
Author: MASHIMESA EMOTO
Artist: TERA AKAI
EXPEDITION COOKING with the ENOCH ROYAL KNIGHTS
6

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Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights, Volume 6
Mashimesa Emoto

Translation by Emma Schumacker
Illustration by Tera Akai
Title Design by Arbash Mughal
Editing by Elijah Baldwin and Charis Messier
Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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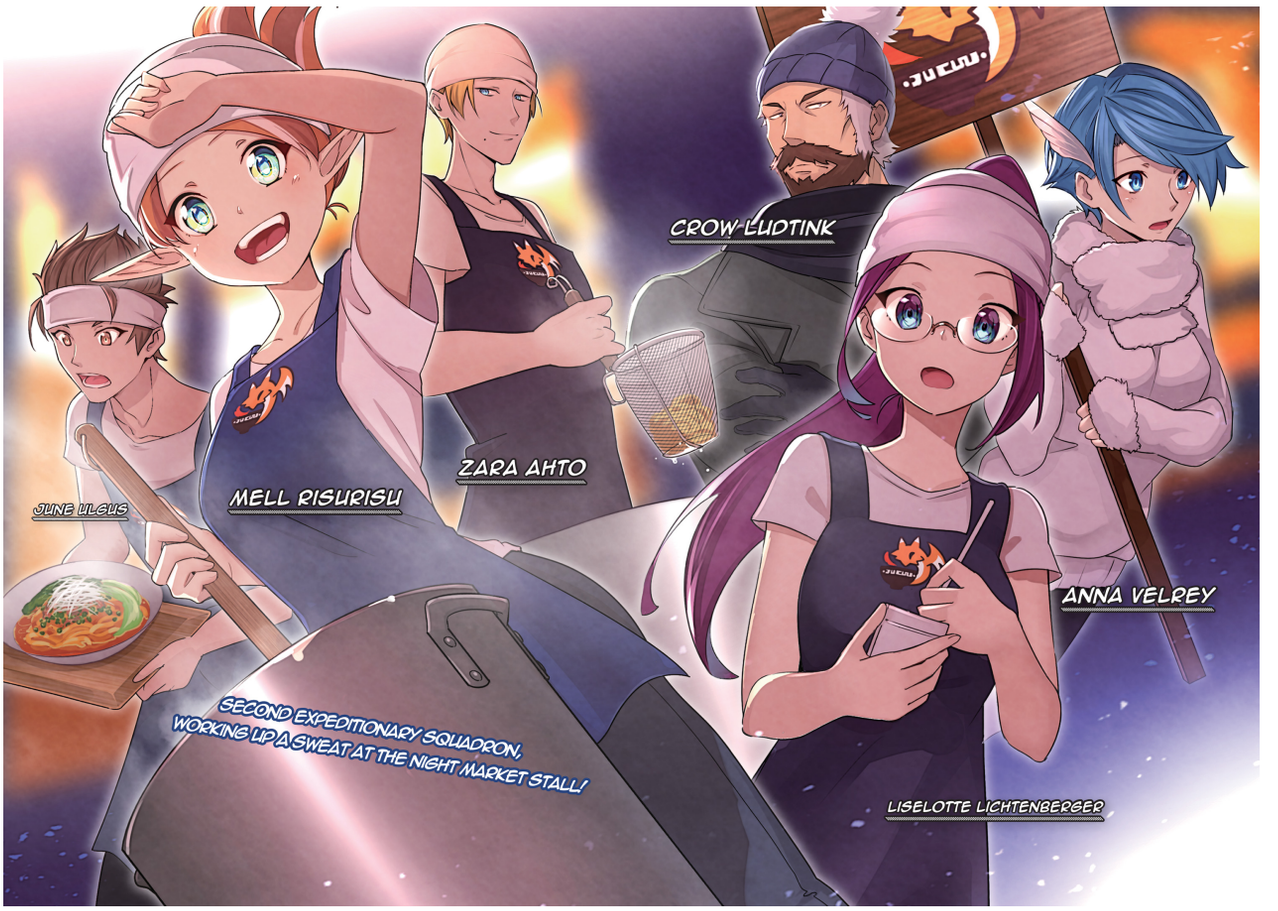
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CROW LUDTINK
ZARA AHTO
MELL RISURISU
JUNE LILIUS
ANNA VELREY
LISELOTTE LICHTENBERGER
SECOND EXPEDITIONARY SQUADRON,
WORKING UP A SWEAT AT THE NIGHT MARKET STALL!



Chapter 1: The Black Griffin and Golden Cheese Potato Gratin

I, Mell Risurisu, am a Fore Elf who grew up deep in the woods. I had no fortune, no magic, and no assets—nothing to offer anyone. To top it off, I was bad at hunting too. Lance, the man I had been engaged to since birth, even called off our wedding.

Self-sufficiency was a fundamental tenet of life for all Fore Elves. We used wind magic to dry our laundry, fire magic to light our stoves, and earth magic to till our fields. But I couldn't cast a single spell, so I ended up taking twice as long to complete chores. That was probably another reason my fiancé ended things between us.

Once the wedding was canceled, my parents rushed to find me another husband, but most people in the Fore Elf village had their marriages arranged at birth. This tradition came from the belief that couples possessing compatible magical energy were more likely to conceive children. Newborns were immediately taken to the village healer to have the nature of their magical energy examined.

That was how my parents quickly learned that I didn't possess any magical energy. Lance's parents were informed and agreed to go ahead with our engagement anyway. But that was only because there were no other baby girls born in the same generation as Lance. His parents compromised, hoping I would be like other children whose magical energy increased with age.

That hope dwindled as I approached my eighteenth birthday.

Fore Elves married at eighteen—the age of adulthood in our village.

Lance ended our engagement one week before my birthday. I didn't even know what to say to him.

The next person my parents picked out was an older man I already knew, who'd lost his wife at a young age. Not only was he twenty years older than me, but I'd always seen him as the friendly

old man in the neighborhood, so I couldn't picture us being husband and wife.

My parents wailed, apologizing that they failed to raise me into a child who could excel in life.

Fore Elves were seen as fully fledged individuals once they were married, and arranging that marriage was the duty of a child's parents. I could only imagine how anxious they felt for me.

Being around my parents made them sad. They were probably going to be criticized by the other villagers for failing to set their child up for success too. I couldn't allow an outcome like that.

I wasn't the only person affected by this problem.

My little sisters were charming girls with lots of magical energy. But my family didn't have the money to pay their dowries. I would hate to see them abandoned by their fiancés like me. After a lot of thought, I decided to move to the royal capital and start earning money. I'd heard that the human city not only offered a wide variety of jobs, but that people were free to live as they pleased there.

I was sure it was the perfect plan. But my parents strongly opposed it.

They wouldn't allow their young daughter—someone who'd never even left the Fore Elf woods before—to work in the royal capital. They also told me that humans hated elves and would never accept someone like me.

"*Don't do it. It will be too much for you.*"

"*Just stay home forever and ignore what others say.*"

"*I don't want my adorable daughter to suffer.*"

I almost cried when my parents said these things to me, but I'd already made up my mind. Even with my parents' objections, I set out on a journey to the royal capital in search of money and freedom.

The monthlong trip to the city was harder than I ever could have imagined.

First of all, elves rarely set foot in human society, so we're seen as something like fictional creatures. No matter where I went, I was looked at like some sort of exotic monster. It was one misfortune after another as I was refused service at inns and restaurants along the way.

But I refused to be discouraged. None of these experiences were worse than seeing my parents cry because of me.

Fortunately, I had plenty of knowledge about medicinal herbs and edible fruits. I was also skilled at finding springs and building shelters. Thanks to this skillset, I managed to complete my journey without relying on help from anyone else.

Finally, I arrived at the royal capital.

I still found myself on the receiving end of prejudice in the city. Throughout my journey, I'd been turned away from inns and restaurants, but now I suddenly wondered if an elf was capable of finding a job in such an environment.

Restaurants, shops, factories, cleaning services—I was turned away at the door everywhere I went.

I never imagined that on top of having no money, no looks, and no magical energy, being an elf would be a problem on its own.

But it wasn't as if my parents never warned me that humans hated elves. I was the one who ignored their objections and chose to move to the royal capital.

Just as I'd started to consider hiding my elf ears to find work somewhere, a kind old woman gave me a tip. She told me that, even as an elf, I would be able to work for the Royal Order.

The Royal Knights of Enoch accepted all races, distributed work fairly, and even paid high wages. But I always thought of knights as brawny, muscular people who could tear monsters into bits or send them flying with their bare hands. I was hardly suited for a job like that.

I slumped my head in resignation. But *maybe* they would have some odd jobs I could help out with. Surely not *every* member of the Royal Order was an elite warrior who fought on the front lines of battle.

The knights of the personnel department weren't startled by my arrival in the slightest. Enoch was made up of people of all races who worked together. There were beastfolk, fishfolk, and even dragonfolk—all races that sounded like something straight from a fairy tale. That was why a mere elf wasn't enough to shock them.

During my interview, I emphasized that my expertise was searching for edible wild plants and that I could also do math. Of

course, I made sure to tell them that I couldn't use any magic that might help the knights—even going as far as to share the story of my fiancé leaving me over my lack of magical energy.

The interviewer looked at me sympathetically and told me that they still had plenty of work for me, even if I couldn't use magic. I silently prayed that I would be spared the front lines and given an office job with the Royal Order.

But fate had other things in store for me. My modest prayer went unanswered.

I was given a notice of employment by the Royal Order, but my eyes almost fell out of my head when I saw my assignment.

Mell Risurisu was made an official member of the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

The Enoch Royal Knights had many different divisions. His Majesty's Guard protected the king, the Imperial Knights protected the royal family, and so on. These were the most elite knights dispatched to guard nobles and other prominent figures as well.

Then there was the Patrol Squadron that watched over the city, the Gatekeeper Squadron who protected entrances into the capital, and the Expeditionary Squadrons like the one I was assigned to.

These were the units dispatched from the royal capital to take care of problems in faraway regions. Their missions included exterminating monsters, capturing robbers and bandits, and tracking down missing people.

The knights explained to me that these units took on the most rigorous jobs of all.

How could I have possibly ended up assigned to such a unit?

Was it my fault for emphasizing how much I knew about medicinal herbs? Or did they not believe me when I said I could do math?

Before I knew it, I was cradling my head in my hands. I decided to go ask the personnel department if they'd made some mistake. How could someone who can't even use healing magic end up assigned to an expeditionary squadron?

The knight who'd interviewed me smiled and said there was no mistake. If I had the guts to come all the way to the royal capital from the Fore Elf woods, expeditions would be trivial to someone like me. It seemed I'd been selected for an expeditionary

squadron for this perceived bravery—an elf who came to the royal capital all on her own.

How did it ever come to this? It wasn't as if I could refuse the assignment once it was finalized. I had to be grateful that I'd found a job at all.

I would come to learn that the Second Expeditionary Squadron was the home of many unique personalities.

First there was Captain Ludtink—a man so big I had to crane my neck to see his face. He had scary features and a beard that made him look more like a bandit than a knight. Even his personality was more like a bandit than his noble heritage would lead you to think. Captain Ludtink was also unbelievably strong. The long sword he swung around with ease was as tall as he was.

When he first saw me, he laughed and shouted these words: "What the hell? They told me we're gettin' an elf, so I assumed she'd be some stunnin' beauty, not a wild rabbit!"

Who're you calling a wild rabbit?!

But Captain Ludtink accepted me—not as the preconceived notion of an elf he held, but as a wild rabbit.

No, I shouldn't phrase it like a good thing. That's a huge problem on its own.

Still, it was a relief to someone who'd been constantly discriminated against for being an elf.

Vice Captain Velrey embodied the gallant, upstanding appearance of a knight, but she was also an incredibly kind person. The proof of that was the "Lady Velrey's Elite Guard" that the Royal Order's maids felt inspired to create for her protection. She was said to be incredibly popular with the ladies as the calm and collected woman she was. I completely understood the appeal. She looked like a knight from a storybook, especially with how cool she was as she elegantly slayed monsters with her twin swords. I always wanted to cry out "Lady Anna!" when I watched her fight.

But Vice Captain Velrey was just as calm and collected on the inside as her appearance suggested. She shared words of advice with me when she heard my reason for becoming a knight.

"Marriage is all about sharing a relationship. It's not something anyone else can force on you. Don't let it get you down, okay?"

I stopped blaming myself for my failed engagement after that. It was a big weight off my shoulders all thanks to Vice Captain Velrey.

Garr Garr was a wolf beastfolk man who fought with a spear. He was even bigger than Captain Ludtink but with piercing eyes and razor-sharp fangs and claws. I shuddered in fear when I first met him, but despite his appearance, Garr turned out to be an incredibly compassionate person.

He would constantly turn around to check on me when I lagged behind on our first expedition. He lent me his hand to get past the areas with bad footing too. Garr was the quiet type, but he was a total gentleman who fought boldly against all foes.

June Ulgus was an archer and one year younger than me. He was extremely talented with his weapon and never seemed to miss a single shot. I'd never witnessed him miss, at least.

Ulgus, upbeat and honest person that he was, quickly accepted an elf like me as a squadmate. He excelled at finding the good sides of people and always offered me compliments.

"You went on a month-long journey to the royal capital and then became a knight? That's incredible. I really respect you."

I hoped to become like him someday—someone who could always find good traits in people.

Zara Ahto, the beautiful ax-wielding warrior, joined the Second Expeditionary Squadron after me. He was raised alongside his many sisters and grew up to be someone with an impeccable taste for all things beautiful. He had silky hair that smelled nice and smooth skin thanks to his daily skincare routine. He was kindhearted like a big sister, but also strong and brave like a big brother. It was rare to meet a person with both sides to them like that.

Zara and I got along well due to our shared hobbies of needlework and cooking. We often cooked meals or baked sweets on our days off together. Talking to Zara put my heart at ease, as he grew up in a rural, snowy land and was raised a lot like I was.

"Isn't the royal capital just the best, Melly? There's no one to tell you that you have to act a certain way just because you're a boy or a girl."

Everyone was probably too busy with their own lives to worry about how others lived theirs. Some people might see that as

coldhearted, but such an environment was perfect for people like Zara and me.

The final member to join our unit was Liselotte, the daughter of Marquess Lichtenberger.

Her father was the head of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and Liselotte herself, something of a strange character, loved mythical beasts above all else. She was very beautiful, but didn't care what anyone else thought of her and often had an attitude—a flawed person indeed. She got into quarrels with Captain Ludtink sometimes, but that just seemed to energize her.

"I've been so ignorant about the ways of the world. How was I supposed to know, when no one ever told me?"

Only Captain Ludtink dared to call her "ignorant" to her face.

But Liselotte changed after joining the Second Expeditionary Squadron. Her only goal at first was to be around a mythical beast, but she gradually came to grow into a true knight to her core. Liselotte became a much better person when she discovered something in life she cared about—something other than mythical beasts.

Thus, the Second Expeditionary Squadron was a group of oddballs. But I'd made other friends as well.

First there was Amelia, the griffin I met on a deserted island. Her fur and feathers were entirely white, making her a rare variety in this world. The two of us formed a contract when I rescued her on the island.

She was small enough to lift up at first, but Amelia grew rapidly until she was larger than a horse. She joined us on expeditions, flew my squadmates and me on her back to cross over mountains, and surveyed land from the skies. She was the ultimate partner when it came to the work of a knight.

Amelia also adored anything girly and fashionable.

Marquess Lichtenberger—the director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and Liselotte's father—provided support for my life with Amelia. He and I *really* started off on the wrong foot, but we'd made amends since then.

He loved mythical beasts just as much as his daughter, Liselotte. Lord Lichtenberger spent his days hard at work to

ensure the safety of all mythical beasts. He was a calm and collected person who would do whatever it took to meet his goals.

"I'm going to dedicate my entire life to protecting mythical beasts," he'd say.

Lately, he'd started doing amusing things out of his love for the creatures—dressing up like a griffin and even fainting when he encountered a rare mythical beast. Amelia and I always watched over the strange nobleman with mixed emotions.

The next friend we made was Sly, the slime.

Sly was an artificial slime born from a sudden mutation. This was all thanks to the Magic Research Bureau and their obsession with producing slime. She had adorable, round eyes and a mischievous personality. Garr and Sly got along well and were always together. Sly even had a special power of her own. She could swallow food items and clean the dirt from them or chop them up into little bits. She was very handy when it came to cooking and had made cooking expedition meals a lot less of a hassle. I knew I could always count on Sly for help.

Album, a weasel spirit, was another creature we met on an expedition just like Sly. The Second Expeditionary Squadron captured the mischievous spirit because he'd been up to no good. After that, he was forced into a contract with Lord Lichtenberger.

Album was a strange, gluttonous being who loved pancakes above all else. He was also quite chatty and referred to me as "Pancake Girl."

"*I wanna go where you go, Pancake Girl!*"

He seemed to have the idea in his head that he would get to eat yummy food by being around me, so he often tagged along on our expeditions. Album's ability to find food was surprisingly useful during expeditions. He even managed to scrounge up rare ingredients at times. At this point, he was an indispensable member of our unit's expeditions.

Charlotte, a fox girl, watched over the barracks while the Second Expeditionary Squadron was out on missions. She was a young girl who'd been captured by slave traders, and through a series of events following her rescue, she ended up as our unit's personal maid.

Charlotte has an innocent personality—a breath of fresh air to the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron. The

village she was raised in had burned down, but despite that tragic past, she'd overcome it and was now a happy-go-lucky girl.

"I love you all soooo, so much!"

My squadmates and I loved Charlotte too.

These were the members that made up the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

Now, to return to the story of when I was just starting out.

Still unsure if I'd be able to keep up with the unit's difficult missions, I was assigned the role of combat medic and sent out on my very first expedition. I expected my bandit of a captain to march forward and leave me behind, but that moment never came.

Everyone looked out for me the entire time. Captain Bandit…I mean, Captain Ludtink even praised me, saying he was surprised a wild rabbit had so much stamina.

Seeing a monster being exterminated for the first time was a big shock, but otherwise, I managed to avoid all of the terrible outcomes I'd been picturing. The worst thing that happened to me wasn't seeing Captain Bandit covered in blood from the monster he killed. It was tasting our downright disgusting field rations.

The bread was sour and the meat was as hard as stone…!

It wasn't fit for eating, so I cooked for them instead. I picked mushrooms and medicinal herbs from the area nearby and somehow managed to turn the field rations into a soup that was actually edible. Everyone told me they really enjoyed it.

That was the exact moment that I realized I'd found a place where I belonged. I was so happy. Even someone like me with no fortune, no magical energy, and no assets to work with had found something she was capable of.

After that, I started helping the Second Expeditionary Squadron out by providing them with healthy food on their missions. As for my personal life, I ended up buying a house with Zara, my closest friend, once Amelia grew too big to stay in the dormitory. But since it looked bad for an unmarried man and woman to live together, and because I found it a little embarrassing too, we asked Charlotte to move in with us.

Being a homeowner was incredible. I got to put up curtains with whatever pattern I pleased, pick out my own dishes, and cook whenever I wanted.

After that, even more people moved into the house with us: Sir Ciel Aiskoletta, the great hero from a major kingdom, and his friendly spirit, Komerv.

Sir Aiskoletta wore a full suit of armor and I'd never actually seen his face. Judging by his voice, he was probably an old man in his seventies. He told us he'd come to this country to live a "slow life"—a concept recommended by a hero from a parallel world.

This slow life had resulted in stomachaches from eating poisonous mushrooms and even near-death experiences from brewing tea with poisonous plants. But with each mistake, he simply boiled a leaf from the head of Komerv—a small spirit resembling a radish—that had the power to heal all ailments. Thus, he managed to survive.

I asked Sir Aiskoletta if a "slow life" was defined by putting yourself through hardships by choice. But he said that was wrong. He explained that a slow life meant relying on nature to live peacefully and self-sufficiently. It wasn't about intentionally eating poisonous plants at all.

In other words, we Fore Elves must have been living this "slow life" in our forest.

I was able to teach him such information that helped him in his pursuit of the slow life, which made him interested in becoming my student. That was how Sir Ciel Aiskoletta, the great hero, came to join us at our house.

Every day was a lively, eventful one.

There wasn't a day that went by where I wasn't grateful I'd made up my mind to leave the Fore Elf woods.



OUR unit had a day off, allowing all of us to sleep in and wake up when we pleased.

I didn't want to get out of bed, even when the sun was high in the sky. I must have still been fatigued from the previous expedition. I felt like I could sleep the entire day. I always spent my work time fantasizing about what I would do on our days off. But when they finally came, I only wanted to laze around.

My bed and blanket were expensive items that cost half a month's salary. The bedframe was the perfect size for me and the blanket was soft and fluffy—incredibly comfortable to sleep under.

Amelia slept curled up in a ball next to my bed. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau provided her cushioning to sleep on—a high-quality blanket made of helmeted guineafowl feathers. A year of my salary alone wouldn't have covered the cost. I was too scared to even try laying down on it. Oh well. It was a gift just for Amelia, after all.

The morning sunlight filtered in through the curtains. Judging by how bright it was, I would have normally been on my way to work already. But I had the day off and could lounge around as much as I wanted. I loved waking up at home with the rest of the day to spend as I pleased.

As soon as I sat up, Amelia blinked her eyes open.

"Kreh kreh!"

"Good morning."

Amelia stretched and spread her wings. The room was big enough to accommodate her size.

I bought this home so that Amelia would be comfortable even after her growth spurt. I was truly glad that I made the big leap and went through with it, watching as she moved around with such ease now.

From my bed, I watched Amelia prepare her breakfast. She started by spreading out a sheet for food, then arranged ceramic plates on top of it. She selected the fruits she wanted from the shelf and heaped them onto the plates. Finally, she wiped her beak with a napkin before digging in.

Amelia ate her meals daintily like a proper young lady. I wondered where she'd learned such good manners.

Watching her enjoying her delicious fruits made my stomach growl. As cozy as my bed was, there was no fighting against hunger. I finally emerged from my little slice of heaven.

"I'm going to have breakfast too, Amelia."

"Kreh!"

I never planned my breakfasts on days off. As I headed to the kitchen, I thought about having some of the candied chestnuts Zara and I made with a slice of bread.

"Hmm?"

A delicious smell caught my attention. Someone must have been cooking. *Is it Zara? Or maybe Charlotte?* Zara struggled to get out of bed in the mornings, while Charlotte usually spent this time going out on walks…

“Good morning.” I peered into the kitchen with that greeting.

There stood a man in a suit of armor and a frilly apron. The sunlight caught the polished steel of his armor, practically blinding me in my half-asleep state.

“And a good morning to you too, Miss Mell.”

“G-Good morning…”

Sir Aiskoletta was the one manning the kitchen.

“I have prepared breakfast!” he announced.

“Uh… Uh-huh. That’s great.”

A great hero was serving a mere combat medic breakfast. I rubbed my eyes, thinking I must be dreaming, but Sir Aiskoletta remained there in his radiant armor. This was very much reality.

“I picked mushrooms as Miss Charlotte previously instructed me, dried them to preserve their flavor in the method you taught me, soaked them in water overnight, and made a soup out of them. Sir Ahto provided the recipe.”

He made Zara’s incredible mushroom soup? I looked inside the pot and saw the tasty-looking soup simmering.

“Oh, where’s Komerv?” I asked, realizing his absence. Komerv was usually perched on Sir Aiskoletta’s shoulder, but he was missing this morning.

“Komerv, you say? He’s out in the garden getting sunlight.”

“He’s sunbathing?”

“Right you are.”

Komerv was a spirit who needed sunlight for energy. I’d learned he also enjoyed things like sugar or honey dissolved in water.

“You must be famished. Have as much as you please.” Sir Aiskoletta filled a bowl with soup and handed me a slice of the bread Charlotte baked the night before. Not skimping on a single step, he even prepared me a cup of black tea.

I sat down at the table and said a prayer. I expressed my gratitude for the blessings of the food and for the legendary hero who spent his morning cooking this soup for us.

“All right, I’ll try it now.”

“Have as much as you please.”

“Thank you very much.” First, I tasted the broth itself, noting how the rich mushroom flavor had permeated the entire soup. “Wow, this is really good!”

“Most excellent. I made plenty, so have as many bowls as you desire!” With that, he set the soup pot down hard on the table before exiting the kitchen.

I finished my bowl in the blink of an eye and went back for seconds, since he insisted. The dried mushrooms were crisp and felt nice under my teeth. He’d even included raw mushrooms to give it more flavor. Zara showed up in the kitchen while I was eating.

“Morning, Melly.”

“Good morning.”

Zara really struggled to get out of bed every morning. He let out a big, sleepy yawn as he joined me at the table. I was so surprised when I first heard how long it took Zara to wake up in the morning. He was always so composed and alert on expeditions.

Zara was a flawless person who never let anyone see his weak sides, but ever since we started living together, I was glad to see him let his guard down around me more.

I ladled a serving for Zara into a soup bowl. He said a prayer, remarked that it looked delicious, and began to eat.

“This is your mushroom soup recipe, or so I was told,” I informed him.

“Oh yeah? It tastes even better than mine. But you didn’t make this, Melly?”

“No, it was actually Sir Aiskoletta.”

Zara started to choke on his soup.

“A-Are you all right?”

“Y-Yeah, I think so.”

He probably never imagined he was eating soup made by Sir Aiskoletta. Perhaps Zara and I were the first knights in the whole world to eat soup made by a legendary hero.

“What a surprise. It wasn’t too long ago that he was curled up in pain from eating poisonous mushrooms,” he remarked.

“I know, right?”

Was it his status as a legendary hero that made him such a quick learner? He was going to spend his afternoon picking herbs in the forest with Charlotte and Komerv too.

“Hey, why don’t we head out to town today?” Zara suggested. “I heard a new general store has opened. Maybe we’ll find something cute there.”

“That sounds great.”

“Then let’s do it!”

“Okay!”

A new general store? My heart was already racing in anticipation of what we might find.

“Supposedly, they stock antiques and imports. I just adore old things. They have such character,” Zara said.

“I know how you feel. It’s like leather goods. The more you use them, the more unique they look.”

“Exactly!”

The two of us chatted as we brought our dishes over to the basin.

“And are you both satiated?”

Sir Aiskoletta was washing the dishes. At his feet was a mountain cat—the mythical beast Zara had formed a contract with. She was licking her lips.

“Y-Yes, it was delicious… Wait, Blanche?!” Zara cried.

“I’ve given Blanche her honey water,” Sir Aiskoletta said.

“Oh…I’m sorry you had to go to the trouble.”

“Pay it no mind.”

Blanche was nuzzling up against Sir Aiskoletta.

“Heh! Good girl.” He pet her fur like he was doting on a little kitten.

“You’re going out with Charlotte later, aren’t you, Sir Aiskoletta?” I asked.

“Correct. Miss Charlotte and I will be making lunch boxes to eat in the forest.”

That was when I heard footsteps approaching. Charlotte had returned from her walk.

“Mister Armor! I hunted a wild rabbit! Let’s use it for lunch boxes!”

“Ah, and what a splendid rabbit it is.”

Charlotte had appeared holding the rabbit by its hindlegs. She'd grown up in a forest as well—a similar environment to where Fore Elves lived, according to her descriptions. That was why she was particularly skilled at hunting.

"I hear you're going out with Sir Aiskoletta today, Charlotte," I said.

"Yeah! Want to come too?"

"Zara and I have plans to go into town. We'll bring you a souvenir, okay?"

"Yay! I work hard and pick lots of herbs too."

"Sounds perfect. I'll look forward to it."

We parted ways after that. Zara and I agreed to leave the house in an hour. I thought we would go our separate ways to get ready, but Zara stopped me in the hallway.

"U-Um, Melly?"

"Yes?"

"There's something I want to ask you."

"What is it?"

He was hesitant to continue. I smiled to show him it was all right. Looking relieved, he finally revealed what was troubling him.

"W-Well, it's been so long, so I kind of wanted to wear something cute."

"You mean like a frilly blouse?"

"Yeah…is that okay?"

"I think it sounds like a wonderful idea."

"Huh?! Really?"

"Of course. You look stunning in men's clothes too, but you're beautiful when you wear women's clothes as well. I love both looks," I said.

"Melly…! Th-Thanks so much."

"I'm excited to see what you wear."

"Right!"

I felt like I saw Zara's eyes get damp. He'd been wearing men's clothes for the past few months, so he must have missed cross-dressing.

"You don't have to worry about me. I want you to wear whatever clothes you like," I insisted.

"Are you sure it's not weird for you to be out with me when I'm dressed like a girl? You don't get scared of what other people

will think?”

Now I understood why he asked me for permission. Zara must have been worried about us being judged and how that would make me feel.

“It’s never been a problem before since I always used to go out alone…” he muttered.

“Why do we have to care about what others think? My only concern is you being able to enjoy yourself in whatever attire you like. If people want to look at us funny, that’s their problem, not ours.”

“Melly!” Zara pulled me into a tight hug in a surge of emotion. He whispered, “Thank you so much,” into my ear.

Before I could pull away, I heard the sound of metal from behind me. I turned to see Sir Aiskoletta leaning against the wall, not budging an inch even as we stared at him.

Was he pretending to be a decorative suit of armor? He probably would have fooled me if this was a nobleman’s estate. But he was glaringly out of place in the relatively small hallway.

Although, he probably just didn’t want us to feel embarrassed that he saw us hugging.

“Um…” I coughed.

“Okay, Melly. Let’s head out in an hour,” Zara said.

“Sounds good.”

We parted ways, still pretending we didn’t notice Sir Aiskoletta against the wall.

I returned to my room and found Amelia sprawled out on the fluffy blanket the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau sent her.

“We’re heading out soon, Amelia.”

“Kreh.” Amelia began to search through her wooden crate of ribbons. “Kreh… Kreh kreh.” She’d set out some ribbons on top of her personal dresser, fussing over which one to wear today. “Kreh kreh, kreh kreh?”

“Let me take a look.” She’d narrowed it down to a red velvet or blue silk ribbon, so she asked me which one I preferred. “The sun is out today, so I think a blue ribbon would look nice.”

“Kreh!” She agreed. I helped tie it around her neck.

“There we go. You look so cute.”

“Kreeeh!”

Amelia let out a bashful cry, then went to the mirror to adjust the bow with her front legs. She never compromised when it came to looking as stylish as possible.

Now I had to decide on an outfit for myself. I took out a few dresses and laid them out on my bed, followed by a wide array of ribbons to choose from.

“Hmm…”

As I weighed my options, Amelia came up and looked back and forth between the dresses and me.

“Kreh kreh!”

She pointed her beak at a bright red dress with a cape attached to it. The sleeves were puffy and it had an adorable little bow on the bodice. This was a fancy dress Liselotte had received from Lord Lichtenberger on her thirteenth birthday, but she thought it looked too childish. That was why the Lichtenberger seamstress altered the dress to fit me instead.

“You don’t think it’s too flashy?”

“Kreh kreh, kreh!”

Amelia explained that I wouldn’t stand out too much next to someone with Zara’s good looks. *I see. Then there’s no problem.*

I put on the dress right away. Maybe it was strange of me to say, but I felt like it really suited me.

“How do I look?”

“Kreh kreh!” Amelia told me I looked cute.

“How should I style my hair?”

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh.” She said that, since my dress was youthful and cute, a more mature hairstyle would look good—especially with Zara at my side.

“I see.”

I’d been planning on braiding it, but Amelia’s explanation made sense. She was so clever to take Zara’s presence into account. Amelia had a real eye for anything relating to fashion.

I took the hair that framed my cheeks, braided it, and pinned it to my head like a crown. Then I tied the rest of my hair back into a high ponytail and added a black silk bow. It came out looking very nice.

Next, I applied a bit of makeup and checked myself over in the mirror.

“All right. That should do the trick.”

“Kreh!”

I finished my preparations in almost exactly an hour, then I grabbed a basket and waited outside. Not long after that, I heard Zara’s footsteps rushing toward me. Blanche came to the front door to see us off too.

“Sorry I’m late, Melly.”

“It’s all right. I just got here too.”

Zara emerged wearing a turtleneck sweater with frilly sleeves as well as tight trousers. He even had long hair—probably a wig—that was braided and reached down to his chest. He was also wearing high-heeled shoes.

I’d expected him to show up in a skirt, not trousers.

Today’s style was more androgynous, and I absolutely loved it. He was both feminine and masculine. It was as much a “Zara” outfit as I’d ever seen.

“Wow, Zara! You look gorgeous!”

“You think so?”

“Yes! You look like both a man and a woman in different ways. It’s such a fresh style.”

“I thought I’d try a mix of both looks, since you said you like me in either one. But it actually came out pretty nice when I got it all together.”

“It’s lovely. This style really suits you too.”

“Thanks, Melly. Your mature look today is fabulous as well.”

Hearing him praise me for looking mature made me so happy. I had to stifle a giggle. *I look mature today!*

Amelia had been right—I didn’t look too flashy in my red dress when I stood next to someone as gorgeous as Zara.

“Um, Melly, I was wondering what you thought of this. It’s something I made.” Zara was holding out a bracelet made of lace and a silver chain.

“It’s so cute. You really made this?”

“Uh-huh. I made two so we could wear matching ones.” Zara had the same bracelet on his wrist. It was so finely crafted that I would have thought it came from a shop somewhere.

“You really don’t mind giving one to me?”

He smiled shyly and nodded. I reached my hand out to take it, but Zara smoothly fastened it around my wrist for me.

“It’s so cute! I really like it!”

“That’s a relief.”

Of *course* Zara knew how to make bracelets too. It was hardly even surprising to me.

“Shall we head out?”

“Yes!”

“Mraw!”

Blanche wagged her thick tail as she bid us farewell.

“Take care of the house while we’re away, Blanche.”

“Mraw!”

Amelia told me that, just for today, she’d carry Zara and me on her back together, so we decided to take her up on that offer.

Amelia spread her wings and took off into the air.

“This feels so nice with the lovely weather today!”

“It really does!”

It was a bit chilly that high up in the air, but it didn’t bother me since Zara and I were seated right up against each other.

The two of us chatted during the trip. Before long, we arrived at the royal capital.

Amelia told me she’d fly around for a while since she didn’t like crowds. She usually napped on a rooftop somewhere, but she must have enjoyed flying on such a nice day.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right on your own, Amelia? I’ve heard that flying monsters appear in the sky sometimes.”

“Kreh kreh!”

Just as Amelia told me it was fine, a black feather fluttered down from above.

I heard a deep cry of “kreh kreh” overhead. I looked up and was instantly overwhelmed by a large black figure.

“Whoa! The black griffin?!” I cried.

“K-Kreeeeh!”

The black griffin touched down elegantly in front of Amelia. It was all so sudden, I was completely lost for words. This griffin had first caught sight of Amelia one month earlier. He was a strong-willed creature who had tried to forcibly make Amelia his wife.

Amelia stared at him in total bewilderment.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh.”

“Kreh kreh!”

She just told him that she “didn’t want to go.” Did he ask her on a date? I couldn’t understand a word out of the black griffin’s

beak, since the two of us had no contract.

"Kreh kreh, kreh."

"Kreeeh!"

"What is he saying, Amelia?" I asked.

She translated his words for me. "Kreh kreh, kreh, kreeeh."

"I-I see."

"What'd she say, Melly?"

"He told her there were flying monsters in the sky, and that it was too dangerous to fly alone. He suggested that, if she really wanted to fly, then he wouldn't mind accompanying her."

What a cocky thing to say!

"You're going about it all wrong. If you want to ask someone on a date, you better show up with a present for them."

The black griffin winced when Zara said that. It seemed that, as a mythical beast, he was still able to understand our words.

But it was Amelia who dealt the finishing blow.



“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh, kreh kreh!”

“*I hate pushy people. I like gentlemen with strong moral compasses!*” Amelia told him.

“K-Kreeeh!” The black griffin chirped bitterly, then turned around and flew off.

Amelia untensed, almost like she was sighing with relief. “Kreh kreh, kreeeh.”

“Zara, Amelia just thanked you.”

“It’s no trouble. I’m used to dealing with people like him.”

I’d expect nothing less from Zara. He must have been hit on like that many times throughout his life.

“Kreh kreh!” Amelia said she wouldn’t go for an air stroll now that she knew monsters were around. Instead, she’d take her usual nap on a rooftop somewhere.

“All right, I’ll call for you once we’ve finished shopping.”

“Kreh kreh!”

Amelia said goodbye, then Zara and I headed for the general store.

“I found the chain for these bracelets in the bargain section at a general store here in town,” Zara said.

“You did?”

“It was originally sold as a necklace.”

“But you cut it in half and turned it into bracelets?”

“Yep, that’s right.”

He was just so creative. I hoped to become as skilled and handy as him someday.

“Ah, there’s the new place,” he pointed out.

“It’s called Junk Store?”

“What a funny name.”

The inside of the shop looked dark, but there was an “Open” sign on the door. Zara grabbed the doorknob and opened it, causing a bell to jingle over the door.

“...Hey there.” An old man with a deep, quiet voice called out from the back of the shop. I couldn’t see him, but as soon as we stepped inside, the interior lit up all at once.

“Whoa! That startled me.”

“The lights must trigger with magic.”

It wasn’t a very large store, but it was packed with items. Something long and thin was hanging from the ceiling.

“Ah, Zara, look at this. It says it’s a broom for flying.”

Could the broom really fly? I was so curious.

“That there will take you up in the air if you channel magical energy into it.”

“Whoa!”

The shopkeeper had approached us without us noticing. The stern-looking old man wore a monocle, a fancy shirt and vest, and held a tobacco pipe.

“Are you an elf? You’d probably go flying all the way to a foreign country if you touched this thing.”

“Ha ha ha!”

I had no control over my magical energy, so it was probably best not to even touch such an item.

“So, you deal in magic goods as well?” I asked.

“Not too many of ’em. Just give me a holler if anything catches your eye.”

“Thank you, we will.”

The shopkeeper took a puff of his pipe, exhaled, and produced thick clouds of smoke that drifted upwards.

“Whoa! What *is* that thing?”

“It’s cloud tobacco. We sell it for three gold coins. The magic broom is fifteen gold coins.”

“That’s so much!” My cry didn’t faze the shopkeeper at all. He chuckled before returning to the back of the shop.

“What a strange shopkeeper,” Zara commented.

“Indeed.”

I wondered if it was smart for him to stay out of the shop floor with such expensive products everywhere. But I put that thought aside to take a look at what he had to offer.

This general store turned out to sell reasonably priced items as well. I found seashell earrings, sabers confiscated from pirate ships, and even foreign candy.

“Look, Melly. They have pots.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

“That’s called a stove pot.” The shopkeeper poked his head out once more.

“A stove pot? I’ve never heard of one before.”

“It’s a special pot imported from a country on the other side of the ocean. Don’t be startled now. This stove pot can bake,

steam, boil, and deep-fry anything you put in it."

"Wow! That's amazing."

He told me its most unique feature was its ability to sear food like you were grilling it on a stovetop.

"For example, you can't make gratin in a normal pot, now can ya?"

"That's right. You have to grill it on a stove to make sure the outside is crunchy."

"Right you are. This stove pot will do that grilling for you."

"B-But how?!"

It was probably possible to grill food in a normal pot, but it was difficult to get the amount of heat right. The food usually burns very quickly.

"First, make your normal gratin, then close the lid once it's nice and cooked. Then you place charcoal or burnt rocks on top. The inside of the pot will turn into a stovetop for you to grill food on."

"W-Wow!"

I was so shocked to learn that a pot was capable of grilling. If only I'd had this, I could have grilled bread or made gratin on expeditions.

"Is it a magic pot?"

The shopkeeper laughed at my question. "It's not magic. It's just plain ol' cast iron. Although, it's definitely a special pot you can't get anywhere else around here."

"I see!" I really wanted it for expeditions. I would be able to cook so many more recipes. "But I'm sure it's expensive, isn't it?"

"Well, it'll cost ya half a silver coin."

"Half a silver coin?!"

No normal pot costs half a silver coin. My assumption had been proven correct.

"I bet you could use the Second Expeditionary Squadron's budget to buy it, Melly."

"Really?!"

"Uh-huh. Why don't I buy it now and get reimbursed later?"

"Oh, yay!"

With that, we agreed to purchase the stove pot.

"We'll take it, mister!"

"Thanks for your business!"

I left the shop in high spirits.

“Ah, I still need to buy a souvenir for Charlotte,” I remembered.

“Why don’t we stop by the market?”

“That sounds good.”

During my shopping for the Second Expeditionary Squadron, one shop in particular had caught my eye.

The market in the town square was as lively as ever. Vendors set up tents and piled their goods on tables—everything from meat and veggies to bread and spices.

“Ah, Zara, look at that. They sell big cakes that look like bricks.”

“Oh my gosh. That’s amazing.”

An arrangement of large, rectangular cakes was laid out on the table. They jiggled whenever anything bumped into the table.

“I bet these taste delicious.”

“I agree.”

As the two of us chatted, the old woman who ran the shop offered us some cake samples. “I call them billowing cloud cakes.” She explained that the name came from their soft and fluffy texture—like a cloud on a sunny day.

“Give it a try. It’s quite tasty.”

“Wow, thank you so much.”

We quickly gobbled up the bite-size pieces she’d placed on our palms. The outer cake was fluffy, but the inside jiggled almost like pudding. My mouth was filled with the gentle flavors of eggs and butter, and almost immediately, the cake itself had dissolved into nothing.

“I-It’s so good!”

“I’ve never tasted anything like this before.”

It was so delicious, I decided to buy enough for all of us at home—not just Charlotte.

“Be careful with it on your way home. It falls apart easily.”

“Understood. Thank you very much.”

Once we secured a souvenir for Charlotte, I felt my stomach rumble.

“Would you like to eat something before we go home, Zara?”

“Sounds great, Melly. What do you want to eat?”

“Um…there’s this restaurant I’ve been curious about.”

It was another place I'd spotted while shopping for the Second Expeditionary Squadron.

"There's always a line to get in, but they have tables and chairs out back where you can eat."

"Okay, let's go with that one."

I followed the route in my memory to get back to that restaurant. We managed to find it, but there was a line all the way out the door.

"It's still so busy. What do you think?"

"I don't mind the wait, as long as it's not too much for you, Melly."

"I'll be all right. Is the stove pot too heavy to carry around?"

"It's nothing. This is like a stuffed animal compared to the ax I always haul around on expeditions."

"I-Is that right?"

Now that he mentioned it, Zara always walked around with an ax as long as he was tall. A single pot would feel like nothing to someone like him.

"Thanks for your help. If you're all right with it, then let's wait in line here," I said.

We joined the back of the line where there were roughly twenty people ahead of us. The food here was said to be prepared quickly, so we'd probably be seated within thirty minutes.

"What kind of food do they serve here, Melly?"

"They pile soft-boiled eggs on top of boiled noodles and add a thick broth made with cubed pork."

"That sounds amazing."

"Right? I always have to resist the urge to come here while I'm out shopping."

Supposedly, this food was called pork cube noodles. I discussed my predictions about the dish for a while, and before long, it was our turn to be seated.

"Welcome!"

"Hello, can we please have two bowls of pork cube noodles?"

"Coming right up!"

The chefs hit the handmade noodles against the countertop, then coated them in flour and stuck them in a pot of boiling water. Once they were cooked, they put them in a bowl and brought

them to another pot of simmering pork cube broth. They mixed the noodles in, and with that, the dish was complete.

They poured the steaming noodles and broth into bowls and brought them to our table out back.

“I can’t believe I finally get to try pork cube noodles.”

“Be careful, Melly. It looks really hot.”

“I will!” I started with one of the pork cubes that had been simmered until it was perfectly tender. I blew on it to cool it down, then stuck it in my mouth. “Mmm!”

I could hardly believe how soft and tender the meat was. The fat was a nice, sweet complement to the savory meat. It had completely melted in my mouth in no time at all. Then I stuffed my cheeks with noodles soaked in the broth. The noodles themselves were springy and split apart when I chewed on them, while the broth had absorbed even more of that savory pork taste. I kept going back for more and more bites.

“This is yummy. I see why people line up to eat here.”

“Me too!”

I was in heaven while I ate those pork cube noodles. I was so grateful that Zara had agreed to my suggestion.

I felt stuffed, but I had a second stomach when it came to desserts. I decided to eat something from the shop Zara was telling me about.

“This shop is absolutely fabulous. I’ve been meaning to recommend it to you, Melly.”

“I’m excited to try it.”

It was only lunchtime, but this place had a line out the door as well. Of course, that was just proof that the sweets there must be delicious.

The shop had multiple pots set out, and the staff members poured the contents into porcelain cups. Customers took these cups and sucked up the liquid with long, thin tubes. It was such an interesting way of consuming a drink. But what could it possibly taste like?

“Zara, what do the sweets here taste like?”

“It’s a dessert from a foreign land called ‘drinking fruit.’ They take fruit juice and add different sweet ingredients to it.”

“I see.”

“You suck up the juice and ingredients together with that tube so you can eat and drink at the same time.”

“So that’s what the tube is for.”

I’d expect nothing less from the royal capital. There were still so many new kinds of food waiting for me to discover them.

Zara explained that there were five ingredients you could add to the juice. “They have jellies that are good for your skin, squishy balls made from yams, popping seeds, bits of solid snow, and candied beans. I think that’s all of them.”

“Wow, there’s so many. What do you recommend, Zara?”

“I like the squishy balls. I’ve never eaten something with that texture before.”

“Goodness…”

“If you’re going for two options, the ingredients should mesh well in the drink.”

“I see. I don’t know what to choose.”

I ended up selecting forest apple juice with beautification jelly and squishy balls, just as Zara recommended. We decided to have our drinks out back again. I started by sipping the juice.

“Mmm! So sweet and sour. It’s delicious.”

Next, I tried a squishy ball and beauty jelly that had sunk to the bottom.

“Whoa! What the heck is this?!”

To say I’d never eaten such a texture before would be putting it lightly. They were just so…*squishy*.

“The word ‘squishy’ just took on a whole new meaning to me. How lovely. It’s very good.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

Zara swiped his hair away from his face and sipped his drinking fruit. Both men and women all around us were staring at him. After all, he embodied both a handsome man and a beautiful woman, making him draw the attention of everyone regardless of their gender.

This was a first. He usually got intense looks from men when he dressed as a woman and intense looks from women when he dressed as a man. But he was wearing an androgynous style today—or maybe more accurately, Zara was putting his true beauty on display.

Still, I never imagined I would make a friend like Zara in the royal capital. You truly never knew what twists and turns life has in store for you. As I thought about this, I realized I'd finished the last of my drinking fruit.

"Shall we head out, Melly?"

"Ah, right."

I decided to buy a souvenir for Amelia on our way back. The two of us selected a ribbon with flowers embroidered on it. I knew she'd just love it. It would be adorable as a little bow on her tail.

"Thanks for everything today, Melly."

"What do you mean?"

"For going out with me, even when I look like this."

"Oh, I see. If that's the case, then I should be the one thanking you."

"How come?"

"I'm a Fore Elf. I'm very grateful that you still like to have fun with me and that my race doesn't bother you."

"You're *Melly*, Melly. I've never cared a lick that you're an elf."

"Thank you for saying so."

I felt myself tearing up when Zara said that. I'd been discriminated against and looked at strangely many times since I left the woods. But Zara never once treated me as anything more than a normal girl. I appreciated it more than words could express.

"I'm the one who's grateful you ever wanted to be my friend, even with the stuff I wear," Zara said.

"You just have an excellent sense for beauty and look good in all clothes. I never once thought it was weird."

"Thanks, Melly."

Zara explained that he'd been dealing with his own worries—what if women's clothes stopped looking good on him the older he got?

"Once I cut my hair short, I really thought I'd have to dress like a man forever."

But he continued being drawn to women's clothes while he was out shopping, and men's clothing didn't have the same appeal.

"I thought it would be less embarrassing for you to be seen with me in men's clothes...but then, this morning, you said I should wear whatever I like. That made me so happy. My fear that

women's clothing will stop looking good on me is a separate issue, but if I combine it with men's styles like today, I can probably make it work even when I'm older."

"Yes, I think it's lovely."

"You've taken a big weight off my shoulders, Melly."

The grin on Zara's face was the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen from him.

After that, we met up with Amelia and headed home.

Sir Aiskoletta and Charlotte had just returned from their own outing.

"Look, look! The old man killed a black boar-pig!"

"Whoa! I've never seen a black one before."

"Me nether."

Its coat was glossy and it was nice and plump.

Sir Aiskoletta stuck his chest out proudly. Komerv, seated on his shoulder, murmured under his breath. "*I…am the one who found it. Master…finished it off.*"

"You two did wonderfully."

They told me they were going to butcher the animal now and make herb-roasted boar-pig. Charlotte was stacking up rocks for an oven so they could cook it in the garden.

"In that case, I'll use my stove pot to make bread."

"A stove pot?! What is this you speak of?" Sir Aiskoletta was completely blown away by my trophy from today's shopping trip. "I see! I'm most envious of this pot that functions like a stove! And where have you procured it from?"

"We bought it at the new general store in the royal capital, although I'm not sure if they still have any in stock."

"I see. Komerv and I will have to go take a look tomorrow."

"*We're going to town again…Master? Let's…try not to stand out so much this time.*" Komerv seemed like he was at a loss. They must have really caused a scene the last time they went to town. "*Master caught a thief…who stole money from a shop.*"

The shopkeeper had thanked him and asked for his name, but Sir Aiskoletta told him he wasn't someone who required acknowledgment, and with that, he was on his merry way.

"*Then…he saved a girl who was kidnapped…*"

It seemed that crimes were occurring everywhere Sir Aiskoletta set foot. I couldn't believe he'd been out there protecting the people of the royal capital.

"Komerv, crime isn't as widespread as you believe."

"*You say that, Master…but then you end up involved in another incident…don't you?*"

"I'm sure we'll be fine this time." With that, Sir Aiskoletta stuck his knife into the black boar-pig and began to butcher it. "What's this?!"

"What's wrong?"

"There's a magic ore in its heart!"

"A what?!"

A magic ore—something a wild animal should never carry. These were normally found in the hearts of monsters.

Three months earlier, the Second Expeditionary Squadron had come up against a great boar-pig. It was terribly ferocious and didn't give in until the very end. We were only saved by Sir Aiskoletta, who just happened to be there. But if it weren't for him…

I shuddered just thinking about it.

"I thought he was a bit violent, but never suspected this boar-pig carried magic ore." Sir Aiskoletta held out the magic ore—a small, pebble-like chunk. The great boar-pig we faced had magic ore the size of one's fist. "It feeds on the flesh of the living and expands when in contact with magical energy. It must not have absorbed much magical energy at this stage."

With a sigh, Sir Aiskoletta placed the magic ore in a bag with a magic circle drawn on it. Then Sir Aiskoletta took a knee and bowed his head in front of Charlotte.

"Forgive me, Miss Charlotte. We cannot consume this boar-pig, as its flesh is tainted by the magic ore."

"Okay, I understand!"

Sir Aiskoletta and Zara agreed to go file a report about this at the Royal Order headquarters.

"Then I cook some other meat instead!"

"I shall leave Komerv with you as a helper, Miss Charlotte." Sir Aiskoletta placed Komerv gently on Charlotte's shoulder. "She's in your hands, Komerv."

"*Uh-huh. I'll work hard…but not* too *hard.*"

“Your help is appreciated!”

“I’ll get started on that bread now.”

“Very well. I am most looking forward to it.”

“Sir Aiskoletta and I will be back soon, okay?”

I waved goodbye and watched the two of them set out. Sir Aiskoletta used a teleportation spell, so they disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“Okay, let’s make a good meal, everyone!”

“Yeah!”

The sun had set by this point. We set square lanterns outside and lit the stone oven, maintaining just enough light to cook with. Charlotte went inside and retrieved some more boar-pig meat, explaining that she’d purchased it at a market on her way home yesterday.

“I make herb-roasted boar-pig with this.”

“That sounds great. I look forward to it.”

I went inside to start kneading the bread dough. But before that, I prepared Amelia’s food, since she’d spent the day accompanying us on our shopping trip. I made Blanche’s dinner too, as she’d stayed home and watched over the house.

“Mraw!”

“Kreh kreh!”

Griffins and mountain cats were different creatures, but Amelia and Blanche got along quite well. They were absolutely adorable, lined up side by side as they ate their dinner together. Liselotte and Lord Lichtenberger, the mythical beast lovers, would probably faint if they laid eyes on this sight.

“Okay, I’m going to make the bread.”

“Kreh!”

“Mraw!”

I left them to their food and began my work. I rolled up my sleeves and put on an apron. I decided to make slightly fancier bread than usual. First, I retrieved flour, salt, sugar, yeast, butter, eggs, and roasted nuts from the shelves.

I started by dissolving the sugar in lukewarm water and adding the yeast. Then I scooped in one-third of the flour and mixed it up well. When all the clumps were broken up, I added the butter, salt, and the remaining flour and kneaded it until it was smooth.

Once the dough was slick, it was time for the initial fermentation. I boiled water before emptying the pot to put the dough in, then closed the lid and waited for one minute. I released the dough's gas when it expanded, cut it into ten equal parts, and let it do its secondary fermentation. This was aided by covering it in a towel I'd soaked in hot water.

Thirty minutes later, I put olive oil on the bottom of my stove pot and placed the puffed-up bread slices on the bottom. Then I sprinkled nuts on top and slathered the surface with eggs dissolved in water. All that was left was to bake them outside.

I went into the garden and caught the scent of cooking meat. Charlotte was staring at the boar-pig meat with a look of great concentration, sweat dripping from her brow.

"*It's going to burn soon…Charlotte.*"

"Ah, you're right!"

It seemed that Komerv and Charlotte were working together. Something about the sight of them brought a smile to my face.

"That looks delicious, Charlotte," I said.

"All thanks to Komerv. We cooked it real good!"

They'd also fried black pepper mushrooms in butter as a garnish.

It was time for me to bake the bread. I placed coal from the open-air fire on top of the stove pot's lid to heat up its contents.

"Wow, you make the bread with this?"

"Yes, it's strange, isn't it?"

Fifteen minutes later, my fluffy nut bread was finished cooking.

"Wow, it smells so good! I bet it's yummy."

"Yes, they turned perfectly brown. They look even better than I expected."

All that was left was to wait for Zara and Sir Aiskoletta's return.

"*Ah, they're back!*"

Just as Komerv said that, a magic circle appeared. Light flickered around it for a brief moment before Sir Aiskoletta and Zara materialized in the garden.

"*Welcome home, Master.*"

"Welcome home!"

"Greetings."

“Welcome home, Zara.”

“It’s good to be back.”

They both looked slightly worn out. The two explained they gave their report to a big crowd.

“The Royal Order will be requesting the Magic Research Bureau and Monster Research Bureau investigate the black boar-pig and its magic ore.”

They hadn’t even uncovered the cause of the previous great boar-pig incident, and now they had another case on their hands. I could only imagine the panicked studies both bureau members were now carrying out.

“You must be hungry,” Charlotte said.

“Indeed.”

“Then let’s eat.”

We warmed up the soup Sir Aiskoletta made that morning, spread out a blanket in the garden, and gathered there to have our dinner.

“My, my. The bread and the meat both look delicious,” Sir Aiskoletta remarked.

“I make the herb-roasted boar-pig!”

“And I made the nut bread.”

I’d used enough olive oil so that the bread easily came out when I held the pot upside down over a tray. Then I served slices to everyone’s plates.

First, I had some soup and discovered the flavors had only gotten richer since that morning. It warmed my body up pleasantly from the inside. Then I tried Charlotte’s herb-roasted boar-pig.

“Wow, it’s so tender!”

“You cooked it perfectly!”

It was made with the herbs she and Sir Aiskoletta had picked and cooked, along with salt and pepper. The flavors were simple, but absolutely delicious.

As for my nut bread, it was crunchy on the outside but soft and fluffy on the inside. The fragrant taste of nuts filled my mouth as soon as I took a bite.

“Mmm! Why, bread made in a stove pot is most delicious.”

“He’s right, Melly. It’s so good.”

“I can eat so much, even without adding anything extra! I love it!”

Sir Aiskoletta, Zara, and Charlotte all seemed pleased with the bread.

After dinner, it was time to eat the billowing cloud cake we purchased at the marketplace.

“Wow, what is it?! I never see such big cake before,” Charlotte said.

“It’s called a billowing cloud cake,” I explained.

“Cloud? How come?”

“You’ll understand when you try it.”

Charlotte took a giant bite of the cake. I watched her eyes absolutely light up. “Wow, amazing! It’s soft and fluffy like a cloud in the sky! The inside is jiggly, but it melt in your mouth!”

She definitely liked the billowing cloud cake. Sir Aiskoletta seemed to have already finished his slice.

“This ‘billowing cloud cake’ has evaporated…!”

“*Didn’t you just…eat it, Master?*”

“Yes, but that’s not the point…!”

I understood their shock. The cake looked so big and hefty, but as soon as it entered your mouth, it was soft enough to melt.

“Ah, I’m full! I’m so happy!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“Me too.”

I stared up at the twinkling stars with a full stomach and a full heart.



ANOTHER day of work was upon us.

On my way to the barracks, I came across a crowd of cheering maids. I tried to get a glimpse of what they were watching, only to find that Vice Captain Velrey was carrying out training exercises. She and a knight from another squadron were having a practice fight with wooden swords.

She was fiercely battling the large, brawny man.

“You can do it, Lady Anna!”

“Beat that guy!”

Not a single maid was cheering for the other knight.

Perhaps spurred on by the crowd's support, Vice Captain Velrey emerged victorious.

"You're so cool, Lady Anna!"

"You're the best in the whole world!"

The defeated knight had taken a knee and was hanging his head. I felt sort of bad for him.

Ulgus was doing laundry outside of our barracks. It seemed that he was hand-washing Captain Ludtink's used towels.

"What's all this about, Ulgus?" I asked.

"Ah, I was playing with a ball during our last lunch break, but I accidentally broke Captain Ludtink's office window."

"So, this is your punishment?"

"Bingo."

Perhaps the captain was actually showing him kindness by not deducting anything from his pay. All I could do was cheer on his efforts with the laundry.

Garr and Sly were in the break room making a house of cards. They were both quite dexterous and had no trouble building up the house to great heights. I sat down gently on the sofa, careful not to do anything that would cause vibrations. But then…

"Hey, is Garr in here?!" Captain Ludtink sent the break room door flying open with enough force to knock the house of cards over.

"Aaah! Garr and Sly worked so hard to make that!" I said.

"Wh-What're you talkin' about?"

Garr's ears drooped. Sly threw her arms up in the air with disappointment.

"S-Sorry 'bout that."

I was proud of Captain Ludtink for at least giving them a proper apology.

Zara spent the morning arranging flowers in the vases in Captain Ludtink's office. "I think Crow will feel a little sweeter if he has flowers to look at."

I truly hoped his modest effort would bear fruit.

Liselotte was the last to arrive. She was in a good mood because she'd found a feather that fell off Amelia and received her permission to keep it. "Today must be my lucky day."

I'd expected another peaceful day with the Second Expeditionary Squadron…but just before lunch, we were called

into the office. I knew something must have happened when a messenger rushed into our barracks.

With a grim look on his face, Captain Ludtink announced that we would be going on an expedition.

“Let’s see. Yesterday, a boar-pig with a magic ore in its body was killed in a forest near the royal capital.”

This was the animal Sir Aiskoletta had slain.

“I’m sure some of you already know about it.” He shot a quick glare at Zara and me. I felt like I heard him mentally chastising us for making trouble outside of work. “The Monster Research Bureau analyzed the boar-pig’s blood and found it was showing signs of feralization. They say the magic ore probably has some sort of method to change the nature of anything living.”

The Covert Squadron of Enoch carried out an independent investigation after that, when they identified a suspicious organization.

“You know the nobles’ vacation homes, about three hours outside of the capital on horseback? They say someone’s gettin’ up to no good in that area.”

Our mission was to head to that location and conduct an investigation.

I thought back to the great boar-pig and how it attacked us three months earlier. It got a shudder out of me. It had been strong enough to knock Captain Ludtink into the air. I could still picture exactly how Zara’s injury made him cough up blood.

I trembled. Were we really going to be safe on our own this time? I was totally overcome with fear.

But as soon as I made eye contact with the captain, he came over and put his hand on my shoulder. Then he walked past me and stood in front of the office door.

“We’ll have someone to help us this time. He’s comin’ with us on the mission.” Captain Ludtink opened the door, revealing a knight in a full suit of armor.

“What?!”

“Whoa!”

Ulgus and I let out cries of shock at the same time. Sir Aiskoletta had been standing just on the other side of the door.

“We struggled to take out the great boar-pig with the magic ore in its body last time. Since we can’t say we won’t run into

another feralized animal this time, we asked Sir Aiskoletta to help out." The captain shook hands with Sir Aiskoletta and bowed his head, thanking him for the help he'd lend us today.

"I shall assist you to the best of my abilities, everyone."

The Second Expeditionary Squadron was unlikely to end up in crisis with Sir Aiskoletta's help. We hadn't even completed our mission yet, but I was already breathing a sigh of relief.

"We're leaving in thirty minutes. Get yourselves ready. We'll meet in the front plaza."

"Yes, Captain!"

We had our orders, so everyone split up after that. We would probably eat on the way to our destination if we were leaving now. I immediately packed the stove pot I had bought the day before. Then I collected various foods and attached them to Amelia's saddle.

"All right. That should do... Hmm?" I heard a voice coming from somewhere, but when I spun around, no one was there. "Was it my imagination?"

"*Down here, Pancake Girl!*"

I looked down at the ground and saw Album waving up at me.

"*You forgot about little ol' Album!*"

"Ah, that's right."

Album, the weasel spirit, had a contract with Lord Lichtenberger. Although, he liked to show up at the barracks to join us on expeditions. Lord Lichtenberger allowed him to do as he pleased, believing that he wouldn't get up to any more mischief.

I stuffed Album in one of the bags attached to Amelia's saddle and hurried to the meetup spot. I was the last member to arrive.

"It's time. Let's head out."

We followed Captain Ludtink, rushing to each of our horses.

Two hours later, we decided to stop by a lake and rest—although, everyone still had tasks of their own to deal with. Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, and Sir Aiskoletta were discussing routes to the destination as they looked at a big map. Zara and Garr tended to the horses. Liselotte was reading documents the Monster Research Bureau had sent over.

Ulgus and I started the preparations for lunch.

“*I wanna help too!*”

“Thank you, Album.”

Album eagerly scampered off to wash his hands in the lake. While we set everything up, Ulgus spotted my stove pot.

“Is this a new pot, Medic Risurisu?”

“Yes, it’s called a stove pot.”

“A stove pot? I’ve never heard of something like that before.”

“It’s a rare variety that they make in a foreign country. It functions like an oven and a stove, so you can bake bread or even roast entire birds with it.”

“Wow, that’s so cool!”

But just then, a black feather fluttered down from overhead.

“I-It’s…!”

“Kreh!”

I heard Amelia cry out behind me. I looked up and saw the black griffin descending toward us. He landed elegantly, holding out something in his beak for Amelia.

“Kreh kreh!”

“Kreh kreh?!”

“*A present?*” Amelia had responded to the black griffin’s chirps. It seemed the bundle in his beak was meant as a gift for Amelia. He had to have been motivated by yesterday, when Zara told him you had to give a girl a present if you wanted to take her on a date.

Liselotte rushed over to us at a full sprint. She was out of breath, but somehow still managed to get her words out at rapid speed. “I-It’s a black griffin! Is this the same one from before?!”

“That’s what Amelia says,” I responded. “He came all this way to pursue her.”

“I-I see. Maybe…the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau should take custody of him after all!”

“Please calm down, Liselotte.” I asked Ulgus to look after the panting Liselotte, then I turned to Amelia to see what the black griffin had brought her.

“Kreh kreh kreh, kreh.”

“I see.”

She expressed how she had no desire to go on a date with him, even after receiving a present. Then the black griffin responded, “*Hmph! I suppose I don’t hate strong-willed girls.*” It was

a strangely positive way of interpreting rejection. I could learn a thing or two from the black griffin.

He'd been generous and told her she could use the present however she liked—that she should just take it, since it might be something useful to me.

"All right, then I'm going to see what's inside."

I poked the bundle with my wooden pole, confirming that it didn't contain anything living. Nervously, I watched as Amelia used her front paws to unwrap it.

Inside was a chunk of bright yellow cheese—so vibrant, it was practically blinding. But what *was* it? I'd never seen such a cheese before.

Liselotte jumped in to clear things up. "Oh my, Mell. That's golden cheese. It's very rare."

"G-Golden cheese?!"

"Yes. It's a legendary dairy product that only royalty and the highest-ranking nobles ever dine on."

"Oh, wow...!"

Where in the world had he found such a thing? Amelia looked at the black griffin suspiciously, demanding he tell her where he'd stolen the cheese from.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh, kreh!"

"What did he say, Amelia?"

"Kreeeh..."

She translated his message with a sour look on her face. Supposedly, the black griffin had been flying over a foreign country the day before, when he spotted a carriage being attacked by monsters.

"Kreh, kreh kreh, kreh."

This was something he came across frequently and usually ignored. But after Amelia told him that she liked people with strong moral compasses, he decided to rescue them.

"Kreh, kreh, kreh kreh...kreh."

After defeating the monsters, the carriage's occupants emerged, revealing them to be members of the country's royal family. They gave him the golden cheese as a thank-you gift.

The black griffin had come to tell Amelia the story of his heroism. With that, his objective was complete, so he flew off with

a simple, "*Until next time.*" He must have been less coercive this time because Amelia told him she liked gentlemen.

"Ah… The black griffin left."

"Don't worry, Liselotte. He'll be back to see Amelia. This is the second time in two days."

"I suppose. I'm so jealous."

"Kreh…"

"*It's nothing more than a nuisance to me*," Amelia had muttered.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh."

"What?! Really?!"

Amelia was offering me the gift of golden cheese—the ultimate luxury food that only royalty and high-ranking nobles got to eat.

"Okay, then let's use it for lunch today!"

Both Ulgus and Album reacted to my declaration.

"Whoopee!"

"*I'm so happy!*"

What recipe used an abundant amount of cheese? That would have to be gratin. I decided now was the time to use my stove pot to try it out. First up was the sauce. I fried some flour in butter until it was nice and smooth, then added milk, little by little, and kneaded it together well. Next, I added salt, pepper, and just a bit of golden cheese.

Then I boiled macaroni noodles and potatoes in a separate pot before mixing them together with the sauce. As the mixture bubbled all together, I put diced bacon and thin strips of cheese on the top. Then I closed the lid, put charcoal on top of it, and let it sit.

Five minutes later, I removed the coal and opened the lid again.

"Whoa!"

"*Oooooh!*"

The gratin in the stove pot sparkled like real gold. It was such a breathtaking color. I almost couldn't take my eyes off it.

"My 'Golden Cheese Gratin' is finished!"

Ulgus and Album cheered and applauded.

I'd filled the large stove pot full of gratin so there would be plenty for everyone. I filled plates with gratin and stuck slices of

bread on the side, then gave them an extra slice of golden cheese too. It was the final touch for today's lunch.

Album went and told the others that lunch was ready. I gave him yet another slice of cheese for his efforts.

Captain Ludtink did a double take at his bowl. "Gratin, huh? Is it just me, or is this cheese sparklin' a little?"

"I made the gratin with golden cheese," I announced.

"Golden cheese?! Where the hell d'ya get that?! That stuff's so expensive, some people don't even think it really exists!"

"The black griffin just came and delivered it as a present for Amelia."

Captain Ludtink had been facing the lake during that conversation, so he probably didn't notice at all.

Sir Aiskoletta seemed to be aware of the situation, but pretended not to be once he determined the black griffin was no threat.

"Please eat before it gets cold," I urged.

"Yeah, you're right."

I said my prayer to the gods, and then it was time to dig in. I started by twirling the golden-brown, baked cheese around my fork by itself.

"Mmmmm!" I couldn't stop myself from crying out. "Extremely rich" was the only thing I could think of to describe such a powerful taste.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!" That shout came from Captain Ludtink. "They ferment this stuff for so long, all the richness and flavor gets condensed in this cheese! But it still tastes damn good, not weird at all. Risurisu! Get me my booze!"

"You can't drink yet. We're on a mission right now," I sternly reminded him.

"Damn it!"

What are you swearing for? Please eat your food like a grown-up.

Album skillfully wrapped the stringy cheese around his fork to eat. He put his paws to his cheeks and stomped his feet like he could hardly stand how tasty it was.

I only wished Captain Ludtink would eat so cutely.

"Do you like it, Sir Aiskoletta?" I asked.

"It's most excellent indeed. Why, it practically melts on the tongue."

He was right about that. Golden cheese was shockingly soft. It melted down all over the potatoes and bacon, spreading its deliciousness to the entire dish.

The others seemed to like it too. We'd managed to have a luxurious lunch thanks to the black griffin.

It was time to get going again now that our stomachs were full. I only wished we were able to go back to the royal capital after a meal like that.

Strangely, a certain young man seemed to have the exact same thought. It was none other than Ulgus.

"Ugh, I'm too full to move. I wanna go home. Or take a nap."

"Snap out of it, Ulgus! What the hell are you even talkin' about? Get a move on!"

I was sure Captain Ludtink, who'd just been demanding booze, was the last person he wanted to hear that from. But I kept quiet, not wanting to receive a scolding either.

I don't know what to say. Just be strong, Ulgus...!

We continued for another hour until we finally arrived at the neighborhood full of nobles' vacation homes. Noble families traveled here from their local territories during the social season. Supposedly, houses weren't as expensive to build here, as it was located three hours outside of the royal capital. Only the highest-ranking nobles, with their massive wealth, could live close to the capital itself.

These houses weren't built for relaxation, nor for taking refuge from the heat or cold. They were secondary residences built so that nobles had somewhere to live during the social season. Calling them "vacation homes" was, apparently, a way of keeping up appearances.

"They think it's shameful to build homes so far from the capital. Not that I really understand that stuff at all."

I listened to Captain Ludtink's explanation as I removed Amelia's saddle.

"Everyone got their weapons?"

"Yes, Captain!"

Everyone was holding their weapons from the "Seven Deadly Sins"—a line of weapons developed together by the Monster Research Bureau and Magic Research Bureau. They were unique

items built from things like monster bones and fangs, then enchanted with spells.

Captain Ludtink was holding his magic sword called Superbia. It had a blade of black mist that could go flying to attack his foes. Vice Captain Velrey had her magic twin blades, Avaritia, which shone brightly enough to blind anyone nearby. Garr clutched Ira, his magic spear. It spawned vines from the earth that could bind his enemies.

Ulgus was holding Acedia, a magic bow. It was capable of firing arrows that put enemies to sleep. Zara carried Luxuria, his magic ax, that could shake the earth and split the ground in two. Liselotte was gripping Invidia—her magic staff. It caused hallucinations in enemies, making them believe they were being trapped in the flames of hell and being burned alive.

Finally, I had Gula, my magic pole. It was able to reproduce any food item I'd harvested. All of these magic weapons activated when their owner experienced the emotion they were named after.

In my case, Gula activated when I was hungry. It happened when Zara and I got separated from our squadmates and had to take shelter. I will never forget the fishy taste of that river turtle for as long as I lived...!

"What mysterious weapons you all wield." Sir Aiskoletta was fascinated by our unique weapons.

"I suppose they do look mysterious..."

He was staring closely at them, only to quietly mutter, "I must be imagining things."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm just curious about something. Allow me to take a closer look upon our return."

"All right."

We tied our horses to trees and asked Amelia to watch over them. Before us was a neighborhood of roughly twenty vacation homes.

They were large manors with spacious gardens, manicured lawns, and beautiful winter roses in full bloom. As lovely as it all was, something struck me as odd.

"It's so...quiet."

There was no sign of anyone in this town. The curtains were all drawn and not a single soul was outside. *Aren't we in the social season right now? What's going on…?*

"Do people not live here, Captain Ludtink?" I asked.

"No, they do. They go around havin' their balls and banquets at night, so everyone's asleep right now."

"Ah…I see."

They had a whole different way of living than we did. The nobles in the royal capital at least had servants going in and out of their homes, but that wasn't the case here at all. It was oddly creepy. I rubbed my arms when goose bumps started to form.

Sir Aiskoletta suddenly drew his crystal sword. "Don't let your guard down. This is an enemy stronghold!" He shouted that before bringing his sword down. Suddenly, a gigantic magic circle appeared. The ground beneath us wobbled enough that we couldn't stay on our feet.

"Wh-What's this?!"

"It's a trap to stop intruders!"

"*A whaaat?!*"

Frightened by Liselotte's response, Album climbed up on my shoulder in a panic.

"Let go of your weapons, everyone!"

"What?!"

As startled by the demand as I was, I felt my hands start to tingle against Gula, so I quickly let go of it. Everyone else followed Sir Aiskoletta's instructions too.

Captain Ludtink was the last to toss Superbia to the ground. Just then, the spell engraved on the sword's surface lit up strangely.

"Wh-Why is it glowing like that?"

The weapons had never done anything like that unless they were activated. Not only was the spell glowing, but the sword itself was trembling violently. It stood up on its own as if it was a living being.

It wasn't just Superbia—all of the Seven Deadly Sins started to attack us.

Sir Aiskoletta sprang into action. He used his crystal sword to cut the nearby Gula in half, then spun around and pulverized Superbia by spawning and shooting stones of light at it.

“Wow… So, this is what his magic sword does…!”

It functioned both as a staff and a sword. Sir Aiskoletta showed us all his masterful methods of battle.

“Ah, look out!”

Ira was shooting toward Sir Aiskoletta from behind. Luxuria, Avaritia, and Invidia all approached him from the front at the same time.

That was when Liselotte did the unthinkable. She cast a spell without so much as her staff. “*Erupt, great explosion!*”

A giant pillar of fire consumed Ira and part of Sir Aiskoletta’s armor. He took that moment and slashed his sword sideways, perfectly bisecting Luxuria, Avaritia, and Invidia.

All the weapons were defeated. Sir Aiskoletta sheathed his crystal sword and turned to look at us. “Phew. I managed to slay the last of them. Is anyone hurt?”

“A-Are *you* hurt? Liselotte’s special inferno spell burned your armor, didn’t it?”

“Ah, it’s of no concern. This armor is enchanted and blocks just about any spell.”

There wasn’t a single scorch mark on the part of his armor that had touched the fire. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“And are you all right, Liselotte? You cast a spell without your staff.”

I’d heard that staves were like matchsticks for sorcerers. They would even get hurt if they tried to cast spells without their staff—the spell just wouldn’t even activate in the first place.

“I’m fine. I borrowed a magic ring from Father.” Liselotte showed me the magic ring she kept around her neck on a silver chain. It was the same one Lord Lichtenberger usually wore and was said to have the same effects as a magic staff. “Father told me he had a bad feeling this morning and that I should take it with me.”

“It seems like His Lordship’s intuition was correct.”

“I suppose so.”

Still, I was utterly shocked by what had just occurred. The Seven Deadly Sins, which we’d taken on so many missions before, had just attacked us.

“I should have looked into it more when I got that strange feeling.”

I remembered how Sir Aiskoletta had a suspicious look on his face earlier when he observed Gula.

“Was something about their spells or shapes unusual?”

“No, they looked like ordinary enchanted weapons. I simply sensed something wicked coming from them.” He explained that it wasn’t something he could investigate very easily, so he would have to spend time looking them over when we returned to the capital.

“But why did they do this *now* of all times?”

“Coming in contact with the magic circle in this neighborhood must have activated the spells planted in them.”

“Planted spells? What do you mean?”

Sir Aiskoletta crouched down and lifted the broken blade of Superbia. “This blade is made with magic ore.”

“What?!”

He revealed that it was the same magic ore that had made the great boar-pig and black boar-pig act violently.

Captain Ludtink clicked his tongue and muttered under his breath. “They told us the weapons used monster fangs and claws. Don’t tell me they put magic ore in ’em too…”

“Could it be…?” As soon as she said that, Liselotte covered her mouth with her hand.

“Liselotte?”

“I just came up with a dreadful theory.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Perhaps the culprit was trying to make puppet knights by using weapons containing magic ore.”

“Wh-What’s a puppet knight?”

The name alone gave me a very bad feeling, so I had to ask for more details to be sure.

“There’s something called puppet magic that steals the magical energy and consciousness from a target, allowing the user to control them how they please. They call its victims ‘living corpses.’ Of course, it’s illegal nowadays.”

“What?! I didn’t know there was such a wretched kind of magic!”

Goose bumps formed on my entire body. Sir Aiskoletta seemed to have reached the same conclusion as Liselotte.

“We must apprehend the culprit at once.”

“But we lost our weapons, Sir Aiskoletta. It’ll be dangerous to keep going at this rate,” I said.

“Then I shall lend you some of my own.”

What weapons could he possibly have on him? Just as I cocked my head, Sir Aiskoletta drew his crystal sword and plunged it into the ground. A large magic circle formed around us and sent bright, glowing weapons shooting out of it.

“Wh-What’s happening?!” I cried.

“It’s spatial magic,” Liselotte answered. “You can cast a spell that forms a special space for item storage. It’s an advanced form of magic that’s said to be mostly lost in present times…”

“I-I see…”

He was a legendary hero, all right. Lost magic was probably his strong suit.

A divine sword with wings sprouting from its guard emerged before Captain Ludtink. It gave off a dazzling, deep blue glow like the bottom of the ocean.

“This is Dumortierite, a sacred sword.”

The sword’s wings flapped when Captain Ludtink took hold of it. Something about the way he held a sacred sword made him look less like a bandit and more like a legitimate knight.

Two daggers appeared before Vice Captain Velrey. They were beautiful creations that glittered with silver light.

“These are the sacred twin blades known as Phenakite.”

They began to glow even brighter when Vice Captain Velrey took them in her hand. Her gallant aura felt like it was bolstered too.

A spear that looked like a stone cross came forward in front of Garr.

“This one is Staurolite, a sacred spear.”

As soon as Garr grasped it, the ground seemed to pulse like a heartbeat. It was like this spear, a creation from the earth, had absorbed Garr’s power.

A white bow with a snake-like scale pattern appeared in front of Ulgus.

“There you have Serpentine, a sacred bow.”

Ulgus let out a startled cry, gripped the bow, and caused it to make some sort of slithering motion. This got a scream out of him, of course.

A battleax, completely red all the way up to the sharp edges of its blade, emerged before Zara.

“That one is Rhodochrosite, a sacred ax.”

Zara took the ax, sending the aroma of roses wafting out around him. Such a weapon really suited him.

A brilliant, golden staff appeared in front of Liselotte. It was nearly as tall as she was.

“That is Orpiment, a holy staff.”

She clasped her hand around it, sending flecks of gold dust scattering. “It’s so gaudy,” she murmured. I wished she wouldn’t be so blunt—the comment almost made me laugh out loud.

I ended up receiving the final weapon. It was a pure white pole with a leaf made of stone at the end.

“That is Petalite, a sacred pole.”

So, it’s not a staff, just a normal pole. Looks more like a stick to me.

I took this “Petalite” in my hands and heard what sounded like the jingle of a small bell. The air around me suddenly felt much cleaner.

“What do you say to these weapons?” Sir Aiskoletta asked us.

Everyone was clutching or swinging their new weapons to get a feel for them. I squeezed my pole too and tried swinging it back and forth.

“*Hey, you! You’re makin’ me dizzy!*”



“Huh?!”

I heard some kind of scratchy, deep voice like that of a middle-aged man. *That sounded like it came from my weapon…?*

“What’s wrong, Melly?”

“Um, did you just hear a strange voice?”

“No, nothing at all.”

Was it just my imagination? I tried spinning my sacred pole again.

“*Grrrrrrr!*”

“……”

I’d been right. It was the hoarse voice of an old man. I decided to report this unsettling finding to Sir Aiskoletta.

“S-Sir Aiskoletta, I hear a strange voice coming from my weapon.”

“That would be its voice.”

“Th-The weapon has a voice?!”

“Indeed. You may hear it at times while holding your weapon. My crystal sword is the very same.”

“I… I didn’t know that. What kind of voice does it have?”

“She sounds like a breathtaking woman.”

“I-I see…”

Now I couldn’t admit that my sacred spear sounded like a hoarse old man.

“But I’ve never heard of someone picking up their weapon’s voice upon the very first use. The two of you must be most compatible indeed,” he said.

“No, I’m sure it’s only a coincidence.”

“Impossible. I only heard the voice of my sword after using it for ten long years. It’s most unusual for you to hear it immediately.”

“O-Oh…”

“Be that the case, then I shall bestow it to you permanently, Miss Mell.”

“What?! But isn’t this extremely valuable?!” I cried.

“There’s little I can use it for on my own, you see.”

At first, I wasn’t thrilled about receiving a weapon with an old man’s voice…but I couldn’t refuse Sir Aiskoletta’s generosity either.

“Um…all right. I’ll be…the weapon’s new owner, then…”

“Such a shy young lass you are.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

I left Sir Aiskoletta’s side and began to hear the old man’s voice speaking to me again.

“*Ahem! It’s nice to meet you, Master.*”

“Ack! …Um, it’s nice to meet you too.”

Life is strange. I couldn’t help but reflect on that as I clutched the pole with the voice of an old man.

“Risurisu! Stop talkin’ to yourself and get a move on!”

“Y-Yes, Captain!”

We commenced with the mission now that we had new weapons.

“*Pancake Girl!*”

“What is it, Album?”

“*I got a weapon too.*” Album was clutching a knife and a fork in his paws. “*It’s sacred tableware known as Gud Eetz.*”

Sacred tableware called Gud Eetz?! I almost burst out laughing, but I contained myself, since Album seemed deadly serious about it.

“*I’ll be a good fighter too!*”

“R-Right. Just please don’t hurt yourself.”

“*I won’t!*”

I wrapped Gud Eetz, the sacred tableware, in a polka dot cloth to make it easier for him to carry.

We followed Captain Ludtink until we finally arrived at an older house in the vacation home neighborhood with ivy growing all over it.

“This is supposedly where the criminal was putting magic ore in wild animals.”

“I’m surprised they found this place,” I said.

Captain Ludtink suddenly got a sour look on his face. Perhaps they already had a good idea about who was behind this.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, Captain!”

A sorcerer resided in this home, so they probably already knew that we were there.

Captain Ludtink stepped up to the locked door and kicked it open. The lock and hinges themselves seemed to be already quite deteriorated, and the door swung open easily.

“This is the house of a sorcerer. For safety’s sake, I want the rest of you to follow behind me in a line.”

Sir Aiskoletta took the lead instead of Captain Ludtink this time. He strode forward with big, heavy steps.

The house turned out to be full of traps, but Sir Aiskoletta destroyed them before they could be activated. He threw a chair at absolutely nothing, only for a magic circle to appear there, sending spears raining down from the ceiling above.

“E-Eeeek…!”

What would have happened if Sir Aiskoletta hadn’t been with us? An icy chill ran down my back.

“Phew. I’m beat.” As soon as Album leaned against the wall, a bunch of sharp thorns suddenly jutted out. “*E-Eeeek…!*”

Fortunately, Album was small enough to avoid the thorns.

“What do you think you’re doing, Album?! You’re supposed to follow Sir Aiskoletta in a straight line,” I scolded.

“*S-Sorry…*”

The sacred tableware on his back must have been too heavy for him. I plucked it up, put it in my pocket, and draped Album around my neck.

We eventually ran into a room connected to the basement. It appeared to be sealed with magic, but Sir Aiskoletta, to no one’s surprise, simply tore it apart with his crystal sword.

I was jealous of Komerv’s sense of balance—he didn’t move a single inch from his perch on Sir Aiskoletta’s shoulder, despite his master moving so violently.

Spears shot out of the walls with each step Sir Aiskoletta took down the basement staircase. However, he managed to simply smack them down before they could hit him. Some even rained down from the ceiling. This manor was a bone-chilling place.

The hallway at the bottom of the staircase was dark, so Sir Aiskoletta illuminated our path with a ball of light. It was a place that reeked of mold, perhaps because of all the moisture. I could even hear drops of water hitting the ground.

“This…is creepy.”

“Quit yappin’, Risurisu. Focus on walkin’, or you’ll trip.”

“Y-Yes, Captain.”

We finally reached the end of the hallway. Waiting there to greet us was an incredibly scary-looking door.

“This is…”

“What’s the matter, Sir Aiskoletta?”

“This door will curse you the moment you lay a hand on its doorknob.”

“C-Curse?”

Not even Sir Aiskoletta could destroy a curse with force alone.

“I see…”

He looked to be very deep in thought. Then he turned around to discuss something with Garr and Sly. Sir Aiskoletta removed Komerv from his shoulder, handed him to Garr, and took hold of Sly in return.

“Wh-What are you going to do?”

“Nothing too complicated. We must simply enter the room without going through the cursed door.”

“What?!”

“Stand back.”

Vice Captain Velrey took my hand and crouched down with me protectively. The others copied our stance.

I had no idea what he might be attempting. But then, Sir Aiskoletta slammed the tip of his crystal sword into the nearby wall with a loud bang, shaking the entire basement. Dust and rocks rained down on us from the ceiling. Sly quickly jumped into the hole in the wall, stretched her body out like a window frame, and kept the hole in place.

“I-I see. You’re using Sly to keep the hole from collapsing.”

Sir Aiskoletta and Sly had worked together to allow us to enter the room. The knight looked over his shoulder at us.

“Onwards.”

“S-Sure…”

We stepped into the room and were met with an unbelievable sight. A gigantic boar-pig was floating in a tank of water the size of the entire wall itself. It wasn’t as big as the great boar-pig we fought three months earlier, but it was like something I’d never seen before. Its fangs and claws were razor-sharp, it had two horns growing out of its head, and its eyes were completely bloodshot.

Goose bumps rose all over my body when I laid eyes on it.

Other monster specimens, bones, hides, and various strange items were strewn across the room as well. Some sort of giant

knives were hung up on the wall too. Horrifyingly, they seemed to be stained with dried blood.

“What a surprise. I never expected anyone to ever make it all the way to this room.”

“Y-You’re…!”

The middle-aged man who emerged from the darkness was dressed in formal wear and had smoothed-back, graying hair and a monocle. His name was Vario Leffra. He clutched a staff in his hands—proof that he was, indeed, a sorcerer.

I remembered meeting this man with Liselotte at the knights’ charity bazaar.

Captain Ludtink sighed before addressing him. “I thought we’d find you here. So, you *were* behind all this?”

“Oh, you knew all along, did you?”

“Well, it’s not like anyone had any proof.”

The captain explained how domestic agencies like the Royal Order, Monster Research Bureau, Magic Research Bureau, and Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau had recently fallen under suspicion. But Liselotte took offense to that.

“Wait just a minute! Why did they suspect the Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau?!”

“The way you use your personal fortunes to take care of mythical beasts seemed shady.”

“How rude!”

But the bureau turned out to be completely clean. Captain Ludtink said no one found a single problem within the organization.

“Of course you didn’t. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau operates out of a love for mythical beasts and nothing more.”

The next questionable group was the Monster Research Bureau. There were rumors that they used the flesh and blood of monsters for unsavory research.

“They were really shady too, but it looks like they’re not actually causing any trouble.”

The bureau’s members spent their days dedicated to research, aiming to reduce harm to humanity caused by monsters. Though they looked like they were up to no good at a glance, they were actually a group of diligent workers.

“Finally, they looked into the Magic Research Bureau and found a single person raising red flags with their actions. That person was you, Vario Leffra,” Captain Ludtink said.

Over the weekends, he’d been taking his mistresses to this vacation home neighborhood only to return to the royal capital alone. No one could presently locate these women’s whereabouts.

“Sounds like you picked mistresses without any family, so there’d be no one to look for ’em, huh?”

“You figured all of that out, did you? Well done.”

“Where are they now?”

Vario Leffra, the director of the Magic Research Bureau, glanced at the boar-pig in the tank. “I’d say they’re probably living as the flesh and blood of that enhanced boar-pig.”

Does that mean he fed them to the boar-pig with magic ore in its body? What an inhumane thing to do to so many innocent people.

“What was your purpose in turning livestock into monsters?”

Vario Leffra answered Sir Aiskoletta’s question with great pride. “Monsters will never obey humans, no matter what spell you cast on them. They’re creatures that cannot be controlled. But livestock is different. The information required to obey humans is embedded deep in their genes. That was what I had my eye on all along!” He explained that his plan involving the feralized boar-pigs was making excellent progress.

“What were you trying to accomplish?”

“The revival of a magic civilization. Conventional weapons are what rule this world. My goal is to use this magic stone kernel here to produce enchanted weapons, making the true power of sorcerers known throughout the world.” He showed us what appeared to be a massive magic stone set out on a cloth. It glimmered faintly, giving off a sinister aura.

“That’s…a magic stone kernel?”

“Yes. The magic ores inside the boar-pigs send all magical energy they absorb to this kernel.”

“So that’s what started this whole ordeal.”

The boar-pigs became able to gather magical energy with great efficiency once they had that magic ore inside them.

“And were you the one who cast that strange spell on these people’s weapons?” Sir Aiskoletta asked in a deep and dark tone.

“Yes, that was me too. I tried to make them into tools that gathered magical energy, but I failed. The magical energy from the monsters you slayed was supposed to be sent back to me. It just didn’t turn out that way…” He explained how he rewrote the spells used on the Seven Deadly Sins when he heard about our unit’s expeditions. “I failed in my efforts to use your weapons as kernels and turn you into puppets. I never expected Sir Aiskoletta to be amongst your numbers.”

It was hard to believe that the Seven Deadly Sins we’d been using all this time had such a spell cast on them.

“Why didn’t the spell to absorb our magical energy work?”

“It’s only a theory, but I believe the elf girl there was responsible. She has some sort of spell cast on her, doesn’t she?”

“M-Me?”

His words took me back to how the Fore Elf village healer had sealed away my magical energy with a spell. That must have stopped Vario’s own attempted interference. We’d almost become victims of this man’s dangerous research. We were only saved thanks to my village healer.

“And you think it’s a good idea to tell us all of this?”

Vario Leffra merely smirked at Captain Ludtink’s question. “It won’t be an issue. After all, you’re all about to become dinner for this feralized boar-pig!” He raised his staff into the air and a crack formed in the massive water tank.

“All units, prepare for battle! Risurisu, find somewhere to hide!”

“Yes, Captain!”

The liquid inside the tank went flying across the room, making way for the boar-pig to emerge, standing upright on his back two legs. He looked more like an orc than any boar-pig I’d ever seen before. The creature grabbed a knife hanging from the wall and began to chase my squadmates down.

Captain Ludtink’s sacred sword Dumortierite collided with the knife first. “Ngh! …Urgh!”

He was almost overpowered by the boar-pig, but the wings on his sword started to flap, kicking up a small tornado. However, the boar-pig was able to jump out of its way. Garr used this as an opportunity to strike with Staurolite, his sacred spear. The weapon

struck the creature's thick skin and merely bounced off it ineffectively with a heavy thud.

Staurolite's special power must be what's making the ground shake. It's throwing the boar-pig off-balance.

The boar-pig even dodged a blow from Zara's sacred ax, Rhodochrosite. But that wasn't the end of things. Rose vines sprouted from the weapon's handle, wrapping around the boar-pig's body and restraining it.

Next, Vice Captain Velrey slashed at the boar-pig's eyes with her sacred twin blades, Phenakite. Blood spurted out from the one eye she managed to pierce. For a finishing touch, the blades erupted with a light bright enough to blind their foe.

Ulgus readied an arrow with Serpentine, his sacred bow. "Ugh! This thing's wiggling!"

The arrow moved strangely once fired. It sailed through the air like a snake slithering across the ground, jumped up once it was in front of the boar-pig, and pierced its lips to seal them together.

Liselotte was wielding Orpiment, her sacred staff, to cast a spell.

"Lichtenberger! Don't use anything too big!" Captain Ludtink ordered.

"I know that!" A tiny magic circle appeared in front of Liselotte. "*Coil upwards, magic flames!*"

A small fire scorched the boar-pig's feet. The gold leaf even sparkled like an extra performance—if that was the right word for it.

"What's going on…?!"

"It has the power to make small spells look even more impactful?"

"What a waste of a power."

But it seemed to have worked. The boar-pig let out an ear-piercing groan. It started to swing its knife in all directions in one final attempt to strike someone.

"All units, fall back!"

Everyone fled from the boar-pig as Captain Ludtink ordered. Sir Aiskoletta took their place at the front of the battle. He raised his crystal sword and plunged it deep into the boar-pig's heart. He

must have struck its magic ore, as the boar-pig vomited blood before collapsing and going still.

"D-Damn you!" Vario Leffra never expected it to turn out like this. Now he was trying to flee.

"*You're not gettin' away!*"

Album was holding Gud Eetz, his sacred tableware, and using them as weapons against Vario Leffra. He straddled his face and slapped both of his cheeks with the knife and fork.

"Y-You little!"

I needed to help Album. I heard Petalite, my sacred pole, speak up.

"*The crotch.*"

"Huh?"

"*Aim for his crotch. You can stop him with just one hit. Don't go easy on him. Want me to say it again? Go for the crotch.*"

Now that he mentioned it, Vice Captain Velrey had once taught me the same thing. Not that I'd ever tried such a thing before.

It was the ultimate attack for someone like me, who had no combat skills whatsoever. While the man was busy with Album on his face, he'd left his crotch unguarded. I squeezed Petalite and brought it down as hard as I could.

"Take that!"

"Eheeeeee!!!" With one final, girly scream, Vario Leffra had been defeated.

"That was a nasty hit you got in, Risurisu."

"But he's a ruthless murderer, right? I didn't hold back at all."

Captain Ludtink gave me a pat on the shoulder. "You did well."

"*What about little ol' Album?*"

"You were a big help too."

"*Yippee!*"

With that, the trouble long plaguing the Royal Order and the research institutions was resolved.

Vario Leffra was apprehended and would soon be charged with his crimes. His position as director of the Magic Research Bureau was going to be handed over to someone else. They offered the position to Lord Lichtenberger at first, but he turned them down, saying that he was too busy working with mythical beasts to hold two offices at once.

The man’s love for those creatures never wavered.

Sir Aiskoletta’s contributions were a major factor in the resolution of the case. He was offered a medal for his service, but flatly refused it. He told the palace officials that he was simply too busy living his “slow life.”

Sir Aiskoletta was yet another person who never changed.

Later on, he agreed to donate his sacred weapons to the Second Expeditionary Squadron. My squadmates were very happy with this, having said goodbye to the Seven Deadly Sins weapons that were so convenient for everyone to use.

It had all been a major affair where things were lost but also gained.

From the bottom of my heart, I was truly glad that everything worked out in the end.

Chapter 2: The Monoceros’ Maiden and Meat Buns During Hunting Season

IT was snowing that morning, so I knew I needed to bundle up before I left the house. I opened my drawer and wrapped a fuzzy scarf around my neck—so nice and warm on a cold day.

“But there’s no better scarf than Album in the wintertime!”

“*I know, right?*”

“And what exactly are you doing here, Album?”

“*I took a nap in your bag, and when I woke up, here I was!*”

I couldn’t believe it. I’d taken Album home with me without realizing he was in my bag. Of course, it was my fault for not checking inside before I left work.

That was when I heard someone’s stomach let out a loud rumble. It was coming from Album, of course. He must have fallen asleep without eating anything. Deciding it was best to feed him, I went to the kitchen, retrieved some bread, and cut it down the middle. Then I filled the slit with buttercream and chopped candied mountain chestnuts.

“This is mountain chestnut cream bread.”

“*Woo-hoo!*”

I told him to have it now, since we still had some time before work.

“*Yay, thanks!*”

I looked out the kitchen window and saw Zara and Charlotte heading to work in a hurry. They had to leave ten minutes earlier than I did, since they rode a horse to the barracks.

Still, I’d never seen them in such a rush before. I looked closer and saw that Charlotte’s hair had been woven into a cute style. They must have gotten carried away with their hairstyling only to realize that they were later than they thought. Zara and Charlotte were a lot like a brother and sister who were very fond of each other.

Zara and I took turns escorting Charlotte to work each day. When we stayed out on expeditions overnight, she returned home

on Zara's horse.

We'd discussed getting Charlotte a horse of her own, but hadn't been able to make any progress yet. Horses were very expensive to buy and cost even more money to care for. We would also need a new stable that could house two horses together. It wasn't something we could afford so soon after purchasing a house.

Album had finished his bread, so I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, wiped the crumbs from his fur, and stuck him in my bag.

"It's time to go, Amelia."

"Kreeeh!"

I grabbed Petalite, the sacred pole that I was keeping in my room.

"*Hrrrumph!*"

"Please don't make strange sounds as soon as I pick you up."

"*Sorry. I was fast asleep.*" Petalite spoke to me with the coarse voice of an old man.

The sacred weapon gifted to me by Sir Aiskoletta allowed me to hear its inner voice. Although, that voice just sounded like any other old man. I'd used it to finish off the culprit behind the magic ore case, hung my laundry to dry on it, and beat the dust out of my blanket with it. It was actually quite useful.

"Kreh kreh."

"*We'll be late,*" Amelia warned me.

"Coming!"

I stroked Blanche's head—she would be watching over the house for us. Sir Aiskoletta was outside pulling weeds in his frilly apron. He bid us farewell as we passed.

We flew over the forest surrounding the royal capital until we spotted Charlotte and Zara riding their horse down below. We weren't likely to be late at our current pace. Then we overtook the two of them, caught up to the other commuting knights and workers, and touched down at the barracks.

A light layer of snow blanketed the royal capital as well. Everything looked as if it had been dusted with sugar. The brown brick clock tower looked particularly delicious—like a big bar of chocolate.

Amelia flew gracefully through the falling snow. The two of us enjoyed the changing season together.

I ran into Garr and Sly at the gates.

“Good morning, Garr. Good morning, Sly.”

Garr greeted me with a bow while Sly stretched out one arm in a salute. She was probably imitating the gatekeeper knight. As always, she was quite the playful creature.

“It’s so cold today…” I shivered. “Oh, Garr, that’s a lovely scarf.” He was wearing a thick scarf made with dark gray wool that looked incredibly soft and warm. “What?! Fredrica made this? Wow, she really loves you!”

Fredrica was Garr’s fiancée. The two would be getting married in the spring. I was so happy for them both.

Sly suddenly stretched out toward me.

“Ah, you have one too, Sly!” I hadn’t noticed, since she was half buried in Garr’s own scarf, but Sly had a matching scarf wrapped around her neck. Fredrica had made this one as well. “They suit you two nicely.”

Garr scratched his nose shyly, while Sly stuck her chest out proudly.

“The wedding is coming up soon, isn’t it? I’m really excited!” I exclaimed.

Garr told me he and Fredrica had been spending their days off planning the ceremony. There were clothes to have made, a new home to search for, and letters to send out—all the work had them stretched thin. But as stressful as they described it, the two of them seemed so happy.

Next month was Captain Ludtink’s wedding. He and Marina were finally going to become husband and wife.

But hearing about all these weddings was making me a little jealous.

If I got married, could I have children and a lively household of my own too?

When I pictured that, the faces of Zara, Charlotte, Sir Aiskoletta, Amelia, Blanche, and even Album appeared in my head.

“…Ah.”

I realized something important. I’d met people who were just as precious to me as family, even if I wasn’t married. Every day I spent with them was a good one. What else did I need?

But…*still.* Just once in my life, I wanted to wear a dazzling white wedding dress too.

Fore Elves wore long, white wedding dresses along with beautiful veils embroidered with silver flowers. Then we crafted items out of our veils once the ceremony was over. Those who wanted to be blessed with children made baby clothes. Those who desired a bounty of food made tablecloths. Couples who wanted a happy marriage sewed their veils into their sheets. It could be turned into many different items depending on what wish the couple wanted granted.

There were days that I thought about what I might make with my veil…but the opportunity never graced me.

Suddenly, the words of Lance, my ex-fiancé, came flooding back: "*I told you, I can't marry you!*"

It wasn't that long ago, so the memory was still vivid.

Fore Elves were only accepted as full-fledged adults once they were married. Those who remained unmarried were treated like something was wrong with them. Being rejected by Lance was like having my entire reason for existence denied. Thinking about that put me in a sour mood.

Sly tapped me on the shoulder, cocking her head as if to ask if I was okay.

"I'm sorry. I'm all right."

I had to stop thinking about it. Marriage wasn't the only means of being recognized in the royal capital. This was a place where your hard work alone was enough to earn acclaim.

I found a way of living here—the life of a knight. I would never return to the Fore Elf woods again.

I had a rewarding job, wonderful friends, and Amelia—someone I could share my life with. I'd even met Zara too. Didn't I already have everything I needed in life? I tried to persuade myself of that fact.

That was when I spotted Liselotte in front of the barracks. *What is she up to over there?*

When I got closer, I realized Lord Lichtenberger was with her. He was wearing a black cloak that made him completely blend in with the building's shadow.

"Whoa! You scared me… Um, I mean, good morning, Lord Lichtenberger. Good morning, Liselotte."

“Good morning.”

“Good morning, Mell.”

“What are you two doing here?” I asked.

“I’m just waiting for the morning meeting to start.”

“And I’m just waiting with Father.”

Lord Lichtenberger explained that he’d come to request the Second Expeditionary Squadron be dispatched on a mission, but he arrived too early and Captain Ludtink instructed him to wait somewhere else. So that was what the pair were doing now.

Lord Lichtenberger, director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau and one of the top five wealthiest men in the country, had been ordered to stand outside in the cold. Captain Ludtink didn’t understand how a man like that was supposed to be treated.

“It’s cold out here. Would you like to come inside for tea?” I invited.

“No, here is fine.”

“Won’t the other knights be startled to see you out here, Father?”

“I’m not enough to startle any knight, I’m sure.”

But you already startled me. Even Garr and Sly’s eyes went wide when they spotted him.

“What’s goin’ on over here, everyone? …Whoa!” Ulgus had just arrived for work. He jumped as soon as he laid eyes on Lord Lichtenberger.

“Do you understand now, Father?”

“He was probably surprised to see such a big group so early in the morning, not me specifically.”

Lord Lichtenberger had no interest in moving from this spot. I didn’t understand why. Perhaps he was the kind of person who refused to give up once he’d set his mind on something.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh.”

“Amelia is saying you should rest inside somewhere,” I relayed.

“Can you show us to a good spot?”

So, he *did* listen when it came from Amelia. Lord Lichtenberger was something of a simple-minded man.

After that, we led him to the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s drawing room. Amelia sat down next to Liselotte and shot me an

intense look. It was like she was saying, “I’ll take care of the father and daughter.” I nodded to show her the mythical beast-obsessed pair were in her hands. I prayed that they wouldn’t be too much for her.

I passed Charlotte in the hallway, glad to see she hadn’t been late for work.

“Why such a rush, Mell?” she asked.

“We have a guest today, so I wanted to make him tea.”

“I not work right now, so I’ll do it. You should take it easy before work.”

“Thank you, Charlotte.”

“Medicine herb tea? Or black tea?”

“Black tea, please.”

“Got it!”

During our unit’s breaks, we usually drank tea made from medicinal herbs I picked in the forest. The fresh leaves were surprisingly delicious and not bitter at all.

However, I couldn’t serve our guest medicinal herb tea that tasted like the wilderness. I needed to treat him to the black tea I purchased with the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s budget.

While we waited for the water to boil, I complimented Charlotte’s hair. “Zara did your hair today, didn’t he, Charlotte? It’s absolutely adorable.”

“Thank you! Hee hee. I’m happy!” She told me it was hard to style her hair around her fox ears. “We were almost late because it take so long.”

“But you weren’t, so it all worked out in the end.”

Charlotte said that Zara had made his horse run a lot faster than usual to make it to work on time. “It was like being the wind. So fun!”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Maids usually arrived at work one hour later than the rest of the knights. Although, Vice Captain Velrey’s fan club showed up early to greet her in the morning. I felt bad that Charlotte had to leave at the same time as us every single morning. Maybe we really *did* need to consider getting her a horse of her own.

There were still fifteen minutes before our morning meeting. I decided to chat with Zara a bit before then.

“Please finish up the tea for me, Charlotte.”

“Uh-huh! Leave it to me!”

I went to the break room and found Zara sewing something by himself—a wedding veil.

“Wow, that’s lovely! But why a veil, Zara?”

“It’s for Crow’s bride.”

“For Marina?!”

He explained that Marina wanted a veil with rose embroidery to wear at her wedding but wasn’t able to find one in any shops. They all refused her custom order, too, as it was difficult to stitch detailed roses into the thin fabric of a veil.

Weddings were supposed to be happy occasions, but Marina was depressed that she wouldn’t be able to have her rose veil.

“She said that roses were the first present Crow ever gave her,” Zara explained.

“What a surprisingly romantic present from Captain Ludtink.”

“Shocking, isn’t it?”

Captain Ludtink had promised Marina that he would find a craftsman for her rose veil. But months later, he was still coming up empty-handed.

“When all else failed, he came to me in a total panic, asking if I could embroider roses into a veil.” Zara stuck his needle through the delicate material, drawing out the complex shape of a rose. It appeared to be the last one, as he severed the thread after that. He held up the rose veil for me to see, a big grin on his face. “Hehe! It’s finished.”

“It’s absolutely beautiful!”

“Thanks, Melly.”

“How incredible. I can’t believe you made the roses look so pretty on a veil of all things.”

“It sure wasn’t easy. It takes a lot of time to embroider normal fabric on its own, so I totally get why all those craftsmen refused.” He told me this was his sixth attempt and that the previous five had ended in failure. “I’m just so relieved I finished in time for the wedding.”

“Yes, that’s great.”

I was looking forward to Captain Ludtink and Marina’s wedding.

“I wonder what Crow will look like up at the altar?”

“It’s hard to imagine.”

I just hoped he would be able to conceal his bandit face on the day of the wedding. It was my one earnest wish.

“Oh, that’s right, Melly. There’s something I wanted to show you.”

“What is it?”

Zara reached into his sewing kit and retrieved another veil—this one with tiny flowers embroidered out of silver thread. Not only was it adorable, but the veil’s beauty was enough to instantly capture my heart.

“Wow! Wh-What is this for?!”

“It was something I worked on for practice before trying to make the rose veil, but actually, I was making it with you in mind. You can have it if you want, Melly. I bet you could make an accessory with it or something.”

It was a bridal veil he’d made just for me. As soon as the nearly weightless fabric touched my hands, tears began to pour out of my eyes all at once.

“Oh no, Melly! What’s wrong?!”

“I-I’m sorry…”

I was only confusing Zara by acting like this. My voice trembling, I explained what the veil meant to me. “Y-You see, we have a tradition in the F-Fore Elf village where we make little accessories with our b-bridal veils. I n-never thought I’d get a chance to do that, since I can’t get married.”

“I-I had no idea. I’m so sorry. That was stupid of me.”

“No, th-these are happy tears. Th-Thank you so much.” I squeezed the veil against my chest. Something warm and tender filled the emptiness in my heart.

“Y-You know, Melly, if you want to get married, I—”

“Hey, Zara, you finish Marina’s veil yet?”

Captain Ludtink thrust the door open and barged into the room. Zara swiftly covered my face by draping the rose veil over my head.

“Look at that! You did it! Not too shabby at all.” Captain Ludtink tried to snatch the veil from my head, but Zara grabbed his wrist.

“I still have to trim the loose ends, adjust the shapes, and finish the little details. It’ll be done by tonight.”

“Oh yeah? That’s fine.”

That was when the bell signaling five minutes before the start of work rang.

“It’s almost time for the morning meeting, Crow. Let’s head to your office,” Zara said.

“Ah, you’re right.”

Zara stole a peek at my face after that. I probably looked like a mess with all the tears running down my cheeks. I didn’t want to go to the meeting like this…but I doubted I’d be allowed to skip it for something so silly.

Zara smiled softly—a silent signal that everything would be all right.

“Oh my goodness, Melly. You’re all covered in thread. I’m so sorry about that. Why don’t you wash your face at the well? I’ll let you know what we discussed at the meeting. You don’t mind, do you, Crow?”

“That’s fine.”

Zara pushed Captain Ludtink out the door, leaving me alone in the break room.

The captain had very nearly caught me crying. I was immensely grateful that Zara was so quick-witted.

I washed my face, calmed myself down, and headed for the captain’s office. Captain Ludtink had finished his reports, and Lord Lichtenberger was about to speak. I got in line next to Ulgus and kept a meek look on my face as I listened.

“A mythical beast has been spotted outside of the royal capital. Reports describe what appears to be a monoceros.”

Monoceros—beautiful white horses said to have horns growing from their heads—were second-class mythical beasts.

“Monoceros love those who are pure of heart. They may at times appear in towns and act out violently until they find someone they accept.”

In other words, they’re troublemakers.

Not only were there consistent eyewitness accounts of the monoceros, but it appeared to be getting closer and closer to the royal capital.

“We don’t want a violent struggle within the town. The goal is to capture this creature before it arrives in the royal capital. That’s why we’ve come to you, the squadron famous for finding, tracking, and capturing mythical beasts.”

Our unit had successfully solved multiple cases relating to mythical beasts over time. Although, that was nothing more than a coincidence.

"I'd also like your squadron's beastfolk maid to participate in this mission."

"You mean Charlotte?"

"That's right." Lord Lichtenberger explained that monoceros loved boys and girls from the ages of eight to fifteen.

"They like boys too, not just girls?" I asked.

"There are old records of monoceros who are drawn to boys too. They're not all males, after all."

"I see."

We would be relying on Ulgus if the monoceros was female. Although, he didn't sound confident that he would be of any use.

"Don't worry, Ulgus. You're a very pure creature."

"Thanks, Medic Risurisu...!"

Once I'd bolstered Ulgus' confidence, it was time to get ready. We all split up and began our preparations.

I heard Liselotte yelling about something as soon as I stepped into the courtyard. There I spotted the two Lichtenbergers and Amelia, still watching over them.

"I told you I'd had enough of your mythical beast disguises, Father! It's mortifying! Do you *really* think you'll lure in a mythical beast this way? It's an utterly childish strategy!"

I felt like I could see Lord Lichtenberger growing smaller while his daughter shouted at him. He was clutching a horse mask with a horn sticking out of it. *He was going to disguise himself as a monoceros with that?*

The sad look on Amelia's face caused a pain in my heart.

There was nothing I could do to help the father and daughter in this situation, so I promptly left the courtyard, pretending I never saw any of it in the first place.

We would need to eat during the mission, so I packed up food supplies and cooking utensils. I opened my bag and found Album fast asleep, cuddled up with my handkerchief. These naps were why I ended up accidentally bringing him home with me.

"Wake up, Album!"

"*Huh?! Time for food already?!*"

"No, we're going on an expedition. Do you want to join us?"

“*Yeah! I’ll probably get to eat more delicious stuff!*”

Album seemed to be mistaking expeditions for picnics…but I didn’t correct him. It was easy enough to bring him along, and Lord Lichtenberger, the person he had a contract with, would be there too.

I finished packing and boarded the carriage. Vice Captain Velrey would be riding Amelia this time. Garr would drive the carriage and have Sly with him as a buddy. Captain Ludtink and Zara were riding horses of their own. Lord Lichtenberger, Liselotte, Ulgus, Charlotte, and I filled the carriage.

“Aaah, I’m so nervous! It my first expedition!” Charlotte was surprisingly eager to go on her very first expedition—something that came as a relief to me.

The carriage took off, following Captain Ludtink’s lead.

“Wow, look at the big meadow! Ah, there’s a mountain rabbit!”

“Really? Where?”

“Right there!”

“I don’t see it…”

I always thought I had good eyesight, but Charlotte’s far surpassed mine. She could spot hopping rabbits all the way off in the distance.

Lord Lichtenberger took note of this and asked Charlotte to help us find the monoceros. “I want you to look for the monoceros depicted in this drawing.”

“Uh…huh?”

He held up a drawing of what sort of resembled a monoceros. But it looked more like a dog with a pole sticking out of its head. His Lordship was not a skilled artist in the least.

Liselotte recoiled at the drawing and wasted no time correcting his information.



“Forget about that picture. Monoceros look like normal horses with a single horn. Perhaps they’re slightly smaller than a normal horse? They’re usually white, but I’ve heard of black and brown monoceros as well.”

“Wow, really? Okay. I help look for monoceros.”

That seemed to help Charlotte understand. Liselotte breathed a sigh of relief. Lord Lichtenberger, on the other hand, was glaring out the window. He’d failed to convey anything with his drawing.

We pressed forward in our carriage but failed to catch a glimpse of the rumored monoceros. It was time for our first break. Captain Ludtink quickly went into the woods where no one could see him.

“Mell, where Bandit go?” Charlotte asked.

“Um…let’s just say he went to go pick flowers.”

“Oh!”

She seemed to accept that explanation. That was a relief. “Picking flowers” was nothing more than a euphemism for relieving oneself.

Charlotte and I were rehydrating with water when we heard a scream from Captain Ludtink.

“Argh!”

“What’s wrong, Crow?!” Zara called back.

“What is it?!”

We didn’t want to interrupt anything we shouldn’t, so we let the male members of our party go and check on him.

Ulgus was the only boy who remained with us.

“Mell, why Bandit pick flowers?”

“Huh?!”

“I don’t understand it either. Why would Captain Ludtink of all people bother picking flowers at a time like this?” Liselotte was the next person to question me. I’d thought that “picking flowers” was a term used by young noblewomen, but I appeared to be mistaken.

“That’s the first I’m hearing of it too, Medic Risurisu.” Ulgus didn’t understand the phrase either.

Just as I was struggling to come up with an explanation, Vice Captain Velrey stepped in and saved the day.

“You say you’re ‘picking flowers’ when you’re actually going to the bathroom.”

“Really? Then I’ll say it too!” Charlotte cheered.

Vice Captain Velrey gently patted the head of the enthusiastic girl. Looking on with envy, Ulgus declared that he would start using the phrase as well. But the vice captain merely responded, “Is that so?” before turning her attention back to Charlotte.

He was disappointed, but Ulgus should never have expected to receive the same treatment as Charlotte.

“I wonder what happened to Captain Ludtink?” I said.

“That scream didn’t sound like it was because of a monster.”

The vice captain was so perceptive. She was able to discern the situation based on a single scream.

The men finally returned five minutes later.

“Wh-What’s that?!”

A white creature was dangling off the end of Garr’s spear. For a moment, I feared it was the monoceros. But the short, stout animal had the wrong body type.

“I-Is that a mythical beast?”

“No, it’s a white boar-pig.”

“A…boar-pig?”

He explained that it had charged at Captain Ludtink while he was taking care of his business.

“I tried to smack the damn thing in the head, but I musta hit the wrong spot, ’cuz it just keeled over.”

He had the strength of a bandit, all right.

The unique coloring of this boar-pig brought me back to the recent magic ore incidents. What if this one had magic ore in its body too? We needed to butcher it at once.

Captain Ludtink sliced it apart with his knife, but there was nothing but normal muscle in its heart. This one didn’t seem to be carrying magic ore.

“It must just be albino. May as well eat it now.”

The boar-pig had beautiful pink meat on the inside. Its coat was nice and glossy too, so it would surely taste delicious.

“I help prepare the meat!”

Lord Lichtenberger scowled when he heard Charlotte say that.

“Father, Charlotte grew up in a forest just like Mell. It’s easy to butcher an animal when you’re raised to hunt.”

“I see.”

I began the preparations for our meal.

"*I wanna help too!*" Album hadn't said a peep this whole time, but he suddenly volunteered to help.

"Could you look around for big leaves we can use as plates?" I requested.

"*Sure thing.*"

Amelia, worried about leaving Album on his own, decided to follow him.

"All right, it's time to get cooking!"

I decided to use the stove pot I'd brought along with me.

First I added flour, yeast, sugar, and salt to a bowl, then poured in water and kneaded it all together. I let the dough rest for a while once it was nice and smooth.

"I finished butchering, Mell!"

"Thank you, Charlotte."

She'd cut up the meat properly into different parts. I decided to serve the tender meat on skewers with salt and pepper. Ulgus and Zara helped out with this step.

"All right, please begin cooking the skewers once they're ready."

"Okay, Medic Risurisu!"

"Charlotte, can you make a dip with this oyster sauce?"

"Uh-huh!"

Next, I needed a filling for my dough. I minced the animal's fat and rib meat together, added medicinal and fragrant herbs to make it smell better, poured in some mushrooms preserved in oil, and mixed it all together thoroughly.

The dough was probably ready now. I used a rolling pin on bite-size pieces, placed the filling in the center, and wrapped them up. Then I oiled the bottom of my stove pot and lined them up inside.

"All right, this looks good for now."

Now all that was left was to bake it. I placed coal on the lid and let it sit for a while.

Ulgus and Zara's skewers were now an appetizing golden-brown color. I also coated them with a healthy amount of the sauce Charlotte made.

"I'll just use salt and pepper to flavor some of the other skewers."

“That sounds great!”

Album and Amelia returned carrying a stack of giant leaves.

“*Do these look good?*”

“Yes, you picked excellent leaves.”

I patted his head, praising the weasel spirit’s work, when I sensed Ulgus looking at him enviously. He must have wanted head pats from *anyone*, not just the vice captain. I had no idea what I should do. But then Zara began to pat Ulgus’ head instead.

“There, there. You’re such a good boy, June.”

“W-Wow. Thank…you…”

Naturally, I couldn’t stop myself from chuckling. Ulgus’s face revealed his sheer disappointment with this outcome.

“Okay, I think everything’s ready!”

I removed the coal, opened the lid, and found my “meat buns” were complete. The skewers had also been cooked to perfection. I placed the buns and meat skewers on the giant leaves.

Today’s lunch was extra luxurious thanks to Captain Ludtink’s flower-picking adventure. I prepared a napkin, knife, and fork just for Lord Lichtenberger. Hopefully he would be able to eat without any issue that way.

“Lunch is ready, everyone!”

The group gathered around me, said a prayer, and began to eat.

“*Woo-hoo! It looks yummy!*” Album took the meat bun and lifted it up with both hands like it was an offering. But a corner of the dough came unwrapped, letting the meat juices dribble out. “*O-Ow, it’s hot!*”

“Don’t raise it up like that, or it will leak, Album.”

“*Awwww…!*”

I wiped his fur with a wet cloth. He was such a little troublemaker. “Please be careful. The meat buns are hot.”

Ulgus blew on the bread before taking careful bites, but the piping hot juices still leaked out anyway. “Ah! It’s hot! B-But it’s really good!”

Now, how was *I* going to tackle the meat bun? Garr was sitting in front of me, so I observed his funny method of eating it. He had Sly open a tiny hole in the bread from which he sucked out the juices before biting into it.

I see. I had to do something about the juices first, or else they would leak as soon as I bit into the bread.

Lord Lichtenberger seemed to have spilled all the juices as soon as he cut into it with his knife as well. He was silently reeling from the mistake.

I decided to copy Garr's method. I held the bread sideways and nibbled a small hole into it.

"Whoa...!"

I'd only eaten a tiny portion, but the glistening meat juices very nearly overflowed. I drank them down before they could spill. The flavors of the juices and spices mingled inside the dough, filling my mouth with a rich flavor like soup. I tried the bread itself next. The stove pot had made it nice and crunchy on the outside, while the dough on the inside had puffed up pleasantly. The minced boar-pig meat was the source of the abundant juices, now soaking into the bread.

"I-It's delicious!"

I recommended Garr's method to the others. No one else had a problem with leaks after that.

"It's not gonna leak if you just eat it all in one bite."

With that assertion, Captain Ludtink stuffed the entire meat bun in his mouth.

"Mm... M-Mmmph!"

He must have forgotten that he was sensitive to heat. His eyes filled with tears and his face went bright red. The kindhearted Zara offered him some water.

"Mell, this meat is soooo yummy! I love it!"

"I'm glad you think so, Charlotte."

Charlotte's approval meant a lot to me.

After that, I wanted to try a meat skewer too. I lifted the metal rod up and watched the fat dribble down.

The meat was shockingly tender even without having cured it. The soft fat didn't retain any unpleasant odors either. It was truly delicious. The oyster sauce recipe Charlotte had made for it brought out the flavors even more.

"What a delicious sauce you made, Charlotte."

"Really? Yay!"

Lord Lichtenberger removed each piece of meat from the skewer individually with his knife, taking elegant bites. Next to him

was Liselotte, who bit the meat directly off the skewer—she was long-accustomed to expedition food at this point.

Amelia was eagerly chowing down on fruit off of one of the leaves too.

Everyone was satisfied now that their stomachs were full.

“Aaah, I’m stuffed!”

We were going to depart again in ten minutes. Album was lying on his back with his limbs spread out, fast asleep. I resisted the urge to poke at his plump belly.

“All right, everyone. Let’s get—”

“Ah, monoceros!” Charlotte was pointing at something deep in the forest.

The Lichtenbergers reacted immediately.

“Where?!”

“Where is it?!”

“There. Ah, it’s coming here now.”

Suddenly, I heard a strange noise. It was a beautiful tone, like a bell being rung again and again.

“Wh-What’s that sound?!”

“It’s the monoceros’ courtship call,” Liselotte, the walking mythical beast encyclopedia, answered me.

“C-Courtship?!”

Lord Lichtenberger chanted a spell and placed his hands on the ground. A few different magic circles formed around him. It was a spell to capture mythical beasts. Supposedly, the spell would activate if the animal crossed those magic circles.

I finally managed to spot the monoceros for myself—a divine, silver creature that was slightly glowing. *Is it my imagination, or is it running toward me?*

It was less than fifteen feet away, having easily avoided Lord Lichtenberger’s magic circles.

“It didn’t work, Father! The monoceros spotted the spell!”

Lord Lichtenberger quickly changed plans. He tossed a ball with a net attached to it at the monoceros, only for that, too, to be dodged. The other members had been given ball nets of their own, but no one managed to snag the creature. Captain Ludtink barked out new orders.

“Get it, Ulgus!”

“Y-Yes, Captain!”

Ulgus fired a special arrow with a capturing spell engraved on the arrowhead—something developed by the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau.

Just as he was about to land a direct hit…

“Kweeeeeeee!”

The monoceros let out a piercing cry with enough force to knock the arrow out of the air. The shockwave did a number on Garr, Charlotte, and myself—those of us with the sharpest ears. I sunk down to the ground.

“Ugh…”

“My ears hurt!”

The monoceros still refused to take its eyes off me.

Vice Captain Velrey let out a pointed cry. “Captain Ludtink, your orders?!”

“I know already! Go to hell!”

Surely, Captain Ludtink wasn’t telling Vice Captain Velrey to go to hell. It had to be a cry of frustration against the mythical beast that he had no way of handling.

We couldn’t simply battle a mythical beast. We had to *capture* it.

Unfortunately for us, monoceros were particularly ferocious mythical beasts. There were no historical records of them getting along with humans either. Monoceros simply abducted the boys and girls they took a liking to and disappeared, never to be seen again.

The monoceros took one big leap and landed before us, revealing its beautiful silver coat to the others.

“It’s…!”

“You must be kidding! A silver monoceros?!”

Apparently, the radiant silver monoceros was an extremely rare variety—one that had never been officially recorded before.

“We…we have to capture it.”

“Y-Yes, that’s right.”

The look in the Lichtenbergers’ eyes changed completely. It would be hard to calm them down now.

Captain Ludtink ordered Ulgus to restrain Lord Lichtenberger. Ulgus was physically small for a knight, but he *was* strong. He grabbed His Lordship under the arms and held him there tightly.

Vice Captain Velrey took Liselotte's arm and whispered, "Calm down. You're a knight, aren't you?" into her ear. That seemed to snap her out of her trance and settle her down.

The Lichtenbergers had been subdued. That just left the problem of how to handle the monoceros.

I suddenly found myself locking eyes with the mythical beast. I couldn't pull myself away from the sight. We stood there like that as time ticked away.

"Melly!"

Zara suddenly wrapped his arms around me and pulled me back. This drew an ear-piercing roar from the monoceros.

"Kweeeeeee!"

"Kreh! Kreeeh!"

Amelia spread her wings and demanded the monoceros be still. But it wasn't listening. Instead, it aimed its horn at Amelia and broke out into a charge.

"Amelia!"

"Kreh!" She flapped her wings and kicked off the ground.

"Kweeeee!"

This time, it was charging at Zara, who still held me in his arms.

"Ngh!" Zara jumped out of the way of the first charge. But the monoceros quickly spun around and made a beeline for us again. Zara was strong, but he wouldn't be able to keep this up while carrying me at the same time.

"Leave me here, Zara. At this rate, we'll both—"

"Absolutely not! I'm not letting go of you, no matter what happens!"

He dodged the next two charges too. Before the monoceros could come back for a fourth time, Captain Ludtink shouted, "Zara! Throw Risurisu over to me, or you're both gonna get trampled!"

He was absolutely right.

"Please, Zara, throw me!"

"....."

"Zara!"

"C'mon, Zara!"

"...Forgive me, Melly."

As soon as his apology reached my ear, I tensed my body. Then I felt myself flying through the air.

Captain Ludtink managed to catch me before I hit the ground. Unlike the gentle Zara, Captain Ludtink slung me over his shoulder like a bag of wheat. *Thanks a lot, Captain.*

“Kweeeeee!”

I was certain the monoceros would charge Captain Ludtink this time, but instead, it remained fixated on Zara.

“Garr, get that thing’s attention without hurting it.”

Garr nodded at the captain’s orders. He raced toward the monoceros and thrust the blunt end of his spear between it and Zara.

“Why does the monoceros keep attacking Zara?” I asked.

“Maybe Zara was his target, not you?”

Was such a thing possible? Charging at someone with its horn was such a terrible way of showing its affection.

“No, that monoceros isn’t displaying courtship behavior,” Lord Lichtenberger, still being restrained by Ulgus, explained. “If the monoceros took a liking to him, it would have played its courtship call.”

He said that the courtship call was something emitted from the horn of a monoceros. Right now, it appeared to simply be in a rage.

“Then why won’t it leave Zara alone?”

“Kreh kreh!”

“What?!”

Amelia landed on the ground and translated the monoceros’ words for me.

“What’d Amelia say, Risurisu?”

“Um, well…” As much as I dreaded repeating those words out loud, I had no other choice. “She said…the monoceros is angry… because I got the stench of a man on me.”

“Ah, I get it now.”

It seemed that the monoceros had been attempting to court me before Zara interrupted and sent it into a frenzy.

“What’re we supposed to do with that thing, Lord Lichtenberger?”

His Lordship quietly cast his gaze down to his feet. Then he looked up, wide-eyed, and answered the captain firmly. “We retreat.”

“Huh?”

“As you can see, the monoceros is a brutal beast. We must retreat and allow it to settle down before we capture it.”

As they were speaking, the monoceros managed to knock Garr’s spear out of his hands.

“Kweee!”

Its horn lit up. It had changed targets from Zara to Garr.

“Garr!”

I thought it was all over...but then Garr threw something at the mythical beast. That something was Sly.

Sly wrapped herself around the monoceros’ horn and clung to a nearby tree trunk, stopping the creature in its tracks. It thrashed and thrashed, but there was no escaping Sly’s firm hold.

“Y-You’re amazing, Sly!” But just when I shouted that, the monoceros let out a shrill cry of its own.

“Kweeeeeeee!”

“Ugh!”

“It’s...!”

The shriek came with a shockwave. I covered my ears and managed to regain my balance after staggering. The others had fallen to their knees from this second shockwave.

Once I caught my breath, the monoceros looked at me and shot me a dreadful glare.

“Kweeeee!”

I didn’t know what it was saying. But I felt like it was calling me a traitor.

But then it did something unthinkable. It bent its legs before taking a huge leap into the air, yanking the entire tree out of the ground from the roots.

“What?!”

I never expected an outcome like this. The monoceros was trying to charge at me, all the while dragging the entire tree behind itself.

Sly was smart enough to release the monoceros. If it kept dragging the tree at that speed, it could hit us like a battering ram.

Was I about to be impaled by the monoceros’ horn?

I grit my teeth. But then someone tottered out in front of me. Charlotte.

“Charlotte... S-Stop it! Get to safety!” I shouted.

“It’s all right. Remember how you saved me from bad guys? Now it my turn to save you.”

“N-No, you can’t!”

She tried to stand up, but her legs were too weak. The monoceros’ shockwave had really done a number on her. It was strong enough to send even Captain Ludtink and Garr straight to the ground.

Her legs were trembling. She was terrified, but she still wanted to protect me.

“Run, Charlotte!”

Charlotte wouldn’t listen. She spread her arms out to protect me from the monoceros and let out a cry.

“Please, settle down!”



I couldn’t bear to watch. I squeezed my eyes shut…but Charlotte’s scream never came.

When I pried my eyes open, I saw Charlotte sitting on the ground.

The monoceros had bent down in front of her. Its horn was glowing. I heard what sounded like the chime of a bell.

“Is that…its courtship call?”

To my shock, the monoceros had taken a liking to Charlotte and was now courting her.

“Wh-What should I do?!” She turned around, her face full of confusion.

“Form a contract with him.” The response came from Lord Lichtenberger. “The monoceros will listen to your orders.”

“What?! B-But…”

“He won’t attack anyone if he has a contract. He’ll become obedient.”

Even knowing that, it wasn’t a decision that anyone could just make on the spot.

Liselotte saw how flustered Charlotte was and called out to her gently. “Charlotte, once you form a contract with a mythical beast, they become your family. They’ll come to your rescue no matter what.”

“But…he attacked everyone.”

“I know. He came on a bit too strong, I’ll admit. If you don’t want to enter a contract, there’s still one last resort.”

She explained that there was a spell that forced mythical beasts to submit for capture, but it required knocking them unconscious and binding their bodies with magic chains. The Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau didn’t care to use it, as it was a much more violent method of capturing the creatures.

“This monoceros has chosen you. You’re the only one who can decide what to do.”

“I’m…the only one…!”

Lord Lichtenberger offered Charlotte even more advice. “Neither of you will be happy if you enter a contract against your will. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau isn’t formally suggesting you enter a contract either. Contracts exist to make mythical beasts and humans happy.”

“Contracts are for being happy…!”

Charlotte stared down at the monoceros. He was still bending his legs and letting out the chime of his courting call. He seemed so much more peaceful compared to when he was attacking me.

“If I form contract with this monoceros, will he be with me forever, just like Amelia?”

“Yes, he will.”

“Then I want to have a contract with him. He’ll become my family.”

Lord Lichtenberger explained that contracts were formed by giving mythical beasts a name. Charlotte didn’t waste any time with her decision.

“I want to call him Umataro!”

The second she gave him his name, the contract looked like it was finalized. A magic circle formed around them, and Charlotte received a symbol branded on the back of her hand.

The monoceros—Umataro—stood up and nuzzled his cheek against Charlotte’s.

But…Umataro? What a strange name. I’ll have to ask her where she got that from.

Umataro, with his silver coat, and the silver-haired Charlotte looked like the perfect match for each other. He bent down low and cried out sweetly, beckoning her to sit on his back. Umataro wagged his tail happily when she hopped on.

“Look at that, Zara. I think Charlotte will be able to ride her monoceros to work now,” I observed.

“Oh my! You’re right.”

It was a miraculous encounter. Charlotte would never have to come to work early with us again.

That was the story of how Charlotte entered into a contract with Umataro, the monoceros. It went without saying that the two Lichtenbergers watched Charlotte riding Umataro with looks of utter jealousy on their faces.

Chapter 3: The Thriving Spicy Noodle Food Stall and the Drug Dealers

WE'D come to welcome a new friend to our home: the monoceros, a second-class mythical beast named Umataro.

He seemed perfectly happy staying outside and liked to sleep on the grass at night. We probably would have had to remodel the house if he insisted on staying inside with Charlotte all the time.

Zara and I were very relieved that it wasn't the case.

Umataro didn't take much of an interest in anyone other than Charlotte. Even the great hero Sir Aiskoletta was of no significance to the monoceros. He acted the same when it came to other mythical beasts, ignoring Amelia and Blanche on a daily basis.

Well, it wasn't surprising that different mythical beasts had different personalities.

We'd been told that Umataro would cease his courting behaviors and treat Charlotte as his master now that they were in a contract. In other words, Charlotte could have a romantic relationship in the future without sending Umataro into a jealous rage.

We also discovered that Umataro liked flowers, so the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau brought him beautiful flowers every single day. Our storehouse was now filled with Amelia's fruit and Umataro's flowers. It had become oddly colorful in there.

Charlotte also started traveling to and from work on Umataro's back. But she decided to keep leaving the house at the same time as before. We told her she could take it easy now, but she insisted on traveling to work with us.

Zara and I were utterly charmed by such sweetness. But that much went without saying.



ANOTHER morning, another new assignment.

“This mission’s gonna be a little different. We’ve received word that people are usin’ the night market to sell drugs, so our job is to find ’em and bring ’em into custody.”

The night market was a famous event in the royal capital—a place where many vendors set up stalls, mostly for food. The streets were lined with red paper lanterns, making the whole thing look surreal from a distance.

“The Covert Squadron and Patrol Squadron already went undercover, but couldn’t catch anyone in the act,” Captain Ludtink explained. They uncovered important information during that time, however. “They said it’s the vendors at the night market who are sellin’ drugs to each other.”

A few of them became dependent and were now going in and out of the hospital. But how did it come to that? The mystery only deepened.

The Royal Order decided to change their method of infiltration, as going undercover as normal customers hadn’t resulted in any leads.

“A few squadrons are gonna be joining the night market as vendors, including the Second Expeditionary Squadron.”

Our ability to cook full meals on expeditions had become a rumor that spread throughout the Royal Order, causing the higher-ups to agree that we would be the right fit for this mission.

“Got that, Risurisu?” Captain Ludtink addressed me. “Come up with somethin’ we can sell at the night market. They said we can keep any profits we make too.”

“O-Oh…!”

The Royal Order was even going to cover our materials and fees to open up a stall. In other words, we got to put the profits directly into our wallets.

“Your roles have already been decided. Risurisu will come up with the food, Zara will be in charge of cookin’, Ulgus is our shopkeeper, and Garr and Sly will patrol the stall to keep an eye out for anyone suspicious. Lichtenberger, you’re managin’ the money, and I’ll be patrollin’ the whole market.”

“What about me, Captain?”

“Velrey, let me think…” He brought his hand to his chin and stared up at the ceiling like he was deep in thought. “I think you oughta dress up nice to attract customers.”

“Attract customers…?”

She probably didn’t expect that. The vice captain’s eyebrows lowered in a confused expression.

“It’s important to bring in customers at a night market. Most of ’em are gonna be men on their way home from work, after all.” He spoke to Vice Captain Velrey with an evil expression that would put a bandit to shame. “You’re the key to our profits, Velrey. We can have a big ol’ party afterwards if we rake in a lot of money.”

“……”

“I’m countin’ on ya.” He gave her a firm pat on the shoulder.

It kind of felt like our objective had gone from catching the merchants dealing drugs to optimizing our profits at the night market. Well, if our stall really became a big hit, there was a higher chance that the criminals would come and interact with us.

“It’s all up to you and your recipe, Risurisu.”

“Urk…!”

Some of these vendors have been in business for decades. I can’t just come up with something comparable on the spot!

I was cradling my head in my hands, but Vice Captain Velrey spoke up to me sweetly.

“Why don’t we go to the night market tonight and see what kind of food they sell?”

“Vice Captain Velrey!”

She was such a kind soul. I got a little teary-eyed.

After work, we also invited Charlotte and Liselotte on our outing to the night market.

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WE finished the workday and changed out of our uniforms in the dressing room. I put on the dress I sewed a month earlier. It was made with thick fabric that would surely keep me warm, even at night. I also wore a woolen cape just to be safe.

“Night market! Night market!”

Charlotte was wagging her tail as she changed clothes. She hated crowds when she first came to the royal capital, but they didn’t bother her in the slightest now.

Liselotte put on a simple, undyed dress of her own. She'd purchased it with me, since she would draw attention to herself in town wearing her fancy clothes.

Vice Captain Velrey wore a leather jacket, trousers, and knee-high boots—all of them black. She looked so cool in that outfit.

"Shall we get going?"

"Yes!"

Amelia and Umataro would stay behind at the barracks. I'd already informed Zara that we were going out with Vice Captain Velrey. He was going to be alone with Sir Aiskoletta at the house, so I hoped it wouldn't be too much for him.

We headed to the night market on foot.

I hadn't been there in a very long time. My first visit was right after I'd joined the Second Expeditionary Squadron. I recalled how we all strolled through the market and ate food from the stalls.

"There's a west street, east street, and north street that make up the night market," Vice Captain Velrey explained.

The most popular stalls were on the west street, which was full of activity every day. The east street was the location of stalls that had been in business for a long time. The north street was a lawless district where people set up stalls without permission.

"We should stay away from the north street. The Patrol Unit is already looking over the area, but it sounds like there's a lot of stalls who refuse to leave."

"That's so scary," I said.

"Yes, it truly is," Liselotte agreed.

"The fishmonger I buy from tells me not to go on north street after dark," Charlotte added.

The drug dealers were likely coming in through the north street. The Royal Order had investigated the area thoroughly but still wasn't able to apprehend anyone. I could only imagine the clever methods they'd come up with to keep their business hidden.

After a fifteen-minute walk from the barracks, the night market lights came into view. Red lanterns were hung in between each stall, casting a glow over the street.

"It smells so good!"

"What would you like to eat, Charlotte?" Vice Captain Velrey called out to her in a gentle voice.

"Hmmm. I want something warm 'cuz it's cold out!"

“Then let’s head to the east street. A lot of vendors sell soup over there.”

“Yippee!”

Vice Captain Velrey seemed to know a lot about the night market.

“Do you come here often, Vice Captain Velrey?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do. It’s cheaper than cooking dinner if I’m on my own.”

“I see.”

She explained that the fee to open a stall wasn’t very expensive, resulting in cheaper food prices than a normal restaurant.

“The night market looks fun!”

Charlotte was brimming with excitement—like she was ready to take off in a dash. Vice Captain Velrey quickly grabbed her hand. It would be hard to find her again if she got lost in a place like this.

“You too, Sorcerer Lichtenberger.” She stuck her hand out toward Liselotte.

“B-But why?”

“It’s hard to walk in high-heeled boots, right? You can hold on to my arm.”

Liselotte’s cheeks flushed slightly. She must have been embarrassed that the vice captain noticed she was lagging behind. Or maybe Vice Captain Velrey’s sheer coolness simply made her feel shy.

Liselotte took her up on the offer and grabbed hold of her arm.

“I hold your hand, Mell.”

“Charlotte…!”

It was such an adorable thing to say to me. I resisted the urge to give her a big hug, instead taking Charlotte’s hand in mine.

“Your hand is so warm, Charlotte.”

“Yours is cold. You should drink soup and warm up!”

Before we arrived at the market, we split into rows of two. I walked alongside Charlotte, and Vice Captain Velrey walked with Liselotte. We wouldn’t be able to make it through the crowds if we stayed in a row of four.

The closer we got, the more people filled the street. Charlotte decided to tie a ribbon on Vice Captain Velrey’s belt that she could

cling to and not get separated—a very helpful idea indeed.

Our goal was to reach the stalls on the east street that had been running for years.

We arrived to find an absolute *ocean* of people! There was hardly any room to move through them at all. Before going in, Vice Captain Velrey reminded us not to get separated.

I worked up my courage and took the first step into the market.

"Wow, the night market is so cool."

"It really is."

First, we had to pass the stalls on the west street to get to the east street.

They sold all kinds of food, from savory to sweet. I spotted whole-roasted young boar-pigs with fat dribbling down them, sandwiches filled with thin slices of grilled meat, candied fruits, roasted beans with sugar, and more.

Charlotte's ears and tail were bobbing with delight. I was relieved to see the crowd wasn't upsetting her.

Once we made it to the east street, we had a little more room to move around.

"It's easier to walk here."

"Yeah, the west street has the most popular stalls. That's why it's so crowded."

The east street seemed to be made up of the "good old fashioned" stalls. The west street was occupied mainly by young vendors, but old men and women ran these stalls.

"What kind of soup do you want, Charlotte?" Vice Captain Velrey asked.

"Um...I like everything, but soup with meat is my favorite."

"What meat do you prefer?"

"I like all meat. But right now, I want poultry!"

"Got it. I know a good place."

Vice Captain Velrey led us to a stall with a giant pot. An old woman with pretty white hair was running the shop on her own.

"What kind of soup do they sell here?"

The old woman answered Liselotte's question. "We make soup from helmeted guinea fowl bones." She lifted the gigantic lid —as big as a shield—off the pot.

"Wow!"

Steam rose, revealing the cloudy soup inside. There were guinea fowl bones bobbing up to the surface.

“It smell so yummy!”

“Do you want to eat here, Charlotte?”

“Yeah!”

We wasted no time ordering four bowls of soup. The old woman poured the soup for us and even gave us wooden spoons of our own.

The four of us went around back, where there was a rug laid out to sit on.

“It certainly *looks* impressive.”

“Indeed.”

The thick bones were jutting out of the broth. I’d never seen such a hearty-looking soup before. I started by trying a sip of the cloudy broth.

“Whoa! So rich!”

It seemed like such a simple dish. She’d merely boiled the guinea fowl bones for a long time and seasoned them with herbs, salt, and pepper. But the depth of the flavors came as a total shock.

Not only that, but the bones themselves had another treat in store. I picked one up with my fingers and saw that it was covered in meat that had been simmered until it was practically sliding off the bone. I took a bite and felt the soft fat and tender meat mingle on my tongue, bringing me to a state of bliss.

“This is yummy!” Charlotte cheered.

“It’s delicious,” I agreed.

Liselotte was silently drinking her soup, though her cheeks were bright red. That was proof of how much she enjoyed it.

“Here. These are excellent when eaten with the meat.” The old woman had brought us a jar of something bright red. It was probably an extra condiment.

Vice Captain Velrey loved spicy foods, so she piled these peppers onto some meat and took a bite. I watched as the spice brought tears to her eyes.

Charlotte, Liselotte, and I tried a small portion for ourselves.

“Wow! It’s so spicy, but it’s delicious in a different way.”

“You’re right. It’s a good kind of spice.”

“I like how it tastes!”

We finished our soup in the blink of an eye.

“Now let’s get something that sounds good to you, Sorcerer Lichtenberger,” Vice Captain Velrey said.

“My mouth is still tingling, so I want something sweet.”

“Sounds good.”

It seemed the vice captain had yet another stall to recommend. We walked a bit farther down until we reached it. A sweet fragrance tickled my nose. A stern-looking old man was hard at work making desserts.

I was working up the courage to speak to him, but Vice Captain Velrey put in orders for all of us instead.

“One for each of ya? Comin’ right up!”

It looked like the old man had an iron plate in his stall where he cooked each dessert individually. I stole a glance at his work.

He first poured batter onto the iron grill and twirled the bottom of his ladle over the top of it. Then he piled three thin layers of cooked batter on top, finishing them off with a scoop of custard cream in the middle. Finally, he flattened it with a spatula and folded the cooked dough over the custard.

“Here ya are, little missy. Enjoy your fresh baked custard pie.”

“Thank you!”

“Eat up while it’s still warm.”

“Okay!”

He looked a little scary, but he was actually very kind.

“Okay, I eat now!”

“Go ahead.”

Charlotte stuffed her cheeks with the fresh custard pie. Her fox tail went as stiff as a board, and her eyes absolutely sparkled with pure joy.

“Wooow! It’s really, really yummy!”

The old man handed me the next custard pie. “This one’s for you, the second youngest little girl.”

“Th-Thank you.”

It seemed he was making them in order of our ages. I wondered how young this old man thought I was if he was calling me “little girl.” Liselotte and I were both nineteen, and I didn’t understand why we looked so different in age.

“Came to the market without your mom today, did ya, missy?”

“Huh?!”

“She’s nineteen years old, sir. She’s no child.”

“Nineteen?! Seriously?!”

“Yep…”

“Sorry ’bout that. I assumed you were thirteen or something!”

Was it because I was short and wearing clothes that hid my physique? Or because it was dark outside? I felt depressed, but I bit my bottom lip to bear the emotions.

“It’ll get cold, Medic Risurisu.”

“Ah, you’re right.” I bit into the custard pie while it was still warm. “Mmmm!”

The dough was crispy and tasted strongly of butter. But the custard inside was incredibly rich. The pies made there in the stall were an absolute treat.

The old man told us that he once worked at a bakery long ago. He wanted to open up a place of his own, but it wasn’t possible in the royal capital where land was so expensive. But instead of giving up on his dream, he came up with the idea of selling his sweets at the market, where it didn’t cost as much to open a stall.

“Now I’ve been selling custard pies here for the past twenty years.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

It made sense that his pies were so delicious.

The custard pie was rich without being overpowering, and I finished mine in no time at all. I could’ve had another one, but I managed to stay strong—we were still going to have more food after this.

“Miss with the glasses? This one’s for you.”

So, Liselotte was just a “Miss” in his eyes. I resisted the urge to let out a “grrrr” of jealousy.

“Oh my. This is delightful.”

“Glad to hear it.”

He finished the order with Vice Captain Velrey’s portion. “For you, ma’am.”

“Thank you.”

The old man seemed to be calling us different things based on our ages. He’d gone from “little missy,” “missy,” “miss,” all the way up to “ma’am.” I doubted he ever used anything past “ma’am” at the risk of offending his customers.

“Yeah, this always hits the spot.”

“Appreciate you sayin’ that.”

“You don’t have as many customers today, do you?”

“Ah… There’s a bit of retaliation at play, ya see.”

“Retaliation?”

“There’s a lotta new vendors showin’ up at the market these days. They came to me and asked if they could sell my products at their own stall.” He told us that they offered five gold coins for the contract as well as a monthly fee. That way, he would receive regular income without having to work so much every single day. “It was too good to be true, so I turned ’em down. But they just wouldn’t let up.”

The vendors even showed him a certain product—a “special bonus” he would receive if he agreed to the contract.

“It was some kinda chewing tobacco. They said it’s expensive stuff that royalty and nobles in foreign countries enjoy.”

“Chewing tobacco?”

“Uh-huh. It was a strange leaf you never see around these parts.”

Vice Captain Velrey narrowed her eyes as if this interested her. She crumpled up the paper the custard pie had been served in, leaned closer, and asked the old man for more details. “Do you still have it with you?”

“Nah, I gave it back. I don’t wanna lose my sense of taste by puttin’ something weird in my mouth. Can’t do this job without a good tongue, after all.”

“I see.”

He said that, upon rejecting the contracts, the vendors began to spread rumors about his stall. “It’s a buncha nonsense. Everyone’s sayin’ I use the juice from bug eggs to make my custard so smooth.”

“That’s awful.”

“Ain’t it? But business has been bad ever since.”

That was when Vice Captain Velrey identified herself as a knight. The old man was startled to hear that Liselotte and I were knights, too.

“What a shock. I never knew there were such cute little knights out there!” He was looking at the two of us as he spoke.

“Cuteness doesn’t matter to knights.”

“Exactly. All that matters is having a sense of justice and the will to fight for the people of the nation.”

“That, and having guts.”

Liselotte and I nodded at the vice captain’s comment.

It seemed that this “chewing tobacco” the shopkeeper mentioned was, in fact, the same drugs being distributed at the night market. He provided us with more information—describing the vendors who approached him, when this happened, how many of them there were, and any other detail he could recall.

“Thank you, sir. You’ll be paid compensation for your help within a few days.”

“Forget that. Instead, could ya tell your fellow knights about the stall with the tasty custard pies?”

“Sure. I’ll tell as many as I can.”

We waved goodbye as we left the old man’s stall. Then, we slipped into a nearby empty alleyway to discuss our findings.

“I’m so surprised. That was the last place I expected to find such important information. Did you invite us here to investigate the case, Vice Captain?” I asked.

“No, I honestly just wanted to show you around the night market.” She said she would have brought the other members along if she wanted to carry out an investigation. “The shopkeeper probably opened up because it was just the four of us.”

We’d been incredibly lucky.

“Could it be?”

“What is it, Sorcerer Lichtenberger?”

“Remember this morning when Captain Ludtink said that vendors had become dependent on the drugs?” Liselotte then shared her theory with us.

The drug dealers approached promising shopkeepers, offered them contracts, and provided them with drugs as a bonus. Those shopkeepers would then become addicted, creating an opportunity for the drug dealers to stop honoring the contracts while their victims’ judgment was impaired. Then, once they’d stolen the vendors’ recipes and techniques, they could use them in foreign countries to rake in profits.

“Couldn’t that be what they’re up to?”

“It’s possible.”

“It’s such a nasty business.”

We needed to catch the culprits as soon as possible. But the only way to do that was to sell food appealing enough to lure in the drug dealers.

“Vice Captain, shall we return to the barracks and report this to the higher-ups?” I asked.

“No, it can wait until tomorrow. The workday is already over. Right now, there’s still more to eat, isn’t there?”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Then let’s enjoy the night market a little longer.”

Charlotte cried out, “Hooray!” when she heard that. She must have thought we were done for the evening judging by our serious expressions.

“Is there anything you want to try, Medic Risurisu?”

“Well, something salty is always nice after a sweet treat.”

We’d already had a meat dish, so I wanted to try a different approach.

“I’d like to have seafood this time.”

“Sounds good. Let’s go with that.”

I could tell she had a place in mind. The stall we arrived at was serving deep-fried freshwater shrimp. They cleaned the small shrimp, doused them in water that had been soaked with herbs for a few days, and once any unpleasant odors were removed, they fried them raw in oil.

It was a very popular stall, with about ten people in line ahead of us.

“Mell, do you eat the entire thing at once?”

“It looks like it, yes.”

Freshwater shrimp were relatively small and had soft shells. There was little chance of it poking you in the mouth or throat. But Liselotte almost never ate anything “whole” like that and seemed a bit uneasy at the thought.

We finally made it to the front of the line after ten minutes.

“Three deep-fried shrimp, please.”

“Coming right up!”

Liselotte said she’d just try a little of ours, so I only ordered three servings.

The shopkeeper picked up a net with a handle and scooped the shrimp out of a tank. Liselotte went pale as soon as she saw this.

“Don’t tell me that man intends to fry them *alive*?”

“No, I highly doubt that.”

He dried off the shrimp and dusted them with salt, pepper, and a bit of potato starch. Liselotte grabbed my sleeve and began to describe what she was seeing.

“O-Oh no, Mell! The shrimp are covered in starch, but they’re still alive!”

“Everything on your plate was alive at one point, Liselotte.”

“I-I know that…”

That was when the shopkeeper plucked the shrimp from the bowl and tossed them into the hot oil. Liselotte let out a little yelp and clung to me. My elf ears were poking her, but she didn’t seem to mind—she just squeezed her arms around me tightly.

Vice Captain Velrey and Charlotte took the fried shrimp from the shopkeeper instead of me.

“All right, shall we head out?”

“Ah, okay.”

“Be sure to keep your eyes ahead of you, Sorcerer Lichtenberger.”

“R-Right.” Liselotte staggered forward, still clinging to me.

We sat down to eat at a table near the food stall.

“Okay, let’s dig in.”

“Yay! It looks yummy!”

The shrimp had turned nice and brown in the oil. Charlotte popped one in her mouth right away. I could hear her crunching on it from where I sat.

“Mmm! The shell is crisp, but the inside is so plump. It’s soooo tasty!”

“Yeah, it’s savory, tender, and tastes great. It makes me wish I had some alcohol.”

I tried one for myself. “Ah, this flavor takes me back!”

I used to go freshwater shrimp fishing with my little brother and sisters in the Fore Elf woods. We usually ate them without cleaning the dirt from them, but they were still incredibly delicious.

Liselotte seemed curious now that everyone was enjoying them so much. She kept stealing glances at the shrimp.

“Would you like one, Liselotte? They’re very good,” I said.

“S-Sure.”

I removed the head and tail just for her, hoping it would make things a little more palatable.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you.”

I placed a deep-fried shrimp on her palm. Liselotte took a moment to steel her nerves before putting it in her mouth. She closed her eyes and chewed a bit before her eyes went flying open again.

“I-It’s very good.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

She’d gained the strength to eat the next shrimp whole. “It *is* good, it’s just the cooking method that’s barbaric.”

“I won’t deny that part.”

Finally, we asked Vice Captain Velrey if she had a stall she wanted to visit.

“Me? I…” She trailed off and started staring into the distance.

“I can eat a little more.”

“I’m completely full.”

“I feel mostly full too!”

Charlotte and I could split a serving and let Vice Captain Velrey have one of her own. But her face fell slightly when I suggested that.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s just that my favorite stall isn’t for everyone. I’d feel bad dragging you along with me.”

“Is it something extra spicy?”

She nodded, a look of shame on her face.

“Now I’m curious. Let’s go and see, shall we?”

“I wanna see too!”

“Really? Just don’t force yourself to try it if you don’t want to.”

“Okay!”

With that, we set out for Vice Captain Velrey’s favorite stop. However…

Charlotte started to cough as soon as we got close to the stall. Liselotte’s eyes were watering too. I didn’t feel anything, but maybe they were just sensitive to spice.

But that was when we ran into someone unexpected.

“Oh, is that Charlotte I see?”

“Ah, it’s Maru!”

A group of five female knights approached us. They'd come here to eat after work just like we did. The freckled woman was the same age as me—I recognized her as the knight who was always bringing documents to the Second Expeditionary Squadron. It seemed that she and Charlotte had become friends.

"There's a great dumpling place over there, Char. Did you try it?"

"Not yet."

"Then why don't we go together?"

"Okay!"

"But look at you, walking around on the east street, Char! Well done!"

Charlotte told them that Vice Captain Velrey had been showing us around. That was when the knights' expressions changed.

"Oh my gosh! Lady Velrey is here?!"

"Sh-She is!"

They hadn't even spotted the vice captain since she was dressed in all black. I'd heard that Vice Captain Velrey was just as popular amongst the female knights as she was with the maids.

"Um, Lady Velrey, may I ask what you plan on ordering this evening?"

"I was thinking of getting the red noodles at the back of the east street."

"Red...noodles?"

The knights went pale. It was like they'd come crashing back down to reality.

I decided to speak up with a suggestion. "Um, why don't we split into groups? Some of us can go eat red noodles and the rest can go to the dumpling stall."

Vice Captain Velrey and I turned out to be the only ones interested in the red noodles. The rest of the group settled on dumplings.

"Don't overdo it, okay, Medic Risurisu?"

"It's all right. I'm curious, so I wanted to join you."

"Is that right? I appreciate it."

She gave me a little smile—something she almost never did for anyone. I practically wanted to bow down and say, "No, thank *you*!"

“All right, let’s regroup here in thirty minutes.”

Vice Captain Velrey wrapped her arm around my shoulders and set off for our destination. I could hear cries of, “I’m so jealous!” and “I should have chosen the red noodles too. Ah, but I could never handle food like that,” from behind us.

I could only imagine what these “red noodles” were going to be like.

The more we walked, the thinner the crowd got.

“This part of the east street is where you’ll find the weirder places,” she said.

We passed a stall advertising “insect tea.” The one next door sold lizard skewers. Some strange-smelling spices wafted toward us.

Even the people wandering around in this part of the market looked distinct. I saw a person with a knife tattooed on their face and another with spiky bracelets. Every last one of them looked like the type who would normally be stopped for questioning.

“I’m…surprised you ever came here at all, Vice Captain Velrey.”

“I was helping the Patrol Squadron out at the time. I first came this way because I thought it looked shady.”

“Yes, it does seem suspicious.”

“But the people here are just unique. They’re not actually bad guys.”

“I-Is that so?”

A man with dyed blond hair was licking a knife. I shuddered, but then I realized he was just in the middle of eating some grilled meat. *Well, it’s easy to misunderstand.*

The two of us finally arrived at the red noodle stand.

“Medic Risurisu, this is… *Cough, cough!*”

Even Vice Captain Velrey, the lover of spice, couldn’t stop herself from coughing here. My skin had been stinging for a while now too.

“Welcome!” The young man running the stall had a cloth wrapped around his head. His face was bright red as he stirred his pot. I peeked inside and saw a bubbling liquid that was redder than blood.

“Wh-Whoa!”

“What do you think Medic Ri— *Cough, cough!*”

“Are you all right, Vice Captain?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. This happens every time.”

Are you sure that’s not an issue? I was worried about her now.

“I don’t think I’ll ever have a chance to eat here again, so I think I’m up for the challenge,” I said.

“Yeah? All right, then. Give us two bowls of red noodles.”

“Two red noodles, coming right up!”

The man turned around and scooped up a serving of bright red noodles. *I suppose it wouldn’t have lived up to its name any other way.* Then he dropped them into a boiling pot of water, only for a tragedy to unfold. The water splashed the man right in the eye.

“Ouch! That stings!”

If the water used to cook the red noodles on its own was enough to sting, just how spicy were the noodles and soup going to be when combined?

“Um, are you all right?”

“Yeah, don’t mind me. I’ll never let a little spice get the best of me!”

“S-Sure…”

I didn’t really understand what that meant, but at least he was fine—if “fine” was the right word for a person like him. *No, I’m sure there’s no issue. He went right back to draining the noodles like nothing happened.*

The red noodles were finished after three more minutes. I noticed the man shedding tears as he served us our bowls. It was probably going to sting our eyes as well. I looked at my bowl and felt that the flames of Hell itself couldn’t be any redder than this food. My tears were welling up already.

We decided to eat at a separate area, since the steam coming off the soup alone was about to make me start weeping.

Vice Captain Velrey had a look of delight on her face. “I haven’t had these in a year, but now I get to eat them again thanks to you.”

“Oh my, is that right?”

“Yep. It’s obviously bad for my health, so I made up my mind to only have one bowl every six months. I guess I just lost track of time.” Vice Captain Velrey took her first bite of red noodles in a year. “Aaah, this flavor is so…*cough! Cough! Cough!*”

“A-Are you all right?!”

“I’m fine…*cough!*”

With tears in her eyes, she managed to tell me that it tasted delicious—in between coughs, that was. But was the vice captain right? My heart was racing. I sunk my fork into the soup and pulled out the bright red noodles from within. The dish appeared to be a simple combination of noodles and soup with no other ingredients.

I mustered up the courage to try one bite.

“Ugh… Oh? W-Wait, i-it’s actually good! It’s not even as spicy as I thought…*cough, cough! Cough, cough, cough!*” I grabbed my water and began to guzzle it like I’d just found a lake in the desert. “I-I-I-I-It buuuurns!”

My tongue was stinging and my throat felt like it’d been scorched. I would have believed the vice captain if she told me actual flames were coming out of my mouth.

“Aaaaargh, it’s spicy! So spicy! What the heck?!”

“Are you okay, Medic Risurisu?” Vice Captain Velrey handed me a candy she’d been saving for Charlotte.

“Th-Thank you…”

“I guess it was too much for you after all.”

“No, um, well, you’re not wrong. But it was delicious before the spice kicked in.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it.”

She offered to eat my bowl for me, but I felt like this was a trial I had to overcome. I mustered my strength and finished off the bowl of red noodles.

“*Pant, pant, pant, pant…* I… I’m done…!”

Tears were streaming down my face, but I’d managed it. The teary-eyed vice captain patted my head and praised me.

“You did such a good job.”

“Th-Thank you. But I’m covered in sweat now.”

“We should probably go back soon so you can change and head home.”

“R-Right.”

The two of us returned our bowls to the shopkeeper.

“What did you think?”

“It was very spicy, but I feel like I’ve accomplished something now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

I didn’t know if it was a good thing or not, but I was relieved to have finished my entire serving on my own. My body was still pouring out sweat, and it felt like it was burning up. Spicy food was supposed to warm you, but this was overkill.

“Want some more water?”

“No, thank you. My stomach is completely full.”

“I see.”

A cold breeze was blowing. I probably would have been freezing if I hadn’t eaten those red noodles. Winter had truly arrived in full force.

“It’s about time to meet up with everyone.”

“You’re right.”

We made our way back to the place where we last saw Charlotte and the others. As we walked, I asked Vice Captain Velrey something I’d been curious about.

“U-Um, are there a lot of night market stalls that serve extremely spicy food?”

“No, that’s the only one.”

“I see.”

She told me that even restaurants in the city didn’t usually serve spicy food. “From what I understand, spicy dishes are something we picked up from foreign lands. It’s only recently that they’ve started showing up more often in the royal capital.”

They used something called “chili peppers” to make the food spicy. We used to harvest natural ones in the Fore Elf woods and use them as a flavor accent with soup. The red noodles were made with large amounts of chili peppers that had been preserved in oil.

“My mom really loved spicy food. Sometimes her recipes were so spicy, they actually made me cry,” she said.

“Then spiciness must taste like home to you.”

“Yeah, it does.”

The extreme spiciness of the red noodles had been a bit too much for me, but I enjoyed some heat when it merely made my tongue tingle a little.

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t seen many spicy foods here either.”

“See what I mean?”

Vice Captain Velrey said that too much spice was bad for one’s health, so it wasn’t a bad thing that spicy food was uncommon

here.

“I wonder where they sell chili peppers with oil here.”

“I make some at home. Want a bottle for yourself?” she asked.

“Really? I can have one?”

“Of course.” She said that she made them on her days off when she had the time, eating it with things like soup and meat skewers. “I’ll bring it for you tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much.”

I needed to study spicy food for Vice Captain Velrey’s sake.

“This is the spot, right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

We’d returned right on time. It wasn’t long before Charlotte, Liselotte, and the female knights joined us.

“Mell! Try this! It soooo yummy!” Charlotte was holding out a whipped cream dumpling. The white dumpling was buried in a mountain of whipped cream. It looked like it would be overwhelmingly sweet.

I would never eat such a thing normally, but my mouth was still tingling, so I decided to try it. “Urk, it’s so sweet…! The ultimate sweetness!”

“Right?”

The fresh sweet cream wrapped around my stinging tongue. The dumpling itself was squishy and delightful too. The tingling in my mouth finally subsided. I thanked Charlotte for her help.

“All right, shall we wrap things up for tonight?”

The female knights were going to escort Liselotte home. She wanted to show them her newest mythical beast plushies, since they were a popular item amongst women in the royal capital right now. I was surprised to find that she’d opened up to the other knights.

“Bye, Liselotte. See you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye. I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me too.”

“Bye-bye, Maru and everyone!”

“Bye-bye!”

Charlotte, Vice Captain Velrey, and I returned to the barracks.

“I’m going to write up a report before I leave. Take care on the way home, you two.”

“We will.”

I changed out of my sweaty clothes and put my uniform back on.

“The night market was lots of fun, Mell.”

“It really was. We should take Zara with us next time.”

“Yeah! I invite June too!”

“That sounds great.”

We finished changing and said goodbye to Vice Captain Velrey.

“We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye-bye!”

“See you.”

After that, we made our way home. Our fun evening outing had passed in the blink of an eye.



THE next day, Vice Captain Velrey arrived with a jar of chili peppers in oil.

“I hope you like it.”

“Wow, thank you so much!”

I tried a sample and found that it wasn’t too spicy this time. I could even taste the *umami* within the spiciness itself—perhaps an aftereffect of eating the mind-numbingly spicy red noodles only one day earlier.

I’d once stewed black pepper mushrooms, medicinal garlic, and chili peppers in oil, but the savory taste of Vice Captain Velrey’s recipe was something completely different.

“I see you’ve filled it with chili peppers, oil, medicinal garlic, ginger, green onions…and something else to give it a kick.”

“You sure know your stuff, Medic Risurisu. It’s a spice called Sichuan peppers that grows in a foreign country. It makes the spice a little more numbing.”

“Sichuan…peppers? I’ve never heard of them before. Would you mind sharing your recipe?”

“Of course.”

She started by frying the green onions and ginger in oil, then added the chili peppers and Sichuan peppers. While they

simmered together, she poured water into chili pepper powder and kneaded it up.

“Then I took the oil I fried the vegetables and peppers in and poured it into the center of the chili powder, let it sit for a while, and put it into a jar.”

“Wow!”

She used the same oil she’d fried the peppers with to preserve them. Who knew such a heart-racing method existed in this world?

“I’ll have to try making it sometime.”

“Go ahead. I’d be honored.”

I was clutching the jar to my chest when Ulgus appeared, asking me what I was holding.

“It’s chili powder preserved in the oil used to fry chilis.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

It wasn’t surprising that a normal person would react that way. He didn’t understand that this spiciness made food even more delicious.

“I’ll feed you something that uses these peppers sometime, okay?”

“Yay, I’m soooo happy…” Ulgus responded in a lifeless tone, the smile twitching on his face. I could tell he wasn’t pleased by my offer. But I was going to prove to him just how delicious the chili peppers could be. He’d lit a fire in this chef’s heart.

After our morning meeting, I stood in the Second Expeditionary Squadron’s kitchen alone. I hadn’t decided what to make yet, but since I wanted something warm, I started by boiling poultry bones. I could make just about anything with them as a base.

“*Let me help too!*”

“How long have you been there, Album?!”

The creature always appeared as soon as I started cooking. But he’d arrived at a good time. I retrieved some small pieces of fabric from the shelf.

“Here, Album. It’s an apron and a bandana.”

“*Huh?!*”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me. It will hurt if any oil or hot water splashes on you while we’re cooking. Put them both on, please.”

I'd been slowly working on Album's apron during my breaks. I put the apron on the wide-eyed weasel and wrapped the bandana around his head.

"They look so good on you!"

"*No way! Can I really have these?*"

"Of course. Who else would use them?"

"*Y-Yeah, good point. Eheheh…!*" Album stood in front of a bowl, admiring his apron in the reflection. "*I really like them! Thanks, Pancake Girl!*"

"You're welcome."

He was even more pleased than I anticipated.

"*What are we making today?*"

"I'm trying to think of something we can sell at the night market…"

A warm dish would definitely be a big hit during winter. But we'd be competing against lots of other shops with that. It would be difficult to get attention and sales with something like a plain old soup.

"Something warm…and unusual…hmmm…" I racked my brain but couldn't come up with anything.

"*What's the red stuff in this jar, Pancake Girl?*"

"Ah, Vice Captain Velrey gave me that. It's chili peppers in oil. You drizzle it in soup or on meat to give it a nice kick."

"*I see. It's weird how it's so red. But it kinda looks yummy too.*"

Album's interest suddenly made me realize something. Why couldn't I use the chili oil for the recipe we sold at the market? It was going to get even colder soon. Maybe a spicy dish that warmed the body was exactly what I was looking for.

The vice captain had even told me that the red noodle stall was the only place that cooked with chili peppers. If I made something that wasn't *extremely spicy*, we wouldn't have the red noodles to compete with either.

"That's it! Let's come up with a recipe that uses the chili oil!"

"*Okay!*"

Album and I put our heads together to decide on what to make.

"A soup isn't filling enough on its own. We'll need some ingredients."

"*I want meat!*"

“Good idea. It will go perfectly with the chili peppers. What else?”

Beans? Rice? Noodles?

“It’s hard to choose.”

“*I prefer noodles.*”

“Yes, they’re a quick way of filling the stomach. Let’s make a chili pepper soup with meat and noodles.”

“*Yippee!*”

Now that we had a general plan, we needed to go shopping at the market. I called out to Captain Ludtink, who happened to be passing by in the hall.

“Ah, Captain Ludtink. I’m on my way to the market.”

“Got it. Need Ulgus to carry things for ya?”

“No, I’m going with Album.”

“Fine. Oh, wait. Change out of your uniform. You don’t wanna interfere with the knights who’re undercover.”

“Understood.”

I changed into my personal clothes, draped Album around my neck, and set out for the market.

It was relatively quiet throughout town late in the morning. The early morning and evening hours were the busiest. The marketplace was quite vacant too—practically empty compared to the night market I’d experienced.

I happened to come across a shop selling spices, so I decided to buy some more chili peppers while I was at it.

“Welcome! Oh?”

“Ah!”

The man selling spices was the same teary-eyed man who’d made our red noodles the previous night.

“What a coincidence, huh?”

“Certainly. I see you sell spices as well.”

“This here is my main profession. My family’s been selling spices for generations. The red noodles are just a hobby of mine, since they don’t sell very well.”

“I-I see.”

The man smiled at me when I asked to buy chili peppers. “Did you get hooked on them too?”

“I did. Well, to be completely honest, I was thinking of opening up a food stall that sold dishes using chili peppers.”

I knew I might upset him, but I would feel guilty opening up the stall without telling him first. I stole a glance at his face. He was totally expressionless.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Y-Yes, um, but I haven’t even made any food to test it yet…”

“Is that right? I’m so happy!”

“Huh?”

“I almost never meet people who approve of chili pepper recipes… Even my own family’s fed up with me. They said I need to stop selling something so stupid.”

“R-Really?”

But my food wasn’t going to be as spicy as the red noodles. I wanted to serve milder dishes that everyone could enjoy.

“I sell the food that I want to sell. I don’t care about what others like, and if someone doesn’t want it, they don’t have to buy it. That’s how I’ve always run my stall. But I like the sound of milder spice! It’s something I could never do.” The man stuffed a bag full of chili peppers and handed it to me.

“Do you have chili powder and Sichuan peppers too?”

“Yep. Here you go.”

He showed me which other spices had a good kick after that—there turned out to be many kinds other than chili pepper. The man let me sample them and I found each variety to be delicious, so I decided to purchase them too.

“Thank you so much. How much will this cost?”

“It’s on the house. Talk about a steal, huh?”

“Oh no, please allow me to pay.”

“Don’t worry about it, really.”

“No, I’d like to pay for the future of the chili pepper industry.”

“The future of the chili pepper industry…? Yeah, I guess that’s what it is.”

What a relief. He finally accepted my money. The man truly loved chili peppers—that much was certain.

“Tell me when your stall’s open. I’ll come and buy something.”

“I will. Thank you for everything.”

It was a weight off my shoulders knowing we would have at least *one* customer.

I left the man’s shop after that. Now it was time to buy noodles. I found a good shop next to the one selling flour.

A plump old woman greeted Album and me inside. “Welcome. What kind of noodles are you looking for?”

“Let me see…” I turned to look at the table where she kept her products. She was selling raw noodles, dried noodles, thin and thick noodles, and many other varieties as well. The spicy soup was going to be the star of my chili pepper dishes, so I needed good noodles to go with it. Noodles were usually the main ingredient in a dish, not an afterthought. “Um, do you have anything that will bring out the flavor in a soup?”

“The soup flavor, huh? Let me think.”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s a difficult question. I want my soup to really stand out.”

“I see. If the soup is your main dish, I recommend these dried noodles.”

The old woman handed me a package of dried, wavy noodles. The noodles I’d purchased for expeditions were completely straight. I’d never seen ones with curves like these.

“These are wavy so that they mingle well with a soup.”

“I see!” I was taken aback. I didn’t think there were *actually* noodles out there that could complement soup. “All right, I’ll take them.”

“Thank you for your business!”

I left her store in high spirits. My last stop was the butcher’s shop. The skinned boar-pig sitting in the store window was particularly impactful.

I was greeted by a muscular old man holding a butcher’s knife. He flashed his white teeth in a smile and greeted me. “Welcome. What can I get for you?”

“Let me think…” Meat on the bone that had been simmered to the perfect tenderness would probably pair very well with chili peppers. But I could picture the meat becoming the main attraction that way.

“I’m happy to give advice if you need some help.”

“Thank you for that.” Deciding to take him up on the offer, I explained my situation. “Um, I’m thinking of adding meat to a chili pepper soup with noodles, but the soup is supposed to be the star of the dish. What meat would you recommend?”

“A chili pepper recipe where the soup is the star, huh? How about a mix of minced boar-pig and three-horned cow meat?”

“Oh, minced meat!”

I see. Minced meat probably won’t outshine the soup itself.

“Okay, I’ll take it.”

“Coming right up!”

The butcher cut the meat up for me when I told him I wanted bits with extra fat.

“All right. That should do it for ingredients.”

Chili peppers, noodles, and meat. I had everything I was likely to need.

“*I’m so excited.*”

“Me too.”

“*I’ve never even tried spicy food before. I wonder if I’ll be able to handle it.*”

Ulgus hadn’t looked too excited when I mentioned making a chili pepper dish. I hoped my soup would be palatable to everyone, even those who didn’t like spicy food.

I wandered around the market looking for another ingredient, but nothing jumped out at me. I finally decided to go back to the man at the spice store and ask him directly.

“Something for people who don’t like spice? You should have them add some of this.” He handed me a jar with some sort of paste inside.

“What is it?”

“White sesame seed paste.” The man explained that it was made from sesame seeds kneaded into a paste with oil—oil also made from sesame seeds. It was a similar method to how the vice captain made her chili oil. “Mix this into any chili pepper recipe to make it more mild. It’ll bring out the savory taste behind the spice too.”

“W-Wow!”

He said you could also add it to salad dressing, use it to make soups taste richer, make it into a sauce for meat, and many other methods of preparation.

“All right, I’ll take it!”

I purchased a jar, but would be back for more if it was useful for the soup.

With that, I had everything I needed for my chili pepper noodle soup. All that was left was to actually cook it.

I returned to the barracks and informed Captain Ludtink that we were back. Then I headed to the kitchen and set out the ingredients I'd purchased, removing Album from my neck and setting him down next to the package of minced meat.

"*Hey, don't treat me like one of your ingredients!*"

"If you don't like it, you're free to move to a different spot."

"*Fiiine!*"

He was acting sluggish, so I reminded him to put his apron on. That got him moving again.

"*Oh, that's right! I've got an apron from Pancake Girl!*" Album put on his apron, wrapped the bandana around his head, and stuck out his chest. Strangely, he actually looked like a legitimate chef.

"Shall we get started?"

"*Okaaay!*"

First up was the soup. I stir-fried the minced meat in chili oil, then added my poultry bone soup once the meat had cooked. Bit by bit, I added spices and sesame seed paste to the bubbling soup, tasting it to make sure it wasn't too spicy.

Finally, I asked Album to try a taste. "How is it?"

"*Really spicy.*"

"I see."

I added white sesame seed paste little by little, having Album test it each time.

"*Mmm! That's perfect! I like it!*"

It had become hard to tell where the line was ever since I had eaten those ultra-spicy red noodles the night before. It was only thanks to Album that my soup was going to have the perfect amount of spice for everyone.

"Good boy, Album." I praised Album and patted his head.

"*Teehee!*"

"All right. Next up is..."

I had some leftover minced meat, so I fried it up to be used as an extra topping.

"Now it's time for the noodles."

I took the dried, wavy noodles and tossed them in boiling water. Five minutes later, they had finished cooking.

"All right, that should do the trick!"

I poured some soup into a bowl, added noodles, and let them soften. Then I topped it with fried minced meat and ginger

shavings. Finally, my “minced meat chili pepper noodles” were complete.

Since it happened to be lunchtime, I invited the members still at the barracks to come try it.

Captain Ludtink, Vice Captain Velrey, and Ulgus gathered in the kitchen.

“Finished your test batch, did ya, Risurisu?”

“Yes! I’m very proud of it!”

Captain Ludtink’s face started twitching when he saw the bowls on the break room table. “Why’s it so red? This is spicy stuff like what Velrey eats, isn’t it?!”

Vice Captain Velrey had looked pleased, but the captain’s reaction disappointed her.

But it’s so good. How can you complain before you’ve even tried it?

Ulgus was sniffing his bowl, a puzzled look on his face. “This smells amazing, Captain Ludtink.”

“Hm? Well, I guess it does.”

“I’d like to hear your opinions once you’ve tried it,” I said.

“Fine, then.” The captain sunk down into his chair with a harsh thud. Although, he followed that with a proper, thorough prayer. The others did the same. “Okay, I’m tryin’ this thing.”

Despite his declaration, Captain Ludtink was actually watching Ulgus eat out of the corner of his eye. Of course, I knew he was easily burned by hot foods as well. He would definitely try some once he heard Ulgus approved.

Ulgus blew on the piping hot soup, then took a bite when it had cooled. “Wh-Whoa!” His eyes lit up dramatically.

“Well, Ulgus? Spit it out already.”

“It’s delicious. *Really* delicious. How can I describe it? It’s like a velvety smooth soup that leaves you with a little kick, but it doesn’t burn for too long.”

“I see.”

Vice Captain Velrey was the next to try the soup. “Ah, what an intense flavor. It’s spicy, but you can taste how much *umami* has been cooked down into the soup.”

Now that Ulgus and Vice Captain Velrey had given rave reviews, Captain Ludtink was ready to try it for himself.

“Mm?! What the hell? I’ve never had anything like this before. How’s it spicy, smooth, and tasty all at the same time?!”

“The secret is…white sesame seed paste!” I announced.

“White sesame seed paste?!”

Its addition had taken the harshness out of the spicy chili flavor without removing it entirely. It was a mysterious transformation. If someone wanted more heat, they could simply add more chili oil.

“Would you like some extra chili oil, Vice Captain?” I asked.

“No thanks. It’s already perfect this way.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Album, the fur around his mouth now stained red, swiftly drank up from his spoon. “*Aaah, it’s so good!*” I tried wiping his mouth, but it didn’t help. I feared I wouldn’t be able to clean the stains even with soap. Well, that didn’t matter at the moment. I needed to focus on the food.

The next part to try was the noodles. The dexterous Album was using a fork to eat his noodles.

“Medic Risurisu, the noodles are delicious with this soup too.”

“I looked at a lot of options and decided on the wavy noodles to make the soup taste even better.”

“I see.”

No one left a single drop of soup behind in the end. Seeing how satisfied they were made all my hard work worth it in the end.

“What did you think, Captain?”

“Yeah, we can definitely sell this. We’re gonna rake in the big bucks with this soup!”

I almost responded with a cheer, but then I remembered that our objective wasn’t to launch a successful food stall—it was to catch the people dealing drugs.

“This soup’s gonna be a big hit. I’d bet a month of my salary on it.”

“I’m honored.”

Each unit would get to take their own profits home, rewarding those who put in the hardest work. That was probably why the captain was so fired up.

“Hey, Velrey. You buy an outfit for attractin’ customers?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Don’t wear all black like you always do. It makes you look like an assassin.”

Vice Captain Velrey stared out the window with a sad look on her face.

“Have Zara pick an outfit. Our budget will cover it.”

“Understood.”

I’d never heard Vice Captain Velrey sound so unmotivated in all the time I knew her.

After work, we decided that Vice Captain Velrey, Zara, and I would go clothes shopping together. We changed into our personal clothes and headed out to town that night.

Zara was wearing a top with frilly sleeve cuffs and black leather pants. He had his real hair tied up into a wig as well. I’d gone with a simple dress with a bow wrapped around my waist.

Vice Captain Velrey arrived in another all-black outfit—this one different from the day before.

“Sorry, this is just what most of my clothes are like,” she said.

“No, it suits you well.”

“Thanks, Medic Risurisu.”

We’d invited Charlotte too, but she went home riding Umataro instead, saying that the “old man” would be lonely in an empty house. Zara offered to give me a ride on his horse, so Amelia went home with Charlotte and Umataro too.

“Isn’t Crow just the worst?” Zara said. “He has some nerve, making you do all the advertising yourself!”

“Well, it’s the only way I can help.”

“That’s not true. Cooking’s easy once you’ve had a little practice.” Zara was offended that Vice Captain Velrey alone had been assigned to advertise our stall.

“I suppose anything’s possible with the right experience.” She sighed, having accepted her fate at this point.

“But you know what? I could hardly believe my ears when I heard you served your minced meat chili pepper noodles to the others, Melly!”

“You had a training course today, right, Zara?”

“Uh-huh. It’s really hard, having to sit there and listen to old men blather on for hours.”

“I’m sure it was difficult. Vice Captain Velrey taught me her chili oil recipe, so I’ll make it at home some time.”

“I look forward to that.”

We chatted until we reached the shop Zara had in mind. He said it was the best place for all the latest clothing trends.

It was a quiet shop located in an alleyway near the center of town. Normal boutiques operated during the day, but this one was open from the early evening all the way until midnight.

“Good evening.”

The bell over the door rang. I stepped inside and was overwhelmed by the sheer number of fashionable outfits covered in frills and bows.

“Oh my, welcome!”

A beautiful woman with black hair and dark eyes, somewhere around the age of thirty, greeted us. But her voice sounded a bit deep to me. *Could it be…?*

“He’s a man, Melly.”

“Hee hee! I sure am.”

“Ah, i-is that so?”

He looked exactly like a woman, but was actually a man. I’d been suspicious, knowing Zara, but couldn’t believe my hunch was correct.

“I wandered into this store when I first came to the royal capital. The shopkeeper here let out a shriek when he saw how ugly my clothes were.”

“That takes me back! You had such a nice face, but you dressed like a total slob.”

“He’s so right. I could hardly believe this was a shop for adult men to buy women’s clothes.”

“Of course that’s what it is! These days, you’re behind the times if you only see clothes as ‘male’ or ‘female.’”

It seemed that this boutique was designed for people to wear anything that suited them—without ever putting gendered labels on the clothes.

“We’re looking for an outfit that will suit Anna here,” Zara said.

“Oh, such lovely material to work with!” The shopkeeper grabbed Vice Captain Velrey’s chin and stared at her face. “Very well. What you need…is this!” He was holding up a formal suit with

golden braided cords dangling from it, like something a young nobleman would wear in high society.

"Th-This is…!"

"Um, yes, it would look good on her, but…"

Zara raised our objections to the shopkeeper. "Sorry, but we came here to buy women's clothes today."

"Didn't I tell you? We don't have 'men's clothes' and 'women's clothes' here. This is simply the outfit that suits her best!"

"And I'm sure it would attract the eyes of every woman in the room if she wore it to a ball…"

But unfortunately, Vice Captain Velrey was trying to attract the male customers of the night market.

"Could you look for something *more* sexy and *less* dashing?"

"Sexy…you say?"

"Is that too difficult?"

"Of course not. I don't know the meaning of the word 'difficult!'"

"Great, then please pick something out for her."

The shopkeeper worked on putting yet another outfit together for the vice captain.

"If we can't find anything that works for me, I could dress up like a mythical beast to draw in the members of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. That might make our stall look pretty popular."

"N-No, we can't disguise you as a mythical beast, Vice Captain!" I objected.

But that reminded me of something useful. Liselotte had said that young women were really into mythical beast goods right now. A mythical beast costume might draw in trendy women too, not just bureau members.

"Perhaps you could carry some sort of mythical beast merchandise instead," I suggested.

"The bureau could help us out if we go to them. It seems like a good way to spread their love for mythical beasts."

I would have to ask Liselotte tomorrow. But the shopkeeper suddenly reacted to the same topic.

"Mythical beasts…? Ah, I've got it!" Our discussion seemed to have sparked an idea in him. He swiftly pulled clothing items and accessories off the various shelves. "Here you go!"

He was holding warm-looking clothes with feather arrangements and fluffy collars. Vice Captain Velrey was led to a fitting room in the back.

“That came together better than I thought.”

“It sure did.”

Zara then called me over to him. He seemed to have found something.

“What is it?”

“I think this would look great on you, Melly.”

He was holding a cream-colored dress that had a warmth to it, like sunlight streaming through the trees. Velvet bows were tied at each of the hips and the bottom half was straight and form-fitting. It was an incredibly mature design.

“Wow, it’s lovely!”

I couldn’t think of anywhere I would need such a dress under normal circumstances, but Captain Ludtink and Marina’s wedding was only a month away. I’d been struggling to decide if I wanted to wear a gown or a well-tailored, normal dress.

“I’d like to buy thi— Whoa, it’s so much!”

My eyes nearly fell out of my head when I saw the price tag. It cost two whole months of my salary. But I couldn’t exactly wear a cheap dress to Captain Ludtink’s wedding either, and Garr’s wedding was coming up in the spring too.

I needed to muster up the strength to pay such a frightening cost. I couldn’t buy it now, as I didn’t have the money on hand. I would have to ask the shopkeeper if he could set it aside for me.

“You know, I think I can make a dress that looks like this, Melly,” Zara offered.

“R-Really?! You can?!”

“I’d be happy to do it if that’s what you want.”

“Oh, but don’t you have to make your own outfit for Captain Ludtink’s wedding too?”

“Don’t you worry about that. I’ve got my formal wear from the Royal Order.”

That’s right. Knights have their own formal wear, so there’s no need for dresses.

“Ah, in that case, I’ll go in formal wear too,” I decided.

“Now don’t do that, Melly. I want to see you in a dress! Why don’t we both work on it together? That sounds like a blast.”

Making a dress with Zara? There was no *way* that wouldn't be fun.

"Um, okay, if you really don't mind…"

"Then it's settled."

As we were wrapping up our discussion, we heard the shopkeeper cry out, "Fabulous!" from the back of the store. It seemed Vice Captain Velrey had finished changing.

"Come, come, take a look! Isn't she just gorgeous?"

"Wow…!"

She had feather plume earrings, a wool coat that clung to her body's curves, a pair of slacks, and a fluffy scarf, but every last item was pure white. She looked as dazzling as a snow nymph.

"I styled her after that white mythical beast that flies over town every morning."

"A white, flying mythical beast? Does he mean Amelia?"

"I believe Amelia is the only mythical beast who flies over the royal capital."

"I guess that's true."

It seemed the shopkeeper had been styling her based on Amelia, not a snow nymph.

Vice Captain Velrey usually wore leather when she wasn't in her knight's uniform, but the woolen clothes softened her image, giving her an oddly sensual appeal.

"I'd have never described you as 'cute' until right now, Anna," Zara said.

"*I've* thought of her as cute before. But that outfit is the cutest you've ever looked, Vice Captain. I love all your black outfits, but white looks great on you too."

Her cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

"Looks like we found our outfit!"

She even purchased a few more clothing items after that. It would all be delivered straight to her house within a few days.

"Come back again sometime, okay?" The shopkeeper waved goodbye as we left his shop.

"You two must be tired from work. Thanks for coming with me anyway," Vice Captain Velrey said.

"Don't you worry about that. It was a lot of fun."

"Getting to see you in a lovely outfit was an excellent perk, Vice Captain."

“Yeah? Then I’m glad.”

But our smiles were about to be interrupted by something we never expected. An old man walking near us on the street suddenly collapsed.

Vice Captain Velrey raced to his side and called out to him. “Are you all right? Hey!”

He was convulsing; his eyes had rolled back in his head, and his breathing was ragged. He didn’t seem to have anything stuck in his throat, though his pulse was fast.

“Zara, Medic Risurisu, keep an eye on him. There’s a clinic close by, so I’ll be back with a doctor.”

“Got it.”

“Yes, Vice Captain.”

She returned five minutes later with a doctor in his forties. He had unkempt hair and a long beard. I found his foggy glasses and wrinkled white coat to be suspicious, but if Vice Captain Velrey brought him here, he *had* to be a real doctor.

The doctor took one look at the old man and murmured, “Him again?”

Again? What does that mean? But I can’t ask him before the patient is treated. A nurse arrived with a stretcher shortly after and we returned to the clinic with them.

The doctor gave the old man a sedative to stabilize him and told us he was asleep now. We asked the doctor for more information now that he had a moment to speak.

“Goodness, me. I was just about to close up shop and everything.”

Um, this is a clinic, not a shop. This doctor seemed to be the carefree type.

“We’re with the Royal Knights of Enoch,” Vice Captain Velrey informed him. “Can you tell us more about the situation?”

“Ah, I *thought* you might be knights. You can always tell a knight with a single look. How should I put it? You stand straight as arrows and look like honest people.”

I understood what he meant. I didn’t fit that description, but Vice Captain Velrey and Zara certainly did—you could tell they were knights even when they weren’t wearing their uniforms.

“Do you know anything about this patient? I may need to report my findings to the higher-ups depending on what you tell

me.”

“This man has overdosed on drugs. He’s the fifth one I’ve seen this week.” He said that the patients spent days in a constant fog. They weren’t even able to hold conversations. It sounded like an incredibly dangerous drug. “I’ve already been told to report any drug-addicted patients to the knights, so I’ll do it myself. I’ll tell them some very upstanding knights in plainclothes helped care for this man.”

We thanked the doctor and said goodbye.

“It’s a terrible case we’ve been handed this time.”

“It sure is.”

“Indeed.”

We had to launch a successful food stall at the night market if we wanted to apprehend the perpetrators.

“We have to do our best.”

“You’ve got that right, Medic Risurisu.”

“We’ll bring these criminals to justice, no matter what it takes.”

A fire had been lit in us—a burning desire to find the people responsible for this mess.



WE were officially given a date to open up our stall at the night market. Charlotte and I worked on the soup together while the crafty Garr and Sly made a sign for the stall. Liselotte was diligently stuffing bags with mythical beast goodies for distribution. Zara and Ulgus were practicing the routine of taking and preparing orders. Captain Ludtink and Vice Captain Velrey were out at a meeting with the trade association.

Everyone was hard at work to make the mission a success.

Three days later, it was finally time for the Second Expeditionary Squadron to set up shop.

Once the sun started to set, we headed out for our stall on the west street. The night market wasn’t very crowded at this point. The other stalls were still getting set up too, from the look of things.

“Um, Captain Ludtink, I thought it was supposed to be hard to open a shop on the west street, since it’s where the most popular ones gather,” I said.

“The trade association worked it out for us so that we can catch the drug dealers.”

“Oh, I see.”

Once we saw Garr’s sign, a firedrake with its wings spread wide, we knew we’d arrived at our stall. We’d decided to change our recipe’s name to “firedrake noodles.” A purchase of one bowl came with a raffle ticket that could win the customer bonus firedrake merchandise. The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau had provided the merchandise for the mission, of course.

Ulgus, Zara, Liselotte, and I were going to run the stall, so we all wore firedrake aprons Zara had made for us. Vice Captain Velrey was dressed in the all-white outfit she purchased the other day, clutching a firedrake plushie to her chest.

“I-I’m kind of nervous, Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus called out to me with an uneasy look.

“M-Me too.”

“It’ll be all right, you two.” Zara was used to this sort of thing, having worked in a restaurant before. But Ulgus and I had been on pins and needles for a while now. I was very worried about whether or not people would like my firedrake noodles. “You doing okay, Anna?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“*I’m gonna help advertise too!*” Album, wearing a firedrake apron just like the rest of us, was determined to participate.

“I see you even made one for Album, Zara,” I noted.

“Uh-huh. He’s one of us, after all.”

When he heard that, Album scratched his head and giggled.

Charlotte and Amelia had stayed behind for this mission.

While we were busy preparing, the old man running the stall across the street came over to talk to me. “Never seen you around these parts. Newcomers, are ya?”

“Um, yes, that’s right.”

“I sell boar-pig skewers over there. What’re you sellin’ here?”

“Noodles in a chili pepper soup.”

“Chili peppers? You’re gonna need a lotta luck to sell any of that!” He broke out into a hearty laugh. It was entirely unpleasant.

“Well, give it your best shot.”

“Thank you very much…” My voice came out unintentionally stiff.

“That man was so rude, Medic Risurisu,” Ulgus said.

“I shouldn’t have even talked to him.”

There were all kinds of people in this world, and not all of them deserved an honest conversation.

The clock tower bell rang one last time for the day, signaling the start of the evening.

“Looks like it’s about time to get going.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

People commuting from work would be arriving in search of their dinners soon. I started to hear energetic calls coming from the stalls around us.

“Welcome, welcome! Try our famous grilled cheese!”

“Who wants a juicy boar-pig skewer?”

“We have the freshest leaf-steamed seafood here!”

Customers were drawn to these voices, and before long, some of the stalls already had lines forming. I knew not to underestimate our fellow vendors.

Vice Captain Velrey was calling out to advertise our stall too, though she looked like she was mustering all her strength to do so. But that was when a young woman approached her.

“Excuse me, is this the place with the firedrake merchandise?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Great! I’ll take one bowl.”

“Thank you for your business. One bowl of firedrake noodles!”

Ulgus called out the order, Liselotte took her payment, and Zara began to boil the dried noodles. I nervously stirred the pot of boiling soup.

“Go ahead with the finishing touch, Melly.”

“R-Right”

This finishing touch was nothing more than a garnish of fried minced meat on top of the bowl. Yet I couldn’t even manage that without my hands trembling.

Liselotte did the raffle while we worked on the firedrake noodles. The customer appeared to have won a small firedrake plushie, and she looked incredibly happy. But I couldn’t let such a touching scene distract me.

“It’s ready.”

“Got it!”

Ulgus took the bowl and handed it to the customer.

“There’s a place to eat it out back, if you’d like.”

The trade association had provided us with special night market bowls for our stall. These were used by almost every vendor at the market, with boxes set up along the eating areas for customers to return the bowls. Trade association officials would then collect and wash the bowls for us. If we ran out, we could always borrow more from the association. They’d set up a very convenient system for everyone.

It wasn’t long before a line had formed at our stall, which Vice Captain Velrey was helping to direct.

“Look at that, Melly. There’s a line.”

“It’s so exciting!”

I recognized a few of the customers as members of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau. They were probably here to claim firedrake merchandise. It seemed the mythical beast angle was an effective strategy after all.

From that point forward, we were absolutely slammed with business. The line never came to an end, no matter how many orders we filled.

“*This one wants two bowls of firedrake noodles!*”

“Wow, okay! Two bowls of firedrake noodles please, Ahto!”

“Got it.”

Album was doing a surprisingly good job as a shopkeeper. Liselotte was serving the customers very well too. Their unexpected talents were really shining through.

“The end of the line is this way.” Vice Captain Velrey wasn’t slacking a bit either. I knew my job was to focus on making the best firedrake noodles I could.

Our first pot of soup was emptied after one hour, and the second was gone once another hour passed. We had to close up shop at this point, as there was no more soup left.

Captain Ludtink returned from his patrol of the area. He was probably wearing worn-out clothes on purpose so that he’d look more like a civilian. Although, more accurately, he’d essentially styled himself as a bandit making his nightly commute.

“Good work, everyone. Now clean up and head back to base.”

We returned to the barracks to review our evening.

“There’s just too many damn people,” Captain Ludtink cursed. “I couldn’t tell what the hell was goin’ on.”

Garr and Sly nodded in agreement. I sympathized with how hard it must be to patrol such a massive crowd. I silently thanked them for their hard work.

The captain looked completely beat. But as soon as Liselotte handed over the day’s profits, the corners of his lips curled upwards. It was a hair-raising expression that could only belong to a true bandit.

“Heh… Not bad, huh?”

The Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau covered the cost of the merchandise, while the Royal Order paid for our firedrake noodle expenses. The Second Expeditionary Squadron was able to claim the entirety of our sales profits.

“What d’ya say we quit this gig and open up a food stall?”

Resign as a knight and work as a food stall vendor? No, it’s too soon to retire and start a new life.

Zara was the one to give him honest feedback. “Crow, just because we had one good day doesn’t mean it will be like that forever. We only drew a crowd because we were new and were doing the mythical beast raffle. It’ll be much harder to maintain this level of profits from here out. Just think about it for a minute. Is it ‘easy’ to come to work and be a knight day after day?”

“What’re you, my mom, Zara? Don’t tell me how to live my life.”

Zara had been a knight longer than Captain Ludtink. He was like a big brother, big sister, and a mother all at once. Their relationship sometimes brought a smile to my face.

“Anyway, that’s it for today. Go home and rest up,” the captain ordered.

We would be coming to work in the afternoon the next day, making more soup, and selling it in the evening. This was going to be our routine until we managed to catch the people responsible for selling drugs at the night market.

I headed home, took a hot bath, and slept like a baby that night.

On the second day, we received a visit from the young man who sold the red noodles.

“I just tried my first bowl. What a shock! It’s like a whole new way of eating spicy stuff.”

“I’m very glad to hear that.”

“I’m just as surprised to see how well you guys are doing here.”

“It’s all thanks to your help. However, a lot of our popularity is because we give out mythical beast merchandise as a bonus. It feels more like we’re catering to mythical beast fans than anyone else.”

“Is that right? Maybe I should try selling stuff with less spiciness too.”

“Really? I think you should keep the red noodles how they are.”

“Honestly, I’ve always felt like I need to change something if I want to keep the business going.”

“But I think people already look forward to having your food.”

Suddenly, the man’s expression changed dramatically. His face went red and he glared at me. “What the hell would you know about anything?! You can’t keep up a business unless you’re getting money!”

“N-No…you’re right.”

“Ah… I’m sorry for shouting.”

“That’s all right.”

The young man who sold red noodles simply muttered, “I’ll be sure to learn from you,” before he went on his way. I couldn’t see his face now, but he still looked strangely depressed.

“Who was that, Melly?”

“He runs a stall on the east street that Vice Captain Velrey likes to visit. But his family runs a store that sells spices.”

“Spices…? I see. He seemed a little unstable.”

“Maybe he had mixed feelings about seeing another stall sell spicy noodles like his.”

“I guess so.”

I was cooking food to have widespread appeal, while that man was cooking the thing he wanted to make. We’d started our businesses with very different motivations, so it wasn’t too surprising that we were seeing different results.

I should have said something to him before we started selling noodles. That must have been the problem.

"I'm kind of curious about that man," Zara said.

"Curious?"

"Uh-huh. I'm going to ask Garr to follow him."

Garr and Sly just happened to be out back on their break.

"Hey, Garr. Can you tail the guy who was just talking to Melly?"

Garr nodded. Sly pounded her chest confidently, as if to say he could count on her. They quickly disappeared into the sea of people to begin tracking their target.

"Was something strange about that man?"

"I thought so. As soon as he yelled at you, it was like the look in his eyes totally changed."

"I was looking right at him, but I didn't notice that at all."

"I just hope I'm wrong…"

My squadmates and I were quite busy after that. Much to my delight, we even had some returning customers who'd come back because they liked the dish so much.

Once again, we sold the rest of our firedrake noodles within two and a half hours.

"*Sorry, we're all sold out… Gyah!*"

I looked up when I heard Album scream. There I spotted a man trying to peer into our stall. He wore a hat pulled down low, a pair of sunglasses, and was dressed entirely in black. Everything about him screamed "shady."

Is he one of the drug dealers?!

Captain Ludtink just happened to have arrived at the stall, so I instantly cried out to him. "Captain! That man looks suspicious!"

Captain Ludtink immediately grabbed him under the arms and held him in a tight lock. "Quit strugglin'!"

"Ngh!"

"No, Captain Ludtink, that's…!"

Vice Captain Velrey tried to give him a warning, but that was when the man's hat fell and his sunglasses slipped down. Suddenly, his face was visible.

"W-Wait…Lord…Lichtenberger?"

When I heard Ulgus say that, I let out a shriek of my own. The scary man in black had actually been Lord Lichtenberger.

"'Suspicious?' Really? How rude!"

Liselotte responded calmly to His Lordship's protests. "I'd say it's your fault for dressing so out of the ordinary, Father. Why are you wearing that in the first place?"

"I wanted...to win the giant firedrake plushie in the raffle. I'll still pay you for the food."

Liselotte brought her hand to her brow and stared up at the starry sky above. Ulgus was covering his mouth and trembling, trying not to get caught laughing at the marquess' answer.

Vice Captain Velrey responded to him with an apologetic tone. "Unfortunately, the giant plushie was already won an hour ago."

"Wh-What?!"

Liselotte had ordered the custom merchandise from a workshop outside of the royal capital. Apparently not even Lord Lichtenberger, director of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau itself, could get his hands on them.

A disappointed Lord Lichtenberger headed home once he learned the plushie had already been claimed.

"Doesn't Father have anything better to do?" she sighed.

When he heard that, Ulgus couldn't contain himself anymore. He burst out laughing.

We were busy cleaning up our stall when Sly returned to us on her own.

"Oh, what happened to Garr, Sly?"

Sly first transformed into the shape of Garr and made a shocked expression. Then she changed into the shape of the young man from the spice shop, produced a small leaf, and gestured as if she was giving that leaf to someone.

"D-Don't tell me the man from the spice shop was selling drugs!"

Garr was probably still tracking the man now. He *did* have a weapon on him too, just to be safe. I looked to Captain Ludtink for orders.

"We're goin' to find Garr. Lead the way, Sly!"

Sly spawned an arm from her body and gave him a salute.

With no time to change into our uniforms, Ulgus, Zara, Liselotte, and I were forced to go in our white aprons. Captain Ludtink was still dressed in his savage clothes like some kind of urban bandit, while Vice Captain Velrey wore that beautiful, all-white outfit she purchased with us.

We found Garr in an alleyway off the main street in the city. He was next to a fence and signaled that someone was on the other side. We stealthily peered past it.

“It’s a medicinal herb you can use like chewing tobacco. It has all kinds of health benefits.”

“Is that right?”

“If you don’t believe me, try it for yourself.”

It really *was* the man who’d sold me spices. In his hand was the illegal drug we’d received reports about. The other party was the unpleasant old man who sold boar-pig skewers at the night market.

He took the leaves, rolled them up, and stuck them in his mouth. But then…

“Urgh!”

He tried to spit them out, but the younger man covered his mouth to stop him. That was when Captain Ludtink sprang into action. He hopped the fence and landed in front of them, with each member following his path.

Liselotte and I had to go around through the gate. Neither of us could hop a fence as easily as the others.

Zara came to the old man’s rescue and helped him get the drugs out of his mouth. The younger man tried to flee, but Captain Ludtink grabbed him by the scruff of his neck.

“Don’t you dare make a run for it.”

“Who the hell are you?!”

“I’m Crow Ludtink, a knight with the Royal Order of Enoch.”

“Liar! I’ve never seen a knight with a scruffy beard like you! You’re at *least* a bandit!”

This tickled Ulgus’s funny bone. Unable to hold it in, he let out a loud “Ahaha!”

He was “at least a bandit.” I would have to borrow that phrase sometime.

“You’re gonna pay for that, Ulgus!” Captain Ludtink growled.

“I-I’m sorry…!”

Garr rifled through the man’s pockets and retrieved a stash of drugs.

“Where did you get this?”

“……”

“Speak up, or I’ll send ya flyin’!”

But the man still wouldn't talk, so Captain Ludtink made good on his threat. He only threw the man into the ground, but I imagined that was still incredibly painful. He grabbed the man again, put on his best bandit's glare, and demanded he start talking.

"What good will it do to tell a bandit anything?!"

"I'm no bandit. I'm an honest-to-goodness knight, like I said! Or are you lookin' to get thrown again?"

"Eek! Okay, I'll tell you everything, just don't hurt me!"

The captain bound the man's arms and legs so he couldn't escape. "All right, now tell me where ya got the drugs. Don't ya know this stuff's illegal in our country?"

"I just got them in a shipment. I think someone screwed up, thinking they were a medicinal herb that looked almost exactly the same."

This drug was supposedly legal in the country it originated from, and since it looked so much like a medicinal herb he'd ordered, it was shipped to him a few months in a row by mistake.

"I was going to send it back, but…"

The night market in the royal capital had once been a warm, friendly place. It was only in the past few years that the entire atmosphere had changed as new vendors started to set up shop.

"I used to run my stall on the west street too, but I was forced out. A vendor told me *their* food belonged on the west street, not the ridiculous stuff that I sold…"

That person paid off the trade association and stole the man's spot. It was the very back of the east street, an essentially deserted location, that took him in after that.

"Even after I relocated, the other vendors kept harassing me. That's why I gave out these drugs. I wanted revenge."

He said that the west street vendors were harassing others too, so this young man gave the victims more drugs and told them to get revenge on the perpetrators. He didn't know what each victim chose to do with their share, but it ended up making the rounds to around ten different vendors.

"I only gave the drugs to the first guy who harassed me and the old man here. It's the other vendors who spread it out further."

"…Fine, then. You can give the details back at the Royal Order headquarters."

“Or so you *say*. I bet you’re gonna sell me to slave traders, aren’t you?!”

“I’m not a bandit!” Captain Ludtink’s roar was deafening.

The case had reached its conclusion in the blink of an eye. The man’s testimony that ten vendors were now giving out his drugs turned out to be correct. They’d all run perfectly normal stalls at the night market and seemed like good people on the outside.

Captain Ludtink stared off into the distance, muttering, “So, the vendors were only givin’ out drugs to the people who harassed them? No wonder I couldn’t find anything no matter how much patrollin’ I did.”

“That makes sense.”

All of the vendors were apprehended and taken in by the knights.

In the end, it was a sad case down to its very core.

The night market wasn’t full of delicious food and human kindness after all. Instead, it was a vortex where jealousy, resentment, and ill will spiraled out of control.

Chapter 4: Nut Desserts of Happiness and Captain Ludtink's Wedding

THE Second Expeditionary Squadron had yet another day off!

Zara and I went into town that morning to buy fabric. We were going to start on my dress for Captain Ludtink's wedding. Zara took us to a new fabric store on the royal capital's main street. He told me he'd been wanting to check it out forever.

"Don't you just love that iridescent fabric in the display case?" he asked me.

"I've never seen anything like that before. It's a beautiful color."

"Why don't we buy it for your dress, Melly?"

"Oh, no, I look much better in muted colors."

"I'd disagree with that…"

The conversation ended there and the two of us entered the store.

One of the interior walls was covered in shelves full of tightly packed fabric bundles. My eyes darted all over the place, unable to focus on any single item. I looked at the iridescent fabric again and saw how it was made with colors different from anything else in the store. It was absolutely lovely.

"Welcome!"

We were greeted enthusiastically by a young girl, about fifteen or sixteen years old. She wore her hair up in a high ponytail and freckles dotted her cheeks. I found her very adorable. An old woman with gray hair and an apron smiled and bowed from the back of the shop. Perhaps the girl was her granddaughter.

"What can I help you find?"

"Um, we're here to buy fabric to make a dress."

"Oh, are you making your debut in high society?!"

"No, it's for our boss's wedding."

"I see. Please follow me." She retrieved various fabric samples from the store's long cutting table. "This light coral color is our best seller this year."

It was a beautiful pink, but I couldn't picture myself wearing a color like that. It was far too flashy.

"This violet fabric is also quite popular."

I didn't think such a color would suit anyone who wasn't very pale. The violet wouldn't stand out against someone with a healthy hue to their skin like me.

"In that case, how about this vermilion color? It's a popular choice as well."

I could picture someone beautiful like Liselotte wearing it, but it was far too big a hurdle for me to cross.

"It doesn't seem like anything is tickling your fancy."

"I'm sorry. I just feel like all of these colors would be wasted on me…"

I felt guilty. The girl was trying so hard to satisfy me, so now I wanted to decide on something quickly before I upset her even more.

"Ah, Melly, how about this one? I think it'd be fabulous on you." Zara had pulled a bright yellow fabric off the shelf. It was so beautiful, I could hardly look away. But I could never imagine wearing a dress in that color. It was just too bright for me.

I looked my best in plain-colored dresses.

"I see you're looking at canary yellow! I really love that color too!"

"What do you think, Melly?"

"U-Um…"

The fact that Zara had picked out such a color for me made me really happy. I honestly wanted to try wearing it as a dress. Not only was this a significant purchase on its own, but we were also going to make the dress by hand. I'd feel terrible if it ended up looking bad on me.

Zara's face fell when I didn't respond right away. The shopkeeper's excitement seemed to fade away too.

What am I supposed to do? It's not like I could ever pull off such a beautiful color.

"Mind if I say something, ma'am?"

"Yes?"

The old woman with white hair approached us from the back of the shop. "You seem to be hesitant about all the fabrics, but you're going about it the wrong way."

“I-I am?”

“The thing about fabrics is that they change depending on who wears them. The more you want to wear a color, the more it suits you. But if you’re trying to be modest, any color will look dull, no matter what it is.”

Her words felt like a blow to the head. If I spent so much time saying nothing looked good on me, I was going to ruin any color I wore. That concept came as a huge shock. Maybe she was right. I’d been holding on to a negative outlook—that these colors would just be wasted on me.

“Choose whatever color you like, and I promise you’ll transform into a beautiful young lady.”

“You’re right… Thank you very much.”

She set an array of different-colored fabrics on the table. This time, I didn’t hesitate. I picked up the canary yellow fabric Zara had selected for me.

“I… I like this color the best. We’ll take it.”

“Melly…!”

“Thank you for choosing this one, Zara. I’m excited to finish the dress and put it on for the first time.”

“I look forward to that too.”

We had her cut the fabric to the right length for a dress. Then we purchased thread, a dress pattern, and ribbons. Zara tried to pay for half of it, but I stopped him. I couldn’t allow such a thing when he was already taking on the burden of helping me make it.

“I’m the one who wanted to see you in this dress in the first place,” he argued.

“But it’s still *my* dress.”

The old woman asked us when the wedding was. The answer was a shock to her. She cut the fabric effectively, leaving us with pieces we could sew together quicker to complete the dress.

“Be sure to wear it with confidence on the day of the wedding.”

“Thank you so much!”

After I paid the bill, I received twenty tickets for the shopping district’s raffle. The shopkeeper explained they were drawing tickets at the plaza with the fountain and that the top prize was a bar of gold—a very appealing raffle indeed.

I left the store in a delighted mood. I was so excited to get home and start sewing the dress.

“Is there anywhere else you’d like to stop, Zara?”

“No, I’m fine. Let’s do the raffle and head home.”

“All right.”

The shopping district’s raffle ended up having an incredibly long line of people. I couldn’t even see where the end was.

“Do you want to get in line, Zara?”

“Why don’t we give it a try since we’re already here? Maybe you’ll get that gold bar.”

“That would be nice.”

The raffle had other prizes too. The top prize was the gold bar, but they also had things that could be used in one’s daily life—assortments of fruits and veggies, pots, knives, and more.

We stood in line for an hour before it was finally my turn.

“Twenty tickets? Okay then, step right up!”

“R-Right.” I pulled the first slip from the container, but it was blank.

“Here’s your consolation prize.”

The man handed me a piece of candy. I would go on to receive eight more when I failed to win anything with my tickets.

“U-Um, you should pull the last ten, Zara.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

I must have used up all my luck for the day when I found that canary yellow fabric. I would leave Zara in charge of the remainder.

“All right, then…” Zara reached in and pulled out ten slips at once.

“Oooh, lookie here. I think two of them are winners.”

I looked at the two slips. Both of them had the words “gaufrette cooker” on them.

“Congratulations. You’ve won two gaufrette cookers!”

Gaufrettes were supposedly a type of baked sweet made by cooking the batter from above and below at the same time.

“Do you know what they are, Zara?”

“Uh-huh. We made them all the time in my family.”

We decided to leave one cooker at home and the other one at the barracks.

Zara had been incredibly lucky to win two of the same product. At least, that was what I thought before we saw the prize table—nothing more than a big pile of gaufrette cookers. They were almost certainly trying to get rid of excess stock.

"Shall we get going, Melly?"

"Okay!"

We also bought a souvenir for Charlotte before we headed home.

After that, Zara and I started spending all our time at home together working on my dress. There were only about twenty days left before Captain Ludtink's wedding. We always spent our days off working on something or another, meaning we got a late start on the dressmaking process this time.

Even Charlotte and Sir Aiskoletta volunteered to help along the way. The job of making my dress ended up involving four people in total.

I was growing more and more excited for the day of the wedding.



I decided to spend my morning making expedition rations with the gaufrette cooker Zara won.

I'd learned that a gaufrette was a dessert made with wheat and was popular in regions outside of the royal capital. It was lighter than a cookie, but crisp at the same time. Zara gave me a thorough explanation of how to make them, so I wanted to try my hand at it right away.

The special gaufrette cooker had a long handle like a frying pan and opened up like a compact, revealing a cast iron mold inside. You were supposed to pour the batter into the mold and turn it upside down a few times as it cooked.

The mold had flower patterns engraved at the bottom too. Excitedly, I wondered what it would look like once cooked.

It was time to start cooking. I added eggs, milk, flour, melted butter, salt, and baking powder into a bowl before stirring it. Then I oiled the inside of the cooker, poured the batter into one side,

and closed the lid. I let it cook for a while, flipping it back and forth a few times until I started to smell something appetizing.

Figuring it was probably ready, I opened the cooker and turned it upside down over a plate. The flower-printed gaufrette slid out perfectly.

“Oh, it looks so nice!”

I tried the first one myself. I bit down and heard a satisfying crunch, instantly hooked on the taste of butter that filled my mouth. It was so delicious and it was only my first time making it.

I’d expected them to taste like homemade cookies, but this was a different flavor altogether. I recalled Zara telling me they were also delicious when eaten like a sandwich with chocolate or buttercream for filling.

I could also picture them pairing well with butter-fried mushrooms or a meat paste.

Charlotte just happened to be passing by, so I called her over.

“That smells yummy. What you making?”

“They’re a dessert called ‘gaufrettes.’”

Charlotte opened her mouth for me to stick the remaining half of the gaufrette in. “Wow! So crisp! How tasty.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

I repeated the process for a while, since I had to cook each one by hand. Charlotte agreed to help me, as she was free at the moment.

I poured the batter into the cooker and focused on cooking the gaufrettes to perfection. Once they were done, Charlotte lined them up to dry before putting them in cans. They fell apart easily, meaning they weren’t the best food for expeditions, but would still be a nice treat to have once in a while.

“All right, that should do it.”

“Good job, Mell!”

“Thanks for the help, Charlotte.”

“You’re welcome!”

I doubted they’d last longer than a week since they were made with butter. If we didn’t have an expedition before then, I could have a tea party and serve them as snacks. I hoped to eat them with a healthy serving of rich custard cream. I could already imagine trembling with delight as I ate something so delicious.

But while I was lost in that fantasy, Ulgus arrived and told me we'd all been summoned to the captain's office.

"Don't tell me... Are we going on an expedition?"

"Probably..."

Ulgus and I both let out deep sighs. We reluctantly dragged ourselves into the office.

Captain Ludtink gave us our orders with a furrowed brow. "There's a farming village half a day away by carriage that's having their crops ruined by a giant bug monster. Our mission is to go there and exterminate it."

I accidentally let out an "Ugh!" Captain Ludtink shot me a glare, of course.

There were many kinds of monsters in the world. Roughly half were land beasts, thirty percent were aquatic, and bug monsters were found amongst that remaining twenty percent.

It was rare to encounter bug monsters at all. They were humongous, ferocious monsters with skin-crawling appearances.

"Captain Ludtink, what does this bug monster look like?" I needed to prepare myself so I wouldn't be scared when I saw it.

Captain Ludtink eyed his report, made a scowl, and answered, "It says it's thirty-two feet long, thin, and has a ton of legs. We also have to watch out for its poisonous tail."

"Eeeeeek...!"

I didn't even want to imagine a thirty-two-foot-long bug monster. But if it really *was* that big, I could see why the fields were being destroyed.

"We have to get there as soon as possible. Start packin' and be ready to go in thirty minutes."

"Yes, Captain!"

We'd have to have lunch along the way, so I needed something we could eat in the carriage.

"Ah, Charlotte, can you prepare two days' worth of food? We're heading out on an expedition."

"Got it!"

"Please get ready too, Amelia."

"Kreh kreh!"

I started making lunch boxes while Charlotte packed for me, although I couldn't make anything too complicated with only thirty minutes to spare.

I decided to use up the remaining stock of eggs I'd purchased. Cheesy omelets with salt and pepper sounded like a good lunch. I could even put them in between slices of bread to make cheesy omelet sandwiches.

I had some leftover minced meat I'd bottled with chili peppers too, so I tried adding a bit to my omelets. I made two each for the male members and one for the female members, piling them all into a basket. Then I made a portion for Album too.

The process went more smoothly than I expected and I was left with fifteen minutes to make something else. I decided to boil the salted boar-pig meat I'd made the other day and work on a sauce while the meat cooked.

The sauce contained chili oil, ginger, sugar, and herbs. I basted it over the boiled boar-pig meat and grilled it a bit longer before my salted boar-pig stir fry was complete.

"That should do it!"

I spotted Album amongst the other members who were rushing around the barracks. He carried a polka dot bundle over his shoulder, packing up for the expedition just like everyone else.

"I'm finished, Mell!"

"Ah, thank you, Charlotte."

"Be safe on your trip!"

"I will."

"I be a good girl and wait at home with Umataro, Blanche, and the old man."

The house was a lot more active than it used to be. I was very grateful that Charlotte didn't seem lonely now.

"We'll be back soon."

"Have a good expedition!"

With that farewell from Charlotte, we took off in our carriage. Our destination was the farming village half a day away.

Garr drove the carriage safely and steadily while Vice Captain Velrey flew on Amelia's back. Captain Ludtink, Ulgus, Zara, Liselotte, and I rode inside the carriage. Album was there with us too.

Captain Ludtink explained more about the mission to us, his brow looking wrinkled. "They say bugs are nocturnal, so it'll probably be comin' out by the time we arrive."

The Monster Research Bureau had looked into the case and found that this was a bug monster called a centipede. The name sounded kind of cute, but I didn't expect that to carry over to how it looked.

"They have twenty eyes but usually only keep two open. We're supposed to watch out for when its eyes are glowin' red and it opens up all of 'em. That's when it gets brutal as hell."

"I hate this..." Ulgus had given a voice to the thought I had in my head.

"Our mission starts at night, so do whatever ya want until we arrive." The captain crossed his arms and closed his eyes to take a nap, but I stopped him.

"U-Um, I made lunches for everyone. Let's have them during our rest stop."

"Yeah, sounds good."

Our first break came one hour after that. We stopped alongside a lake and let the horses rest while we spread out a blanket to have lunch.

Vice Captain Velrey had given Amelia's coat a brushing to thank her for her help. She was very happy with her glossy, squeaky-clean fur. Garr and Sly were staring at a map. They would be able to take us all the way to our destination without needing to switch drivers.

Liselotte was comparing that map to her own notebook. When I asked what she was doing, she told me she wanted to know if any mythical beasts dwelled near our destination. She let out a heavy, *heavy* sigh when she found out they didn't. Her love of mythical beasts was a constant in this world.

Captain Ludtink was memorizing his wedding vows, reminding me how close we were to the big day.

My dress was very nearly complete. We were still putting it together little by little on our days off.

"I should've brought the dress to work on, huh?"

"Yes, it's just about finished now."

"I'm so excited to see you wear it, Melly."

"I just hope I look good in it. It makes me nervous."

It was going to be an adorable dress covered in ribbons and frills. I was anxious about how it would turn out in the end.

“By the way, Melly, did you really make lunch for everyone in those thirty minutes?”

“Yes, I did. I figured I wouldn’t have time to cook on our break, since Captain Ludtink said we had to hurry.”

“You’re incredible.”

“Thank you, Zara. But it’s nothing too exciting.”

His face lit up when I showed him the contents of my basket. “That looks yummy. What are they?”

“They’re omelet sandwiches. But it’s more than just eggs and bread.”

“I’m excited to try it.”

I handed out omelet sandwiches to my squadmates and set the stir-fried boar-pig out where everyone could have some. We said our prayers of gratitude before digging in.

“Mmm! This is really good, Medic Risurisu!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

They were simple sandwiches that would be popular with children. Although, I questioned that assumption when I heard Captain Ludtink praising the sandwich as well. Album’s eyes lit up when he saw the cheese inside the omelet.

“Melly, this boar-pig has just the perfect kick of spice.”

“The meat was salted, but is it too much?”

“No, the salty taste is totally overpowered.”

“That’s good to hear.”

Vice Captain Velrey and Liselotte said it was delicious as well. I breathed a sigh of relief. Album had eaten the omelet out of the bread and was now making a stir fry sandwich with the leftover portion. It seemed like a good idea, so I followed suit.

“I-It’s really good this way too!”

“*I know, right?*” Album stuck his chest out with a look of pride on his face. He truly had a gift for sniffing out anything and everything delicious.

“But Crow, isn’t tomorrow supposed to be the wedding rehearsal?” Zara asked. “Is Marina going to be there all alone?”

“Yeah, we rented the venue out and everything.”

“Poor girl.”

“There’s nothin’ I can do about it. I made sure she knows what it means to be a knight’s wife.”

Captain Ludtink and Marina had always seemed to be in some kind of fight, but they were coming to a mutual understanding of each other little by little.

"You better apologize when you get back, or else she'll hold it against you for the rest of her life."

"I know already, damn it. You don't have to tell me that."

"Are you sure?"

I rubbed my eyes, having briefly mistaken Zara and Captain Ludtink for a mother and her troublemaker of a son. But surely my mind was just playing tricks on me. It made me realize just how strong Zara's maternal instincts really were.

We set out again after lunch. Zara rode Amelia this time and Vice Captain Velrey joined us inside the carriage.

"You should get some sleep now if you can, Medic Risurisu. You won't be able to sleep at night because of the mission. You can lay down on my shoulder or lap if you want."

She wants me to nuzzle up against her or use her lap as a pillow? What a luxury!

"Oh, um, but I don't want to bother you."

"It's no bother. Being tired tonight will interfere with the job, right?"

"I-I guess that's true."

"I'm going to take a nap too, so don't worry about me. Maybe I'll end up on your shoulder instead."

"I-if you insist…"

I decided to borrow the vice captain's shoulder for a nap.

I awoke with a start when the carriage hit a bump. I looked outside and saw that the sun was already starting to set.

"You can go back to sleep, Medic Risurisu. We're not that close to the farming village yet."

I could tell I'd slept like a baby thanks to the help of my soft pillow.

"Mm… Hm?"

Soft pillow? What pillow would that be? I was slowly growing more alert.

"Ah! What did I…?!" I sat up in a panic. To my utter shock, I realized I had been out cold on Vice Captain Velrey's lap. "F-F-F-Forgive me, Vice Captain! I didn't realize I was on your lap!"

“It’s fine. I moved you down because you looked uncomfortable.”

“I-I see…”

Sleeping on a commanding officer’s lap was utterly unthinkable. I was completely mortified. But the kind Vice Captain Velrey smiled and forgave me anyway.

The sun continued to sink closer to the horizon. I wondered if Amelia would be scared to fly at night. I glanced out my window and realized that, much to my relief, she and Zara seemed to be enjoying themselves.

We arrived at the farming village one hour later. It was a tranquil-looking town made up of houses with straw-thatched roofs. Although, I couldn’t see much else due to how dark it was.

Many of the villagers had come out to greet us. I doubted they had very many visitors like knights in their daily lives.

The mayor was a man in his forties with a solid physique like a farmer. “We’re very grateful that you came all this way to help us,” he said. “Please, come inside. There’s hot mushroom soup waiting for you.”

“Thanks.”

We entered the mayor’s house and were welcomed by his wife and their three children. They even treated us to mushroom soup—a specialty of the village. The broth was rich and the mushrooms themselves were tender. It was a delicious meal that warmed our cold bodies to the core.

Captain Ludtink finished his soup and began to question the mayor. “Have you ever had centipedes appear in the village before?”

“Yes, it’s been happening for the past few years. But they were no larger than snakes, so we exterminated them ourselves with hoes and sickles.”

But one day, a massive centipede appeared like some sort of mutated version.

“I’ve never heard of any farming village dealin’ with centipedes before.”

Monsters only attacked things with magical energy. I’d certainly never heard of them destroying crops like this.

The mayor explained the reason behind this oddity. “I believe it’s because our village grows a special plant that sorcerers use for

their cigars. They're called smoke bombs."

"What's a smoke bomb?"

"It's a kind of plant that contains a lot of magical energy. It only retains a little by the time you turn it into a cigar, but you can ingest that magical energy by smoking it. I believe we're the only village in the kingdom that grows it."

"I…see."

The centipede was targeting the plants for their magical energy.

"We've been growing it for a few years now at the request of the director of the Magic Research Bureau."

"The director of the Magic Research Bureau?! You mean Vario Leffra?"

"Y-Yes…"

"I see."

Captain Ludtink scratched the back of his head and explained the unfortunate news to the mayor. "Vario Leffra is in prison for criminal charges right now."

"H-He's *what*?! B-But he just came here half a month ago…"

"He was arrested after that."

"Th-That can't be…!"

"I thought smoke bombs were illegal," Liselotte murmured quietly. "I believe their sale is prohibited within the kingdom."

"What…?! Lord Leffra never said anything like that!"

"He probably set you guys up."

The mayor slumped.

"That centipede might have magic ore in it too."

"Magic ore…you say?"

"It turns monsters bigger and more violent. Vario Leffra was putting them into animals for his experiments…"

But I never imagined he might be doing the same to monsters, not just livestock. What a dreadful man he was. I was so glad we'd managed to apprehend him.

"Why would Lord Leffra do such a thing?"

Captain Ludtink was staring up at the ceiling. Even someone as bold as him was hesitant to reveal that truth.

Instead, it was the mayor's wife who spoke next—her voice audibly trembling. "Was he trying to cover up the evidence of making us plant smoke bombs?"

“……”

Captain Ludtink nodded quietly, refusing to deny the reality before them. “We’ll deal with that later. For now, you can rest assured that we’ll get rid of that centipede.”

“Right… Thank you for your help.”

“Now show us where to find it.”

The mayor led us to a field outside of the village. Liselotte used a spell to light the area with a glowing orb, allowing us to get a clear look at the situation.

“This is…”

The soil had all been dug up and the smoke bombs consumed, leaving only scraps behind. Their roots were dry and the once-green leaves were now withered. But worst of all, the plants surrounding the smoke bombs had decayed too.

“The centipede devoured the smoke bombs and dispersed its poison everywhere, resulting in what you see here…”

“That’s awful.”

They probably tried all sorts of countermeasures, as I could see broken fences and barbed wire scattered about.

“Were any people attacked?”

“Yes, but fortunately, no one was injured.”

“I see.”

The mayor looked very uncomfortable now, though I understood why. He’d been growing illegal plants, after all, even if he didn’t know any better.

“It never attacked the village, did it?”

“C-Correct. We have a seal that repels monsters, which is probably why it never came our way.”

The mayor explained that, roughly three centuries ago, one of their villagers rescued a sorcerer who had collapsed in the woods. To thank him, the sorcerer carved a seal that would protect the village from monsters. Since that day, the villagers have maintained strong feelings of respect for sorcerers and have always tried to help them when they needed it.

It was unforgivable that Vario Leffra abused those villagers’ earnest emotions.

“Our village has been spared monster attacks ever since.”

“A seal that repels monsters? That’s impossible!” Liselotte cried out in shock.

“What’s the matter?”

“First of all, no spell can last for centuries. They usually wear off once the sorcerer dies.”

A spell could only be maintained with a stream of magical energy from the person who cast it, meaning it ceased its effects once the sorcerer died. But there were exceptions to that rule. Liselotte explained that a long-term spell needed to be sustained by a medium—something containing powerful magical energy.

“Is there anything like that in your village?”

“Y-Yes, there’s some sort of staff sticking out of the ground.”

“That must be the medium for the spell.” She said that a continuous monster-repelling spell was advanced magic that had been lost to time. There were many more sorcerers three hundred years ago than there were now, so it was reasonable that they’d left behind long-lasting spells. “I thought it seemed strange. The centipede could gain far more energy by eating people instead of smoke bombs.”

“So that centipede couldn’t approach the village because of the monster-repelling spell.”

Suddenly, Liselotte gasped. “Now I remember. Smoke bombs are said to give off a pleasant scent to monsters. They were banned because so many villages growing them were attacked.”

“Do you mean to say Lord Leffra…tricked us?” the mayor asked.

“Probably. You’re likely the only farming village in the world that still happens to have a monster-repelling spell.”

The mayor collapsed to his knees.

“Damn it, Lichtenberger. You don’t gotta be so blunt,” the captain said.

“What’s the use in keeping it a secret?”

Garr helped the mayor get back on his feet. He walked him back to his house too, since the man’s legs were still wobbling.

“All right. For now, let’s hide in the bushes.”

Before that, I handed out bug repellent I’d made from mint grass.

I’d ended up getting stung by insects during our previous mission in the grasslands. I spent a full week crying over how itchy it was and refused to ever make the same mistake again. That was my motivation for making an insecticide for expeditions.

“Please apply this to your neck, chest, and upper legs. You can rub it on your boots too and it will still be effective.”



“Chest…?” Ulgus asked for clarification with a very serious look on his face.

“All of the parts of the body that get hot, or in other words, the sweatiest places are where bugs tend to sting you.”

“Oh, I never knew.”

Women’s cleavage and the area under their breasts often got sweaty, but we’d have nothing to worry about with a thorough coating of this medicine.

“H-How do you apply it?”

“Like this!” Zara covered Ulgus’s eyes and spun him around. “The men are looking the other way, Melly, so go ahead and apply the bug repellent.”

“Thank you, Zara.”

“But we can’t all do it at once. Have two people be lookouts and take turns.”

“Yes, that’s smart.”

Zara patted Captain Ludtink on the shoulder and made him turn around. We took a moment to apply our bug repellent.

“That should do it.”

“Mell, this medicine has a strange, cooling sensation. It smells so unique too.”

“I know. Just please bear with it.”

I spread it on Amelia’s fur too. Now that we were ready, Liselotte extinguished the light as we crept into the bushes.

“I wonder if the centipede will show up tonight.”

Liselotte responded to Ulgus’s speculation, “I’m certain it will. Just look at how bright the moon is. It’s the perfect setting for a monster to become active.”

“Ah, I see what you mean.”

Moonlight carried magical energy down to the earth, which was why monsters became more active at night. It was the world tree that managed the magical energy brought down from the moon. The moon and the world tree were absolutely vital components of this world.

We ceased all conversations after that. Everyone quieted their breath and waited for the centipede to arrive. That waiting period grew longer and longer…with absolutely no sign of the centipede emerging.

Winter in the farming village was unforgiving. They probably watered their crops with canals directly from the river. I was shivering, so Amelia lifted her wing and invited me to sit underneath it.

“Ah, it’s so warm…!”

When I said that, I heard someone grit their teeth loudly in response. I could feel a pair of eyes digging into me through the darkness. It could only have come from Liselotte.

“Can Liselotte join me, Amelia?”

“Kreh.”

With Amelia’s permission, I called for Liselotte to join.

“I-I couldn’t dare warm myself with Amelia’s body heat.”

“It’s all right. Please come on in.”

Liselotte crawled under Amelia’s wing and let out a blissful sigh. “Why, it’s heaven on earth.”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration…”

Another hour passed with no sign of the centipede. I heard Ulgus yawn and couldn’t stop myself from yawning too.

It was probably past midnight now. As I was calculating the time, I suddenly heard Ulgus’s stomach let out a loud growl.

“Urk! I’m sorry. We only had that mushroom soup for dinner…”

It wasn’t unusual to have soup on its own for dinner in a farming village. Bread, meat, and fish were still luxuries to many.

“I made some gaufrettes before we left. Would you like one?” I asked.

“Sure!”

“Do you prefer salty or sweet?”

“Hmmm. It’s hard to decide.”

“Then I’ll get one of each.”

I’d made the salty ones with meat paste and spicy minced meat. The sweet ones were covered with candied forest apples and a chocolate spread.

Liselotte cast a small ball of light—just enough to illuminate my hands—as I stuck the fillings in between gaufrettes.

“Here you go.”

“Thank you so much.” Ulgus bit right into the sweet gaufrette. “Whoa, it’s so crisp. This goes right to the top of my crispiness ranking.”

What’s a crispiness ranking, exactly?

“I really like the salty one too.”

I handed out gaufrettes to the others, listening to the sound of them crunching in the total darkness.

Another hour passed after our snack break. Still, the centipede was nowhere in sight.

“Maybe it’s not comin’ today.”

But as soon as Captain Ludtink muttered those words, my ears picked up on something. Garr reacted with a gasp at the exact same time.

“C-Captain Ludtink, something big is coming this way!” I warned.

“So, it finally shows its face? Lichtenberger, put a ball of light in the middle of the field when I give the signal. I wanna blind that thing with it.”

“Roger.” Liselotte began to chant a spell.

My heart was racing even though I wouldn’t be the one fighting that thing. Captain Ludtink unsheathed his sword—the sacred item named Dumortierite he received from Sir Aiskoletta.

I could tell the monster was getting closer. Zara stood up and readied his sacred ax, Rhodochrosite. Ulgus drew an arrow from his quiver and readied it with his sacred bow, Serpentine. Garr’s ears stood up straight, listening to the sounds of the monster. He squeezed his hands around Staurolite, his sacred spear.

Vice Captain Velrey drew her sacred twin swords, Phenakite, and gave me orders in a deep voice. “Medic Risurisu, take Amelia and run to the village if you think you’re in danger. No matter what happens or what state we’re in, your job is to make it back and report to the higher-ups. Understood?”

In other words, I was to flee if the Second Expeditionary Squadron was annihilated.

Unlike the usual monsters, this centipede was likely to have magic ore in its body, so the vice captain was taking extra precautions. Even the normal boar-pig was a tough foe with that magic ore. We had no way of knowing what a monster might be capable of.

“It should be here soon. All units, storm the enemy! The battle plan is called ‘Kill That Damn Thing!’” An incredibly simple name. Captain Ludtink followed it up by shouting, “Lichtenberger, fire off the light!”

Liselotte raised her sacred staff, Orpiment, and chanted her spell. “*Gleam brightly, ball of light!*”

It seemed she’d made a special ball this time. I could still see it shining even when I closed my eyes.

“Gyuroooooon!” The monster let out a pained shriek. She must have succeeded in blinding it.

As soon as the light went back to normal, the battle had begun.

I fearfully opened my eyes and was met with the sight of an utterly terrifying monster. It was as if an enormous snake was clad in armor, crawling around on its many legs. Such a disgusting creature could only be the centipede we were looking for.

It was darting all over the place at rapid speeds, ignoring all the bumps in the dug-up field.

Captain Ludtink led the way, jumping directly in front of the great centipede. The extermination was now underway. Captain Ludtink brought his sword down hard against the centipede, but its skin must have been as tough as metal. The captain did little more than make a loud “clang” with his attack.

“I-It’s disgusting. Can I just roast that thing already?”

“W-Wait, Liselotte. Captain Ludtink or Vice Captain Velrey will tell you when to use a spell.”

Liselotte wasn’t allowed to use large, uncontrollable spells without permission. She would have to be patient for now.

Garr jumped out for a swift attack, but the centipede dodged the impact. It was agile for a creature of its size.

Zara raised his ax and brought it down as hard as he could. Not only was the monster uninjured, but it didn’t so much as flinch.

“Watch out for the poison in its tail!” Vice Captain Velrey reminded everyone. The centipede was already spraying poison all over the field. The soil probably wouldn’t be usable for a while after this. I only hoped there was some method of removing it.

Captain Ludtink let out a shout. “Ulgus!” Then he ran in the opposite direction of the centipede. Ulgus fired off the arrow he’d kept aimed at the target, hitting it square in the eye.

“Gyuroooooon!”

That was when it opened all of its eyes—revealing how they were glowing bright red. It struck its tail against the ground over

and over again, sending its poisonous liquid raining down over the field.

“Damn it! We can’t get close to the thing! It’s too dangerous. We’re fallin’ back for now!”

They had to get away from the centipede to avoid the shower of poison. At this point, the captain barked orders at Liselotte.

“Kill that thing, Lichtenberger!”

It had been a long time since Liselotte got to cast a high-tier inferno spell.

“*Freeze, thaw, and destroy, O raging flames of Hell. Ignite, great explosion!*”

A blindingly bright magic circle formed under the centipede’s legs, followed by a boom like fireworks going off. A pillar of fire billowed up toward the heavens.

“Gyuroooooooooon!”

I saw the centipede struggling to escape the magic circle from within the pillar. The more it moved, the stronger the flames got. There was no escaping the likes of that spell.

Liselotte had laid long, thick magic stakes that stitched the centipede’s body to the ground.

“Wh-What a terrifying spell, Sorcerer Lichtenberger.” Ulgus was stricken with fear by his comrade’s attack. I couldn’t help but agree with him.

“...Wait, it’s getting hot! We’re going to be burned to a crisp if we stay here.”

“Hey, Lichtenberger. Those flames can’t escape the magic circle, right?”

“Correct. But they won’t disappear until the target is killed.”

“In that case, all units, fall back! Run as fast as you can!” Captain Ludtink ordered.

“Kreeeh!”

Amelia crouched down and told Liselotte and me to get on her back. We followed her orders and took off into the night sky. I turned to look at Liselotte’s massive pillar of flames. It was a true inferno—resembling a natural disaster more than a spell.

Not only had the smoke bomb field been showered with poison, but now it was burning to a crisp.

“I didn’t expect it to turn into a slash-and-burn field...”

“Perhaps the flames will burn up all that poison.”

“That would certainly be nice.”

We returned to the village and kept an eye on the fire. The villagers were shocked to see flames big enough to light up the night sky.

“I-It’s the wrath of the gods!”

“We’ve incurred divine punishment because of our wrongdoings.”

…That’s Liselotte’s inferno spell, not the wrath of the gods. Once Captain Ludtink explained that it was a spell to kill the monster, the villagers calmed down and returned to their homes.

In the end, I was told that the pillar didn’t disappear until dawn, but Liselotte and I fell asleep while watching it. Thanks to Zara and Garr carrying us to the mayor’s house, we got to wake up wrapped in soft pelt blankets.

When we went to survey the area the next morning, the field had turned completely black. Captain Ludtink looked at the mayor and bowed his head.

“I’m sorry it came to this. I know your field is very important to you.”

“No, it’s all right. We couldn’t use it anyway, since it was covered in poison. Now we’re planning on abandoning that field and cultivating a new one somewhere else.”

“Is that right?”

The mayor had a depressed look on his face. I understood why—cultivating land and tilling a new field took a lot of time and energy. Losing all of it was a huge, crushing setback.

“We’ve committed a crime by planting smoke bombs…found ourselves betrayed by someone we trusted…and lost a portion of our field. This village will lose its entire reason for existence if we can’t sell the smoke bombs. It’s just one misfortune after another.” The mayor slumped his shoulders. But Amelia had words of encouragement for him.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh, kreeeh!”

I could see a question mark over the mayor’s head, so I translated her words for him. “Um, she says that the air here is pure, the starry sky is beautiful, and you have a spell that repels monsters. Your village has lots of wonderful traits, so there’s no need to be upset.”

“I…see. She’s right. We haven’t lost everything.”

They were going to set foot on a journey toward recovery.

"Sorry, but you'll probably have an inquiry commission show up about the smoke bombs too," Captain Ludtink informed him.

"That's all right. I intend to tell them everything I know and everything I've done." With that, the mayor bowed his head deeply. "Thank you all so much. You've really saved us."

"We're just doin' our job."

The captain was right. The job of the Second Expeditionary Squadron was to travel to different places and solve their problems.

Three days later, a report arrived from the inquiry commission revealing that magic ore had been discovered in the remnants of the field. It seemed the centipede had indeed been strengthened by the ore.

Liselotte also received a warning that her spell was too powerful. Although, we probably never would have defeated that centipede without her inferno in the first place. That poisonous rain shower definitely would have wiped us out completely.

I heard that Captain Ludtink responded with a strong objection, arguing that her use of the spell was justified. To our relief, the inquiry commission sided with him and deemed it a legitimate usage.

No charges were brought against the mayor and his village for growing smoke bombs. That was only natural, as they never had the slightest notion that the plant was illegal.

But it came as a shock when I learned that Vario Leffra, former director of the Magic Research Bureau, was reselling the plants for ten times the price he'd bought them at. It seemed he was also ruthless when it came to profits.

The village was going to be paid reparations from the Leffra estate for the damage they took.

Despite everything that happened, I was glad to hear that it was all being resolved without issue.



THE Second Expeditionary Squadron was granted one week off for our excellent work on the mission. Of course, we would still be

summoned in case of an emergency.

I ended up spending the first day fast asleep, as I turned out to be quite fatigued. Zara did the exact same thing.

Sir Aiskoletta, concerned about our health, made a medicinal herb soup with Charlotte that he said would give us a nutritional boost. He even tried to feed it to us straight from the spoon, still wearing that frilly apron. Secretly, I was brought to tears by how much he reminded me of my mother.

How could I suddenly miss my mother from looking at a legendary hero in a full suit of armor and an apron? It *had* to be my exhaustion messing with my head.

The medicinal herb soup made me feel a lot better.

Later on, he told me that the soup actually contained a leaf from Komerv. Komerv, having been born from the world tree, grew leaves that were full of regenerative powers. Now I understood why I felt so rejuvenated.

I lost the first day of our break to exhaustion. Zara and I spent the second day working on my dress and managed to finish the rough outline. We planned to include embroidery, sew lace to the sleeves, and add the other little details after that. I went out to the forest to pick medicinal herbs with Charlotte and Sir Aiskoletta on the third day. I didn't neglect the dress either, of course. There were only a few spots left that needed finishing touches.

I spent the fourth day preparing the medicinal herbs, cleaning the house, and making a hat for Amelia.

Until that point, it was a very fulfilling vacation.

Now it was the fifth day, and I'd received a request from Captain Ludtink to leave some time in my schedule for him. What could he possibly want? He and Marina were going to come to our house for a visit.

Zara took Amelia and Blanche to the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau for their routine check-ups. Charlotte and Sir Aiskoletta were out picking herbs with Umataro and Komerv. I watched them enter the forest, looking so much like a grandfather with his granddaughter.

After that, I was left all alone in the house.

I had three hours until the guests arrived, so I decided to bake some treats to welcome them with.

It was a good opportunity for me to bake a traditional dessert from the Fore Elf village called “shattered cookies.” We baked these cookies to be larger than the bottom of a pot and crushed them with a hammer before eating them. You could also read your fortune based on the shapes the cookies cracked into or how many pieces formed. It was a very entertaining dessert.

I started by adding room-temperature butter and sugar in a bowl, mixing them until they’d all turned white. Then I poured in milk and sugar and stirred it well until the mixture was smooth, adding in flour little by little and kneading it together. After letting it rest for an hour, I would shape it and put it in the oven for forty minutes.

I checked the color after twenty minutes of baking, then let it cook again for twenty more minutes. After forty minutes were up, they’d finally baked into the perfect color, meaning my shatter cookies were complete.

I was taking a breather when I heard an urgent banging on the front door. Such a restless knock could only belong to Captain Ludtink.

“Wh-Who’s there?”

“Me.”

It definitely sounded like him, but I wanted to be sure.

“Who is ‘me?’”

“Damn it, Risurisu! Quit messin’ around!”

Then I heard Captain Ludtink get a scolding for his harsh words.

“Crow! Watch your tongue!”

“O-Ow! You’re too quick to hit me!”

“The pain you feel is what Mell is feeling in her heart!”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Marina.”

“It’s your fault for being so rude to her!”

The soon-to-be husband and wife were practically acting out a comedy skit on my doorstep. I could tell my visitors were Captain Ludtink and Marina with that. I opened the door for them.

“Welcome, Captain Ludtink and Marina!”

“Good afternoon, Mell.”

“We haven’t seen each other in so long, Marina.”

“I know!”

With her wedding right on the horizon, Marina looked even more beautiful and mature than the last time I saw her. I could tell that there was no better beauty regimen than days full of happiness.

“You can have these, if you’d like.” Captain Ludtink was holding a crate full of golden forest apples.

“A-Aren’t golden forest apples very expensive?! Y-You’re sure we can have them?”

“Marina’s family sent a bunch. We can’t eat ’em all, so just take ’em off our hands.”

“Thank you very much. We’ll really enjoy these.” I could already smell their sour-sweet fragrance. I was excited to eat them.

“We’re sorry to barge in on you during your vacation, Mell,” Marina said.

“No, it’s all right. We have the whole week off and I was just running out of things to do anyway. Please, come inside.”

“Thank you for having us.”

Zara had rearranged our parlor a few days ago and filled it with roses. The curtains, tablecloth, and even the cushions on the sofa were all covered in rose patterns.

“Oh my goodness! What a lovely room!”

“It’s too stuffy in here.” When Captain Ludtink muttered that, Marina smacked him on the back as hard as she could. “Damn it, that hurts…!”

“It’s divine punishment for saying something rude.”

“What, are you a god now?”

“Perhaps I’m a god who exists only to judge you.”

“Not denyin’ it, eh?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at their amusing conversation. They’d always been funny, but they were perfecting their craft. It was incredible.

“Forgive him, Mell. Don’t listen to anything Crow says. He’s a pathetic little creature.”

“It’s fine. I’m perfectly aware of that.” I gave my honest response and received a glare from the captain. But then he bit his lip, unable to complain with Marina next to him.

“Still, I really love the room you’ve put together here!” Marina said.

“Thank you for saying so.”

“Where did you buy these pieces?”

“Actually, Zara made them all by hand.”

“Zara? You mean the craftsman who made my wedding veil?”

“Correct.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember hearing he lives here too.”

“Yes, he does.”

“I’d like to say hello and thank him for his help.”

“Oh, Zara is actually out of the house right now.”

“Is that so? How disappointing.”

Captain Ludtink patted his dispirited fiancée’s head. “I can make plans for us to see Zara too.”

“No, I’m sure he’s busy, so I can’t take up any of his precious time.”

Marina was such a compassionate woman. She *had* to have a big heart to marry Captain Ludtink, a man who resembled a bandit in both looks and demeanor. Maybe she really was a god after all.

I wondered if I needed to be even kinder with Captain Ludtink too. I took Marina’s hands and prayed for her divine protection.

“What the hell’re you doin’, Risurisu?”

“Nothing at all.”

I heard the sound of water boiling in the fireplace kettle, so I took it out and brewed some tea. I selected the medicinal herbs Charlotte had harvested with Sir Aiskoletta just the other day. Unlike my usual dried medicinal herb tea, these were fresh and had a rich aroma.

“Risurisu, this tea smells like a garden after ya pull all the weeds out.”

“It’s not tea made with weeds.”

The bandit was truly unfeeling down to his core. I let out a deep sigh. There *was* a bit of a grassy taste, but it turned into something very appetizing when you added lots of honey.

“It’s delicious, Mell.”

“Thank you for saying so.” I was relieved to hear Marina liked it.

“I’m curious, what is that hammer and the covered plate for?”

“Oh, these? It’s a traditional dessert in the Fore Elf village called a shatter cookie. You bake a large cookie twice to make it

extra hard, then smash it with a hammer before eating it."

"Ah, I see how it gets its name."

"Yes. You can even read your fortune by the shape and number of pieces you make."

"Goodness, that sounds like fun!" Marina eagerly volunteered to use the hammer.

"Okay, then I'll prepare it."

Bringing the hammer down on the ceramic plate was likely to shatter it along with the cookie, so I spread out a sheet and put the shatter cookie on top. Then I covered it with a cloth so it wouldn't go flying everywhere.

"All right, that should do it. Please smash the cookie as hard as you'd like."

"Here I go!" Marina raised the hammer and brought it down hard against the cookie. There was a dull thud, but she didn't seem to feel the sensation she wanted to. "Oh?"

"Let's see if it broke." I gently lifted up the cloth, but the cookie's shape remained unchanged.

"How hard's that thing anyway?" Captain Ludtink asked.

"Perhaps I didn't do it with enough force." She covered the cookie and brought the hammer down again, only to be met with yet another "thunk" sound.

"You sure ya made a cookie, not a rock, Risurisu?"

"It's a perfectly legitimate cookie, not a rock."

They switched off after that. Captain Ludtink grabbed the hammer, looked down at the shatter cookie, and swung. *Crack!* I heard the sound we were looking for. I just knew we could rely on Captain Ludtink.

"That sounded more like the cookie was pulverized to me..."

"I didn't hit it *that* hard."

Despite the assertion, I lifted the cloth and found that the cookie had been turned into tiny little pieces.

"Oh no!"

"Guess it was weaker than I thought."

Captain Ludtink had to be the only person in the whole world who would describe a cookie as "weak." *Doesn't he know any self-restraint?!*

"We can't read our fortune like this, can we?"

“No… Ah!” There were still two bite-size pieces left. I picked them up and stared at them. “These shapes represent happiness and a harmonious household. How perfect for the two of you.”

I handed them each their parts of the cookie. Captain Ludtink looked embarrassed, but Marina was eating hers in delight.

“It’s so delicious.”

“It’s so chewy.”

I wasn’t sure if Captain Ludtink’s remark was a compliment or not, but I decided to take it that way.

“But what will you do with the rest of this powdered cookie?”

“I think I’ll use it as a crust for a tart,” I said.

“What?! How do you turn a cookie into a tart crust?!”

“Are you curious?”

“Yes, extremely.”

“In that case, would you like to assist me?”

“Are you sure it’s something I can help with?” Marina asked.

“Absolutely. Please stay here and wait for us, Captain Ludtink.” I gave him Sir Aiskoletta’s beloved catalog of medicinal herbs to entertain him.

Marina and I headed to the kitchen.

Zara’s frilly apron turned out to look wonderful on Marina. I tied her long hair up with a bright green ribbon to keep it out of the way while we cooked.

“Now we’re ready to begin!”

“Y-You see, Mell, I don’t really cook…”

“It’s all right. This is very simple.”

I started out by warming some butter until it had melted, then added it to a bowl with the powdered cookie.

“Please stir them up until they’re mixed together thoroughly.”

“A-All right.”

Marina was stiffly stirring the powdered cookie together in the bowl. But the longer she did it, the better she got.

Once the butter had really soaked into the cookies, it was time to fill the tart mold.

“Please use your fist to grind the dough into it.”

“L-Like this?”

“Yes, that looks good.”

I placed tart stones over the dough before baking it.

“Why do you put stones on it?”

“It’s to stop the dough from puffing up once it’s baked.”

The tart crust would turn out lumpy if the dough expanded too much, so the stones were kept on throughout the baking process.

“All right, let’s bake it now.” In the meantime, it was time to make a filling. “Why don’t we use the golden forest apples for our tart?”

I started by peeling the skin, revealing that both the fruit and the skin of the apples were a dazzling golden color. I tried a bite and found it to be very sour, but with a satisfying crunch to the fruit. I squeezed some citrus juice onto the apples, sprinkled sugar over the top, and mixed it all together.

“Now we just need to bake the apples in butter. I’ll leave that to you, Marina, while I work on a nut cream.”

The tart crust finished baking while we were busy, so I had to remove the stones and let it cool. But Marina didn’t even realize the crust was done, as she was so busy making sure not to burn the golden forest apples on the stove. I decided not to interrupt her.

For my nut cream, I mixed butter, sugar, eggs, and nut flour together until they were nice and smooth. Then I added just a bit of fruit liqueur as a finishing touch.

“Okay, I think that should do it.”

Marina’s golden forest apples had turned a lovely golden-brown too.

“Is this right, Mell?”

“Yes, they look wonderful.”

That was when she finally spotted the finished tart crust.

“Oh, my! How did that powdered cookie turn into such a wonderful crust?!”

“The shape really came out perfect.”

“Yes, I’m so surprised.”

To be honest, I’d thought it was all over when Captain Ludtink pulverized the cookie, but we’d succeeded in bringing it back from the dead in the form of our crust. I was filled with a sense of accomplishment.

“All right, let’s continue!”

I poured the nut cream into the crust and laid the candied forest apples down in a circle on top. Then I diluted some forest

apple jam with water and slathered a thin layer over the tart, cooking it again for another three minutes.

When I took it out of the oven, a sweet scent filled the room.

“Our golden forest apple cookie tart is complete.”

“It looks absolutely delicious!”

“Yes, I’d say it was a great success.”

We returned to the parlor and found Captain Ludtink out cold. I wondered if you could call it a “talent” to fall fast asleep in someone else’s house.

“Wake up, Crow!”

Captain Ludtink jolted up when he heard Marina shout at him. “You scared me!”

“And I’m just as scared that you could fall asleep when you’re a guest in someone’s home.”

“But this book is just impossible to read.”

Well, I understood how he felt. I’d once fallen asleep reading the very same book.

“Anyway, what’d ya make with the cookie dust?”

“Just take a look!” Marina set the golden forest apple cookie tart down on the table.

“The hell? You made this with that cookie?”

“Yes, it’s like magic, isn’t it? Mell can do just about anything when it comes to cooking.”

“I guess I can’t deny that.”

I sliced up the tart and dished up plates, pairing it with a fancier black tea we kept for guests. “We made this with your generous gift of golden forest apples. Please eat up!”

Marina nervously watched as the captain took his first bite.

“Mm! What the hell?! Those sour forest apples are covered with sugar and they’re all crunchy. The crisp tart crust goes really damn well with the refreshing nut cream! I can hardly believe how good it tastes when you get it all in one bite!” He was rattling off one thought after the next. Marina sighed with relief, knowing that he was pleased. “It’s unbelievable. I was sure that cookie was a goner, but it’s been totally reborn.”

“It was so shocking to witness.”

Marina was the next one to try the tart. Once she took a bite, a blissful smile spread across her face. I could tell just from looking at her that she loved it.

Finally, I tried my first bite. “Mmm! You baked the candied apples so well, Marina!”

Captain Ludtink’s eyes went wide when he heard that. “You made the apple part?”

“Yes. I stirred it very carefully to make sure it didn’t burn.”

“Well, you did good.”

She blushed upon receiving the captain’s praise. It was an adorable scene to witness.

“That reminds me. What did you come here to discuss?” I asked.

Captain Ludtink and Marina weren’t just here to have fun. They’d visited because they had something they wanted to ask me.

“I was so satisfied, I completely forgot about that. I was about to suggest we head home.”

“Get it together, won’t ya?”

Marina suddenly sat up straight and bowed her head to me.

“We’d like to ask a favor of you, Mell!”

“What would that be?”

“You see, our wedding is right around the corner, but we’d like to give the guests a souvenir to take home with them. We may not be able to share our happiness with them, but we can at least give them a small treat, so I’d like to learn a good recipe.”

“Ah, I see.”

Captain Ludtink made his own suggestion. “Can’t we just give ’em splatter cookies like this? The guests can break ’em up and take ’em home.”

“Captain, they’re called shatter cookies, not splatter cookies. Please don’t splatter them.”

“My bad.”

Marina crossed her arms. “I suppose it would be easy for everyone to get a piece if we do shatter cookies…”

“How many guests are you expecting, by the way?”

“It’s not a very big ceremony. There should only be fifty guests or so.”

“I see.”

Marina wrinkled her brow like she was deep in thought.

“What’s the matter, Marina? You don’t look very happy.”

“No, the shatter cookies are very fun, and I imagine everyone would enjoy the fortune-telling aspect. It just seems like it could

become very hectic when the entire crowd shatters them."

"I guess so."

Shatter cookies were best eaten at lively parties with a group of friends. A simpler treat was better suited for a wedding.

"Hey, Risurisu, do you Fore Elves have any other traditional desserts that're good for weddings?"

"Let me think... Ah!"

I could think of one such dessert. It was a treat Fore Elves gave out to their neighbors after giving birth to a child.

"There's a certain nut we call the 'blessing nut.' They come from what's known as 'almond trees,' and we cover them with a syrup made from sugar. We add colors like yellow, pink, and light purple to the sugar to make the almonds cute and eye-catching. They would be perfect for an event like a wedding. What do you say?"

"I like it!"

"Then why don't we make a sample now?" I suggested.

"Is that possible?"

"Yes, I already have the ingredients on hand."

As soon as she heard that, Marina put her hand to her chest and let out a sigh.

"Um, is something wrong?"

"I thought we would have to harvest the ingredients from the top of a mountain or a rushing river or something."

"Us Fore Elves may be self-sufficient, but we don't go anywhere dangerous to obtain food."

Marina said she'd been absolutely determined to go out and harvest ingredients with me if it came to that. She even had a knife, a knapsack, and a pair of pants to change into out in their carriage.

"I told ya we wouldn't need any of that stuff," Captain Ludtink grunted.

"B-But how could I know for sure?"

I was very impressed that she came here with the intent to go harvesting. She was a young lady with guts.

"Mell, may I hear more about these 'almond' nuts?"

"Of course. They grow on almond trees and are harvested in the summer. You have to shake the trees to harvest them, as they don't drop once they're ripe. It's a difficult process. Shaking the

trees takes a lot of strength, and you never know if a bug or a snake will fall on you instead of the almonds. It's a lot harder than you might expect."

"I'm so glad they're not in season right now."

We removed the hulls, dried the seeds in the sun, and split the shells to reveal the kernels called the 'almond' inside. You could also eat them roasted.

"The nut cream in this golden apple tart is made with almonds too."

"In that case, it sounds like nobles would already be well-acquainted with the flavor."

She was right about that. Almonds were sold for relatively cheap prices in the royal capital. I'd heard that there were even regions that cultivated them en masse. Ever since I learned that, I made a vow to never go and harvest them in the forest again. I also sent my family regular shipments of almonds from the royal capital.

"Um, is Captain Ludtink going to participate in making the blessing nuts?"

"Why, of course he will! The wedding's for both of us, after all!"

I stole a glance at the captain. He looked very reluctant, but would probably go through with it for the sake of his dear fiancée. Captain Ludtink had an unexpected soft side to him.

"All right, then let's head to the kitchen."

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake a feeling of unease seeing Captain Ludtink in the kitchen. But there was a bigger problem at hand.

"U-Um, Captain Ludtink, it'd be best if you wore an apron. Do you mind?"

"Nah, that's fine."

With his approval, I handed him the apron. It was one made for men and regularly worn by both Zara and Sir Aiskoletta at home.

"What the hell is this supposed to be?!" he growled.

"I-It's an apron."

"I know that. I'm askin' what's wrong with you, given' me an apron like that."

"It's the only one I have."

“I don’t believe you. Where’s the ones for Zara and Sir Aiskoletta?!”

“They wear this one.”

“Are you kiddin’ me?”

“It’s the frilly apron that both Zara and Sir Aiskoletta wear all the time.”

“They what?!” Captain Ludtink unfolded the apron and took a look at the design. He let out another groan when he saw that the entire thing was just as frilly. “Risurisu! I can’t put somethin’ like this on.”

“But if you don’t, you might get oil or liquid splashed on your clothes. That would be bad, wouldn’t it? Can’t you just grin and bear it?”

“I won’t be grinnin’. You swear you don’t have any other aprons?”

“I swear.”

“Fine, then!” He wrinkled his brow, grit his teeth, and put the apron on with a glare. “Are ya happy now?!” He let out that desperate cry. Captain Ludtink was now wearing the frilly apron.

It was a lovely feeling, seeing a scary-faced man wearing a frilly apron—like I’d been transported to a different world. The kitchen had only become even stranger. I couldn’t help but applaud.

“What’re ya clappin’ for?!”

“I’m honoring the courage it took to accept your fate.”

“You’re gonna pay for this, Risurisu!”

He could threaten me all he wanted, but his intensity was less than half what it usually was in that apron. Besides, I knew it was an empty threat. I didn’t hold back my laughter.

“All right, shall we begin the blessing nuts?” I said.

The first step was to inspect each almond.

“We remove any nuts that are cracked, have the peel coming off, were eaten into by bugs, or that have the wrong shape.”

The treat could only be made with clean almonds that had a good shape. Captain Ludtink and Marina examined the almonds with intense focus.

Each time Captain Ludtink and his frilly apron entered my vision, I had to bite my tongue and hold my laughter in.

“Now, can I have you parch the almonds to begin?”

“Parch them? What does that mean, Mell?” Marina asked.

“It means frying them without oil. This removes any excess water and gives them a fragrant aroma.”

“I see.”

Captain Ludtink put our selection of almonds in a pot, concentrating hard on stirring them up.



“Am I doin’ this right, Risurisu?”

“Yes, you are.”

The scent of the almonds grew stronger and stronger. They’d be delicious when eaten like this with a bit of salt. My father always had those as a snack with his alcohol.

“Um, Mell, how did you make the almond cream in that tart?”

“I boiled the nuts, crushed them, and roasted them in a pan to make a fine powder. Then I added butter and milk to turn it into a cream.”

“Ah, I see.”

Powdered almonds were a bit more expensive, even in the royal capital. It was cheaper to buy my own nuts and process them how I pleased.

“Ah, you can stop parching them now.”

He spread the almonds out on a steel pan to let them cool.

“Next, we’re going to make the sugar coating.”

The almonds would be covered with that colorful layer of sugar. In the Fore Elf village, we used fruit juice to give them color. I still remember how red my hands turned from harvesting those fruits. However, they came from trees that didn’t grow near the capital city.

“What should we do without them?”

“You can buy coloring drops that make food red.”

Supposedly, it was used to make brightly colored sweets served to nobles. I was so surprised when I first saw it in a confectionery shop.

“You know how things like cakes sometimes have edible rose petals on top? Those are made with food coloring.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of that, now that you mention it. But I only know of the kind that adds color and doesn’t have any flavor.”

Food and desserts served to nobles probably prioritized appearances over flavor. This was like a whole different world to me.

“I don’t have any food coloring on hand, so we’ll have to make them all white today.”

First up was the sugar coating.

“You only need powdered sugar, egg whites, and citrus juice.”

You simply added the powdered sugar to a bowl and mixed in the egg whites, little by little. Once it was nice and thick, you

poured in the citrus juice.

Captain Ludtink stirred while Marina added the egg whites. The looks on their faces were deadly serious.

“Is the sugar coating…finished now?”

“Yes, it turned out very nice.”

Instantly, I could see the relief in their expressions.

“Now you just need to coat the almonds with it.”

They had to carefully dip each almond in the sugar, all while thinking of the blessings they wanted to send their recipients. Deboning fish was a helpful skill to have in this process. You learned how to grab just the tip of something small, which was how you needed to dunk the almonds.

“I-It’s very difficult.”

“Damn… Can’t get this right.”

They were both too stiff at first, but the more they dipped, the better they got. They sighed with relief once all the almonds were coated. But it wasn’t over yet.

“You can still see the almond inside with just one coating, so please give each of them two or three dunks.”

“Y-Yes, I see.”

“What, we’re not done?”

Most of the almonds had a solid coating within two to three dunks. They would be ready to serve once they had time to dry.

“These are now what we call ‘blessing nuts.’”

“It was harder than I expected.”

“Yeah, it’s rough.”

But Captain Ludtink and Marina both had looks of triumph on their faces.

“When should we make the ones for the actual wedding?”

“How about the mornin’ before?”

“Would you like my help?” I offered.

“We’ve already asked too much of you, Mell. I’d like the two of us to make them all on our own next time.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll be cheering you on in my heart.”

“Thank you, Mell.”

The blessing nuts had turned out excellent. I imagined the pair would make an even better batch for their wedding.

We sampled them once they dried.

“Ah, it’s so sweet, fragrant, and refreshing. These are pretty damn good.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“This is what happiness tastes like, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

Captain Ludtink seemed to be experiencing strong emotions as he ate the nuts.

“We’ll have to buy you an apron on the way home, Crow.”

“Yeah, good idea.”

“Oh, wait. Most places won’t sell aprons large enough for a man of Captain Ludtink’s size,” I pointed out.

Sir Aiskoletta had once ventured into town for an apron, only to return and sadly inform us that they didn’t make aprons to be worn over full suits of armor. That was why he had no choice but to wear the one Zara made.

“Ah, that’s right. I have an apron I was going to give Zara, but I’ll give it to you instead,” I said.

“No, that’s too much to ask.”

“But I was going to remake it anyway. I didn’t like how parts of it looked.”

I went to my room and pulled the apron out of the back of my drawer. Then I raced back to the kitchen and presented it to Captain Ludtink.

“Here you go.”

“I-It’s so…!”

I’d made it with fabric that had an adorable little cat right on the chest.

“Oh my, Crow. Isn’t that lovely? I think it will look great on you.”

“Are you outta your mind?! It’s for a little kid!”

“Don’t complain. You should be grateful for the present. You don’t want oil splattering on your clothes, do you, now?”

“But we didn’t even use any oil for that stuff.”

“Hm? Did you say something?!”

“No, nothin’ at all.”

Even Captain Ludtink was no match for Marina. In the end, he agreed to take the cat apron home with him.

“Thank you so much, Mell.”

“Of course. I’m just glad I could help you.”

Captain Ludtink bowed his head and thanked me too. “Sorry for all the trouble on your day off, Risurisu. You really saved us.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

I sent them off with a smile, silently praying for their happy future together.



CAPTAIN Ludtink and Marina’s wedding arrived only a few days later.

Not only had Zara managed to prepare another dress for Charlotte, but he even brought in a professional to help us get dressed and do our makeup.

That was why we spent the morning overwhelmed with preparations.

The dress the two of us made together was like something straight out of a dream. The canary yellow fabric seemed to sparkle when it caught the light coming in through the windows. It was absolutely beautiful. I could have stared at it forever and ever.

But there was no time for that. We needed to get Charlotte dressed and do our makeup too.

I was extremely nervous to put on something that only a princess would normally wear. The fabric felt soft against my skin, and I let out a warm sigh. I was so incredibly happy. I had once been a mere Fore Elf rejected by her fiancé and with nowhere else to go. But there I was now, clad in an utterly stunning dress.

It was a dress that belonged to me and me alone. I’d put in so much hard work to have it. I was in such high spirits that I had to resist the urge to ask the worker—who was tying the bow on my back—if they thought I looked amazing too.

They finished by applying my makeup and weaving my hair. The final touch was a canary yellow bow, the same color as my dress.

“You’re all finished now. What do you think?”

“Wow!”

It was like a different person staring back at me in the mirror. Maybe it was immodest to say, but I looked so beautiful. No one could ever call me a country bumpkin elf like this.

I was so happy, I almost started to cry. But I couldn't ruin my makeup. I did my best to hold my tears back.

There used to be a time when I thought very little of myself. I had no magical energy. My family was poor. I was ugly. Those were the only things that defined my worth as a person. But then I came to the royal capital and learned just how small a world I'd spent my life in.

I couldn't use magic, but I was capable of other work instead.

I found people who helped me and people I could help too.

I was able to give them support when they needed it.

I'd only *thought* there was nothing in life I could do, when really, I could do it all. I met people who liked me for who I was. I wasn't rich, but people still wanted to be around me.

I was so grateful. Just thinking about it made my heart ache.

I was going to stop putting myself down from here on out. If I didn't, it would be like disavowing all the people in my life who cared for me.

It was wrong to deny my worth as a person. Sharing those negative feelings with others might have made me feel like I was forgiven, granting me a brief sense of relief. But the pain from those words would remain, leaving me with lifelong scars.

I still had many years left in my life, so I wanted to use them to take care of myself and cherish the people who loved and stayed with me.

All sorts of emotions had started to well up inside me at once. I took a deep breath to calm myself.

I opened the window to breathe in some fresh air when I spotted Zara dressed in his knight's formal wear. Today he had on a braided wig that went down to his chest. The tip of the braid had a little bow tied around it too.

This was no time to be distracted by how handsome he looked. I lifted my dress over my feet and rushed outside to see him.

"Zaraaa!"

"Melly?!"

I startled him with my sudden arrival. Sir Aiskoletta, who'd been removing weeds in a corner of the garden, flinched as well.

"U-Um, I've finally put on the dress. It's so beautiful and adorable… O-Oh, but it's not just the dress! You made me just as

beautiful!” My voice was coming out so shrill. Normally, I would never be caught dead saying something like that.

“Yes, you’re beautiful, Melly.” Zara smiled warmly at me.

I knew that it was finally time to tell him—tell him about the feelings I’d been keeping buried deep inside my heart. Revealing my truest emotions was incredibly embarrassing. But I felt like this was my only chance.

Sir Aiskoletta was right there in the corner of my vision, but I couldn’t let that stop me now. If anything, a once-in-a-lifetime confession was the perfect time to have a great hero watching over me.

The sun was out. The weather was warm, even though it was the middle of winter. It was a special day. I mustered up an entire lifetime’s worth of courage to tell him my most honest feelings.

“I love you, Zara!”

“Huh?!”

Zara looked downright shocked. Sir Aiskoletta, sensing what was about to happen, had been on his way out of the garden too. But he was too late. He dropped his shovel on the brick path with a loud clang.

Sir Aiskoletta’s panicked interruption actually helped me calm down a bit.

I sorted out my feelings and expressed them all to Zara, one by one. “I’m sorry. I’ll be very embarrassed if I’m wrong, but I’ve always…felt like you might actually love me. I just couldn’t tell…if you loved me like a friend, like a family member, or if it was something special, like a romantic love. I was never able to figure it out.”

I was just a puny little elf. I was certain that a beautiful, talented knight like Zara would never have romantic feelings for me. I’d been a coward all this time. I thought it was wrong to confess my feelings to him unless he felt the same about me.

“But today, I decided it was more important to tell you my honest feelings. You’re a kind, gentle person who cherishes the same things that I do. I love you, Zara.”

I managed to get it all out, although my heart still felt like it was going to explode in my chest. I had no regrets. In fact, I felt relieved.

“Thank you, Melly.” Zara squeezed my hand and bowed his head. “I think you’re an adorable, hardworking girl who always manages to find a way to my heart. I love you too, Melly!”

As soon as I heard him say that, a flood of tears erupted from my eyes, ruining the nice makeup I had on.

I’m so glad I was brave. We felt the same way after all.

I was unbelievably happy that the two of us were able to tell each other how we felt. It was too much happiness to take, and my tears just wouldn’t stop. Even Zara was shedding beautiful tears of his own.

“S-Sorry, it’s so pathetic of me, huh? It’s like my feelings all turned straight to tears.”

“M-Me too.”

We were probably both going to show up to Captain Ludtink’s wedding with red eyes.

“Let’s just say that Captain Ludtink’s wedding made us emotional.”

“Yeah, I’m going with that.”

Finally, I called out to Sir Aiskoletta, who was clutching sticks in an attempt to blend in with the forest trees.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Sir Aiskoletta.”

“N-No, I think I’m the one who interrupted you two. Uh, what should I say? I’m wishing you both the best.”

“Thank you very much.”

He made a swift exit for real after that. Zara and I were left there, smiling at each other. It had all happened so quickly, but the moment was one of immense happiness.



EVERYONE attended the wedding in their very best outfits.

Vice Captain Velrey was almost frighteningly handsome in her white formal wear. The women in Captain Ludtink and Marina’s families squealed when they saw her.

Garr had put product in his usually un-styled fur, giving him a very impressive, serious look. Sly sat on his shoulder with a cute little bow on her head. They were both a well-matched pair with Fredrica, Garr’s fiancée, who joined them as a guest.

Liselotte arrived with Lord Lichtenberger, who was clutching a mountain cat plushie as if to spread an interest in mythical beasts throughout the wedding. Although, with the stern expression on his face and a stuffed animal in his arms, the other guests seemed to be avoiding him. *Um…I think your propaganda technique might be failing*, I warned him silently.

Even Album showed up with a white bowtie. It was probably his attempt to dress up, but the bowtie was easy to miss when the rest of his fur was white too. Amelia, prioritizing cuteness above all else, had chosen a pink ribbon for the occasion. The adorable griffin drew the eyes of all the wedding guests.

Sir Aiskoletta made an appearance too. The majority of the guests didn't recognize the hero, so they merely stared at the strange man in the suit of armor with a radish on his shoulder. But Sir Aiskoletta didn't seem to mind one bit. He was simply enjoying the atmosphere of the wedding.

Charlotte, the adorable little girl that she was, turned out to be very popular amongst the old men and women. She probably reminded them of their grandchildren. Although, she was overwhelmed by the attention and hid behind Ulgus, who didn't seem to mind helping her.

The wedding had really brought everyone into one place.

Then it was time for the ceremony to begin.

The chapel was filled with the elegant sound of music as Marina, the bride, made her entrance. She walked toward the altar where Captain Ludtink was waiting for her.

Marina looked gorgeous in her wedding dress. The rose veil Zara made for her was the perfect touch.

I was so moved, I shed a few tears.

The couple stood next to each other and began their vows. They swore to cherish each other for better or worse, in sickness and in health, and to share all the joy and the hardships they endured in their life together.

Once they said the words "I do," it was time for their kiss.

Captain Ludtink, apparently feeling shy, placed his lips on Marina's forehead. But she wasn't satisfied with that. She stood up on her tippy toes and kissed Captain Ludtink on the lips.

He had a look of total disbelief on his face.

The audience broke out into applause for the well-matched couple.

Once the ceremony was finished, it was time to have the reception, which took place in the garden at Captain Ludtink's parents' home. I knew they lived in the noble district of the royal capital, but once I was standing in front of the mansion, I found myself just about lost for words.

"I-Is this really…where Captain Ludtink grew up?!"

My jaw was hanging open. I mentally apologized for all the times I'd thought of him as a bandit up until now. Next to me was Ulgus, frozen in the exact same position as me.

"Medic Risurisu…I guess Captain Ludtink really *is* a nobleman after all."

"Th-That's how it seems."

Some people had very misleading appearances.

There was a buffet set up for the party in the main hall. Captain Ludtink and Marina were surrounded by the guests, so I doubted I'd be able to approach them for a while.

Everyone split up to do different things after that.

Charlotte, Ulgus, and Sir Aiskoletta headed off to the dessert table. The three of them made for a simpleminded group. Since they were getting married in the spring, Garr and Fredrica were surrounded by their own acquaintances to wish them well. Vice Captain Velrey was swarmed by a group of female guests. She was just as popular as always, even at a wedding reception.

I decided to stick with Zara.

The hall was full of dashing gentlemen and beautiful young ladies, so dazzling that they were blinding. It was like being inside of a storybook. Yet Zara still managed to stand out in such a crowd. His looks were more than enough to make him fit in, even in high society.

On any other day, I probably would have felt disheartened.

But today was different. I was wearing the dress Zara and I had worked so hard on together, and I even had my hair and makeup done all nicely. I imagined I looked like someone straight out of a story too. I was even drawing a few glances from the other guests. Although, most of them were probably due to me being a Fore Elf.

“Hey, Melly. There’s food over there. Why don’t we go try some?”

“Okay!”

The food table was much less crowded—probably because guests typically came to these events to socialize, not to have a meal.

A big hunk of meat was sitting squarely in the center of a silver tray. I asked the waiter standing nearby to cut me a piece. It was cooked to a deep brown on the outside, but the inside was still a little pink. I knew this must be high-quality meat. I watched the juices seep out when I stuck my knife into it.

The thinly sliced meat was topped with a bright red sauce. It looked incredibly appetizing. I was even given a serving of steamed potatoes on the side. I piled some of the other foods onto my plate as well. We went to the next room over, where a space to eat was set up. It was a much calmer environment that way.

“It looks delicious. Let’s give it a try.”

“Agreed!”

We said a prayer to the gods before digging in.

I could hardly believe how tender the meat was. I was able to shred it with my knife by applying only the tiniest amount of force. Then I dipped my bite in the sauce and stuck it in my mouth. There were no words to describe what I was tasting.

“Aaaaah…”

I couldn’t even contain my sigh—it was just that good. I shouldn’t have underestimated food made for nobles. They were working on an entirely different level.

I’d been worried about getting sauce on my dress at first, but once I tasted that meat, it was the absolute last thing on my mind.

“Ah, there you are!”

I heard Marina call out to me. She was wearing a bright orange dress for the reception, while Captain Ludtink was dressed in a tailcoat.

“I’ve come to share our happiness.” Marina was holding a basket filled with colorful blessing nuts. It looked like they were able to make a good batch on their own.

“Share your happiness?”

Zara was confused, so I explained it to him.

“This is a dessert we give out to our neighbors in the Fore Elf village during happy occasions. They’re said to carry blessings.”

“Oh wow, I see.”

“Please try one.”

“Sure, thanks.”

“Thank you.”

The almond was covered in a shiny coat of sugar. It was crunchy, sweet, and savory all at once.

“It’s delicious.”

“Yeah, I’ve never even tried this before, but I really like it.”

“I’m so relieved!” Marina explained that they planned to cook them all in one day, but her mother scolded her, telling them not to rush so much. “So, we started two days ago and kept messing up. We only managed to finish after midnight last night.”

“It sounds like you really cut it close.”

“Yes, I never expected it. Crow here even said we weren’t going to make it in time, so we should call for you in the middle of the night!”

“Captain Ludtink…”

“What choice did we have? It’s not like we know anything about cookin’.”

It seemed the spiky blessing nuts in the basket were something Captain Ludtink had made in a hurry. None of the other guests were touching those ones.

“I’m actually curious how you managed to make them so spiky.”

“Strange, isn’t it? All he did was dip the almonds in sugar like normal, so there was no reason for it. I don’t understand it at all.”

“How mysterious.”

“Y-You guys are gonna pay for this!”

Zara and I burst out laughing, hearing Captain Ludtink’s favorite line come out at a time like this.

“Thank you, Mell.”

“What for, Marina?”

“For teaching us about these blessing nuts.”

She told me that the guests were thrilled with the treat. They were shocked to hear the couple themselves had made them, but that only made everyone more eager to try some.

“They don’t look as nice as the ones you made, but we put our heart into them by doing the cooking ourselves. We wouldn’t have been able to see so many smiles if we simply gave our guests something we purchased. It was hard work to get it right, but a sense of accomplishment has filled my heart.”

I was just glad to hear she was satisfied. I was also proud that a traditional Fore Elf treat had put smiles on the faces of these city residents.

“Mell, Ahto, I hope you enjoy the reception.”

“Thank you, we will.”

After that, the lovely reception went by in the blink of an eye.

Captain Ludtink prepared a carriage to take us to our home outside of the city. It seemed that Amelia and Charlotte had already left with Sir Aiskoletta. I was very thankful to the great hero for looking after them.

Our carriage traveled through the silent streets of the royal capital. I could barely even see Zara inside the dim passenger car. Yet, despite the darkness, I felt strangely calm. I didn’t even want to turn on the magic stone lantern.

I let the events of the day play again in my mind. It had all felt like a dream.

“The wedding was so lovely, don’t you think, Zara?”

“Yes, it was.”

Captain Ludtink and Marina had looked so happy. It felt like an even more joyous occasion having known them since they were first engaged.

“At first, I was a little sad. I thought that Captain Ludtink might turn into a different person once he was married…”

“But it doesn’t look like he’s gonna change a lick.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

I knew we could count on Captain Ludtink to keep being the same bandit leader we were used to.

“Husbands and wives stay together for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, and they share both their joys and their hardships,” Zara repeated the wedding vows to himself.

“I think they’re lovely vows,” I said. “If you’ve struggled with worries all on your own, it’s wonderful to be able to share them with someone once you’re married.”

This concept didn’t exist in Fore Elf culture. To us, weddings were a means to have children with magical energy and live a more abundant life. Women and the children they gave birth to were seen as ways of increasing the village’s workforce.

“I always thought so too, but when you really think about it, doesn’t it sound tough for two people to share everything with each other? Everyone’s emotions fluctuate in different ways. I’ve kinda started worrying that it might be too much for Crow and Marina.”

He was right—different people would see it as either a positive or a negative thing. If you were someone with a lot of concerns, sharing them with a generally unconcerned person wouldn’t be of much help, as they wouldn’t understand what you were going through.

“Most Fore Elves are given a marriage partner from the moment of their birth. But here in the royal capital, you marry the person you love. So wouldn’t it be best to marry someone you can picture sharing everything with, even a life together?”

I’d heard that some people got married early, when their feelings were at their peak, only to divorce a few years later. That probably happened because both parties weren’t on the same page with their emotions.

“I’m sure that even the royal capital has plenty of couples whose feelings and values grow apart from each other. After all, they’re different people who grew up in different environments until one day, they suddenly become a family. It’s not difficult to sympathize with. But everyone in this world makes compromises in their life. What’s most important is to forgive your partner without placing too much pressure on them. I believe that message was hidden amongst the vows they made today.”

“Forgive them…?”

“The more you forgive them, the more they’ll forgive you in return. You don’t have to force yourself to be on the same page as your partner, nor to understand everything about them. You just have to keep forgiving each other for the rest of your lives. I think that’s what it means to be husband and wife.”

“Now that I see what you mean, I totally agree. You’re amazing, Melly.”

“It’s just my own interpretation of those vows, since we don’t have them in the Fore Elf village.”

“No, it’s more than that. I think Crow and Marina are going to be able to forgive each other for the rest of their lives too.”

“Is that so? How lovely.”

The conversation stopped at that point, leaving us with nothing but the sounds of the rocking carriage. I wondered if I’d said too much. Being unable to see Zara’s face in the darkness must have made me extra talkative. But I didn’t regret it either. There was no need with someone like Zara.

Through the windows, there was nothing but the pitch-black forest outside. We would be home in no time.

“Melly…”

“Yes?”

“Do you think you’d be able to forgive me too?”

I didn’t know what he meant at first, but then I realized it went back to what we’d just discussed. That was a question I could answer right away.

“Yes, I think I would.”

“Thanks, Melly.”

I couldn’t see it in the darkness, but I could tell that Zara was smiling at me.

Captain Ludtink and Marina’s wedding had finally come and passed. I felt like I’d gained so much over the past few days as well.

In any case, may the two of them be happy together!

Chapter 5: The Snowy Mountain and White Snowberries

WINTER was already on the verge of winding down. I could sense spring approaching even when the days were still cold.

Garr's wedding was getting closer and closer, but I learned something shocking. Garr wasn't going to have a big wedding with lots of guests like Captain Ludtink. Instead, he and Fredrica were inviting close friends to their new house for an informal party.

Fredrica's older sister had broken up with the man she was planning to marry last year. Their family had a custom where the younger sister was never supposed to be married first, but Garr and Fredrica had been planning their wedding for a while now. Fredrica's parents said they didn't mind if she had a ceremony, but Fredrica decided against it, as she didn't want to bring shame to her older sister.

It all sounded like a disaster to me, but Garr and Fredrica weren't bothered in the slightest. They explained that receiving so much attention during a wedding ceremony sounded embarrassing to them, so this worked out perfectly.

Well, it wasn't as if everyone in the world actually *wanted* a full wedding. There were many people who didn't care to have others fussing over them.

That's why they decided to gather people for a lively party if they weren't going to have a wedding ceremony.

Zara, Ulgus, and I were already planning on cooking them things with special ingredients to celebrate.



ONCE again, it was time to set out on an expedition.

This time we would be exterminating a bipedal mushroom monster that kept appearing near the royal capital. According to the Monster Research Bureau, its features didn't correspond to

any known monster and was probably part of an undiscovered species. It moved alone, not in a pack, and attacked travelers and passing traders. It wasn't a powerful fighter, but it liked to steal belongings and take off running. Reports of its thievery just kept piling up.

We were given an illustration made based off the victims' testimony. The monster seemed to have a brown cap, white stem, and limbs sticking out of it.

"Hey, Medic Risurisu, don't you think this monster looks tasty?" Ulgus murmured to me when he saw the drawing.

"Yes, I agree."

Mushroom monsters were usually scarier-looking colors like red or blue. But the one invading the area around the royal capital looked exactly like the delicious, edible kind.

I had to speak up before I accidentally drooled over a monster. "Today I've brought some meat on the bone that I marinated in sauce! I'll grill it up for lunch, so please do your best, everyone."

I made sure to emphasize that today's lunch was meat, not mushrooms. Everyone's faces seemed to change when they heard the word "meat." Even Ulgus looked deadly serious.

Before I could laugh, I felt someone tapping on my boot. It was Album.

"*Hey, Pancake Girl, is there any meat for little ol' Album?*"

"Yes, there is."

Album got the exact same serious look on his face. This time, I couldn't contain my laughter.

Captain Ludtink gave us a warning before we departed. "Don't let your guard down just because this mushroom monster can be killed with your bare hands, got it?"

The mushroom monster was said to be intelligent. It hadn't shown itself to the other expeditionary squadron who attempted to exterminate it a few days earlier, meaning it probably selected targets based off their appearances.

That was why we would be disguising ourselves with the clothes of different occupations instead of going in our knight's uniforms.

Captain Ludtink was wearing a worn-out top and wrinkled pants. He kept his sacred sword, Dumortierite, wrapped in cloth

on his back. He looked exactly like...no, there was no need to spell it out.

The captain even had backstories picked out for us.

“I’m supposed to be a young man who grew up in the countryside but longed to see the royal capital. On his way here he got attacked by bandits, had his stuff torn away from him, and only managed to get near the capital by the skin of his teeth.”

Everyone listened to this silently until Liselotte made an unnecessary remark. “You mean that’s not a bandit costume?”

I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing. But I wasn’t in danger, since everyone else did the same.

“Damn...you all...!”

We didn’t have much time, so Vice Captain Velrey revealed her outfit next. She wore a beret with a feather, a cute outfit with frills on her sleeves, and was holding a lyre. Her sacred twin blades, Phenakite, were packed in her bag.

“Velrey’s a traveling bard and a real lady-killer.”

A lady-killer? What kind of backstory is that?

Still, she made such an attractive bard, almost like she was a stage actress or something. The vice captain had a pained look on her face.

Garr was wearing pointy cat ears and a tattered cloak. Sly had transformed into the shape of a rope from which Staurolite was dangling. He was supposed to be a relaxed cat beastfolk who traveled from place to place to go fishing. His dog-like face didn’t look like any sort of cat to me, but maybe it wasn’t an issue, as he only needed to trick a monster, after all. It was his overall presence that mattered most.

“Garr’s a fickle, lazy cat who does as he pleases. It’s the exact opposite of a hardworkin’ guy like Garr, but he’ll just have to put on a good performance.”

Zara was cross-dressing when he appeared. He wore a long skirt and a wig tied up into a ponytail. His messy hair and the sad look in his downcast eyes made him look strangely sensual.

“Zara’s playin’ a widow. It’s weird how well it fits him, even though he’s a man!” Captain Ludtink sounded strangely boastful. Well, it *did* look shockingly good on him.

Even Zara was excited about his own disguise. His sacred ax, Rhodochrosite, was too large and would be spotted by any

monster, so he didn't keep it on him. Instead, he stashed a knife inside the handkerchief he was holding. Surely, most widows weren't nearly as frightening.

Ulgus wore short sleeves, shorts, and a straw hat. He was holding both a butterfly net and an insect cage. Garr was keeping Ulgus's sacred bow, Serpentine, in his knapsack.

"Ulgus' backstory is that he's a kid."

"Why's mine the only bad one, Captain?"

"Dontcha worry, Ulgus. They're all just as bad."

"I-I guess you're right." Ulgus looked at all of us like we were pitiful creatures.

Liselotte was clad in a dress—the only member whose eyes were full of light. For some reason, she was also holding a whip. When I looked closer, I realized her sacred staff, Orpiment, had the whip tied around it.

I was shocked to see a sacred weapon being used as an accessory for a disguise. What would Sir Aiskoletta say if he witnessed such a thing?

Actually…knowing him, he'd probably just say, "I never thought of using it like that!"

As for my sacred pole, Petalite, it was determined the weapon would be unnecessary on this mission. Instead, it was spending another day as a towel-drying rack at the barracks.

I'd been forced to wear a tattered dress and a collar with chains attached. I wanted to scream and ask why it had to come to this.

"Risurisu's an elf slave again, and Lichtenberger's the new money noblewoman who bought her!"

"This is horrible."

"What a rude backstory you've given me."

"Kreh, kreh?"

Amelia volunteered to play the mythical beast who was also purchased by the new money noblewoman, but there was no need for anyone other than Liselotte and I to get the worst roles. She would have to wait until next time… *Not that I want to be an elf slave for a third time.*

Album had also been tied up with rope. He was dangling from Liselotte's belt.

"What's Album's disguise, Captain Ludtink?"

I wasn't even sure if "disguise" was the right word for it.

"Album's a trained weasel that was given to her as a bonus for winnin' the elf."

Album had silently accepted his fate. It was probably because I said we were having meat for lunch.

Honestly, all of this was terrible. We'd gone in disguises before, but this was the worst batch of them all.

"There really weren't any other options?"

"I didn't come up with this stuff. It's from the Covert Squadron, so go and complain to those guys, not me. C'mon, we're wastin' time! Let's get a move on!"

Amelia would stay home with Charlotte this time so that the monster wasn't scared of her.

We took to our mission in our various disguises. The looks from the other knights were piercing as we exited out the back, but we had to carry ourselves unashamedly. We weren't doing this because we wanted to, after all. It was all for the mission.

The Second Expeditionary Squadron headed to the scene on foot.

I was instructed to only use feeble and extreme language—not that it was going to be very easy for me.

"*I-I'm hungry...!*"

Captain Ludtink encouraged Album by telling him to just keep going.

Liselotte's face suddenly changed. She looked at me with cold eyes and shouted. "Hey! Quit walking so fast!"

"Huh?!"

"Don't 'huh' me, slave!"

I finally realized that this was just a realistic performance. Liselotte had become immersed in her role.

I had no choice but to say a line too.

"W-Waaah, waaah, I wanna go hooome...!"



I tried my hand at a fake cry. I thought it sounded good, but Captain Ludtink muttered under his breath.

“You suck at actin’. How old’s this elf slave supposed to be anyway?”

It was a good question, and Ulgus burst out laughing. They managed to hold it in like the professionals they were. Although, I didn’t know what kind of “professional” that made them.

But the captain was right. Nineteen-year-old girls didn’t cry going “waaah, waaah.”

How am I supposed to change my character now?

“I’m a nine-year-old elf slave…who misses her family… Waaah, waaah.”

“Don’t say your backstory out loud! Show it with your actin’! And don’t just shave off ten years! You can’t call yourself ‘elf slave’ either!”

I was given even more instructions from Captain Ludtink. Finally, the others couldn’t hold it in anymore and burst out laughing too.

“Just don’t talk anymore, Risurisu. Look at the ground no matter what Lichtenberger says to ya. That’ll look much more realistic.”

“…Okay.”

It seemed I had absolutely no talent for acting.

Our group of shady characters all gave different performances.

Garr was feeding jerky to Album while Ulgus tried to catch the rare butterfly he spotted. Surprisingly, Vice Captain Velrey could play the lyre pretty well and was showing off her talents as a traveling bard. Captain Ludtink was muttering about monsters with the scariness of a bandit.

Zara, the widow, was constantly listless. He told me that part wasn’t really an act, since he didn’t get enough sleep last night.

“Captain Ludtink…how long do we keep this up?”

“Until the mushroom monster shows its face!”

I prayed that this would all be over as soon as possible, but the gods didn’t grant my wish. It was time for lunch, so we set up alongside a lake and began to prepare. I grilled up the meat I promised everyone.

“*Meeeeat, meeeeat, meeeat!*”

Album was singing to himself as he gathered sticks and threw them in the fire.

I placed a wire grill over the flames and lined up pieces of meat I'd marinated in sauce.

"*Aaaaah, it smells so yummy!*"

I picked Album up and set him a few feet away before we ended up with grilled Album for lunch. The meat soaked in sauce would burn easily on the grill, so I flipped each piece over and over again.

"Okay, that should do it!"

They were a nice brown color now, meaning my "sauce-grilled meat on the bone" was complete.

"Lunch is ready, everyone!"

Ulgus raced to be first, seeming eager to eat. His appearance and actions were both equally childish today. The others all gathered around too.

Captain Ludtink's sharp eyes spotted that this was a nicer lunch than usual. "What's with this meat, Risurisu?"

"Oh, um, I wanted to try a new recipe for lunch, but then we got our orders to leave."

"I see."

I sighed with relief when he didn't question me any further. I actually planned to serve this dish at Garr and Fredrica's party. But I never expected us to go on an expedition the day I brought it in for taste testing. My luck was terrible.

"All right, let's eat."

It was delicious when bitten into straight off the bone, but I decided to use a knife so I didn't get sauce on my clothes.

The first person to react was Ulgus—the one who'd been most excited to have meat for lunch. "Wow, I can't believe how tender this is. The sauce turned nice and crispy on the grill and made the whole thing extra savory. It's really good!"

Album held the bone with his front paws and took big bites off it. "*Aaaah, nothing's better than meat after a hard day's work!*"

He'd done his best to immerse himself in his role, so his food probably tasted even better.

Everyone was pleased with the recipe. Now I knew it was likely to be a hit at the party too.

After our break, we went back to tracking the mushroom monster.

As we trudged along, I picked up a sound like something was pushing through the bushes. Garr's ears perked up too. I could hear a shrill cry of "Mush, mush!" from far away.

"Something is approaching, Captain Ludtink. I hear a strange voice, so it's probably a monster."

"Look who finally decided to show up. All units, prepare for battle!"

Everyone managed to hide their weapons just in time for the monster to jump out at us.

"Mush, mush!"

It turned out to be a gigantic mushroom monster as tall as Ulgus was.

"What the hell? I've never seen— What're ya doin', Garr?"

When the giant mushroom tried to flee, Garr tossed Sly at it. She took the shape of a rope and bound the monster up.

"Argh!"

"Argh?"

That was when I spotted what looked like buttons on the mushroom's back. There were gaps between them where I could make out bare skin.

"Um... Are you...a person?"

Captain Ludtink kicked the giant mushroom.

"O-Ow!"

"Yeah, it's some guy."

Apparently, he was naked under that costume.

Everyone gazed off into the distance. The monster we'd been searching for was actually a perverted thief in a mushroom costume.

We quickly apprehended him and brought him back to headquarters.

Later on, the area around the woods was searched, revealing the thief's secret hideout and the stolen loot within. Most of the items were untouched and could be returned to his victims.

Still, it was an outrageous case where a person had dressed up like a terrifying monster to steal from people.

I was just glad that it all got resolved in the end.



WE had the day off, so our small group held a meeting about what food to bring to Garr and Fredrica's party.

Zara, Ulgus, Charlotte, Sir Aiskoletta, and I were working out a plan.

The party was to be held at Garr and Fredrica's new house, so they would probably be serving food as well. There was no need for us to bring a huge amount. Instead, we wanted to carefully select a lineup of special dishes.

"I think we should also bring things like fruit and nuts that will keep for a while. That way, if they run out of food, we can cook something else with those ingredients."

Sir Aiskoletta was taking fierce notes every single time I spoke, for whatever reason. It wasn't as if I was saying anything useful or things that needed to be memorized.

"If we're looking for something special, I just *adored* that grilled meat with sauce you made on our last expedition."

Ulgus was nodding at Zara's suggestion.

"I'm jealous. I wanted to try too."

"I'll make it for you some other time, Charlotte."

"Yippee!"

I heard another, deeper "yippee." It came from Sir Aiskoletta. He was such a rascal. He'd started saying innocent things like that ever since he met Charlotte.



“Aw, I’m so jealous. I wish I could be a kid at Medic Risurisu’s house, too.”

“I don’t remember having any child as big as you,” I said, but I also promised Ulgus I’d bring him leftovers the next day. “We can make grilled meat on the bone with sauce, but what else?”

“Fish!”

Charlotte’s tail and ears were sticking up straight. “I like butterfly tuna!”

A fancy butterfly tuna dish sounded sort of perfect for a celebratory occasion.

“But that would put us a little over our budget.”

“Really? How sad.”

Once he saw Charlotte slump down, Sir Aiskoletta raised his hand.

“If it’s butterfly tuna you want, then I shall capture some for you.”

“What? You know how to fish, Sir Aiskoletta?”

“Absolutely not. But nothing in this world is impossible for the likes of me!”

Yes, he was still a great hero, all right. He boasted that he could do *literally anything*.

“Okay, then why don’t we make butterfly tuna cutlets?”

As soon as we settled on that, Charlotte broke out into a big grin. Sir Aiskoletta took note of it and nodded, satisfied. They were exactly like a grandpa and granddaughter after spending so much time together.

“We have grilled meat with sauce on the bone and butterfly tuna cutlets. Now we need something sweet for dessert. What does everyone think?” I prompted.

“How about we make a big cake for them too?”

“That sounds great!”

I really wanted to make the couple a three-tiered cake topped with sweet strawberries. But there was just one problem.

“No one sells strawberries or raspberries at this time of year.”

It was too bad. If the party was just one month later, raspberries would have been in season.

But then Sir Aiskoletta raised his hand and made another suggestion. “Perhaps you could procure snowberries.”

“Snowberries? I’ve never heard of those.”

He explained that these were pure white strawberries that grew on snowy mountains, describing them as shockingly sweet and delicious. “They grow on a certain mountain in my territory. I only ever saw them long ago and do not know where they might be lurking now. Would you still like to go out in search of them?”

“Y-Yes, I would!”

“I’ll tag along too.”

“I’d like to join.”

“I wanna go too, but will I slow everyone down?”

“Don’t worry, Charlotte. You have good stamina and better reflexes than me.”

“Then I wanna come!”

We all decided to go out on a snowberry hunt for Garr and Fredrica’s sake…but that was when an unexpected member joined our ranks.

“*Don’t forget little ol’ Album!*”

I didn’t even realize he was at home with us. He was peeking around a corner, trying to join us in our plans. But Album *did* have a talent for finding food. He could probably help us hunt for snowberries.

“Then shall we depart in an hour’s time?”

“Okay!”

We needed to dress warmly since our destination was a snowy mountain.

“Ah, what should I do about that?” Ulgus asked.

“I’ll lend you my overcoat, June,” Zara offered.

“Wow, thank you! But I feel like the bottom will drag on the ground if I wear yours, Ahto.”

“It’s no biggie. I don’t mind if you drag it a little.”

“Ah, you don’t?”

I smiled and watched Ulgus and Zara leave, then helped Charlotte prepare too. It was her first time going to a place where monsters might appear.

“Why don’t you wear the thick leather coat you bought recently, Charlotte?”

“Uh-huh, I will.”

I also gave her a knife and rope to protect herself. I didn’t forget to pack nuts and biscuits either, just in case she got separated from us.

“Now you just need a scarf…” Since Album was nearby, I grabbed him and draped him around Charlotte’s neck.

“Wow! Album is soooo warm!”

“*Of course I’m warm!*”

Charlotte was ready for the mountain now, so next up was Amelia.

“Amelia, we’re going to head to a snowy mountain and harvest snowberries. I’ll get you a scarf and a cape since it will be cold.”

“Kreh!”

I wrapped the scarf I’d spent three whole months making around her neck. Amelia lifted her wings so that I could put on her cape too. Then I dressed her in the special griffin boots sent over by the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau so her paws wouldn’t get cold.

“That should do it for Amelia.”

Finally, I changed clothes and put on my warmest coat too. I also grabbed the scarf I’d spent a full week knitting. Then I packed a bag with food and gave it to Amelia to carry. Our hour of preparations was over very quickly.

When we regrouped in the garden, everyone was dressed for the peak of winter. Of course, Sir Aiskoletta alone was wearing his suit of armor. He’d simply added a fluffy cape for the occasion.

“Shall we set out?”

A magic circle appeared at our feet—a teleportation spell. The text of the spell glowed slightly and I felt my body float upwards.

“Whoa!”

I was flapping my limbs in the air until Zara grabbed my arm and pulled me close to him.

“Look after Charlotte, June.”

“Ah, right.”

Right when Zara said that, the teleportation spell activated. The scene in front of us switched out in the blink of an eye.

The feeling of suspension disappeared as we landed on the ground.

“Wow!”

A strong gust of wind swiftly knocked me over, sending me tumbling on top of Zara. At least we only crashed into a soft pile of snow.

“You all right, Melly?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Are you?”

“Totally.”

Charlotte, Ulgus, and Amelia seemed to have landed safely too. Album was desperately clinging to Charlotte’s neck so that they wouldn’t get separated.

We’d arrived at a silver mountain absolutely covered in snow. Everywhere I looked there was snow, snow, snow, and more snow. The sky was incredibly cloudy. It wasn’t a blizzard, but the wind was still so strong.

“Bad weather today.” Sir Aiskoletta was muttering under his breath. Perched on his shoulder, Komerv was trying hard not to get blown away by the wind.

“Um, Sir Aiskoletta? Should we call it off for today?” I asked.

“No, this will do.”

He unsheathed his sword and began to chant some kind of spell. A magic circle appeared and shot a pillar of light straight up to the heavens. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of a blue sky. All the clouds steadily drifted away from his spell.

Just like that, the sky had turned sunny. The winds died down and the weather became perfect for harvesting food.

“There. That should do the trick, don’t you think?” he asked.

“Y-Yes…”

I was amazed. I didn’t know great heroes could control the weather too.

“The snow is still deep. Be careful where you put your feet down,” he warned.

“R-Right.”

Our search of the mountain had begun.

We climbed upwards and upwards, exhaling white breath as we moved. It wasn’t that steep of an incline, but it really drained my stamina over time.

We also encountered the occasional monster. Rabbits with sharp horns had been lurking in the snow, jumping out to attack us as we passed.

“Horned rabbits are coming!” As he shouted that, Zara used his massive ax to chop the monsters in two. Ulgus struck them right in the skulls with his arrows.

Sir Aiskoletta defeated one horned rabbit after another with his crystal sword.

“Wooow, everyone is so strong!”

Now that I thought of it, Charlotte had never seen us in a real battle before. I’d been shocked when I witnessed my squadmates fighting for the first time too. They were like totally different people compared to how they normally acted.

Charlotte praised Ulgus after the fight, telling him he looked really cool in battle. Ulgus giggled happily. He was the type of person who thrived on praise, so I hoped Charlotte would keep it up.

“I just haven’t seen anything that looks edible yet.”

“Me neither…”

It was nothing but trees on the mountain. I didn’t see anything that looked like it might grow berries.

“I’m surprised you ever found them here, Sir Aiskoletta.”

“I came in search of a missing relative when I was young. That is when I came upon the snowberries.” He said that was over fifty years ago now. “The tree had vines all around it from which it grew the fruit.”

“I see.”

In other words, they weren’t buried under the snow. I thought that tip would make it easier, but we didn’t come across any tree with vines around it at all.

“*Pant, pant, pant, pant*…!”

The farther we went, the steeper the slope turned. I felt like the oxygen was getting thin too.

“Kreh?”

“Ah, yes…I’m all right.”

“Kreh kreh.”

Amelia, sounding concerned, asked me if I wanted to ride on her back. I decided to take her up on the offer, just for a little bit.

I stole a glance at Charlotte, but as a beastfolk, she still had plenty of energy. Her eyes were sparkling, thoroughly enjoying her first time on a snowy mountain.

I wanted to get that same light back in my eyes, so I made a suggestion. “Um, w-would you like to stop for lunch, everyone?”

“Very well.” Sir Aiskoletta gave a deep nod. I was hoping to have our break in a cave, but that would be too convenient. We

had to just crouch on the ground to regain some energy. “Stand back.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

What in the world was he planning? Sir Aiskoletta unsheathed his crystal sword and chanted a spell. Suddenly, a magic circle appeared over the snow on the ground, causing it to swell upwards.

It turned into a massive ball of snow I had to crane my neck to see the top of. Then he applied pressure and shaped it into a neat semicircle.

“Wh-What is this for…?”

“I’m not finished yet.”

Zara gasped, having figured out his intentions. Charlotte, Ulgus, and I were still left confused.

Another spell activated, this time sending a ball of fire into the snowball. The snow in the center melted away…leaving us with a perfect cave on the inside.

“Ah, I understand now. You were making a snow hut!”

“Right you are.”

Sir Aiskoletta never ceased to amaze. I would have never thought of making a snow hut with spells like that. He’d even used magic to make sure it didn’t collapse. I wasted no time stepping inside and found the hut’s interior was spacious enough to fit more than ten adults.

“Wow, I didn’t think it would be this warm!”

The walls, floor, and ceilings were all made of snow, yet it was strangely toasty. I spread out a blanket for us to sit on.

“Awesome! A snow house!”

“I’ve never seen anything like this before. But you recognized it right away, didn’t you, Zara?”

“I sure did. We made these all the time when I was a kid. They were just a lot smaller.”

“That reminds me, you’re from a snowy country, aren’t you, Ahto?”

This snow hut was like a nostalgic memory for Zara. I could practically see the longing for his hometown deep in those eyes.

“Please rest here for a while, everyone. I’ll go outside and cook.”

I tried to stand up, but Sir Aiskoletta stopped me.

“Wait one moment. You’re free to cook inside if you please.”

“But won’t the hut melt if I light a fire?”

“Fear not, as my spell shall prevent any melting or collapsing so long as it is active.”

“I-I see.”

“Let us all prepare our meal together.”

“Okay!”

Sir Aiskoletta cast another spell, providing me with heat to cook on. This new magic circle would heat up once anything was placed on top of it.

“I think I’ll use this opportunity to make soup with snow.”

First, I filled a pot with mushrooms, onions, and boar-pig meat that I’d been preserving in salt. Then I piled snow on top of them.

“Ulgus, Charlotte, could you pack this pot full of snow? Then place it on the magic circle when you’re done.”

“Okay!”

“Roger.”

It was time to start the second dish.

“Zara, please cut these potatoes into thin wedges. Sir Aiskoletta, can you cut the bacon up into thick strips?”

“Sure thing.”

“As you wish.”

“*What should Album do?*”

“Please watch over the soup for me, Album.”

“*You got it!*”

I oiled another pot and stir-fried the potatoes Zara cut with salt and pepper. Once they were cooked, I topped them with bacon.

“*The soup’s boiling, Pancake Girl!*”

“Charlotte, can you add herbs to the soup until it tastes good?”

“Okaaay!”

I roasted the potatoes and bacon until they were nice and crispy. As a finishing touch, I laid sliced cheese over them and removed the pot from the heat. Then I covered it with the lid and waited for the cheese to melt.

Next, I sampled the soup itself. The broth turned out tasty thanks to the rich flavor of the mushrooms. Not only was the soup

ready to eat, but the cheese in the pot was melted too.

I'd completed two dishes in hardly any time at all. My "snow-thawed boar-pig soup" and "potatoes and bacon with cheese sauce" were ready to eat.

Sir Aiskoletta sliced up some bread, so I handed it out to everyone before digging in.

"These potatoes with bacon and cheese are just as delicious when eaten with bread."

Album raised his slice up and started to beg me. "*Th-That sounds amazing! Put some potatoes on my bread, Pancake Girl!*"

"Okay, okay."

I dipped his potatoes and bacon into the soft cheese and placed it all on a slice of bread. I repeated the process for the others.

Everyone stuffed their cheeks with the steaming warm bread. There was no better combination than potatoes, bacon, and melted cheese. All of those delicious tastes mingled together to form the ultimate delight to the tongue.

"*Aaaaaaah! It's soooo good!*"

"It's delicious, Melly."

"So yummy!"

"Most delicious indeed!"

I was glad everyone enjoyed the meal. The salted boar-pig soup was full of tender onions and crisp mushrooms. The meat itself had soft fat and the perfect level of saltiness. It was a wonderful soup that seemed to convert my fatigue back into energy.

Now that we had a second wind after our meal, it was time to get back to hunting for snowberries. My body was nice and warm after all that soup. This time, I wouldn't be shivering like before.

"Mell, I too hot now, so I give you Album back," Charlotte said.

"S-Sure."

The warm weasel was fast asleep. I stuffed him in a bag so that I wouldn't accidentally drop him.

"The path will be even more treacherous from here on out. Perhaps Miss Mell and Miss Charlotte should proceed on Miss Amelia's back."

"Kreh kreh!"

Amelia told us she didn't mind. I decided to accept her offer so that we didn't slow the others down. Charlotte and I mounted Amelia. With that, the group returned to our search.

The path grew more dangerous, just as Sir Aiskoletta warned. It was a steep slope that we had to climb carefully, going from boulder to boulder. Zara and Ulgus, as knights from an expeditionary squadron, weren't even out of breath as they followed Sir Aiskoletta's lead.

The weather worsened the longer we climbed the cliffs. Thick clouds streamed in overhead and soon darkened our surroundings. The wind picked up and snow started to fall.

It came down harder and harder until we were practically in a blizzard.

"How are you all faring?"

"I-I'm doing good. What about you, Ahto?"

"I'm fine. How's it going for you guys, Amelia, Melly, and Charlotte?"

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh."

"We're good!"

"I feel much more stable on Amelia's back."

We managed to climb the mountain without the wind or snow putting a stop to us, only to find something unbelievable waiting at the peak.

"Hmm?"

Sir Aiskoletta froze, looking up at the summit. Then he suddenly jumped up to the clifftop in a single leap.

"Huh?! Wh-What is it?!" I cried.

Charlotte answered, "Maybe a monster!"

"Whaaat?!"

How could we run into a monster just when we finally made it to the summit? We really had terrible luck.

"Grrrrrooooh!"

"Wh-Whoa!"

The entire mountain shook from that roar. Fearing an avalanche, I wondered if we should hurry up to the top with the others too.

Zara and Ulgus were ready to join the battle. We reached the top of the mountain, but I was completely shocked when I saw the monster Sir Aiskoletta was fighting.

“I-It’s a snow bear?!”

The beast was over thirty-two feet long. I hugged Charlotte tightly when she started to tremble.

It was rotten luck. We’d encountered the worst monster of them all.

When was the first time I ever saw a snow bear? I felt like it was during our search for the runaway nobleman on that mountain. We’d been looking for a human only to run into a bear in the forest—a bear that turned out to be impossibly strong.

But perhaps that was only natural. Even wild bears were excellent at fighting. It didn’t take a genius to see how a monster version would be unimaginably powerful. Not only that, but this snow bear was significantly larger than the last one and mighty enough to shake the ground with nothing more than its roar.

We’d only managed to defeat it when the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron put all their talents together. But this time…

Zara’s battleax was no match for the bear’s thick pelt. Even Ulgus calculated the wind speed and struck the beast, only for his arrow to bounce off fruitlessly. It was like its entire body was covered in ice.

Still, they continued the battle fearlessly.

How could they ever defeat such a thing? I had no choice but to pray to the gods.

That was when, out of nowhere, the snow bear trembled and fell to the ground.

“What?!”

Behind it, I watched as Sir Aiskoletta drew his crystal sword from the snow bear’s body. As unbelievable as it seemed, the great hero had pierced the beast’s heart with a single thrust.

Ulgus collapsed with relief. Zara dropped his battleax to the ground.

“Are you all right, everyone?!”

“W-We’re fine!”

“Is that so? I’m most relieved.”

After confirming we were all unharmed, Album began to stir in my bag. Then he poked his head out.

“What is it, Album?”

“*I smell something sweet!*”

“R-Really?”

“*Really. This way!*”

We followed his directions deeper into the forest. Suddenly, I spotted white strawberries growing off a tree with vines.

“A-Are these…snowberries?”

“Right you are.”

We finally found them. I was so happy it almost brought tears to my eyes.

The tree was covered in snowberries, so I plucked one and gave it a try. The surface of the berry was slightly frozen, but once I bit down, its juice seeped into my mouth.

“S-So sweet!”

I couldn’t believe it wasn’t frozen solid in an environment like this. The inside probably contained copious amounts of sugary juice.

“I think Garr and Fredrica would love these. Don’t you agree, Zara?” I asked.

“Of course. We got our hands on an amazing ingredient thanks to Sir Aiskoletta.”

I filled my basket up with snowberries. Now that our goal was complete, there was nothing left to do but head home.

Sir Aiskoletta told us to descend a bit farther down first, since the magical energy near the summit was unstable. A chill went down my spine when I peered over the cliffside. There would be no saving anyone who fell from a place like this.

“Miss Mell, Miss Charlotte, I’d like you to ride Miss Amelia on the way down.”

“Sure, we’ll— Ah!”

A strong gust of wind struck me. My body went tipping toward the cliff.

“Melly!”

“Miss Mell!”

Zara and Sir Aiskoletta reached out for me at once, but neither of their hands connected.

Slowly, little by little, the sights before my eyes changed.

Then the last thing I saw was the cloudy sky.

“Aaaaaaaaah!”

“Mell!”

“Medic Risurisu!”

Everyone's faces grew further and further away. I watched as Amelia spread her wings and jumped after me, but the wind was blowing her back. She couldn't fly forward.

"Kreh! Kreh! Kreeeeeeeeeh!"

I heard that heartbreaking, tearful scream from Amelia.

Time was practically at a standstill.

I shouldn't have held back. I should have eaten just one more snowberry—

"Kreeeeeeh!"

"Whoa!"

Just then, some sort of black creature caught me in my fall. I watched as it flapped its beautiful, jet-black wings.

"I-It's you!"

The black griffin had swooped in to rescue me. *What is he doing here?!*

But more importantly, I was alive.

The black griffin carried me back to the others.

"Melly!!!"

"Kreeeeeeeeeeh!"

Zara ran up to me, but Amelia beat him to the punch, leaping into my arms.

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreeeh!"

Amelia was weeping as she cried out with relief that I was safe. I wrapped my arms around her tightly, apologizing for scaring her.

Zara came up to me once Amelia and I separated.

"Thank god, Melly…"

"The black griffin saved my life."

"I know, he really did."

Zara pulled me into a big hug. I finally felt my heart settle back down.

"What a shock this is. Encountering a black griffin was the last thing I predicted."

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh."

The black griffin answered Sir Aiskoletta's confusion.

When Amelia heard that, she responded, "*You must be joking!*"

"What's wrong, Amelia?"

"Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh."

"What…?!"

She explained that the black griffin had been following Amelia all this time. Even after we teleported away, he still managed to track her down to the mountain.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh.”

“Kreh…”

Our contract meant that if I died, Amelia would die. That was why the black griffin saved me. Amelia was the entire reason I was still alive right now.

“Kreh, kreh kreh, kreh…kreh.”

“*You’re horrible for following me around all this time… But thank you.*” Amelia said those words to the black griffin before nuzzling her cheek against his.

He puffed up his feathers and wagged his lion’s tail happily.

I didn’t know if I was right, but I felt like their relationship had taken a step forward. I was actually quite touched. At least, I *was*, until Amelia shouted, “*Don’t follow me anymore!*”

That was when the black griffin suggested something outrageous.

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh.”

“Kreeeeh?!”

Amelia’s beak fell open in a cry of utter shock.

“Um, what did he say, Amelia?”

“Kreh, kreh kreh, kreh.”

“Whaaat?!”

I had the exact same reaction she did.

“What’s Amelia saying, Melly?” Zara asked.

“The black griffin told her he wanted to form a contract with me so that he could stay with Amelia forever.”

He’d made up his mind—he wanted to die when Amelia did.

“In other words, you two will enter a contract if you give him a name, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Are you going to do it?”

With the help of the Royal Mythical Beast Preservation Bureau, another griffin wouldn’t be too much of a burden on my wallet. We even had an empty room in our house.

But the real issue was how Amelia felt about it.

“Let me ask her. Amelia, the black griffin wants a contract with me. What do you think I should do?”

“Kreeeh… Kreh kreh.”

She seemed like she was pondering it for a moment, but then she responded plainly with, “*I don’t mind either way.*”

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh kreh, kreh, kreh.”

“I-I see.”

“*If he wants to follow me so badly, he’s not going to stop. It’d be better to just keep him around.*”

“Kreh kreh, kreh kreh, kreeeh!”

“*But just because you have a contract doesn’t mean I’ll agree to marry you,*” she warned the black griffin next.

He seemed to respond with something to the effect of, “*I don’t mind.*”

“All right. I’m going to give you a name now,” I said.

I hadn’t given any creature a name in so long. I was kind of nervous. Garr would have definitely been a big help with this if he had joined us.

“Um… I don’t know what to choose.”

“He looks like a black bird, so how about Crow, Medic Risurisu?”

“But that’s already Captain Ludtink’s name…”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Ulgus’s sense for names was as amusing as ever. When she saw me struggling, Amelia chirped out, “Kreh kreh.”

“Huh? ‘Rih?’”

She explained that it meant “wind” in an ancient language.

“I like it. I think it suits him well. All right then. This is my command. You will now be known as Rih!”

I heard something like a faint pop. The griffin then stood up straight, so I knew he must be receiving the contract seal on his body.

The black griffin, now Rih, bent his knees before me. I leaned down and patted his head.



Our incredibly eventful day had come to an end. Of course, every muscle in my body was aching when I woke up the next morning.



TODAY, I was spending my morning preparing for Garr and Fredrica's wedding party.

Charlotte was wagging her tail as she worked on the butterfly tuna Sir Aiskoletta caught for us. Zara was in charge of the grilled meat with sauce while I took on the task of the snowberry cake.

To start off, I separated some egg whites from the yolks and whipped the whites into a fluffy meringue. Then I added sugar to the yolks and beat them together until they turned a whitish color. Once I mixed in the meringue, I added flour to the batter and stirred it gently. Finally, I mixed in milk and melted butter until it was nice and smooth, poured the batter into a buttered pan, and baked it for about twenty minutes.

The result was a light and airy sponge cake. I made three layers, each one a little smaller than the last, to stack on top of each other. I cut each one into two pieces so that they could cool properly. Then I spread a layer of cream on the cooled cakes and topped them with sliced fruit. I decided to make each layer unique so that the flavors didn't get boring.

The first layer contained whipped cream and sliced snowberries. I piled the toppings on, refusing to skimp. The second layer was topped with jam, cream, and candied forest apples. Finally, the third layer was topped with chocolate cream and crushed, toasted almonds. I carefully stacked them on top of each other and coated the entire cake with whipped cream. Then I piped the top with more whipped cream, decorated it with snowberries, and with that, my "three-tiered white snowberry cake" was complete.

"I'm finished!"

"Oh my, Melly! It's fabulous," Zara said.

"That looks yummy!"

The tough job of transporting the cake would be left to Sir Aiskoletta. He agreed to use a teleportation spell to bring it to Garr

and Fredrica's house. He was even wearing a white bowtie today for the celebratory occasion. I decided to wear my canary yellow dress again too.

Charlotte had given Album a bright red bow to wear, and now he wouldn't stop asking if he looked cute. When I told him he did, just to satisfy him, he scolded me. "*But you didn't even look!*"

Album was a troublesome, yet adorable little guy.

Blanche received an invitation to the party this time because it was taking place in a private home. Zara had tied a white bow on her tail.

Amelia and Rih were wearing matching green bows. They were nestled up close to each other, chirping in some sort of conversation.

Rih, the newest member of our home, had become a much calmer creature compared to before our contract. He was kind to everyone now, not just Amelia. This came as quite a relief to me.

Charlotte was even bringing Umataro to the party. She'd tied a bow around his horn, though I worried that might not be the best place for one.

"It's nearly time. Let us depart, everyone!"

Komerv raised a flag bearing the words "Bound for Sir Garr and Miss Fredrica's residence." Everyone collected their food and gifts before stepping into the magic circle.

It shimmered faintly before the sights around us suddenly changed.

Garr and Fredrica's house was located in a quiet corner of the residential area toward the middle of the city. It was an adorable little two-story home made with warm, brown bricks and a red roof.

"Thank you for coming, everyone."

Fredrica greeted us in a white wedding dress. She looked absolutely beautiful. Garr and Sly came up to see us too.

"Garr, Fredrica, congratulations on your marriage!"

"Thank you so much."

It seemed the other guests had already arrived. Captain Ludtink was there with Marina, who waved when she spotted me.

I stepped inside and had Sir Aiskoletta set my three-tiered white snowberry cake down on the large dining room table. Garr

and Fredrica's eyes went wide at first, but then they smiled. I was glad to see it had pleased them.

It was time for the party to begin.

One by one, delicious foods were brought out for us guests. They served whole-roasted helmeted guinea fowl, freshwater crab steamed with alcohol, rich scallop soup, pies full of three-horned cow meat, and more.

Everyone was eating and drinking with big smiles on their faces. We saved the three-tiered white snowberry cake for the very end of the party.

I wanted the husband and wife to cut the cake themselves, as was tradition in the royal capital, but it was too at risk of falling apart. Instead, I would have Zara cut the slices, since he was so experienced with cakes.

Sir Aiskoletta was recounting the tale of our snowberry quest in great detail. Even Ulgus and Charlotte were on pins and needles despite having been there themselves. *Don't you two already know how the story ends?* I couldn't help but laugh.

"*Aaaah! I could just eat it all up!*"

Album was clutching a plate and ordering Zara to cut the exact slice he wanted. *Just who does he think he is, anyway?* Amelia and Rih were eating fruit together in a corner of the room. Blanche was curled up in front of the fireplace, fast asleep, while Umataro sunbathed in the garden. The mythical beasts truly did whatever they pleased.

Fredrica and Marina were enthusiastically discussing things between the two of them—maybe because they were both wives now.

As for Vice Captain Velrey, she was enjoying a cup of dry alcohol. She looked like she was savoring each and every sip, but right next to her was Captain Ludtink, who guzzled down the exact same booze in one gulp. The vice captain gave him a lecture about appreciating his drinks properly. Perhaps she was drunk, as I'd never seen Vice Captain Velrey yell at Captain Ludtink before. Once again, I couldn't help but laugh.

"Here, Melly. Have some cake."

"Ah, thank you."

I took a big bite of the snowberry cake Zara sliced for me. The cake itself was smooth and fluffy, pairing nicely with the whipped

cream I'd made to be not too sweet. The snowberries, the main attraction of this cake, were at the perfect ripeness. I nearly shuddered at how sweet and juicy they were.

"It's delicious, Melly."

"It really is! Maybe it's wrong to praise my own work, but it turned out great."

Zara and I smiled at each other.

The lively day was over all too soon.

The next day, Garr and Fredrica left on a weeklong honeymoon.

As for the rest of us, well, we still had work. The Royal Order told us they would try not to assign us expeditions while Garr was away. I decided to use this opportunity to make a large batch of preserved food.

"I'm heading out to the market, Captain Ludtink."

"Gotcha. Need Zara or Ulgus to carry your bags?"

"I'll be fine."

I could have anything too heavy delivered to the barracks, so I didn't need extra help.

I found Amelia and Rih sunbathing when I stepped outside. It looked like a very pleasant activity.

"Amelia, Rih, I'm heading to the market!"

"Kreh kreh!"

"Kreh!"

Amelia warned me not to go with any strangers. *Does she think I'm three years old?*

Rih bluntly told me not to let the wind drag me off somewhere. I wasn't a leaf, so that wasn't something I needed to worry about. I had come to understand Rih's chirping now that the two of us had a contract. He still said harsh things, but at his core, he was a kindhearted griffin.

I exited the Royal Order headquarters through the front gates, basket in hand. The weather was lovely. The laundry I hung up that morning would probably be dry by the afternoon.

I wanted to head home early and make mushroom soup for dinner. But what main dish could I serve it with?

As I pondered that question, I heard someone call out to me from behind.

“Mell!”

I knew that voice. Startled, I turned around.

That silver hair. Those pointy ears and beautiful green eyes, like the depths of the forest. He wore a sweater with a stand-up collar and the seal of the forest on it, along with a pair of black trousers. It was the quintessential attire of all young Fore Elves.

This slender young elf man was Lance, my ex-fiancé.

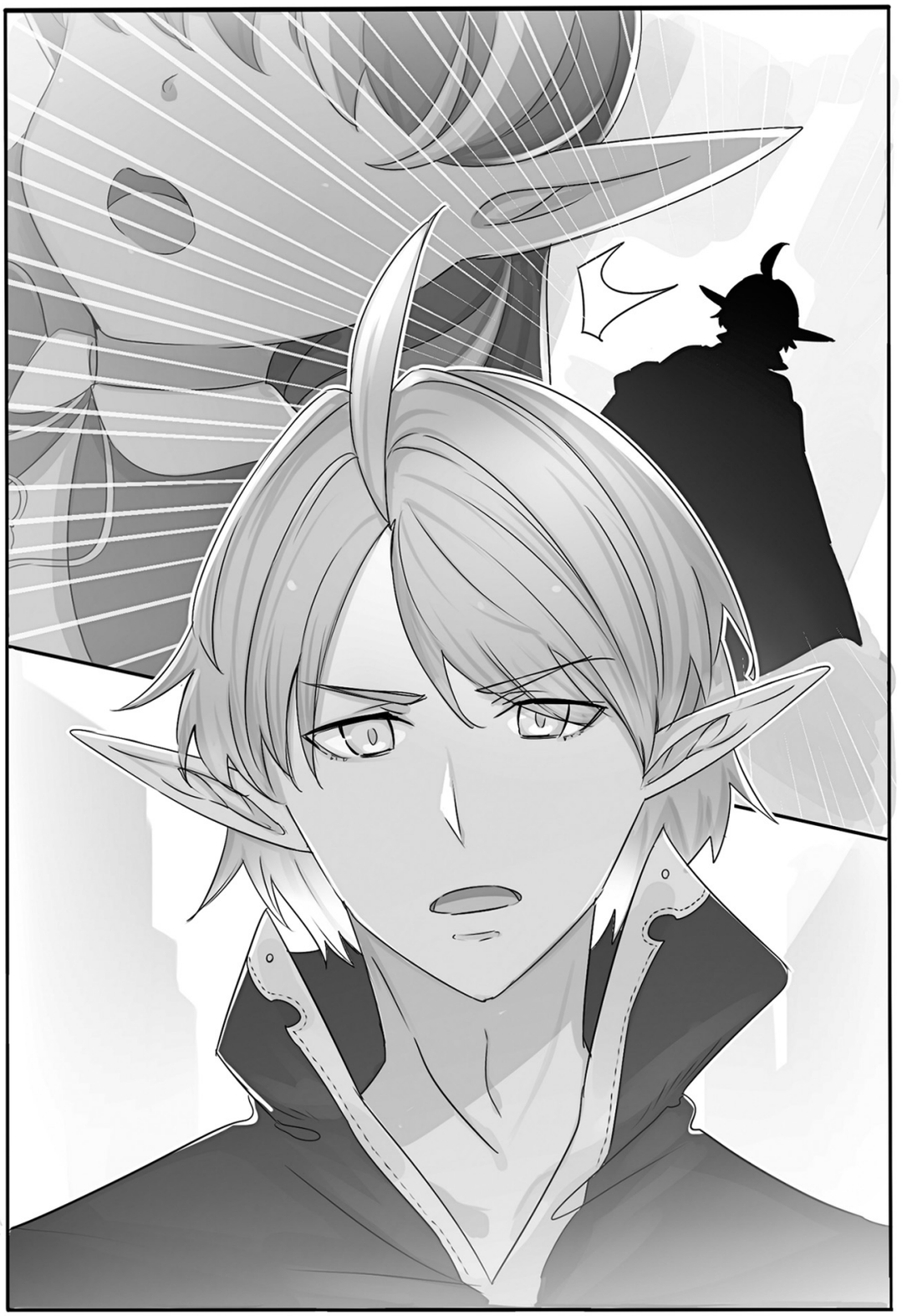
“What?!”

My jaw fell open in absolute shock.

Lance strode right up to me, grabbed my arm, and demanded, “Come on. We’re going back to the Fore Elf woods.”

When I heard that sudden declaration, I was completely and utterly lost for words.

To be continued in volume 7.



Bonus Chapter: Ulgus and *****’s Exquisite Expedition Cooking

“HELLO, everyone. It’s time for another installment of Expedition Cooking— Wait, where’s Medic Risurisu?”

“*Little ol’ Album’s here today!*"

“Little Album! What happened to Medic Risurisu?”

“*Um, I dunno. But since I’m already here, let’s make something.*"

“Oh, well, I guess you’re right. I have no idea what’s going on, but with Little Album joining me, I’ll begin our expedition cooking! Actually, I don’t have any recipes I can teach people.”

“*In that case, I’ll take charge today!*"

“Oooh, you can cook, Little Album?”

“*A bit, yeah! Pancake Girl taught me some stuff since I was always complaining about being hungry.*"

“Wow, I see. So, what are we making?”

“*Steamed chicken with rice!*"

“Ah, that sounds delicious. We’ll need chicken thighs on the bone, white rice, ginger, cilantro, and other seasonings for this one, right?”

“*You got it. Start by sticking a knife into the thigh meat and making a hole.*"

“Like this?”

“*Yeah, good work! Now season it with salt and pepper. Next up…*"

“You rinse the rice, pour in water, then add sliced garlic, alcohol, salt, and grated medicinal garlic, right? Then you drizzle it with fish sauce.”

“*Exactly. Now set the meat aside and let the rice cook for a while!*”

“Understood. I’m still surprised you actually learned how to cook, Little Album.”

“*I know! Aren’t I clever?*"

“Yes, you’re very clever. Since I can’t cook, I pretty much go out to eat every single day.”

“*What’s the problem with that? It’s nice and easy.*"

“Little Album… Thank you for saying that. Anyway, the rice looks like it’s done.”

“*Woo-hoo!*”

“Now we pour on the sauce made from fish and oyster sauces, citrus juice, and minced cilantro, right?”

“*You’ve got it. After that, cut up the chicken meat and mix it all together.*”

“Got it… There, how’s that?”

“*Looking good!*”

“All right, with that, Little Album’s special steamed chicken with rice is complete!”

“*Woo-hoo!*”

“Ready to give it a taste?”

“*Yaaaay! Time to eat! Munch, munch, munch!*”

“How is it?”

“*It’s soooo good!*”

“Yay, that’s great. I’m gonna try it too now… Oooh, this is delicious!”

“*I know, right?*”

“Yeah! The chicken broth has soaked into the rice and the meat is so soft from the steaming. I can’t stop eating it!”

“*Go ahead, have a lot!*”

“I will!”



“THANK you for your help today, Little Album.”

“*Anytime!*”

“Will Medic Risurisu return for our next installment? My heart is already racing in suspense. But either way, we managed to pull it off this time thanks to Little Album. Thank you again for the help.”

“*Eheheh!*”

“This has been Little Album’s Exquisite Expedition Cooking!”

Afterword

IT'S been a while. I'm Mashimesa Emoto.

I made you wait quite a long time after volume 5 was published last April in Japan. My schedule for the year was completely full when I received the offer to publish the next volume, so this continuation came out quite late.

Light novels usually only thrive with some sort of speed and freshness, but the patient staff at GC Novels told me, "Okaaay, guess we'll just have to wait!" I'm truly grateful for them.

Furthermore, I even received the generous offer to publish volume 7 after this. That's why *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights* will be releasing two volumes in a row this year. The first in February and the second in March (for the Japanese release).

The release of volume 7 will be the conclusion of the series.

These days, people in the light novel industry say they're satisfied if they're able to publish five volumes of a series. That's why I can't believe my series is going all the way to volume 7! It really fills me with gratitude.

Now, moving on to a different subject.

Volume 4 of the *Expedition Cooking* manga went on sale last November.

This latest installment is full of even more beautiful illustrations drawn by Renji Fukuhara-sensei. Though I was depressed to learn volume 4 would mark the end of this manga... I received good news!

Expedition Cooking is being made into yet another manga series.

Shinobu Take-sensei will be in charge of the illustrations, and it will be published in "Comic PASH!" It has likely already started serialization by the time this book is released.

Shinobu-sensei draws a very adorable Mell, and all the members of the Second Expeditionary Squadron practically come

to life on the pages. Captain Ludtink's bandit face is still alive and well, of course.

It's definitely worth reading, so I hope you'll keep up with Mell's new adventures in the manga!

As for volume 6 here, this story contained more expeditions and a fulfilling home life for Mell. The relationship between Mell and Zara barely made any progress through the first five books, but it makes a really sudden change in this one. I know this volume ends with a big cliffhanger, but volume 7 comes out soon, so please don't be worried.

I mentioned a trip to Hokkaido in the afterword of volume 5. Fortunately, I was able to go! It was my second time visiting Hokkaido, but my first time going during the cherry blossom season, so I got to experience a flower viewing for the second time in my life. I was very surprised by how tall the cherry blossom trees in Hokkaido were.

All the food was so delicious too! The best thing I ate was miso ramen with bacon and corn. I also saw a newborn bear cub, spotted wild foxes, and touched a pony. It was a very fun trip.

I hope I can go on another trip sometime this year.

Finally, I'd like to thank the editors at GC Novels, especially the one in charge of my series, for all of your help. I also want to say thank you to everyone else involved with the publication of *Expedition Cooking with the Enoch Royal Knights*.

Tera Akai-sensei, you once again provided me with adorable cover art, colored pages, and illustrations throughout the book. I give you my heartfelt gratitude for drawing everything so wonderfully, from the serious scenes to the comical ones.

I sincerely appreciate any readers who've followed the story this far. Thank you very much for your time.

May we meet again in volume 7 for the conclusion of the series!



Ayakashi and the Fairy Tales We Tell Ourselves

By Kosuzu Kobato　Illust Meij

When Haruka's life collides with Takumi's, she suddenly starts seeing ayakashi! But it's not scary because they look like cute stoats to her, much to Takumi's dismay because all he sees is her fawning over goblins!



How I Swapped Places with the Villainess, Beat Up Her Fiancé, and Found True Love

By BlueBlue　Illust Meiji Anno

Alexandra swapped places with the villainess and is ready to stop the endless otome game loop cycle by beating up the love interests and the heroine!



How I Became King by Eating Monsters

By Daken　Illust Shiba

A prince unknowingly rises from assassination target to king by eating monsters! A story of comedic misunderstandings.



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