dahlia rose from her seat to depart, Davide followed her out of the classroom. Right before she reached the school gates, he quickened his pace to catch up to her.

"Miss Rossetti, are you going to work as Professor Lina's assistant after you graduate?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Yes, she requested that I do so. And you're going to work at a magical tool workshop, right?"

"Yeah. I'm also working on developing a new magical tool myself."

"I hope to do that too someday."

He already knew that too. She had told him twice that she wanted to invent new magical tools.

"Let's both do our best as magical toolmakers. Oh, and one more thing. If you're ever amazed by something I made, I want you to say, 'Not bad, Davide.'"

Most magical tools did not display the creator's name—if there was any name on the product, it would be that of the company—so it was unlikely that Dahlia would recognize a tool as his anyway. He wondered—had Dahlia picked up on his roundabout way of asking her to call him by his first name?

"I will. And if you see a magical tool of mine that you think is well-made, you can tell me, 'Not bad, Dahlia.'"

"...I will."

Dahlia smiled sunnily at him. She had given him permission to call her by her first name too, but that smile was one of complete innocence. As always, Dahlia only saw him as a friend. He had come prepared to say all sorts of things to her today, but he decided that perhaps it was best if he refrained.

Davide noticed a sandy-haired man standing behind Dahlia. Her strict father had come to pick her up from school again. Davide stood up to his full height and faced Dahlia with his right hand on his left shoulder.

"I wish you nothing but fortune and happiness in your future,

Dahlia Rossetti.”

“H-Huh?! Uh, um... I wish you nothing but fortune and happiness in your future as well, Davide Aldini.”

Dahlia, not used to such aristocratic expressions out of Davide, gave a flustered but equally formal response in turn.

After bowing to Carlo, Davide took one more look at Dahlia, then put on the most cheerful smile he could manage as he passed her by. It was at that moment that he realized he had finally grown taller than her.



“Davide, will you be able to finish those magical lanterns by tomorrow?”

Davide was working in the corner of the workshop when the clerk came over to ask him that question. The lanterns he was currently working on were for export abroad. They were scheduled to be loaded onto a ship tomorrow, so the clerk must have been anxious about the approaching deadline.

“Yes, I will. I’ll be finished by afternoon tea.”

“Wonderful!”

Soon after Davide had joined this workshop, the previous manager had taken him on a tour of Ordine’s islands and Ehrlichia. He had assumed he would start making tools immediately, but he had been told he first needed to acquire a deeper understanding of the materials he would be working with. Davide spent all his energy on observing, feeling, and learning how to process monster and plant materials.

When they finally returned home, he got his wish—he spent all his time making magical tools. Once again he found himself expending all his energy on the task, but as he had expected, he was having much more fun.

Life continued on in that way, bringing him to today.

“Oh, I have something else for you. We’ve been asked to take on a job making camp stoves for the Order of Beast Hunters. The magical circuitry is apparently very intricate and complex. Here are

the relevant documents, and this package contains one of the stoves. The manager told me to bring them to you...”

The clerk apologetically held out a stack of papers containing the specifications and the design plan for the tool. And the bundle of red cloth contained, as he’d said, a camp stove.

“Ah, I see...”

He understood what the clerk meant the instant he opened up the blueprint. The circuitry wasn’t difficult, but it was indeed intricate. Three pathways needed to be drawn within a very small area, a challenging task for those who could not regulate their magic well.

It was a finely assembled circuit, but the enchantment required a great deal of attention to detail. In this workshop, the only toolmakers capable of reproducing it beside himself were two other more experienced craftspeople and the manager—and, it suddenly occurred to him, his red-haired friend from college. She could surely have done it as well.

“Do you think you can manage it, Davide? The owner of the company will be doing the final inspections, and we’ve been told that in the event that making the camp stove is too difficult, we can also just take on making the exterior.”

Davide had gotten momentarily lost in his memories, so he was late in responding.

The workshop manager had recommended him specifically. He didn’t want the manager to think that he wasn’t up for the job just because it was difficult.

Davide hastily put the blueprints down on his desk and replied, “I can manage. I’ll try drawing the circuitry on a few units first, so could you bring me the materials?”

“I’m happy to hear that! I’ll bring them as soon as I can.”

As soon as they finished speaking, the clerk was summoned over by another employee.

Well, well, it looks like some interesting work fell into my lap, Davide mused as he unwrapped the red cloth bundle and held the camp stove in his hands.

The construction was slender and light without sacrificing

durability. The corners were rounded so it fit comfortably in his hands, the dials were easy to turn, and safeguards had been put in place. Every aspect was well thought out.

As he admired the stove, he flipped it over and saw that there were letters engraved on the bottom. With a start, he flipped through the specifications document to check the signature at the very back.

Dahlia Rossetti. After doing a double take at the name, he felt the corners of his mouth turn up in a smile. His red-haired friend was clearly doing very well for herself.

"Not bad, Dahlia."

Carlo the Magical Toolmaker and Dahlia the Student

"Try some of this, dad. It's delicious."

"You've gotta try some of this too, Dahlia."

Carlo was in a private room at a café in the capital's Central District. He and his daughter sat across from each other as they ate.

It was a new café and had already received favorable reviews. Ivano, an employee of the Merchants' Guild and a friend of Carlo's, had told him the establishment served good food, so Carlo hadn't hesitated to make a reservation.

It was a little early for dinner, but they had come straight here after Dahlia was finished with school. Carlo had ordered grilled pork loin with a side of baked vegetables and cheese. Dahlia had ordered seafood stewed with tomatoes and olive oil. They had also ordered freshly baked walnut bread and a salad topped with a soft mountain of grated cheese. Each item had been recommended by Ivano.

Although the portions were a little small, they were beautifully plated and tasted great. Carlo could see why this place was so popular with women.

"This place is really popular. A bunch of my classmates are coming to eat here tomorrow too."

"Really now? Did they not invite you?" Carlo asked with a touch of concern as he sliced the walnut bread.

Dahlia had seemed a little down for a while now. Recently, she had gotten so lost in her own thoughts that she'd burned the fish she was cooking, then gone ahead and eaten it, though the inside was still half raw, and gotten terribly sick. He had tried to ask her casually what was bothering her, but she wouldn't tell him.

Carlo had wondered if Dahlia was going through that phase in a girl's adolescence when they became prone to shouting, "I hate you,

dad!" Carlo had an old college friend—a fellow member of his Magical Tool Research group—who now worked as a teacher at the college, so he'd decided it was time to pay the man a visit.

Not having any information about the situation either, his friend asked Dahlia's homeroom teacher, who raved that she was a model student and was doing a wonderful job on her enchantments. That statement seemed to make something click for Carlo's friend, and he went to another coworker of his, a language teacher, who picked up a few things from reading other students' lips.

What he learned was that Dahlia's exceptional talent had resulted in her being ostracized. *Her father and grandfather are magical toolmakers, so it's no wonder she can make tools she's made so many times already.* When he heard what her classmates had been saying about her, Carlo felt heat radiating from the back of his head.

Is everyone in Dahlia's class a damned fool? he cursed to himself. If they were incapable of doing something, they should have kept trying, and if there was something they didn't understand, they should have just asked the teacher. If they lacked skill, then they should have let their jealousy fuel their efforts to improve. At the very least, they shouldn't do something so base as to hold another student back.

Even if someone was born the child of a magical toolmaker and grew up in an environment that gave them a head start, they still needed to put in the effort or they would never be able to hone their craft.

Dahlia had dreamed of becoming a magical toolmaker ever since she was a little girl. Her current ability was the outcome of trial and error, failures, and even dangerous experiments. For her classmates to put her through misery without even considering that...

Carlo had clenched his fists to restrain the beast growling inside him when his friend smiled and said, "Carlo, why don't you join our department as a teacher? That way you can teach your daughter at school too, and other students while you're at it."

"Oh, hmm... No, no, I've got my hands full with my own work."

He'd almost agreed on impulse. *That was close.*

"But your teaching style is so effective and easy to understand!

You can even be as strict as you want! I'll write you a recommendation letter right away!"

His friend gripped his arm as he tried to persuade him. Somehow, Carlo managed to free himself and leave.

As he was preparing dinner, he made a decision. He would sit Dahlia down that night and have a real talk with her. He would make her understand that she had done nothing wrong.

He would tell her it was fine if she wanted to switch classes or get hands-on practice elsewhere. And if she preferred, she could drop out of college entirely so that he could teach her all she needed to know about magical toolmaking at home while she received a general education at the commerce school. That way, she could work hard without the judgment of her classmates.

We can look for a place where you'll feel more at home. There are plenty of paths to becoming a magical toolmaker. Yes, that was what he would tell her.

However, that day, Dahlia came back home with a smile. Before Carlo could say a word to her, she told him all about how the entire class had helped each other during their lesson.

Carlo was a bit disappointed, yet also relieved, that his daughter didn't need his help.

"Someone invited me to come here with a group tomorrow, but I didn't want to come two days in a row... I might gain weight."

"I see. And was it a friend who invited you?"

"It was Aldini, the person who saw me off at the gate the day I got sick from eating that undercooked fish."

"Ahh, *him*..."

The day Carlo had met that boy, he could tell at a glance that he was a noble's son. As soon as he got back home, he'd checked the noble registry. The Viscountcy Aldini was responsible for the manufacture and management of carriages and equestrian gear for the royal knights.

Aldini was not only a noble but one who had ties to the castle, so Carlo wanted to do everything he could to keep him away from his daughter. Otherwise, there was a chance Dahlia might be

approached with an invitation to work for the castle, just as he himself had been.

Among magical toolmakers, it was a coveted post. Carlo would have had no qualms about Dahlia working at the castle if it was what she wanted and if she was making magical tools for use in daily life, but there was something else the castle toolmakers were expected to make—weapons. Carlo refused to make magical tools that harmed humans, and he didn't want his daughter to make them either.

That Aldini fellow might have seen Dahlia off at the school gates, but Carlo had no way of knowing if he'd done it out of his own pure intentions or if his family had ordered him to get close to Dahlia.

Carlo had turned around to get a look at Aldini, hoping to discern what sort of person he was, but all he'd seen was a worried boy.

If possible, Carlo wanted to ensure Dahlia never set foot in the castle or noble society. But if his daughter held feelings for the boy, then he would have to teach her all about the aristocracy. As he had that thought, he bit down a little too hard on the walnut bread he was chewing on.

"Yeah, so I told him that since I was coming here today with you, I couldn't join. Oh! And to make sure he took no offense, I thanked him for inviting me. I do like my classmates, after all."

As he listened to Dahlia explain herself, he felt a sense of satisfaction along with a dull headache.

"...Is that so?"

Dahlia's accidental use of an aristocratic turn of phrase had unexpectedly served as a defensive wall. When a noble replied to an invitation to go somewhere by saying they were going to that same spot with their father, it essentially meant, "If you wish to marry me, you will have to get my father's permission to court me." And thanking someone for their invitation meant something like "I prefer to keep our relationship as it is."

Carlo had a feeling that as Dahlia's father, he presented a high hurdle for a college boy who didn't yet know what the future held. As for his daughter, she seemed oblivious to the situation.

In any case, there was one other thing that bothered him about

what she said.

"Dahlia, if your classmates are going together, we could have come here on a different day."

"Why?"

"Well, I'm sure you'd have more fun talking to all your classmates, right?"

Perhaps it was on him to cut the apron strings. Dahlia would have a better time hanging out with other youngsters. It was even about time for her to start making friends with the opposite gender. And if she were to be with anyone, it ought to be someone with a good career in the making (ideally one involving magical tools), a good family with no noble rank, a healthy body, and a good-natured personality.

While he thought up those bare-minimum qualifications, Dahlia opened her mouth to speak.

"Nope, I'd rather eat with you, dad."

His precious daughter beamed at him with a smile that reached her eyes. There was truly no better way to describe her than "precious." No other words could describe and no painting could capture her beauty. As a magical toolmaker, he wished there were a way to preserve his daughter's smile in a fairy glass lantern for eternity. And perhaps it was time to get serious about researching a magical tool that could record voices.

Internally, Carlo made an apologetic but unwavering vow. *Sorry, Aldini, but I can't clear up this misunderstanding!*

"Plus, with you, I don't have to worry about how I act, and we can share our food... Oh, should I order the strawberry cake or lemon pie?"

"...Hmm? Ah, thinking about dessert? If you can't decide, we'll get both."

"Okay! Then we can split them!"

He had gotten so distracted thinking about enchanting a magical lantern that he had nearly missed what Dahlia said.

She could have all the dessert she wanted.

Although he no longer had his dear wife next to him, he was here splitting dinner and dessert with his precious daughter. What could

be a greater luxury or joy? Once they were back home, he would open up a bottle of his favorite red wine and write about what had happened today before he forgot. When he passed on, perhaps he could boast about this day to his wife.

"Here you go, dad."

"Thank you, Dahlia."

Carlo smiled at his daughter as he took the larger half of the slice of lemon pie she had cut for him.

Epilogue: The Letter with the Floral Watermark

One sunny afternoon, a carriage pulled up in front of the Green Tower. A messenger in a dark gray suit handed Dahlia a letter from the castle.

"Madam Rossetti, I have a letter for you. Your reply has been requested."

The messenger had delivered so many letters to Dahlia that by this point, they were well acquainted.

"Thank you. I will read it here, so please wait a moment."

When Dahlia took the envelope, sealed with blue and gold wax, she saw that the sender was Volf. Not wanting to keep the messenger waiting, she quickly opened up the envelope where she stood.

When she unfolded the paper, she was momentarily taken aback. Volf hadn't written his letter on plain white paper as he usually did but on paper with an elegant floral watermark.

The beautiful flowers looked to be either roses, buttercups, or another similar flower. But Dahlia reminded herself that she didn't have the time to ponder that right now. She composed herself and read the letter.

"I just got back from an expedition. Could I come by tomorrow afternoon if your schedule allows it?" Dahlia breathed a sigh of relief when she saw a normal message written in Volf's familiar handwriting.

"Please tell him I accept."

The messenger repeated her words back to her for confirmation, then smiled and returned to the carriage.

Once the carriage was gone, Dahlia began to think about what to serve for lunch. Volf had just returned from one of his fatiguing

expeditions. That called for a hearty, meaty dish and plenty of seasonable stir-fried vegetables on the side. As for what to drink, she would leave that choice up to him.

She planned their meal as she made her way back inside, and once she closed the door, she walked upstairs and went straight to her room. This was something she did whenever she received a letter from Volf. Even though there was no one else around to see them, she didn't want to leave his letters out in her workspace or living room and have them get dirty.

In her room, she sat down in a chair in front of her vanity and once again opened Volf's letter.

"Such pretty stationery..." she murmured.

Now that she got a better look, she could see that the exquisite flowers were roses. They were made even more radiant by the ray of sun shining through the window. A faint shimmer of gold was visible in the black-inked letters. The colors made her think of Volf, and she couldn't suppress the smile that rose to her lips. It was then that she noticed the soft, sweet scent of roses. This paper almost seemed like the kind people used for love letters.

Dahlia took two deep breaths of the scent, then smiled.

"How thoughtful..."

The other day, Dahlia had told Volf she preferred roses and other fragrant flowers over her namesake. He must have remembered her saying that. The paper itself was certainly lovely, but she was happier about the effort that had gone into choosing it. She decided that she would look for patterned paper for the next time she wrote Volf a letter.

What kind of design would he like? she wondered as she carefully slid the paper back into its envelope.

"This goes in here too..."

Inside Dahlia's closet was a silver strongbox intended for storing gold coins and other precious metals. Dahlia, however, used it to keep her letters from Volf. She had stuffed so many inside that it was only a matter of time before it overflowed and prevented her from fully closing the lid.

But that time hadn’t come yet. For now, the lid held firmly in place, protecting the feelings that almost seemed to show through the stationery. A secret known only to Dahlia.

Dahlia put the letter with its floral watermark away in her strongbox, along with the rest of Volf’s letters.




Randolph the Knight and the White Baphomet
Tilly the Marquis' Daughter and the Shooting Star
The Couturier Lucia and the Orange Muffins


Ivano the Apprentice Merchant and the Silver Bracelet
Magical Toolmaking Department Classmates
Jonas the Bodyguard's Hot Night
Dorino the Knight and His Golden-Eyed Friend


The Engagement of Gildo, Son of a Marquis
The Marriage of Grato, Son of a Marquis
Oswald the Student and Gray and Silver

Bonus Translation Notes

Hello, and thank you for reading the latest volume of *Dahlia in Bloom* and joining us for the premium bonus content! I'm A.M. Cola, the new translator for *Dahlia*. Although this is only my second volume of *Dahlia*, I have also translated two volumes of the spin-off series, *Lucia and the Loom.* I'd like to thank both Niki and Osman for their work on this series, as their translations contributed greatly to how quickly I fell in love with this story, setting, and characters. I'll strive to uphold the standards they set!

I come to you for the first time in a collection of side stories—organized into sections that Shakuzan and I decided to call "Tales"—to share some thoughts about this volume as well as elucidate a few translation choices.

Dahlia has a large cast of lovable side characters. I was happy to get a deeper look into some of their lives, and I hope you were as well! We also meet some brand new characters and learn more about some who were previously only mentioned in passing—Gismondo, for example, has always been lurking in the background but was never named until this volume. We meet Gildo's wife, Tilnara. We learn about another knight in the Order of Beast Hunters, Ruche, and his love interest, a maid named...yes, *Maid.* We also meet Lotta and Reinecke, characters who have until now only made appearances in *Lucia and the Loom*. It was great to learn more about the inhabitants of this world, their dynamics with one another, and also how they relate to our main duo.

The White Baphomet and Ehrlichia

In the story "Randolph the Knight and the White Baphomet," we

meet a baphomet named フランドフラン (*furan do furan*), which is given the definition "white of white." I chose to transliterate that as "Flanc de Flanc." If you know French (or wine) you might be reminded of the phrase "blanc de blanc" which is written ブランドブラン (*buran do buran*) in Japanese, and used to describe white wine made entirely from white grapes. I wanted to go for a transliteration that would make the reference as clear as possible, hence Flanc de Flanc rather than something like Flan de Flan, which is closer in pronunciation.

Although it's not specifically said so in the text, I have to wonder if this name is meant to be Ehrlichian, given that it's presented as a foreign word and Randolph, who grew up in Ehrlichia, knows the meaning right away. Shakuzan and I both found this interesting, since previous descriptions of Ehrlichia made it seem like it was based on Germany. Now we wonder if maybe it's meant to be based on Switzerland, which would align with having both German and French influences, bordering Italy, and traditionally being a "land of herders."

[Shakuzan/ED]

This makes a lot of sense in retrospect; Switzerland is a big part of the Japanese vision of Europe, in part because of the World Masterpiece Theater anime of *Heidi, Girl of the Alps*.

Tell Me, What is Love?

This volume contains several references to an in-universe opera called *Tell Me, What is Love?* including mentions of golden holly and a silver rose that are supposedly able to grant wishes, as well as part of a line from the opera itself: "Love is something you fall into. Like a sleipnir without its reins, a ship without its helm..." I believe this is the first time this opera has been mentioned in *Dahlia*, but it was introduced in volume 2 of *Lucia and the Loom.* The second half of the lyrics can also be found there. If you're curious to learn more

about this opera, I definitely encourage you to read *Lucia and the Loom*!

Bitter Orange Peels

In the chapter "Lucia and the Orange Muffins," I had to find a creative solution to a bit of wordplay that was happening in the Japanese text. In the English text, it's written: "Romina and her coworker-turned-fiancé had baked the beautiful orange muffins together. As Lucia contemplated the bitterness of the orange peels, she couldn't help but feel another type of bitterness as well." In the second line of that excerpt, the Japanese expresses Lucia's jealousy for her friend's relationship by using the word 妬く (*yaku*) for "to be jealous." "To bake" in Japanese is 焼く (again, *yaku*).

I was trying to decide how to work around this wordplay when I remembered that Lucia had conveniently remarked on the hint of bitterness that's present in the sweet orange muffins. Instead of basing the English wordplay on baking and jealousy, I decided to use the double meaning of bitterness. It made sense to bring Lucia's observation of the bitter and sweet flavor of the muffins back to parallel her slight jealousy even as she was happy for her friend.

The Watermarked Stationery

In the final chapter, the epilogue, we see Dahlia's reaction to Volf's stationery, which has a watermarked design of a rose. In Japanese, watermark is 透かし (*sukashi*), which means to be see-through or transparent and, of course, refers to the see-through quality of watermarked designs. At the end of the chapter, Dahlia puts the letter away into a strongbox with its lid firmly in place, "protecting the feelings that almost seemed to show through the stationery." In Japanese, "the feelings that seem to show through" is expressed with 透けそうな想い (*sukesou na omoi)*, with *sukesou* having the same root as *sukashi*, making it clear to Japanese readers the connection with the watermark design and transparent feelings. In English, this isn't so visually clear in the language itself, making it a more subtle connection.

Table of Contents

Cover

Tales of the Order of Beast Hunters

Prologue: The Order of Beast Hunters' Toast

Dorino the Knight and His Golden-Eyed Friend

The Order of Beast Hunters and the Purple Bicorns

Randolph the Knight and the White Baphomet

The Assistant Manager of the Black Cauldron and the Two Customers

Randolph the Knight and Apple Pie

Gismondo of the Order of Beast Hunters and Egg Dishes

What the Knights of the Order of Beast Hunters Count on Sleepless Nights

Tales of Merchants and Artisans

Prologue: The Merchants' Guildmaster and Vice-Guildmaster

Ivano the Apprentice Merchant and the Silver Bracelet

Fermo the Apprentice Craftsman and the Small Silver Box

The Vice-Chairman's Abacus

Tales of the Kingdom's Nobles

Prologue: The Marquises' Matching Handkerchiefs

Tilly the Marquis's Daughter and the Shooting Star

The Engagement of Gildo, Son of a Marquis

The Marriage of Grato, Son of a Marquis

The Dowager Duchess Altea's Lessons on Nobility
Bad Company and Dried Barracuda

Tales of Friends

Prologue: Tea Time with a Magical Toolmaker and a Couturier
The Hairstylist Irma's Father and the Couriers' Guild Courier
The Couturier Lucia and the Orange Muffins
Lunch with Lucia, Head Manager of the Magical Garment Factory
Lucia the Couturier and Almond Cookies

Tales of the Scalfarotto Family

Prologue: Love Letters of Master and Servant
The Scalfarotto Family's Knight and the Written Report
Jonas the Bodyguard's Hot Night
The Fourth Scalfarotto Son and Bath Salts

Tales of the Kingdom's Students

Prologue: Knights and Stationery
Oswald the Student and Gray and Silver
Raul the Student and the White Embroidered Handkerchief
Magical Toolmaking Department Classmates
Carlo the Magical Toolmaker and Dahlia the Student
Epilogue: The Letter with the Floral Watermark

Color Illustrations
Bonus Translation Notes
About J-Novel Club
Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 10 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Dahlia in Bloom: Crafting a Fresh Start With Magical Tools ~Side Stories~
by Hisaya Amagishi

Translated by A.M. Cola
Edited by Shakuzan

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Hisaya Amagishi 2024
Illustrations by Shima
Character designs by Kei, Hachi Komada

First published in Japan in 2024 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: June 2025

Premium E-Book for Xelum