
5
BY You Fuguruma
ILLUST. Nama
Housekeeping Mage from Another World
Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!


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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 5 [Complete]

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Part 1: Idol of the Holy Night

Chapter 1: A Night of Conspiracy

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It was December 7th, the day before what was widely considered the biggest event in the whole of Storydia—the Tris Cathedral Saint's Nativity Festival—and the northern capital of Torisval was lively with all manners of people. Shiori was bright and happy as she walked among the crowds, enjoying the atmosphere and looking at all the food stalls selling grilled meats, stews, and baked sweets. Rurii, too, was in high spirits—the slime's gaze seemed to linger over all the delicacies.

"Once we're done with work, let's buy something to take home," said Shiori.

The slime quivered with joy. Shiori smiled at it, then turned back to the bright and vibrant city streets. They bustled with tourists, many of whom had come from as far as southern Storydia, and even from the royal capital. But it wasn't just the wealthy and the rich who could make the most of the festive mood—Storydia was a peaceful and prosperous nation, and now even ordinary citizens could indulge in a little luxury.

However, the nation of Storydia, which was covered in snow for almost half of the year, had not always been so prosperous. In the past, it had been invaded by the Empire, after which its people had suffered through a long period of poverty. Storydia's reform and recovery had begun three generations ago, when the king instituted policies for agricultural reform and improved transportation and traffic infrastructure. He had also made publicly available the technology and knowledge usually reserved for the wealthy and powerful. In doing so, he made it possible for Storydia to walk the path to prosperity, which he and his descendants did over the following decades and the next three generations.

The reason I've been able to do so well for myself, too, is in no small part thanks to the ease of living in Storydia. It's so well-off.

A prosperous country was a comfortable and generous country. This was as

true of general living as it was the mindset of a nation's citizens, and the many smiles on the faces of the tourists filling Storydia's streets were a symbol of this very prosperity and comfort.

Shiori had been dropped into this country suddenly and without warning. She had left the safe and prosperous lands of Japan that she called home, and found herself in an entirely unknown world. That Storydia happened to be safe and prosperous in its own way was a silver lining on this otherwise inexplicable incident. It was truly a stroke of good fortune—a blessing.

But it was not the only blessing Shiori had received since her arrival...

As Shiori pushed open the door into the Adventurers' Guild, the first face to meet her belonged to a tall, well-built man. It was her love, Alec Dia, and he greeted her with a smile.

Shiori had no relatives or family in Storydia. She was entirely unaccustomed to the subtleties of its local customs. With her weak magical powers, it was all she could do just to play a combat support role. This had once led to her being wrapped up in a terrifying incident—all of it hidden by her party at the time—and it had left her scarred. Shiori had been on the brink of breaking down entirely, but in the aftermath, Alec had been there to help her on the road to recovery. He was a kind man, and she loved him.

"Morning, Shiori," he said. "Did you make sure to get enough rest?"

"Morning, Alec. I did, thank you."

There was love in the way that they spoke each other's names. It was there in the touch of their hands. Shiori felt that this happiness—the joy of meeting the love of her life—had to be some sort of miracle. She stared into Alec's gentle, dark magenta eyes, her own eyes full of affection for him.

"What do you want to do today?" Alec asked. "Shall we pick up a request?"

"Let me think for a moment..."

Alec took a look around the room. In contrast to the bustling streets outside, the guild was almost entirely empty. The Nativity Festival brought with it an increase in requests for guides and protection, and almost everyone was out working.

“I *was* thinking we could take a day-request...” muttered Alec, “but given the circumstances, perhaps we’d best stick around.”

The end of the year was a busy period for adventurers, and Alec had been hoping to pick up something they could finish in a couple of hours. However, he hadn’t expected the guild to be so empty, and with that in mind, he wondered if it might be best that they remain on standby in case of any emergency requests.

“I must say, we’re certainly low on people this year,” said Shiori, “and there’s more requests than last year too.”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” said Alec, “being that I’ve been away for the past few years.”

Shiori didn’t think the crowds outside *looked* any bigger than normal, so she wondered if it was simply a matter of there being an especially large number of Nativity Festival-related requests—she felt certain they’d had more than enough adventurers last year and the year before last.

“Yeah, about that...”

The voice came from Zack, who saw the puzzled looks on Shiori’s and Alec’s faces. He took a moment to stop sorting the requests in front of him, and ruffled his hair.

“The seasonal crew has been delayed. It’s because of what happened in Brovito Village, apparently.”

“Hm...? Oh, come to think of it—we still haven’t seen any of them, have we?” said Shiori.

By “seasonal crew,” they were referring to a special type of adventurer—people such as carpenters and farmers, whose work slowed in off-seasons or during the harsh winters. At such times, these individuals supplemented their income with adventuring work. Because they only worked for about half the year, their ranks weren’t particularly high, but that didn’t make them any less trustworthy—their regular work kept them fit and strong, and they had a wealth of specialty knowledge. For this reason, they were especially valuable in the winter when there was an increase in smaller gathering and protection jobs.

Under normal circumstances, the seasonal crew would start work around mid-November, but this year many still had yet to show.

“The Blue Forest still hasn’t calmed,” explained Zack. “There haven’t been any more snow wolf attacks since the one you two witnessed, but there’s still other beasts roaming near the villages that don’t usually venture so close. That kind of thing is keeping the seasonal crew busy, it seems.”

The Brovito snow wolf attack had happened at the start of winter, and the lingering effects of it had rippled out in unexpected ways.

“Ah, so that’s it. Can’t be easy for them...” said Alec.

Shiori and Alec could do little more than share a wry grin, and plan to settle in for a busy few weeks, even after the Nativity Festival. That which could usually be done by ordinary citizens without issue, such as simple gathering tasks, became dangerous endeavors in the snowy winter. Magical beasts that only came out in the winter season were also a problem, which meant that trustworthy protection was a necessity when taking the lesser-traveled paths to small villages. This was the very reason that, compared to the summer season, the Adventurers’ Guild found itself with a sharp influx of smaller requests as soon as the snow began to fall.

A sigh echoed across the room as the adventurers in the guild looked at all the requests that were piling up on the request board. But it so happened that at that very moment, the door to the guild opened, and a flood of burly men walked in.

“Ha! So you finally made it,” said Zack with a wave and a relieved smile. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

The men grinned back, their faces tanned and weathered from their work in the sun. It was the seasonal crew themselves. The adventurers greeted their part-time acquaintances, whom they hadn’t seen in about six months.

“I wish I could have made it sooner, GM,” said one of the men. “Had my hands full building fences and reinforcing the livestock barns.”

“We got lucky, though—a couple of tourists asked us for protection on the way here,” said another. “We left in the morning and arrived a little earlier.

Glad we're at least in time for the festival."

"And boy, are we glad for the help," said Zack. "As you can see, almost everyone's out working. We've got a backlog of requests, and they're just waiting to be picked up."

"Hey, Alec! How long has it been? Four years?" said one of the seasonal crew.

"About that long, yeah. I finally finished up the work I was doing. Got back in the summer."

"And Shiori—you're looking well. You too, Rurii."

"We're doing great," replied Shiori. "Thank you."

It was a six-month reunion for many of them, and so the men spent some time sharing strong handshakes and catching up on recent events.

"My village is pretty far from Brovito, you know? I hadn't expected any trouble where I was."

"I'm a fair bit closer than you are, and the villagers were scared stiff. It was pretty rough for a while there—we put up extra fences and reinforced barn doors, things like that. All the same..."

The seasonal crew adventurer who was speaking—a farmer and swordsman by the name of Olof—turned to Shiori and Alec.

"I'd heard you were back, Alec, but...hmm, how do I put this...? There's something different about you. That, and..." He looked back and forth between Shiori and Alec before going on. "Aren't the two of you kind of...close?"

All eyes were suddenly on the two adventurers, and Shiori felt herself flinching beneath the pressure. Alec, however, was steadfast in his confidence, and grinned before taking Shiori by the shoulder and planting a kiss on her black hair.

"Well, you know how it is," he said. "But now you know what it means too—no one lays a finger on her."

"Alec..." muttered Shiori.

Public displays of affection like this turned Shiori as red as a tomato, but

Alec's cool and calm demeanor, along with his words, hit the seasonal crew like a blast of explosive fire magic. After a brief moment of silence, the guild filled with cries of shocks that bordered on screams.

"What?!"

"Alec has a lover?!"

"The ice-man who turned down all those babes has a girlfriend now?!"

"You've gotta be joking! A guy like this who'll even run from a woman's shadow ends up falling for a simple virgi—*hurk*!"

Olof couldn't finish what he was trying to say because Alec had covered his mouth with a viselike grip. Shiori was wide-eyed with shock as Olof mumbled and Alec tried to move the conversation along.

"What? What did he say? Vegewhat?" asked Shiori.

"Nothing for you to worry about," said Alec. "It's nothing important...well, it *is* important, I suppose...er, wait, hurm..."

Shiori turned away from the now-bumbling Alec and towards Zack, who was also avoiding her gaze, somewhat awkwardly. Unsure what to make of the atmosphere, Shiori turned to Rurii, at which point Alec finally released Olof. Olof wheezed, getting air back into his lungs, but once he recovered, however, his suntanned face filled with a smile.

"All the same...I'm glad," he said.

He didn't say *what* he was glad for, but Shiori felt the strong emotion in his words, and she smiled back.

"Thank you," she said.

All of them knew of the struggles that Shiori had been through, and so it made them happy to see her find someone who could truly support her. The guild's rowdiness faded back into calm.

"Ah, almost forgot," said Olof, opening his knapsack and laying items on the table. "Here—we brought the usual souvenirs. You'll want to store it all away like you always do."

What the seasonal crew revealed were bottles of mushrooms and tree nuts, smoked river fish, jerky, and similar produce. They had brought preserved food that they'd painstakingly made themselves during the farming seasons. But they had also brought slabs of raw meat. They did this every year, always arriving with lots of preserved produce in hand to keep the guild's stockpiles topped up.

"Wow. Thanks again," said Zack. "Always a huge help. You'll all get a little bonus for your first job too, so have at it."

"Many thanks."

"Take the raw meat to the kitchen," said Zack to a few nearby employees. "The rest goes to storage."

Then he took the request tickets that were already on the counter and spread them out. They were all requests that had required extensions on account of there not being enough help.

"Sorry to rush you all, but these gathering requests are in desperate need of..." he began to say, but his voice was muffled somewhat by the neighing of horses.

Shiori looked out the window and saw a carriage come to a halt in front of the guild. The door of the carriage opened, and a young man in glasses alighted in a hurry, looking a touch panicked.

"Potential client?" asked Alec.

Everyone watched as the old, amber-colored door of the guild opened and a tense-looking young man poked his head inside. Shiori noticed a familiar white standing collar peeking out from within his well-tailored coat. It was the garb of the Tris Cathedral.

"He's with the..." Shiori started to say.

"Yeah," said Alec, reading her mind. "Looks like he's from the cathedral."

Upon closing the door behind him, the young man let his gaze wander across the room. But as soon as he saw Shiori he stopped. Their eyes met, and the young man began to speak.

"Erm... I would like to submit an emergency request," he said, "to the

house...keeping mage, Shiori.”

An emergency request specifically for Shiori. She knew they were meeting for the first time, but the young man was clearly looking at her when he spoke—he’d likely heard about her from someone.

“I am Shiori,” she said, introducing herself. “May I ask the nature of your request?”

“My apologies, but it’s a rather sensitive matter...” said the young man, looking from Shiori to all the adventurers keeping watch from behind her.

“In that case, let’s head to a meeting room in the back.”

Requests were most commonly submitted at the guild’s front desk, but meeting rooms were available for things such as price negotiations, scheduling arrangements, and particularly complicated requests. This request wasn’t just an emergency—it was from the Tris Cathedral itself. And on the day before a huge festival, to boot. There was no doubt the young man wasn’t mincing words when he said it was a problem of a sensitive nature. That said, although it was Shiori he had requested, she had to consider the possibility that it might be too much for her to tackle alone. She glanced up at Alec, who nodded back.

“I know you have requested me by name, but do you mind if my partner accompanies me?” she asked. “We may need to handle the request together, pending the responsibilities.”

Partner. Though speaking the word aloud made Shiori feel a touch bashful, it also seemed to warm her body. As if sensing her feelings, Alec gave her a gentle pat on the back.

The young man hesitated for a brief moment but soon nodded. Shiori turned to Zack, who gave her a reassuring wave before turning his attention back to his request tickets and the seasonal crew.

“This way, please,” said Shiori, trying to control the nervousness in her heart as she ushered the young man to a meeting room. Once the young man had removed his coat and taken a seat, a guild employee brought tea and sweets while everyone introduced themselves.

“My name is Conny Envary, and I’m with the Tris Cathedral ceremonial

division. I'm responsible for the Nativity Festival's special events."

He was a priest, but the border of his collar was embroidered in gold with certain symbols, the moon and the figure of a bird, which was reserved for those in important positions. None of the reverends Shiori knew wore such a collar, indicating they were of a lower rank.

"I am Shiori Izumi, a B-rank housekeeping mage. I play a combat support role, and handle the cooking, washing, and general housekeeping duties during adventuring. This is my familiar, Rurii. And as for my partner..."

"Alec Dia. I'm an A-rank magic swordsman, and Shiori's partner."

"B-rank and A-rank. I must say, that makes me that much more confident in asking this of you."

An adventurer's rank indicated the extent to which they could be trusted. A person's character was an important part of being promoted to B-rank and above. An adventurer with issues of attitude and conduct would never make it past C-rank.

Conny knew this, and the relief was clear in the blue eyes behind his glasses. He took a sip from his cup of tea with a polite word of thanks, then let out a sigh—it was as if some of the weight and agitation he'd been carrying with him had dissipated.

"My apologies," he explained. "It's my first time doing anything like this and it's quite nerve-racking."

"Please, think nothing of it," Shiori replied. "Take your time and please relax."

The Tris Cathedral had its own private knight division, and so it was rare for them to ever need to call upon adventurers. That Conny was doing so now meant there was a problem that was beyond the scope of the knights' abilities.

"An issue has come up regarding a Nativity Festival event. Reverend Jens mentioned that you might be able to help."

"Oh, Jens," said Shiori, surprised.

Shiori had just been thinking of him. Reverend Jens Floyen was responsible for overseeing the Tris Orphanage, which was connected to the cathedral. He was a

truly wonderful man and well known among the guild since it had started sending adventurers to meet and spend time with the children at the orphanage. If Shiori's name had come up by way of Jens's recommendation, it was unlikely she would be walking into something she couldn't handle. Or at least, she hoped so.

"We have a musical performance scheduled for tomorrow but we've run into trouble with the performers. That's where we'd like to ask for your assistance."

"This is not the church choir we're talking about, is it? I saw the posters and was quite intrigued."

The choir performance, put on by young women dressed as saints, was considered *the* highlight of the Nativity Festival. It was held at the grand and majestic auditorium, and the melodies of the pure, graceful young saintesses were said to be magnificent. Many had come to Tris purely for the church choir, though it seemed that Conny was talking about something else.

"Yes, the choir is considered a part of the Nativity Festival mass, but in recent years the number of attendees for the performance has exploded. It's always a full house and many have no choice but to give up on the event entirely. Given that it's a part of the mass itself, we can't just schedule multiple performances, so this year we decided to hold another musical event to give others a chance to enjoy something different."

Conny's eyebrows drooped. He seemed truly troubled.

"For our main event, we called upon the services of a songstress from the royal capital, and a symphony orchestra. Unfortunately, most of the orchestra have fallen horribly ill. It appears they caught something at an inn on the way here. A stomach bug of sorts..."

Conny didn't provide much more in the way of details, but the rest was easy enough for Shiori to infer. Rurii munched on one of the sweets at the table and gave a sympathetic wobble.

"That's...quite the predicament," said Shiori. "Even sitting up won't be easy for them in that state."

"Exactly. Their stomachs hurt, they're on the verge of being sick every minute

—certainly in no shape to perform. And sending them out as they are only increases the chance that the bug spreads even further. Luckily, the songstress and all the female members of her group are safe—their carriages and rooms were separate from the males, you see. But as you can imagine, putting together a new group or preparing a replacement at this stage is impossible."

"I completely understand your circumstances, but...where do you think *I* can be of service?"

Shiori could understand if Conny wanted her to help nurse the orchestra back to health, but that did not seem to be what he had in mind.

"I've heard all sorts of stories about you from Reverend Jens, and one such story was about your illusion magic. He said that you're capable of remarkable music and imagery through the use of it. I came here today to ask you to support the songstress's performance tomorrow. Even the Tris Cathedral has heard about your famed 'narrated pictures.'"

Shiori's narrated pictures were something she did on her visits to the orphanage—using her own unique illusion magic, she brought to life scenes from stories, complete with music and sound effects. Apparently, some had even heard rumors of it and snuck over to the orphanage to watch them when she was there.

Shiori had been surprised to learn that it wasn't just children watching her movies, but this request was beyond anything she could have imagined. She was quite literally being asked to assist the main event of a musical performance at the nation's biggest festival. On top of that, the performance itself was the afternoon of the following day. It simply didn't feel like enough time for her to get prepared—not mentally, nor in terms of practice.

"The songstress feels responsible and has said she's happy to work something out, but all she has is a few string and woodwind instruments—it's not at all the scale people will be expecting... Some of the top brass of the church are worried that the main event might only succeed in letting people down."

Conny nervously pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, then went on.

"I know this is perhaps unbecoming to hear from a man of the cloth, but we receive a significant amount of donations from the wealthy and influential who

believe in the aims of the festival and performance. If we leave them disappointed, there's every chance we can say goodbye to any donations at all. We're expecting to have the margrave and his wife in attendance, along with Count Enqvist. We've already received donations from those who dabble in the arts, like the Lovner family. Then there's the fact that the margrave has also made a personal donation outside of the official family one..."

Conny put his hands on his knees and clenched them into fists.

"We simply cannot afford to fail," he muttered. "It's expected that we put as much effort into this as we do the choir performance. Shiori, you're our only hope. And of course, Alec is more than welcome to join you. So, please..."

Shiori felt Alec glance in her direction, waiting for her decision. Everything she'd heard about the margrave and his wife said they were generous and well-liked, and she knew firsthand that Count Enqvist was of fine character, having met him in the fall in the search for a lost child. Annelie Lovner was, of course, a wonderful person too. Shiori did not think any of them would blame the Cathedral if they were to hear the circumstances surrounding the performance, but she knew from her own research that they were all very influential among the nobility. She could also imagine how the other donors might feel after an underwhelming performance—she could sympathize with Conny when he said they could not fail.

This was a request that she had to decide on right here and now. But after a moment of thought, Shiori nodded. The request was worth doing.

"I will accept the request," she said.

Conny let out an awed gasp, and then his face burst into a smile.

"Oh, thank you *ever* so much! I'll take you to the Cathedral immediately. I want you to meet the songstress as soon as possible."

Though the songstress had said she would see to the problem herself, Shiori imagined she would still be nervous and worried. Shiori agreed to leave with Conny at once. She calmed the rushed Conny down, then had him fill in his request ticket and sign his contract. He offered a very generous sum, which was accepted without any need for haggling.

“Great. To the carriage, and on the double,” said Conny.

Shiori and Alec shared a nod and Rurii wobbled at their feet.

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Their carriage practically slid along the roads of crushed snow, but it was not like the ones Shiori sometimes saw, which were emblazoned with the Cathedral crest. In fact, at a glance, it looked just like any other.

“We use this carriage for anything outside of special events and diplomatic business,” said Conny with a wry chuckle. “There’s no need for us to make it obvious that we’re with the Cathedral right now, anyway. And besides, we don’t want the general public to know that there were any hiccups until at least *after* the performance is said and done.”

The songstress and her orchestra were quite famous in the capital, and it was likely that when people saw her without her usual ensemble on the day of the concert, they’d start to think that something strange was afoot.

“As long as the performance goes well, we can take any cascading fallout without too much issue. However, if news of this leaks, we could very well end up with less reputable journalists and gossipmongers pushing their way into the performance. It behooves us to ensure we create an environment where listeners can sit back, relax, and enjoy.”

It seemed that in this world—just as in Shiori’s own—there were disreputable media outlets and nosy gossips. Shiori cringed at the thought. The snow carriage entered the religious district while they talked, and eventually came to a stop at something like a back gate. After a few words with the knights stationed there, the carriage took off once again, but it was not long before it stopped one last time.

“My apologies, but we’ll have to walk from here,” said Conny. “There is an abundance of people around today, and there will be just as many, if not more, tomorrow.”

The grounds they found themselves in were vast, and Conny told them that under normal circumstances, the carriages took people to their destinations as required. However, on the night before the festival, the grounds were busy with various preparations, and the use of carriages became rather dangerous. Conny

led Shiori, Alec, and Rurii down roofed passageways that linked the different Cathedral areas, and on the way they passed a white building—by the looks of it, an infirmary.

“This is our clinic,” Conny explained. “It’s where we’re looking after the sick orchestra members.”

The trip from the royal capital was one that took several days. Just what kind of illness had they all come down with?

“Are they in critical condition?” asked Alec.

“No, nothing that bad. And most of them are past the worst of it, now. Unfortunately, the nausea and the stomachaches continue...so none are in a state to perform. They’ll need at least another two or three days.”

Conny cringed, uncertain of how to continue with his explanation.

“When the orchestra was at their inn the day before yesterday,” he eventually said, “one of its members helped to look after a guest who was sick and vomiting. We believe that’s when the infection began to spread. That particular guest, well...apparently they’d eaten schoner clams.”

“Ah, the schoner virus,” said Alec. “Well, winter *is* the season for shellfish.”

The two men couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Yes, we believe it to be the schoner virus,” replied Conny. “Though at the time, the band member thought that guest was merely drunk. They were aghast when they were told the following day what the guest was really afflicted with.”

“Um...schoner virus?” asked Shiori.

Wondering if it was something difficult to deal with, she tilted her head in curiosity.

“It’s a type of gastroenteritis caused by schoner clams,” said Alec. “They’re a bivalve found in Schoner Lake, which faces the royal capital. In these parts, Mane Lake in the Enqvist domain is famous for them. The thing is, sometimes they result in very bad cases of food poisoning, and it’s also highly contagious—very easy to catch from a person’s vomit and diarrhea, which makes it all sorts of troublesome. Back when the reasons for the illness weren’t properly

understood, it was endemic to the Schoner Lake region, and so it came to be called the schoner virus. That name has stuck."

"Oh, I see," said Shiori. "So it's like the norovirus. That's a nasty one to deal with..."

Now that Shiori knew what it was, she understood why it was better for the orchestra members to simply rest until they recovered. With so many people around at this time of year, you would only end up spreading the virus further.

"Norovirus?" asked Alec.

"Oh, right. It's a form of gastroenteritis, like the schoner virus, but common back where I come from. It too comes from consuming raw bivalves, and it's terribly contagious—so bad, in fact, that some food-related industries put a ban on the consumption of raw shellfish entirely. If a family member comes down with it, everyone in the household is made to stay home, even if they feel well."

"That's very cautious, but I think perhaps we in the kingdom should be doing the same. Every year, we see this spread during the winter. Perhaps because it's usually so expensive, in the winter lots of people will buy and eat shellfish that, well...they're really better off leaving alone."

"Indeed," said Conny, nodding gravely at Alec's comment.

"In any case, as soon as they heard that it might be the schoner virus, the orchestra did their utmost to respond, but a night had already passed and so everyone in that particular room ended up coming down with it. More and more got sick as their journey continued, and by the time they arrived in Tris yesterday, they were in quite the sorry state. Ordinarily, they wouldn't have continued to travel from the moment they found out about the spread of the virus, but...circumstances being what they were, the orchestra was left in quite a difficult predicament."

It certainly wouldn't have been easy—they were the starring event of a festival renowned both in and outside of the nation, and now they were left to decide whether or not to pull out of the performance completely.

"Yeah, they were in a tough spot all right," said Alec.

"On the bright side, their efforts at least kept the songstress and the female

members of the orchestra from coming down with anything. And to be doubly safe, they avoided people wherever possible, so we haven't heard of any cases spreading to the towns and villages they passed through afterwards... Hm? What's this now?"

Conny's eyes grew wide at the sight of a group of women, all in white, rushing out of the laundry connected to the clinic. They must have been a group of nurses. They wore white hats and white face masks, and carried a mountain of laundry with them.

"Oh! Sir Conny!" exclaimed one. "We've got so much washing to do that we can't manage the laundry. The Cathedral knights have gotten the visitor linens out for us, but they've said that's as much as they're capable of..."

"We're making full use of the heater and the iron we have, but there's just so much," added another. "We can barely get any of it to dry... What we've got here is still damp, but we just don't have anything better."

"Oh my... That's quite the conundrum."

The nurses had put in an emergency request with a manufacturer in order to acquire more linens, but were left twiddling their thumbs as they waited for a response. The Cathedral clinic was only ever intended to be used for Cathedral staff, and it was not prepared to deal with a sudden influx of some twenty patients, though this was less an issue of man power and more an issue of supplies—linens, to be exact. First they washed the dirty sheets by hand, sterilized them in boiling water, then dried them, but the bigger sheets took a long time to dry. Even quicker-drying flax and gauze materials dried more slowly in the winter.

Shiori glanced up at Alec, who was by her side. His smile told her he was happy for her to do as she liked.

"Sir Conny," she said. "Do you mind if I give the nurses a hand? It won't take me long to handle at least the laundry load they're carrying with them now."

"Hm? Oh, but..."

"I am a housekeeping mage, and my magic is for just this kind of work. It's my specialty. It will not take long, I assure you."

The shocked Conny looked at Shiori, then took out his pocket watch to check the time.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said. “At the very most we have twenty.”

“That’s more than enough time.”

In order to avoid contracting an infection herself, Shiori opted not to use the laundry area itself, and instead went to work in the space under the entrance to the clinic. There were a total of nine damp sheets, and they were already dry enough that she could finish them all with time to spare. Shiori had the nervous, hesitant nurses fold a sheet in half then hold it at either end, then sent a warm wind through them. The nurses were shocked to see the sheets drying right before their eyes.

“Amazing!” one exclaimed. “They’re totally dry.”

The nurses quickly folded the now-dry sheet with practiced ease, then brought her another one. The nine sheets were dried in no time.

“Um, you mentioned that you use magic for housekeeping,” said one of the nurses. “Is it easy for you to boil water with which we may disinfect the laundry?”

“Of course.”

Conny looked at his watch again.

“We have a little less than five minutes,” he said.

At this point, a nurse showed up with a big tub that was filled with gowns for patients. It had been washed, but not yet disinfected.

“All the large pots for disinfecting the washing are already being used, so if you could please do this for us...” said the nurse, placing the tub before Shiori.

Shiori had Alec create a wind behind her to prevent any of them from being splashed with water, then cast water magic to fill the tub, after which she quickly brought the water to a boil. The gauze clinic gowns bounced around in the bubbling water, and Shiori allowed it all to boil for about three minutes.

“Oh, thank you!” cried one of the nurses. “This will make our next steps that much easier.”

“Just glad I could help,” replied Shiori.

Now that their most pressing concern had been seen to, the nurses saw Shiori, Alec, and Conny off with relieved smiles.

“Having seen your housekeeping abilities with my own eyes, I must say I’m very impressed,” said Conny as he led them to the place where the songstress was waiting.

By the looks of things, Shiori seemed to have earned Conny’s trust, and his tense nervousness relaxed into a smile.

The two adventurers and their slime companion passed by a few more Cathedral facilities before arriving at an elegantly designed building. The Cathedral knights on either side of the door gave a salute in greeting—and Shiori remembered one of them being a gatekeeper at the orphanage. He smiled when he saw her.

“Welcome to the guest house,” said Conny. “This is where the songstress and her band are staying.”

“Are the other performers here also?”

“No. The songstress and her orchestra were originally scheduled to stay at a hotel in the city proper, but circumstances dictated otherwise.”

Other visitors to the Cathedral were also staying at the guest house, but perhaps they were out—there was barely a sign of any other souls.

They walked in through the refined entrance, and a man Shiori recognized was there to greet them. It was Reverend Jens Floyen from the orphanage. Wearing a calm, gentle smile, he waved at Rurii, who stretched out a feeler to wave a “hello” of its own.

“Ah, fantastic,” he said. “I take your presence to mean you have accepted the request?”

“Yes. But what are you doing here, Jens?”

“It was I who recommended you for the job, so I wanted to be here in case you needed anything.”

A night earlier, Jens had come to the Cathedral for the evening mass and to

give his scheduled report—that was when he'd bumped into Conny, who was running around trying to work out how to help the suffering orchestra members, and what he should do next.

"I was called here on business, but took the chance to see you. And by the way," Jens said, turning to Alec. "It's Alec, yes? Thank you ever so much for your visit. The children loved your performance."

"Oh... They did?"

"Very much so, yes. Many of the children have become enamored by swordsmen as a result. If you have some time I do so hope you can share more of your stories with us. The children would love it."

Alec's eyes bulged with surprise, then settled as he felt suddenly self-conscious.

"Well...in that case, when I next have the chance I'll be sure to visit."

"Please do. But if you don't mind me asking, what are you doing here, Alec? Are you helping Shiori?"

Having reunited with Shiori and essentially scheduled another adventurer visit, Jens next let his curiosity take the lead in their conversation. Shiori herself was slightly embarrassed, clearly unsure of how to explain. Alec chuckled, doing the explaining for her.

"Yes, that's the long and short of it," replied Alec. "We started working together recently."

"Is that so? I see... Though come to think of it, having you here is actually quite fortuitous."

There was something more to Jens's statement, and Shiori and Alec didn't know what—all they knew was there was a touch of something ominous to his words.

"In what way?" asked Alec.

"Miss Felicia—er, that's the songstress's name—is terribly worried. She seems to think all this commotion of late is part of some kind of plot."

Shiori gasped—this was the last thing she had expected to hear.

“Plot, you say?” asked Conny, his gentle expression hardening. “I’ve heard nothing of this.”

As the organizer of this very event, this was not the kind of topic that Conny could allow to slip by unaddressed. As they walked towards the room in which the songstress was staying, they lowered their voices and continued their conversation.

“She seems to think it’s all a little strange, and called on me for a consultation. When I asked what was on her mind, she revealed her suspicions.”

Being that Jens spent his days looking after kids, each with their own individual problems and complicated inner lives, he had become quite adept at getting information out of those he spoke with. When Conny had left for the Adventurers’ Guild, the Archbishop Oskar Lundgren had come to check up on the songstress, but the visit ended up being little more than that, and so the songstress had then called upon Jens to listen to her troubles.

“She says she suspects all of this to be the work of her rival,” said Jens. “The rival in question is a top starlet who has her eyes set on being the most famous in the capital and has, in the past, bullied the songstress on numerous occasions... Apparently this rival made it quite clear she wasn’t happy about Felicia being invited to perform at the Nativity Festival.”

Being invited to the Nativity Festival was indeed quite the honor, and very prestigious. No rival would have enjoyed seeing such a thing happen—it only made the songstress’s position harder to reach.

“It is true that a variety of singers were considered for the performance,” said Conny. “However, in the end it was Miss Felicia who was deemed the most suitable. She’s capable of a stunning range, from current hits and lullabies, to ancient melodies and religious pieces. I don’t know who this rival is, exactly, but if they weren’t selected, well...I would hope they’d at least understand the reasoning for it.”

Conny’s face scrunched up with displeasure. He then seemed to realize that the tone with which he had spoken was unbecoming of his position, and apologized profusely.

“But are we quite certain that there’s a plot or conspiracy going on?” asked

Alec. “If someone is getting people sick intentionally, it sounds like we should bring the knights into this.”

Jens’s eyebrows drooped and he shook his head.

“Apparently there’s no proof of such a thing. Nonetheless, Felicia is quite shaken by the timing of it all. And if it *is* true, it’s a huge problem. However, I’m hopeful that having two distinguished and high-ranking adventurers at her side will put her at ease.”

Distinguished and high-ranking. The sudden and excessive words of praise startled Shiori, and Alec chuckled at the sight of it before giving her a pat on the back. Jens smiled warmly at them and went on.

“I’ve heard that you’re very much an equal to the S-rank Zack, Alec. And I am hearing more and more of Shiori these days. Ever conscientious and considerate, and always courteous and respectful, regardless of the request. You’ve had to work very hard just to master the language here, and yet in just a few years you’ve risen through the ranks—you have made quite the impression on many of those around you, Shiori, and you should be very proud of yourself.”

Jens’s words were kind and heartfelt, and it warmed Shiori’s heart to know that someone completely unexpected had, in his own way, been watching over her. She bowed her head a little to accept his words graciously, and felt Alec’s hand circle up to her shoulder from her back, where he gave her a few reassuring pats.

“Felicia’s room is just over there,” said Conny. “For starters, let’s just hear what she has to say.”

The room was at the end of the corridor on the second floor, which was protected by knights at either side. One look at the two knights’ faces made it crystal clear that they were not merely there for show. Conny spoke a few words to them, then turned back to Shiori and Alec.

“Let’s head inside,” he said. He pushed at the thick wooden door with a hand, before announcing himself. “It’s Conny, miss. I’ve brought the adventurers.”

“Please come in,” replied a refined female voice.

The adventurers stepped inside. The first thing that jumped out at them was a thick pillar, adorned with an engraving of a bird in flight against a gentle backdrop of vines. There was not an oppressive or overbearing feeling in the room, however, and the tranquil ivory wallpaper helped to give a relaxed impression. In the middle of the room, which was clearly reserved for guests of a particularly high standing, was a long sofa, upon which sat a girl with kind features, who wore her wavy, golden-brown hair up. Beside her was a woman who resembled a home tutor—she wore silver-rimmed glasses and kept her dark brown hair in a ponytail. Around the two women sat a number of other girls. Shiori assumed the woman in the center was the songstress, and those around her the orchestra members who had managed to escape catching the schoner virus.

“Thank you so much for coming,” said the songstress. “Please, come in.”

She stood to her feet to give an elegant bow, and with a soft smile, gestured for them to enter. Though her appearance gave off an impression of sweetness and frivolity, the light in her eyes showed there was something stronger and deeper at her core.

If the holy woman existed, perhaps this is what she’d be like.

This was the feeling Shiori got as she and Alec moved further into the room, but as they did so, the songstress’s eyes went from intelligent to suddenly sultry. Her gaze, which wafted with more than a hint of passion, was not aimed at Shiori, but rather at the man standing by her side. Shiori knew exactly what meaning lay in the girl’s eyes, and it sent a needle through her heart.

I, erm... I don’t like this much at all...

Shiori didn’t like it one bit, but she was a professional, and so didn’t let her feelings show in her expression. Still, in a moment of worry, she allowed her gaze to flicker to her partner, at which point she had to stifle a gasp.

In contrast to the lust that wafted from the songstress, Alec’s handsome features were the very portrait of how Shiori herself felt. His brow was furrowed, his eyes were narrowed sharply, and his mouth was drawn into a line of discomfort. He was doing his best to hide it, but failed to conceal the disgust that bubbled up within himself.

“Alec...” Shiori whispered.

Shiori’s soft admonishment—a gentle prod to tell him he was being too obvious with his distaste—brought Alec back to reality. His expression lightened, and he walked with Shiori towards the songstress as if the last instant hadn’t even occurred. The songstress smiled at Alec, her eyes still wafting with desire, but Alec merely held her gaze, his body language conveying that he was completely uninterested in her.

Shiori felt herself getting flustered at the tension drifting through the air. Jens and Conny glanced awkwardly at one another. Just then, a giggle drifted from a corner of the room, spreading through all the girls who were seated around the songstress. They seemed to be enjoying the moment, or perhaps they were poking fun at the songstress herself.

“Come now—that’s very unbecoming of you, Felicia,” said the woman in the silver-rimmed glasses.

The lust and desire dissipated immediately from the songstress’s eyes, and her face filled with a cheeky, playful grin.

“I’m sorry. I felt bad doing it, but I wanted to test you a little,” she said in a friendly tone, with a graceful bow. “I am Felicia Amren, a singer from Alvestam Hall.”

“I am Shiori Izumi, a B-rank adventurer hailing from the Tris Adventurers’ Guild, and a housekeeping mage. This is my familiar, Rurii.”

“Alec Dia. I’m an A-rank adventurer from the same guild, and a magic swordsman. I would appreciate it if you could explain to me exactly what kind of ‘test’ you were talking about.”

Alec’s question showed he was at once both annoyed and confused, and as she gestured for them to take a seat, Felicia proceeded to reveal all.

“Whenever a gentleman is to be hired, I like to make sure whether or not they are worth it. We’ve hired a number of men for protection services, but there’s just so many who have more on their mind than just the job at hand...”

Felicia’s eyebrows drew an awkward and apologetic, if still beautiful, arc as she spoke.

“And so what you did just now was your test, so to speak?”

“Yes.”

“And you can learn all you need from just that alone...?”

Alec was still suspicious—even if he *had* passed, he couldn’t be sure her opinion wouldn’t shift on a whim.

“Indeed I can. I do my best to be very observant. Surprisingly, people will either reveal their interest right then and there, or make it obvious that they’re pretending not to notice. When they do, it makes it clear to me that their attitude will impact their work.” Felicia then tilted her head and grinned. “But you passed with flying colors. Nobody has ever looked at me the way you did just now.”

The girls around Felicia giggled quietly. It was a very curious atmosphere indeed—perhaps because most of those present made their living in the field of the arts.

Shiori wasn’t sure how to feel about it all, and looked at Alec, who let out a sigh and shrugged. At his feet, a concerned Rurii gave the man’s leg a few sympathetic pokes.

Still, I can’t help feeling like they’re all acting with a kind of false bravado...

Shiori surveyed the room and the people in it without drawing attention to herself. Though at a glance it seemed they were all up to mischief, they were also unusually spirited, to the extent that it felt almost unnatural. Anybody could tell that much—in some sense it felt like their behavior was an attempt to push away their worries.

“Miss Felicia,” said Conny, clearly uncomfortable, “shall we get down to business?”

The laughter stopped at once, and the air in the room grew tense—clearly, they really *were* worried about the situation they were in.

“I’ll handle the explanation,” said the woman in the glasses, with an air of control.

Though she had eyed them with some enmity earlier, that was gone now,

replaced by a friendly smile. While her outfit and dress were simple, anything but ostentatious, her smile was refined and elegant.

“I am Karina Svanholm, Felicia’s manager. I had heard that we were requesting only Miss Shiori, but seeing as you have brought this gentleman with you, am I right to assume that you have already heard about...the potential danger to Felicia’s person?”

“No, we still haven’t heard anything in detail. Alec is my partner. We work together as a team.”

“Ah, I see. Nonetheless, it is terribly good fortune that you’ve brought a swordsman with you. We are asking two jobs of you—the first is supporting us with the musical performance, and the second is protection.”

As Karina spoke, Felicia sat up straight, though Shiori still noticed the slight trembling at her fingertips. This must have been a manifestation of the worry in her heart. Karina cast a kindly glance in the songstress’s direction, then put a hand softly to her shoulder.

“Let’s start with the protection request,” said Karina. “I believe that will help put everyone at ease.”

Felicia cast a worried look at her manager, who replied with a resolute nod before continuing.

“Felicia has a rival—a fellow songstress looking to usurp her throne, so to speak. Her name is Hildegarde Lindi. She matches Felicia in terms of singing ability, emotion, and intensity, but Felicia is a step ahead in terms of the variety of genres she can perform. Perhaps that is what bothers Hildegarde. All the same, she is constantly criticizing Felicia... And that’s not all.”



Karina took a breath, sighed, then went on.

“Perhaps she’s frustrated that she can’t turn the tables on Felicia, but Hildegarde has since resorted to the contemptible—intimidation. At first, it was merely the hiding of personal belongings and other such trifling pranks, but as of late, things have escalated. It’s to the point now that we fear there is real danger to Felicia’s life.”

“To her life? That’s certainly crossing the line.”

“Yes. Felicia’s stage shoes were tampered with so that the heels would break and send her tumbling down the stairs, and pins have been found in her outfits. Once, during rehearsal, one of the lights in the ceiling fell.”

Karina’s voice trembled as she spoke, as though she were reliving these very memories. By her side, Felicia grew pale, which was an odd match for the vibrant blush she’d applied to her cheeks. Shiori frowned. This was no longer mere intimidation—it was a crime.

“Have you not filed a report with the knights?” she asked. “Going that far is attempted murder.”

“We would like nothing more than to do so. However, at this point we’ve been fortunate to avoid injury. If any incident were to be revealed within the Hall, it would erupt into scandal—for this reason, we’ve been strongly advised against filing a report at this stage.”

They clearly wanted to avoid any harm to the Alvestam Hall’s name and reputation, but on the other hand, doing nothing about the situation was extremely dangerous.

“I recommend filing a report as soon as you notice anything new,” said Shiori. “If you wait until the next time something happens, it might well be too late.”

“Yes, we intend to do just that. And we will,” said Karina, nodding. “In any case, we can’t help wondering if the recent events are related. That’s why we’d like to request someone to protect Felicia.”

Karina glanced at Alec, who nodded.

“Understood. I’ll do it,” he said.

“Thank you so much. That’s such a relief,” said Felicia, the tension in her

shoulders easing as she spoke.

Her relief seemed to spread across the room, to all the girls around the songstress.

“Very well. Let’s move on to the topic of the performance,” said Karina.

Now this was something that Shiori had to undertake alone, without Alec’s assistance.

“Before you begin, do you mind if I make a few things clear?” asked Shiori.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I have agreed to support the performance...but there are certain things that are beyond the scope of my abilities, and I would like the chance to explain the ways in which I can support you.”

“Go on.”

The songstress and her orchestra members looked at each other with worried expressions, and Shiori began her explanation.

“Firstly, when it comes to musical ability, I am in every way an amateur. My experience goes only as far as enjoying music as a listener, and sometimes attending concerts. With that in mind, I cannot use my illusion magic for a song that I am not familiar with. Considering we have only one day before the performance, I simply am not able to play the missing parts of a professional orchestra.”

“Oh, dear me!” uttered Felicia.

The songstress had gone pale once more, and was about to stand up when Karina sat her back down, assuring her that the housekeeping mage’s explanation was not yet done.

“What I *can* do,” said Shiori, “is project a movie for the audience that works in harmony with your performance.”

“A *movie*...? Whatever do you mean...?” asked Felicia.

Everyone looked skeptical—none knew what Shiori’s word meant.

“I will project moving images upon the stage.”

“Images...that move?!” exclaimed Felicia, completely forgetting her manners for a moment.

Though silent, Karina’s expression, too, looked no different.

“Yes. I believe it will be easier to understand if I simply give a demonstration. Hm...”

Shiori dropped into a moment of thought, then projected an image no larger than a *kamishibai* picture-book performance—a lavish retelling of a particular fairytale scene. In the scene, a poor girl was made into a beautiful maiden with a beautiful dress by a kindly fairy, and attended a castle ball. She danced with the handsome prince, but when the clock’s bell chimed and she realized she was out of time, the girl panicked and ran away, leaving only a single glass shoe, which the prince held in his hand, a lonely look wavering in his eyes.

The movie was without music or speech, and so was not unlike a silent film. All the same, Shiori’s audience was glued to it, forgetting even to breathe as the scene played out. When the illusion finally dissipated and faded, everyone looked as if they were waking from a dream, and were left in a few seconds of awed silence before they broke into cheers.

“Marvelous! Why, I’ve never seen anything so amazing!”

“That was so beautiful! It felt like I was a part of the world in the story!”

Jens, who was used to seeing this level of performance, nodded happily, while Conny, who was seeing it for the first time, was left frozen in shock. The orchestra members chatted excitedly back and forth until Karina told them all to quieten down, at which point a calm returned to the room. Felicia was beyond excited, however, and her cheeks flushed red as she spoke.

“So you’re saying you’ll be able to create something like this to go with my songs, yes? Wonderful...simply wonderful. Even with a smaller-scale band, I’m sure those who attend will be more than satisfied!”

“I hope so,” said Shiori. “Along with stories, I can also use my illusion magic to recreate scenery too.”

Shiori once again cast her illusion magic, this time creating something she often saw on music television programs—an awe-inspiring morning mist

hanging in the air as bubbles and bird feathers drifted among it all.

Felicia let out a deep sigh of admiration, and the orchestra members all looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

“We’ll get started picking songs right away,” said Felicia. “Then you can listen to them so we can decide the best imagery to go together with them. Are you able to create movies based on requests for particular songs?”

“Yes, as long as it is within the scope of my abilities.”

The songstress and her orchestra had been filled with worry, but now, finally, they saw hope. The now serious-looking Felicia was ready to jump straight into talking about the set list, but Karina once again had to pull her back in line, reminding her that Shiori still wasn’t finished.

“Come now, girls,” she said, “the housekeeping mage isn’t done yet. It looks like there are still some details she needs to inform us of.”

It looks like Karina plays the role of big sister among all the girls...

Though Karina and Felicia were about the same age, Karina was calm, cool, and composed in a way that made her seem significantly older. She urged Shiori to continue.

“Another thing I have to inform you of is the length of time of each performance. Though it’s a little embarrassing to admit, my magical power is quite limited, and I would like to request that each song be...let’s see...about five or six minutes long at most.”

Shiori could actually perform her image accompaniment for longer periods of time, but she wanted to be careful and felt it was best to err on the side of caution, which meant shorter songs.

“Very well— we’ll make sure to select songs that are about five minutes long. Please give us a little time to get a list together.”

Though it was likely the orchestra already had a set list prepared for the performance, the fact that they could so quickly change it based on the circumstances was true proof of their professionalism. Letting the songstress get to work, Karina turned to Shiori and Alec.

“The new set list shouldn’t take much longer than an hour to prepare,” she said. “What will the two of you do in the meantime?”

“Considering we’re here for protection duties also, would you mind if we remained in the room?” asked Alec.

“Not at all.”

“Then I’ll have tea prepared at the seats by the window,” said Conny. “It’ll be ready in a moment.”

Conny hurriedly left the room, and Shiori, Alec, and Jens all moved to the window so as not to disturb the songstress.

“Well then, I’d best be off,” said Jens. “And how about you, Rurii? Perhaps you’d like to accompany me for a stroll?”

The slime seemed to consider its options for a moment, then pointed a feeler towards a small gap in the shelving.

“Hm...? Oh, I see. You’ll handle bug extermination for us, then?”

The slime trembled in the affirmative, and Jens burst into laughter.

“So very diligent. Well, if you insist, we’d be only too happy for your help. Perhaps you could start in the kitchen and pantry?”

No matter how clean a place was kept, there was a certain black bug that always found its way into places once it caught the scent of food. The bug was well accustomed to colder climates, and had arrived via ships carrying import goods, after which it had multiplied. In the colder seasons, when food was more scarce, the bug made a home wherever people stored food, and there it continued to multiply. Even the Cathedral’s exclusive team of cooks were at their wit’s end.

“You go off and have a good time,” said Shiori. “You’ll be able to find your way back by yourself, I assume?”

The slime wobbled a reply: “*But of course!*”

Shiori and Alec watched as Jens left with the buoyant slime—which seemed happy to be of use—then turned back to the songstress and her orchestra. Felicia’s gaze was focused.

“Alec,” said Shiori, “do you really think this is the work of Felicia’s rival?”

Alec kept his eyes on the orchestra, deep in their discussion, as he replied.

“Hard to say at the moment...but it all sounds a little too convenient, if you ask me.”

“Too convenient?”

“Yep. The first thing that bothers me is how small the scope of infection has been.”

Shiori realized then that Alec held doubts similar to her own.

“Right,” she said. “The schoner virus is extremely contagious, yes? They said that the first orchestra member to be infected was smart about it, but even then...”

“Indeed. It’s a wonder that the virus only got to the members in that one shared room. Pretty much any inn you visit on the roads to Tris during the Nativity Festival is going to be packed. It all started with that one orchestra member looking after someone who was vomiting—even if the doctor came straight away, it’s hard to imagine that the orchestra member wouldn’t have been in contact with others before then. The vomiting individual might not have been where it all started.”

And no matter how kind that one orchestra member was, he almost certainly would have called upon the inn staff to clean up any mess—surely he’d have extended that much kindness to a simple drunkard. And yet, none of the inn staff or other guests at the inn had become infected, which seemed highly unusual.

But what if the orchestra member in question had known that the drunkard had schoner virus from the start? In that case, would it have been possible to keep the spread of the infection confined...?

“Let’s say for a moment that it was intentional, though,” Alec continued. “Why the need to do this in such a roundabout way? If you wanted to cause trouble, the simplest and most straightforward method would be to get Felicia herself infected.”

And if they were talking about someone who continued to engage in dangerous intimidation tactics, such a person would surely have gone straight for the songstress herself. By contrast, doing things in this fashion made it seem like the person behind it all didn't want to cause too big of a scene.

"I don't much like to entertain the idea," muttered Alec, "but it's entirely possible that Felicia herself is behind this."

"Huh...?"

Could that even be? After all, she was the one who was harmed most by the loss of half of her ensemble.

"Not the best option, but it's *an* option if you want to frame someone," said Alec. "You saw the act she put on for me—she's one hell of an actress. It wouldn't pose a challenge for her if she wanted people to think she was the victim."

Alec's brow furrowed as he went on.

"She could arrange things so that she looks like she's in trouble, and it would place further suspicion on her rival. For example...okay, let's say she calls her rival to a staircase, and it's just the two of them. She lets out a scream and throws herself down the stairs. Yeah, it's going to hurt, but she can make everyone think that her rival did it. It puts her in a position to look like the heroine clawing her way out of tragedy, while her rival is labeled a criminal and forced off the stage, destined to disappear into obscurity."

"Oh my..." said Shiori, who could do little more than cringe at the thought.

"It's an old-fashioned method, but surprisingly effective. Even just turning suspicion on someone—the idea that 'they *might* have done it'—is powerful. I'm sure there are plenty of people who would be all too happy to jump on the bandwagon and criticize Felicia's rival, however fair or unfair such behavior might be."

Alec was right—it was indeed a possibility. Felicia looked like an innocent young woman, but they knew after meeting her that there was a much harder and more callous side to her, also. Not to mention, she had fought her way through the ranks in the royal capital to rise past her rival and to the top. She

was not entirely helpless, that much was for sure.

“The story of a songstress who suffers through the scheming of her rival only to stand up to it, climb on the stage, and find success through adversity... It would cement her place as a true heroine, and also send her rival plummeting into the depths for her cowardice.”

“Alec... Don’t you think you’re going a little *too* far, now...?”

“Sorry. She just gave me a very bad first impression.” Alec turned away for a moment, chuckling wryly, with a slightly awkward expression. “I am just *not* good when it comes to women who are calculating like that.”

Come to think of it, he did mention some horrible experiences with women back before he became an adventurer.

Alec had been horribly burned by the woman he loved at the point of their breakup, and he had met groups of unscrupulous women who approached him purely for his status. It seemed like there really *were* women who would plot and scheme just to see their rivals fall.

As she thought about Alec’s explanation, which felt oddly detailed, she glanced up at his profile. His eyebrows were creased into a frown, and he stared off into the distance, then sighed as if letting go of an old memory.

“In any case, let’s keep things in the realm of what we know,” said Alec. “If there really *is* a plot at play here, it might well be worth looking into that drunkard at the inn and the orchestra member who took care of them. They may be accomplices in all of this.”

“That’s a good point.”

Shiori hoped they were only overthinking things, and sighed at the way things seemed to be spiraling into detective-novel territory. Her gaze once again fell back on the stern and conscientious features of Felicia, deep in discussion, and Karina, who watched over her quietly.

3

Upholstered chairs were brought in along with tea. After they were all seated, Shiori and Alec brought up the possibility that what was happening to Felicia might be an inside job. Conny's eyes went wide with surprise.

"You think someone might have spread the schoner virus intentionally?" he asked, incredulous. "But that's... Well, actually, come to think of it, the circumstances are indeed quite odd."

"If we're just overthinking the whole thing," said Alec, "then that's all it is. However..."

Conny dropped into thought. His gaze drifted over towards Felicia.

"After we brought them all to the Cathedral yesterday, we put in a report with the city's disease prevention division, but just to be on the safe side we also sent a messenger bird to the parish along the main route of travel. The reply we received this morning said that there had been no viral outbreak to speak of."

It seemed that the cases of schoner virus, which was known to be extremely infectious, were limited to a very specific group. Even the inn where the first case had been reported had seen no other infections. It was so unusual that Conny, too, thought it perplexing.

"So the infections began *after* everyone boarded for Tris?" asked Alec.

"Yes. The male orchestra members began falling ill one after another about three hours after departure. Considering the incubation period of the schoner virus, this is unsurprising. Knowing that Tris has dedicated medical facilities, they decided to simply grit their teeth and bear the conditions until they arrived. None of them wanted it to grow into anything bigger than it already was. They didn't stop at any further towns or villages, and when nature called, well...they handled that particular business out in the snow."

"Oh my... That's so awful..." uttered Shiori.

She felt a wave of pity wash over her. At the same time, she wondered. It was

about five hours from the inn in question to Tris, and they'd only stopped at one village before the first infection was discovered. After that, they did everything possible to avoid further contact with anyone else. That said, Shiori was still skeptical as to whether the group really could have been as careful as they claimed.

"Ever since Felicia and her band arrived, I've been so busy with everything that I haven't had a chance to sit and really think about it all..." said Conny, "but the more I consider it now, the stranger it all seems. I must admit, given the scope of the infection, I'm doubtful as to whether it even *is* the schoner virus we're dealing with."

"Right," added Alec, "which means..."

All three had reached the same conclusion—that it might be poison—and their expressions turned grave. There was no shortage of toxic herbs that had similar effects to the schoner virus, and because some of them grew naturally in parks and by the roadside, even an amateur could easily get a hold of them.

"Will the orchestra members be okay?" asked Shiori. "Are their lives in danger?"

"All of them are already recovering," replied Conny, "so I suspect they'll be fine. But if it *is* a poison at play, then things are much simpler. Magic can be used to remove the toxins. And if magic is indeed effective, it proves that it was poison after all. I'll get on it immediately."

Conny finished the rest of his tea. His brow furrowed as he went on.

"But regardless of whether or not it's poison or the schoner virus, if there really is a plot at work here, then...well, we simply will not stand for it. We cannot allow for self-interest or greed to result in harm to others."

The words were a reflection of Conny's character, and of his position—he was a man of the cloth, and he spent his days praying for peace and good health for all. He brought a notepad from his chest pocket and began scribbling into it—likely putting down a plan of action.

Shiori's gaze dropped to the floor and, without realizing it, found herself rubbing her arms. Alec *did* notice, however, and put a hand to her back. The

feel of it was reassuring—he gave her a gentle pat then took his hand away.

"What about security?" he asked.

"We usually keep security details strictly confidential," said Conny, "but we have four guards on watch at this location and the rooms of the injured. They're working in shifts."

"And as for patrols and security at the venue?"

"Because there are so many people from outside of the Cathedral during the Nativity Festival, we've increased the rate of patrols. That said, we'll beef up security around the guest house and clinic, and to be on the safe side, the venue as well. We'll have to inform the knights in case we confirm that poison was used."

"Right. It would be wise to put limits on the movements of the songstress and her traveling group too," said Alec. "We still don't know who is involved, nor in what way. It's possible they may be in contact with people outside of the band."

"True," replied Conny. "I just hope that all of this is our imaginations getting the best of us."

Conny sighed and went on scribbling in his notebook. When he was done, he tore the page out, folded it neatly, and headed to the doors of the guest house. A few people looked up and followed him with their gaze as he did so. Conny passed his note to one of the knights at the door, and though they spoke with great seriousness, they did so away from the eyes of Felicia and her orchestra, who went back to their discussions moments after he disappeared.

The knight gave a salute. Conny watched as he walked away, then returned to Shiori and Alec. Shiori sipped at her tea and milk, then turned her gaze to the garden outside the window. In the shadow of a tree, Shiori could see the reflection of the room behind her. She looked at Felicia, who was flipping through her sheet music as she talked, then found her gaze drawn to Karina, who sat beside the songstress.

Shiori let out a short gasp—she realized then that Karina was looking at her. She felt a sudden urge to turn and make sure, but pushed it down and instead observed the woman in the reflection of the window. It seemed that Karina was

unaware that Shiori could see her in return, and because the reflection was unclear, Shiori could not make out the expression on Karina's face. Nevertheless, she knew that she was being watched.

It was only when Felicia raised her head and spoke to Karina that the woman's gaze left Shiori. She nodded a few times at Felicia's comments, then turned back to the adventurers and spoke up.

"I apologize for the wait," she announced. "Felicia is ready."

Shiori looked at Alec and Conny, who nodded.

"Shiori," said Alec, putting on a calm and casual expression but speaking in a low, serious voice, "you and I have to be careful too. If someone is plotting something, we may be targeted because we present an obstacle. Let's try to avoid working apart, and be vigilant when it comes to food and drink—make sure you always have an antidote at hand."

Shiori gulped.

"Understood. I'll be on guard."

Felicia and her orchestra members were waiting with their sheet music at the ready. They were all quite excited after their passionate discussion.

"We've decided on a set list," said Felicia. "We've selected seven songs in total. We have two nursery rhymes, two popular hits, and three with a focus on operatic vocals. Some of them don't have musical scores—we've done our best to select shorter pieces."

Felicia giggled before going on.

"And the more songs we have, the more of your *movies* we get to see, yes?"

Shiori could do little more than muster a somewhat embarrassed smile, and her bashful expression caused Alec to erupt with laughter.

"How fantastic," he said, with an edge of sarcasm. "The most popular songstress of our current age has blessed you with her wondrous stamp of approval."

"There's something about your choice of words..." muttered Felicia, her eyes narrowing.

Alec let out a short “hmph,” and looked away, but did not deny the songstress’s comment.

“Well, whatever the case may be,” said Felicia, looking away with a sigh before rising to her feet and gesturing for her band members to follow suit, “we’d like to play the songs to help you get accustomed to them.”

“I’m ready whenever you are,” replied Shiori.

The girls arranged their seats in a half circle and sat down with their sheet music. Felicia stood in the center. Then came the sound of a double reed, followed by the tuning of the woodwind and string instruments.

“Only woodwind and string instruments,” murmured Shiori. “I can see how the performance might feel as though it lacked impact.”

A number of renowned musicians had been invited to take part in the musical performance, which was open to the public and held at the auditorium facing the Cathedral square. On top of that, the collaboration between the songstress Felicia and the Alvestam symphony orchestra had been widely promoted. The smaller ensemble they were left with was far better suited to an indoor performance, which naturally would have been worrying for the event organizers.

“You have experience with this sort of thing? Wait, but you said yourself that you’re an amateur...?” asked Alec, tilting his head quizzically.

“I’ve been to concerts a few times, but that’s it,” said Shiori. “Other than that, there’s just the times I’ve listened to musical performances at school festivals.”

She spoke the words without thinking anything of them, but Alec was left awed.

“You went to a school that had an *orchestra*?” he exclaimed. “That’s usually reserved for the upper classes.”

“Hm? Oh, erm...”

Shiori realized immediately that she’d put her foot in it again. In this world, it was usually only the wealthy and the nobles who could attend school. What was common sense to Shiori in terms of economic and educational standards

sometimes shocked people here. Though she was less likely to be asked about it now, when she'd first arrived, she'd often left Zack and the others quite perplexed indeed.

"Music as an extracurricular activity was fairly common, and not all that special," said Shiori. "Some even bought and owned their own instruments. My home was quite wealthy in that sense."

Alec was left with his mouth agape. For a moment he seemed about to say something, then stopped himself.

"I...I'm sorry, I can't say too much about it," Shiori said. "I'm not quite ready..."

Alec's eyebrows drooped for a moment, but then he let out a wry chuckle.

"It's fine. One day you'll open up to me, right? And besides, I have things of my own I'm still not ready to talk about." He smiled. "We're in the same boat, in that respect."

"We're ready to begin," said Felicia.

With the instrument tuning complete, the room fell into silence. A moment later, the performance began.

The orchestra played a variety of pieces—nursery rhymes that brought to mind youth and the beauty of the seasons; bittersweet love songs; popular theme songs from stageplays; and arias, hymns, and lullabies written by the kingdom's most renowned composers. The vocals that accompanied the woodwinds and string instruments were gentle and bright, at times longingly sweet, and at once relaxed and resonant. It was all so beautiful that it was hard to believe the group was in the midst of any issues whatsoever. But eventually, the clear and wonderful soprano of Felicia's singing dissipated into the air, reverberating in the silence as the performance came to a close.

For a moment, Shiori was silent. Then Felicia's tilted head revealed a cheeky grin, and the housekeeping mage snapped back to reality. She clapped her hands in excited admiration.

"Amazing! Felicia, you're amazing!" said Conny. "This is exactly why we invited you to perform for us!"

“Very impressive,” said Alec. “Can’t judge a book by its cover, after all.”

“Alec...” muttered Shiori.

The girls all smiled at the lavish praise that had been heaped upon them.

“I... I honestly wonder if you even need my illusion magic at all,” said Shiori. “It’s so wonderful already...”

That truly was how wonderful Shiori felt their selection of songs was. She couldn’t help but think that a larger orchestra and even her illusion magic would only get in the way of what was a truly beautiful listening experience.

“Well! I must admit I’m happy you would say as much,” said Felicia, “but I’m beyond excited to have you accompany the songs with your elegant movies.”

Shiori smiled at the excitement she felt in the songstress’s words.

“Very well. Shall I start showing you some illusion magic that might complement the setlist? And please don’t hesitate to let me know your opinions too.”

“Oh, please do!”

As the girls got into a lively discussion, Alec stepped away while ensuring he kept an eye on the proceedings. Conny, too, followed suit, then noticed a knock at the door and, with a quiet nod, went to see to it. It was a Cathedral knight, and though Alec could not see Conny’s expression because of the direction he was facing, he gathered by the severe look the knight wore that unfortunately, as they had suspected, the situation was not good.

Once Conny finished speaking with the knight, he closed the door and silently returned. He wore a placid smile so as to ensure none of the girls would think anything of the conversation he’d just had. Alec had thought him quite openly expressive, given he was from the church, but in these situations Conny clearly knew the value of secrecy. He kept his smile as he stood next to Alec, who smiled back. What followed would have looked like an ordinary conversation between friends to anyone out of earshot.

“All the male orchestra members were successfully healed of their poison,” said Conny. “A senior member of the city’s disease prevention division came

running soon after. According to the following analysis, they detected traces of poison herbs, meaning it was *not* the schoner virus."

"So they were tricked. And as for them saying that they came in contact with someone who'd ingested schoner clams...?"

"Well, as embarrassing as it is to admit, we simply believed them. The symptoms were identical. But now the idea that they caught it from a drunkard at the inn is suddenly very suspect."

"Right. And as for the orchestra members?"

"They were shocked, naturally. We've ordered that everyone working at the clinic say nothing, and we've increased security. We'll wait for word from above, then report it to the city knights."

Conny's expression tightened for a moment, and he let out a sigh.

"It's a crime. There's no other word for it. Someone is using the Nativity Festival to commit a crime. It terrifies me to even think about it."

"I hear you."

"We're boosting security for the girls here too. Being that there's still so much that's unclear, the increased security will also mean more eyes on them. As much as it pains me to say it, everyone from Alvestam Hall is a potential suspect."

There was no way of knowing yet whether it was simply an attempt to interfere with the songstress's performance, or if there was some other aim. However, they could not allow for any more damage, nor any further victims.

"And as for participation in the performance? Report this to the city knights and some of these people could be taken into custody."

Conny's eyebrows drooped slightly, hidden behind his bangs. For a moment his smile threatened to crumble, but he held it together.

"I'll have the senior officials negotiate something for us. Circumstances being what they are, that could prove difficult, but...so many people have been looking forward to this event. And it's so rare to see the songstress outside of the royal capital. We want nothing more than to allow the performance to

proceed as scheduled."

"I see. I'll do my part to see that it does."

"Thank you ever so much. I'll tell the girls once they've finished their discussion. I'm aware that the shock of it all may have an impact on their performance, but it simply cannot be helped. They simply must know—it's for their own protection."

"I agree."

The two men fell into silence.

A plot, huh? Humans—so deeply sinful, and so often greedy.

And perhaps it was not something Alec himself had a right to say, being that he himself had, through a plot, brought on the downfall of an entire nation. But Alec knew, all too painfully well, that there were many who had no issues hurting others out of greed and a desire for personal gain. Even now, the day before a most sacred occasion, someone had set a plot into motion.

Alec turned his gaze to his lover. Felicia made a suggestion of some sort, and Shiori then cast an illusion in response. It was something out of a stage play—the image of a dashing knight holding a maiden with black hair in his arms.

And at that moment, Alec's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at the sight of an expressionless Karina—looking down at his lover as she cast her illusion magic.

Chapter 2: Eve of the Songstress

1

Rurii had left Shiori in Alec's care and followed Jens to the kitchen, where the slime was set to take on an "emergency request" of sorts—insect extermination. The kitchen, where meals were prepared for all those who made a living at the Cathedral, was kept as clean as possible on a daily basis. However, its staff were plagued by harmful and uncleanly insects that seemed to come out of nowhere, drawn by the scent of food. And they were multiplying. Rurii couldn't help but wonder if it was acceptable to engage in the taking of lives in a holy place such as the Cathedral, but Jens seemed to sense the slime's concern and spoke to it in a low, placating voice.

"We turn a blind eye in cases when such things are unavoidable," he explained. "After all, we make our clothes and our food from other living creatures, and though the exact understanding of this differs a little between denominations, what is most important is to remain grateful to all that allows for us to live as we do."

Jens smiled at Rurii, and the slime felt glad that it could now throw itself into the job that lay ahead of it. As a slime, working in narrow spaces was but a trifling matter—it went easily behind the shelving and throughout the storehouse, eliminating whatever insects it found, then went beneath the floorboards to where their nest was, appearing back above ground only after its extermination mission was complete. It curled its feelers into a circle to indicate the act was done, and the kitchen staff relaxed with relief.

"You are a lifesaver, little one! Those bugs were giving us all sorts of grief!"

"Who would've thought they'd have a whole nest under the floorboards? No wonder we couldn't get rid of them."

While the kitchen staff talked and praised the slime, the head chef arrived with a great big tub filled with hot water. He gestured for Rurii to enter, after which he took to washing all the dust and grime from the slime. Perhaps it was

because the man was used to handling delicate foodstuffs, but his hands felt surprisingly wonderful—not too strong and not too weak—and Rurri trembled with great pleasure while the head chef and Jens chuckled.

Behind the bathing slime, the kitchen staff began talking amongst each other in a serious manner. There was a small fracture where the sink connected to the wall, and it was from here that the insects had gotten inside.

“Can’t believe there’s a gap right here,” said one. “We’ll have to stuff it with something.”

“Perhaps we can ask one of the construction staff to see to it? If we’re lucky, they’ll get to it quickly.”

Jens watched as they stuffed the minor gap with a piece of cloth and some bug-repellant herbs.

“At least they won’t have to worry about this problem for a while,” he muttered.

“I only wish we could get this little guy here more regularly,” said the head chef as he continued to wash Rurii. “What I would give to have the slime here once a month or thereabouts...”

The slime trembled a response—*I’d be all too happy to!*—and Jens, who had spent enough time with the slime to understand it, answered on its behalf.

“In that case, please allow me to pass your message on to the slime’s master. That’s okay with you, isn’t it, Rurii?”

The slime replied with another tremble. The head chef burst into joyous laughter.

“You truly are a clever one,” he said. “You understand everything we say, huh?”

“That it does,” replied Jens. “It’s also very calm and always thoughtful. That became very clear to me once I saw it interacting with the children at the orphanage.”

Rurii didn’t mind all these compliments in the slightest, and trembled once more.

With all the dust and grime washed off its body, the slime was back to looking sparkly clean and smooth as silk.

“Well, now that you’re all nice and clean, how about some tea?” asked the head chef. “We’ve got a special cake on account of the festival too. How about it?”

Special cake. The slime felt that Shiori’s baked treats and the Enander familiar snacks it sometimes ate were already especially delicious, but it had a feeling this cake would be a different kind of tasty. It wobbled in the affirmative, and the grinning head chef brought forth a completely white cake from the cold storage. The square base of the cake was covered in pure white cream, and on top of it was an image of vines and small birds, also drawn in cream. It wafted with the sweet aroma of sugar and milk, and certainly looked very delicious.

Rurii wobbled in excited anticipation as a slice of cake was placed in front of it. Between the slices of yellow cake, there was even more cream and fresh berries to go with it.

“Dig in!” said the head chef. “I hope you like it!”

The slime replied with a polite bow, and began absorbing the cake into its body with a feeler. It was overjoyed at the flavors—there was of course pillowy sweetness, but there was also a bursting, sweet acidity from the berries.

“The ‘Saint’s Cake’ was once reserved only for the high nobility, but we’ve come a long way since then,” said Jens, choosing only to drink his tea, perhaps thinking of the children waiting at the orphanage. “Now even more common citizens like ourselves can enjoy these wonderful treats.”

“You said it,” replied the head chef. “We can thank the king, his father, and his grandfather for that. It’s thanks to their efforts that we can live without worrying about starvation. But it’s not just food—it’s travel, it’s theater, it’s music and books...we’re a nation now in which the pleasures of the upper classes are open to us all. We’ve gotta thank the gods, and the work of the kings, I say.”

Rurii wobbled at the sound of the word “king.” It wondered if its peach-colored brethren—now the king’s own familiar—was doing well. Rurii decided it would send a message to it as it melted the rest of the cake into its body, then

neatly cleaned all the cream from its plate. It wobbled a message of thanks, and the head chef smiled at how neatly the cake had been eaten before taking the plate away.

“Many thanks,” said Jens. “Well then, I suppose we should be heading off.”

“All righty. And thanks for passing along the request about the regular extermination visits.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Rurii waved a feeler to the chef and his kitchen staff as they saw it off, and then the slime departed the kitchen with Jens.

“I must pass that message to Shiori before I return to the orphanage. Let’s go together.”

The reverend and the slime were passing through a corridor lined with beautiful circular pillars towards the guest house when they noticed a Cathedral knight heading their way. It was one of the knights who acted as security for the orphanage, and when he saw Jens, he picked up his pace.

“Reverend Jens!” he called. “So this is where you’ve been!”

“Whatever is the matter? Is it one of the children?”

“No...it’s...”

The knight paused for a moment, and glanced hesitantly at Rurii before going on.

“Toby brought a young woman to the orphanage. Apparently she’d gotten lost in the area nearby. She seems very concerned about something, and we weren’t sure what to do.”

Toby was a young boy who lived at the orphanage. The new year would see him become an official adult, and so he had gone off to collect an application form for the Adventurer’s Registration Exam, so that he could become just like the adventurers he looked up to. It was on his way home that he found the young woman and brought her into the orphanage’s care. According to the knight, she was currently recuperating at the guardhouse.

“She’s concerned about something, you say... Understood. I shall return at

once.”

The knight was clearly relieved to hear as much. It wasn’t entirely uncommon for people to bring their worries to Jens, who was by all reports a good listener. It seemed that this was just another case along those lines.

“Well, I must apologize, Rurii, but would you mind if I took a small detour? I also don’t mind if you’d like to return on your own first.”

The slime dropped into thought, then wobbled left to right, indicating it wouldn’t head back on its own. Rurii felt secure in the fact that Shiori had Alec with her, and there wasn’t much it could do while everyone was in the midst of discussing the musical performance.

More importantly, the slime had a hunch that it should go along with Jens, anyway.

“Oh, you’ll come along with me, then? Very well. Let’s return to Shiori together, once we’re done.”

The slime gave an affirmative wobble, and Jen smiled at it before they all headed off. The reverend, the knight, and the slime looked quite the unlikely team as they passed through the Cathedral woods and to the orphanage. The formidable wall that surrounded the location was not for the sake of locking the children in, but in fact for keeping them safe—not only did it prevent them from getting lost, but it also kept them out of the hands of kidnapping slavers and traffickers.

“Thirty or forty years ago, such a thing was far too common,” explained Jens, with a sorrowful look in his eyes. “So very tragic.”

The orphanage was a simple structure that had originally been a home for monks. Past its front gates there was a small guardhouse for the knights. The guard there was one who knew Shiori, and it looked down at Rurii with surprise.

“You’re by yourself today, huh?” he said, before showing them inside.

The guard led them to a small break room at the back of the guardhouse, where there was a young woman sitting and sipping tea by herself, her face downcast and her eyes staring into her cup. Her braided hair was a shade of silver not unlike the trees in the Blue Forest.

Toby, who had brought her here, was nowhere to be found—it seemed the knights had already sent him back to the orphanage. The girl lifted her head when she realized Jens had arrived and nodded politely. When she saw the slime at his feet, however, she let out a gasp.

“It’s quite all right,” said Jens reassuringly. “He’s the familiar of an acquaintance of mine. The slime is gentle, friendly, and very intelligent. Why, he even listens to the children’s worries when they come to him for advice.”

And this was true enough—many a child had come to Rurii asking the slime to listen to their troubles. Alec and Zack, too, often shared their thoughts with the slime—though whether they were going to the slime for advice or merely complaining, Rurii did not know.

“They go to the slime? Amazing,” said the girl.

Rurii poked out a feeler to say hello, and the girl broke into a smile—some color returned to her pale cheeks.

“You’re adorable. May I touch you?” she asked.

Rurii trembled in the affirmative, and the girl reached out gingerly to touch the lapis-colored slime. The girl poked the slime a few times, and seemed to love how pliable and bouncy Rurii’s outer layer was, which made her more bold. The slime climbed upon the table so the girl could touch it more easily, and she promptly buried her head in its body.

“Ugh... So healing...” the girl whispered.

Jens and the Cathedral knight with him burst into laughter, and the girl came back to her senses, her face flushing red as she apologized.

“It’s quite all right,” said Jens, pulling up a chair to face the girl. “I’m just glad to see you looking a little more relaxed.”

The knight, sensing a conversation was about to start, quietly left the break room.

“Well, then,” said Jens. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Jens, and I supervise this orphanage. I was told that you were lost in the area nearby—did you have business with somebody at the Cathedral?”

The girl straightened her posture upon realizing the talk was getting serious. However, perhaps out of nerves or worry, she kept one hand on Rurii's body. Rurii reached out with a feeler to pat the girl's hand, which for a moment shocked her, but she soon eased into a smile.

"My name is Hilde," she said, after hesitating for a moment.

It was a name Rurii felt like it had heard somewhere recently. The slime wobbled, and Jens's brow furrowed.

"I came here to see a friend," continued the girl, "but it seems like her accommodations have changed... That's why I got lost."

"Her accommodations? Do you know where she is now?"

"Yes, she's in the Cathedral. Apparently the schedule was shifted and so her original reservation was canceled on the day she was expected to check in. That's why I came here, but then the knights drove me away. Apparently they're always dealing with people trying to get into the Cathedral by claiming they know someone...and even though I really *do* know someone, they wouldn't believe me. I could prove it if they'd just let me see her..."

Jens was shocked. The only people to have changed their accommodations to stay at the Cathedral were the Songstress and her orchestra members.

"Miss Hilde...you said? I don't suppose the friend you're referring to is Felicia, is it?"

Now it was Hilde's turn to be shocked.

"You know of us? Yes, she said she wanted to see me, so here I am. But the knights told me 'That's what they all say,' and they wouldn't even give me the time of day."

Hilde. A friend of Felicia. A hint of confusion flitted across Jens's features, and after a short silence, he spoke.

"Miss Hilde, would I be right in assuming that your full name is Hildegarde Lindi, and that you're a singer in the royal capital?"

"Wow! You know who I am?!" The dejected Hilde's face brightened in an instant. "I have achieved a small amount of renown in the capital, but nothing

even comparable to the likes of Fels. But oh, this makes me so happy...to think that someone so far away knows who I am."

Jens wasn't sure what to do in the face of Hilde, who was the very portrait of an innocent smile. He was uncertain but he did not want to worry the girl, who had come to him for advice, and so he tried not to let it show. Nonetheless, the aura around him was clearly one of confusion.

Was this not the girl who was Felicia's rival? Was this not the girl they had been told was so hungry for Felicia's position that she was resorting to intimidation? If so, why did Hildegarde not only call Felicia a friend, but refer to her by a nickname, no less? It was impossible to think that the girl who sat before them in that moment, with her carefree smile, could ever be at the heart of such plotting and scheming.

Rurii felt that Hildegarde was most likely a good person—this was what its magical beast senses told it. This was not the sort of evil person who would harm its slime kin. But Jens did not yet make a move to clarify the points of inconsistency that he had noticed.

"Actually, there's been an issue of sorts," he said instead. "And as a result, the Cathedral has had to be strict about letting people see Felicia."

Hildegarde's aura—until now like that of gentle flowers on the breeze—grew suddenly cloudy.

"What kind of issue?" she asked.

"On their journey to Tris, some of her orchestra members fell ill. What they caught is believed to be contagious, so they were brought to the Cathedral clinic for treatment. Fortunately, Felicia herself and her female band members are fine, but just to be on the safe side, we had her change her accommodation plans."

Hildegarde couldn't believe what she was hearing, and seemed to float off her seat as her face grew pale. An instant later, however, she deflated.

"So the letter was true..." she muttered. "Oh, I just knew I should have come sooner."

"Letter?" asked Jens gently. "What do you mean?"

The girl spoke as if she knew the infections were going to happen in advance. Jens did not want to frighten Hilde and so he kept his gentle, placid expression—it was a skill he had developed from his constant dealing with children.

“On the day that Fels left, I got a letter from her. She said she felt like she was being targeted, and she was scared that something might happen at her performance. Actually, lots of weird things have been happening around her recently, so I couldn’t bear to just sit back and do nothing...”

“Do you happen to still have that letter?”

“I do. I was asked to burn it as soon as I read it, but I couldn’t bear to so I brought it with me... Um, here it is. Please, take a look.”

Hildegarde brought an envelope from her travel knapsack. The creases showed that it had been opened and read quite a number of times. It was an elegant and refined envelope complete with a beautiful seal pressed into it. The white letter inside was written in a fine script.

“A woman’s handwriting,” muttered Jens as he read through its contents. When he finished, he let out a sigh. “Miss Hildegarde, do you mind if I keep a hold of this?”

“Oh, not at all, please do. Um, and...”

Hildegarde’s eyes wavered with uncertainty. Jens smiled at her.

“Unfortunately, I cannot promise that you will be able to meet your friend, but I will ask on your behalf. Where will you stay today?”

“I came here so suddenly that I still haven’t made a reservation anywhere. But it’s so packed in the city, I don’t think there will be any spare rooms. There were barely any in the inns on my way here, so in the end I talked my way aboard a night carriage.”

“Have you visited Tris before?”

“No, this is my first time. I was so shocked when I saw how many people there are.”

“I can imagine. Around the time of the Nativity Festival, Tris is especially busy. It will be quite difficult to find accommodations at this point. We’ll prepare a

room for you, so please stay here this evening."

Hildegarde blinked in disbelief.

"Are you quite sure?" she asked.

"Oh, yes. I believe there are spare rooms in the monks' quarters or otherwise the knights' dormitories. The situation being what it is, I'll need to have a knight with you for protection, but as long as you don't mind that small bother, it's fine."

Hildegarde's face opened into a smile and she nodded happily in agreement. With that, the three of them turned back for the cathedral guest house. Hildegarde couldn't believe her eyes when she saw how easily they passed through restricted areas.

"If Sir Jens is vouching for your person, there's no problem," said the knight on guard, who—it was clear—was the trustworthy type.

"This is so vastly different to when I tried to get in myself," said Hildegarde as she looked around curiously. "And it's all thanks to you, Reverend Jens. Thank you so much."

"Think nothing of it," replied the reverend.

Rurii felt that Hildegarde was like the spring—she exuded a soft warmth like sunlight through the trees in the cold, winter air. Compared to Hildegarde's aura of ease, however, Jens was more on edge than usual. There was a tension about him that showed he was on guard. This was perhaps because of Hildegarde, or something else entirely.

Rurii gave the reverend a few pokes in the leg, and Jens looked down and smiled at the slime. Rurii was trying to tell him that it would be okay, but for a moment Jens's expression grew muddled. There were stern-looking guards on watch at the entrance to the Cathedral clinic, and more guards on patrol than earlier. Perhaps something had happened? The hint of a frown fell upon Jens's face as he took it all in, but he looked otherwise unaffected. A knight that passed them by looked at the trio with a pointed gaze, and Hildegarde shrunk beneath it, but that knight soon headed off to see to another job.

"The security here is really tight..." Hildegarde muttered.

“That it is,” said Jens, his voice calm so as not to worry Hildegarde. “The Cathedral welcomes many renowned and influential visitors during the Nativity Festival. Security is always beefed up around this time.”

“Oh, I see...” said Hildegarde, somewhat vaguely. “But the Hall is the same. There’s always a lot of security whenever there’s a performance, and sometimes they even hire strong adventurers. There are some extremists among our fans—the types of people who try to sneak in or push their way into dressing rooms to get close to their favorite singers and actors.”

Hildegarde cringed for a moment, realizing that the Cathedral knights earlier must have thought she was exactly that kind of fan.

“In Fels’s case, her family was so worried that there was talk of getting her a personal bodyguard, but she’s so popular that when they put out the word, all sorts of weird and strange people applied. They couldn’t work out who they could trust... Apparently they tried putting a request up at the Adventurers’ Guild too, but even the high-ranking adventurers turned her down. They said they didn’t want that kind of responsibility.”

“I see,” muttered Jens, his voice sympathetic. “It isn’t easy being so popular, is it? Speaking of work, what about yours? It seems like you came here very suddenly.”

“It’s fine. My schedule is lighter until the end of the year. If I’d had work, there’s no way I could have made it here.” Hildegarde’s eyebrows drooped as she giggled. “But I only left Ragnar—that’s my manager’s name—a note before coming, so the Hall might be in a bit of a commotion right now. They won’t like that I’ve skipped my singing lessons.”

Hildegarde poked out her tongue and let a cheeky grin flash across her face. Jens chuckled wryly in reply.

“Be sure you apologize upon your return,” he said. “Be honest about your regret, and I am sure they will understand your decision. After all, you’re here because you’re worried about your friend, yes?”

“Of course. Fels and I have been friends since we debuted. It’s just...” The expression on Hildegarde’s face turned to one of loneliness as she went on, “When we started getting more popular, we both got busier, and we couldn’t

talk as much. That, and...”

Hildegarde looked like she had something she wanted to say, but then closed her mouth. She seemed to struggle with whether or not to give voice to what was on her mind.

“Is something wrong?” asked Jens. “Something worrying you?”

“Hm... It’s just...I don’t want to sound like I’m bad-mouthing anyone...”

Jens encouraged Hildegarde to open up, and so, with some timidity, she did.

“I’m a little frightened of Miss Karina... Do you know her? She would have come here together with Fels.”

“Yes, we met her earlier. She’s Felicia’s manager, isn’t she?”

“That’s right. Um, what’s the word for it? ‘Elitism’? Is that it? She’s the daughter of a baron’s family with a long history, and because I was raised in the downtown district, she doesn’t think very highly of me being around Fels. Recently I’ve been turned away whenever I try to see her, and I feel so distant.”

Hildegarde fidgeted with her fingers as she spoke—it seemed she really didn’t feel comfortable talking badly about a person who wasn’t present. She noticed Jens looking down at her with a sympathetic gaze, and her face grew a little troubled.

“Though I am also the daughter of a baron’s family, because my mother worked as a manor assistant, I lived in the downtown district until I was older. That’s why acting like a noble doesn’t come naturally to me. Fels too—she was an orphan, but her foster father liked her so much he adopted her. She said it’s really hard to get used to the lifestyle of noble ladies. Our circumstances felt similar in that sense, and so we became friends. But then Fels became the top songstress and she was all set to do even more shows, and that was when I was told that if a...if a lowly commoner like me got too close to her, I’d ruin everything she’d worked for.”

“Karina said that to you?”

“Well, she didn’t say it quite so directly, but...I don’t try to hide where I come from. But it seems that Fels is going the route of the nobility, and Karina said

that if she's seen with me, then her past might come to light. If anyone were to find out that she used to be part of a wandering theater group, well... Uh... Oh."

Hildegarde covered her mouth with her hands, realizing that she'd just spoken words she shouldn't have. Her face grew pale and she looked up at Jens in a panic.

"Everyone back home tells me off for talking too much too..." she muttered.

Jens reached out a hand hesitantly, but paused before reaching her shoulder. He instead gave her a light pat on the back, as if reassuring a child.

"Rest assured, your secret is safe with me," he said. "Everyone has a few things they want to hide. And if you yourself are aware of your own shortcomings, it means you can do something to mend them, little by little."

"Yeah..."

Rurii reached out a feeler to rub Hildegarde's hand. Hildegarde was still a little downcast, but she put a smile on for the kindness of the two who accompanied her.

"I would have been happy just writing a letter," said Hildegarde, "but the contents of each letter Fels receives are checked by Karina, so that wasn't an option. That's why when *I* got a letter from *her*, I was overjoyed. She said that in times of real trouble, I'm the one she can rely on, so I really want to help her. I know there's not much I can do, but I thought maybe if I was just with her, things might be different."

"Understandable."

The three walked along in silence for a time. Rurii desperately wanted Hildegarde to cheer up, so it jumped around in front of her in a wobbly manner, and the girl giggled. Finally, they arrived at the guest house, where Hildegarde was handed off to the knights at the guardhouse by its entrance. Her face filled with worry for an instant, a fear of being left with people she did not know.

I'll be by your side.

Rurii was steadfast—after all, it was the job of an adventurer to help those who were lost or in trouble. The slime thought for a brief moment, and it

surprised Jens when it pointed with a feeler at Hildegarde. But Jens understood the slime's intentions.

"Take good care of her," he said, before leaving them at the guardhouse.

2

After the main discussions were finalized—and after taking the lunch that was delivered to them somewhat cautiously—Shiori spent a relaxing time with Felicia and her orchestra until there came a knock at the door. Conny stood from his seat and went to answer it, after which there was some whispering. A short while later, Conny reappeared and caught Shiori and Alec's attention.

"A moment, if I may," he said.

Shiori and Alec excused themselves, and one of the Cathedral knights came in to take their place—ensuring that Felicia and her orchestra were protected in the adventurers' absence.

A troubled Conny and Jens were waiting for them outside of the room. Conny directed them to the room next door, which was empty.

"Whatever is the matter?" asked Shiori. "Was there some kind of trouble?"

"Indeed there was. We may very well be truly out of our depth, now," said Conny, his brow furrowing. "It is imperative that we get a decision from my superiors, but I would appreciate your opinion on the matter, also."

"A person by the name of Hildegarde has come to see Felicia," said Jens.

"You mean the singer from the royal capital? Felicia's rival?"

"Yes. However, the situation appears rather different from what we have heard thus far. Hildegarde claims to have received a worried letter from Felicia, who feared danger to her being. The girl said she rushed here as quickly as she could. She's currently at the guardhouse together with Rurii, but...well, it's all very alarming."

"That it is," said Conny, growing slightly pale. "First there was the poison, but now this... We can't simply ignore the appearance of this letter."

"Poison?!" exclaimed Shiori in surprise. "So it really *was* poison?!"

She seemed to shrink at the thought of it, and Alec put a hand to her shoulder, pulling her in close. He focused his gaze on the two reverends.

“You mentioned a letter...but what do you mean when you say it cannot be ignored?”

Jens brought the letter out of his pocket and passed it to Alec. The envelope was slightly crumpled and stamped with a family seal, with a white letter inside of it—both seemed of a fine, delicate quality.

“Do you mind if I take a look?” asked Alec.

Jens nodded, and Alec inspected the back side of the envelope before taking another closer look inside of it. He compared the envelope to the letter, then let his gaze run along the family crest. The letter was written in a rather cute script, as though it were penned by a young woman.

When Alec realized that Shiori was standing on her toes, he brought his face down closer to her own, so they could read the contents together.

To my dearest Hildegarde,

It has been an age. I know we have not been able to speak recently, but I hope you have been well.

I must admit to you that I am so worried and fearful of late. Such strange things have been occurring. I have such a bad feeling about this upcoming concert, and it frightens me. It has gotten so bad that I even dreamed of it last night. Everyone was falling suddenly ill and collapsing all around me, and I was left standing upon the stage all on my own. I couldn’t sing even a single note, and I was a laughingstock before the crowd.

I am scared. How much safer I would feel if you, my best friend, were here with me. And is it not true that you will be free from work for a time? I beg of you, come to Tris with me.

But no—to do so would only involve you in all of this. And how can I call myself a songstress if I fall to such cowardice? I will do my utmost, on my own. I ask only that you think of me.

Your friend,

Felicia

P.S. We know not what might happen to you should someone happen to see

this letter, so just in case, please be sure to burn it upon reading.

“At a glance it seems to be just an ordinary letter,” said Alec. “That is, outside of the part about the dream.”

“Yes, and there’s something odd about asking Hildegarde to burn it too...”

“Yep. The contents are very suggestive. Are you certain that the person who brought this to you is actually Hildegarde herself? I’d also like to make sure that this handwriting is indeed Felicia’s.”

In answer to Alec’s question, Jens was momentarily shocked.

“I...I am unsure,” the reverend replied. “Though I did not need to ask who she was—she introduced herself as ‘Hilde’ when we met. When I asked if she was in fact the songstress Hildegarde from the royal capital, she confirmed that indeed she was. As far as our conversation went, I felt nothing out of the ordinary. She seems to believe that the letter was indeed written by Felicia.”

“Though I’m sure Miss Felicia could tell at once,” added Conny, “I do not believe it wise to allow the girls to meet at the present time. Perhaps once things have settled...that is to say, once the performance has safely been concluded. That’s my opinion. And also...”

The adventurers knew what Conny was getting at, and nodded.

“There are discrepancies in both of their stories,” said Shiori.

“Then there’s the fact that the concert really *has* turned into an incident, as is written in the letter,” said Alec. “All you’d be doing if you let them meet now is inviting confusion.”

“I dare say you’re right,” said Jens.

The two reverends were in agreement.

“Well then, what shall we do? Would you like to meet Hildegarde?” asked Jens.

“If that’s okay,” replied Alec. “Hopefully it sheds some light on things.”

Jens left the room quietly and Alec turned his gaze back to the letter. His eyes narrowed, and he fell into thought. Then he turned the letter over as if to make

sure of something.

“Did you notice something?”

Conny and Shiori both watched Alec with great curiosity.

“This letter...” Alec said finally, letting out a short breath. “It may actually be a fake.”

“What?!” exclaimed Shiori.

“What do you mean?” asked Conny. “You can tell it’s a fake even without familiarity with the sender’s handwriting?”

“Yes. It’s true that I haven’t seen Felicia’s handwriting, but I believe this letter may well be a forgery designed to make people *think* she wrote it. Take a closer look. It doesn’t add up.”

To prove his point, Alec then put the envelope and the letter on the table.

“Firstly, there’s the fact that the envelope and the stationery on which the letter is penned don’t match. The envelope is of a high quality—it has the Amren family seal, and is printed with accompanying decorations. You can tell that the songstress is from a wealthy family—they’ve spent good coin on this, and it’s order-made, quality material. The letter, in comparison, is indeed good quality, but it’s also mass-produced stationery. It doesn’t even have a printed letterhead. Don’t you think it strange that a family which would spend so much on their envelopes would opt for such plain and simple letter stationery?”

“Perhaps they...ran out of paper?” offered Conny.

“The higher-ranking nobility are very careful about how they socialize and interact. It would be one thing if they were poor or careless, but a family that uses made-to-order letter stationery like this? It seems highly unlikely that they’d wait until they ran out of paper before ordering more.”

“Ah, I see...”

As something of a commoner in Japan herself, Shiori was a little uncertain of the exact circumstances, but she understood well enough what Alec was getting at. And it was true that the ivory envelope was pleasant to the touch and decorated with the Amren family name beneath its seal. The plantlike

decorations on the envelope and the seal were also printed in color. In comparison, the letter itself was pure white and undecorated—at most one could only see that ruled lines were printed on it. It was not at all on the same level as the elegance of the envelope in which it had arrived.

"Next is the content of the letter itself," said Alec. "The style is very neat, but there's an awkwardness to these letters. It's most clearly evident in these letters here, and where she writes in larger arcs. The curves are crooked. This wasn't written with any sort of flow or rhythm."

"Hm...now that you mention it, I see what you mean. You don't see it in the straight lines, but it appears where the letters curve, yes?"

The crooked feel gave the impression that the writer had been trying too hard, or perhaps forcing themselves somewhat.

"Oh, I see," said Shiori. "The letters look just like when I was learning how to write."

The penmanship lacked rhythm, and though it was neat, there was no energy to it. There was something about them, as though they lacked confidence. It made Shiori think of her own writing, four years ago, when she was studying desperately to learn the language of her new home.

"But it's not just that," said Alec. "There are a few examples where the cursive connects unnaturally. It's well written, but if you look closely you'll see that each letter has been written individually. You can see it in the words '*suddenly ill,*' '*collapsing,*' and '*just in case.*'"

"You're right. You can see that the ink is darker where one letter ends and another begins because the ink overlaps. But why?"

"Clearly, those three phrases couldn't be taken from whatever was used to trace this message—the letters had to be individually put together."

"Tracing...and letters individually put together?" asked Conny. "Wait, you don't mean...?"

The letter's strange patchwork words pointed to one thing in particular.

"I do," said Alec. "This letter was made by someone tracing Miss Felicia's own

script. There's proof of that right here."

Alec turned the letter over and pointed to a spot on the back side of it.

"Oh my!" exclaimed Shiori.

"Well, I never!" said Conny.

If you weren't specifically looking for such traces, you wouldn't have thought anything of them, but there they were all the same—upon the back side of the letter were the faint traces of blue ink in the shape of letters.

"My guess is that this is ink from whatever was used to trace this letter," said Alec. "Cheaper ink dries quickly, but it still leaves marks. From a second-rate inn, or...well, it might even belong to the Hall itself. You'd be surprised how many lavish halls and hotels save costs by having their own employees use cheap materials."

"So you're saying that someone used something Felicia had written at Alvestam Hall to fake this letter?" asked Conny.

"Indeed. The fact that only the letter is of mass-produced quality is likely because the Amren letter paper wasn't well suited to tracing."

"Wow... Amazing," said Shiori, entirely awed. "Alec, you're like a detective!"

The heartfelt words of praise left Alec momentarily speechless, and his cheeks reddened ever so slightly. He scratched bashfully at his jaw.

"Well, I mean...it's nothing, really. I used to help with the family business, and I learned a thing or two about telling the real deal from forgeries."

"Huh...? You learned *those* skills through work?"

Shiori was flabbergasted, but Alec replied with a wry chuckle.

"It's an important skill to stop counterfeiting," he said. "There are some who would fake another's handwriting to frame them, for example."

Which, essentially, was what this letter was doing too.

"That said, this case was rather easy to discern," said Alec. "So I'd guess the person who did this isn't exactly used to this kind of thing."

"But if you hadn't been here, we might never even have noticed," said Shiori.

“I know the knights would have investigated, but still...”

“On top of that, if Hildegarde *had* burned the letter as she was asked, nobody—not even the knights!—would have had any idea that it was a fake,” said Conny. “We’d have no proof at all that someone had asked Hildegarde to come here.”

First you had the songstress and the strange way in which her orchestra members had fallen “ill,” which threatened her chances of even putting on the concert. Then, you had her rival suddenly showing up unannounced. Many would likely have seen this as part of Hildegarde’s scheme to cause Felicia’s downfall.

Conny’s dejected voice dissipated into the air, and the three fell into silence. After a short time, however, Conny let out a frustrated wail and ruffled his hair.

“Why is this even happening?! We just want everyone to have a great time! That’s it! We want nothing more than to give the people a show to enjoy the end of the year! And then we get someone blowing smoke like this...?! Why do they gotta do something that’s gonna disappoint all the fellas who have done nothing wrong...? And using *poison*? Are you serious?! C’mon now, get outta here with that business...”

Conny didn’t seem to notice his speech slipping from that of a holy man to something more like a fellow from his own age group might utter, but it all went to show how clearly vexed the situation had left him.

“Fine! I’ve made up my mind!” he announced. “I will see this through myself!”

Conny lifted his head and pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. When he spoke next, it was with renewed strength.

“I will see to it that the concert is a success! The people who attend will get a show that leaves them happy and satisfied, and they will have a wonderful time. I will *not* allow a single person to come to harm. I will not let any untoward individuals get away with any hijinks on such a holy day!”

There was a fierce determination in Conny’s eyes as he looked at Alec and Shiori.

“However, I will need your help to make good on my word,” he said. “Miss

Shiori, your magic will be an essential part of making Felicia's performance a success! And Sir Alec, thankfully you seem to be quite used to this kind of work. I beg of you, help me with this task!"

Conny was every bit the portrait of an ardent church believer, and Shiori thought of him in that moment like a quiet ray of spring sunshine, within which burned the passionate fire of the sun itself. The man dropped his head into a pleading bow that was impressively steep, and the two adventurers smiled in reply.

"By all means," said Shiori, "I will help you wherever possible."

"As will I," added Alec.

The three shook hands just as Jens returned with Hildegarde in tow. There was a slight look of surprise on his face at the sight that greeted his eyes. Hildegarde, too, tilted her head quizzically, while Rurii by her feet trembled a greeting.

3

At Jens's suggestion, Hildegarde took a seat. Across from her sat Shiori, Alec, and Conny. Alec had wanted to remain standing, but given his height and intimidating gaze—not to mention the pressure he would have exerted on the girl—he was somewhat forcefully made to sit. Jens sat by Hildegarde's side as if he were her guardian, while Rurii positioned itself between her and Shiori.

Hildegarde was clearly nervous, but she smiled when the slime gave her a few gentle pokes, and the tension in her shoulders eased just a little. It seemed that Rurii had made itself a new friend while it had been off on its own.

Rurii always has *been good at looking after the lost and the worried...*

The slime was always friendly, bright, and kind, but after spending some time living in the city with Shiori, it had become much more expressive with its gestures, and in some ways almost humanlike. Shiori was unsure where it had learned these skills, but perhaps it was because the slime was surrounded by many who were kind and considerate. The thought brought a smile to Shiori's face.

Once everyone was seated and settled, Conny pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and kicked things off.

“Well then, we don’t have a lot of time, so let’s make this quick. I am Conny Envary, with the Tris Cathedral ceremonial division. I’m responsible for the organization of the events for the Nativity Festival.”

“My name is Shiori Izumi, and I’m an adventurer with the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. I am helping out with the concert. That slime is my familiar, Rurii.”

“I’m Alec Dia, also of the Tris Adventurers’ Guild. I’m here on protection duties for a performer.”

“My name is Hildegarde Lindi, and I’m a songstress from Alvestam Hall in the royal capital. Um...”

Hildegarde seemed uncertain exactly why she was in the situation where she now found herself, and she looked at everyone’s faces with more than a touch of uncertainty.

“Though it pains me to have to put you in such a spot,” said Conny, “I wonder if you have any evidence on your person that proves you are indeed Hildegarde Lindi, acquaintance of Felicia Amren? Are you carrying any identifying documents?”

“Hm?”

Hildegarde seemed momentarily stumped by the question, but after some thought, shook her head.

“No,” she muttered.

“Though you say you have come here to see Miss Felicia, we cannot simply allow anyone an audience with her without first knowing who they are. There’s no shortage of people who would claim to be an acquaintance just for the chance to see her.”

“That’s what I was told earlier too,” said Hildegarde. “I’ve experienced the very situation you mentioned, so I know how it feels. Some people say that they’re fans or that they’re old friends, and they do everything they can to get close to their favorite singers or performers. I know it would be simplest to send

an inquiry to the Hall, but I'm aware that would take time. A business card, perhaps...? Oh, last month Schjerven Publishing released a songstress almanac, which includes my picture. Perhaps if that is sold here, you could confirm my identity. Or, um...shall I sing something?"

Jens and Conny sent a look to the adventurers for their opinion, but Alec, who had been watching the girl closely, glanced at the Alvestam Hall card with the seal printed on it, and shook his head.

"I think we can trust her for the time being," he said. "If she'd come prepared with documents to prove her own identity, that in itself would have been somewhat suspicious. I would have been more skeptical of her if she'd come overprepared."

"That said, when it comes to whether or not we can let you meet Miss Felicia, well, that's another problem entirely," said Conny.

"What...whatever do you mean?" asked Hildegarde.

"She's in something of a tight spot at the moment," said Conny. "To put it bluntly, Hildegarde, you too are in a rather difficult position. You're the prime suspect in an incident that occurred not long ago."

Hildegarde froze as Conny, the event organizer, went on to explain.

"Many of the Alvestam Orchestra's members came down with an infectious disease, and are currently undergoing treatment. I'm sure you've heard this much already, yes?"

"Yes..."

"Well, the infections and their spread were somewhat suspicious, and so they were investigated. What we discovered was that the orchestra had in fact been poisoned. The city's disease prevention division also confirmed this for us."

"P-Poison?!"

Hildegarde practically jumped from her chair. Jens comforted her, and eventually she sat back down, her face pale.

"Is everyone...are they all all right?" she asked.

Hildegarde's eyes were wide with fear and the edges of her lips quivered as

she spoke. Shiori's eyebrows drooped at the sight of her. The reaction did not look to her like it was an act—and if it was, Hildegarde was an incredible actress. However, the truth of the matter was that without more information, her involvement in the incident could not be completely ruled out. All they had for now were Karina's words—that Hildegarde stood in opposition of Felicia, and had been intimidating and bullying her.

Karina...

Though it may well have been just Shiori's imagination, she had gotten the feeling on several occasions that Karina was watching her. Perhaps Karina was just trying to assess whether Shiori was someone she could trust. However, Shiori's senses as an adventurer said otherwise—as someone who had been the victim of a major incident herself, she had a hunch that something was off.

"The poison was taken care of with magic. The orchestra members are shaken, as you'd expect, but there are no visible aftereffects so far, and there appear to be no other problems outside of fatigue."

"I...I see. I must admit I'm glad to hear it," said Hildegarde, clearly relieved. "I have friends in the orchestra. But still, poison? Why...?"

The singer's expression once again grew muddled, and Conny looked at her sadly. There was a moment of hesitation before he spoke again, a sign that it pained him to say what he did next.

"Unfortunately we still do not know. However...Felicia and her band seem to suspect that this might well be *your* doing. They think you may have acted this way out of jealousy."

Hildegarde's eyes bulged from her face in shock. She tried to say something, but when the words wouldn't come, she covered her mouth with a hand.

"We have heard that Felicia has undergone harassment recently, and that it was your doing," said Conny.

A heavy silence draped itself over the table. Hildegarde looked down at the floor while the two Cathedral men watched her with worry in their eyes. Shiori glanced at Alec, who put a hand to his jaw. He was watching the girl very closely.

“It is true,” said Hildegarde, “that when Fels’s star began to rise, I was jealous of her. I’m sure I said some things that were not very nice too. There were rumors floating around for a time that I was harassing her, but they were little more than an annoyance. But when I saw how different her level of devotion to our craft was to my own, those feelings of mine vanished immediately.”

Rurii reached out with a feeler and gently patted Hildegarde’s hand. She looked down at it, her face on the brink of tears, and gazed at the slime for a time before finally forcing a smile to her face.

“I am a bit lackadaisical, I suppose. I’m fine so long as things are going well. But Fels is not like that at all. She’s looking well into the future...and I figured that even if I can’t work as hard as she does, then I can at least follow in her footsteps. By doing so, I made it to the number two spot. All I feel for her now is gratitude. So the idea of harassing her...and using poison, no less, it’s just... But...I see...”

Tears fell from Hildegarde’s eyes as she went on.

“Fels suspects me of doing it...”

Hildegarde began to sob, and Jens put a gentle hand to her back, the way he might have if he were soothing a child. Shiori stood quietly, walked around to Hildegarde, and offered her a handkerchief.

“Thank you,” said Hildegarde, still looking down, but dabbing her eyes with the handkerchief.

Rurii slid up and onto the girl’s knees, and Hildegarde promptly gripped the slime in a hug and buried her face in its mass.

Shiori did not yet believe the girl’s words completely. Shiori herself had been burned terribly by people she had thought to be good, and so she put neither trust nor hope into people she was meeting for the first time. But even then...



I want to believe her...

Shiori wanted to believe the feelings that Hildegarde seemed to have for Felicia, and the tears that she shed.

“Alec...” she said.

“Okay,” Alec said, nodding.

He had been quiet since Hildegarde had entered the room, but now he lifted his back from the chair in which he sat and leaned forward.

“Miss Hildegarde,” he said.

“Yes...?”

Hildegarde sniffled.

“We do not yet believe everything you have told us,” said Alec. “However, that does not mean we believe everything we have heard from Felicia either. There are contradictions in what each of you have said, and given that there is no way for us to verify what has happened in the royal capital, we must proceed with great caution. You understand that, yes?”

“I do... You mean that I won’t be allowed to see Felicia, right?”

“Yes. But we cannot let you simply go home either.”

“Huh?” said Hildegarde, her expression once again one of shock. “Is that so?”

“Until we have some way of proving what you’ve said and taking you at your word, we cannot eliminate the possibility that you are involved. There is, more importantly, the chance that you are a victim in all of this, brought in without your knowledge. It might prove dangerous to let you go.”

Hildegarde’s body grew tense, and that tension traveled to her arms, which gripped Rurii tightly. The slime writhed uncomfortably in Hildegarde’s arms until she realized and with a gasp, released the slime, who trembled a positive, “*Don’t sweat it!*”

Alec then took the letter Hildegarde had received and put it on the table.

“Jens showed this to us earlier... You’re sure this letter came from Felicia?”

“Huh? But...it’s written in her script, isn’t it? The envelope is from her family too.”

“You’re certain?”

Hildegarde thought for a moment, then pulled a notebook from her traveler’s knapsack, which was decorated with flowers on its cover. She opened it to a particular page and put it on the table for everyone to see.

“Here, it’s where I asked Fels to write her home address.”

Alec took the notebook with a polite nod and studied the page with his focused gaze. Conny leaned forward to get a better look himself.

At a glance, the letter and the notebook looked like they were written in the same script. If Alec had not pointed out the discrepancies earlier, anyone would have said they were written by the same person.

“It’s blue ink,” he said.

“It is indeed,” said Conny, “and look at how it leaves a slight trace on your fingers when you touch it.”

“Indeed. Miss Hildegarde,” said Alec, turning back to the singer, “where was this written?”

“At the Hall. When we first became friends, she wrote her address for me in her dressing room.”

Conny sent a knowing look in the adventurers’ direction. There was blue ink at Alvestam Hall, just as there were traces of blue ink on the back side of the letter.

“But if you exchanged addresses,” said Jens, titling his head in a moment of confusion, “couldn’t you have simply sent letters directly to Felicia’s home? Her manager would have had no way of getting to them that way, no?”

Jens then explained that Karina did not think highly of Felicia being friends with Hildegarde, and had gone as far as limiting their contact with each other. Attempts to exchange letters had naturally gone through Karina, who had opened then discarded them.

“Miss Karina lives with Felicia,” replied Hildegarde with a wry grin. “Felicia was an orphan, so there was some worry she wouldn’t be accustomed to the social etiquette of the upper classes. Her relationships are thus managed by

Miss Karina. So even if I deliver a letter straight to Felicia's home, it probably still won't reach her."

"I see. In which case, how did this particular letter arrive in your possession?"

"It came to my house, early in the morning. The postman who brought it said that Fels had asked him directly. He said she was worried it wouldn't arrive on time if she went through the post office, so she asked him to deliver it directly."

"Making some money on the side, huh?" muttered Alec. "It would be wise to investigate that, and find out where the letter actually came from."

As a general post office rule, postmen were not allowed to accept private deliveries, but there were those who would take the extra money and accept such jobs. This was what Alec meant by "making money on the side." It seemed that someone had sent the letter by way of a not-so-scrupulous postman.

Hildegarde ran a finger along the address written in her notebook, and began to speak.

"I think Miss Karina is a relative of Fels's father, and she started out as a private tutor and conversation partner. They're about the same age, so it seemed like a good fit. Miss Karina enjoyed singing as a hobby and she taught Fels a little, and when it turned out that Fels had a knack for it, Miss Karina encouraged her to get lessons. She's the one who discovered Fels's talent, so to speak. Fels even once said that if Miss Karina hadn't been around, she might never have gotten to where she is now. She said Miss Karina was a great friend and teacher, and...oh, erm..."

Hildegarde covered her mouth with a hand and, for some reason, glanced at Jens, who chuckled.

"Let's get back to the topic at hand," he said.

"Yes, right. I apologize."

Alec couldn't quite believe what he'd just heard. Hildegarde's shoulders slumped.

"You, er...you were saying that I might also be a victim?" she asked.

"Yes. It's very likely that this letter is a fake. I'll spare you the exact details, but

it’s beyond strange for Felicia to write a letter asking for help and sending it to the person suspected of harassing her.”

She had sent the letter to her “rival” on the day of her departure, and gone so far as to ask her to burn it upon reading...

“The songstress’s orchestra members conveniently fall ill, the songstress herself is driven into a corner, and who else should appear then but her own rival...? At that point it would look an awful lot like this rival had plotted the songstress’s downfall.”

And if Hildegarde *had* burned the letter, she would’ve had no proof that she had been called to Tris. But even so, the letter was written in Felicia’s script and seemed to foresee the incident in advance...

“That said, it might also look as though Felicia herself had planned it all to bring down her nearest rival...”

As the depth of it all dawned on Hildegarde, she shivered at the situation she had suddenly found herself in.

“But she wouldn’t possibly... Oh, who would even do such a thing? And why?”

“Unfortunately, we do not know. We simply do not have enough information. All we know for certain is...”

“It’s a dastardly thing to talk about,” said Conny, picking up for Alec, “but there may well be a third person involved... One who would like to see both you and Miss Felicia dethroned, so to speak.”

“With that in mind, if this is true, then you could well be in danger,” said Alec. “Until we work out who is behind all of this, it is best that you remain here. At the very least, we can guarantee your safety until the knight corps takes over.”

“I’m going to talk to my superiors immediately,” said Conny. “We’ve already reported to the knights, and I have every intention of making this concert a successful one. I’ll get to negotiations with the knight corps. We’ll have Cathedral knights watching over you, Miss Hildegarde. I’ll make sure you have two bodyguards at all times.”

Hildegarde nodded meekly.

“Miss Hildegarde, what we need more than anything else is information to work with,” said Alec. “Do you know of anyone who might have a vendetta or grudge against you or Miss Felicia, or someone who might benefit from the two of you being gone? If you can think of anything at all, please tell us. We’ll decide whether or not to act on it.”

“Hm... Our job is all about popularity, so I can’t speak for who might have a grudge against us, and there’s certainly no shortage of people who would benefit if we lost our positions. We’re at the top of the food chain, so to speak.”

Hildegarde’s eyes wandered as she dropped into careful thought.

“However, I think I might have something. I don’t know if you could call it a vendetta, per se, but there are a few people who approached Felicia romantically and were turned away. Some of them are in the orchestra too. There’s the cello player, Konrad, and the flutist, Helge. When it comes to fans, however, I’m afraid I don’t know any names. As for me, I was approached by Mauritz, the viola player, and Pontus, on the horn. I don’t know about Pontus, however, seeing as he got married recently. Regarding people who might benefit from our losses... I’m sorry, but I’m just not sure. There’s just too many. Everyone I don’t really get along with suddenly feels like a suspect.”

Alec quickly scribbled down the names in his notebook, while Conny whispered in his ear.

“If I remember correctly, the man who helped the drunkard at the inn goes by the name Helge.”

Alec kept his eyes on his notebook and gave a small nod as his pen raced across the paper. He added Conny’s comment next to Helge’s name. Conny then stood from his chair.

“I’m going to discuss things with my superiors,” he said. “Please wait until my return before saying anything to Felicia regarding the incident.”

“Understood,” said Shiori.

“In which case, we’ll return to her room,” added Alec.

The general course of action was set. Felicia would perform at the concert as originally scheduled, while Shiori and Alec would both support the performance

and act as protection. Hildegarde would be put under the protection—and watchful eye—of the Cathedral knights.

"I really must be getting back to the children," said Jens.

The reverend stood from his chair, and upon Conny's urging, Hildegarde did too. The girl looked extremely worried, and looked up at Jens. Perhaps she was scared at being separated from the one person she felt she had built a connection with.

I know how that feels...

Shiori cringed slightly as she thought back to herself, four years ago. During the first few months, until she had gotten used to her new environment, she felt petrified when Zack or Nadia left her for even the briefest instant. She looked down at Rurii, who wobbled up at her.

"Rurii, would you mind accompanying Miss Hildegarde?" she asked.

Not a problem, boss! trembled the slime in reply.

"Thank you so much."

The slime wobbled a nod, then stretched out a feeler and gave Alec a poke. The slime pointed at Shiori and wobbled another message—one that a wide-eyed Alec heard loud and clear.

"Don't you worry. I'll take care of Shiori, so you look after Miss Hildegarde, okay?"

The slime reached out with a feeler towards Alec's hand, and the adventurer fist-bumped it in reply. It was like watching an agreement play out between male friends, and it brought a smile to Shiori's face. Rurii then took up a position by Hildegarde's feet.

"Oh? Are you quite sure?" the girl asked.

It seemed that Rurii, too, was one of the few whom Hildegarde had connected with since her arrival at the Cathedral, and her pale expression brightened in an instant. The slime reached out with a feeler and she clasped it tightly. Shiori thought the gesture not unlike a child clutching tightly to the hand of an adult they felt safe with.

“Um, thank you ever so much, Miss Shiori,” said Hildegarde.

“Don’t mention it. Be safe, Rurii,” she replied.

At Conny’s behest, Hildegarde and her new slime bodyguard left the room. Jens smiled gently and followed after them. The room filled with silence.

“What do you think?” asked Alec.

“I don’t think she’s lying,” said Shiori, answering candidly. “She’s very honest—one might even say honest to a fault. And Rurii likes her too. I’m still not sure about Felicia, but she doesn’t seem like a bad person either.”

Alec nodded.

“I got the same impression. For better or worse, Miss Hildegarde seems incapable of lying. I can’t imagine her planning something like this and then having what it takes to see it through. If she was planning something, she’d likely want her freedom, but she didn’t seem too bothered by the fact that she’s practically under arrest. If that was all an act, then she deserves an award for it. But I *did* feel that we have to be a little more on guard when it comes to Miss Felicia.”

Alec had, as he’d said himself, come from a noble family. Beguiling others and speaking in more than just words was part and parcel of that life, and if Alec sensed that from her, his instincts were probably right.

“That said, there is the chance I might be playing right into either of their hands,” he said with a wry chuckle. “Do you think this might all be an inside job?”

“I don’t know if it’s an inside job, but...if it *is* the work of someone bearing a grudge, I have a feeling they’d want to see their victim flounder with their own eyes. And if that’s the case, they’re probably nearby.”

“Hm... I see.”

“What about you, Alec? Is there anyone you’re particularly suspicious of?”

When the question was turned on him, Alec was silent for a moment. His thoughtfulness perhaps indicated he had suspicions but no evidence.

“If you mean someone whose actions are a touch suspicious,” he said,

choosing his words carefully, “then yes. It’s only very slight, though.”

“Who is it?”

“Karina Svanholm. Miss Felicia’s manager.”

Shiori gasped. It was the very name that had floated up into her own mind. Karina was a woman who was mostly expressionless, and yet who sometimes revealed glimpses of unreadable emotion.

“What is it?” asked Alec. “You know something?”

“Well, sometimes I catch her watching me. She’s always expressionless so I don’t know what she’s thinking, but...how do I put this? It doesn’t feel like a good thing, I suppose.”

“As I thought,” muttered Alec, his brow furrowing. “I’ve noticed that too. I don’t think she has any ill feelings for Miss Felicia, but it certainly looks like there’s something about you that gets to her.”

“You think so? If you’ve noticed it too, then maybe it really *is* something. But I wonder what?”

Alec shrugged.

“I don’t know. But it’s fair to say she’s been looking at you a lot, and it doesn’t seem ordinary. Perhaps there might be some hidden reason for it. Hopefully we’re just overthinking things.”

Shiori’s lips drew into a tense line. Whatever the facts might be, she and Alec had a request they had to see through. But more than that, it was a request that she *wanted* to see through. She had no desire to see Conny’s passion go to waste. There were also many who wanted to enjoy both the concert and the Nativity Festival, and Shiori did not want to see their joy spoiled if it was not for a very good reason.

“Shiori,” said Alec, one of his strong, muscular arms reaching around and gripping her tight around the shoulders. “I will protect you—both you and the songstress. All the same... Please, be careful.”

“I will. I believe in you, Alec. And I won’t let my guard down.”

Alec leaned down quietly and brought his lips closer to hers. Shiori tugged

him closer, standing on her toes, and felt the warmth of his lips on her own. The feel of his tongue gently caressed the inside of her mouth.

4

After lunch, a cup of tea, and a short break, Shiori noticed that the sun was beginning to set. It was only ten minutes before three, but this was the end of the year in Storydia—sunrise came after eight in the morning, and sundown often happened as early as three. The hours of daylight were far more limited than back in Japan.

The days really are so much shorter here.

Felicia and her band members were getting ready for practice. Shiori stared out the darkening window, watching the Cathedral knights on patrol in the snow.

“There’s more of them...” Alec uttered.

And though he didn’t say more of *what*, Shiori knew what he meant.

“Yes, they’ve boosted security,” she replied

“Yep.”

The increase in the number of guards since the morning was noticeable. It was safe to say that they were now on high alert, and that the Cathedral saw what was going on as an actual incident.

“There may be reparations to pay depending on how this all shakes out,” said Alec.

“There is that, yes.”

It would have been one thing if the culprit was an outsider, but if it turned out that the crime really was an inside job, that was entirely another.

There was absolutely no doubt that bringing over the royal capital’s top songstress and a symphony orchestra would have cost quite the pretty penny. If it came to light that the problems today were due to someone within the group, it would not matter that the Cathedral was considered a place for holy men and women—they would not stand by in silence. For starters, half of the orchestra had been taken out by poison, which had forced the Cathedral to hire

adventurers. This was to say nothing of the fact that emergency requests for specific adventurers came with higher price tags, and were not cheap. Even if the Cathedral managed to salvage the concert after all of this, there were sure to be meetings regarding the incident.

The two adventurers were looking gloomily out the window when there came a gentle knock at the door. There was a pause while the person behind it waited for permission to enter, and then the door opened, revealing Conny. He looked rather exhausted, and gave a polite bow and greeting to Felicia and her band members before hurrying to Shiori and Alec.

“My oh my... That was all rather difficult,” he said, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose as his face scrunched into a grimace. “Negotiations with the knights went fine. They weren’t too happy about the idea of things getting more out of hand, but the eminent archbishop himself is now involved, and the margrave—who, as you know, has invested in the concert—was brought into the discussion. An official hearing is set to be held following the concert.”

The strict police force of Japan wouldn’t have allowed for it, but the knights were a little more considerate of the circumstances. It turned out the margrave was in charge of the northern knight corps in times of emergency. For the knights, it was essential that their work be beyond reproach as it reflected on his reputation.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Shiori. “Does that mean that the concert will proceed as planned?”

“Yes, most certainly. However, the northern knights made it a condition that they be allowed to work with the Cathedral knights—they wish to do some questioning and evidence collection of their own, and are currently talking to the orchestra members at the clinic. Once they’re done, most of the orchestra members will return to Felicia’s band. Unfortunately, the shock has been too much for some of them, and it’s unlikely they’ll recover by the time of tomorrow’s performance. That said, I can’t make a judgment on the topic alone, so I intend to discuss the matter with Miss Felicia and her band.”

If the structure of the orchestra itself changed, the set list might also need revision. Some confusion was a given due to the dizzying circumstances, but at

the same time, Felicia and her band were professionals—they would find a way to push through. Shiori took a deep breath—she knew that she too would have to approach the performance with the same fortitude. She looked up at Alec to get his opinion on things, and noticed him staring out the window with a frown.

“What is it, Alec?” Shiori asked.

Alec’s eyes narrowed and he silently gestured to the window with his gaze. Shiori glanced at it. The darkness outside meant that the window now reflected the interior of the room, leaving it near impossible to see what was going on outside. It was essentially a mirror. Shiori surveyed what it showed to her, and let out a quiet gasp as one thing in particular caught her attention.

She was being watched.

Though the window was not so clear as to be able to show people’s expressions, it *was* still clear enough to show the direction in which those people were looking. Shiori could see Felicia and her band busying themselves with their work, but one person among their number was directing their attention elsewhere.

“Is something the matter?” asked Conny with a confused look.

“And what about the band?” asked Alec, shrugging Conny’s question off with a vaguely worded question of his own. “The circumstances have changed yet again.”

“Yes, and I thought it was about time I explained things to them,” replied Conny. “Now that we’ve come this far, there’s simply no avoiding it. We all have to prepare ourselves for the road that lies ahead.”

“Understood,” said Shiori. “We’ll be ready for anything.”

“I’ll be counting on you.”

Conny’s lips tightened for a moment, and he let out a short breath before walking over towards Felicia, who had just finished her preparations. Conny kept his explanation short and sweet. Shock waves ran through Felicia and her troupe.

“Poison?!” cried Felicia. “Whatever do you mean, *poison*?!”

“Is everyone okay?” asked a band member.

“How terrifying...” muttered another.

The girls had all gone pale at Conny’s explanation of the incident in which they were all now wrapped up in. Felicia’s comments caused the rest of the band to voice their own concerns and suspicions. It took all Conny had to soothe them and calm them down, at which point, with his expression still grave, he went on.

“The poisoned members were all cured with the help of a physicker, and there are no aftereffects to speak of. However,” said Conny, shattering the brief air of relief as he went on, “being that poison was used, we’ve had to contact the knight corps. As such, everyone from Alvestam Hall will be put under the watch and guard of the knights.”

The room fell into silence as Conny’s words sunk in. Nobody quite understood the depth of them immediately. However, as understanding dawned upon them, everyone began to react. Most went pale with shock, while others let it be known that they did not like being considered a criminal. The most intense reactions came from Felicia and Karina, but it was the contrast of them that was most surprising.

“So you’re saying that we can no longer go on with the performance, then, is that it?” said Felicia. “You’re saying that someone went as far as using poison to stop me, yes? Well, if they wanted to stop me from what I was doing, they would have been far better off simply coming at me directly!”

Felicia’s porcelain skin had gone red, and a rage filled her that was out of keeping with her usual dainty appearance. In comparison, Karina had gone white as a sheet. Though she did not lose her coolheaded calm, she could not hide the unusual rage in her eyes, and Shiori felt herself shirking from the sight of it. Karina held Felicia’s shoulder, her eyebrows creased with anger.

“What is the meaning of this?! We are the victims here! Putting us ‘under watch’... It is the very height of disrespect. We’re being treated like criminals! However much power and authority you may have as a reverend of the Tris Cathedral, there are limits to how much we will put up with. We are going to protest this through our manager, I will tell you that—”

“I apologize,” said Conny, cutting Karina off as she made her displeasure clear. “The truth of the matter is, we *are* treating all of you as suspects. Ever since the first band member was poisoned, there has been far too much that is out of the ordinary, and the knights themselves have deemed that the chances of it being an inside job are very, very high. It is of course true to say that you are victims in this, but you are victims as much as you are suspects. Should this incident be the reason that the concert is canceled, and should this put the Nativity Festival itself in jeopardy, the Cathedral *will* be making a request for reparations.”

There was no scandal worse for the songstress, her orchestra, and Alvestam Hall than having to pay reparations for an incident at a festival of such magnitude. Trust in the Hall would plummet, as would its business—a scandal of this size would not be fixed by simply firing the songstress and orchestra involved in it.

Karina turned gray at Conny’s words. The sheer weight of the situation had finally impressed itself upon her. She tried to say something but was unable to, and then she seemed to struggle with tremors that shook her to her very heart. Though eventually she regained some control over herself, she could not hide the trembling at the corners of her lips.

“Hildegarde...” she muttered, squeezing the name out through gritted teeth. “This is the work of Hildegarde Lindy. It *must* be her. It’s always been her harassing us until now...”

Conny glanced at the two adventurers, and Alec sent him a subtle nod.

“The Hildegarde of whom you speak is currently in the custody of the Cathedral knights,” said Conny.

Felicia’s eyes went wide with shock, while Karina’s expression seemed to suddenly light up—not with surprise, but rather with joy. Shiori frowned, because the reaction was so out of sync with the circumstances. Conny, too, seemed to feel it—something was off. Something wasn’t right.

“Well then! So it was her after all!” cried Karina. “I bet she came all this way just to see the results of her handiwork in person. She probably even intended to improve her own reputation by swooping in to pick up after Felicia!”

Shiori looked at her feet. She felt a chill run through her at the sheer joy in

Karina's voice—it was as if the woman was holding up the head of a slaughtered demon in celebration.

There's no doubting it now...

"Guilty..." muttered Alec.

There was nothing else Shiori could do but agree with him. And it was clear enough in the strange looks that the orchestra and even Felicia turned on the woman—there was something off about Karina's excitement.

"Unfortunately, we are in no way able to confirm that for certain," said Conny, pushing up his glasses and wiping out Karina's joy. "Hildegarde herself may well be another victim in all of this."

Upon hearing that her old friend might be a victim, Felicia spoke up.

"Hilde, a victim? What do you mean?" she asked.

"She was tricked into coming here," said Alec, "by someone pretending to be you. Hildegarde brought a letter with her, written by someone who had forged your handwriting."

"Someone copied my handwriting in a letter?"

"They did. And I gather from your reaction that you haven't sent Felicia any letters recently."

Felicia shook her head.

"There are a few things about the letter that point to it being a forgery. For one thing, it seems to predict almost exactly what has happened here. It also asked Hildegarde to burn the letter upon reading it, as if pushing her to destroy the evidence. Fortunately, instead of doing that, she brought the letter with her, which allowed us to investigate it more closely. I'm confident that it's a forgery—and that means two things: someone called her here...and they planned to pin the crime on her."

Alec paused for a moment. The room fell into a stunned silence.

"In any case, I'm sure the knights will look into things more thoroughly," said Alec. "Just as I'm sure they'll look into the postman who delivered the letter."

Felicia's face had gone pale, and she stood with her emerald green eyes wide with shock. After a time, she managed to speak.

"What was written in the letter that I supposedly wrote to her?" she asked.

"It said that you were scared, and you wanted Hildegarde to come to Tris. But then it said you didn't want to involve her, so you'd do your best on your own. That was the gist of it."

Felicia sighed.

"If that's what it said, I've no doubt that Hilde would have come running," she said with a wry chuckle. "She's always been honest, kind, and...just so good to her friends. It's why I never really believed she was behind all the harassment."

Felicia smiled, but then her gaze locked on Conny and the adventurers.

"Based on what I've heard so far, it would seem as though Hilde *isn't* the culprit, yes?"

"We can't say anything for certain just yet," replied Conny, "but it seems highly unlikely that she's behind all of this."

Felicia looked genuinely happy, and she let out a slow, relieved sigh.

"Thank goodness," she said. "We used to be such good friends. It's true that things got a bit awkward when we both started gaining popularity, but I always knew that...wait. Hm? So who *was* behind the harassment, then?"

"Hildegarde denies doing it. The knights will be sure to look into that too, and the truth will come to light soon enough. That particular investigation will fall under the jurisdiction of the royal knight corps, but I'm sure they'll work together just fine."

"I am glad, and..." said Felicia, pausing to smile. "I believe in her. She's my best friend, after all."

It was a clear and innocent smile, and one that came from the heart. It stood in stark contrast to the muddy gray of Karina's face as she stared at the floor.

"In any case, that's where we stand," said Conny, "and though I do deeply apologize, as of now, you are all under the care of both the Cathedral knights and the northern knight corps. The concert will be held as per schedule, and

you can all take part. When the orchestra members in the clinic are finished talking with the knights, they will join you. As for how things will go upon the conclusion of the concert, please understand that the knights will have the final say with regards to the proceedings."

"Understood," said Felicia, speaking up for the still-silent Karina and sending a smile around to the rest of the orchestra to put some of their fear to rest. "In which case we will leave the particulars of the investigation to you, and pour our souls into putting on an outstanding show. We certainly can't go around calling ourselves professionals if we can't pull it together when it counts. We'll make the concert a success, I assure you."

Felicia spoke with the power and confidence of her songstress title. The band members around her also brightened at her words and nodded amongst themselves. With everything decided, Felicia turned and reached for Shiori's hand.

"I do apologize for pulling the two of you into this incident, but I hope we can still rely on your help."

Felicia's eyes were alight, and they sparkled like stars as they reflected the magical lanterns. Shiori and Alec nodded.

"Now that we've gone to all the trouble of deciding on the visuals for our concert, I'll do my utmost to ensure that the set list remains unchanged," said Felicia. "There's a chance we may add a song or two from the original set list... Would that be quite all right?"

"But of course," replied Shiori. "But I'll need your help with ideas if that does end up being the case. There's a limit to my powers of imagination."

"You have my word. I feel fired up and ready to sing! I don't know who it is that's behind these tricks, but we can't have any...*mischievous pixies* getting up to no good for a concert so many are looking forward to."

Felicia let out a little snort of a chuckle as she spoke, and Shiori burst into laughter.

Alec watched the troupe of women and their excitement in silence, and

turned when he heard a knock at the door. A Cathedral knight poked his head into the room and gestured to Conny with his eyes. Just before he left, however, Conny spoke in a low voice.

“For a time, I worked as a prison chaplain,” he said. “I listened to the repentance of those who had been sentenced for their crimes, and I taught and admonished them as was called for. The majority felt a deep guilt for their crimes and a desire to repent. However, among them were those who refused to recognize their own sins. They claimed they were falsely accused, or that it wasn’t their fault, or that it was the fault of those around them.”

A sadness ran through Conny’s eyes as he paused for a moment. Something like displeasure ran through him.

“That woman’s expression back then reminded me of that time. It was the look...of a criminal.” Conny thought for a moment before going on. “But it’s no good pointing fingers when there’s no evidence. That said, I will be increasing security...around Karina in particular.”

“We’ll be on high alert too,” replied Alec. “She may not be the only one in on this.”

Conny nodded and left. Alec turned his gaze casually back towards the band. The girls had started practicing, knowing there was precious little time before the rest of the band arrived, and Alec watched them. It was then that he felt a unique sensation run across his skin—a feeling that put him on alert, and made him ready for battle.

It was a slight magical energy in the air. It was different from Shiori’s, and he was certain that Shiori felt it too, even as she cast her own illusion magic. He could see it in her—though was diligently practicing with the band, she was on edge.

That said, I doubt she’ll actually make a move in a place like this...

More likely, Karina was simply having trouble controlling her panic. Though she had managed to, at least in appearances, return to a state of calm, behind her masklike expression was a dim, dark emotion that welled up as she stared at Shiori. It wafted from her body like the aura of an assassin, and though it was very slight, the sense one got when they could read that magical energy was

enmity. The malice of the magic crept into Alec's skin, causing his face to contort.

At least her magical energy is only barely that of an actual mage...

It was so faint in the air that it would only be noticed by those who were practiced in magic. However, it was still enough that those particularly sensitive to it might feel that something was amiss, like a bad omen. And it was true here too—a few of the band members shivered as if a chill had run down their spines.

The feeling in the air stood in contrast to the beautifully elegant music, with its accompanying illusion magic. But the source of the feeling, and Karina herself, remained expressionless. Even then, however, she stared at Shiori intently, like a magical beast watching its prey from the darkness. Alec did not know why, but the woman showed excessive enmity towards Shiori, even though they had only just met.

Karina's expression gave Alec a sense of déjà vu, and he soon realized why. He let out a low groan as it hit him.

This is jealousy.

It was an expression he saw all too often when he lived in the castle. In noble society, it was unbecoming for one to wear their emotions on their sleeves, but outside of the most wily and cunning, a person's emotions could still be seen, if only slightly, behind the masks they wore for the sake of good manners. The expression most common in the young and immature was contempt and jealousy—it was clear in the eyes they turned on their betters.

In Karina's forced calm, and in her eyes, Alec felt that which he had felt back at the castle. He did not know exactly what it was Shiori had that Karina so envied, but he nonetheless stood with his arms crossed, ready to unsheathe his weapon at a moment's notice. He had no intention of simply cutting the woman down, but...

You will get no mercy from me should you even try to cause her harm.

A strange tension ran through the air, interrupted by another knock at the door and Conny's reappearance. The girls stopped their practice, their faces

filled with worry.

“I apologize for the interruption,” Conny said. “The knights have finished their questioning, and the rest of the band would like to see you all again. Please prepare your things—we’ll leave as soon as you’re ready.”

“Understood. Let’s go,” said Karina.

It was likely taking everything Karina had to maintain her calm, but she put her manager’s mask back on and took the lead. The girls began putting away their instruments and sheet music.

Shiori took this as an opportunity to head to Alec. She had not used her magic for an especially long time, and yet she looked exhausted as Alec passed her a magical recovery potion. Shiori took it with thanks, and drank a small portion of it.

“Tired?” Alec asked.

“Yes—I could feel her magic the whole time. I won’t enjoy it very much if I have to endure it at the concert proper...”

“Oh? Is there a problem of some sort?” asked Conny, who had just arrived after speaking a few words with Karina.

“Our potential suspect just shot my partner with an open look of enmity. She was trying to hide it, I’m sure, but her magical energy was wafting with murderous intent. I will not let her do the same at the concert tomorrow.”

“Well...that’s not very nice at all, is it?”

Conny’s kindly features scrunched up with discomfort, and perhaps without realizing it, he took a hold of the amulet that hung from his neck—a small bird and moon that together symbolized healing. Perhaps Conny, too, was tired.

“The knights have indeed finished their questioning,” said Conny, “but the orchestra will now be left suspecting that one of their own is the culprit. According to the knights, the water the orchestra drank in the carriage is suspect. That puts the first person to have caught the so-called poison, Helge, in quite the unenviable position. Nobody has actually said anything aloud, but you can feel it in the air.”

Everyone was suspicious. Everyone was a suspect. And with their feelings in disarray, the band would have trouble focusing. As a result, the quality of their performance was sure to drop. Conny of course hoped they could overcome this—they were professionals, after all—but he knew it would be no small task. They had been poisoned, and the culprit may well have been one of their own.

“This is likely exactly what she wants. But I simply can’t fathom it—she seems to treasure the songstress. Why would she want for her to fail...?” asked Shiori.

That Karina carried an ill will in her was undeniable. But all they had at present was circumstantial evidence. They were not yet completely certain that Karina was behind it all, and as Shiori pointed out, her motives were unclear. Alec wanted nothing more than to nip things in the bud as soon as possible, but at this point they still had no proof with which to take Karina into custody. He let out a sigh.

“Let’s put an end to things, tonight,” he said. “Our job is to protect the songstress and to make sure the concert is a success. We can’t let anyone continue to roam around who may intend to do our clients harm.”

Shiori and Conny gulped.

“Tonight? But how? Are you sure?” asked Shiori.

“If my hypothesis is right, then we’re dealing with a complete and utter amateur. As long as we don’t let her know that we think she’s the culprit, she will take action to try and fix the situation herself.”

Karina’s own comments had made her aims clear. *I bet she came all this way just to see the results of her handiwork in person. She probably even intended to improve her own reputation by swooping in to pick up after Felicia!* It was a plot to embarrass the songstress, and to pin the blame on Hildegarde.

However, with Hildegarde now in custody and essentially under arrest, it was impossible to put the blame on her for anything that happened next. This would leave Karina in a position where she would try to accomplish at least her main goal—sullying Felicia’s reputation.

“Shiori,” said Alec.

“Yes?”

Alec paused for a moment, uncertain. Based on the current circumstances, Shiori was perhaps the one person left who stood between Karina and her goal. Felicia had truly loved Shiori's illusion magic, and if Karina could stop Shiori from taking part, the chances of Felicia's ultimate failure were that much more certain. Karina would definitely want Shiori out of the picture. In that case, if they were to make Shiori a decoy and put her on a platter, then Karina would likely jump at the opportunity. But that, too, was a problem for Alec.

Shiori looked up at him, still silent, and she smiled.

"Oh, I get it. You want to force her hand, and create a situation in which she takes action."

"Yes."

"Then let me be the decoy. She already thinks I'm a nuisance. If I'm the bait, she's sure to bite."

"Shiori..."

Shiori was perceptive, as she always was, but Alec still hesitated. It was madness—he was going to use the woman he loved and treasured as bait for a criminal. To top it off, Shiori had already been the victim of an incident that had almost resulted in her own death. That she was offering to do so of her own accord was even more astounding.

"If something happens, you'll be there to protect me, right?" said Shiori. "And I won't do anything rash, so we'll be fine. Let me do this."

"Shiori, I..." Alec was shocked, but the determination in his lover's eyes strengthened his resolve. "Yes. I will protect you, no matter what. Will you help us?"

"Of course."

Conny had looked back and forth between the two adventurers as their discussion played out, and finally let out a wry chuckle.

"As a man of the cloth I want nothing more than to say I cannot allow it, but...we do not have the luxury of choosing our method. So it's settled—I will put my complete and utter trust in the two of you."

“You have our thanks,” replied Alec. “And though it will depend on how she ultimately decides to act, we’ll do our best to keep everything quiet.”

Alec was nothing but impressed at how quickly Conny understood the circumstances and elected to act. It was no wonder that, even with his young age, he had been put in such an important organizational position.

“Given what you’re planning, however,” said Conny, grinning as his mind ran through the situation, “you’ll need some kind of a ruse in which we can remove some of our guards, yes?”

Alec loved working with intelligent people. “That we will,” he said. “I’d be glad if you could arrange one.”

“We’ll get to the detailed planning straight after dinner. Until then, I’ll spread word through the two knight corps.”

“Got it.”

Alec felt a strong gaze piercing his back, but he pretended not to notice it. Shiori’s face, too, showed a certain tension, but it was not easy to read on her face—Easterners were known for their subtle expressions. Conny was a brilliant actor, and made the whole thing look as though they were merely making arrangements.

“Are you all settled, Conny?” asked Karina. “Perhaps we should be leaving?”

Conny turned to the prim and proper voice of Karina with a smile and a nod. So, with Conny and the Cathedral knights in the lead, Felicia and her orchestra took their instruments and sheet music and followed them out the room. It looked very much to Alec as if they were being taken in for a crime.

The Cathedral grounds were very spacious, and the group walked for several minutes through halls and corridors before they arrived at an open square in front of an auditorium, which was open to the public. Given the preparations, however, the auditorium’s closing time was earlier than usual, and it was empty apart from those who were there on Cathedral business.

The auditorium was built in the traditional style, and had once been used as a church before the Cathedral was constructed. Now, it was a sightseeing

location, a practice grounds, and a meeting hall. Though it was nothing in comparison to the Cathedral proper, it was still a very spacious place. The long rectangular interior was filled with benches, and there was a stage at the end of it that would have once been used for sermons. It was not of the level of the royal capital's theaters, but as a temporary performance hall it was a splendid setting indeed. It also seemed to be equipped with good magical tools—upon entering, everyone felt a gentle warmth permeating the air.

"My... How wonderful," said one of the band members. "I was worried we might have to deal with cold air breaking the strings of our instruments or spoiling our tuning. I was admittedly a little worried when I heard we'd be performing in an old church, but the feel here might even be nicer than the Hall itself."

Conny smiled proudly.

"That was pointed out to us when one of the Hall's people came to scout the location in advance. We had the most cutting-edge heaters installed. They cost a pretty penny, to be sure, but hearing your comment makes it all worthwhile."

"Which means we certainly can't afford to fail now," added Felicia.

Karina put a hand to the songstress's shoulder, and Felicia looked up at her, nodding to tell her she'd be fine. It looked as if the two had built quite the bond of trust between them, and if Karina really was the culprit, her motives were still unfathomable.

Trust, huh?

Without realizing it, Alec put a hand to Shiori's back, and she looked up at him in surprise. He shrugged her off with an awkward smile.

He and Shiori had only known each other for about four months, but they had grown to trust each other in that time, and it had warmed both of their hearts. Though it was true that they each kept their own secrets, Alec believed that their feelings and their trust were genuine. He did not doubt what they had built. And yet still he wondered—what would Shiori think when she found out that he was part of the royal family, and that he had deceived and injured a great many people to incite a rebellion that led to the downfall of an entire nation? Would she be hurt? Angry? Scared? Would she call him a coward whose

hands were muddied by deceit, enmity, and bloodshed?

He found himself sinking into these thoughts when the soft touch of a warm hand pulled him back to reality. Shiori's gentle smile melted his frozen heart, and though no words were spoken between them, he felt her tell him, silently, that it was all right, and so he smiled back.

Just then, a small commotion could be heard behind them. The doors to the auditorium opened and some men appeared, all of them carrying instrument cases. It was the remaining orchestra members, surrounded by Cathedral knights, and they could not hide their exhaustion—they had just suffered through a debilitating poison, after all.

"I'm so glad you're all safe," said Felicia.

The men looked pale, but the words brought wry grins to their faces.

"That was a tough one, all right," said one of the men. "I have *never* felt so awful in my life. Like all the water in my body just drained right out of it."

"After going through that, I dare say I'll swear off eating schoner clams for the rest of my days," added another.

"Well, let's not forget that it was *actually* poison."

The last man to speak sent a silence through the auditorium, so piercing that it almost hurt. The man eventually spoke again to break the silence.

"Look, we're all here, you know? I just want to make things clear."

But as he spoke the words, his eyes were on another band member in particular—a man with blond hair and a long instrument case. His hair lacked gloss after his ordeal, but it was done up in a popular style, and there was something slightly smug about him. He had soft features and gave off the air of a frivolous playboy.

"Helge," the man continued. "You're the one who said you helped out the guy with the schoner virus. Is it true?"

Helge. It was a name Hildegarde had raised, saying there was a chance he still carried a grudge for being turned down by Felicia. Helge turned to face his fellow orchestra members with a lethargic and exhausted look.

“I don’t know how many times I’ve said this to the knights already, but it’s true. I didn’t find out it was the schoner virus until the next day. I thought the guy was just a drunk. He didn’t look so hot, so I took him to the inn and told them to have a doctor check on him the following day...” Helge then stopped for a moment and let out a long sigh. “You can check for yourself. I took the drunk to the person working at the inn lobby the day before yesterday. They’re the one who told me it was possibly the schoner virus. That’s the whole reason I thought I’d come down with it when I started to get sick on the carriage. Who would have thought at that point that it was poison?”

Helge slumped back into one of the auditorium benches.

“So then you weren’t the one who spread the poison? And this wasn’t some way to harass Miss Felicia out of spite or revenge?” asked a fellow band member.

It looked like the drama around Helge’s sweet-talking and Felicia’s dumping him was known by everyone. It seemed they were all aware of the ongoing harassment too. Helge, however, made his stance clear.

“It wasn’t me,” he declared. “I swear it on my lifeblood, my flute. It wasn’t me.”

A musician’s instrument was like a knight’s sword. When one pledged a vow on it, it was a declaration of honesty. Still, Alec narrowed his eyes as he watched—he wanted to ascertain the truth of Helge’s words.

“Look, I *know* you all suspect me,” said Helge. “But I’m a professional. A professional musician. Even if I *did* have a grudge against Felicia, I wouldn’t even dream of bringing my own personal issues to a job in a place as sacred as the Cathedral. Anyone who *would* simply doesn’t have the right to call themselves a professional. That’s how I feel about it.”

A gasp was heard from one of the orchestra members—they’d clearly been struck by how earnest Helge’s statement was.

He seemed like a pretty generic playboy-type initially, but he’s surprisingly sincere, deep down.

Alec let his gaze linger on Helge for a time, then glanced towards Karina. Her

eyes harbored an anger that she was keeping under wraps. It was especially noticeable in contrast with the others, who seemed impressed by Helge's words. Perhaps Karina felt that he had seen through her, and was making a personal attack. She was putting on a calm front, but now that Alec knew there was another side to her, the falseness of her expression hit him even harder.

Still, he knew that it was unwise to focus his attention solely on Karina, and so he took a step back to better survey the entire orchestra. However, not a single other person showed any suspicious movement or gesture. Alec had no way of knowing yet whether all of this was a one-person job, but he was certain that Karina held a key to understanding it. He knew that it was an amateur at work, and this was likely their first crime. The person behind it all had planned carefully, and yet there was an awkwardness to the finer details that showed the criminal wasn't used to this kind of work.

"Whatever the case may be, we'll get to the bottom of it tonight," said Alec.

"Yes. I feel like...we're starting to see the cracks in the armor."

Panic and worry clouded one's decision-making, and there was no doubt that Karina was panicking. And though a professional would have pulled out the moment they realized that their plans had failed, Karina looked as though she were waiting for an opportunity—some kind of break—that she could use to put her plans back on track.

"Um, Alec," whispered Shiori, looking up at him with a smile. "Thank you. For seeing me and treating me as a genuine partner. I'm happy you trust me to play decoy tonight."

Alec was left stunned by the unexpected words of gratitude. But even then, he understood the feelings behind them, and clasped Shiori's hand softly—in the shadows where the gesture was free from prying eyes.

5

Though its time as a church was behind it, the air in the auditorium was still pure and innocent in its elegance. The orchestra's instruments echoed with great weight against the arched ceiling, and the voice that sang over them was

piercing in its lucidity. It was a voice with a weight that did not lose to the power of the orchestra, resonating as it sang of the beauty of the passing seasons, and the joy of life.

Alec stood in a position behind his lover, who sat beside the stage and focused entirely on her illusion magic. He noticed a slight change in the flow of the air, and turned to the auditorium's entrance, where one of two knights on duty opened the door and spoke to two other knights. There was some nodding, and then the guard who'd answered the door ran over to Conny and whispered something in his ear. Conny then headed to the door himself, and after a few words with those standing there, gestured for Alec to come over.

Karina stood silently in a position not far from Shiori, but Alec judged that she would not dare make a move here, and so silently went to the door himself.

"I apologize for the interruption," said Conny, who then gestured at the two Cathedral knights. "Sir Alec, these two are in charge of security here."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," said one. "I'm the captain of the third Cathedral knight corps, Johann Patriksson."

"I'm vice-captain, Nicholas Neumann."

"I'm Alec Dia, of the Tris Adventurers' Guild. I've taken on the job of bodyguard for the songstress."

As Alec spoke, his eyes narrowed slightly. The vice-captain's name struck him as familiar. Nicholas, too, did the same, and in the next instant, it clicked for the knight.

"Long time no see," said Nicholas with a grin. "Though that said, it's only been a month, I think."

Alec couldn't hide his surprise.

"Sir Nicholas," he said, "of the Northern knight corps."

When the snow wolf attack had occurred at Brovito Village, Nicholas had been in charge of making sure the travelers headed for Tris arrived there safely. Alec seemed to remember the man having ringworm...but he wasn't sure exactly *why* that particular fact struck him, and so did his utmost not to look at

Nicholas's feet as he offered a handshake.

The two men smiled at the reunion and shared a firm handshake.

"Fancy meeting you in a place like this," said Nicholas. "Oh, are you here with the Eastern woman?"

"Do you two know each other?" asked Conny, wide-eyed with surprise.

"We've worked together in the past," said Alec.

"Indeed," said Nicholas. "And let me assure you, Reverend Conny, that you're in safe hands with these two in your company. They were of great help to us during the snow wolf attack on Brovito Village."

"Is that so? That *is* something..." said Conny, nodding in admiration.

"Though we are indeed knights, as Cathedral knights our core duty is security within the Cathedral grounds," said Johann, a touch embarrassed and frustrated. "It vexes me to say it, but we're very much amateurs when it comes to apprehending criminals. I feel much more secure having a few experienced hands onboard like yourself and Sir Nicholas."

Johann gave a bashful smile. He and his knights were equipped with weapons, but they, too, were essentially men of the cloth.

"I see. So that explains why Sir Nicholas's unit is taking part in security measures," said Alec.

"Exactly that," said Nicholas, nodding. "Being that we also have to consider patrolling the grounds, I only have half my men with me—they're mixed in with the rest of the third Cathedral knight corps. The rest are on security. Our job is to make sure that the festival itself goes off without issue."

"Excluding the orchestra members who are still at the clinic, everyone is being moved to the guest house," said Conny. "We've decided to keep everyone who is potentially a suspect in one location. We also have a few knights on standby in the guest house's spare rooms—they're undercover as visiting guests."

Alec chuckled.

"Understood. I have to say, I like the way you work, Conny," he said. "Quick and all in. It's an honor to be working with you."

Conny was speedy when it came to talking to his superiors, and when it came to negotiations with the knights. It was work that most would usually be hesitant about, but Conny jumped into it without flagging. Alec wasn't mincing his words—he really did respect Conny's guts and abilities.

"The kind reverend here has also said he's taking full responsibility, which means we can get to accomplishing our work without worry."

Conny chuckled bashfully and scratched his cheek.

"Well, I...it should be said that many see me as being more than a little eccentric. But I suppose if I've been given a responsibility as large as this one, it at least means my work is being respected. I'm thankful for the kind words. I don't want to let it get to my head, but I'll do my utmost, I promise." Then Conny's face hardened. "Now, let's get down to business."

"Indeed. The one you suspect is the woman over there, yes?" asked Nicholas, not moving his head, but instead gesturing to Karina with a flash of his eyes. "The one with the glasses, by the side of the stage?"

The men all continued to talk casually, making sure not to draw attention from anyone by the stage.

"But are you sure?" asked Johann.

"Unfortunately, we have little more than our hunches. No actual evidence," said Conny, answering honestly.

Nicholas dropped into a moment of thought.

"Given my position, It pains me to suspect someone like this, but...I feel the same as Alec," Conny said. "At the very least, I believe she knows something. Her behavior, it's not normal."

"Do we know of any partners in crime?"

"No," said Alec. "Outside of Miss Hildegarde, there was one other potential suspect, but he denies any involvement. You can see him in the middle there, the blond one with the flute. Goes by the name Helge."

"And your impression of him?"

"Innocent."

Conny nodded.

“I see,” said Nicholas, dropping once more into thought for a time. “We can’t take anyone directly at their word. But we *can* keep a close eye on all of them. If there are partners in crime outside of the Cathedral grounds, you need not be concerned—we’ve already strengthened security considerably.”

Once he was sure he had everyone’s understanding, Nicholas went on.

“So let’s move on to final prep. You said that the chances of someone making a move this evening are very high, yes?”

“Yes,” replied Alec. “And if the culprit really is Karina, I believe she’ll likely make a move on Shiori.”

“Oh? Not the songstress?”

Given that embarrassing Felicia was her ultimate goal, the songstress had to be kept safe until the time of the actual performance. This meant Karina would turn her sights on those who could still help to make Felicia’s performance a success.

“I’ve noticed her looking unfavorably at Shiori more than a few times,” said Alec. “Once, I could even feel the hint of a murderous magical energy drifting from her. There’s some reason for it, but I don’t know what.”

“Murderous? I see. Can’t have that, can we?” said Nicholas, rubbing his jaw. “And the person plotting all of this is an amateur...an amateur who will move again tonight... Okay. We’ll need to make it look like we’ve lightened security to give our...*mischievous pixie* a stage on which to dance, yes?”

Nicholas’s choice of words for the criminal brought a wry chuckle from Conny and Johann. Nicholas himself shrugged as he went on.

“In any case, there’s no denying it—we have someone using the festival for their own personal vendetta, and they’re harming innocent people as part of it. The Nativity Festival is a day for peace, happiness, and the enjoyment of both. We cannot allow a personal vendetta to sully that which the citizens value so highly.”

Nicholas’s words were strong. He was born in Tris himself, and he loved his

hometown.

“I’ll tell the guards to find a reason to lighten security. Then, an hour after lights out, we’ll pull out some of the knights because of ‘trouble’ of some sort.”

By lessening security on two separate occasions, they’d send the criminal a message—*if you’re going to act, the time is now*. Given that the criminal was not a practiced hand, there was a good chance they’d fall right into the trap.

“As for where the orchestra is staying, those undergoing treatment will remain in the clinic, while the others are moved to the guest house,” added Conny. “We’ll prepare a room for you and Shiori next to Felicia. Karina and Felicia will share a room, while the rest of the orchestra are on the same floor, three per room.”

“I see,” said Alec. “How very kind you’re being to our first-time criminal.”

Nicholas burst into laughter at the veiled insult, and the two Cathedral men could only chuckle awkwardly—they weren’t used to such sarcasm. Alec then turned his gaze back to Shiori. He could tell that she was tired, and he felt a sudden urge to be back by her side, but pushed it away.

“Be aware that she may use magic,” said Alec. “I don’t expect much more than about as much as a low-level mage.”

“I’ll make sure we have knights in place to accommodate the eventuality.”

The meeting had come to a close, and the men shared a silent nod with their eyes.

“Well then, until we’re done here,” said Alec.

The matter of their original request was still a priority—the concert and the protection of the songstress. On top of that was a plan—a trap in which to catch a pixie spreading misfortune to those around her.

The orchestra and the songstress hit the climax of their rehearsal, and the instruments and the vibrato of Felicia’s voice rang out into the air before slowly melting away. Someone let out a deep sigh, and a few of the orchestra members smiled among one another. The rehearsal had gone well, it seemed.

“Professionals really are something,” said Shiori. “They don’t have any

problems even after a shuffled setlist.”

Alec had by now returned to Shiori’s side, and nodded to her. He took a potion from his For-Shiori pouch as though it were the most natural thing in the world, and she took it with a bashful smile.

“I know some of the orchestra members are missing, but to an amateur like me, the performance was amazing,” Alec said.

“Indeed. But I suppose for those with a deeper knowledge in the field, they might still notice something missing.”

The orchestra was short around ten members. These ten members were either far too dehydrated or still in shock, so even if they recovered by the following day, it was easier for them to simply sit out the performance than to risk ruining it. Unfortunately, this meant that half of the brass, percussion, and bass accompaniment was missing. This in turn meant that many of the songs on the original setlist would prove difficult. Felicia had thus elected to stick with what they had decided on earlier that morning.

“Music,” muttered Alec. “I took some lessons when I was younger, but as sad as it is to admit, I wasn’t good at any of it. I don’t mind listening to musical performances, but I’m still not much for being made to listen to music I don’t have an ear for...”

Alec scratched his head with a shy chuckle.

“One time I actually fell asleep during a performance because I was just so bored. My father and my brother got a bit of a laugh out of it, but the nobles in the audience made it clear they were less than impressed. I promised myself that I would never get caught napping like that again.”

It was an incident in the man’s past that had happened long ago enough that he could laugh about it. Still, there was something like a slight ache in Alec’s words, and Shiori’s own smile seemed to empathize with him.

Shiori and Alec talked easily like this for a time, until they noticed Karina say something to the orchestra before walking towards them. She wore what, at least on the surface, looked to be a satisfied smile.

Shiori felt her body tense, but Alec, who was more used to playing the game

of noble communication, put a gentle hand to her back to settle her nerves and welcomed Karina with an easy expression.

“A most wonderful performance,” said Karina, in high spirits. “Illusion magic is very difficult to use well, and so I admit that at first I felt some hesitation, but you have changed my view of it entirely. I’m certain that the audience will be overwhelmed by your abilities. I simply can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“Thank you ever so much,” replied Shiori. “I’ll do my utmost at the concert proper, also.”

On the surface, it was a pleasant conversation between two women, and yet something muddy seemed to waft from Karina’s eyes as she looked down at Shiori, who was shorter than her. Alec could not be sure if he were actually seeing it, or if perhaps it was simply his overcautiousness playing tricks on him.

Alec let nothing show on his face as he turned his eyes to Felicia. She was smiling gently, as were the members of her orchestra as they looked at Shiori with wonder. It was such a pleasant atmosphere that Alec could almost believe that this was all the overimaginative fancies of a would-be detective.

Or so he thought, because at that point he caught Helge, sitting in the middle of the orchestra, send an affectatious wink at his lover.

“That son of a bitch...” muttered Alec, the corner of his lips twisting into a slight snarl.

Shiori’s eyes went wide at the utterance, and then she burst into laughter. Karina, for her part, let a cringing smile creep across her face.

“Will he ever learn...?” she said. “I will have words with him afterwards. He’s the type that can’t help but pour on the charm when he’s around women. It hurts the dignity of the orchestra. He only means it to be polite, but given his looks and demeanor, there are just *so* many women who get the wrong idea... Please, Shiori, don’t let it bother you.”

Though it was actually Alec who seemed to be the one bothered by it all, Shiori was the one who had received the apology, so she nodded politely in response. But if Karina had gone that far in her explanation, it seemed that perhaps Helge often found himself in hot water when it came to interacting

with women.

“Marvelous,” said Conny, who had watched over the rehearsal also. “One day I do so hope I get to see your ‘narrated pictures’ too, Shiori. As for these two...”

The reverend then brought forth the two Cathedral knights standing by his side.

“And they are?” asked Karina suspiciously.

“These are the two responsible for protecting the songstress and orchestra,” replied Conny with a smile. “Captain Johann Patriksson and vice-captain Nicholas Neumann. The knights they lead will be looking after you all.”

“Hm?” uttered Shiori, recognizing one of the knights.

Alec gave Shiori a gentle tap on the back, and she looked up at him. His expression told her *not* to follow through with the question she was about to ask, and let her know that their trap was already in motion. The housekeeping mage blinked and smiled at him. This was all she needed to do to show Alec that she understood.

“Since you’ve all recovered, we’d like to move you all into the guest house,” said Conny. “I’m sure there are some finer details to sort out, but you’ll be relatively free to come and go as you please. That said, lights out is at ten to ensure security, at which point we ask that you stay indoors.”

The orchestra members nodded obediently.

“And may I ask what kind of security we’re talking about here?” asked Helge, timidly raising his hand. “Will there be a knight for each room?”

Conny glanced at Johann, who picked up the explanation from there.

“We had indeed planned for that initially, but given that it’s the night before the Nativity Festival, we simply do not have the man power. That said, Felicia’s room will have two guards stationed outside of it, and each room will have two guards on patrol at all times.”

“I, uh... I see,” said Helge, trying to smile even as his eyebrows drooped with his troubled thoughts. “It’s just, well, many still have their doubts about me, you see. If security were especially tight, that would essentially prove my

innocence in the event that something were to happen."

"Each floor only has one corridor, so we'll notice anything suspicious right away. We've also increased security around the guest house itself, so there's nothing to worry about on that front."

"Well, in that case..." said Helge, who still didn't seem quite satisfied, but was nonetheless pleased by either the confidence he heard in Johann's voice, or the fact he'd had a chance to profess his own innocence.

"Sir Alec, how will you go about your protection duties?" asked Felicia.

"I'll be in your room until lights out, after which I'll be with the guards stationed at your door. It would be safest for me to be in your actual room, but I'm sure we'd both prefer that *not* be the case."

"Indeed, you're right. I appreciate your consideration."

"I will need to get a little sleep before morning," added Alec, "but there will be a guard to cover for me during that time."

"Very well, I will leave those details to you."

Karina had no particularly strong opinions and simply agreed with what she was told. Alec wondered if there was not a mediator for the orchestra members, but then found out that the person who usually spoke on behalf of the orchestra was one of the members still in the clinic. Karina had taken up this position on the man's behalf, and likely because she was well trusted. She was a talented and skillful woman, both as a manager and as a singing coach. Alec still couldn't work out why a woman who had so much going for her would carry such enmity for Shiori.

"I hope it's simply because she doesn't like me," muttered Shiori.

Shiori meant, of course, that the orchestra was made up of good people, and she did not want to see them being betrayed by one they had put their trust in. Alec, too, felt the same. However, Alec knew that when people came together, it gave rise to a myriad of different thoughts and feelings—some of them good and well intentioned, and some of them not. He knew that there were people who, when the bad thoughts and bad intentions grew too much to bear, struck out and hurt others far more than was ever necessary.

6

During the day, the guest house was lively with the comings and goings of visitors and Cathedral staff, but by eight that evening everyone had returned to their rooms, and not a sound could be heard save for the occasional opening and closing of doors, and the rhythmical footsteps of the guards on patrol. It was so quiet, in fact, that it was hard to believe it was even the night before the Nativity Festival—Shiori knew that many shops were still open, and the city streets would still be lively.

“Usually it’s even quieter. Around the time of the Nativity Festival there are always people up and about until quite late, and I suppose it makes us all a little restless,” said Conny, who then chuckled. “Perhaps we could all do with some more monastic training. In any case, lights out is an hour later than usual. All the preparations and meetings with various guests always end up taking time.”

However, now it was already nine thirty—well past the accepted lights out time.

“Oh, I see,” said Felicia, her eyebrows drooping with worry. “You must be exhausted, then.”

“Well, it *has* been a long day,” replied Conny with an honest smile.

Conny’s grin was growing more frequent as he got more comfortable with everyone, and perhaps it was a natural character trait.

“However, the final preparations are done and things are finally in a good place. I’ll take my leave. That said, I won’t be too far away, so you can always send word to me through the guards as necessary. Once the adventurers and I leave, be sure to lock the door.”

Karina nodded obediently.

“Um... This is not to say that I doubt the abilities of any of our guards,” she said timidly, “but what will happen in the case that someone comes in through the window?”

“I can assure you that *won’t* be a problem—all the knights on patrol have

skeleton keys. They'll be able to get in should there be any trouble."

"Oh, is that so?" said Karina, sharing a relieved sigh with Felicia. "That's one less thing to worry about, at least."

Perhaps Karina was confirming the existence of such keys. But even if she were, that too was likely part of the trap that had been laid.

"Well then, I believe it's time I called it a night. I bid you all a good evening. Rest well," said Conny.

"I'll be on watch at the door," said Alec. "I'll take a brief nap in the room next door, but don't hesitate to wake me should something happen."

Karina nodded.

"Thank you," she said. "I pray that we won't need to."

Shiori chuckled internally—she could feel Karina's feigned worry and concern. That said, it was still not a certainty that Karina herself was the culprit. The knights had kept an eye on her since practice finished—and all through dinner too—but neither she nor any of the orchestra had done anything to raise suspicion.

Still, there was no harm in being overprotective, even if nothing happened over the course of the evening. At the same time, Conny and the adventurers wanted desperately to solve the crime as quickly as possible, and it was with these complicated feelings swirling within them that they left Felicia's room.

There was nobody in the hall save for the knight on patrol. Everyone had retired to their rooms, either to sleep or to spend some time quietly on their own. Conny made sure to close the door completely and, when they were some ways away from the room and Conny was sure nobody was listening, he looked at the guard in the hallway with a knowing glance, and the two shared a nod.

"Everyone is in position," whispered the knight.

Shiori gulped at the nervous tension that was thick in the air. She had never imagined that this day would end with her working with the knight corps to capture a criminal. It was hard to believe that this wasn't just a dream of some sort.

Since coming to this new world, there had been a few times when Shiori got the sense that her reality had slipped away. It felt not unlike a deep ravine that separated who she had been in her old world and who she was in this one. Sometimes, it was as though she couldn't keep up with the reality she was experiencing in the moment.

But this really is *reality...*

Shiori had experienced more here than she could have ever imagined in her old world—she had crossed over into another world entirely, become an adventurer, and developed the abilities of a mage. Then there was the fact that there had been more than a few times when her life itself had come under threat. She had felt like she would break, but she had continued to fight and to live, and all of that was part of her reality now. It was not an illusion or a dream—it was her living reality. Right now, this was the world in which she lived.

Shiori looked up at Alec, who met her gaze with a firm nod.

"I'd like to run through things one last time with Shiori," he said. "I'll need five minutes."

The knight nodded, then raised one of his hands up high and waved it in a slightly peculiar manner. In response, the knight at the other end of the hall responded by raising his own hand—a message between them that their sting operation had begun.

"I will be on standby in the room next door," said Conny, who had been assigned the room next to Shiori's.

"Understood. Talk soon," said Alec, who then ushered Shiori into her room.

Shiori's room was the one in which they'd all talked with Hildegarde earlier. Though it was not quite up to the standards of Felicia's room, it was nonetheless elegant and comfortable. In the center of the room were some upholstered chairs and a round table, with a desk by the window. Against the wall was a cupboard and a movable partition behind which one could change clothes. Beside these was a most comfortable-looking queen-size bed. The whole room gave a glimpse at the stature of those who usually stayed at the Cathedral guest house and, under any other circumstances, would have provided an entirely relaxing night of rest.

Alec took Shiori's hand and led her to the bed so he could explain things in more detail.

"At around eleven, we've arranged for a problem that will draw away some of the knights on guard. I'll make it look like I'm going with them, but actually I'll sneak back here. If our criminal takes the bait, they'll move quickly. Try not to worry—there are knights on standby in several rooms, and I'll be right behind the bedside partition. All you have to do is pretend that you're asleep."

"Okay, got it."

"We know that there's a chance she'll use magic, which is why all the knights on standby are magical soldiers. Please know that you can rest easy."

Based on what they'd felt earlier, Karina did not wield high-level magic. This meant that if she tried an attack spell or even psychomagic, Shiori would be able to defend herself from it as long as she was focused. She knew she'd be fine.

Shiori nodded as if to confirm for herself that she really would be okay, and felt Alec pull her into a strong embrace. He held her there for a short time, then kissed her on the lips. They kissed several times before he quietly pulled away.

"There's still a while before things will get rolling," he said. "Try to get some rest. I'll wake you when it's time."

"Are you sure? But to be honest, I'm so nervous I don't think I *can* sleep."

Alec chuckled.

"I thought as much. But still, you'll feel better if you lie down and close your eyes. It will do you good."

"Okay, I will. Oh, by the way..." said Shiori, remembering something that was on her mind. "That knight we met earlier, at the auditorium, I feel like we've met somewhere before. He looks so familiar."

"Oh, you mean Nicholas."

"Nicholas... Oh! From Brovito."

Nicholas was one of the knights who had led travelers to Tris after the incident at Brovito Village. He was the same age as Shiori, and worthy of his

status as a captain. She seemed to remember him having ringworm, but she wasn't sure exactly *why* that particular fact struck her, and so she did her utmost to purge the thought from her mind in the name of the man's honor. If she didn't, she had a horrible feeling she'd end up staring at his feet the next time they met.

"You were just thinking about his ringworm, weren't you?" said Alec.

Shiori's head shrunk into her shoulders. He'd hit the nail right on the head.

"Same thing happened to me," said Alec. "You know, we should introduce him to Nils's dispensary."

"Good idea," said Shiori.

The two adventurers shared a chuckle.

"Well, I better go and take up my position. Get some rest, okay?"

"Okay."

Alec took Shiori's hat from her head and sat her on the bed. She took off her cape and her boots, let her hair down, and then got under the covers. She looked up into Alec's dark magenta eyes—a gentle color of evening that she so loved.

"I'll wake you when it's time," Alec repeated. "Until then, good night."

Alec dropped one last kiss on Shiori's lips—brief, but filled with deep emotion.

7

Shiori was on edge, filled with tension and nerves at the prospect of sudden battle, and she didn't sleep a wink. She did manage to doze for a short time, but came back to her full senses at the sound of footsteps and whispered voices outside of her room. They came to a stop partway down the hall, after which a door opened, and a hurried conversation took place between two men.

"What is it?"

"Hildegarde has run away. We're currently looking for her, but she may have already escaped the Cathedral grounds."

“What?!”

“We don’t have enough support. I apologize, but...”

“Wait. Okay, hang on a moment.”

Ah, now I get it. By saying that Hildegarde is on the run, they give Karina even more reason to take action.

Earlier, Karina had spoken in a way that made it seem that her intentions were to have Hildegarde blamed for what happened. Hildegarde’s “escape” was thus the perfect opportunity, and Karina would know this—she would not want to waste such a chance. It was a terribly effective—if cunning—trap that the knights had concocted.

Within moments, knocks could be heard, along with a knight calling Felicia’s name. Then came the sound of a key unlocking that door, and that same door opening.

“Whatever is the matter?”

The person who answered was Karina.

“Miss Hildegarde has escaped,” reported the knight. “We think there’s a good chance she’s left the grounds.”

“What?!”

Karina’s reaction was instantaneous, her voice filled with confusion and anger.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked. “Was she not under strict watch?”

“My apologies. A VIP requested her as a speaking partner and we could not refuse. That was when she found a chance to escape. She sweet-talked her way out.”

“The city is especially lively during the Nativity Festival, even at an hour as late as this one,” added another knight. “We’ll need help if we intend to get down among the tourists to look for her. I apologize, but we’ve had to move a few knights from this location and put them on the search team.”

“Oh... And what of our protection?” asked Karina.

“We’ll leave as few knights as we can to ensure your safety. All the same, keep your door locked and do not leave your room.”

“Okay. I suppose we’ve no other choice. Very well.”

Karina’s voice sounded confused, but all the same she could be heard accepting the knights’ decision. A moment later, footsteps came stomping down the hall, with someone calling Alec’s name. Thus the ruse continued.

“Sir Alec!” called a knight. “A messenger has arrived from the guild.”

“At this time?”

“It’s an emergency. They insist on at least consulting you. We have them waiting at the back gates.”

“Damn it,” spat Alec. “Understood. Miss Karina, trust that I will be back as soon as possible.”

“You’ve no other choice,” replied Karina. “I understand.”

Her voice was filled with clear displeasure, but it was uncertain if it was how she really felt, or just an act. Perhaps it was both.

A whispered conversation could be heard outside, followed by the locking of a door. Then the footsteps of several knights trampled down the hall, and at the same time Shiori’s door opened silently, then closed, and was locked.

“Alec,” Shiori whispered.

“You’re awake,” replied Alec.

Shiori sat up in bed, and Alec rushed to her without so much as a sound, then knelt at her bed.

“The game is afoot,” he said, “and she bought it. She was looking for an opening.”

He sounded certain. Karina had acted like she’d just woken up, but there were no signs that she’d actually been asleep. She had also answered the knock at her door without a moment of hesitation, among other noticeable slips.

“I’ll be hiding behind the partition. We’ll move according to plan.”

“Understood.”

Shiori went back under the covers, and Alec planted a kiss on her cheek before hiding in the shadows of the partition.

How long would they have to wait? A few minutes? Perhaps longer?

As Shiori was waiting for something to happen, she felt herself grow tense—she could feel something wavering in the air.

Someone is using magic...

It was only a hint of magical energy—nothing particularly powerful, but it was close. Shiori cast her search magic, and slowly spread out a thin net of magical energy. It immediately caught on a few presences nearby—likely those staying in their rooms and the knights who were in hiding.

At about the ten-meter mark, Shiori felt something unusual. Based on the distance, she knew it was Felicia's room. It was only faint, but Shiori could sense somebody up to no good. The presence stood up, and cast another spell. Then came the sound of a body slumping to the ground.

So, it was sleep magic.

Shiori remembered what Alec had told her—that all the knights in the guest house were magical soldiers. That meant they could easily parry such a weak magic. That they didn't was merely a sign that they were feigning sleep. However, even knowing that, Shiori let out a short gasp. She was nervous. The gasp was so slight as to be almost inaudible, but to Shiori it seemed to echo through the room. She held her breath and touched the band on her left arm without realizing it—it was the first gift that Alec ever gave her.

Shiori heard the quiet sound of a key unlocking a door, and the presence moved slowly out into the corridor, pausing there. Shiori guessed whoever it was was searching the knights for a set of keys. In the next instant, the presence was on the move once again, until it stood before the door to Shiori's room.

Shiori let her search magic softly dissipate into the air and closed her eyes. She calmed her breathing so that at a glance it would look as though she were still asleep, but she kept her senses sharp.

She heard a few different keys being tried in the door, and finally, a metallic click as one of them fit. The door opened silently—followed by the sound of

swaying clothes and stealthy footsteps along the carpet—and then it closed. The air around the presence was muggy with ill will as it stood by Shiori's bedside. Shiori's skin felt suddenly prickly as if it were burning.

Here it comes...

She heard a low muttering followed by the dispersal of magic. Then, Shiori was hit by a wavering through her consciousness. Hypnosis magic. Still, it was weak in strength, and after only a moment of drowsiness, it seeped away and was gone. The caster, however, was unaware of this—Shiori gave no signs of being awake, and her breathing still held the rhythm of one who was fast asleep. Perhaps this was why the intruder spoke, her voice low and filled with spite and ridicule.

"The buffoon. To think she's considered high rank. She didn't even wake during all the commotion. In the end, she's little more than an uncivilized Easterner, I suppose. It reflects poorly on the guild that sent her."

There was no doubting it now—the spiteful voice belonged to Karina.

Buffoon? Look who's talking.

Shiori felt for a moment as if she could hear Alec's voice. It was, of course, nothing more than her imagination, but in her mind she felt certain that this would have been his reaction.

Shiori heard Karina's movements. First she took something out of a pocket or satchel, and then came a *pop* like a lid being taken from a bottle. Karina's presence came ever closer, and her cold, trembling fingers softly and silently opened Shiori's lips just a touch.

"Please don't think badly of me. I just need you to sleep. Yes, just long enough for the concert to fail completely."

Karina intended to give Shiori sleeping medication, and she tilted the bottle to pour it down the mage's throat.

At that very moment, Shiori heard the sound of a blade unsheathing and a small squeal of surprise. The fingers on Shiori's lips were pulled away.

"That's enough," said Alec.

His voice was low, grim, and ice cold in a way that it never usually was. It was the sign Shiori had been waiting for—she opened her eyes and was at the ready.

In the next instant, the door to Shiori's room burst open and a number of knights flooded inside. The once-dark room was suddenly illuminated as the lights went on, and the brightness made Shiori a little dizzy. Nonetheless, she stood by Alec's side, her gaze on the woman who was now frozen by her bed.

It was Karina, standing as still as a statue, a magic sword pointed straight at her neck. Her skin was deathly pale like the winter sky, and the blood seemed to have drained from her now purple lips. In complexion she looked not unlike a corpse, and yet her eyes glimmered with an unusual light—one that stood in stark contrast to her panic. Karina looked around hesitantly, and her mouth opened just a touch. But when she could not find the words she was looking for, all that left her throat was a trembling sigh.

"Shiori," said Alec, calling her without taking his gaze from his target.

She could not speak immediately, but she acknowledged him with her eyes.

"You didn't drink any of the liquid, did you?" Alec asked.

"No, I'm fine," she replied. "You were there to stop it before it could happen."

Alec. He had timed things exactly so that Karina would show her hand, but made absolutely sure that no harm would come to his lover. He grinned for a moment, but it was just an instant, and then the harsh severity returned to his eyes.

"Take the bottle," he said.

"Got it."

Shiori took the bottle from the still-frozen Karina. The hands that had touched her lips were now sweaty, and Shiori averted her gaze from the woman, unable to look at her.

Alec sheathed his sword when Nicholas took a hold of Karina, then inspected the bottle that Shiori had taken. It was no larger than an ordinary enamel bottle, and its only unique feature was that it had a pointed end—the design

indicating that it was a dropper, and that the liquid was only meant to be used in small quantities. Alec read the label on the bottle, then dropped into thought before sniffing its contents.

“It’s sleeping medicine,” he said as he passed the bottle to Nicholas. “Extracted from evernight grass.”

Nicholas confirmed the contents of the bottle in much the same way as Alec.

“Easy to get a hold of too—just claim you have trouble sleeping.”

Perhaps because of the force in Nicholas’s words, or perhaps because she had now composed herself somewhat, Karina spoke.

“Exactly right. I use that medicine whenever I have trouble sleeping. And Shiori seemed so very stressed and nervous. I wanted nothing more than to ensure she got a good night’s sleep...”

“You wanted to help her so badly you used sleeping magic on Felicia and the knights in the corridor, then stole their keys? That’s quite the motivation.”



Karina herself was just as aware of the situation. The words were her one last

glimmer of hope, but they were pained and a last-ditch effort, and they made for a pitiful excuse. Karina's lips closed tightly and she stared down at her feet. But in the next instant, she raised her head to speak again.

"Shiori was in my way. She was an eyesore. I needed her gone for the plan to succeed. So I wanted her asleep until it was all over. She was one among a few I was going to put to sleep."

"Until it was all over, huh?" Alec practically spat the words, his ice-cold gaze making it crystal clear that he was holding back his rage. "This medication is meant to be taken in small doses. All it takes to have an effect is one or two drops in a cup of water. But you were going to give this to Shiori undiluted."

Karina did not understand the weight of what Alec said, and grew confused.

"Yes, well... If I gave her the correct dosage, she would have woken up. I needed her to sleep the whole day."

Shiori, however, *did* realize what Alec was saying, and it sent a shiver of fear through her. This was a medicine powerful enough to cause sleep with just a few drops. Karina had intended to give her much more than that. Alec drew the shivering Shiori in close.

"Then let me ask you this," Alec said, his voice low. "How much of this medicine did you intend to make Shiori drink?"

"I imagined about a third of the bottle..."

Gasps of shock and anger filled the room. The dark magenta eyes that impaled Karina grew ever sharper—this was a gaze even fiercer than when he confronted a magical beast. Having been raised in a good home, Karina had likely never encountered such raw anger before, and it caused her pale face to go as white as a sheet. She stumbled with fear, and Nicholas was forced to help her remain standing.

"Then I am very glad that we noticed in time," said Alec, "because if we hadn't, you would now be a murderer."

"A...A murderer?!"

Karina could scarcely believe it. She struggled against the knights who held

her, broke free, and stamped her feet.

“That is going well over the line!” she cried. “It’s little more than sleeping medicine!”

“So you really *are* an amateur,” said Alec, with an edge of ridicule to his voice. “If you give someone a couple drops of this, undiluted, then yes, they will usually wake after two or three days. But in large quantities, the shock this causes to the nerves means you will not wake again. You fall into a coma, your body weakens, and then you die.”

Death by overdose. As with all medicines, in excess it became a poison. Karina had no idea.

“But I...I...I never intended for...”

“Whether you intended to or not, had you followed through with your actions, you would have been responsible for the results.”

“But I never succeeded!” shouted Karina in response to Alec’s harsh words. “You can see for yourself! Shiori is safe!”

And even though she pointed to Shiori’s well-being with her words, she glared at Shiori with such fierce enmity that Shiori’s hair stood on end.

“Be that as it may,” said Nicholas, whose voice was at once quiet but straight to the point, “that does not mean you are innocent of your crimes, my lady.”

Karina dropped to her knees and covered her face. The sound of her weeping filled the room. Still wrapped in the safety of Alec’s embrace, Shiori said not a word, and merely looked at Karina as she cried. Shiori’s impression of the woman was that of intelligence and calm, and even now, that impression had not changed. Karina was an exceptional talent—the manager of the royal capital’s top songstress and the representative for an entire orchestra. It did not bring Shiori any joy to see the woman here in agony as she suffered for what she had done.

“Why did you do this? I understand now that Miss Shiori was in your way, but what exactly were your plans? Was it the downfall of Miss Felicia?”

The quietly spoken question came from Conny, who revealed himself from

behind the gathered knights. Karina, her head still hidden in her hands, nodded.

“But why? It’s obvious to everyone that the two of you have such a strong bond of trust. And I could see for myself that you truly do care for Miss Felicia. But if so, then why do all of this?”

Karina’s hands slowly dropped from her face to her knees, but her gaze remained downcast, her expression unreadable.

“I was jealous,” she replied. “No matter how hard I tried, I never made it to the top. But Fels, she did it in just a few years. I was the one who taught her how to sing, but she got so good so quickly, and just like that, she’d left me behind. But even then, I...”

Shiori saw Karina’s lips shut tight for a moment before she pushed on.

“The best I ever managed was the opening act. The girls behind me overtook me, and then I was nothing. That’s why I’d decided to give up on it all.”

Though there were nations in which performance art was seen as something unbecoming for the nobility, Storydia was, in this sense, more generous. One hundred and fifty years ago, the king’s second queen had been a superb soprano singer, and it was said that at the time of a battle to recapture their land, she had sung for all the knights who were headed into battle so as to inspire victory.

Alvestam Hall, which existed on the royal capital’s finest land, was also a distinguished opera house of authority. The hall had produced many fine musicians from among the nobility, starting with the Lovners. For this very reason, working at the Hall was considered an honor among young nobles who would not be inheriting their family domain. It was an intelligent profession that ranked alongside teachers, scholars, and civil servants.

Karina had been seen as someone of talent, and had entered the hall in her teens as a trainee, though it had also been seen as a chance for an otherwise lesser noble family to add some prestige to their daughter’s name. However, in the end Karina had only achieved as much as opening act performances, and there was little else to do other than give up on the idea of more spectacular ones. There was also the fact that an engagement had been reached between her and the son of a regional noble family with its own domain.

And then Karina had met Felicia. She had been brought in as the girl's tutor, and as they got to know each other, discovered Felicia's singing talents. Thus, she had found herself back in the world she had once given up on, this time as Felicia's manager. As she watched Felicia start to make a name for herself as a singer of renown, a bud of jealousy began to sprout in Karina's heart.

While Karina was widely considered an excellent manager, she still saw something of herself on the stage, like flashes of the past, as Felicia's star began to grow. However, this only heightened the overwhelming contrast she felt—on the one hand was Felicia, sparkling brighter with each day, and on the other was her own miserable life and abandoned dreams.

The arrival of Hildegarde, too, marked a person that Karina simply could not accept. Hildegarde had inserted herself between Karina and Felicia's friendship—a friendship which had been built over years—and in what felt like a trivial amount of time, Hildegarde was suddenly Felicia's best friend. And to add insult to injury, Hildegarde too became the kind of singer that Karina had only ever dreamed of being.

The more Karina saw the two songstresses talking and sharing their woes, the more she felt like an outsider. She was a daughter of the nobility, and she could not stand herself for being less than a former traveling performer and a servant's daughter. She could not stand herself for being relegated to backstage after failing to accomplish her dreams, and could not stand that, as a mere attendant, there was still a world she could never be a part of. Karina swayed in these waves of friendship, work, and jealousy, and she did so for days, entirely unbeknownst to anyone.

"That was around the time it became difficult for me to sleep," said Karina. "The doctor recommended that I step away from work to recover somewhere peaceful and quiet. He said that getting away from the Hall was far, far better for me than trying to overcome my issues through my work."

"And that was the doctor who prescribed you the medicine?" Nicholas asked.

Karina nodded. She let a small silence fill the room before she went on.

"I wanted to get away from it all. I wanted to rest. My fiancé wanted the same. He said that I had done more than enough—that I had achieved much as

a noblewoman pursuing a career. He told me that it was the perfect opportunity for us to get married and move to the countryside. And that was what I intended. I intended to quit. However..."

Karina's thin hands, still on her knees, balled into fists.

"I was frustrated. Vexed. I couldn't stand the idea that Felicia would be traipsing through the royal capital as a renowned songstress while I had to give up my dreams and quit my job to move to the countryside."

"And so you decided to ruin her performance, so as to sully her reputation?" asked Conny quietly.

Karina nodded.

"I was filled with envy. I was jealous—she has everything I want. She is beautiful. She's the number one songstress. She has friends at the same heights. I'm jealous! I couldn't even begin to touch any of those things, and she has all of them!"

"Well, lemme tell ya what then, eh? I'll give yer what I've got, but you betta give me likewise!"

Karina had just bared her soul to all of them, and received this brazen and disrespectful response. These words were spoken by a woman, and everyone turned to the sound of the voice, where they found a shaky-looking Felicia being supported by Helge.

For a moment, Shiori couldn't understand who had spoken the words she'd just heard, and she was far from alone. It felt nearly impossible to link Felicia's graceful appearance with her rough-and-tumble barmaid-style of speech, and Shiori stared at the songstress in shock. Even Helge's mouth was agape.

"So you say you wants everything I've got, eh? What more could ya ask fer?"

This, it would seem, was the accent that was most natural for Felicia. Her words sounded surprisingly irreverent and harsh as she stood free from Helge. The songstress was pale—it was as if she'd just woken from a bad dream, perhaps because of the hypnosis that had been cast on her. Nonetheless, she insisted on standing on her own as she glared Karina down.

“If ya want me spot as the songstress, then I’m more’n happy t’give it to ya. But you’ll give me what you’ve got in return, ya hear?”

“What...what do you mean? Do you take me for a fool?” asked Karina, her face reddening with anger as she stood to her feet. “You say I have what you want? But I am plain, without charm... What could I possibly have that you would want?!”

“Oh, you’ve got it, all right,” said Felicia. “Ya still can’t tell?”

The songstress laughed derisively, and it was as if all her maiden-like grace from before had all been a lie. She laughed at Karina for being so clueless.

“You’ve got yerself a *home*, don’t ya? Eh? A warm family y’can run on back to if’n whenever you feel like it, no? You’ve got yerself a *real* family, don’t ya? Eh?”

Shiori let out a gasp. Alec gripped her shoulder more tightly. Perhaps the words had struck a chord with him too, but Shiori could not read exactly what was in his expression—she saw only the slight wavering in his dark magenta eyes.

“You’ve got y’self a home ya can go to whenever ya feel like it, and a family that’s waitin’ right there fer ya, no? You’ve even got yerself a fine gentleman of a fiancé to boot. Me? I don’t gots *none* of that.”

“Rubbish. You have all of the same things. Well, perhaps not the fiancé, but...”

Karina’s response showed that she could not grasp the meaning in what Felicia had spoken.

“I know that perhaps once you were just a nobody—a mere street performer, yes, but *now* you are the adopted daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants in the nation. Your father and mother are kind and upstanding people. The ideal parents. And does your older brother not treat you as if you were his own sister?”

“Yeah, there’s that. But it don’t change how precarious me position is, not a bit.”

Felicia’s blonde hair wavered as she let out a slight chuckle. There was a gloominess in her bright, emerald green eyes.

“However much they may care f’me now, it don’t change the fact that I’m not their real daughter. It’s fine now, but mom and pops are getting older, eh? And when they’re gone, suddenly their adopted daughters got no place t’go. All of it gone. Poof. Just like that.”

When Felicia’s adopted parents passed away, their son would inherit the family, and as such, he would manage it. And perhaps even the women he might potentially come to marry would be wary of his adopted sister, who had no blood connection to the family line. There would also be relatives suspicious of the relationship between the heir-to-be and the adopted daughter. Among these would be many who did not want to see this harm their business dealings. Being that Felicia’s presence alone could get in the way of business between families, she could not simply freeload for as long as she wanted. The songstress herself felt a debt of gratitude to the Amren family, and said she did not want to cause them problems, anyway.

“Me enterin’ the world of singers wasn’t just ’cos I liked singin’. Weren’t just a form of payback, neither. I get famous and I’m a billboard of sorts, eh? Figured maybe I could help the family business that way. But the truth? I wanted t’save enough money t’stand on me own. I wanted enough money that I could leave whenever I ’ad to.”

And so Felicia had sung with everything she had, and as a result, received the title of songstress.

“But... But it can’t be...” muttered Karina, shaking her head, still unable to understand. “Even if you left, you’d still be a songstress. There are so many who would want you, are there not?”

“Ya little fool,” said Felicia, her smile tinged with sorrow. “‘Songstress’ isn’t an eternal title, y’hear? They love me now while I’m young and I’m cute, but what happens when I age, eh? What happens when I’m past me prime? In this world, there’s always someone young and talented on the up-and-up. A few years and I’ll be givin’ up me title to someone else. And what value do I have when that happens, eh? All I am then is an old hag who used t’be a starlet.”

There were not many in the performing world who would allow you to stay when your time had run its course. There was always the path to becoming a

theater performer, but Felicia did not know how much she would have left in her when the time came. Compared to others, she was lacking in education, but she was not one to cling to uncertain and distant hopes.

For as long as she could remember, Felicia had been a street performer. She had spent her youth scraping by—feeding herself with the meager money she made from each show. Then she had been brought in by the person who was now her father, and given the opportunity to enjoy her youth as the daughter of the wealthy, complete with an education becoming of the upper classes. But Felicia knew that she lacked the general knowledge to live among the common people were she to suddenly find herself in such a position. She could not imagine herself leaving home to work an honest, ordinary job. If she could make anything happen through force of will alone, it had to be when she was young. What would she do when she was past her prime? What if she got sick or injured and could no longer work?

"I don't got a home I can go back ta," Felicia said. "No place that'll welcome me unconditionally, neither. So what's left for me to rely on then? Money. This ain't a story 'bout hopes or dreams, this here's...reality. Not that a princess like you would understand that." And once again, Felicia flashed that same sad smile. "I always looked up t'that. Family. That's why I was so happy when pops took me in. I had a house without leaks or rain gettin' in through the roof. I had a kind family. Delicious grub. Pretty clothes. A bed as soft as a cloud. When I got sick, I could just stay in bed. They'd call a doctor, I'd get me some medicine, and what's more, a whole lot of sympathy along with it. But that don't last forever. So long as I was an adopted daughter, one day I'd have to let it all go."

Such was the vague position that Felicia occupied. A place that she could call home, but not one that would last forever. Her choice to aim for the position of songstress, then, was to save enough money that she could live on her own when such a time came. As someone largely uneducated, her only choice was the one thing in which she had any sort of talent—song.

"So listen up, Karina. I was jealous of *you*. I was always jealous. From the moment you were born, you had everythin' I always wanted."

Shiori put a hand tight to her chest—she knew exactly how Felicia felt. Shiori had felt exactly the same when she had realized that this new world—that she

had come to without warning and without a single trace of her origins—was one she would have to survive in on her own power. Even now, with a brother, a lover, and countless irreplaceable friends, she still could not rid herself of the feeling entirely—because she knew to the core of her very being the terror of having no connection to anyone whatsoever.

The hand around Shiori's shoulder pulled her in tight, and she felt the warmth of Alec's strong embrace.

Karina turned her eyes from Felicia and towards the floor. Her pale hands clutched at her chest.

"But even then, I...I always wanted what you have," she said.

"But you went too far," said Alec, his voice quiet, but dripping with a clear disgust. "Just how many people do you think you've pulled into this attempt to satisfy your own pride? The people who suffered through poison for an entire day—they all trusted you. This performance was important to these people and now some of them cannot even take part in it. But even outside of all of that, you wanted to frame two innocent people—do not expect this to be simply forgiven and forgotten."

"Two people? What do you mean *two* people?" asked Karina, shocked. "I only ever intended to frame Hildegarde. Who else could I possibly have framed?"

"Miss Felicia herself."

Karina looked dumbfounded. Alec sighed.

"I had thought that perhaps your last resort was to put the blame on the songstress herself, but it seems you never even considered it."

"Whatever do you mean? All I ever wanted was for Felicia to retire from her position as songstress. I never intended to frame her for anything."

"Hildegarde receives a letter from Felicia asking her to come to the Cathedral. Said letter also seems to foresee what is going to happen. That could look a lot like Felicia has invited Hildegarde just to frame her for the crimes. And there's no doubt she would have been a suspect. Did you not even consider that Hildegarde might not burn the letter? Because that's exactly what happened."

Karina was wide-eyed in complete and utter shock. It looked like Alec was exactly right—Karina really *hadn't* considered the possibility. She had only ever written the letter to call Hildegarde to the Cathedral.

"But...there's no way I would want to see Felicia subjected to that. All I wanted her to do was step down. She's a precious student to me...and a friend. I just wanted us to be away from somewhere so extravagant... I wanted us to be somewhere quiet, where we could drink tea and chat, and sing when we wanted to, and just live peacefully. I... That's all I..."

"Miss Karina," said Conny, cutting in with a voice that was both gentle and firm. "Your life is your own, just as Felicia's life is hers. Her life is not just an accessory with which you can decorate your own."

The reverend walked to Karina and took her cold hands in his own.

"You were born into entirely different worlds, and ordinarily you would never have even crossed paths. That you did, and that a friendship was born from your meeting, is itself a miracle which we should rejoice."

Karina's eyes remained downcast, and she did not speak a word. However, after a long silence, she gave a slight nod. A knight was about to move in to tie her with rope, but Nicholas stopped him with a quiet shake of the head. It was a message—Karina was not going to run away any longer.

"My lady," said Nicholas, facing Karina. "This was quite the crime you were looking to pull off. Did you arrange this all on your own?"

Though Karina seemed to hesitate for a time, eventually she shook her head.

"To create a coincidence the likes of Hildegarde not having work at the time of the concert? I could not have arranged that on my own. Though she may appear free-spirited, Hildegarde is very earnest when it comes to work. If her schedule had not been free at the time that the letter had arrived, she would most likely have put her work first."

Shiori did not at first understand what Karina meant, and looked up at Alec.

"Ah, I see," he muttered after a little thought.

There were only a few people who could have cleared Hildegarde's schedule

around the time of the concert.

“Which means...”

But before Alec could finish his sentence, a knight rushed into the room and hurried to Nicholas. After a few whispered words and a shared salute, the knight left.

“My apologies for the interruption,” said Nicholas with a grin. “It would seem that your partner in crime has just now been apprehended. He’s also confessed.”

8

About one hour earlier...

With the guest house trap left in Nicholas's trustworthy hands, Johann was put in charge of security for the Alvestam Orchestra as a whole. He heard the sound of rushed footsteps, and turned to find a knight in such a rush that the man had left the door open behind him. It was one of the knights tasked with guarding the back gates. He gave a salute and began to speak.

"A man claiming to be Miss Hildegarde's manager is at the gates," he said.

"What? At this hour?"

During the Nativity Festival, eating and drinking establishments stayed open until late in the evening, and there was nothing strange about people being out and about in the city streets at this particular hour. The Cathedral, however, was another story—none visited after lights out.

Johann's eyes narrowed. He looked over at Noah, whose ash-gray eyes had also sharpened at the report. Noah was second-in-command after Nicholas, and was in disguise as a Cathedral knight.

Unlike the Cathedral knights, whose main duties involved security and exorcisms, the northern knight corps's work included regional security as well as investigating and apprehending criminals. They were professionals at this particular kind of work, which made them a firm shoulder to lean on, what with all that was taking place within the Cathedral grounds.

"He says that he's been running around looking for Hildegarde all night, hence his appearing at this late hour," continued the knight. "What would you have us do?"

Noah shot Johann a knowing glance.

"Very well," said Johann. "We'll go with you to see him."

The three men walked the short distance to the guard house at the back gates. Inside the guard house were two guards and the man in question, who rose from the simple chair he'd been sitting in to greet them. His somewhat

unruly flaxen hair was tied behind his head, and the scent of fruit drifted from him—it was his shampoo.

"I do apologize for calling upon you so late in the evening," said the man. "I am Ragnar Orsted, of Alvestam Hall."

The handsome, pale man smiled and, with a graceful gesture, brought forth a business card. Upon it was his name and the contact details for the distinguished Alvestam Hall, all printed on thick, ivory-colored card. It was also stamped with a seal—one of the goddess of song.

Johann had seen the seal before—it was used on the posters informing citizens about the concert. It was the seal of Alvestam Hall, and Felicia—the star attraction of the concert—was their songstress.

"I think perhaps the singer I'm responsible for has been causing you trouble," said Ragnar with a somewhat embarrassed look. "She left a note saying that she was going to see a friend and then simply left without so much as another word. I saw the note and came as quickly as I could...but I was not fast enough. I got to town just as the sun was setting, but couldn't find her at any of the hotels where I'd expected her to be. That left me running around all evening looking for her, and, well, here we are."

Ragnar spoke before he had even been asked a single question. The collar of the coat he wore was finely tailored, and currently in vogue. Johann often saw it on guests visiting from the royal capital. Both the materials and tailoring were first class. Even Johann, who came from a lower noble upbringing and had toiled in the fields with his community of his domain, knew what he was looking at—the coat was a Liljeholm, a famous brand among the kingdom's gentlemen. It was not something easily purchased by those working for hire.

He must be making good money. I guess that's what working for a powerful, famous hall gets you.

The thought flittered through Johann's mind as he casually sized Ragnar up, but he paused when he caught sight of the man's shoes. His lace-up boots were of the latest trend, but even among the traces of fallen snow their sheen was noticeable—they actually looked recently polished.

That's weird.

He had the slightest sense that something was amiss. Ragnar claimed to have arrived after a long trip and to have spent the last few hours running around town, yet he was, for the most part, spotless. He also didn't seem the least bit tired or worn out. His coat was long enough to hide his knees, but for someone who had supposedly been running around on snowy paths, it wasn't particularly damp. Perhaps he had walked only the cleanest of streets, because even his boots were pristine. The hat he held in his hands, too, looked freshly brushed—there wasn't a hint of dirt on it.

Oh, speaking of which...

Johann's gaze moved back to Ragnar's head. The scent of shampoo he'd caught earlier was not unlike that of someone who'd just taken a bath. Here was a man who was unusually clean, yet claimed to have arrived at sunset and run around in desperate search of a songstress. It didn't make sense.

Noah, too, looked as if something was bothering him. Johann gave himself a pat on the back for his own powers of observation, then stood more sharply at attention.

"Um...?" uttered Ragnar, who seemed to have grown slightly worried at the silence.

Johann snapped back to reality.

"My apologies. Yes, it is true that a singer has been taken into custody by the knights."

"By the knights, you say? Oh my!" said Ragnar, looking shocked and dismayed.

His dramatic act sent another wave of suspicion through Johann. He hadn't even uttered the name of the singer that had been taken in, and yet Ragnar was reacting as if it were exactly the woman he'd been searching for. That much was made clear by his exaggerated reaction.

Wait, no. I shouldn't be making assumptions.

Of course, Johann knew of the incident in which the songstress was involved. He had also been told that there might be another person (or more individuals) involved, and that they might try to make contact. That was likely why Johann

had been immediately on guard. But the Cathedral knights were devoted defenders and disciples of the organization that revered the saint of healing and affection. It was unbecoming for him to cast doubt on others without reason.

The problem that was now raised, however, was that of whether or not Ragnar was actually who he said he was.

“My apologies, Sir Ragnar,” said Johann, “but would you happen to be carrying anything else aside from your card that would identify your person?”

“Huh...?”

Ragnar looked lost and confused.

“We have a number of nobles and influential guests staying here over the Nativity Festival,” explained Johann. “That means we cannot just let people in as we please.”

“Oh yes, I see. Which is to say...ah! Yes! I have her note! I do hope this is enough proof for you.”

Ragnar reached into his coat as if he had just remembered something, and took a piece of paper from between the pages of his notebook. The paper had the watermark of a family seal upon it, and the rounded letters upon it danced as if they were written by a young lady.

Dear Ragnar,

I’m going to visit a friend. Please don’t worry, I promise I’ll be back before work starts up again.

Hildegarde

The letter was very short. And even when Johann looked for clues, it still struck him as just an ordinary letter. Then he remembered that the adventurer, Alec, had quickly seen through a previous letter and said it was possible there was a plot at work. One could learn how to see through such forgeries when working for a distinguished family with many people in positions of importance, which meant that perhaps the adventurer, too, had come from such a family.

Johann glanced at Noah, who, after a moment of silence, nodded.

“I see,” said Johann. “It is true that we have Miss Hildegarde in custody. Right

this way, please."

Ragnar stood from his chair as directed and let a pained look spread across his face.

"Oh, I do apologize for causing you such trouble, and for the trouble our singer has caused you. I'll take her back to the Hall immediately and have our superiors talk with her."

However, though Ragnar's face was trapped in a state of displeasure, his eyes were alight with excitement, and it only served to heighten the feeling of incongruence that his manner gave Johann. All Johann had told the man was that Hildegarde was in custody, but Ragnar was already talking as if she had committed a crime. The way he had jumped to such a conclusion just wasn't natural.

Noah passed a silent message with his eyes to the two knights behind Ragnar, one of whom was with the northern knights. The man nodded with a flash of his own eyes, then announced he was returning to his post and left the guard house. In reality, he was most probably making preparations to have Ragnar surrounded—everything about the man was fishy.

With Johann in the lead, the knights walked with Ragnar to the knights' headquarters, where Hildegarde was in custody. It was not a particularly long way, but Ragnar was all too happy to fill the air with his story. According to Ragnar, Hildegarde was jealous of Felicia, and had recently begun harassing the songstress. She had then refused to listen when she was reprimanded, and things had only gotten worse.

Hildegarde herself had already told the knights that she hadn't taken part in any of the harassment. And though her words could not be believed outright, even if the accusation *was* true, who was Ragnar to speak of it openly as if she were some mere criminal up to no good? He was supposed to be her manager—her partner—and yet instead of defending her, he piled on her with criticism, giving every impression that he believed she was guilty.

Johann pushed away the disgust he felt as he walked, and finally arrived in front of the door to a room—an empty room, typically used for resting in, located right next door to the one in which Hildegarde was staying. Johann told

Ragnar that Hildegarde was inside, and as Ragnar gripped the door handle, Noah leaned in from behind to speak.

“By the way, Sir Ragnar,” he said. “You said you came here after finding Miss Hildegarde’s note, so I thought I’d ask—did she leave any other notes about where she was going or whom she intended to meet?”

Ragnar spun to face Noah and, without so much as a worry on his face, replied.

“No. She left only the note I showed you.”

“I see.”

It was a question and a reply that on the surface meant little, but Johann felt it.

Checkmate.

“My apologies, Sir Ragnar,” Noah said, taking the man by the arm. “We have some doubts regarding what you’ve said and would like to confirm a few things.”

“Huh?”

Ragnar was shocked. He had no idea what was happening, and smiled awkwardly.

“Doubts, you say? Whatever could you mean?”

“The note you showed us says only that Miss Hildegarde intended to meet a friend. And yet you came to Tris as if there were nowhere else she could have gone, even though *she did not tell you where she was going*.”

Ragnar’s face went suddenly pale.

“Oh, well... But...when she said she was seeing a friend, I assumed she meant Felicia.”

“About that,” said Noah, ready to impale Ragnar on another misstep. “All this time you’ve spoken about how Miss Hildegarde was jealous of Miss Felicia. How she’s been harassing the songstress. You make it very difficult to believe that the two could possibly *be* friends.”

“Erm, uh... Well, you see, for a time they *were* friends...”

“Even if that were the case, how can you be so sure that it was Miss Felicia that Miss Hildegarde wished to see? After all, Miss Hildegarde has been *harassing* her. Miss Felicia is hardly the first name that would come to mind upon reading the line, ‘*I’m going to visit a friend.*’”

“Well, I...” Ragnar started, but fell into silence and instead let out a moan, looking around in panic.

“And that’s not even the last of it,” said Noah. “You claim to have been running around all night looking for the girl, but your clothes are spotless and your boots look freshly shined.”

Noah reached out and took Ragnar by the collar of his coat, forcefully pulling it open. Inside, the knights could see a well-starched, unwrinkled dress shirt. The scent of soap wafted out from within.

“It smells like you’ve just taken a bath, and it looks like you’ve just changed into a freshly washed shirt. You told us that you rushed here as soon as you saw Hildegarde’s note. The journey took days, and when you arrived you immediately set to finding her. And yet somewhere along the way you had the time and luxury to take a bath, and you also came prepared with a change of shirt. Do you not think that unusual?”

“Erm, the change of shirt, well...I bought that on the way here, at a town I stayed at.”

“You bought a tailor-made shirt while you were chasing after Miss Hildegarde? This is a Liljeholm shirt of the highest quality.”

“Oh...”

Noah was not holding back, and Ragnar had no response—he was struck speechless. The blood had drained from his face, which was suddenly covered in a sweat that was itself unusual, given the season. His lips trembled, and his eyes were suddenly bloodshot.

I see. So this is what a criminal looks like...

The man before them was not like those who came to the Cathedral looking

for repentance—this was a true criminal, through and through. Ragnar's appearance was so horrific to Johann that for a moment he forgot his duties and stood there, dumbfounded. Johann lived his life in a holy place, where they revered a saint, and where they prayed for the peace and safety of the people, and forgiveness for the sins of the past. Thus, the poison that faced him now was far stronger than he had expected. Nonetheless, he stood and he endured, and that was when he heard it.

"Oh? Mr. Ragnar?"

The door to the room next door opened, and Hildegarde peeked in. Her hair was messy and she wiped at her eyes—all the noise had probably woken her.

"What are you doing—?" Hildegarde began to ask, until she saw the ragged, bloodshot look in Ragnar's eyes.

"It's her!" Ragnar shouted. "She's in on it! She's plotting the songstress's downfall! All I did was go along with it! It's her! It's all h—"

Ragnar broke free of the knights trying to restrain him and leapt at Hildegarde only to find a wall of deep red waiting for him. In the next instant, Ragnar was trapped in a red glue, and staggered to his knees.

Johann, who had put himself in front of Hildegarde, looked down at the man with clear disgust.

"Rurii! Don't kill him!" he ordered.

The slime—Shiori's familiar—kept Ragnar bound, and curled a feeler into a circle. It seemed to have understood the message. Ragner was held down and tied up, after which he seemed to give up. His head hung low. The slime, which appeared to turn red at the first sign of danger, returned to its usual lapis blue. The danger, it seemed, had passed.

Rurii released Ragnar and went over to Hildegarde, who was trembling behind Johann. It tapped the girl a few times with a feeler—a soothing gesture—and the frightened young girl began to heave with sobs. Johann was careful to make sure she could still stand, and led her to the bed in the corner of the room.

"Miss Hildegarde," said Noah, "your name still has yet to be cleared in all of this, so we're going to need you to stay here a little longer."

Hildegarde nodded. Still, Johann was sure that it would not be long before her innocence was proven. That was how he felt as he watched his men bring her some restorative herb tea, her face still stained with her tears.

Johann's hunch would indeed prove correct—a few days later, Hildegarde would be sent back to the royal capital in the company of knights, her name cleared.

"Well, then," said Karina.

There was something of a dismayed grin on her face as she heard of Ragnar's fate.

"That idiot," she continued. "All he needed to do was wait patiently at the royal capital, and yet...he just *had* to see it all unfold with his own eyes, didn't he?"

Ragnar, too, Karina explained, was an amateur when it came to matters of a criminal nature. She could do little more than sigh and laugh.

Ragnar had followed Hildegarde from the capital, and in order to do so, he'd organized a private carriage to Tris and accommodation several weeks in advance. Hildegarde had, as expected, run off to Tris and Ragnar had been on her trail. Once he was sure she'd entered the Cathedral, he'd returned to his inn, where he had initially planned to spend the evening. However, Ragnar simply could not wait until the following day to find out what happened, and went once more to the Cathedral where, it could be said, his luck ran dry. As soon as he'd heard that Hildegarde was in custody, he'd assumed that everything had gone to plan, and this assumption had landed him in hot water.

"Let me ask you two last things," said Alec. "The harassment at the Hall—was that your doing?"

"Yes. Everything except for the stage lighting."

Karina admitted that she had set all of it up so that she could be seen as the one to save Felicia from the potential outcomes.

"Then my last question. You went after Shiori because she wasn't a part of your plan...but that wasn't the only reason, was it?"

Alec was digging for the meaning of something he'd sensed from Karina—the seething enmity that had wafted from her on a few occasions.

"The two of you, you're more than just partners. Anyone can see that," said Karina. She'd recomposed herself, but her eyes still wavered. "And it's especially obvious whenever *you're* looking at *her*. That passionate gaze... I wanted someone to look at *me* like that."

Karina had turned away, but her gaze fell on one person in particular—Helge, still standing next to Felicia. The man reacted with shock, and then his face twisted with discomfort.

"You're saying this is *my* fault?" he muttered.

"No," said Karina, shaking her head. "It was my fault for misunderstanding it all."

Though she felt love and affection towards the fine young man who was her fiancé, it was a far cry from the love that had burned like a fire in her heart—her love for Helge. He had been friendly and casual with her, even though Karina had felt plain compared to the gorgeous singers who took the stage at the theater. He treated all women with the same attitude, and it was not long before she fell for him. Unfortunately, it was not Karina for whom Helge had eyes—but rather the girl who was always next to her...

"Everything I ever wanted, Felicia always took from me. And now Hildegarde is trying to take even Felicia from me. On top of it all," Karina said, the envy and jealousy in her eyes directed straight at Shiori, "there was *you*, a foreigner who'd been here no more than a few years, and yet had carved herself a fine rank and a fine reputation, and found herself a most wonderful lover too. To say I was jealous is an understatement."

It was jealousy and envy, and all of it was directed at the women who had achieved that which Karina had given up on. So much of it, in fact, that it could drive a person crazy. The feelings had been enough to push Karina into quite the bold criminal endeavor. But was she aware of this? Was she aware that at the heart of it all was a superiority complex that had been flipped upside down by women who had achieved that which she could not, even though she thought them inferior to herself?

Karina looked away from Shiori and to Nicholas, to whom she gave a slight bow. The knight nodded, removed his cloak, and placed it over her head. It was an act of compassion—a gesture that let them all know that Karina's shame was now her own to bear. Nicholas put a hand to the woman's back, and with a gentle nudge, they began to walk.

"Oi, Karina," said Felicia as Karina passed her by. "You made me the songstress that I am today. You pushed me t'reach for the top. No way I coulda dunnit by meself. I'll always be grateful, so...just don't you forget that."

With her face hidden by Nicholas's cloak, none could see the look on Karina's face. All they could see was the tiniest flash of a smile on her lips, a few whispered words, and the tears that fell to the ground by her feet.

Karina was led out, surrounded by knights. All the people she had arrived here with were now there to watch it happen—some of them saddened, some of them in tears, some of them with grave frowns, and some of them pained by conflicted feelings. All of them watched with their own unique emotions as their friend—or perhaps more accurately, their *former* friend—was led down the stairs.

Silence draped itself over the room for a time.

"'Sorry'...? Don't gimme that...!"

Felicia spat the words through clenched teeth. She let a sad whimper escape her lips and ruffled her hair messily with her hands, while a somewhat restrained Helge gave her shoulder a gentle pat. The remaining knights looked over the room with kindness in their eyes, then left to return to their posts.

"Hey, Alec," said Shiori.

Alec was still holding her, but his eyes were on the door through which Karina had just left.

"Hm?"

"What's going to happen to her?"

What crime *would* Karina be charged with? None had been killed, and the poison she had used was of the nonfatal variety. Nonetheless, what she had

done was still a crime that had, in its own way, harmed many. Alec frowned.

“It’s going to depend a lot on two things—the fatal doses of sleeping medicine she intended to give to you and others, and her harassment attempts back at the capital.”

It was a question of intent. Though Karina herself had denied having a hand in the stage lighting incident, the truth of that matter would likely impact the final verdict. Had the falling lighting struck the songstress, no doubt it would have been a tragic end. The pins in Felicia’s dress and the shoes that had been tampered with, too, were incidents that—had things gone differently—could have ended up fatal.

“Sir Alec, Miss Shiori,” said a knight at the doorway. “A word, if I may.”

The knight was there to begin investigating the scene, and the two adventurers nodded.

In this way, the curtain fell on the incident that occurred on the night before the Nativity Festival, and it was not until the day afterwards, once the Nativity Festival had safely come to a close, that information about it spread outside the Cathedral walls.

Following the incident, and after an interrogation by the northern knight corps, Karina Svanholm and Ragnar Orsted were escorted back to the royal capital. The interrogation revealed that the mastermind, so to speak, was Ragnar, who had convinced Karina to become his coconspirator. At the same time, Hildegarde’s innocence was confirmed.

It turned out that Ragnar had been embezzling a portion of their expenditures. Alvestam Hall was a very distinguished domestic theater, and the money spent on its second-ranked star for advertisements and on her performances was substantial. Even a portion of that money was quite the hefty sum. This was why, even though Ragnar had left home and worked as an employee of the Hall, he was still able to afford the rent in an expensive residential neighborhood, along with the kind of clothing preferred by upper class gentlemen.

But when Ragnar’s embezzling had been discovered, by none other than the

Hall's third-ranked star, his crimes were used as blackmail. Ragnar thus found himself ordered to bring down the careers of both Felicia and Hildegarde, lest his own crimes be made public. He was powerless to refuse—and at the same time, he had also been promised that he would be made manager of the number three star when she rose to the rank of top songstress.

Ragnar then made inroads with Felicia and Karina through Hildegarde, at which point he became aware of Karina's feelings of inferiority. Ragnar was careful to nurture these and build them up, and was thus able to recruit Karina into his scheme.

Ragnar and Karina then went to work separating Felicia and Hildegarde, and began spreading rumors that Hildegarde was jealous of her friend and was resorting to harassment. Just as talk of the conflict had spread throughout the Hall, a request arrived asking for Felicia to perform at the Cathedral concert. Ragnar saw this as a golden opportunity, and concocted a plan through which the two singers could ruin each others' reputations.

First, Karina forged the letter from Felicia and gave it to a postman disguised as an Amren family aide. The two then hired an uncouth adventurer—the type who would do anything for the right price—and had him pretend to be their schoner virus victim and approach Helge. Helge, it should be noted, was made the first victim to satisfy Karina's spitefulness.

With just a few hours before their arrival at Tris, Karina stealthily poisoned the drinking water in the carriage Helge was in. Doing this just before arriving in Tris was strategic—if the orchestra were to have stopped at a village on the way to Tris, there was every chance the performance would have been canceled outright.

From there, everything proceeded according to plan. However, what neither Ragnar nor Karina had anticipated was Conny hiring adventurers to support the performance, or the songstress herself deciding to push on and perform without a full orchestra. They also hadn't expected one of the hired adventurers to have such a wide range of knowledge and experience—within hours of his arrival, both the poison in the water and the forged letter were uncovered.

While suspicion on Karina grew—and the woman herself was frantically trying

to right the ship because things had gone so far off course—Ragnar planned to see the fruits of his well-planned labor firsthand, but was instead summarily caught with his pants down. He had used these crimes to satisfy his greed and pride, and the results were a pitiful, unsightly thing.

Looking back on the case, Nicholas Neumann, the knight in charge of the investigation, would comment, “The stage he decided to gamble on was far too big. Perhaps they might have been successful had they limited their plans to the Hall in the royal capital.”

Ragnar and Karina were taken to public court, where both confessed their crimes and were given sentences in prison. The singer who had threatened Ragnar into action in the first place admitted to being behind the stage lighting incident, and was given an extended prison sentence for attempted murder.

This incident, however, would not end in its entirety at this particular point.

Karina Svanholm was released from prison on good behavior, and after stopping briefly at her family home, entered the nunnery located next to the Tris Cathedral. She became a nun herself, and after some years of prayer and labor, began wandering the lands as a traveling nun.

In the years to come, stories and rumors would circulate of a traveling nun, known and revered as “the twilight songstress” on account of her navy blue robes. The nun known as Karina was said to travel to prisons, medical facilities, and orphanages, where she soothed and comforted with her use of song and her magical theater, also called “narrated pictures.”

Whether or not the Karina of these stories was in fact the individual Karina Svanholm remains unconfirmed.

What *is* known, however, is that the traveling nun was known to have met with the following distinguished people: actress and former songstress Felicia and her husband, the flutist Helge Lundin; Archbishop Conny Envary; and founders of the Institute of Magic (formerly the Adventurers’ Training Academy), Count Aleksey Frenvary and his wife.

Chapter 3: Songstress of the Holy Night

1

It was well past midnight when the knights finally concluded their questioning. The archbishop was kind enough to have medicinal tisane delivered to help calm everyone's nerves, and each orchestra member took a cup and retired to their rooms. The northern knight corps finished up their investigation of the scene, after which they promptly left.

"We should get some rest too," said Conny. "Though I dare say it might be a challenge given what you've all been through."

The reverend had delayed their waking time by an hour—just enough so as not to impact their schedule, but long enough that everyone was grateful for it. Alec wanted nothing more than to let Shiori rest for as long as possible, and was in a slight panic as Felicia called out to them.

"Er...may I ask a favor?" she asked, somewhat apprehensively.

Felicia's demeanor and tone had returned to that of the songstress they knew, but the two adventurers now had her more carefree accent burned into their minds, and for a moment were unable to even muster a reply. Felicia noticed this, and her mouth drew into a tight slit. She looked around uncomfortably before finally letting out a sigh and ruffling her hair as she cringed.

"Nope, not goin' t'put the act on for you two, eh?" she said. "Too late ferrit now, innit?"

Though there was a slight dissonance between the delicate appearance of the songstress and her rougher mannerisms, Alec couldn't help but feel more at ease around this version of Felicia. He was never very good with women who put on airs. Shiori, by his side, chuckled.

"Karina's been carted off, and it's lonely sleepin' by meself. Me head's so full I doubt I'll sleep even a wink. Sure do wish Hilde was here, eh?"

Felicia glanced in Conny's direction, but he and the knights with him chuckled and shook their heads—they could not bring out someone whose name had not yet been officially cleared. Felicia, of course, was aware of this also.

"That's why I was wonderin' if you two could join me?" Felicia asked. "There's a spare bed and everythin'."

Felicia hoped they might talk with her a little and calm her nerves so that she might sleep, but her smile lacked energy. She was trying to put up a strong front, but it was all too clear that she was hurt after being betrayed by one she'd put so much trust in.

Alec glanced down at Shiori, who smiled and nodded in silent agreement.

"Okay," said Alec. "After all, my job here is still to ensure your protection."

Felicia broke into a smile—one of relief. They bid goodnight to Conny and the knights on guard, and entered Felicia's room. It was very spacious, and as she had told them earlier, had three beds—two of which had clearly been used.

"Oh..." muttered Felcia, "I suppose the idea of sleepin' in a used bed ain't so appealin', eh?"

The bed in the center—which was Felicia's—was a haphazard mess of sheets and covers, perhaps because she hadn't been able to sleep. Next to it was the bed Karina had been using. The knights had searched it for potential evidence and moved what they needed to, after which they had somewhat apologetically folded the sheets and covers and piled them by the side of the bed. Resting on top of them were Karina's pajamas.

Even if it was only for a brief period of time, it seemed that Karina was apprehensive about going outside in her pajamas, and had been wearing her usual clothes at the time of her arrest. For both Karina and for Ragnar, it was just these kinds of subtle habits—the type that neither could seem to let go of—that made Alec think they were not well suited to the type of crime they had tried to commit. He hoped they would serve their sentences, repent their crimes, and return to the path of the straight and narrow. Though Alec still could not forgive the fact that Karina had intended to harm Shiori, as a member of the royal family he could not help but hope they mended their ways.

Felicia looked at Karina's bed, and her eyebrows drooped. Outside of a few creases in the sheets at the corners, there was no sign that it had even been used. Karina had told Felicia that she'd intended to read a little before going to bed, and so Felicia had gone to bed first. She'd had no reason whatsoever to think that her friend had never actually intended to sleep.

"I didn't know that she couldn't sleep," said Felicia. "When I asked about her lookin' sleepy, she said she loved this one particular author so much she couldn't put the books down."

It seemed that the only person Karina had spoken to about her insomnia was her fiancé. She had not even told her best friend, perhaps because her pride would not let her.

"I don't think she used the bed," Felicia said, "but how's about we get the sheets and pajamas changed?"

The songstress was being kind, but it was already just a few minutes before two. The adventurers told her that they didn't want to trouble the staff and really didn't mind, so Felicia nodded and, with a grin, fell onto her bed with a loud *fwump*.

"All righty," she said. "The beds on either side are yours. As for pajamas..."

"I'll be fine as I am," said Alec. "I'm only taking a brief nap anyway. Shiori, get changed and get some rest."

Felicia was more shocked by Alec's words than even Shiori was.

"What? Still got it in ya head that yer me bodyguard? The perps've been caught! You can sleep if ya so please. We've got the knights, don't we?"

A pained look flashed across Felicia's face at having used the word "perp," but Alec ignored it.

"Be that as it may, it never hurts to be careful," he said. "I'm not going to let my guard down until the concert has safely concluded."

"Oh, I see," muttered Felicia, half impressed and half in a state of disbelief. "You're a diligent one, eh?"

"Are you sure?" asked Shiori. "We could always sleep in shifts, like when

we're on expedition."

"Except that for this request, *you're* a key player. Don't mind me—just get some rest. I'll get a couple of hours of sleep in the morning, so I'll just need you to get up a little early."

Shiori had just gotten changed behind the partition, and with some hesitation, nodded obediently at Alec's reply. He put Shiori in the still-unused bed by Felicia's side, and after turning on her bedside magical lantern, turned off the rest of the lights in the room. The room faded into darkness, illuminated only by the warm orange glow around the girls' beds. After watching Felicia and Shiori get comfortable under their covers, Alec took a seat on Karina's bed.

Silence filled the room for a time, and then Felicia spoke.

"So uh...how long've y'been here for, Shiori?" she asked.

"About four years now."

"They speak differently in the east, eh? How'd ya manage the language barrier?"

"I was fortunate to have some kind people teach me the language. Those same people are now my trustworthy companions and friends."

"Wow...friends, eh? So I guess them same people taught ya the adventurin' ropes?"

"They did. When I found myself here, the first person to find me and look after me was himself an adventurer. Thanks to him, I've made it as far as I have in the same profession."

"That so? Guess you and me's the same in that respect, eh?" said Felicia, smiling with a hint of sorrow. "Me foster mother taught me the basics o' bein' a lady, but Karina was much better at it. I was so stupid I didn't even know what I didn't even know, but she was patient with me, yep. I'm where I am now because of her."

Felicia placed an arm over her eyes, then went on.

"You know, when I think about it, I kind of knew somethin' was up. But I couldn't work out why. I never woulda guessed she was jealous. Never even

considered it.”

Karina had said that she learned singing as a hobby, but in truth it had been so much more. She’d been serious about it, just as she’d been serious about making it in the world of performing. But it was a world in which she could not make a splash, and so she had eventually given up on it. And then the disciple she’d taken on seemed to rise through the ranks in an instant...

“I really thought we was goin’ to the top together,” Felicia said. “But she was different. She thought that I’d taken everythin’ she’d ever wanted...”

Alec had not seen how their relationship had developed, and so he could not infer or imagine all of what had happened. Perhaps it was that Felicia had in her a talent that Karina had never possessed, or perhaps it was that from the very beginning, Felicia’s resolve was on a different level to Karina’s. Or, perhaps, it was simply that when she had poured time and effort into helping her friend achieve what she had not been able to, she had then been unable to derive joy from those achievements. Then, when the man Karina had fallen for had set his heart on Felicia, this may have been the last straw that threw Karina’s mental state out of balance.

However much we try, a person’s heart is not something that will simply abide by our wishes...

It was not unlike some court nobles, whose efforts were not acknowledged no matter how hard they worked nor how modest an act they put on. And though Alec himself had done his utmost to sincerely face the problems he had encountered in his life, his own former lover had still denied his very existence.

People’s lives were not something that could be molded to fit another person’s will, and yet it was what Karina had tried to do for herself. She had tried to ruin the reputations of Felicia and Hildegarde, and bring their lives under some form of control—which was her great mistake.

Even if things could not be shaped in the precise way he desired, Alec wanted to live in the company of those he liked and loved, and to derive joy from that alone. This was how Alec wanted to be—like Annelie and Dennis, whom he’d met on a journey to Silveria Tower, and like himself and Shiori. Zack, Clemens, Nadia, and his brother with whom he shared a father—all of them lived their

own lives, yet they were priceless friends whom he had met through both coincidence and miracle.

“I...will I ever be able to forgive her?”

Felicia asked the question with her face still covered by her arm.

“It may not be easy to do so straight away,” said Shiori quietly. “But if Karina truly reflects upon her crimes, atones for them, and returns some day...would that not be the best time to look for your answer?”

Shiori’s gaze wavered as she spoke, but there was no way for Felicia to have noticed this. Still, the songstress let the words sink in slowly—if, once the woman had repented, she found in her heart the desire to forgive Karina, then when the time came, she would.

“You’re right. You’re right. She’s me friend and she’s why I’m here. Even if she did almost blast my life into nothin’. Even then, I still...I still want to...”

No other words followed, but none had to either. Felicia’s question of whether or not she would be able to forgive was no different from her saying that she wanted to.

“Thank you for hearin’ me out,” said Felicia. “I feel like a load’s off me shoulders.”

With a wry chuckle, Felicia then added that it wasn’t something she could easily discuss with the people she knew. Rather, it was because her relationship with Shiori and Alec was still new that she could speak so openly.

“I’m sorry I don’t have any pinpoint advice for you,” Alec said, “but if we managed to help you, then that’s what’s important.”

Felicia nodded.

“Well, that’s it for me,” she said, reaching for the magical lantern by her pillow. “Nighty night.”

The light faded with a small pop, and Shiori turned her own lantern off moments after, with Alec acting as their nightlight and protection. The room was enveloped in a gentle darkness, and it was not long before Felicia’s breathing told the room that she was asleep. The girl had perhaps always been

determined and dauntless in her disposition, and coping with change likely came easy to her. Alec let out a sigh of relief, and walked quietly over to Shiori's bed, where he heard a light rustling.

"Still can't sleep, huh?" he asked.

Shiori's eyes opened slightly and she nodded.

"I think I'm still a little on edge. Which is not to say I'm not sleepy, but..."

Alec made sure that Felicia was still fast asleep, then kneeled down by Shiori's bed. He reached out a hand and stroked her black hair.

"Are you...are you okay?" he asked.

When Shiori had given her answer to Felicia—that of forgiving someone when they'd truly repented for their crimes—Alec had gotten the sense that the woman was reminiscing on her own past. He did not think she was thinking of Karina.

After some silence, Shiori spoke.

"I don't know. From what I've heard, most of them are dead. But recently I've been remembering them. When they abandoned me, some of my companions —not all of them—were crying..."

She spoke of her former party members, who had abandoned her. All of them knew that if they left her, she would surely die. Ivar had spoken in a cold, detached manner, and yet she had heard the way his voice had trembled. Sven and Bart had made their own excuses, but had been unable to bring themselves to make eye contact with her. Rachel had tried to say it was fine because Shiori was an outsider, and yet she too had been sobbing. Torre, who had always acted as if they were lovers, had apologized over and over, his voice on the verge of tears.

"I still can't forgive them," Shiori said. "They said the most horrible things, they took everything I had, and in the end they tried to kill me. If I saw any of them again, I'd want to scream in pure rage. And yet..."

Shiori did not know if what she had felt from her companions as they left was sincere regret. But if they'd had *some* regret, and if they'd had enough honesty

left in them to feel it, then perhaps that was enough to calm the doubt and uncertainty in Shiori's own heart.

As Shiori spoke, her hands trembled slightly. Alec wrapped them in his own and rubbed them gently. Even if a criminal was tried for their crimes and atoned for their sins, this by no means meant that the victim's heart was completely healed. The scar that remained was small, but deep. Shiori was now in the process of coming to terms with that damage, and whether she overcame it or forgot it—no matter what she did—Alec wanted to be there for her. He wanted to support her. And if she wanted help, he would take her hand and fight by her side. That was why he took her hand—to tell her that he was there for her.

"Even if you never forgive them, that is no longer something for you to worry about. Your forgiveness and their repentance are two separate things."

The members of Akatsuki had been summoned to a court beyond the realms of human knowledge, where only the gods knew what judgment they would receive. There was no need for Shiori to trouble herself with such thoughts any longer. All she needed to do was mend the wounds in her own heart.

There was a slight wavering in Shiori's eyes, which looked as dark as obsidian, but after a time she smiled.

"Thank you. You're so kind, Alec."

Shiori reached out with a hand to touch his cheek, then pulled him close for a kiss. The kisses they shared in that moment were soft and kind, as if they were healing each other's wounds.

2

Alec woke to the slight sound of cloth rustling and the movement of people. He opened his eyes to find that it was still dark, a dull blue light visible through the curtains. It was the color of dawn. And though it was still dark outside, the clock showed that it was nearly eight. It was morning, and in just a little while they would all have to be up.

"Oh, sorry," said Shiori, by the window. "Did I wake you?"

“No,” said Alec, walking over to her quietly. “It’s fine.”

He’d slept a little under two hours since Shiori had covered for him, but it was far better than no sleep at all. The two adventurers shared a kiss in place of a spoken “good morning,” and Alec washed his face with the warm water that Shiori prepared for him.

In time, Felicia began to stir, then sat up in bed with her legs crossed. Her hair was a mess, and she thrust her hands under her pajama shirt and scratched at her stomach.

“Ugh...” she moaned. “Still sleepy...”

Alec was shocked by the sight of the girl, a far, far cry from the pure and perfect songstress she usually was. Shiori let out a little chuckle.

“That’ll cool the fire in almost anyone’s hearts,” he said. “Your fans would faint if they saw you like this.”

“Oh, shut your gob.”

Felicia gulped down the glass of water Shiori brought to her, and her lips curled into a wry grin as she went on.

“To be honest, it’s only trouble when people fall for me as the songstress. That’s a mask made for sales, eh? That’s what performing is, but there simply ain’t too many who realize that. I’m happy to show ’em all a dream o’ sorts, but ain’t nothin’ I can do when someone says they’ve fallen in love with what I look like.”

“I suppose it makes sense when singers and performers hide their real faces. Without any other way of knowing who you are, some people are bound to get the wrong idea. I can sympathize with you, though.”

“Yeah, I know. It just leaves me feelin’ empty sometimes.”

The impression that the songstress and her fellow singers gave was little more than a gorgeous mirage. Felicia’s true fans were those who were given dreams to enjoy through that mirage, but there were yet those who mistook it for reality, and many who fell hard for it.

“It don’t feel bad when someone says they love ya, but what ya really want is

someone t'look past the appearance and t'ya heart, eh? I admit it's a lot t'ask fer, yeah."

Hildegarde had said that a few people had professed their love to Felicia, but Alec now saw that most of these people loved the mask that she wore, and not the person behind it.

"And I suppose that's why you've turned a cold shoulder to your potential suitors?" asked Alec.

"I suppose. I wasn't much feelin' it neither, t'be honest, but when I thought t'meself, *aw, this bugger's only got eyes for the songstress*, I just lost all interest. And look—this here's who I really am. I'm only ever gonna disappoint."

"How about taking the mask off, then? Perhaps it's not something you can do at your concerts, but it wouldn't be an issue backstage or behind the curtain, would it?"

It was an amateur's opinion, to be sure, but Alec wanted to voice his honest thoughts. Just one night earlier, Felicia had revealed who she really was, and though it had resulted in shock, he didn't feel like she'd left a bad impression either. Perhaps it was true that everyone was more wrapped up in the case at hand, but at the very least, Helge hadn't left her side even after her change.

"I...suppose there's that, ain't there? This whole creatin' a character thing was Karina's idea," said Felicia with a smile. "I'll think on it, then."

Shiori passed Felicia a bowl of warm water to wash her face, and Felicia took it with a smile and a "Thank ya kindly."

There was a knock at the door, followed by Conny calling out to them.

"I'd best be off then," said Shiori, who then left.

Knowing that Felicia still had to get ready, Alec stood up. He announced his own parting and made to leave, when Felicia spoke.

"Oi," she said, a touch of reserve in her voice. "Karina said it last night, but...are you and Shiori really a couple?"

Alec answered without hesitation.

"Yes."

“Oh, I see...” muttered Felicia, her face suddenly hard to read. “F’real...?”

“What is it?”

A dubious look spread across Alec’s face, but Felicia grinned at the sight of it.

“Yer quite me type, that’s all,” she said. “Ya look like you read your books as much as ya like yer covers, if ya know what I mean. I’d be quite chuffed to make ya me number one potential lover.”

Alec didn’t know if she was joking or not, so he could only chuckle.

“You can’t be serious...” he muttered. “But if you’ve got time to joke around, then you’d best start getting ready. Breakfast is about to be served.”

“Tch,” muttered Felicia. “Yeah, yeah...”

The songstress poked her tongue out at him, then grudgingly stood to her feet. Alec watched as she ruffled through her bags for her clothes and makeup.

“And uh...this is just one man’s humble opinion,” he said, catching Felicia’s eyes as she turned to look at him, “but the face you’re wearing now suits you so much better than that mask.”

He did not wait for a reply, but simply left. Felicia stood staring at the door for a good long time before the corners of her lips curled into a grin.

“You son of a bitch...” she muttered, putting her hands to her chest and clutching them tight. She felt a tickle sting her heart. “Keep that up and I’ll fall in love with ya f’real, y’dolt.”

3

While breakfast was under way, Shiori surveyed the dining hall of the guest house with a casual glance. Everyone in the orchestra was a little different—some of the band members looked fine, others were exhausted, and still others were blinking away their sleepiness.

Conny, however, appeared to have slept well, and didn't show a hint of exhaustion—he was buzzing around here and there seeing to all of his organizational duties. Though many saw people of the cloth as soft-spoken and weak, those who worked for the Cathedral did so under very strict regulations, and their training in work and prayer was austere and rigorous—they were anything *but* weak.

"After this and up until the end of the concert, I'll have to manage things on-site," said Conny, hurriedly—but elegantly—sipping the last of his soup. "I'll have someone take you all to the auditorium after breakfast."

Conny had requested that they discuss the concert over breakfast so as not to waste time. Around him were Shiori, Alec, Felicia, and Helge.

Karina had been the orchestra leader, but she was now gone. So, with the orchestra's usual representative also still sick, the role had been taken up by Helge. Though the man had his own thoughts about the incident, he said he'd assume the role as a form of penance. Though many felt he was a victim and shouldn't feel responsible for how things had gone, Helge was of a slightly different mindset.

"I might not have meant any harm, but I still hurt someone. Not only that, I didn't even know that they'd felt cornered in such a way," he said. "I will fix that which requires fixing within myself, and I'd like to do at least this much as a gesture of apology."

"He's good looking, honest, and responsible to top it off," commented Alec. "You have to imagine there's a lot of ladies who would fall for a man like that."

Helge's looks and bearing gave the impression that he was a playboy of sorts, but Alec now saw that his casual manner was perhaps really a kind of

politeness.

“He’s not even aware that he’s putting on the charm,” said Shiori.

“Not even aware of it, huh? I see,” chuckled Alec.

“Well then, that makes two of you, y’dolt,” muttered Felicia as she chomped on a slice of bread.

“Did you say something?” asked Alec.

“Didn’t say nuffin,” replied the songstress.

In the end, it seemed that Felicia had opted not to hide her natural manner of speaking, and though it produced a little confusion here and there, by and large everyone simply accepted it. Though some of course had their own opinions about her decision, none went so far as making them heard.

“The Cathedral will almost certainly issue some strong words regarding the incident,” said Conny. “Firstly there’s the fact that two of the Hall’s people were involved, and then there’s all the money that’s been spent. Once the concert is wrapped up, they’ll most certainly enter into talks of some kind.”

In order to avoid causing a commotion, no official announcement of the incident would be made until the concert was over. That said, Alvestam Hall had already been informed by way of messenger bird.

Shiori could imagine the chaos that would soon follow, and even though it had little to do with her personally, it still made her feel sick. It was all too easy to imagine it becoming little more than lowbrow, vulgar gossip. Shiori hoped that things would settle down for Felicia, Hildegarde, and the orchestra soon enough.

“Well then, I’ll see you all later,” said Conny once they’d finished breakfast.

Everyone watched him shuffle away hurriedly, and after a short break, began to prepare for their rehearsal. There were of course other performers, but all eyes were on the current top songstress and her distinguished orchestra, who were widely considered the greatest in the nation at what they did. Naturally, failure was unacceptable.

Of course, there was nervousness and uncertainty in the orchestra after the

unexpected incident and the betrayal by one of their comrades. These feelings were heightened by the fact that the set list had been changed. Nonetheless, Felicia took the tension in the air around them all and tore it to shreds.

"Orrighty then," she announced. "What say we all let it rip then, eh? Let's get this practice going!"

Some of the band cringed at Felicia's choice of words, but nonetheless they felt encouraged by the strength and confidence that they heard in her voice. But while the orchestra smiled at their steadfast songstress, Shiori felt frozen with anxiety. Her role in the concert was behind the scenes, yes, but it was nonetheless a big part of the performance. The concert had drawn much attention, and there would be influential nobles in attendance—she simply could not afford to make a mistake.

Alec placed a hand on Shiori's shoulder.

"You'll be fine," he said. "I'll be right there with you, so just relax. I won't tell you to do your best, because I know you, and I know you'll already be pushing to do even more than your best. I'm actually worried you'll try *too* hard. As long as you relax, I'm sure you'll do great."

"Thank you, Alec."

Alec took her hand and they left with the songstress and her orchestra and headed for the auditorium.

When they arrived, they found that the other performers had already begun tuning their instruments. These performers glanced up for a brief second at the new arrivals, but quickly returned to their work—everyone was taking things very seriously.

Conny, who had arrived a little earlier, noticed that everyone had arrived and gave a signal. The auditorium went silent. After a brief explanation, the final rehearsals began, and the melodies and tunes of the various famous performers echoed through the magnificent auditorium.

There was a refreshing serenade by the chamber orchestra, which brought to mind the purity of night. A song of love sung by a passionate songstress from a southern nation, her unique melody brimming with the deep emotion of her

country. Dancers dressed as farmers from the middle ages performed a simple and lively folk dance, accompanied by the sounds of the traditional royal nyckelharpa and zither. A heavyset tenor sang a song of triumph, his voice utterly resonant. An adorable youth choir took great joy in singing a children's song, their voices voluminous in their purity. The kingdom's most northern city of Tris had their beloved symphony orchestra in attendance, which played a grand and magnificent orchestral number.

"Amazing..." uttered Shiori.

All of the performers had been invited to play at the nation's biggest festival, so it was no wonder that they were of the highest quality. And yet it was not just that they were all skilled at what they did, but that they were all pouring their emotions into their performances—Shiori listened so intently that she even forgot that she would be performing herself.

"Amazin', innit? I couldn't sing that deep even if me life depended on it. I've gotta keep up me practice, don't I, Karina?" whispered Felicia.

So engrossed was the songstress that she uttered the name of her former friend without at first realizing it. However, as it dawned on her, she was for a moment sullen, and Helge put a comforting hand to her back.

In the near future, it would likely be Helge who would become the place where Felicia felt most safe. Karina would probably never return to the position she had once occupied, and would be replaced by a different manager. But once she had atoned for her crimes, it seemed almost a certainty that Felicia would welcome her back as a friend. They were the betrayer and the betrayed, and yet, even then, the future would most certainly see their relationship mended...

Shiori let herself go, entrusting herself to the beautiful music with its lingering sorrow, and soaked in the reverberations when it was over. Then, all that was left was Felicia's rehearsal.

"You're up next."

Alec's words and pleasant smile brought Shiori back to reality.

"You really lost yourself in the music, huh?" he added.

“I did. It was so amazing.”

So it was true that some things were so beautiful that they were beyond description. Shiori felt it was enough just to lose yourself to that sheer awe and admiration.

“Let’s get to it, everyone.”

Felicia flashed a beautiful smile, and in an instant had transformed from her irreverent self into the gracious and elegant songstress. Her fellow invited performers watched her and the orchestra with a mix of expectation, curiosity, and a certain amount of jealousy. But none of them seem particularly intimidated. Gone were the looks of worry and uncertainty that Shiori had noticed earlier in the morning—they were replaced by confident smiles. The orchestra’s ability to shift into performance mode was impressive, and all of them seemed ready for the performance proper. It was almost hard to believe that they had been caught up in an incident just the previous night.

They really are *top class...*

“We’ll be counting on you,” said Felicia as she passed Shiori.

Shiori nodded, took a deep breath, and looked up at her lover, Alec. The smile he gave her in return was all the courage she needed.

The sound of instruments being tuned filled the air, and those who were seated eagerly awaited the beginning of the Alvestam Symphony Orchestra’s rehearsal performance. Shiori, who was waiting at the edge of the stage, peeked out at the audience. Those who were seated in place of the crowd began to whisper among themselves, and Shiori had a feeling she knew exactly what they were talking about.

Rather small for an orchestra, no?

Something strange about that brass section...

Shiori let out a sigh. The Tris Symphony Orchestra had played earlier, and the Alvestam Orchestra didn’t have nearly the same visual impact. All of those watching were professionals themselves—they knew that something was off with just a glance.

But that was exactly why Shiori had been called upon—to make up for what they were lacking. And not only that—Shiori was sure that Felicia, Helge, and everyone onstage would make sure that nothing sounded amiss or was lacking. Everything would be okay.

"Relax," Alec said. "I know you, and you're going to be great."

"Thanks."

Alec had seen through Shiori's nerves and wanted to cheer her on. She let go of the tension in her face, and took a deep breath.

The conductor sent everyone a sign, and the tuning came to a stop. The auditorium fell into silence. The conductor's baton rose, then fell, and as the stringed instruments began to play, Felicia started to sing.

The first song was one of the kingdom's nursery rhymes, sung since times of old as a lullaby. It was for the children who would be attending, and Felicia's voice had a gentle and kind sweetness in it, as though she were a mother singing to her own child.

To match the song, Shiori cast illusions in the air of softly colored, seasonal childhood memories. There was spring, when the trees in the fields bloomed in vibrant green, and children ran around chasing butterflies and fairies that danced in the air. There was summer, where beneath a blue sky that stretched out past the clouds, children splashed about in a lake that sparkled in the sunlight. There was fall, where the city streets were bathed in the scarlet light of sunset, and the children ran about the hills and fields collecting tree nuts in baskets. And then there was winter, in which the fields were covered in white and the children played with sleds or otherwise indulged in snowfights.

Cries of surprise and awe rose from those who were watching. But eventually, the waves of surprise subsided, and vanished into the resounding melodies. The audience was so engrossed that they forgot to breathe, and even to blink.

At a glance, the orchestra's excess of wood and stringed instruments seemed to cause an imbalance, but the orchestra—the pride of the royal capital—had more than enough skill to make up for it. The brass section, which was clearly lacking in members, had revised their scores to cover for the areas where they were lacking. Their skill and abilities allowed them to maintain a voluminous

and full sound.

Shiori, for her part, worked as best she could to cast illusion magic that would not get in the way of the marvelous vocals and the wondrous melodies. One of the songs was a story of love between two individuals of different classes, in which the two lovers met in a secret flower garden. It was a popular novel among the young, and the ditty was used as the theme song for its stage performances. For this, Shiori cast the image of a knight and the witch he had fallen for, and controlled them in time to the music, drinking from the magical potions that Alec passed her while she worked.

Finally, the last tunes of a song praising the goddess rang out through the auditorium, and the beautiful images of the kingdom's scenery faded along with them.

Silence fell.

But it was just for a moment, and then the auditorium filled with applause.

"Amazing. We never should have expected anything less from the best of the best. What power."

"Those vocals... There's such strength in them."

"I felt like I was a part of the stories. What manner of technology *was* that?"

The audience couldn't stop themselves from sharing their thoughts and impressions, and continued to shower the songstress and orchestra with applause. A few people began to approach the orchestra, likely wanting to speak with their contemporaries, but then the applause stopped at the far end of the auditorium, and whispers rose up all around.

"Is that...?" Alec muttered from behind Shiori.

His eyes were on Conny, who was walking through the auditorium with two people in tow—one a gray-haired man of impressive build, the other an elegant and kindly woman. It was clear from the way they held themselves, their quality tailoring, and Conny's attitude, that they were both high-ranking nobility.

"It's the Torisval Margrave," Alec stated.

"Huh?"

It was Kristoffer Osbring, the margrave who governed the Torisval Region. He was a noble whose influence rivaled even that of the duke's family. The woman with him must have been his wife.

"This is the Torisval Margrave and his wife," said Conny. "They wanted to meet you all."

The auditorium was suddenly wrapped in excitement and tension. This was no ordinary visitor—this was the biggest donor to the concert, here in person. Kristoffer himself gestured for everyone to be at ease and sent them all a generous smile.

"I hope you don't mind that I listened to you all before the performance," he said. "Truly wonderful. You're everything we could have hoped for. Though I must admit I am not very well versed in the arts, I was still truly overwhelmed."

The aura in the auditorium brightened—someone of such high rank was not one who needed to mince his words. The margrave spoke honestly.

"I must agree," said the margrave's wife, whose vivid jade-green eyes left quite the impression. "The performances were incredibly moving, and I'm certain that everyone will love them."

The margrave's wife smiled kindly. She was particularly passionate about charity work, and was known as the biggest donor to the Tris Orphanage. She had also paid with her own money for the children of the orphanage to attend the concert, and was so excited for the concert that she'd made a personal donation of her own, outside of the margrave family's donation. This concert was not simply set up for the enjoyment of tourists and travelers—Shiori got the sense that it was also a charity concert for the wealthy, and she felt herself shrinking with nerves all over again. It dawned on her that she'd taken on quite the massive undertaking when she'd accepted this request, though she was well into the thick of it, now.

And we already heard that a great number of other high-ranking nobles had donated...

The rehearsal had gone smoothly and without issue, and the response to it was good. But how would the performance itself go? At the time of the actual performance, the archbishop, the most senior Cathedral staff, and many high-

ranking nobility would be in attendance. Though all of the performers were top class and were accustomed to being onstage in front of such audiences, Shiori herself was just an ordinary citizen, and an amateur to boot. But now she was a part of the main act in a concert attended by the city's many influential individuals—the pressure and responsibility were more than she could imagine.

Without even being aware of it, Shiori had wrapped her own arms around herself. Then, she felt a big hand on her shoulder pull her in. Alec smiled at her, and in that smile was a message—*you'll be fine*. She felt her body relax.

"Thank you..." she said. "I feel more confident when you're with me."

"I'm glad," Alec said happily.

His smile made her happy too, and Shiori smiled back.

Shiori felt something in that moment, and when she turned, she gasped—she got the sense that Kristoffer had been looking straight at her. But perhaps it was just her imagination. More likely, he'd simply been looking in this general direction, and hadn't been looking at her in particular. Still, if he *was* looking at her, Shiori felt it would be bad manners to look away, so she fought the urge to look at her feet and kept her eyes up. A short moment later the margrave looked away and spoke to Conny, and then he and his wife walked towards Felicia.

"So you're the pride of the royal capital—Miss Felicia and the Alvestam Symphony Orchestra. I heard that you had a few hurdles to jump to get here, but I couldn't detect even a hint of that in your performance. Truly marvelous."

"It is a true honor to receive such compliments," replied Felicia, who, as an experienced performer, did not flinch before even the high nobility. "We did indeed face some turmoil, and in fact a few members of our orchestra are unable to perform. Nonetheless, we consider ourselves professionals, and believe it is our duty to ensure that everyone who attends the concert leaves satisfied."

Felicia's bearing and manner were such that anyone would have thought she'd been born into a noble family.

"They don't call her number one for nothing," said Alec. "That girl is going

places.”

Shiori nodded.

She realized then that she was B-Rank, and Alec was on the cusp of S-Rank. It was likely that they would be doing more work with the higher nobility. Somewhere in the far corners of her mind, Shiori thought that perhaps she too would be best off learning the manners to interact with the nobility, just as Felicia had.

“But I must admit to being very surprised. That performance combined with that illusion magic—it felt as though we were all being pulled into the worlds of the songs themselves. Are such performances popular in the royal capital?”

Shiori had been entirely lost in her own thoughts, and it was only when the margrave’s wife mentioned her part in the performance that she came to her senses. And though the margravine was asking the question of Felicia, her eyes were clearly pointed in Shiori’s direction—she knew that Shiori was the one behind the illusion magic.

“Before she married the margrave, she was a magic soldier with the knight corps,” whispered Alec, reading Shiori’s mind. “It’s only natural that she knows you’re the caster.”

Shiori looked up at Alec with a bashful smile and nodded.

“Oh, I see. So that’s why. I was so surprised.”

But Shiori noticed a clear nervousness in Alec and couldn’t help but blink in surprise. He had interacted with the Lovner family as if they’d stood on equal footing, but perhaps when it came to someone as powerful as the margrave, even Alec got nervous. And it was true to say that the margrave had a presence and silent power that Annelie did not—which was not to mention the feeling that there was something unknowable behind his generous smile.

“Even the theaters of the royal capital don’t have performances quite like that,” said Felicia. “Originally we were worried that even fewer of our orchestra would recover in time, at which point Reverend Conny was kind enough to introduce us to an adventurer capable of illusion magic.”

“The two adventurers Miss Felicia speaks of are just over here,” said Conny.

“The master of illusion magic is Miss Shiori Izumi. Alec Dia, the man with her, was hired for extra protection. The two are highly dependable adventurers with much experience.”

Shiori screamed internally at being called a “master,” but she managed to keep the reaction tucked away, and bowed politely to the margrave and his wife. Alec placed his hand on his chest and bowed lightly—a salute afforded those in power.



“There’s no need to be so formal,” said Kristoffer with an easy smile. “Please,

relax—this is not a formal setting.”

His wife, too, sent them a warm smile. Shiori got the sense that they wanted everyone to feel as though they were on equal footing, but this only made Shiori more nervous. At the same time, however, she understood this to be a gesture of generosity, and so she did her best to act natural.

“You must be Miss Shiori,” said the margrave’s wife, her voice gentle. “I’ve heard about you from Reverend Jens. What was it again? ‘Narrated pictures’? He said it’s what you call using illusion magic in place of storybooks.”

“Oh...yes. That’s right,” said Shiori.

It was at first quite the shock to discover that the margrave’s wife had already heard of her, but after some thought Shiori realized it was perhaps not so strange after all. Though the Tris Adventurers’ Guild was in the habit of regularly sending adventurers to visit the orphanage, this was not volunteer work—it was in fact a request via the margrave’s wife. Though the request itself came from the orphanage, she was the actual client, and the invoices for such requests were always sent to her address. It was only natural that reports of the adventurers’ visits reached her ears afterwards.

“I cannot tell you enough how grateful I am to the Tris Guild’s adventurers. And the children *always* look forward to your visits. I think it’s so important for us to have things we can look forward to—it makes life worth living. I’ve heard that your narrated pictures are quite the hit with the children. I’d long wanted to see them myself, and I’m so glad that I happened upon the chance to see them today.”

The margrave’s wife then admitted that her favorite moment was the scene from the romance novel, and the bright smile on her face was like that of a much younger girl.

“Thank you so much. I’m honored.”

Shiori was unsure of the proper etiquette involved in talking to the nobility, but her acceptance of the compliment seemed to make the margrave’s wife very happy.

“I’m actually of mixed blood myself,” said the margrave’s wife. “Immigrants

are in my family history. Our family experienced much hardship, and so it makes me ecstatic to see the work and efforts of foreigners."

The woman took Shiori's hand and patted it softly, then let it go with a smile. Kristoffer watched the two smiling women for a moment, then turned his eyes on Alec.

"It's been a long time, Sir Alec. Four years, is it?"

"It has indeed, Your Excellency. I apologize for my rudeness—I should have contacted you."

"Don't let it bother you. As long as you are in good health, that is all that matters."

Shiori was surprised—she'd never heard Alec speak in such a stiff, formal way before. But what surprised her even more was learning that he and the margrave were acquainted. Even Conny and Felicia were shocked.

Alec looked nervous, and an awkward smile was plastered on his face. In contrast, Kristoffer looked slightly pained, and yet all the same his smile brimmed with joy. It was a smile that struck Shiori with a certain sense of déjà vu.

It's the same look I sometimes see big brother wearing when he looks at Alec.

Perhaps Kristoffer, like Zack, had watched over Alec in some capacity. When Shiori thought about it, it was not just Zack, but also Clemens and Nadia who sometimes looked at Alec in this way. It dawned on her then that they all knew the man's past, and Shiori found her gaze dropping to her feet.

Shiori wanted to know Alec. She wanted to know him even more than she already did. Knowing that she was the only one who *didn't* know these things about him gave her a sense of estrangement. Alec's past was complicated, this much she knew for certain, and he had only shared with her a fraction of it.

But at the same time, she too was hiding things. She had not even told Zack, a man she considered her brother, of her past. So she understood that Alec's past, much like her own, was something that required resolve and strength of will to bring to light. That was why they were together—they would support each other until they were both ready.

Shiori felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up—the conversation between Alec and the margrave was over.

“Well then, we’ll be looking forward to the concert,” said Kristoffer as a farewell, sending them all one last generous smile before Conny led him and his wife out of the auditorium.

As soon as the margrave was gone, the auditorium filled with whispers and chatter.

“I’m so shocked,” said Shiori. “You know the margrave?”

Wearing something of a pained smile, Alec nodded. When he spoke, he kept his voice low.

“Well, yes. He occasionally contacts me for requests. And once, when I was younger and unwell, he took care of me for a time.”

“I...I see.”

Kristoffer was a man in a position of great influence and power, and much of his authority came from the king. This same man had looked after Alec for a time. What that meant, Shiori did not know. However, if they had been close when Alec was younger, it could only mean that Alec had come from a family of high nobility.

“Let me guess—you were just wondering about my identity, weren’t you?” asked Alec.

“Ulp.” He’d hit the nail right on the head. “Well, I mean...er, a little, perhaps,” she stammered.

But even then, he had told her that he would be with her, and so it didn’t matter. When she told him as much, Alec smiled and whispered his thanks.

It had been two days of seeing glimpses into the past—both Alec’s himself, and that of the people they were working with—and it was all coming to a close as the concert approached.

4

Before the concert, the auditorium was buzzing with chatter and commotion. The excitement of the audience could be felt even in the backstage dressing room, where a nervous Shiori put a hand to her chest and took more than a few deep breaths. Seeing her like that made Alec chuckle, and he put a hand to her shoulder. She was dressed up in traditional festival garb.

“You’re nervous, huh?”

“Yes... My heart is racing. I know I’m not going to be onstage myself, but still...”

Shiori smiled hesitantly. It was clear that she was restless. Alec smiled down at her and played with the hair under her veil, which was embroidered with golden thread.

“And I never imagined that this costume would be a part of it all either,” Shiori muttered.

Alec continued to soothe the fidgety Shiori with gentle pats on the back.

“Indeed,” he replied.

The concert was attended by many wealthy and influential nobles. Though both Alec and Shiori would be working backstage, they had been told that their adventuring gear was unbecoming for such an occasion, and so they were currently dressed in formal Cathedral wear. Though formal wear would have been preferable, time was against them. Alec, who was accustomed to working with the higher nobility, owned a formal outfit for such occasions, but there was no time to retrieve it. In Shiori’s case, being of smaller than average stature meant that there were no tailors who could provide a dress off the rack for a woman who was the size of a young girl, yet was well out of that age range. This left them with no other choice, and so formal Cathedral wear was readied.

Shiori was dressed in the traditional festival outfit of a priestess, while Alec wore the formal attire of the Cathedral knights. That they both wore the clothes of the upper classes was to help them fit in—the Cathedral didn’t want those who didn’t know any better telling the adventurers that they were in the wrong place and had to leave.

“But it looks great on you,” said Alec. “You look stunning.”

Shiori was beautiful in the neat dress of a holy woman. Her milky white skin practically glowed against the white clothes, her face framed by her black hair. And seeing her there in the light that poured through the windows of the dressing room—which had once been a chapel—made her seem like a real saint. Still, Alec held back from saying too much in the way of compliments—he knew that it would only make her more fidgety and more restless.

"Thank you. You look quite dashing yourself," said Shiori. "Like a real courageous knight."

"You think? Wow, that makes me happy."

Alec smiled in response to the blushing smile on his lover, then let his gaze casually take in the area around them. He'd felt eyes on them since a short time ago—nothing particularly malicious, but he still didn't like the gazes he could feel falling upon Shiori. It seemed that many were curious about her role in the concert with her illusion magic and wanted to approach her. However, they had second thoughts about the idea as soon as they saw Alec. He was taller than average, and he knew himself how sharp his resting gaze was. The space around him was not one that would be easy to breach for your regular, everyday citizen. When he thought of his presence as something of a deterrent, Alec realized that he'd made the right choice in partnering with Shiori.

If it were just for job requests, that would be one thing, but...

He didn't want to think that distinguished people of culture would do anything strange, but it was unfortunately true that there *were* those who saw foreigners and immediately thought of prostitutes. He had also heard that the musical world was not always as gorgeous as it appeared. There were those who sold their bodies for work, and those who demanded access to bodies before providing it. As sad as it was, it was the dark truth that lay in the shadow of the world of entertainment.

That said...

Alec couldn't help but let out a wry chuckle at the thought of the impromptu reunion they'd had earlier. He'd heard that Kristoffer would be attending the concert—he was a sponsor, after all—but he had not expected to see the man face-to-face. It was also possible that perhaps Kristoffer had wanted to check up

on him without making it especially obvious, but Alec got the feeling that it was Shiori he was more interested in.

Zack had not gone into the particulars, but Shiori's arrival—the sudden and perplexing arrival of a foreigner—had happened at around the same time as Alec's return to Tris. As he was once royalty, this would have put Shiori under the careful watch of the Intelligence Division. As an important player in the defense of the northern region, Kristoffer had to be aware of her—he might well have been receiving direct reports from Zack himself.

Now that he was aware of Shiori's character, Kristoffer might look upon her in friendly terms, but there was no doubt that she would have initially set alarm bells ringing—she was a girl whose identity and past were unknown, and she had entered into friendly relations with the royal prince. Kristoffer, much like Zack, had been very worried about Alec—to the extent that he could be considered not unlike an older brother.

Alec had long felt a debt to Kristoffer, and that came with a certain difficulty when interacting with the man. When he had been young and living with the royal family, Alec had spoken with Kristoffer, an influential noble, on a few occasions, but not so much that they could be considered close. And yet Kristoffer had provided the margrave's residence as a quiet place for Alec to rest and recuperate. Regardless of whether or not this was the request of a friend or royalty, this meant looking after and hiding the king's illegitimate son for a number of months—it was a lot of work, and very dangerous. But Kristoffer had seen through to Alec's heart and how he felt, so outside of occasionally checking in on him, Kristoffer had never made a point of visiting. He had simply made his residence a place where Alec could rest his heart and his mind.

"There is no need to feel like you owe me anything," Kristoffer had said. "I have done little more than a job that the king requested of me. I don't want you to think you are indebted or any other such thing, but I do hope that when you feel up to it, you will drop by to visit."

They were his parting words, spoken when Alec had been well enough to leave for the city. And so Alec had taken them at face value, and decided that he would not visit the man unless it was for urgent business of some kind.

Alec was protected in this way. By Olivier, Zack, and Kristoffer—and most likely Clemens and Nadia too.

I need to get things settled soon, to put everyone's minds at ease.

He brought Shiori's delicate shoulder closer to him, and Shiori smiled up at him once more. They shared smiles, then readied themselves as the air in the dressing room wavered, before the door opened.

Conny popped his head through the door, and though everyone thought it was time to start, apparently that was not why he had come. He scanned the room until he found Alec and Shiori, then quickly walked over to them with his company in tow, one of which was a most familiar-looking blue shape. Though the dressing room began to buzz at the unexpected arrival of the slime, Rurii for its part merely raised a feeler and waved.

"Is that...Miss Hildegarde?" asked Shiori, as she waved back at her slime companion.

"Looks like it. Perhaps she's been cleared of suspicion?" pondered Alec.

On either side of Hildegarde were two knights, both dressed in the same formal attire as Alec.

"We managed to convince the knights to permit her to visit," said Conny, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a grin. "She was so restless she couldn't seem to contain herself, so I brought her with me. I'm sure she'll feel a little better once she has a chance to speak with her friend."

It took guts to bring someone who had been suspected of a crime to the concert this close to the start of the performance, but it seemed like Conny had made the right call.

Felicia and Hildegarde had been very close friends, and though there was something like fear in their expressions at first, once they noticed each other their faces burst into smiles. It was like watching flowers bloom, and the dressing room filled with life.

"Wow, do you feel that? The whole air in the room has changed," remarked Shiori.

It was the presence of the two songstresses. It wasn't just because the two of them were beautiful and talented performers—it was the light that seemed to pour out from within them that was different.

"Welcome back, Rurii," said Shiori.

The slime, now relieved of its protection duties, bounced over to Shiori and wobbled by her feet.

"Rurii had quite the adventure, it would seem," said Conny. "I suppose it goes without saying that the familiar of a seasoned adventurer is nothing to balk at. Your familiar protected Hildegarde last night and helped us to apprehend a criminal. It even helped to soothe the girl's battered heart."

The slime twisted somewhat bashfully at all the praise. Shiori couldn't help but laugh at how human the gesture looked, then cast some magic water for the slime, which it happily drank down before trembling a message of thanks. Alec smiled down at Rurii's adorable gestures, then looked back at the two songstresses.

They had been led down paths of misunderstanding, and were finally able to reunite. Their friends around them celebrated a friendship reforged.

"Aw, that's wonderful," said Shiori.

"Indeed," agreed Alec.

They bore wounds that had been caused by betrayal by those they believed in and those they trusted. These were not wounds that would heal easily. However, what they had regained through the experience was truly precious, and their friendship now was reinforced—it was rock solid. Of this, Alec was certain.

"I'm so glad. I was a little worried about doing this so close to the performance, but I wanted you to be able to sing without any further anxiety in your heart," said Conny. "I can tell by both of your faces that this was the right call."

Felicia was bold and daring. With her mind free and clear of stress, she was now capable of putting on a truly breathtaking performance. She spoke to her friend for a time, and then took a step towards Conny. Behind her was

Hildegarde and Helge.

“Um...” she started. “I understand I may be asking too much, but I have a request to ask of you.”

It was clear on her face, and the faces of those behind her, that the songstress and orchestra had come to a decision. Conny looked shocked at the serious expressions before him.

“What might that be?” he asked.

“Thanks to all of you, this whole incident has almost come to an end, and I’ve been able to reunite with my friend,” said Felicia. “We’ve caused you no end of worry and bother. As an apology, and as a celebration of friendship, we’d like to sing you a song of our thanks.”

Felicia looked around at the dressing room. All the other performers watched on, curious.

“You’ve gathered all these truly wonderful performers together. As a closing song for the entire concert, we’d like to sing together with them, and I’d like to sing together with my friend.”

They were suggesting a closing number, in which every performer could take part. It was a symphonic poem, and in fact the very poem that they had planned to end on, were their whole orchestra able to take part. When Felicia revealed the title of the piece, the dressing room dropped into silence. Performers exchanged glances and whispers rippled throughout. But this was only for an instant, because soon after, the resolve upon all of their faces was clear. And if that wasn’t enough, some of them began to voice their approval.

“A wonderful idea. Please, you must allow us this one song.”

“Indeed. We’ve played it so many times we all know the sheet music by heart.”

“Everyone in the kingdom knows the song. Even the audience can join in.”

Conny was yet again left wide-eyed with surprise, but eventually, he too nodded in agreement.

“Very well, you have my permission!” he said. “Though to be honest, I insist

and beg that you perform it. There won't be time for a rehearsal, but I'm confident that you'll all be just fine."

He flashed a bold and daring grin, something quite unexpected for a holy man, then went on.

"And rest assured that should anything go wrong or poorly, I will take full responsibility. I'll also be sure to take boatloads in compensation from Alvestam Hall."

Conny's energetic and lively joke of a reply sent excitement running through the room, which was suddenly filled with enthusiasm. Only one person in the room looked around in uncertainty, unable to follow exactly what had just happened.

"Is it *that* famous a song?" asked Shiori.

"It is indeed," said Alec. "Perhaps even more well known than the national anthem."

It was more famous than even the song that symbolized the very nation—a symphonic poem crowned with the name of the kingdom itself. It told the story of a battle for territorial reclamation one hundred and fifty years ago, one that had ended in overwhelming victory for the kingdom. It told of national passion, and the joy of a freedom earned in battle over Dolgast oppression.

It was the symphonic poem, *Storydia*.

5

The auditorium had been constructed to allow for two levels for the concert's audience. Though originally a location dedicated to prayer, and nothing compared to a proper theater, great care had been taken to ensure that people could enjoy the concert comfortably. The second-floor box seats were equipped with partitions and long benches, in which sat the concert's patrons, the influential, and the wealthy—starting with the archbishop and the high-ranking seniors of the Cathedral. The first-floor seats were made comfortable with cushions, and many travelers and citizens were in attendance in the designated standing area.

All the performers and guests of the Cathedral were dressed in formal attire. However, those occupying the first-floor seats were dressed casually. The children from the orphanage, whose attendance had been arranged by the margrave's wife, were dressed in neater and tidier attire than usual. Still, none were particularly uncomfortable—it was more important that they be comfortable for the performance.

Though the kingdom of Storydia was affluent to the extent that even ordinary citizens could enjoy music, the chance to see and listen to those from a distinguished location such as Alvestam Hall was a luxury usually only afforded to the wealthy. The concert was a chance to listen to grand melodies performed by eminent musicians, outside of where they were normally played. It held a most alluring appeal for the audience.

The elegant and expressive tunes of the chamber orchestra were a delight for the elderly listeners. The passionate song of love by the southern songstress had the young lovers in the crowd blushing. Sighs of awe rang out through the auditorium at the strength of the tenor's solo performance and the symphonies of the orchestra, which were such a rarity for ordinary citizens.

When the folk dancers and the choir were onstage, the orphanage children couldn't help themselves and put the adults in something of a panic when they got up and started dancing themselves, but this was looked on generously by the concert's donors and allowed. The worried adults were calmed at the sight of the archbishop and the margrave smiling and clapping at the sight, and the young Count Enqvist waved happily at the children.

The concert had been planned so that many could enjoy the spectacle, and additionally as an alternative to the church choir, which was so popular that many were turned away every year—and it was already safe to call it a success. As long as the main act went off without a hitch, none could say otherwise.

"We're up next," said Felicia. "Ugh. I'm sweatin' with nerves."

The songstress looked as nervous as she sounded—her smile was slightly crooked to match her mood.

"*You* get nervous?"

Alec had thought her a woman with nerves of steel, but it seemed even the

songstress got pre-performance jitters.

“Just who do you think I am, anyways, eh?” said Felicia with a slight frown, keeping her voice low so that those around her couldn’t hear. “Yeah, I might be used ta singin’ n’front of nobles and the like, but this ain’t me home ground, is it? Not to mention the change in me set list. How d’ya expect me *not* to be nervous?”

Felicia wore a dress with the delicate embroidered image of a bird and an ivy leaf, done in emerald silk, together with a large magic stone necklace carved into the shape of a crescent moon. It was meant to bring to mind the image of Saint Sanna Grunden. The songstress gripped the necklace with worry, and Hildegarde took Felicia’s hand in her own.

“I’ll be fine,” said Felicia with a smile. “I ‘ad a concert recently wot was attended by a retired member of the Duke’s family, but I weren’t nearly as nervous then as I am now. This ’ere’s as bad as when I sang at my first-ever show.”

“The duke’s family? That’s amazing. That’s a single step down from the royal family, isn’t it?” asked Shiori.

“That it is,” said Alec. “All the families have descendants who were once royalty. And I guess that just goes to show how big of a deal the number one songstress really is, huh? One of the duke’s ancestors came to watch you perform?”

This seemed to have intrigued Alec, and Felicia answered his question as he expected.

“That they did. Used to be chancellor to the former king. I remember it right clearly cos’ all the Hall’s higher-ups were on me back about not fluffin’ the performance.”

The chancellor to the former king—that could mean only one man. Frederick Fauchelle, sometimes called the king’s right-hand man, and Zack’s real father. Yet another person who had cared for Alec some eighteen years ago.

Alec hadn’t been able to meet Frederick again since he’d returned to Tris so quickly after coming back from the empire, but if the man had been able to

attend a concert, that at least meant he was in good health. He was nearing sixty, and thinking of his face—and his likeness to Zack when it came to the eyes—brought a grin to Alec's face.

I should send him a letter some time in the near future. Perhaps with a gift, Alec thought; something to apologize for his rudeness.

The crowd erupted with applause, indicating that all the performers, save for the Alvestam Symphony Orchestra, had finished.

Felicia stood up straight, and in that moment her expression changed to the visage of the beautiful songstress.

"To the stage," she said.

Alec, Shiori, and all the members of the Alvestam Symphony Orchestra nodded. Rurii wobbled. Felicia and her band walked out to the stage, watched on by Hildegarde, who was protected on either side by knights.

The group was welcomed onstage with applause. First were the brass section, followed by the string and woodwind sections. All of them walked to their seats and stood before them, facing the crowd. The conductor came out a little after, and after him the songstress made a graceful entrance, to which the applause of the crowd grew stronger.

The orchestra gave a polite, synchronized bow, then took their seats. The conductor looked over them all, nodded when everything was in place, and silently lifted his baton. The orchestra readied their instruments. The auditorium fell into silence. The air was thick with anticipation.

When the baton fell, the string instruments began with a few bars of a prelude, after which the songstress began to sing. Her sweet, gentle voice rang out clearly through the auditorium, and as it did, Shiori cast her illusion magic. A stir ran through the audience as the air wavered and colors began to take shape. But the stir lasted just for a moment, and then the voices of the audience were lost as they were pulled into memories of youth.

Shiori's scenic images of youthful reminiscence were designed to match Felicia's nursery rhyme, and the combination of the two burned into the listener's hearts feelings of sweet nostalgia. The parents they could now only

meet in memories of their past, the siblings who now lived at a distance, and the friends who now walked different paths. Their own pasts—collections of moments they could not return to—overlayed with Shiori's illusion magic, and so some shed tears, some laughed, and all let their hearts flow with the melody of the song as it was performed.

Alec was just another listener, affected in just the same way. He thought of his mother, back when she'd been healthy. He thought of playing in a little corner of the city with his friends until dark. They were days without worry, spent with his beloved mother and his close friends, and the trip back to those days sent a slight pain through his heart.

Shiori, too, is exploring memories of her own...

In contrast to the slight smile on her face, there was a wavering nostalgia in Shiori's eyes. Alec quietly draped an arm across her shoulder, careful not to disturb her concentration. Brought back to reality, she looked up at him with a strong smile. It sent him a message that Alec was sure he heard even though it was not spoken aloud—*I'm okay*.

The first song thus came to its end.

The audience sat in stunned silence, soaking in the reverberations of the song to such an extent that they forgot even to blink. Alec smiled as he caught sight of a familiar young boy telling the young Count Enqvist off for leaning over the railing of his second-floor seat. The performance was off to a very good start.

Behind the curtains, Shiori sat on an upholstered chair. Alec took her in his arms and passed her a magical energy recovery potion.

"Thanks," she said, drinking half of it and taking a breath.

The illusions that Shiori cast for the concert were far bigger in scale than what she did at the orphanage, and it sapped a great deal of her magical energy. On top of that, the stakes were also higher—this was a concert at which the wealthy and influential were also in attendance. Alec knew at a glance that Shiori was both more nervous and more focused than usual.

Alec stood in a position where Shiori's back was protected by his silhouette—blocking the view of the performers who were now waiting for the last song of

the evening. He felt something of a heat and a passion in their gazes, and it brought a frown to his face.

Shiori drew attention—in appearance she was completely different to the usual citizens of the kingdom. She had a gentle demeanor and there was something about her that was ethereal in a way that seemed to defy reality. On top of that, there was something charming about the mysterious smile she always wore—a unique Eastern trait. At the same time, Alec knew that the performers were drawn to her tonight not just for her physical appearance.

If one wanted to listen only to the music, then illusory accompaniment was little more than a nuisance. However, when one thought of it as entertainment, then there was perhaps nothing else even comparable to this kind of performance.

Once this concert is over, I have a feeling there are going to be a lot of nobles asking about her...

Alec was sure that Conny would not simply reveal Shiori's name to the public, but he felt it best to make sure things were handled thoroughly. He was of course overjoyed to see Shiori's talents recognized, but as her lover he had mixed feelings about all the attention it would draw.

On top of that, depending on Alec's future course of action, Shiori would be a subject of attention unlike anything she had ever known. If he were to return to the public eye, then the gazes that turned on him would most certainly harm Shiori. If, after many long years, the missing prince returned together with a woman of Eastern origin, it would cause a huge stir; of that there was no doubt. She would be picked out and made a subject of attack and criticism.

For Alec to be able to have his name removed from the royal register and live among the common populace as Alec Dia, there were many barriers that needed to be overcome. Zack himself had pushed Alec about the fact. He had told Alec that while his name was on the royal registry he was in a position of uncertainty—and the one who could be harmed by being together with him was Shiori.

I've made up my mind to live the rest of my life with Shiori. No matter what happens, I will see things through. And if any should look to harm her, I will see

Shiori protected. We will fight, and we will fight together.

Alec looked down at the woman he loved. It was she who had given him the strength to face that which he had for many years avoided.

But for a brief instant, as he looked upon her, he saw the pale rage of the girl he had once loved. A searing pain and regret ripped at his heart, and Alec put a hand to his chest and let out a low moan.

Perhaps noticing this, Rurii reached out with a feeler to rub at Alec's leg. Alec nodded at the kind gesture to indicate he was okay, and let out a short breath. Fortunately, it seemed that Shiori hadn't noticed a thing.

Me...and you*. Perhaps we were not as close as we needed to be.*

The woman he had once loved was not entirely to blame for how things had gone. They had not had nearly enough time in that last year to properly talk things through before Alec left. Even if it meant forcing the discussion to happen, they should have spoken. Had he truly loved her, he would have told her of his intentions before he had made his final decision.

She had told him that the four years they'd spent together were worth nothing, and that without his royal status he was nothing. Even now, Alec did not know if she had ever really loved him. He did not know if the love she had shared with him in those four years was the real thing. And it was for this reason that he felt disloyal and regretful, and at the same time a fierce rage and sorrow for the betrayal he felt. Even now, those feelings remained rooted in his heart.

One day I'm going to have to face these feelings too.

No matter how much pain and suffering waited for him on the path forward, Alec had made his decision—he would run away no longer.

His grip on Shiori's shoulder tightened, and after looking up at him with a smile for a moment, her face grew serious. It was time for the next song.

The second song was a tale of a love between two of different statuses—a noble young man and an ordinary young girl. This was followed by a song of a passionate and secret romance set in a forest, where a witch living on her own met a young knight, who fell in love with her. The two songs weaved stories of

love, and the images Shiori cast told of the intimate emotions of the young. It was clear in the awed cries of the crowd that they were utterly enchanted.

When he saw the young couple that Shiori cast with her illusion magic, Alec wondered if it was just his imagination that the young man happened to look not unlike himself. But perhaps he was simply being vain, he thought, and chuckled from behind his lover.

The next song was a lullaby from an opera. The aria was performed to a background of night, in which countless stars sparkled in a sky of navy blue fading into dark magenta. The crowd was thus lulled into a quiet world of healing.

Last on the set list was a hymn. It began with a gentle melody played by the string section, upon which the wind instruments were layered to create depth. The hymn told of the grand traditional scenery of Storydia—it was at times gentle, and at times powerful and resonant, and as it echoed through the auditorium, it left the audience's hearts aflutter.

At the end of the song, the affectionate smile of the beautiful goddess melted into the stained glass altar, leaving only the songstress's vibrato echoing through the auditorium and sinking into its arches.

The auditorium sat in stunned silence. But slowly, the silence began to fill with applause, until the whole auditorium was clapping and even cheering.

"Brava!"

"Bravi!"

The audience was on their feet now, praising the performance. Amidst all the excitement and enthusiasm, a smile appeared on Felicia's face like a flower blooming. The orchestra members rose to their feet, and together with the songstress and the conductor, dropped into a deep bow.

The applause continued to grow louder.

"The show is a success," said Shiori.

"Indeed," replied Alec.

There was a look of satisfaction on her face, and Alec, standing behind her,

wrapped her in a tight hug, while Rurii wobbled happily at their feet. Felicia looked up for a moment and glanced at the two adventurers. Then she motioned with a hand and invited another to the stage—her friend and fellow songstress, Hildegarde. For a moment Hildegarde looked uncertain, but one of the knights by her side smiled warmly at her and gave her a gentle push, urging her towards the songstress and the Alvestam Symphony Orchestra.

"Get out there," he said. "Your friends are waiting for you."

Hildegarde looked like she might burst into tears as she smiled, but she nodded firmly and stepped onto the stage and towards her friend. Soon after, the other performers at the concert took their designated positions onstage. The audience had by this point stopped clapping, and were now filled with curiosity as they whispered among one another, waiting with bated breath for what might be happening.

While they were getting ready, Alec passed Shiori another magical recovery potion and prepared her for the last part of her job. Felicia's suggestion had been a sudden one—that all the performers come together to perform the symphonic poem *Storydia*. There was no time for a rehearsal, and all they'd managed was a hurried meeting about it, so Shiori had been told that there was no need to add illusion magic. At the same time, some were of the opinion that having seen her "narrated pictures" this far, the audience would be expecting something for the grand finale.

This was why Shiori had not accepted the idea of sitting the last song out. The audience were enraptured by the concert, and here at the very end of a most wonderful experience, she did not want to leave any of them feeling even the slightest amount of disappointment. She'd had a chance to quickly review the lyrics of the poem, and it was more than enough for her to come up with an idea—the perfect illusion to match the words and song that spoke of the joy of national freedom.

When everyone was in their places, Felicia and Hildegarde faced the audience. The whisperings of the crowd faded, and then the conductor raised his baton and let it fall to mark the start of their song.

The Alvestam and Tris Symphony Orchestras began to play a profound,

moving melody. And at the end of the long and majestic opening, Felicia and Hildegarde—joined by the tenor singer, the southern songstress, the youth choir and the dancers—sang as one.

Storydia, o beautiful motherland of ours.

The warbler sings of a long winter passed,

Of coming peace, and vibrant fields.

The arid plains will bloom at last,

O beautiful motherland of ours.

It was an impromptu choir formed of distinguished performers, and behind them was a vision—a white bird swooping through the skies. The bird spread its wings and soared freely as the beautiful light of dawn began to shine upon it. It was a herald of Aurora, the goddess of morning and spring, and it said that the long, arduous winter was over. It was graceful in the sky, looking down as the snow melted and the spring flowers began to bud.

The audience were by now used to the illusion magic, but even still they cried out in awe and surprise. They were astounded and bedazzled by what played before their eyes—a chance to look down at the world from high, high above. It was a sight that was utterly impossible unless one had the powers of flight, but Shiori cast it with little trouble.

The rays of the morning light arrive,

A signal of the passing of the darkness of night.

From the depths of the gloom, a glimmer survives,

And through the rain of life that falls, we see the light.

It had been a battle for territorial reclamation, one that saw an end to more than a hundred years of Dolgast rule, and ended with freedom reclaimed. *Storydia* was sometimes called the nation's second anthem, and it was a song of

praise—it sung of love for one's homeland, the joy and freedom of release, and the celebration of victory.

The song was resonant as the singers—all of them representing their nation—strung its words together in song. A few in the audience did their best to clumsily sing along, and this feeling began to spread until the auditorium itself was filled with singers. Some sang with great joy, and some sang with tears streaming from their eyes. The young boys and girls sang bashfully, while the kids who did not yet know the lyrics instead broke out into dance. It was a song of joy, in which all took part.

Blooming sprouts and flowers fragrant,

The fields a bountiful golden yellow.

The arrival of winter brings a sleep of healing,

And the peaceful night is gentle, mellow.

The birds sing at dawn, and the morning is bright.

Live bountiful, prosper, and rejoice!

O Storydia, our frenvary, this motherland of ours.

In the lyrics of the symphonic poem was an ancient Storydian word—*frenvary*, which meant "kind lands." Alec was taken by the unbelievable sight Shiori was casting—a view from the heavens themselves—and gasped in surprise at the sound of his own middle name.

Ah, I see.

It had been a long time since Alec had heard the poem. Over the last eighteen years, Alec had not listened to music all that much, and had barely even hummed a tune, so the lyrics of the song had grown hazy over time. He had heard it a few times at musical performances, but being mostly disinterested, he had never properly listened to the words. Here and now, however, he was shocked to hear that his own name was hidden within it.

Alec's real name was Aleksey Frenvary Storydia. His middle name had come

from his mother, who was no longer of this world. He wondered then if his mother's choice of middle name had come from here—from this very song. There was no way for him to know anymore, but he felt now as though he were in touch with his mother's feelings, and it sent a fierce warmth through his chest.

"Rejoice, Storydia. Our frenvary, this motherland of ours."

This was a line that was repeated at the climax of the poem, and Alec hummed along with it. As Shiori cast her illusion magic upon the stage with everything she had, he saw the hint of a trembling in her back, and he wrapped her in his arms, singing.

"Rejoice, Storydia. Our frenvary, this motherland of ours. Our frenvary."

He felt a quaver at the edges of his words. He felt certain that the stinging he felt at the corners of his eyes was just his imagination. Shiori continued to cast her magic, but let a single, delicate hand rest upon one of Alec's.

Live bountiful, Storydia.

Prosper, Storydia.

Rejoice, Storydia.

Beautiful lands, our frenvary, this motherland of ours!

The auditorium shook with the melody of the wind and string instruments, and the bird projected behind the performers soared above a pristine sky. The abundant and magnificent Storydian landscape grew distant. The lands grew dim, until all that remained was the blue of the sky and the grandiose arc of the distant horizon, all of it enveloped in a blinding light.

The light and the music came to an end, and through it all a few feathers drifted, dissipating into the air until they disappeared completely.

The auditorium sank into a long silence, after which it erupted with cheers and applause.

“Whoa...”

Kristoffer let out a long breath as he watched over the ending number—a symphonic poem—from the second-level box seats. He could feel it tremble as the air left his body.

That magic—that illusion magic. A scene displayed through the use of a spell, as cast by the “celestial maiden.” A view of the world from high above; the kind of sight that no ordinary person could ever bear witness to.

“It was the view of the gods...!” he muttered.

Was it even possible? Was that woman truly...?

Kristoffer looked to the edge of the stage, where the royal prince was hidden, protecting the mage with her head of black hair. The two of them were dressed in formal white, and Kristoffer could not help thinking of the pair as a holy woman and her Cathedral knight protector.

“Is she truly...a celestial maiden...?”

The applause went on, and showed no signs of stopping.



As the auditorium filled with passionate cries of joy and admiration, and as his

wife clutched his arm, tears filling her eyes, Kristoffer could do nothing but watch the black-haired housekeeping mage, stunned and in awe.

6

The concert was a smashing success, and a standing banquet party was arranged at the guest house for all of the performers. While waiting in the dressing room with the other performers for a guide to take them to the party, Shiori found herself hidden behind a protective wall made up of Alec and Rurii. The gazes on Shiori—all of them filled with keen interest, expectation, and suspicion—felt overwhelming, and Alec wanted nothing more than to simply get her out of the concert hall. Shiori felt the same way. Now that her role in the concert was over, she did not feel inclined to stay much longer, especially not with all the pressure surrounding her.

The scenic view from the throne of the gods—a sight that only the servants of the gods themselves could ever know. Shiori could hear people talking about it in the whispers around her.

She'd slipped up and made a thoughtless mistake. In her home world, one could see that same view through any number of different mediums, and thus it was commonplace. But this was not so for the people of this world. Shiori had shared with them a sight that no ordinary person could ever possibly know, and it was no wonder that people were suspicious. Some even tried to approach her to ask about it, but ultimately shrunk back under the pressure of Alec in his formal Cathedral knight attire, electing to keep their distance instead.

Felicia and her orchestra were more thankful than they were anything else, but Shiori was certain that they all had thoughts of their own on what had happened—their confused expressions made this much clear. The gazes of Felicia, Hildegarde, and Helge, however, were filled with kind sympathy.

At that point, two Cathedral knights cut their way through the crowd. One of them was Johann, who had helped them the previous evening.

"Wonderful work," he said. "The two of you have..."

Johann paused for a moment, his eyes locked on Alec. It seemed he was overwhelmed by the sheer presence of the man in formal Cathedral attire. On him, the outfit did not look borrowed.

“My apologies,” he went on, coming back to his senses. “Please follow me. His Excellency the margrave and the archbishop await.”

Johann made a point of speaking the names of those two high-ranking individuals. His tone was also very polite and respectful. This was likely a farce—a way of propping Shiori and Alec up as people of import so that those around them would keep their distance.

The second Cathedral knight approached Felicia and whispered something in her ear. Johann glanced at her while leading the two adventurers and their slime out of the dressing room. Outside, he told them that he’d been instructed to do all of this by the archbishop and Conny.

“We’ve arranged a little time for Felicia and Hildegarde to speak with you later. For now, however, let’s get away from the auditorium. We’ve prepared a room for you.”

Johann led them to an elegant-looking building deep in the Cathedral grounds.

“This is the archbishop’s residence. The archbishop and the Cathedral’s senior members have their offices and private rooms here. Only those with express permission are allowed entry.”

The residence was the best place to go to avoid prying eyes. Johan and his fellow knight opened the door to an empty room and pointed to the table inside.

“We’ve readied your change of clothes and some tea,” said Johann. “Please relax here and wait for Reverend Conny’s arrival. He’ll be here as soon as he can make some time.”

“Thank you so much for your consideration,” said Shiori.

She watched Johann and his fellow knight hurry gracefully out, then let out a long sigh.

“You must be tired,” said Alec. “You put on a great show.”

“Thanks. I really *am* tired. But the two of you put in a hard day’s work too.”

Shiori changed out of her formal wear with some difficulty, and Alec got

changed as well. He passed her a cup of tea which she sipped from gratefully. The restorative herb tea had been kept warm on a warming device, and the sweetness of it soaked into her body. She took a few more sips, then glanced at her lover. As always, his eyes were filled with a strong, sharp light.

I feel like...perhaps he was crying earlier.

It had happened near the end of the grand finale. He'd wrapped her in his arms so tight that she'd been unable to see his face at the time. She'd heard something like a trembling in his voice that at times sounded not unlike sobbing. Then there were the tears that she'd felt. His singing hadn't sounded like that of someone who was simply in awe at the grandiosity of the performance—there was something else woven into it. Perhaps something about the symphonic poem had tugged at Alec's heart strings. When the song was over and the cheers and applause rang out through the air, Shiori had tried to turn and face Alec, only for him to strengthen his grip to keep her from looking at him.

Whatever the case, Shiori got the feeling it was a topic Alec would not open up about, and so she said nothing.

"Hm? Something wrong?" asked Alec, who felt Shiori's eyes on him.

"No. I was just looking at you, wondering if you were tired."

"I'm not that tired," he replied, "though admittedly yesterday was a lot to deal with."

Alec chuckled, then brushed a stray hair from the nape of her neck with a finger. They spent some time after that in silence, where the only sound was that of the occasional tea cup against a saucer. Rurii, too, remained silent, mostly occupied with absorbing a treat—Saint's Cake, apparently.

After some time, they heard footsteps from the hall outside, which stopped before their door. Someone then knocked lightly.

"Come in," said Shiori.

It was Conny, who was looking a little worn out himself.

"I'm sorry I'm so late," he said.

“Not all, I’m sure you’re very busy,” replied Shiori.

As an organizer for the events on the day of the Nativity Festival, there was no doubt the man was rushed off his own feet. However, it seemed he’d managed to find a sliver of time to drop in on them, and he apologized again as he fixed his glasses and chuckled.

“I truly cannot thank you enough,” he said. “Thanks to you, the concert was a huge success. To see everyone come together like that, the sense of unity in song, along with your illusion magic—well, it was the very definition of the term ‘awe-inspiring.’ Why, I’m sure even the deities and the holy woman herself had a good time. I’m beyond grateful to everyone for putting in their very best, and for the two of you. And don’t think I forgot you, Rurii.”

“I’m just happy we could be of use,” said Shiori.

Receiving such high praise from their client filled Shiori with a sense of achievement. Rurii, too, wobbled proudly, and Conny laughed at the sight of it before continuing.

“I am most glad that I requested the two of you. You solved the incident yesterday, and as for the concert...it’s had quite the impact.” Conny let a hint of a charmed smile cross his freckled face before going on. “Your illusion magic, it truly was amazing. Everyone in attendance was wowed by it. The scenery you presented in the symphonic poem left even the archbishop with a deep sense of awe. It goes without saying, but the margrave too was very impressed. He’s quite certain that many will be clamoring to get in touch with you, and they might be quite forceful about it.”

The margrave—Kristoffer Osbring, with whom Alec was acquainted—had told Conny himself that he did not want to see Shiori’s peace and safety disturbed as a result of the concert. There was a stern look on Conny’s face now as he continued.

“There were a great many people who were fascinated by your illusion magic, and we’ve already received several questions about who was responsible. At this rate, we can expect many, many more. Though illusion magic itself is quite the feat, the scenery you projected was that which no ordinary person could ever know. Some have even whispered that it’s the second coming of the saint

herself.”

“I’d like to ask that you *don’t* reveal Shiori’s current whereabouts and address,” said Alec. “And that includes to the other concert performers.”

“That is my request, also,” said Shiori. “I am glad to have been of assistance, but I had no idea it would garner such attention.”

Though her identity had been partially revealed when she’d introduced herself, Shiori wanted her private information kept as confidential as possible. She was glad for the work-related inquiries, but she did not want to be the center of attention, especially if it got in the way of her job.

“Please rest assured that we have no intention of sharing the contact details of *any* of the concert performers. That said, we’ll need to issue an appropriate warning, and put a lid on all of this.”

Conny pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and let a familiar troubled smile drift onto his lips.

“However, a select number of people already know that you’re an Eastern woman, which means there are any number of ways for them to find you, should they be so inclined. We have to assume that some of those who intend to approach you might be of a stature that makes them hard to refuse. This was something that the margrave himself was particularly concerned about. So, should you find yourself in such a difficult position, the margrave has asked that you bring his name up. He has suggested that we spread the word that your request for the concert came directly from him. The archbishop is in agreement.”

“Oh... Oh my...” uttered Shiori.

She had taken the request as a mere supporting cast member, but it had suddenly grown into something much, much bigger. Shiori hesitated at the idea of such important people having to get involved and being so considerate of her. Alec put a reassuring hand to her shoulder.

“It might feel a bit much for you, but we’d best accept their kindness. I’ll send a message of thanks to His Excellency myself too.”

This helped to allay Shiori’s nerves somewhat.

“Hm... Okay. Thank you very much, Conny. And you too, Alec.”

Shiori let out a sigh and when she met Conny’s gaze, he turned to the window. From between the clouds a pale blue sky peeked out, along with gentle sunlight.

“Seeing the world from the heavens,” Conny muttered, his voice filled with awe, “was a truly beautiful sight...”

Then the reverend let out a gasp, as if he’d woken from a dream.

“My apologies,” he continued. “Changing the subject for a moment... The Cathedral has its traveling reverends and nuns visiting orphanages and medical facilities, and we’ve heard talk of some utilizing illusion magic to aid their storytelling. Nothing particularly complicated, mind you—most of it is in the vein of shorter picture books and the like.”

Conny sipped at his cup of tea and grinned, then went on.

“We’ve had some suggestions that it would be most wonderful to introduce ‘narrated pictures’ into these visits. I apologize for bringing this up after everything we just discussed, but we’d like to call upon you in the future in a teaching capacity. Would you mind?” He chuckled and added, “Not that we expect any of them to reach your great heights after just a few lessons.”

“Of course, that would be fine,” replied Shiori.

“Thank you so much,” said Conny with a joyous smile.

They’d had a short but fruitful discussion, and Alec saw this as a good time to jump in.

“I do apologize,” he said, “but we’d like to be taking our leave soon, if possible.”

A lonely expression flashed across Conny’s features, but an instant later it was replaced by his usual gentle smile.

“Yes, we certainly did ask a lot of the two of you, and we mustn’t keep you any longer. I should be getting back as well, but I insist that you at least allow me to see you off. We have a carriage waiting, and it will take you home.”

“Many thanks,” said Alec.

“We appreciate your kindness,” said Shiori.

“Think nothing of it. This is the very least we could do. We’re beyond grateful to the both of you.”

The two adventurers and their slime left the archbishop’s residence and followed Conny along a corridor that looked out at the winter scenery. They passed a few white-clad clergymen and nodded politely, and as they neared the end of the hall, Shiori stopped in place when she spotted who was waiting there—Felicia and Hildegarde, and standing behind them like bodyguards, Helge and Johann. True to his word, Johann had brought them to say goodbye.

Shiori smiled at the sight of the two songstresses, standing side by side. Their bond had been twisted and almost broken entirely, but now they were together again. The two young women were finally where they should have been, *as* they should have been. It made Shiori happy to see it.

“Thank you two so much,” said Felicia. “That I could sing t’me heart’s content was all because of you two.”

“And Fels and I reclaimed our friendship,” added Hildegarde. “It is unfortunate that it meant breaking relations with two others we thought were friends, but in exchange, we took back a bond that I’d thought lost.”

“It really should have been *us* that settled all of what happened, but you led us to solving the case, and because of that, we could put everything into our performance,” said Helge. “We won’t forget this.”

It was clear that all three of them were curious about Shiori’s illusion magic, but they avoided talking about it, and stuck solely to words of thanks.

“What will all of you do now?” asked Alec.

“Us? I want to take it easy b’fore we leave,” said Felicia. “The rest of the opera are going out t’enjoy the festival, but, well, after all that’s happened...”

Though Felicia didn’t say it aloud, there was a certain prudence and caution to her words. Though she was a victim in all of what had happened, she had come here with the people who had almost ruined the concert entirely. As someone whose own friend had been revealed as the criminal behind it, Felicia’s self-restraint demonstrated her sincerity. On top of all that, now that the concert

was over, the knights' more in-depth investigation was waiting.

Felicia sighed for a moment, but instead of sinking into gloom she dispelled it with a smile and grasped Shiori's hands.

"Thank you so, so much. And I'm sorry...for Karina."

Shiori smiled and shook her head. Felicia looked conflicted as she hovered between smiling and crying, and Helge put a gentle, if slightly hesitant, hand to her shoulder.

"And thank you too, Rurii," said Hildegarde. "Can I come see you again sometime?"

After a great big hug, the slime waved a feeler and jumped up and down on the spot to say goodbye.

It was finally time to part ways. Though they had only spent two days together, those days had been busy and action-packed. Shiori, Alec, and Rurii were seen off by the friends they'd made in that short time—the two songstresses, the flutist, and the Cathedral knight.

"There they go," muttered Felicia with a hint of a smile, as the two adventurers and their slime finally disappeared from view.

They had spent only two days together, and yet Felicia felt something for them. This emotion, paired with the strong sense of achievement within her was, she thought, friendship. And so, their parting was all too sudden for her. Would they ever meet again? It would be no simple thing—not when they worked in different locations, so far from each other, and could not gather without significant effort.

But the prickling at Felicia's heart was not merely from the loneliness that she felt at this goodbye.

"Felicia, you actually like him a little, don't you?"

At Helge's question, Felicia's shoulders shook awkwardly.

"Shut yer trap," she said, a smile rising to her features.

Hildegarde and Johann both responded with shock.

“You know, he didn’t even flinch when I put me charms on ’im,” said Felicia. “Then he goes and tells me the best version o’me’s the *real* version. Pretty much like askin’ me to fall fer him.”

Helge, for his part, was not entirely sure how to react to this.

“Don’t you worry yer little head,” said Felicia. “Ain’t no gettin’ between him and the mage. Not a chance. And I don’t intend to, neither. I just... I guess I’m just a wee bit jealous.”

Felicia’s pretty face, and the smile on it, painted a picture of her pain and envy. She could sense the bonds between Alec and Shiori—they cared for one another, and supported one another. Felicia wanted to feel that *for* someone, and to feel it *from* someone too. She wanted someone to see her not as the songstress, but just as the girl she was—as Felicia.

Helge listened in silence, then straightened up and faced the young woman. He took her hand in his own, and placed a gentle kiss on her fingers.

“In which case,” he said, “won’t you choose me?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve fallen for you all over again, Felicia.”

“I’m sick o’jokes, in case you can’t tell,” said Felicia.

But the serious look on Helge’s face brought her suddenly to silence.

“I love a strong woman,” said Helge. “A woman of fierce determination and willpower. When I heard the way you spoke to Karina, in the heat of that moment, I fell for you. I fell for you all over again.”

He told her that he had always seen a certain strength in Felicia’s grace, but he had never imagined her to be quite as strong as she was.

“I know you’ve dumped me once already,” said Helge with a chuckle. “But this time, I’m sure of it—I can talk you around.”

Felicia’s eyes almost popped out of her head, but in time she began to chuckle.

“Well then,” she said with a daring grin. “Give it all you’ve got, playboy.”

Helge thrust out his hand with a grin of his own, and Felicia took it. The smiles on their faces seemed less like a romantic gesture, and more like a bet the two were agreeing to. The two of them walked off happily, and following close behind were Hildegarde and the Cathedral knight entrusted with their protection, Johann.

They, too, wore bright smiles.

7

Shiori had her hat pulled down to hide her eyes and her hair, trying to avoid any prying looks as they walked. Finally, they arrived at a familiar back gate, and in the evening darkness she saw the unmarked carriage they had arrived in just a day earlier.

“Thank you ever so much,” said Shiori.

“Think nothing of it.”

Conny put out his pale hand, and the two adventurers shared a firm handshake with the unshakable young reverend before hopping in the carriage.

“Have yourselves a joyous holy night,” said Conny, just as the carriage doors were about to be closed.

It was a farewell befitting the young man’s position. Rurii waved a feeler, and the two adventurers smiled.

“And a joyous holy night to you too.”

Conny smiled and waved at the slime, then nodded at the driver, who closed the doors before getting the carriage moving slowly.

The carriage traveled through streets filled with people, with the city illuminated by the colorful lights that celebrated the Nativity Festival. Everyone looked in high spirits—the city was the very portrait of peace.

After a time, the carriage finally came to a stop in front of the Adventurers’ Guild. Shiori took Alec’s hand and alighted, and Rurii bounced out of the carriage behind them. She watched the carriage as it left, then heaved a great sigh. When she realized that her lover was watching her, she hurriedly put a

hand to her mouth.

“Oh! I’m sorry...” she said.

“Don’t even sweat it,” said Alec. “That was a *very* busy couple of days for you.”

He gave her a pat on the back, and admitted that he, too, was feeling worn out. Work hours were over already, but the lights were still on inside the guild, and a few of their fellow adventurers were inside too.

“It really is a busy time of year,” remarked Shiori. “They still haven’t gone home.”

“Yep. And it’ll be busy for a little while yet,” added Alec.

During the Nativity Festival, there were always a lot of requests for guides and for protection on the way to nearby villages. The guild was open until late, but business hours were over, and those who were still there had either just finished up for the day, or were otherwise waiting for friends for a night out on the town.

Upon Shiori, Alec, and Rurii’s arrival, a few people waved hello before returning to their conversations. It seemed that it was the seasonal crew—and mainly Olof—who were at the heart of it.

“Gotta tell you though—it was *amazing*.”

“Sure was. I’ve never been too interested in songs and music, but even *I* was moved to tears.”

“I was doing a guide request and pretty much got dragged into the concert. Felicia’s every bit as good as they say, but that illusion magic was mind-blowing. Made me feel like I was a god myself.”

Shiori seemed to shrink at the realization that the seasonal crew was talking about her illusion magic. However, because she’d only really started making use of the magic over the course of this last year, there weren’t many people at the guild who actually knew she could. Olof and the seasonal crew clearly didn’t.

Zack half-listened to the conversation and shot Shiori a knowing glance. He dropped into thought for a time, then ruffled his red hair and chuckled. It

seemed clear that he was being a worrywart of a big brother again, and suspected that she'd pushed herself into putting on a big magical performance. Being that he was essentially right, Shiori shot him a vague smile in reply as she and Alec walked to the counter.

"Welcome back," said Zack. "Sounds like you've been up to something."

"'Up to something'...? You make it sound like we were up to no good," said Shiori.

"Well, can't deny that your efforts *did* raise a lot of eyebrows," said Alec.

Zack looked suddenly inquisitive.

"Huh? I thought you were working *behind* the scenes?"

There was a question in Zack's eyes. He was wondering if perhaps Shiori—who already stood out for her Eastern appearance—had been dragged into a situation where she would stand out even more. At the same time, he was also being considerate of Alec, who was careful not to give away too much here in public.

"It *was* behind-the-scenes work," replied Alec. "Protection and performance support, so we were both hidden at the edge of the stage. That said..."

The request had a lot of facets to it—not to mention the details of an incident that still couldn't be made public—and the guild's counter wasn't the place to discuss it. Alec let Zack know this with a glance, and Zack nodded, then motioned to the guild master's office with his jaw. The office wasn't a place they went to often, but the two adventurers and their slime headed inside to give Zack their report while he had someone stand in for him at the counter.

"I see," said Zack, after getting the whole story. "Who would've thought you'd get pulled into an incident like that?"

He rubbed at his brow and sighed. He'd been about to jump from his chair when he first heard about using Shiori as bait for a trap, but came around once he was assured by Shiori that Alec and the knights kept defenses airtight and made sure no harm would come to her.

"It really was our best option," said Shiori, "and because there were so many

to protect me, I went for it. I'd never stick my neck out like that if I didn't have the right fail-safes in place, so please don't worry, brother."

As overprotective and grumbly as Zack was, he could accept his little sister's line of reasoning. More than anything else, he never wanted to see her put in danger, and Shiori got the sense that he wanted to be able to protect her with his own hands—likely because he still carried a certain guilt at not protecting her during the Akatsuki incident.

Four years ago, when they'd first met, Zack was often on guard, but he'd grown more relaxed after a year, and was now an older brother to her. He had helped her tremendously when she'd felt entirely alone in this other world, and Shiori was more than grateful—she didn't begrudge him in the slightest. Nonetheless, after the Akatsuki incident, Zack's protective nature had grown to the point that it was almost excessive.

All the same...

Shiori clenched her fists on her knees.

"Um, brother?" she started, choosing the words for her feelings carefully. "I know I've been through some hard times, and on multiple occasions it's honestly felt like too much. But now, I'm quite...no, not 'quite,' I'm *very* happy. I have people like you to watch over me, I have lots of friends, and...I have someone to share my feelings with."

Zack took this in while Alec put a gentle hand to Shiori's back. Rurii, who had been happily munching away at the snacks Zack had put out for it, poked her softly in the leg.

"Four years ago, I had nothing," Shiori said. "But now I have so much, and it's so important to me. I lost enough to make my heart feel empty, but it's full enough now that I can take another look at myself. I think with a little more time, I can call myself whole again. But that's only possible because I have trustworthy people by my side to protect me. So..."

Don't worry anymore.

Zack's eyes went wide, but after a moment of silence he smiled and nodded.

"I hear you," he said. "And I'm sorry. I should put more trust in you."

“No, there was so much I did to worry everyone. I should apologize too.”

“That wasn’t all your fault,” said Zack. “So don’t even worry about it anymore. If you feel like you can be yourself, then...well, as your brother, I’m happy for you.”

As your brother.

Zack seemed to stress that part of the sentence, and for a brief moment Shiori felt as if his sky-blue eyes wavered. They were the color of a clear sky, and though they trembled for an instant, soon after they filled with the warmth of his smile. He stood up, gave them both pats on the shoulder, and filled their cups of tea.

“Gotta say, though,” he said, changing the subject, “poisoning your own companions in the name of jealousy? Sure are some terrifying women out there.”

Zack sipped at his steaming cup of tea and let out a short breath. The jealousy that the perpetrator had felt was complicated, and it had been taken advantage of in the attempt to commit a crime. Though Karina herself had not been the mastermind behind it all, her role had been large—and her punishment would surely reflect this.

I do hope she is released soon, though...

Shiori found herself wanting to believe that Karina was not rotten to the core—she wanted to believe in the tears the woman had wept, and the apology she had spoken before she’d left. Though there would be many who could not forgive her so easily for how many she’d drawn into her plot, there would still be those waiting for her return. And if she could repent for her crimes, then one day she would surely see them again.

“And as for the...problematic illusion magic...you’ve been hearing about,” said Alec, moving on.

“You mean the narrated pictures, yeah?” asked Zack.

“Yes. It created much more of a stir than I ever expected,” said Shiori awkwardly. “It seems that it captured the minds of many.”

“Well, I’ve seen your magic for myself a number of times,” replied Zack. “I’ve got to say, it’s quite the spectacle. But was it really so big a spectacle that *Kri*...ahem, that the margrave and the archbishop had to get involved?”

“The word ‘amazing’ really doesn’t cover it. Shiori’s last illusion, during the encore? It made a huge commotion,” said Alec, pausing for a moment. “It was the world, as seen from the view of the gods—like looking down at the world from above the clouds.”

“From above the clouds...the view of the gods?!”

Zack couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t find the words to express himself, and eventually settled into silent thought, a hand on his jaw. Shiori felt lost seeing Zack like that, and with her own lover’s eyes on her. Rurii gave her a few reassuring pats.

I didn’t even think about it at the time...

It was true, however, that it was impossible here to see such scenery—that of the world from the skies above—without the power of flight. At present, there was no such thing as magical flight, and no known method for riding flying magical beasts. The closest was levitation by way of wind magic. Though it appeared there was research being done into flying technology, it had not yet left the realm of hobbyists. In a world with this level of technology, what would happen if she were to show them an image of the stratosphere?

“Apparently, the nobility have already started asking about her. The archbishop, too, was thoroughly moved. Having to deal with them all will be a real headache, so the plan is to say that she’s an expert who appeared by direct order from the margrave himself, and is otherwise off-limits.”

Zack let out a little groan as Alec went on.

“I’m going to send a message of thanks myself too. I haven’t seen him in quite a long time. I won’t be able to do it soon, but I’d like to see him again when the time is right.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Shiori. “This all got out of hand, and it’s all my fault. I do intend to explain everything at some point, but I’m still, well...I’m not quite...”

She still wasn't yet ready to reveal her true background, and her true past. She did not know where she would stand once she revealed she was from another world, and it scared her. Alec smiled, and a moment later, so too did Zack.

"Don't you worry," said Zack. "You put your utmost into completing a request from a client, and you should be proud of yourself. Try to rest easy. Anything that comes up as a result of that—annoying or otherwise—is the responsibility of the guild master."

"Thank you."

Shiori's two protectors chuckled, then grew serious.

"But I bet there are already people sniffing around to find out more about her," said Alec. "And news of the incident will spread soon enough. We can't rule out that people will try to make contact via that angle. Try not to go out walking by yourself for the immediate future."

"Make sure you're taking jobs with Alec too," added Zack. "Though I guess that goes without saying. You keep your eyes peeled too, Rurii."

The slime replied with a robust wobble that did the talking for it—*Leave it to me!* It was nothing if not a most trustworthy companion.

"I'll be careful, I promise," said Shiori with a dutiful nod.

Zack's face lit up a moment later, and he was back to his cheerful self.

"In that case, is that the whole report?" he asked.

"Yep."

"Great. Here's part of your reward. I know I said it before, but great work."

The remainder of the request fee would be paid and delivered in the following days. They would most likely also receive an update regarding the whole Alvestam Hall incident at that time too, but for now, the request was done and dusted. Shiori and Alec took their payment, bid Zack a good night, then slipped past their fellow adventurers—who were still talking about the concert—and out the guild doors.

"We're finally done," remarked Shiori.

“Yes, indeed.”

Alec put a hand to Shiori’s shoulder and pulled her in close, as if he were already on guard. Being so affectionate like this out in public made Shiori a little nervous, but she let it go and they walked on. As it turned out, the streets were filled with couples walking side by side, and nobody paid her nor Alec any mind.

And so...she decided to indulge in the moment just a little more.

Shiori rubbed her cheek against Alec’s chest, and for a moment he was startled—this was not a common gesture for her. But he soon relaxed into an easy smile and planted a kiss in her hair, near the edge of her hat. Their eyes met and they shared a smile, then the two of them noticed Rurii wandering through the food stalls and laughed.

“What should we do for dinner?” asked Alec. “We could eat somewhere and go home, or...perhaps we should avoid eating out for the immediate future...”

“Yes, and I’m getting a little worn out from the crowds. I’d prefer to eat at home.”

As they walked through the stall-lined streets, Shiori bought deer meat pie, pickled Tris salmon, snow strawberry liqueur, skewered beef and horned hare for Rurii, and last but not least, two small wooden cups of mulled wine. Alec chuckled as he saw Shiori’s quizzical glance at the price of the wine—much higher than she’d expected—and paid for her.

“You can take the cup home with you,” he said. “It’s a commemorative souvenir, and the price reflects that.”

“Oh, that explains it. I thought it was just a good old festival price hike.”

The wooden cup had the symbol of the saint carved into it—an adorable ivy leaf, bird, and crescent moon. It was the kind of design Shiori thought her mother would have loved.

“The designs are different every year,” said Alec. “You can find metal and ceramic cups in the First and Second Districts, and sometimes they’re even crafted from mythril and magic stone. They cost quite the pretty penny, and every year some people set their hearts on collecting every type.”

“Wow... Those people must have houses filled with cups.”

The two chatted easily all the way to Shiori’s apartment building. There was no sign of anybody at the entrance, and a bell had been placed on the counter, which likely meant that the building’s caretaker, Lache, had already turned in for the evening. They walked the stairs to Shiori’s room, and she unlocked the door. Alec followed her inside like it was the most natural thing in the world, and Shiori giggled quietly to herself—it filled her with joy to think that walking around and returning home together was just part of their everyday life now.

“Being that you’re here, would you like me to run a bath?” Shiori asked.

Alec’s boarding house had a communal bath, and using it meant first asking the landlady. Alec sometimes couldn’t be bothered, and so he’d use Shiori’s bath on those occasions. She’d make him dinner, then they’d lounge and nap on the sofa, and sometimes he would stay the night.

“If you’re going to take a bath, stay the night,” she offered. “You must be exhausted.”

Alec thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. In the beginning he’d been more hesitant, but a lot of that had dissipated as of late. This brought Shiori joy—they were growing closer, little by little.

Oh, but...I wonder if I’m coming off as too inviting...?

Now that their hearts were intertwining, their relationship was sure to progress to new, and more physical, levels. Shiori wasn’t against the idea, but a part of her wasn’t quite ready either. She still felt some hesitation when it came to revealing the scars on her arms and legs. She knew that Alec was considerate of her feelings in this area and wouldn’t rush her, and she let herself take advantage of his kindness.

That said, Shiori could also be the one to go on the offensive once she’d sorted out her feelings, but this idea made her blush so much that she had to hide behind the paper bags they carried.

“Are you okay?” Alec asked. “You look tired.”

“Oh, erm. Well, I am, but I’m more embarrassed. Actually, um, forget I said anything.”

Faced with a reply he didn't quite understand, Alec could only tilt his head.

"Okay...?" he said.

Rurii then poked at the bags they were carrying. The message was obvious—*I'm hungry, so could you get a move on?*

"You were stuffing yourself full of treats, both at the guild *and* the Cathedral. And you're telling me you can *still* eat?" asked an astonished Alec.

The slime was unimpressed with the question, and wobbled a response—*Snacks and meals are completely different things!*

Alec and Shiori burst into laughter. Their laughter and smiles filled the room as they readied the table and enjoyed the food they'd bought from the food stalls outside. Shiori hadn't ever imagined that spending the holy night in the company of those you cared for could be such a joyous and precious thing.

She watched Alec and Rurii as they split the pie between them, and sipped at her mulled wine, still in its brand new cup.

By the time they finished eating and took their baths, it was late into the evening. Ever a lover of baths, the practically steaming Rurii took to doing an easy stretching routine before falling into an early slumber. As for Shiori, perhaps the bath had woken her up—she still didn't feel the least bit sleepy.

I'm so happy...

She and Alec sipped at a light wine, chatted, and kissed in between. It was the very thing she had thought she'd never experience again upon coming to a completely unknown world—a time of warmth and peace.

If Alec and I end up together...this will be our everyday life.

Together. A family.

In the corner of Shiori's mind, a scene flashed by. In it, warm light flooded into a garden where she and her brother played while her parents watched over the two of them. Then, she found the image of her parents replaced with herself and Alec.

"Shiori," said Alec, his voice low and gentle.

Shiori snapped back to reality as he went on.

“You looked so happy just now. What were you thinking?”

“Oh. Erm...”

Shiori blushed, having just been caught in the blissful world of her imagination, and wasn’t sure how to respond.

“I was remembering my family,” she said eventually. “I was thinking of playing with my brother as our parents watched us...”

It was a happy memory. One of family.

“Family, huh...?”

Alec’s eyes creased as he smiled at her, then he looked out at the window. From between the curtains they could hear the dim sounds of revelry, and see the colorful lights of the festival outside—signs of people enjoying the Nativity Festival.

“That song at the end of the concert—*Storydia*,” said Alec suddenly, as if remembering something.

“Hm?”

“My name is hidden within it,” he said, taking a sip of his wine, and choosing his words carefully. “I have a middle name, one I only used when I lived with my mother. When I left home to start out on my own, my father told me that my mother gave it to me.”

“Your mother?”

“It’s an old tradition of sorts. The father chooses the newborn’s first name, and the mother their middle name.”

Alec swirled his glass, and the sweet, gentle scent of his scarlet wine drifted into the air.

“I told you earlier, but I never had much interest in music appreciation, and to be honest, I’d never properly listened to that symphonic poem—our nation’s second anthem. Today was the first time, and when I heard my name in it, I thought that perhaps...perhaps my mother chose my name from the lyrics of

that song.”

“Oh...”

So that’s why, thought Shiori to herself, thinking back. Near the end of the encore, Alec had started humming, perhaps because he’d realized the meaning of his middle name, and could not control the emotions that welled within himself. Even now that the song was well over, Shiori could still remember how strongly he’d held her, and the steamy breaths that she’d felt upon her neck.

Alec’s smile now was one tinged with a hint of sorrow, as he thought back to nostalgic times with a mother who was now gone.

“Will you tell me your middle name?” Shiori asked.

“Sure,” said Alec with a chuckle. “That’s why I was telling you this story to begin with. It’s Frenvary. In the ancient language, it means ‘kind lands.’”

Frenvary. Kind lands. It was a phrase that repeated multiple times in the poem, which prayed for bountiful harvests and prosperity while celebrating the freedom and new life of the nation.

Be kind and strong like this motherland of ours. May you live a bountiful life.

Shiori felt in the name the hopes and wishes of a mother, bestowing upon her beloved child his first-ever gift. She rubbed her cheek into Alec’s chest, and found herself wrapped in his strong embrace.

“It’s a wonderful name,” she said.

“It is.”

“Kind, strong, warm... It’s perfect for you.”

“You think so? Thank you.”

He squeezed her tight, then silently let her go, lifting her jaw with a finger. His handsome face grew closer, and then his lips touched her own. This was not like the playful kisses they had shared until now; this was much stronger and deeper. Their tongues entwined, mixing with the sweet scent of the wine they’d been drinking. The kiss went straight to Shiori’s core, taking her breath away, and when Alec pulled away, Shiori let out a sigh—she felt drunk with him.



“Shiori,” said Alec, his voice a whisper in her ear as he embraced her. “Will

you sing it for me? Will you sing *Storydia*?”

“Erm...me?”

“I want to hear it in your voice. I want you to call for me.”

“Okay...but I don’t actually know the words properly.”

The melody had been burned into her mind, but the lyrics were still unclear to her. Nonetheless, Alec was persistent.

“I’ll teach you,” he said. “I remember the last refrain. That’s all you have to sing for me.”

Shiori could do nothing but nod—she felt trapped in the passion of his dark magenta eyes.

“Blooming sprouts and flowers fragrant, the fields a bountiful golden yellow.”

He sang the words, and then she hummed along.

Blooming sprouts and flowers fragrant,

The fields a bountiful golden yellow.

The arrival of winter brings a sleep of healing,

And the peaceful night is gentle, mellow.

The birds sing at dawn, and the morning is bright.

Live bountiful, prosper, and rejoice!

O Storydia, our frenvary, this motherland of ours.

“O Storydia, our frenvary, this motherland of ours.”

Shiori held his name close to her heart as she spoke the name of her strong and kind lover.

“Rejoice, Storydia. This motherland of ours, our frenvary.”

It was a melody that was easy to remember, and in time she could sing it on her own, without Alec’s support to lead her.

“Our motherland. Our frenvary, frenvary.”

Shiori sang. In her gentle singing voice she called her lover’s name. It was a song like a gentle lullaby, and in time Alec began to doze. Shiori let herself fall into his body as they lay on the sofa. She ran her hand softly through his chestnut brown hair, and continued to sing until she heard from his breathing that he was asleep.

Shiori. 詩織.

Suddenly Shiori saw the characters that made up her name in her mother tongue, and heard her name the way that others spoke it—her friends, her father, her mother, and her brother. “Shiori” was written with the characters for “verse” (詩) and “weaver” (織). The name showed that her parents didn’t need her to be anyone particularly remarkable or exceptional—they just hoped that she would have a heart that was full and free, like the gentle warmth of a finely written poem.

I don’t know if I have lived up to the meaning hidden in my own name.

Still, Shiori smiled as she sang.

But I want to weave warm and gentle memories together with you, Alec.

Perhaps Alec heard the feelings in her heart—the hint of a smile crossed his sleeping face, and he uttered two words.

“My songstress.”

Interlude 1: The Thoughts of Holy Men

1

On the morning two days after the Nativity Festival, gray clouds teased snow as they hung in the sky, and peace and quiet was finally returning to Tris. The festival decorations had been taken down, and many of the outdoor stalls had disappeared. Most of the tourists and travelers had gone home, and most of those walking the streets were ordinary citizens. Things were set to remain quiet in Tris until the Cathedral's new year event.

"It's so quiet," said Shiori. "I guess we'll see a decrease in requests for guides and protection now?"

"I'd love to see a decrease in suppression requests too, but..." Alec glanced at the knights on patrol in the city before going on. "That seems unlikely."

The knights walked with a purposeful gait, and though at a glance nothing seemed out of the ordinary, they could not completely hide the exhaustion in their faces. At this time of year the knights had special patrols, but they were also extremely busy handling drunken quarrels and thieves targeting tourists. One of the knights, a woman Shiori knew, passed by and gave a salute and a wry smile. Shiori and Rurii waved back.

"The knights are so busy this time of year," said Shiori with a sigh. "And even more of them are off to help handle the refugee situation, right?"

It wasn't something that anyone spoke about too loudly, but a percentage of knights from across the entire nation had been dispatched for that very purpose, which left things feeling a little less safe and secure than usual. Shiori had also seen newspaper articles about problems stemming from the revolt in the empire, and many warned their readers to be careful.

A number of refugees had already entered the kingdom. While most of them were simply looking for work, many had fallen into begging or banditry. There was also talk of suspicious trafficking groups that had their sights set on women and children. A great many citizens had voiced their worry about Storydia's

safety. The Adventurers' Guild had also been told to contact the knights if they encountered refugees or anyone suspicious.

"It will be hard to crack down on all of it," said Alec. "Some people rely on the Imperials who have made a home of this place. All we can do is hope that the country and its knights do a good job."

Alec told her that there was only so much they could do as adventurers, but Shiori noticed a sorrow in his face. Perhaps as a citizen himself, and as a former member of the nobility, there was more to Alec's thoughts on the subject than what he was willing to say aloud.

"You be careful too," he said. "Immigrants make for easy targets. And then there's the fallout from the concert to keep in mind."

"I will," Shiori replied. "I won't be walking around on my own for the foreseeable future."

This made things like daily shopping more of a nuisance, but Storydia was not Japan. Tris was a safe enough city that one could walk the streets at night, but there was no comparison to her former home. In Storydia, thieves lurked in the deserted backstreets and the less reputable downtown parts of the city. And even where it *was* safer, Shiori had still been approached by men who were more than likely pimps. There were even occasions where she had almost been whisked away to shady places of business by men pretending to be lost tourists.

"Don't worry too much," said Alec. "I'll be with you most of the time, and so will Rurii."

"Thanks, both of you."

Shiori was safe on both sides with her lover and her slime friend acting as her protection. Shiori took the feeler that Rurii reached out to her, then smiled up at her lover.

At the Adventurers' Guild, Zack and his employees were neck-deep in paperwork. Some adventurers were in the lounge area seeing to their various tasks—checking out the request board or finishing up reports. A few of them waved as Shiori, Alec, and Rurii entered, and the trio responded with nods.

Zack held a sheaf of papers and lightly tapped them on the table to align

them, then rolled his stiff shoulders in an attempt to loosen them up. He shot the trio a glance and a tired grin, then gestured for them to join him. He also did his very best *not* to focus on Rurii, who had slunk behind a shelf in search of a crawling *something* it had noticed.

"Morning, brother," said Shiori. "Already hard at work, I see."

"Morning," replied Zack. "We've got a lot of smaller requests, and then a whole lot of reports and invoices that need looking at. It's nothing that requires too much thought, but it *is* overwhelming in terms of sheer quantity."

Some guild masters would have stamped the paperwork without so much as a second thought, but Zack was the type to give everything a proper look over. The guild master before him, Ranvald, had also been meticulous, but on the other hand he'd also been the mastermind behind foul play in the guild's paperwork. As a result, revisions had been made to the guild master selection process, the definition of their duties, and the regular reports they were expected to send to Guild Headquarters in the royal capital.

That's how difficult it all was for headquarters to accept, I suppose.

Shiori had been a victim in the incident Ranvald caused, but not a single person who helped him had received any punishment by law. Ranvald, the leader of the plot himself, had simply been removed from his post, and Shiori's former party members had, at worst, moved to other guild branches of their own volition. But it was still an incident of much import, to the extent that the knight corps was involved, and Guild Headquarters had sent its own investigators to look into it. The guild was an organization of such scale that it had branches spread across almost all the major nations in the northwestern continent, so it was not an incident that could simply be ignored.

"That concert of yours—it's front-page news," said Zack.

Shiori, who had been lost in thoughts of Akatsuki, snapped back to reality.

"Already? That was quick," she said. "Then again, Felicia *is* the top songstress, and it was clear to everyone that it was quite unusual."

Shiori took a look at the newspaper on the table. The front-page article detailed the case that Felicia and the Alvestam Orchestra had been pulled into

before the concert. A picture of both Felicia and Hildegarde had been included. Fortunately, there was no mention of the use of Shiori as a decoy in any of it—Conny and the knights had been kind enough to leave that particular detail hidden.

“Karina Svanholm and Ragnar Orsted will be taken to the royal capital in the following days...” said Shiori, reading a few lines aloud. “The Cathedral and Alvestam Hall are preparing to further discuss the matter...”

Alvestam Hall was a very distinguished opera house, and this plot—which had taken aim at their own songstresses—had ended with the arrest of two of their own managers. From the Cathedral’s point of view, their concert—funded by influential nobles—had been on the verge of cancellation. Had that actually happened, they would have had very harsh words for the Hall. Fortunately, the concert had been a huge success, and thanks to the opinions of both Archbishop Oskar Lundgren and the Torisval Margrave, no reparations would be sought save for what was spent in handling the incident.

“How very generous of them,” muttered Alec, somewhat ironically, as he turned his eyes towards the newspaper’s accompanying article. “‘Astounding illusion magic performance offers a sight only visible from the throne of the gods. Is the unknown caster a saint or servant of the gods?’ This article is little more than a gossip column.”

Alec chuckled. Shiori, feeling suddenly awkward, dropped her gaze.

“Word is going around that the one who cast that magic is an Easterner,” said Zack. “We even had a few reporter types snooping around the guild yesterday. I had a few strong words with them and nipped that in the bud, but...”

“But there were a lot of people involved in the concert,” said Alec. “So someone let the information leak.”

“Oh... I’m sorry,” said Shiori.

Zack put a hand to her shoulder.

“We’ll take care of things here, but use the margrave’s name when you have to.”

Shiori could do little more than reply with an awkward smile. She was under

the protection of the high nobility now.

“Okay...” she said.

Just then, they heard the sound of a carriage, and saw that one was coming to a stop in front of the guild.

“Hm? A package?” muttered Zack. “But this isn’t usually the time that they make deliveries...”

Zack stood to his feet, wondering if it was a special delivery. But as soon as Shiori and Alec saw the face of the man who exited the carriage, they gasped in surprise. The coat and clothing were indeed that of a delivery man, but hidden under his hat was a head of silver hair and a pair of glasses that they had seen before.

“Is that Conny?”

The man pulled the brim of his cap down and peeked through the window. It *was* Conny, and he flashed them a cheeky grin as he opened the door to the guild carrying a wooden box with him.

“Mornin’,” he said. “Brought ya a special delivery!”

In appearance it was indeed the reverend they knew, but his tone of voice was exactly that of a young deliveryman. He walked up to the two stunned adventurers as if there was nothing out of the ordinary and held the package out.

“Package for one...Zack Ciel. It’s a wee bit heavy, so lemme carry it to yer room for ya.”

The real meaning of Conny’s words was clear—he wished to speak somewhere private.

“Shiori, Alec. You mind giving him a hand?” said Zack casually, gesturing to the guild master’s office.

The two adventurers led Conny inside the room, where he put the box on the table and took off his hat with a chuckle.

“Apologies for the disguise,” he said. “There are reporters on the streets, so I got a little help from our own deliveryman. And please don’t worry—he’s a very

trustworthy sort and won't leak a single thing. The package is actually for you and Sir Alec, but just to be on the safe side, I had it made out to Zack."

"I must admit to being surprised, but...thank you so much for your kindness," said Shiori.

"You're quite the actor," said Alec. "You could probably make it onstage if you wanted."

Conny scratched his nose bashfully at Alec's joke and told him to knock it off.

It was not easy to leave the Cathedral with so many reporters wanting to know more about the Alvestam Orchestra incident and the caster of the illusion magic. Left with no other alternative, Conny had asked for the help of a trusted deliveryman, and left in the man's very uniform.

"With that in mind, I'm afraid I can't stay long," said Conny. "I'm here with the remaining request payment, and little update regarding events."

When all was signed, Conny paid their remaining fees with a hefty bonus, then sipped at a cup of tea that Zack had prepared himself.

"There isn't a whole lot for me to update you on," admitted Conny. "We at the Cathedral haven't been told much more than what's already in the press."

Felicia had been moved into the care of the knights as of yesterday morning and would return to the royal capital once her questioning was complete. In order to avoid causing a commotion, she too would leave in disguise.

"She'll either leave in the same disguise as me, or otherwise as a knight," said Conny with a chuckle. "Now, on to the topic of you, Shiori."

This, it seemed, was what Conny had come to discuss. Alec put a hand to the nervous Shiori's shoulder, and Rurii—who had at some point finished its extermination work and entered the room—rubbed her leg.

"As expected, we had a number of inquiries after the concert. All requests for interviews were declined on the spot, and anyone who tried to push further was met with the name of the margrave. The vast majority of people gave up there, but I still think it's best for you to be cautious over the next few weeks."

"Oh... I see," said Shiori. "I apologize... This all got to be much bigger than I

expected.”

“Oh, no, think nothing of it,” said Conny. “This response is due to you giving the concert your very best. That said, most people are, as expected, rather curious about the illusion you cast during the encore...”

Though Conny’s eyes and his smile were kind and gentle, something about them was probing, almost as though he was searching for something. Perhaps it was just Shiori’s imagination. She had not thought too much about it all since the concert, but reading the paper and hearing from Conny made Shiori realize that this was all far more troublesome of an incident than she’d thought. The scenery she’d cast with her magic displayed an understanding of the view of the world from the stratosphere, but this was not something that could be known given this world’s current level of technology. It would not be surprising if people were already trying to find out who Shiori really was...

Shiori felt unable to bear Conny’s silent gaze, and her fists clenched on her knees.

“My apologies,” said Conny. “The Eastern region has been largely closed off to us, and it has only been in recent years that it has opened its doors, so it would be no surprise if they have knowledge and technology that we do not. I believe that the illusion you showed us is among such knowledge. That is how I, and the archbishop, have chosen to understand it. There is simply no other realistic way to explain it. As for the illusion, the archbishop himself has ensured our full cooperation so that you are not bothered if people should be stubborn in their attempts to learn more about it. The Cathedral is, after all, in possession of paintings that depict the world of the gods.”

“Erm... You mean to say...?”

“We will have it announced that the scenery of your illusion magic came from a painting among the Cathedral’s private collection. It will sound like a bit of a stretch, but it should work. We also have to confer with the margrave for his opinion on the matter. On a somewhat related topic,” said Conny, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a grin, “it’s been decided that the concert will now take place every year! On top of that, the closing number will be Storydia, as performed by everyone in attendance. We’d like to ask that you

once again perform your illusion magic for the finale.”

“Aha...” muttered Zack.

“*Now* I get it,” added Alec.

By spreading the word that the illusion magic was just a recreation of a painting from the Cathedral’s private collection, it took the unique and special qualities of the scenery away from Shiori herself. Though it was likely that some would still cause a commotion about it, given enough time, this reasoning would be accepted and, eventually, become simple fact.

“I’m so sorry for causing you all this trouble,” said Shiori.

“No, really, please pay it no mind,” replied Conny. “We called you to help us, and summarily got you involved in that whole orchestra incident. If anything, we should be the ones apologizing. So please, I want nothing more than for you to go on living an ordinary life.”

“Thank you ever so much.”

“I am an acquaintance of His Excellency, the margrave,” said Zack. “I’ll speak with him on the matter.”

“We’re most thankful,” said Conny.

The room had been filled with a somewhat unsettling air, and only now did it start to really dissipate. Conny drank the remainder of his tea then stood to his feet.

“Well then, I’d best be off,” he announced. “I apologize for the rushed visit, but I look forward to seeing you all again soon.”

And with that, they all shared firm handshakes and goodbyes.

“Whoops,” uttered Conny as he was just about out the door, “Almost forgot about the delivery!” He pointed to the wooden box on the table, explaining, “It’s a gift from one of the concert’s donors, Count Enqvist. Word is that he was awed and absolutely loved the performance. It would have been wonderful if all the performers could have shared it, but unfortunately the package only arrived this morning. All in all, it was, er...quite the amount, so we wanted to make sure that you got a share for your hard work. It was all caught yesterday, so it’s very

fresh. However...”

Conny let a crafty smile creep to his face before going on.

“No, it’s nothing. Please open it soon. You’re in for a treat—it’s the finest produce from Mane Lake, which is the second largest fishing produce location in the nation! In any case,” Conny said, putting his deliveryman’s cap back on to hide his silver hair, “I’d best be off. ’Ave a nice day, all!”

The reverend left with this farewell, in the same tone of voice he’d used when he’d arrived—that of a young deliveryman.

He really could *be an actor...*

Shiori was left a little shocked by the man’s acting abilities, but once he was gone, she turned her gaze towards the box on the table.

“So what is it?” she asked. “I’m guessing it’s seafood, but...hm? What’s wrong, Alec?”

Alec had a look on his face that said he’d just eaten something that didn’t agree with him.

“Um... As soon as he mentioned Mane Lake, I knew what he’d brought us.”

With something of a cringing smile, Alec motioned for Shiori to open the box, and so she did. The scent of the sea wafted out from inside of the chilled delivery box. Shiori wiped the snow from the contents within, and as she pulled the large, black shape from the box, a slimy opal white feeler reached out and stuck to her hand.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaat?! What is this?!”

Shiori let out a scream and clung to Alec in an instant. The black item from the box hit the table with a thud, and Zack panicked, trying to keep it from falling.

“Whoa there!” he cried.

“Huh? Is it a shellfish?” asked Shiori. “Is that...a shellfish?”

Alec looked down at the distressed Shiori and burst into laughter.

“Oh, right,” he said. “You never would have seen one of these before. It’s a schoner clam. Remember those?”

“*That’s* a...? Really?!”

It was a giant shellfish. A bivalve that took two hands to hold. It must have been at least forty centimeters long. It struck Shiori as not unlike a giant oyster. From between its shell, she could see the slimy mollusk within, and it sent a shiver down her spine. Rurii, meanwhile, poked the shellfish a few times with a most curious feeler of its own, and the shellfish shrunk within itself.

“A fully mature schoner clam can get to four or even five meters in size,” said Alec. “At that point, the mollusk hardens and becomes inedible, and on top of that, they’re savage. During their breeding season, these clams are known to attack fishermen, so the nearby guild gets its fair share of suppression quests. A young clam like this though? Creamy and delicious.”

“Young...? *That’s*...young?”

And to think they were handled not unlike magical beasts. The mollusk within the clam twisted suspiciously on the table. Shiori got the strange sense that it was looking at her, and her grip on Alec tightened.

“I-It’s so creepy...” she said.

Though Shiori was pale as a sheet, Zack couldn’t hide his excitement.

“Not much of a looker, but very tasty,” said Zack. “These are the pride of Mane Lake—can’t eat them anywhere outside of high-class restaurants. They’re thick and creamy like grilled cheese.”

Shiori and Alec looked at one another and shared a grim smile. It was only now that they truly understood the grin on Conny’s face as he’d left.

“Um, brother...” said Shiori. “We don’t actually need the clam, so why don’t you share it with everyone here at the guild?”

“Huh? You sure? But we’re talking top-quality produce here!”

The schoner clam—and the schoner virus it was notorious for—was how the whole songstress incident had begun. And though it wasn’t actually the schoner virus but in fact poison that had made the orchestra members sick, both Shiori and Alec had heard enough about its effects that they now felt a certain apprehension. They couldn’t eat such a thing without their thoughts and

memories ruining the experience.

“I have a feeling it’ll make me sick.”

As far as Shiori was concerned, even just the sight of the grotesque, giant shellfish was enough to turn her off.

“I see. Well, we’ll gladly take it off your hands. And now I can’t wait for lunch!”

Zack put the clam gingerly back in its box, then called on a guild employee to take it to the kitchen. Shiori and Alec looked at one another silently and cringed.

2

That night, in a room at the archbishop’s residence on the Tris Cathedral grounds...

Boiling water dripped into a tea cup, and the scent of flowers wafted into the air. The scent was pure—fruity and refreshing. As the dried flower petals steeped, the water in the cup took on a vibrant color.

After a few minutes, the tea strainer on the cup was lifted away, and what remained was a scarlet liquid, pure like a high-quality gemstone. Into this a man placed a spoonful of golden honey to melt, and a gentle smile rose to his face as he passed the cup to Conny.

“Here,” he said. “Drink it while it’s still warm.”

“Thank you ever so much,” replied Conny.

Conny sipped gingerly from the cup. He felt his mouth filling with a slight acidity, the scent of flowers, and a gentle touch of honey. The heat soaked into his stomach and spread throughout his body, warming it.

“It’s delicious...” he said with a sigh.

He meant it honestly, and the man once again smiled kindly.

“I have baked snacks too. Would you like some?”

“No thank you, but the gesture is much appreciated.”

Conny wasn't against sweets, and in fact was quite tempted by the offer, but decided it best not to eat anything before bed.

"Very well," said the man, returning a can of snacks to their shelf before sitting to sip from his own cup of herbal tea. "Ah yes, this particular blend is truly exceptional. The color, the flavor—I've not a single complaint."

The man beamed as he praised himself for his own tea, and Conny couldn't help but chuckle (though he made sure to hide it behind his own cup).

The man was Oskar Lundgren, the recently appointed archbishop. His predecessor had fallen suddenly ill, and when it seemed likely he would be absent for quite some time, Oskar was appointed to the position quite abruptly. It was thought that it would reflect poorly on them for the most important person in the Cathedral to be absent for its biggest event. Though there were a few quarrels with the changeover happening so close to the Nativity Festival, Oskar's predecessor somewhat forcefully made it happen.

The Yggdre Church was the largest religious organization in the continent's northwest. It worshipped the deities and spirits that inhabited all things, and the saints that connected those to our world. However, the church was by no means monolithic, and had splintered into factions due to different understandings of its teachings. These factions were often at odds with one another. One faction among these was known as the Reformists, who believed in protecting the traditions of the church while ensuring it still met the needs of the modern day. Oskar Lundgren's predecessor was considered a leading figure in this faction and, as his right-hand man, so too was Oskar himself.

As the nation grew more affluent and faith began to wane across the citizenry, it was the work of the Reformists that ensured the Tris Cathedral was widely known, and increased its number of faithful worshippers. Oskar's predecessor had not wanted his reforms to stop here, however, and so, when he realized that his battle with illness would be a long one, he quickly recommended that Oskar take his place. Though he was somewhat pushy about it, the decision was nonetheless accepted by the Holy Vatican. An official coronation ceremony still had yet to be held, but Oskar was considered the rightful successor.

It was this man, Oskar Lundgren, who sat calmly before Conny, despite being at the center of all this Cathedral drama. Now in his pajamas and sipping at a cup of tea—the leaves for which he'd grown himself—Oskar looked anything but a leading figure in the Reformist faction. "Relaxed" was the only real word for him. Still, Conny knew all too well that there was more to this man than met the eye—he would not have reached this position of leadership otherwise.

"So, were you able to talk with Miss Shiori?" asked Oskar.

"Yes, though it was rather difficult to leave with all the reporters and bystanders around the Cathedral. I managed to get out in the guise of a deliveryman, and explained the situation to her."

"A deliveryman?" exclaimed Oskar, before exploding into laughter. "You are nothing if not crafty. I'm sure nobody expected a man of the cloth to go out in disguise. I see, I see."

Oskar sank into his chair, a pleased smile on his face.

"And what did she say?" he asked.

"She was most grateful, and she agreed to continue her 'narrated pictures' and 'the View of the Deities' for future performances."

Shiori had not put on any airs, nor shown any displeasure—she had simply agreed. It was as if it was only natural that she would help. She even seemed relieved.

No greed whatsoever...

The suggestion of the Cathedral had been that "the View of the Deities" be explained as a recreation of something the Cathedral already had in its possession. Doing so meant that for all intents and purposes, the magic depicted scenery the Cathedral already knew about, which took away everything that made Shiori seem special for casting it. Had Shiori so desired, the Cathedral would have more than happily paid her too.

"Archbishop, will we not invite her into the church?" asked Conny.

"Shiori? And why would we do that?"

"However you look at it, what she cast was no ordinary illusion magic."

There were many works of art that imagined scenery from above the clouds. The Cathedral itself was even in possession of pieces based on mythology that displayed a world map. However, none left the realm of the imagination—and with knowledge of astronomy being at the level it now was, one could tell from a glance that the art had sprung from imagination, even without having seen the reality of things.

However, in Shiori's work there was a distinct sense of realism. She gave them a view of the boundary between land and the sea, fading into the distance. It was a most grandiose sight. The horizon carved such a huge arc that one could not understand it in its totality. It felt far too realistic to be simply a product of the imagination—the imagery carried such weight that one could not help thinking they were seeing what the world really looked like from such heights.

And yet, that very scenery was one that could not be known except by being in the heavens themselves. This made it very clear that Shiori, who could depict such scenery, was no ordinary individual.

"Yes, there are indeed those of the opinion that we should take her in," said Oskar. "Some say that we should bring her in and protect her as a saint, being that she is capable of showing such images."

Conny bit his lip. Though he had asked the question himself, he knew the cruelty that lay behind the words that such people spoke. "Protect" made the gesture sound kind, but in essence she would be imprisoned. She would be denied contact with the outside world and made into a sacred cow of sorts, which would only be brought out for events and ceremonies. She would be little more than church propaganda. A bird in a cage. Conny could imagine it all too clearly, and he felt a slight groan escape his lips.

"Those of the Cathedral who are more hardheaded would turn her into a caged bird dressed as a saint," said Oskar. "But that would be contrary to Saint Sanna Grunden's teachings. Namely, 'Let that which longs to live, live freely.'"

Naturally, when one lived as a part of civilized society, they were bound by their position and circumstances, and had to follow the law. Nevertheless, one's soul could not be bound or tied down. It should be made free. What one did with their soul was not something for another person to decide. That was the

teaching of Saint Sanna, who believed in the sanctity of freedom.

"I must admit that I do not much like acts of bending something so it 'becomes' what we might call sacred or holy. Faith is, at its roots, a personal thing. It is not something that we force or push on to others. It is a place for the heart to be, and evangelical propaganda is the antithesis of that. In the end, I am not a fan of placing a human on a pedestal and revering them as a deity or any other such thing."

Oskar's words would have once seen him brought to trial for heresy, but the world was moving into a modern era, and freedom from religion was a train of thought becoming more and more commonplace. It was no different from talk of the existence of the gods, even. But what Shiori had depicted in her illusions far surpassed such thoughts, and so it was no wonder that it had stirred so much talk among the people.

"I wonder if you remember, Conny, the incident that occurred some two years ago. An adventurer was almost killed by her own party. She had become deadweight to them, and so they abandoned her in a labyrinth."

"Hm? Oh, yes. I do recall such an incident. It's just...so utterly horrendous to think about."

The incident had been published in the newspapers, and for a time was a subject of discussion around the Cathedral. Many of Conny's fellow reverends had been outraged at humans doing something as inhuman as leaving their own fallen comrade in the territory of magical beasts. Many had even cried with a deep sadness, and many more had offered her prayers. Fortunately, the adventurer had been rescued, but she had nearly crossed the line between life and death.

"That adventurer," said Oskar, "was Shiori."

Conny couldn't believe it.

"What?! Are you most certain?! Oh, but then there *were* rumors that the adventurer was an Easterner. Which would mean that... How very tragic..."

The Shiori that Conny remembered was always smiling. She did not look at all to him like someone who had gone through something so terribly harrowing.

The wounds from an incident of that magnitude were not the kind of thing that one recovered from in just two years. Conny wondered if she had hidden her suffering behind her smile.

“Confined by walls built by her own party, it seems that Shiori was treated not unlike a slave. Fortunately, she was saved, but...to take her from the arms of her lover and put her behind walls of a different kind, or to make her a puppet for the Cathedral’s convenience... Well, I simply refuse. Even if she *is* a servant of the gods, taking her freedom is in itself worthy of punishment.”

“Yes... You’re exactly right,” said Conny, nodding thoughtfully.

Oskar chuckled.

“You are not completely dyed in the colors of the Cathedral, and I must say, I *do* like that about you. You value the teachings of our religion, but your feelings—your instincts—put you far closer to the ways of the common people. You are exactly the sort of person that Tris Cathedral needs, now that it has truly opened its doors. Those who rise too high often lose touch with the workings of the human heart. You must be sure not to lose this part of yourself.”

Conny bowed deeply, and Oskar smiled.

“In any case, the fact that Shiori will provide her skills for us again is more than we could have hoped for. The Nativity Festival will grow more lively and our reverends and nuns will have a new skill to use on their travels. And let’s be honest, it’s a wonderful form of entertainment, is it not? I quite liked ‘Snow Princess and the Seven Knights,’ and ‘The Man-eating Troll and her Gingerbread House’ certainly has its moments, but ‘The Persikka Knight’ is truly a most powerful tale.”

For a moment, Conny completely forgot his own position, and that he was in the company of the most powerful person in the Cathedral. He was stunned.

“Whaaa?!” he cried.

The man before him had essentially admitted to sneaking into the orphanage during Shiori’s visits to watch her narrated pictures!

“I still haven’t even seen *any* of them!” said Conny. “When in the world did you manage to make the time?!”

As the right-hand man of his predecessor, Oskar was nothing if not a busy man, and it would not have been easy for him to make time for himself. And yet, he had—not once, not twice, but on *three* separate occasions!

“That, my young friend, is confidential,” replied Oskar, grinning.

Conny found himself grinding his teeth, much to the archbishop’s delight.

“That aside,” said Oskar, even though putting the topic aside was the *last* thing that Conny wanted to do, “I believe Miss Shiori to be a person we cannot handle lightly. The margrave himself ordered that she, a commoner, be protected under his own name. It is not something that a person of his rank would ordinarily do.”

Had he so desired, the margrave could have easily ignored the Cathedral’s wishes and had Shiori brought into his custody on a whim, after which he could have wrung her for all her knowledge and abilities. This was the sheer difference of power and authority between the lord of the margrave’s family and an immigrant woman with no relatives to speak of. But instead, Kristoffer was concerned for her, and wanted to ensure that she was able to live in peace.

“I...” uttered Conny. “But why would he do so?”

“Hm... I cannot say I know for certain, but I tend to think that perhaps for some reason or another, she has always been under his watch.”

In other words, it was possible that Shiori was a person of import from a foreign country.

“But if that were the case, it doesn’t make sense that she was wrapped up in that terrible incident either,” pondered the archbishop. “In any case, the margrave has made it clear that she is to be left alone, and so we have no other choice.”

“I see. However... I would so like to see her again,” said Conny.

And not just Shiori, but Alec and Rurii too. They were all so interesting. So fascinating. They thought in ways that Conny didn’t, and had all sorts of knowledge, and from the bottom of his heart, Conny simply enjoyed being in their company. There was so much he still wanted to talk to them about.

“And of course you still may,” said the archbishop. “I would encourage you to do so. I am sure it would be just as good for her to have you as one of her friends.”

Oskar gave his blessing with a quiet smile, and Conny replied with one of his own.

“Thank you!”

There was much about Shiori that was still a mystery, but they were sure to meet again now that her illusion magic was interwoven with the Cathedral. Conny wanted to deepen their friendship whenever these chances appeared, and ask the adventurers about that which he still did not know.

Conny sipped at the last of his cup of tea and, as he thought about the fulfilling days that were waiting on the horizon, he could not help but smile.

Interlude 2: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ December 7th, morning

An emergency request came in for Shiori today. Apparently there was a problem and the client wants Shiori's help. So, Shiori, Alec, and I went to the Tris Cathedral with a man named Conny, who had learned about Shiori thanks to Yens, from the orphanage. Actually, Yens was waiting for us when we arrived. He's very kind to Shiori, and just a good guy all around.

Shiori was asked to help out with a concert. It didn't look like there was going to be much for me to do for a while, so I ended up going with Yens to do some pest extermination. I wasn't worried about Shiori because she had Alec with her, and I had a hunch that I should go with Yens anyway.

Yens took me to a huge kitchen. Apparently, some pests had built their nests under the floorboards and were getting into the kitchen from the sink. I wiped them out. There is nothing quite like a job well done!

Everybody in the kitchen was super happy, and as a reward I got to have a bath *and* eat a special cake. They said it's the kind of cake you can only eat during the Nativity Festival. It was so fluffy and delicious. I sure hope I get to eat some next year.

■ December 7th, midday to midnight

While Yens and I were on our way back to Shiori, we took a detour. Toby, from the orphanage, had found someone who was lost. My slime senses started to tingle again, so I went with Yens to check it out. The person who was lost was a girl called Hildegarde. She was super worried so I let her touch my body. Then she gave me a fright by wrapping me in a tight hug, but she seemed happy, so I didn't mind.

Hildegarde said that she was friends with Felicia. She said she'd come to the Cathedral because she was worried about her friend. Yens and the knights were troubled by it all and decided to confer with Conny, but unfortunately,

Hildegarde wasn't allowed to meet with Felicia. Apparently the situation was getting all sorts of complicated, so Hildegarde was put under the protection of the knights.

Hildegarde was scared like a lost little kid, so I asked Shiori for permission and she let me be Hildegarde's bodyguard. And boy, am I glad that she did. In the middle of the night, I got this bad feeling, and then this weirdo showed up and tried to attack Hildegarde. Yeah, I totally swallowed him. And yeah, I totally wanted to eat him whole too, but I wasn't allowed because the knights wanted to ask him stuff. More's the pity, if you ask me. I should have melted his clothes, like that one time Pel told me about.

That weirdo turned out to be Hildegarde's manager. She'd thought they were friends, and so when he suddenly tried to hurt her it was a massive shock. It made her cry. Totally understandable reaction—I mean, I'd be sad if one of my own slime kin betrayed me. Shiori has been through the same thing, and it made her really sad too. I spent the night together with Hildegarde, and it seemed to calm her a bit. But she tosses and turns like crazy. When I woke up I was crushed underneath her, and there was a little pool of drool on my body. Hildegarde...

■ December 8th, morning

The knight corps spent the whole morning talking to Hildegarde, and it wore her out. It made her remember yesterday and so she was kind of deflated. Conny was worried about her, so he decided to let her visit Felicia.

The Cathedral people told me that everybody trusts Conny. He's decisive and he takes action. He's also very popular with visitors to the Cathedral, apparently. I can totally see it. Even *I* can tell he's a really good person.

Hildegarde looked *so* happy to see Felicia. As it turns out, Hildegarde and Felicia were estranged because of the work of that woman Karina and the weirdo I swallowed. I'm super happy that they're friends again!

Hildegarde and Felicia told Conny that they wanted to say thanks, and also apologize, by performing a special song at the concert. Everyone was shocked at first, but then they all wanted to take part too. Conny was all for it, and Shiori

said she'd do her best to back them up. I can't wait for the concert. I'm a slime that loves having fun, so it's going to be a total treat for me!

■ December 8th, afternoon to evening

The concert was beautiful, it was fun, and it made me super happy! I'd heard people from the village near the Blue Forest singing before, and it always looked fun and interesting. But this was way more people playing all sorts of instruments, and it was astounding. I can't sing, though, so I had to settle for dancing, but dancing with everyone was heaps of fun. Slimes love to have a good time. I used to like listening to bug calls and bird songs in the forest, but human music is really beautiful and it carries so much weight—I love it. It was so amazing that some people even cried with joy. One day, I would *love* to listen to this with all my slime kin. None of us can sing, but we can jump and we can dance, so I hope someday we get to participate.

During the last song of the concert, something changed in Alec. He looked shocked partway through, and then he started singing along. It even looked like he cried a bit, but it was different from the overjoyed tears of the others. I was worried so I gave his leg a pat, but he told me he was all good.

But wow, Shiori's illusion magic sure was something else. How does she even know what the world would look like from that high up in the sky? She's full of mystery, she really is. Maybe she really *is* an angel or a goddess of some kind?

Alec is always calling Shiori "my goddess" and things like that. Now it's "my songstress." I sometimes wonder, what *is* Shiori to that guy?

■ December XX

Sometimes Alec stays over at Shiori's place. Alec's place is too small for sleepovers. I've been to his apartment a couple times, but the kitchen is cramped and there's no bath, so it really doesn't look like it'd be much fun for Shiori. Every now and again he'll mumble to himself like, "I suppose we could start looking for a place for the two of us, but... Well, maybe it's still not time..."

If you ask me, though, they're pretty much already mates. Just live together already.

“Still, there’s so much I have yet to settle...but the idea of living together sure is tempting.”

So just live together then.

“Then again, if we were living together in the same place, I don’t know if I’d be able to control myself...”

I don’t think Shiori would mind. I mean, she knows how much you care!

“But living together... Living together, huh... But how can you put a feast before me, then expect me not to eat...? Ugh, I don’t know...”

Alec is, like seriously, the most annoying man alive sometimes.

■ December XX

Yens from the orphanage came to visit Shiori. With all that happened on the day before the concert, he completely forgot to pass the head chef’s request to her—that they wanted me to visit once a month to help with pest extermination.

Shiori said, “If Rurii is okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

Whoo! This slime’s gonna work *so* hard!

■ December XX

In the morning, there was this real weird guy following Shiori and Alec around. He was exactly what you’d imagine a disreputable reporter to look like. He was muttering in the shadows about getting a big scoop, so I knew I had to put a stop to it.

I tried out the clothes-melting tactic that Pel told me about, and it worked like a charm. I figured if I melted all his clothes he’d be cold, and I am a kind slime, so I just melted away everything below the waist. The weirdo reporter was so focused on his work that he didn’t even notice. But when he walked out onto the street to tail Shiori and Alec, he was met by frightened screams and angry shouts. The guy was totally shocked. Finally, he looked down at himself and let out his own scream. That was when a knight ran over and dragged him away,

saying, “Indecent exposure?! For that you will be penis...er, penalized accordingly!”

It was *exactly* like Pel told me. Amazing.

I’m totally going to use it again the next time a weirdo tries anything.

■ December ⅩⅩ

Recently Shiori has been asking Alec for massages. She’s all like, “Your hands are the right size,” and “The pressure is perfect.” And she says she’s way more at ease with him than a masseuse.

She totally *loves* the massages too. She makes it look like they’re pure bliss.

“Mm, a little more gently...” she said the last time.

“Oh, sorry. Too strong, huh? H-How about this?”

“Oh, yes,” Shiori moaned. “That’s the spot...”

Not that I care, but I always wonder why Alec is all about heavy breathing whenever he gives Shiori a massage. The guy couldn’t get into the bath fast enough as soon as it was over.

Zack came to deliver a letter and even he was all mumbling to himself like, “I won’t tell them to not do it now that they’re a couple...but how about saving it for the evening or, I dunno, keeping your voices down a little?”

What’s he even on about?

Downstairs, I could hear him talking with Lache.

“Don’t you think the walls are a bit thin here?”

“Well, the young don’t seem to care at all if you can hear them...”

■ December ⅩⅩ

Shiori and Alec are getting even closer to each other with each passing day. They look so happy together that it makes me happy too.

That said, they each have these huge secrets they’re keeping from one

another.

Shiori said to me, “Alec is of a different status, and I’m from another world—I’m a little worried about whether we can really be together forever. But Alec told me not to worry, and he promised he’d stay by my side, so...I’ve chosen to believe in him.”

Shiori is worried that Alec might be way more important, and that maybe he’s not in a position where he can just choose anyone to be his mate. But Alec made a promise to her, so I’m sure that everything will work out fine!

But what did she mean, “from another world”? Does that mean Shiori isn’t from this world?! Is she like an actual goddess?! Hm... It would seem that this slime is friends with a most wondrous individual.

Alec is curious about Shiori’s past too. He was like, “I wonder if she knows the scenery above the clouds because she came from the sky? Still, whoever she is and wherever she came from, I’m going to be there for her, forever.”

Actually, though, he’s more worried that it might be too much for her to find out that he’s the brother of the king.

Everything will be fine! She loves you and she said herself that she believes in you! Everything will work out fine!

On top of that, I don’t care who either of you are or where you came from, you’re my friends! And we’re going to become even better friends from now on!

Part 2: A Distant Prayer

1

Alec couldn’t hide his astonishment.

“You’re closing the boarding house?!” he cried.

He was standing in the lobby of the boarding house—a location not far from the Guild, known as “Ivy Place.” The landlady had called out to him somewhat hesitantly before delivering the news.

“I’m so sorry for how sudden this is,” she said, her eyebrows drooping. “I’ve tried to keep the place in good shape, but it’s fallin’ apart at the seams, it is. Apparently it fell to pieces once before, durin’ the invasion, and it’s been patchwork fixes ever since. The carpenter says there ain’t no more that can be done. That, and my daughter’s expectin’ this month, and with her husband’s parents already passed, the two of them are strugglin’ on their own. I’ve been by myself all this time, y’see, and my son-in-law offered me a place with them.”

With this in mind, the landlady had finally decided that it was time to close up the boarding house. All the other residents had already been informed, and given that it was so sudden, the landlady had already put in a word with nearby landlords and made a list of rooms that her tenants could move into immediately. Of the three current residents, one had already packed his belongings into a rucksack and was going to move into a new place later that day. The other, excited by the prospect of a fresh start, planned to move out in the next few days.

That left one resident—Alec. He took the list of potential rooms from the landlady and looked it over. There were a few other boarding houses not unlike Ivy Place, and a few rental houses with slightly higher price tags—Shiori’s apartment building among them. All of the rooms were fully furnished, and all were available immediately. The list was quite extensive, and it showed how far the landlady had gone to help them. She was nothing if not sincere.

“I see...” muttered Alec, nodding. “I’m sure you want to be with your

daughter as soon as you can. I'll make sure to find a place by end of day tomorrow, so feel free to start packing."

The landlady smiled and let out a sigh of relief. She'd already arranged buyers for the property and furniture, so once Alec was done, she'd be able to leave almost immediately. There were only a few days left before the coming of the new year, and being that it took a day to reach her daughter's village by carriage, the landlady could still make it before the end of the year.

That meant Alec would be house hunting as of the following day. He had loved Ivy Place, but it had admittedly been a tad too cramped for company, and he *had* started thinking about moving somewhere with a little more room. Alec gave the relieved landlady a pat on the shoulder, bid her good night, and walked up to his room to turn in early.

The following day, as the sun was beginning to set, Alec let out a deep sigh.

"I honestly thought that deciding on a new place would be a piece of cake...but it's surprisingly difficult."

Alec wasn't especially picky when it came to housing. However, none of the places he'd been to so far had clicked with him immediately, so he hadn't been able to commit to any of them on the spot. They were all much nicer than Ivy Place, yet all the same, Alec couldn't make a decision. And there was one reason—one big reason, in fact—that was stopping him.

"If I hadn't met Shiori," said Alec with a wry chuckle, "then I probably would've snapped up that second place in a heartbeat..."

Alec looked back down at one of the apartments on his list: Aslund House. The rent was pricey, but it was a spacious location fully equipped with a bath, a kitchen, and all the necessary furniture. Thanks to a fastidious landlord, it was apparently in great shape. The building also happened to be located across from a variety of different shops, making it very convenient. Under any other circumstances, Alec would have jumped at such a chance.

But it also happened to be the apartment building in which Shiori lived...and it happened to have one open apartment.

“We only just became lovers... If I moved into her building now, would I be moving too fast?”

Though it was admittedly strange for a tall, well-built man to be talking to himself in the middle of a crowded street, Alec was, in his own way, earnest. Because of the presence of Aslund House on the list, Alec had found excuses to hold off on all the other places he’d visited so far.

“But I at least owe it to myself to check the place out, right? Then let’s have at it.”

Alec didn’t even know what he himself meant by the words “have at it,” but at the very least his mind was made up, and so he walked the familiar streets to Aslund House. The apartment building was just a few minutes walk from the Guild, and when Alec came in through the front door, he met the gaze of the caretaker, who by this time was very used to seeing him.

“Ah, Sir Alec,” said Lache, “welcome. If it’s Shiori you’re after, she’s been in her apartment all day.”

Alec chuckled at Lache for bringing up Shiori’s name like Alec’s visits were an everyday occurrence. While he *did* intend to drop in on Shiori once he was done, he didn’t say as much as he walked up to the counter.

“Oh, actually, I came about the available apartment,” replied Alec. “The landlady from Ivy Place told me about it. I’m currently looking for a new place.”

“Ivy Place, you say... Ah, I see,” said Lache as he took out a set of keys. “So *that’s* where you were living.”

Alec followed the man up to the top floor of the apartment building. The available apartment was one of two that occupied the top floor. While the second and third floors were designed for those living alone, the top-floor units were more aimed at families.

“That said, these two apartments tend to be a touch inconvenient for families,” admitted Lache. “Being that they’re on the top floor, the walk can be tough on women who are expecting, and oftentimes for younger children too. And you can imagine how difficult it would be for the elderly. In the past, they’ve mainly been occupied by adventuring parties or couples without

children.”

Until a few months ago, a young, newly married couple had occupied the apartment, but they’d moved out when the wife became pregnant. It had sat empty ever since.

“I don’t have any issues with a single person moving in, but it’s been empty until now because of the rent—the top-floor apartments are a little more expensive than those on the second and third floors.”

Aside from the kitchen and the spacious living room, the apartment also boasted a bedroom and a splendid bath with a hot water system and a place to hang the laundry. It certainly was spacious for someone living alone, but it was also very comfortable. Gentle winter sunlight shone in from the west, and the whole place was roomy without feeling bare and gloomy. The furniture, too, was rich in color, relaxing, and recently wiped clean of dust. The bed was clean and fluffy. The place was practically begging for someone to move in right away.

“Not bad...” muttered Alec.

He could already feel the place calling to him. At the same time, he knew that if he *did* let himself move into a place this nice, he’d run out of excuses to stay at Shiori’s place. Her bath was his excuse for staying over. He also couldn’t help feeling that he might be moving too fast by inviting her to live with him.

Lache seemed to notice the worry and hesitation on Alec’s face.

“I hope you don’t think me rude for saying so, but you could move in with the expectation that at some point you and Miss Shiori will live together. That is to say...if that is indeed your intention?”

“Well...yeah, but still...”

It was true—Alec *had* made up his mind. He was going to ask her to marry him once he’d settled everything. And yet...

“If we end up living together, I’m not confident that I’ll be able to control myself,” muttered Alec.

Alec wanted all of Shiori, but the wounds upon Shiori’s heart still needed time to heal. Alec, too, had to settle his own feelings. He’d made up his mind to wait,

but if he were being honest with himself, he'd gotten into risky territory more than a few times. On more than a few occasions, he'd had to commend his own self-control for spending the night without anything happening.

Overhearing Alec's words, Lache reacted with surprise.

"How very perplexing..." he uttered, dropping into thought. "In which case, what exactly was it that Zack heard that had him in such a tizzy...? He *did* say he heard voices..."

"Hm? What's that?" asked Alec.

"Oh, um, just talking to myself," replied Lache, deflecting the question with a bright smile.

Up to this point, Alec could indeed say he had controlled himself...but he'd kissed her body, he'd rubbed parts of her body, and he'd done some fondling. Essentially, he'd picked away mischievously at her without ever indulging in a full meal, so to speak. But if they started living together, there was every chance that Alec's appetite would get the better of him.

Lache silently watched the thoughtful Alec for a time, then smiled gently.

"Miss Shiori really means the world to you, doesn't she?" he said.

"Hm...?"

"It's made obvious by just how concerned you are for her comfort. She's very important to you."

"Uh... Yeah, she really is."

He couldn't deny that in the beginning, he was simply intrigued by her. But before he even knew it, he was drawn to her strength and kindness. She shared with him a pain that was like his own, and had within her a similar emptiness, and with time his feelings for her only grew. The day he'd truly realized that he loved her was when he had collapsed with fever and she had nursed him back to health.

"I wanted to settle down, and I'd all but given up on love for myself, but then I met her. She just came into my life. My one, and my only."

They would support each other, heal each other, and fulfill one another.

Meeting Shiori had brought the color back into his world.

"I see..." said Lache, nodding a few times before taking Alec's hand. "Please, be happy. I mean that, for the both of you."

Alec had not known Lache for a particularly long time, and yet he too seemed worried about Alec's well-being, to the point where he seemed to be praying for Alec. It filled Alec with joy.

Tris was a melting pot of different cultures. This led to no small amount of conflict, but more than that, the city's acceptance of so many meant for more accepting, kinder people as well. It was the very reason that foreigners and people with secrets buried in their pasts like Alec were drawn to the place. Tris was a generous city. It was where Alec had been born.

"We will be," Alec said. "I promise."

His words were filled with his resolve, and Lache nodded happily.

In the end, Alec signed the contract to rent the place at Aslund House, and told Lache that he'd move in the following day.

Lache looked down at the contract in his hands, and the bold penmanship of Alec's signature. Lache had been with the royal prince for only a few months. Even though he had left the knight corps due to injury and returned home, he still sometimes took on work as an operative for the intelligence division. This was how he had ended up spying on the royal prince upon the man's return to Tris. The word "spying" made it sound somewhat nefarious, but Lache's duties were mainly to keep watch over Alec and report on his physical and mental health.

In his preliminary reports before taking on the job, Lache had learned that Alec was indifferent to women, and only ever occasionally visited the brothel. Lache had watched over Alec with this in mind, and it was why Lache had never expected the man to fall for the so-called "celestial maiden." At first he had expected it to be little more than a fling, but it was not long before Lache saw how serious Alec was about her. He knew then that Alec was an earnest man, and one with a great depth of emotion.

And just like that, Lache found himself watching over the romance of Alec and his love, Shiori—who, like the royal prince, bore great wounds of her own. He could not help but pray for the two of them.

Alec had lost his mother at a young age, then been made to endure an unfortunate youth, and suffered from ill health to the point that he needed to be nursed back to recovery. Through it all, he continued to bear a great many wounds that had never had the chance to heal.

Shiori, too, had crawled her way through a world in which she had nobody to rely on, fighting and working herself to the bone to survive, all to live a life of her own.

The feelings that Alec and Shiori shared were not mere lust—the two were connected at the deepest parts of their souls, and so Lache prayed for the best for both of them, hoping that they would both be at ease.

Lache finished off the rest of the contract paperwork and turned his gaze out to the city at twilight. As the calm of night began to fall, lights began to turn on in the houses outside, and warmth emanated from all of them.

2

“Is this it? The bookshop you were looking for?” asked Alec.

“Yep. Thanks for coming along with me.”

Though Shiori’s eyebrows drooped apologetically, Alec was bright and happy.

“I don’t mind. I’m the one who asked you to join me for shopping in the first place.”

Alec had just moved into Shiori’s apartment building, and had asked her to go out shopping with him. His old boarding house had closed, and his former landlady was set to take off and begin life in the village where her daughter lived. Before she was gone, Alec wanted to buy her a present, and something for the woman’s daughter, as well. He’d asked Shiori along because he wanted her opinion with regards to gifts for women—but this was more or less an excuse, and the two were essentially on a date. They’d spent most of the

morning choosing gifts and buying food, and after lunch at one of their regular spots, they headed for a bookshop that Shiori frequented.

Bergenskjold Book Depository was located along the path by the park in the second district. Shiori did not actually know much about the current history of books, and how it had only been a few decades since ordinary citizens could enjoy the act of reading, but she did know that Tris—the largest northern capital—had a wonderful selection of reading material. Shoppers lined up in front of the shelves in search of books. Though the shop was only about the size of a privately owned bookshop back in her home world, for a place where the educational standard only expected enough reading and writing ability for basic math, it was quite the selection. Reading had become more common in recent years with the advent of the novel, but now there were also travelogs, essay collections, encyclopedias, and art books along with etiquette instructionals and even self-help books. Though there weren't a huge number of them, there was also a corner dedicated to children's books. There was nothing in the way of specific study materials for scholars or students, but there was more than enough for the ordinary citizen, at least.

It had been a few months since Shiori had last visited, and the elderly owner of the shop pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and smiled brightly at her. Shiori nodded politely in return, and took to looking around the shop.

"No blind spots, so I can give her a little space without worrying," said Alec to himself. He was as much Shiori's lover as he was her bodyguard.

The largest shelf in the shop was against the wall, while all the other bookshelves were shorter than Shiori in terms of height—someone as tall as Alec could watch over the whole shop with ease.

Shiori had come to the shop in search of a textbook on etiquette, because it seemed likely that she would be doing more work with the nobility in the future. While it was of course better that she learn all she needed directly from Nadia—who came from nobility herself—Shiori wanted to have something on hand that she could reference and review whenever she wanted. Nadia had thus recommended a book by a particular author, but Shiori had also decided that she wanted a cookbook and a particular children's book with illustrations by Annelie. Deciding exactly what she wanted to purchase was going to take a

little time.

Alec was also in search of a book of his own, and he told her to take his time, smiling as he returned his gaze to the shelves.

Rurii wasn't with the two adventurers that day because it was out on pest extermination. Bertil—the owner of Bread Studio Nilsson—had come himself for the slime after "black bugs" had gotten into his yeast storehouse. The slime would also be checking nearby shops in the vicinity for the same thing.

"Okay, I'll see you in a bit," said Shiori.

"Yep."

Shiori found the shelf she was looking for, then started searching for her books. She found the etiquette textbook and Annelie's illustrated book quickly, then took some time flipping through the cookbooks. She narrowed down her selection, then narrowed it down further, and finally took two books from the shelves.

Shiori turned to glance behind her and saw that Alec was still thinking about what he wanted. He noticed her gaze and turned to her, asking her with his eyes, "Finished?" She shook her head and Alec nodded before turning back to the books he was looking at.

"Perhaps I'll buy just a few more," Shiori muttered.

Shiori moved to a different shelf, reading through the blurbs of a few books. It was in the midst of this that she paused, her eyes coming to rest on one book in particular. It was a book of names, their origins, and their meanings. Shiori picked it up and flipped through it.

"A name encyclopedia... They have them in this world too..."

There were various chapters about this name or that. Some told stories of the gods, when a name happened to originate from mythology. Some gave explanations for names that came from flora or fauna. There was even one which discussed current naming trends and ranked the most popular names.

"How do they even go about getting the data for this?" Shiori mused. "The citizen ledger is far from completely accurate..."

It was all very fascinating, and Shiori found herself picking up and looking at a few books on this topic before she came to pause at a particular chapter—one on middle names.

“Japanese people aren’t really accustomed to the concept of middle names, but overseas you see them quite often. Here, you get the impression that middle names belong to those of high standing or the nobility.”

That reminded Shiori of Alec, and how he’d told her he had a middle name. It wasn’t something he used at present, and in fact it was hidden. He’d told her what it was as if it were a secret—*Frenvary*.

Intrigued, Shiori read on. Commoners didn’t have a culture of middle names, but it seemed there was once a time when everyone among the ranks of the nobility had a middle name. There were middle names that were only given to generational heirs, and those of old heroes or gods, as if bearing their parents’ wishes within them. Sometimes, women would take their maiden name as their middle name.

However, in recent times this custom had all but died out, and it was now practiced only by a small portion of the higher nobility, and the royal family. Even then, many did not make their middle names public. It was only the royal family who made their middle names known.

“The higher nobility... The royal family... So he really *does* come from a high standing...”

Shiori already knew that Alec’s family was of the nobility, but...

Gripped by a sudden sense of impatience and panic, she bit her lip. The next chapter she came across was about the naming habits of royalty. As it turned out, in a marriage of royalty, those entering the family were given a middle name as a gift. In the case of the birth of a child, it was customary within royalty for the father to choose the first name, and the mother to choose the middle name.

“The father chooses the first name...and the mother the middle...?”

Shiori had heard of this before, and very recently. Alec had told her about it. He’d said that it was a family tradition—for the father to choose the first name,

and the mother the middle.

“Alec...”

Shiori let out a trembling sigh. She closed the book gently and returned it to the shelf. She wondered if there were other families that followed the same naming tradition, or if...

“Um...” said Shiori, getting the attention of the shop owner, who was rifling through some paperwork.

“Oh, what can I do for you?” asked the man, his face crinkling as he smiled.

“Erm... Would you happen to have any books about the names of nobles and royalty, or any books about current events?”

“You mean regarding the royals and nobility?” asked the old man, blinking in surprise.

“Oh, well... I intend to live here permanently,” said Shiori, “and I’d like to do some study on the history of the nobility and the royal family. There’s nothing similar where I come from, so I don’t really understand it, but I feel I should have an understanding of it for work purposes. Preferably more recent happenings.”

The old man nodded.

“I see. You’re certainly conscientious, and that *is* an important topic if you intend to live your days here.”

The old man lifted himself from his chair and took Shiori to a bookshelf.

“Here we are. We don’t have much but...ah, this,” said the old man, going over a few books. “And this too. And this one is a very easy read. This one here is about twenty years old, but it’s still useful even now. If it’s names you’re after, the Henneberg Nobility Almanac is a solid choice. Also...this book details incidents and happenings regarding noble families. It’s quite interesting, but, well...I can’t wholeheartedly recommend it because it *does* have some content that borders on gossip and more what you’d expect of newspaper scandals. That said, it’s probably your best bet for grasping the lives of the nobility in recent years.”

“Thank you so much,” said Shiori, nodding politely. “I’ll take a look.”

The old man smiled, told her to take her time, then wandered back to the counter. Shiori watched him go before focusing on the books he’d recommended. She elected to look at the nobility almanac and a book detailing the recent history of the kingdom—it contained information from recent ages until the present, including the work of various kings, incidents of notes, and sections on families Shiori was familiar with like the Lovners and the Enqvists.

The nobility almanac was the most current edition. It was a must-have for functioning socially in the world of nobility, which was why it was updated annually. It certainly struck Shiori as a useful reference, but because it did not contain what was most on her mind at that particular point in time, she turned her eyes to a different book—one titled *The History and Happenings of Storydian Royals and the Nobility as Told Through Newspaper Articles.* The title reeked of scandal and gossip, and Shiori understood exactly what the book shop owner meant when he’d said he couldn’t recommend it.

“Gossip and newspaper scandal...” uttered Shiori.

And yet, perhaps this was the quickest way for Shiori to find what she was looking for. Which was to say that Shiori felt certain the information would be here, because she’d gathered as much over the last few years. She knew that some decades ago, shock waves had rattled the general public when there had been a disappearance in the royal family. There *had* to be an article about that in this book.

“Close to twenty years ago, when my father fell ill, a question arose of who would inherit his position—me, his illegitimate son, or my younger brother, his legitimate heir. Arguments and factions broke out around us and it got out of control—I thought that everything would be sorted out if I simply left the family.”

It was a sliver of Alec’s past, and one that he had shared with her after their expedition in Silveria. Then there was the story that the Lovner aides had mentioned—that of a fight to see a particular son become successor to the king. They’d said that the king had fallen ill, and the nobles then split into two factions—one supporting the illegitimate older son, and one supporting the

younger legitimate heir. In the end, the older son had vanished.

There were many points of overlap between that story and Alec's. Even the custom behind his middle name matched that of the royal family. Shiori had not been able to find the name of the missing prince in the nobility almanac, but perhaps this book of articles might be different.

Shiori took the book in hand and looked at the table of contents. She found the article she was looking for in an instant.

"'The missing third prince—absconded, or assassinated?'" Shiori uttered, reading the title aloud.

Her hands felt clammy as she flipped to the page she was looking for, then read the article's explanation of the incident. Most of it was exactly as she'd already heard from Annelie and her aides. The two princes—who'd ended up on opposing sides—had been incredibly close. The newspaper articles made the argument that, based on how calm the king and his heir were immediately following the incident, it seemed likely that they had arranged a chance for the king's illegitimate son to run away and vanish. The article also included that very son's name.

"Aleksey," uttered Shiori. "Aleksey *Frenvary* Storydia..."

Shiori's hands shook. The middle names matched. The first names, too, were barely any different. Even Alec's last name was merely the last three letters of "Storydia." The illustration that accompanied the article was unclear—perhaps to avoid giving too specific a picture of the person himself—but the physical description given in the article was not. Chestnut brown hair and sharp, dark magenta eyes. When Shiori did the math based on the date of the article and the prince's disappearance, she worked out that he would now be thirty-four.

So much of it matched up. The stories she'd heard from Alec and Annelie, and now the article in this book. It matched up so neatly that it was hard to deny the truth. There was one answer that everything pointed to, and it was...

"Shiori? What's wrong? You don't look well."

Alec's voice startled Shiori, and she snapped the book shut. Taking great care not to look strange or unnatural, she gently returned the book to the bookshelf.

“Erm, I think I’m a bit tired. That’s probably it,” she said.

She smiled up at him, and he smiled back as he put a hand to her shoulder.

“Well, we *have* been on our feet all day,” he said. “If you’ve found the books you were looking for, let’s head on home.”

“Yes, good idea.”

Shiori felt Alec’s hand gently lead her, and she gathered up her books.

3

As they began to walk away from the bookshelf, Alec subtly glanced at the book Shiori had been reading, which jutted out slightly from amongst the others *—The History and Happenings of Storydian Royals and the Nobility as Told Through Newspaper Articles.*

Ah, I see...

Alec chuckled. He knew from the title alone that it was not the most reputable of books. But he also knew, from the lack of dust and the clean, unfaded cover, that it was recently published. If it included more recent “happenings,” then it was sure to also include the incident which Alec himself was directly connected to.

In truth, Alec had been watching her the whole time. He had watched Shiori move to a different shelf after picking out her books, and seen her complexion grow pale. He had watched as she approached the old man at the counter, then noticed that she was looking at a name encyclopedia.

I wonder if she’s worked it out...now that she knows my middle name...

Alec knew how intelligent Shiori was, and had always thought that some day she would put it all together. However, she had worked things out much more quickly than he had expected.

I may have to talk to her about it earlier than I thought...however terrifying that idea may be.

Alec could not rid himself of the fear that once he revealed the truth, and

once Shiori's suspicions were confirmed, that she would distance herself from him. At the same time, he wanted to stay with her, no matter who either of them were.

I can't let her go. She's my...

Everything.

She was one of a kind. She was irreplaceable.

Once Shiori had finished paying for her books, she looked up at Alec. He smiled at her somewhat hesitantly before putting a hand on her shoulder and leaving the book depository.

It was sunset, and the evening, which came so much more quickly now than in the summer, enveloped the city of Tris. The sky began its shift from red to navy blue, and the stars began to sparkle in the sky. The scenery of the city sinking into the night was one of such beautiful colors.

The two adventurers returned home in silence, and Rurii—who had been having a casual chat of some kind with Lache after a hard day's work—was waiting for them with a bag containing its reward: a selection of bread and meat.

"Ah, welcome home," said Lache, looking at the bags that Alec and Shiori held. "It looks like your shopping trip went well."

Alec gave Lache a gift—the same baked treats that he'd bought for his former landlady—and Lache took them with a smile. Alec, Shiori, and Rurii then made their way upstairs to Alec's new home.

"Pardon my intrusion," said Shiori somewhat hesitantly as Alec invited her in with a kiss on the top of the head and a smile.

When he thought about it, this was the first time he had ever invited her to his home—his old boarding house had been rather cramped for guests, and he'd felt some hesitation about bringing an unmarried woman home with the landlady's own residence right there.

"Erm...well, I'll be in the kitchen," announced Shiori. "I'll get started on dinner."

Shiori had said that to celebrate moving in, she'd treat Alec to a home-cooked meal. She took off her coat and went to the kitchen, but her eyes were downcast and there was something dark in her expression.

Well, it's now or never...

Alec still wasn't ready to tell her who he was. But if he did not tell her, right here and now, that his love and his intentions were true, then he would only be worrying the woman he loved. Alec opened his shopping bag and took out a particular item, and with some nervousness, held it out to Shiori as she sifted through ingredients.

"Shiori, this is for you," he said.

It was a one-piece dress in an ecru color. The sleeves, hem, and collar were embroidered with snow violets, and stitched with dark magenta thread.

"What is it...?"

Shiori took it timidly in her hands as she asked the question. There was worry in her eyes.

"It's a traditional Storydian garment," said Alec. "In the past, these were used as wedding dresses."

The snow violet, a strong, robust flower that bloomed wonderfully amidst the snow, symbolized Storydian women. Though it was more common now for wedding dresses to be of a more elegant, southeastern-inspired design, in less affluent times, the simple ecru coloring and snow violet embroidery was the very best people could muster.

Men gave their wedding partners the fabric—woven in the year of their marriage—and their partner then did the embroidery. The stitching was done with thread that had been dyed in coloring made from snow violets, and all the women in the village worked together on the decorations.

All of the necessary materials for the dress—from the fabric for the wedding dress itself to the dyed threading—were a huge extravagance for ordinary villagers. It was for this reason that even though it was a wedding dress, it was essentially just a simple one-piece dress with a wide hem. However, for the wearer it was their sole luxury possession—an item made solely for them, and

one they could treasure for the rest of their lives. The dress was carefully stored away and worn on special occasions such as birthdays and festive events, and cremated along with its owner when their life drew to its end. Though this tradition had been common when the kingdom was poorer, now that Storydia was a wealthier and more affluent nation, there were only a small number of villages that still partook in the custom. Now, the dresses remained as a traditional handicraft, and were sold in shops.

Alec had found the dress when he had been at a shop looking for a gift for the daughter of the boarding house landlady, and the child she would soon give birth to. Making the dress his own felt entirely natural—Alec had thought then that he would give it to Shiori on the day she agreed to spend her life with him. He had never imagined that he would be giving it to her so soon.

“A wedding dress...”

Shiori’s eyes wavered as she whispered the words.

“Shiori.”

“Hm?”

“No matter what happens from here on out, I will be here, with you. That will never change, no matter who we are. There’s still so much I’m not ready to tell you, but I can tell you this—I want to spend the rest of my life with you, no matter what.”

Shiori was taken aback. She opened her mouth as if to speak, then shut it, and looked down at the dress in her hands.

“Shiori,” said Alec, “I know it’s not the usual order of things, but will you move in with me?”

“Huh...?”

Shiori was left once again shocked and speechless. Alec went on.

“I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want, and I’m sure your head is swimming with your own thoughts about all of this. So if it doesn’t feel right to you, you can say no—I won’t mind. I know that usually you’re supposed to propose first, but I think this is a great opportunity. We can live together...as

lovers.”

“Alec...”

“You...don’t really like the idea?”

Shiori still couldn’t find the words she was looking for. Alec put a hand silently to her cheek as Shiori shook her head.

“I’m so happy you feel that way,” she said, “but I just don’t think I’m the right person for you. I’m nothing more than a foreigner, brought up as one of the common people. And if you were to find out who I truly was, then maybe...”

If they were to move in together, and live together, her heart would transition to a place of no return. This terrified Shiori. But even then, she still did not have the confidence to reveal the whole truth about herself.

“I always knew that you were a person who came from a high standing,” said Shiori. “But I thought that as long as you never said anything about it, we could stay together. I know it wasn’t right of me to think that way, but now...”

“So you’ve realized...who I really am, haven’t you?”

Shiori did not answer, but her silence said everything.

“I always felt that if you knew who I really was, you’d worry and distance yourself from me,” said Alec. “So I couldn’t bring myself to tell you. And just like you, I too thought that if I just remained silent, we could stay together.”

Alec feared that Shiori would pull away from him, just as his past flame had, upon realizing that her and Alec’s standings would change. Living together as a married couple while straddling a difference in status was an act that required significant courage—and this was no more evident than in the difference between royalty and the common people.

The responsibilities of the higher nobility were as heavy as the statuses they inherited. It was imperative that they receive education and knowledge befitting their responsibilities. In times of emergency, they had to be prepared to stand on the front lines and offer their own lives. But common people, too, needed knowledge, skills, and the physical and mental fortitude to survive in harsh conditions. In terms of just living standards and education, the

differences were stark, and Alec now truly realized why it was that relationships between those of different standings were often avoided.

“If the silence between us was anyone’s fault, it was mine for approaching you even though I knew that we were of a different status,” said Alec. “But even now that you know, I’m still scared of admitting the truth aloud. Yet if some part of you still wants to spend the rest of your life with me, then I beg of you...please, accept this dress as my gift. We’ll live together as lovers, and when we’re both ready, we’ll share with each other who we really are. But if you never want to tell me, then you never have to. I don’t care if you choose to remain silent forever. It doesn’t matter who you are. You’re you, Shiori. But there are many matters that I still have to settle, so I beg for your permission—when I have settled it all, and when the time comes that I can tell you the truth, let me ask for your hand in marriage.”

“Per...permission?”

Though it was perhaps strange to ask permission for a marriage proposal, in truth it had been the same for Alec’s brother Olivier. He had been in love with the woman who was now queen—then the lowest in terms of rank among his prospective marriage partners—and he had needed to prove that his love for her was genuine. To do so, he’d arranged a duel through which he would seek permission to ask for her hand. The queen was the daughter of the lowest-ranking of the four margrave houses, and as a daughter of the nobility had spent a formidable amount of time living as a knight. Olivier had told Alec that in order to convince her, there was no other way than for him to show his resolve by challenging her to a one-on-one duel.

Among the royalty—and those of particularly high standing—a proposal was, in and of itself, considered a definitive engagement. So if Olivier had merely proposed, the wheels would have been set in motion regardless of his prospective partner’s feelings on the matter. Olivier had wanted to avoid such a thing by any and all means, and so he had deliberately put himself at a disadvantage, to prove that his feelings were genuine. Alec had heard that in order to best the queen—then a formidable knight—Olivier had needed to undergo extensive training to raise his abilities beyond the level of mere self-defense.

“I know it might be cowardly of me to say this when I still haven’t truly sorted out my own future, but my feelings for you will never change, no matter what happens. Even if you really did fall from the heavens, and even if you’re not of this world, I pledge to you, here and now, that my love for you will never waver.”

Alec brought the awkward and shrinking Shiori into his embrace, and lifted her chin with a hand.

“It doesn’t matter who you are, or where you came from. I met you, I was drawn to you, and I fell for you,” Alec said, his own face reflecting in the light of Shiori’s eyes. “I love you. I love you, Shiori. I love you with everything in my heart.”

Shiori opened her mouth to speak but her lips quivered, and all she could do was let out a sigh, which melted into the air.

“Shiori. You are my one, my only.”

She was his beloved. She was irreplaceable. There was nobody else like her.

“Alec, thank you.”

It was the very most she could muster, and tears began to flow from her eyes.

“Will you accept my gift?” Alec asked. “When everything is settled, I will have a ring for you.”

Shiori nodded, and clutched the dress to her chest.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you, Alec. I want to live together. You are so kind for accepting me as I am, whoever I am, and I want to be with you forever. And one day, I want to tell you who I am, and where I came from. Will you be there for me then...?”

Shiori’s words were like a whisper, but they rang clear. Alec smiled and nodded. The two adventurers hugged and kissed. As their lips met, it was like their minds and their bodies melted, filling their hearts. As they kissed passionately, they whispered of love between breaths, and felt the love that each held for the other.



When the two finally separated, they looked down at Rurii by their feet, who

had been silently watching the whole conversation unfold.

“Well, there you have it, Rurii,” said Shiori. “We’ll be living together, the three of us. There’s a very spacious bath too.”

Rurii lifted two feelers up high and waved them over and over as if to say congratulations, and jumped joyously around Alec and Shiori’s feet. Their laughter echoed throughout the room.

4

In the kingdom of Storydia, located in the north of the continent, sundown came early. It was New Year’s Eve, and by half past three the sun was already sinking. The veil of night fell over the city, and magical lanterns began to light up in the houses.

Zack watched out the window as people hurried home along warmly lit streets, and allowed himself a smile before turning back to his paperwork. It was a summary of reports submitted by adventurers and each guild division. He went through each page, and anything with an error was summarily marked and put in a box for resubmission (though usually by the time anything reached the guild master’s desk, it had been revised and was free of issues). As the final step in the process, Zack signed off on anything that had no problems.

“Done,” he said as he passed a sheaf of finished papers to the chief clerk. “We can save revisions for the new year, so feel free to call it a day. I’m sure the others have already gotten started.”

The clerk, who was around the same age as Zack, nodded and said, “Make sure you don’t stay too late either, Master,” before leaving.

Zack could hear the revelry and laughter as the clerk closed the door behind him—it was everyone taking part in the end-of-year party. Though it wasn’t clear who had started the tradition or when, at some point each Adventurers’ Guild branch had taken to holding a party to end the year, and it was now a tradition complete with its own budget expenditure. The Guild Master and other high-ranking people donated money, and branches in cities with a great number of adventurers held big parties. Being the second largest branch after

the royal capital, the Tris Adventurers' Guild's end-of-year party was, unsurprisingly, a lively affair.

"I'm just glad they're all having a good time," muttered Zack.

He stood from his chair and tidied a few reports on the shelves. All that was left now was to finish up tidying the locked shelves in the study next door. That was where confidential documentation was kept, including accounts ledgers, client address books, and private information. Among all of this were also records of incidents that the Guild's adventurers had gotten caught up in.

Naturally, all information regarding the Akatsuki incident was kept in this location. Zack took a hold of the confidentially stamped reports with barely so much as a thought, and flipped through them. The circumstances of the incident and the handling of those involved was described in great detail, but it was confined to only what had happened within the Guild.

None of what had happened afterwards was recorded—including, of course, what had become of the mastermind (and former guild master) Ranvald Lumbeck. The report merely said that he had been removed from his position.

In actuality, Ranvald had been at the heart of an incident so heavy that it verged on becoming an issue of international scale. There were only a small number who knew that Ranvald had been executed in secret. If any records existed regarding the man's demise, they would be safely locked up in the Royal Knight Corps' safe, or the private documents of the Torisval Margrave.

For a brief moment, Ranvald's end flashed before Zack's eyes. He felt the moment in his hands, having been the executioner himself. Even now, Zack could not forget the rage and emptiness that flooded him in that moment. He could not forget the anger he felt at himself, for not having seen it at the time.

"Shiori..." Zack muttered.

He put a hand to her name, written in the report as the victim of it all. He had taken Shiori in, watched over her, and at some point found himself in love with her.

"Your nightmare is over now. You have so many friends you can count on and, I imagine, a partner with whom you can spend the rest of your life."

She had a friend who had saved her from the very brink of death. She had companions who watched over her. And she had a lover with whom she could share her pain, and find healing.

“You are not alone. You’re our friend, you’re my sister, and you’re his...”

Behind Zack’s closed eyes, he saw her as a bride for the man he thought of as his little brother. Then there came a knock at the door.

“Hey, you almost done? Everyone’s waiting for you.”

It was Zack’s little brother himself, Alec. He’d taken off all his usual equipment, and was instead wearing a white apron and a bandana. The look was so unexpected that Zack burst into laughter. Clearly Alec had been helping Shiori in the kitchen. Sometimes when there weren’t enough hands in the cafeteria, he helped with things like putting out the food. Alec looked oddly at home in his “cafeteria uniform,” and Zack laughed heartily at how heartwarming—or perhaps how bizarre—the picture was.

“What?” muttered Alec.

The man knew exactly what Zack was amused by, but Zack still grinned in the face of his little brother’s annoyance.

“Nothing,” said Zack. “It’s just a surprisingly good look on you.”

“Shut it.”

But the frown on Alec’s face quickly eased as he went on.

“Finish up already and come on out. All the rookies are clamoring for S-Rank storytime.”

“Storytime...?” Zack ruffled his head of red hair. “Come on, now.”

Rookie adventurers and the young were always after stories from the A-Rank and S-Rank adventurers, but Zack was always a little embarrassed by it now that he was no longer active. Nonetheless, Alec gave him a few encouraging pats on the back.

“You might not be aware of it yourself, but you’re a mood-maker,” he said. “When you’re around, everyone’s a little more cheerful. So get out there already. They’re all waiting for you.”

“All right, all right,” Zack mumbled.

It was embarrassing for the guild master, but it wasn’t a bad feeling, all things told. He glanced for an instant at the report in his hand, then put it back on its shelf.

“Alec,” he said, as the man was heading back for the door.

The bandana covering Alec’s chestnut-brown hair shook as he turned. It was a look that, until now, Zack never could have imagined on the man, and it made him think that as long as they were given a chance, humans were capable of change in any manner of ways.

“You be happy,” Zack said. “The both of you.”

Alec was, for a moment, stunned, but after a time, he nodded confidently.

“We will,” he said with a smile. “I promise. But it’s surprising—Lache recently said something along similar lines.”

“Oh?”

To think that there were others who were also wishing for Alec and Shiori’s happiness. The thought made Zack happy. He flashed Alec a smile and patted him on the shoulder.

“Well then, I’m heading out,” he said. “You two make sure you get out of the kitchen soon too. We’ve got more than enough food even with what we ordered in advance.”

The cafeteria chef and Shiori were making extra out of the goodness of their hearts, but as the manager of the entire guild, Zack wanted to reward everyone, even those whose work happened behind the scenes. He felt bad for those who were working on the day of the party itself.

“No worries,” said Alec. “We’re almost done anyway. But I’ll pass along your message.”

“Great.”

Zack watched as Alec returned to the cafeteria, then locked the door to his office and headed out to the lounge where the party was being held.

Over the course of the year, some had lost their lives to adventuring, and others had left it upon their retirement. There was no doubt that some at the party would be mourning and lamenting these losses. But that was the point of the party—it was a chance to look back over the year, at both the good and the bad, and to applaud and commend one another.

Zack could hear joyous laughter as he approached, warm and bright. Much had happened over the past year, and Zack prayed that the new year ahead would bring much happiness. He hoped that a year from now, on this very day, he'd be able to spend a peaceful and enjoyable time with all those at the Guild.

It was with those hopes in mind that Zack stepped into the lounge, where all his friends were waiting for him.

5

"This is the last of the food we've prepared," announced Shiori. "These are salted, and these are a little on the spicy side. Help yourselves."

So saying, Shiori put a large plate on the table, piled high with thinly cut slices of potato fried in oil. The scent of them drifted into the air, whetting everybody's appetites, and cheers rang out through the room.

"They. Look. Delish! Grub's up!" cried the archer Linus, who was the first—and quickest—to get to the plate.

The rookie adventurers watched him with envy, listening to the enticing crunch as Linus stuffed his mouth.

"Linus..." muttered Alec with a wry grin.

Alec, for his part, began putting portions of the fries on plates and handing them out to the hesitant rookies. They were reluctant but happy, and Alec flashed them a smile before turning back to Shiori and those who helped her with the plates of food.

"Shiori," he said. "Isn't it about time you and the others joined the party too? Make sure you all get some food before it gets cold."

"Oh, but there's still a little cleaning to do..." muttered Shiori.

At that instant, Nadia took Shiori's hand and pulled her into the party, while Clemens and the herbalist Nils gracefully escorted the kitchen hands to a place to sit. Alec watched this as he took off his apron and bandana, then noticed that all of his fellow male adventurers were staring at him, smirking.

"What?" he asked.

"Well, it's just..." started the magic swordsman, Ludger, who ate a fried potato before pausing in thought. He then shared a wry chuckle with Linus.

Clemens, who had returned to his seat, sipped at a glass of wine—a weaker variety, just in case any emergency requests came in—and wore a smile ripe with hidden meaning.

"The hell! How could you do that to me, Clemens?!" cried Zack, who had somehow managed to extricate himself from the enthusiastic rookie adventurers. "Leaving me on my own and running away!"

But he, too, paused as he looked back and forth from the smirks on the adventurers' faces to the grimace on Alec's.

"What's all this about?" he asked.

"No, it's nothing. Just pondering on the fact that humans are capable of great change," said Clemens, taking a fried potato and eating it. "Mm. Delicious."

"What does that mean? What are you talking about?" asked Alec.

"I don't mean to say that you're unapproachable or anything like that, but I never saw you as much of a people person. You never used to be the sort of man to be considerate the way you were just now. And this whole thing with the apron and the bandana... I never imagined you to be the type to go that far for a woman."

Clemens was, of course, referring to Alec doling out the fried potatoes among the hesitant rookies, and his helping out in the kitchen—both of which were things that he had never done in previous years. In fact, when it came to women, Alec had almost always been on guard around them until he got to know them better.

All the men around Clemens nodded in agreement, and Linus and Ludger took

Clemens's words as a chance to get some thoughts off their own chests.

"Now that you mention it, you *were* kind of intimidating and distant when it came to women and the rookies, Master Alec," said Linus.

"Yep. I can get along with pretty much anyone, but Master Alec was a tough one to get a conversation going with," added Ludger. "Once we got to talking, I realized he wasn't as stern as he appeared, but it wasn't easy."

"Really? Was that how it was...?" muttered Alec, his head tilted. "Actually, I probably was reticent, wasn't I?"

He could see it more clearly in hindsight. He knew that he wasn't very good around women or the younger adventurers. And his feelings would have certainly been clear in his attitude and the way he held himself.

"It wasn't all of them," said Alec, "but I still carry some uncomfortable memories, and I really didn't like it when any of them came on too strongly."

Alec simply could not stand the passionate enthusiasm in the eyes of the rookies, hungry for advice, and the sometimes seductive gestures that women would make. It brought him back to his youth and the young nobles who would gather around him, hungry with expectation. In response, Alec's attitude was at once cold and distant, and this aura emanated from him, making him very difficult to approach.

"But all the same, my attitude might well have caused discomfort in the groups I was a part of," admitted Alec. "And if that was the case, then it's something that needs fixing."

Even though it had been an act, the songstress Felicia had hit him with clear seductive charm, and Alec still wasn't comfortable around such behavior. But now that he knew, he could at least change the severity with which he responded to it.

"I don't think it's had an impact on your work," said Zack, giving Alec a pat on the shoulder, "though I may simply be looking at it all through my own rose-colored glasses. If you can see it for yourself, then that's a good start. Everyone's got their weak points, and it's better to get to them sooner rather than later, especially when it's a matter of human interaction. It's important

that we sometimes take a good, hard look at ourselves.”

Clemens took another sip from his glass and smiled.

“Your kindness and consideration, it’s not unlike Shiori’s,” he said. “The two of you are together so often, it’s no wonder that some of her is rubbing off on you.”

Alec smiled at the kind words.

“You might be right,” he said.

She didn’t just fulfill him, and she didn’t just heal him either—she also had a noticeable positive influence on him.

I wonder if I’ve had some kind of positive influence on her too...? That would make me happy.

If it was true that they were influencing one another, and leading each other on a path to a better place, then Alec wanted nothing more than to be with her even more than he already was.

Perhaps sensing these feelings from Alec, Linus let out an envious sigh.

“Shiori has helped you become more comfortable with yourself, and you’ve helped her to smile more honestly. That’s so wonderful. I wish *I* had someone like that in my life.”

He let a yearning gaze wander over to where the women were sitting.

“It’s a wonderful thing to have someone to protect,” said Ludger, speaking with open pride about his wife. “You feel more empowered in everything you do, and...how do I put it? It enriches your life, I suppose.”

Ludger was, like Alec, a magic swordsman. The story went that Marena—three years his senior—was a childhood friend, and Ludger’s secret love for her was the reason he became an adventurer. The spear-wielding Marena had at first thought of him as little more than a child, but his passion for his work saw them fighting eventually as equals, and she began to fall for him. That said, the story was told entirely from Ludger’s point of view, which meant that there were likely embellishments.

Alec chuckled to himself behind his glass, then turned the topic back to Linus,

who was still happily munching away on potatoes.

"I'm surprised, though," said Alec. "You're good at what you do, you're a stand-up guy, and you're handsome—I would have picked you to be popular among the ladies. You haven't had any lovers until now?"

"Well...people tell me that kind of thing a lot. And women have approached me in the past too. But until now I haven't really wanted a relationship—work has been so much fun. But when I saw you and Shiori together, I started thinking that maybe a relationship could be fun after all."

Linus licked the salt from his fingers and chuckled.

"I see. I guess you never know what kind of impact you're going to have on people."

Meeting Shiori had changed Alec. The same could be said for Shiori too. By coming together, the two of them were able to face the pasts that shackled them. And perhaps, the changes within them could inspire change within others. Alec looked down for a moment and smiled. For better or worse, humans were influenced by one another.

"Speaking of impact," said Olof of the seasonal crew, who had until now been eating in silence. "Alec, you were famous at that brothel you used to frequent for your bottomless appetite. I hear you and Shiori have had some rowdy evenings, but she doesn't seem to be showing any effects the next morning. Are you holding back or something? I mean, there *is* a difference in size, and I don't know if she'd be able to hold up against someone with *your* kind of stamina."

Olof seemed completely oblivious to how racy his question was, and for a moment the joyous air in the group entered awkward territory. It was clear by the way that Linus and Ludger leaned forward that they were brimming with curiosity, but the more rational Zack and Clemens seemed rattled by the topic. Zack, who was well beyond the age of naivety, twitched in response, while Clemens, who was trying to keep his cool and failing, choked on his wine.

All of that aside, Alec frowned. He had no recollection of such events.

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"What do you mean...*what*?"

Alec crossed his arms and dropped into thought.

“We still haven’t done anything like that, so I don’t have the faintest clue what you’re talking about. Are you sure you’ve got the right person?”

“I am mighty curious by what you mean when you say ‘still,’ but I’m sure that I’m sure,” replied Olof.

“Right, right,” added Linus. “And didn’t you stay at Shiori’s place right after we got back from Brovito? I heard you walked out of there in the morning looking all sorts of satisfied.”

“*And* you’ve been staying over at her place a lot recently, right?” asked Ludger. “You can’t tell me you’ve done nothing at all, right?”

Olof, Linus, and Ludger all looked over at Nils for agreement, but the man was confused.

“Don’t ask me, I haven’t heard a thing,” he said.

All the same, the adventurers around them nodded.

“I’ve heard it,” said Zack. “I’ve heard her moaning in the middle of the day.”

Alec was now deep in thought, and everyone was waiting on him with bated breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I honestly don’t know what you could be talking about. We still haven’t done it.”

Alec had told himself he wouldn’t take that step until Shiori’s wounds were healed. Yes, he may have licked and rubbed and fondled, but he had no recollection of doing anything so energetic that she’d moaned in the midst of it.

“After Brovito, Shiori came down with a fever so I was there nursing her back to health. That’s it. If I looked satisfied, well...probably it’s because she agreed to become my partner, and the joy was right there on my face.”

But even then, things hadn’t progressed to the next stage.

“Hang on a sec,” muttered Zack. “But I *heard* it. I heard your voices coming from her apartment.”

That was when Rurii appeared at his feet with some meat skewers and poked

him in the leg.

“Huh? What is it, Rurii?” he asked.

Rurii reached out with its feelers and made a rubbing gesture at Zack’s back. Alec watched in silence for a time, then nodded as the pieces clicked into place.

“I think what you heard was me giving Shiori a massage,” said Alec. “That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“What..._”

Zack couldn’t believe it. Clemens let out a great sigh and glared at Alec. A short silence hovered over the group before it was broken by raucous laughter. Zack seemed to let out his frustration by giving Alec heavy slaps on the back.



“Knock it off!” cried Alec. “*You’re* the one who got the wrong idea in the first

place.”

Now that the air was cleared, Alec put aside the fact that the sound of Shiori’s voice during those massages had indeed gotten him very hot under the collar, and shot Zack a glare. Meanwhile, the group of female adventurers all turned to see what the laughing was about.

This was the Tris Adventurers’ Guild at the end of the year. Yes, the end-of-year party had opened up with some trivial and silly discussion, but that in itself was part and parcel of the fun of it all. Alec wanted to make the most of it, and enjoy it until they were all out of food and drink.

It was a year of building new relationships, and now a new year was on the horizon. Alec hoped that it would be one he could see through to its end together with the woman he loved and his companions. A year from now, he hoped they would all be talking over drinks just as they were today.

And it was with these thoughts in mind that he gave his older brother Zack—whose face was frozen with a sullen expression—a friendly poke with his knee.

6

Nadia pulled Shiori to a chair and had her take a seat. Shiori took off her apron and, with some lingering hesitation and timidity, took a look around. Her fellow adventurers were eating heartily and happily, and the kitchen hands who had been helping looked to have loosened up—they had started eating and drinking as well. It was only then that Shiori let out a sigh of relief. Nadia chuckled at the sight of it and put a plate of food in front of Shiori.

“You can eat too, you know,” she said. “Your work ethic and consideration for others is laudable, but you must know balance.”

“Oh, right. Thanks, sister,” replied Shiori.

Shiori’s eyebrows drooped. She was hesitant to sit amongst all these adventurers, partly because of her role as a housekeeping mage. Rurii—who had been happily wandering around taking the bits and pieces of food that people gave it—patted Shiori’s leg reassuringly.

“I understand how you feel,” said Bertil, the baker. “As a support class, it’s easy to think that perhaps you’re lesser than those who risk their lives on the front lines.”

Bertil had read her mind. As he spoke, he thinly sliced the bread he’d brought with him, topped it with cheese and smoked meat, and passed it around. His skillful hand was a wonder to watch, but Shiori was more surprised by how smoothly and easily Bertil made himself a part of the group of female adventurers. Admittedly, a few women kept their distance—they were unsure how to deal with the man and his effeminate tone of voice—but Bertil himself paid this no mind.

“I’m proud of the work I do,” he continued, “but all it takes is a gossiper or two to complain that your only job is being protected, and suddenly you doubt yourself.”

“*You*...doubt yourself?”

Nadia and Marena tilted their heads quizzically—Bertil did not look at all like

the sort to have such worries.

“I totally understand,” said Ellen. “Nobody says anything anymore, but back when I was a lower rank, I heard that kind of thing a lot. People would say I should be waiting on them and serving them if I was just going to take it easy on the back lines.”

“People really said that to you, Ellen?” asked Shiori.

“Yes. I guess there’s always going to be people who think that way because we don’t take part in battle. There’s fewer of them now, but a lot of older people are still very stubborn about it.”

In the field of magic, the healing of physickers was truly special. It was also an innate ability, much like the magic wielded by holy mages. It was not something that one could simply learn. It was for this reason that physickers and holy mages were extremely rare, and anyone with such powers was valuable, no matter where they went.

Ellen wasn’t just a physicker, however; she was a physician with great talents. And yet even she had been looked down upon. It was no wonder that Shiori, too, had faced discrimination. And even though she now resided in a different world, both places were the same in that discrimination existed in the workplace.

“Everyone in the sales department thinks of us office clerks as errand runners, and nothing more!”

Shiori thought back to the complaints of one of her coworkers back in Japan, and cringed slightly.

“Storydia is quite progressive on that front,” said Nadia, sipping from a glass of wine, “but it’s still not entirely free of discrimination, especially when it comes to women.”

Nadia’s comment sparked the gathered adventurers to voice their frustrations.

“Yep. Even when we do the same jobs, women are expected to do all the busy work and chores.”

“The number of female knights is increasing, but there still aren’t many who make good coin. Even though women are progressing in society, we have different body types—there are going to be days when we simply can’t work like men can, and that can’t be helped. Then there’s the fact that once you get married and have kids, the women are the ones who have to stay home.”

“I’ve heard that much has changed since Cecilia became queen. She used to be a knight herself, after all. But it’s still a tough problem. When you consider their point of view, I can understand where the men are coming from. Still, I don’t like them talking about our bodies like they’re weak points.”

“Yes, I feel the same...”

Women could, with training, build muscle and specialize in weaponry. However, women had their own unique circumstances to deal with, and this meant that for a period of time, once a month, they could not work at the same level as their male companions. This was a particular issue of concern for female knights. And though female adventurers faced similar issues, they *did* have things slightly easier—for one thing, they could plan their own schedules.

Enandel Trading Company had released a line of sanitary equipment especially for female adventurers, and Shiori, too, secretly used these items in her own work. Thanks to this consideration, female adventurers were increasing in number. That said, Enandel’s products did not make that time of the month any easier, and so many women still opted to take a week off from work.

Oh. Now that Alec and I are moving in together I should probably tell him about that.

Since coming to this world, and likely because of the mental and physical strain she’d been through, Shiori’s period was irregular. Some months it simply did not come, and so she couldn’t count the days and plan her schedule around her cycle.

But it’s kind of hard to talk about... I wonder how everyone else manages?

Shiori was thinking about asking Marena, who worked as a pair with her husband, about it. Meanwhile, Bertil seemed to realize that the group might feel hesitant to continue the discussion with him around, and stood from his

chair.

“I’m going to make sure the boys aren’t up to any mischief,” he said, and wandered over to the other side of the room.

Nadia watched him go as she munched on a canapé he’d brought.

“He’s so good when it comes to being sensitive about that kind of thing,” she said.

Yes, Bertil was an effeminate yeast nerd, but he was nonetheless a gentleman. And in fact, there were many women who adored him for living life not tied down by gender expectations. Unfortunately, relationships for Bertil did not last long. His job was demanding—he woke very early and worked long hours. It would not be easy to live with Bertil unless his partner, too, was truly prepared to marry into the lifestyle of a baker.

“Yeah, but adventurers have the same problem with short-term relationships,” said Marena as she munched on some fried potatoes. “We’re away from home all the time, our income isn’t particularly stable, and oftentimes our lives are in danger too.”

“They say relationships between adventurers and ordinary citizens don’t last,” said Louise Forsen, a veteran who now worked the guild counter. “And I understand that—thinking about pregnancy and raising a family when your partner’s job means they might not come home... It’s terrifying. But you can’t just tell someone to throw away their career either.”

Louise did office work, but she was proud of her career, and ever since breaking things off with a lover who demanded she quit adventuring, she’d remained single. She had no intention of simply quitting when this was a job she worked because she wanted to.

However, many adventurers began to feel the decline in their physical abilities as they hit their mid to late thirties. At this point, many either moved into desk work, took up teaching positions, or found other jobs. This decline could not be avoided—it was simply part and parcel of growing older. Adventuring work meant living on the border between life and death, and many began to think about next steps when they reached this point in their lives. There was one noticeable exception in the eighty-year-old man who was still

active at the Tris branch of the guild, but even he had opted to drop from A-rank to B-rank upon reaching his sixties. The man had said himself that he'd made the choice because he could no longer move the way he once did.

"Next steps, huh..."

Shiori intended to keep working as an adventurer. Though circumstances she couldn't avoid had contributed to her decision, she had also worked very hard to get to where she now was. At the same time, however, when she thought of her current age and where she would be in another ten years, she wasn't confident she'd remain as physically healthy as she was currently. What was Alec going to do when that time came? What was she going to do?

"Speaking of next steps, Shiori..." said Nadia, smoothly changing the subject to lead them all away from the somewhat gloomy territory they'd found themselves in. "I heard that you moved in with Alec. Is that true? He moved into your apartment building, didn't he?"

"Erm...yes. He said the place was too big for just him, so he invited me to move in..."

It was a sudden invitation, to be sure, and though moving in before the end of the year was impossible, Shiori told the women at the party that she planned to move in with Alec at the start of the new year. As soon as she did, the women erupted with cheer and surprise.

"Amazing! Alec just keeps riding the momentum, doesn't he?"

"Will we be counting the days until the *next-next* step, then?"

"To think that the two people with the hardest shells would end up together!"

"Wh-What?!"

Shiori was bowled over by the waves of sheer interest and curiosity. She realized that it didn't matter what world you were in—love would always be the most intriguing and exciting of conversation topics. She glanced over at Alec and found that he, too, was similarly surrounded and fighting off the questions of his friends. No doubt he was in the same situation that she was.

Alec must have felt her gaze because he turned to her for a moment. When

their eyes met, he flashed a gentle smile before returning to his conversation. It was just a tiny sliver of a moment, and yet it brought joy to Shiori, and she smiled in return.

“A lover... I sure wish I had one...” Ellen muttered.

The woman slumped across the table. Either the atmosphere had gotten to her, or she simply couldn’t hold her drink.

“Oh?” replied a wide-eyed Nadia, whose face then filled with a devilish smile. “And here I was thinking that you were so devoted to your work that you were avoiding romance.”

Ellen was beautiful the way elves from famed fantasy novels were beautiful, and she was one of only five physickers in the Tris branch of the Adventurers’ Guild. Many men had approached her with romance in mind, but she was passionate about her work, and saw great meaning in the act of being useful to others. She was so passionate, in fact, that she had left adventuring for some years to make the most of her abilities by studying for her doctor’s license. Any man who was foolish enough to approach her for her looks alone found themselves summarily cut down and refused by the woman, who could be terrifying when she was in full-on work mode. Shiori thought back to that very power and how Ellen had used it to give Alec a stern warning at Brovito Village, and laughed quietly to herself.

“I’ve been enjoying work so much that I never really felt inclined towards a romance of my own,” said Ellen. “But after seeing Shiori and Alec together, I started wanting something like that for myself too. It’s just nice, the way you two support one another.”

Ellen smiled and glanced over at the group of male adventurers. Perhaps she had her eye on someone over there—but even if she did, Shiori could not tell who.

“I bet there’s a literal ocean of people who would line up for a chance with you, Ellen,” said Shiori.

Ellen giggled.

“It’s not a bad feeling, being popular, but...I want someone who is serious

about their work. And someone who makes me happy when we're together. Someone passionate about their career, bright in nature, a good talker, kindhearted, who has a wonderful smile."

"I...hm?"

Shiori tilted her head. Ellen's expectations of her ideal lover seemed much too high, and yet the details she gave were strangely pointed. It was as if Ellen was describing someone she actually knew. The physicker herself, however, said no more, and merely smiled. It was only natural, in following, that the conversation flowed into the topic of everyone's ideal man, and the types of men they were attracted to.

"Hey, Shiori," whispered Ellen, after taking a sip from her mix of wine and soda water. "You be happy, you hear?"

Shiori felt Ellen's fingers brush against her hands, then felt a gentle warmth. A soft light came with it, and just as soon vanished. In an instant, Shiori's hands—worn out from all the work she'd been doing—were smooth and free of cuts and bruises.

"Oh..." uttered Shiori.

"You shouldn't *really* use physicking on anything that isn't a major injury, but today's a special day," said Ellen, her silver-blue eyes sparkling like topaz as she smiled. "It's been a big year for you, and I can't wait to enjoy another one together."

"I feel exactly the same way, Ellen."

Shiori smiled. She was so happy to have the encouragement of her peers. She spotted Rurii absorbing skewered meat, and the slime trembled with joy.

She was welcoming in the new year with her kind companions, and she hoped that they would all get through another one together. With that prayer in her heart, Shiori went on enjoying the conversation around her.

7

It was seven in the evening when the party came to a close. Everyone at the

Guild enjoyed the end-of-year party, and everyone pitched in to help clean up afterwards. Though some people had left earlier to go home and be with their families, others were preparing for a night out on the town.

New Year's Eve was the last day of the year. It was a long-standing tradition in the kingdom that businesses closed early, and people spent time with their family and friends. Everyone brought food and talked until late into the evening. When it neared midnight, people went outside to watch the magic lights that were launched in place of a fired salute, and welcomed in the new year.

The so-called "Rings of Light" that were launched by the Tris Cathedral's holy mages were second only in scope to that of the royal capital of Storid, and the blooming flowers of light could be seen from far and wide. Many tourists came and stayed in Tris especially to enjoy the end of the year in this way, and the streets were filled with joy as people passed back and forth on the streets.

After taking a leisurely bath, Shiori spent some time relaxing at Alec's apartment, and stared out at the traffic on the streets. It was essentially the middle of the night, but people were still out and walking towards the Cathedral for the light show. Though the holy lights were launched high enough that they could be seen from almost anywhere, it was said that the most beautiful place to see them was with the Tris spire in the background.

Fortunately, the skies were clear, and save for a few clouds, there was nothing to get in the way of the Rings—they would launch into a clear night sky filled with glittering stars.

"Shall we head out soon?" asked Alec.

He finished off his glass of mulled wine—filled with spices—and stood behind Shiori to look out the window with her. Rurii, who was on the window sill, wobbled happily, clearly excited by the prospect of enjoying the night outside.

"Yes, let's do that," replied Shiori. "Where should we go?"

"Given the time of year, how about we try the Cathedral?"

It was not exactly close, but it was nonetheless a walkable distance.

"Yes, good idea. I wonder if we'll see Conny."

“Who knows?” said Alec with a smile. “It gets very crowded there every year. He might be there, but getting to him might not be easy.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

The two adventurers chatted as they put on their cold-weather gear and left the apartment with Rurii in tow, heading for the Cathedral.

Perhaps Zack and the others would be there too. Or perhaps they’d all decided to enjoy the show from indoors somewhere. He and some of the others had gone drinking at one of their regular bars after the end-of-year party, and the place was located along the riverside, which provided a great view. Just as with the Cathedral spire, the riverside was another popular location for watching the Rings of Light. The bar was sure to be full on a night like tonight, but Shiori assumed that Clemens would have reserved them a spot well ahead of time.

Under different circumstances they would have invited Shiori to join them, but Zack, Clemens, and Nadia hadn’t wanted to get in the way, and so they’d left Shiori and Alec to enjoy the night on their own.

“Zack and the others were very considerate of us tonight,” said Alec.

“Yes,” agreed Shiori.

Alec put an arm around Shiori, and Rurii bounced around happily.

“Oh! Hi Rurii!”

The voice belonged to a young boy, riding on his father’s shoulders. He was the youngest of a family that lived near the Guild. Even kids, who were usually told to go to bed early, were allowed to stay up on nights like tonight and the Nativity Festival. The family were probably on their way to watch the Rings of Lights themselves.

“It’s so peaceful,” muttered Alec, as he watched everyone walking the streets.

His words alone showed he was happy to see such a peaceful sight, but there was also something sorrowful in his tone of voice.

“Oh, my apologies,” said Alec, realizing that he was perhaps bringing the festive mood down. “Until summer of this year, I’d been working for a number

of years away from Storydia.”

“Oh...right.”

He’d been away for four years in total. A little before Shiori had arrived in this new world, Alec had undertaken a very important request and left Storydia. Then, upon his return, the first request he had taken happened to be where he met Shiori.

But what job could have possibly taken so many years?

Had he been working in a far-off country?

“It was a bit of a difficult request,” said Alec. “I worked in a country that lacked the safety we have here. It was poverty-stricken.”

“That sounds awful...”

It had only been a few years since Shiori had arrived in this world, and so she did not really understand the circumstances of the nations outside of Storydia. When she heard the word “poverty-stricken,” it was the neighboring Dolgast Empire that immediately came to mind.

“The gap between the rich and the poor was enormous,” said Alec, thinking back. “Only a small portion of the population was wealthy, but for ordinary people, life was...well, it was so bad that it’s hard for me to even put into words.”

“Oh...”

Shiori did not know which country Alec spoke of, but she remembered then the words of Marius, a grocer who was born in the Dolgast Empire. According to him, the tax ordinary citizens needed to pay to accommodate the needs of the upper classes was extraordinary. It was so bad that his family wasn’t even allowed to eat their own farming produce. Instead, they were forced to subsist on a tasteless gruel made from weedy nuts and soft tree roots boiled in well water. Marius saw no end to the despair and made a choice—if he and his family were going to die anyway, then they might as well die in pursuit of a better life. Together with his wife, their newly born daughter, and his elderly father, Marius had fled the Empire. It was more than Shiori could even imagine for the usually bright and happy grocer.

Unfortunately, Marius's father did not survive the journey, but Shiori often saw his wife and daughter, healthy and happy, at their grocery. Marius now had a family of four children, and his days were as lively as they were filled with joy. The image of his smiling face, bright like the summer sun, flashed across Shiori's mind. She wondered if he, too, was somewhere with his family, waiting for the launch of the Rings of Light.

"It was a country in which the people survived on weeds and water that was far, far from sanitary. An enjoyable end of the year, like the one we're experiencing now, was unimaginable. Instead, it was so bad that families were forced to discuss how to thin their numbers so as to make it through another year. While I was there, over those few years, I don't think I saw more than a handful of real, genuine smiles."

Alec was careful about the words he used, but Shiori could tell by his face that things had been far worse than he was letting on. But what in the world had Alec been doing in a country like that?

Shiori placed her cheek softly on his chest, and she felt his grip on her grow stronger.

"The work was confidential, so there is much I cannot say, but it was a cruel and unforgiving place. It's so very peaceful here by comparison. This country is affluent and full of life, and I am proud to be one of its citizens."

"Alec..."

If Alec truly was a member of the royal family, then in him flowed the blood of kings who, over generations, had stood before the nation's people and pushed reform for the betterment of the nation. The king of a generation ago, and the king that preceded him, had both done such tremendous work that their achievements had gone down in the annals of history. These men were, most likely, Alec's father and grandfather.

Shiori glanced up at Alec's face, calm and kind.

"I am too," she said.

As Shiori spoke, she looked around at the people on the streets, walking with those who were important to them and filled with hope for the new year. The

streets of Tris were bright with the warmth of the streetlights.

“And I am glad that this was the country I fell into. I’m glad that I happened to meet such kind people here. If I hadn’t met the people I did, I never would have met you either. I would have died by the side of the road somewhere, or otherwise been sold into slavery.”

Shiori had come to this world with nothing, and the only reason she had lived and survived was because of the kindness and consideration of those who called the generous Storydia their home.

Alec was shocked by Shiori’s words, and for a time he stared at Shiori’s face. Rurii, too, trembled as if it had something it wanted to say.

“There you go again,” he said finally.

“Hm?” asked Shiori.

Alec looked down at her, and she could see the flash of something mysterious in the streetlights that reflected in his eyes.

“The way you say, ‘fell into.’ It’s just like when we were on our expedition in Silveria.”

“Erm...”

Shiori couldn’t remember when or how she’d used the words on the trip, but she realized that she *had* said it without even thinking just now. She had definitely used those exact words before she even knew she’d spoken them. Panic seized her. The words were heavy with meaning, and it was only natural that Alec would be skeptical of them.

“Um...erm...” she stammered.

But while Shiori searched frantically for an excuse, Alec chuckled and kissed her on the head.

“I admit that I *am* curious enough to want to take you back to our apartment for an interrogation, but...you’ll tell me someday, won’t you, my celestial maiden?”

Now, as he had before, Alec called her a “celestial maiden.”

Perhaps he already knows. Perhaps he knows that I'm a foreign being, from a place that defies explanation.

"Shiori..." Alec whispered, his voice warm and kind. "I already told you. Whoever you are, I will not let you go. And even though you've already realized who I am, you haven't said anything. You've given me space. We're two peas in a pod."

Alec smiled and dropped a kiss on Shiori's forehead.

Right then, the people around them began to murmur as white lights began to travel across the night sky. They flew soundlessly up, higher and higher, and finally they burst into rings, painting the canvas of the evening sky. The city was lit up, and the eyes of those watching seemed to light up along with it. Cheers rang through the air.

"Whoops. Looks like we didn't make it in time," uttered Alec.

They hadn't made it to the Cathedral, but the Rings of Light could still be seen between the buildings, and they were beautiful. But perhaps, for Shiori, the lights in the sky were all the more precious to her here, in the city streets where she could feel the life of Storydia's ordinary citizens, and see the Rings between the buildings they called home. The holy light cast its illumination far and wide, to believers and nonbelievers alike, and those who hailed from other places too.

"The first time I saw these lights, I was alone," said Shiori.

"Oh?" asked Alec, knowing there was more to the story and prodding Shiori gently.

"The Rings of Light. I had only been here two months when I first experienced the end of the year here in Storydia. So I watched them alone."

Shiori had been struggling to adapt to life in a new home, and her nights had either been spent fiendishly studying, or otherwise asleep with exhaustion. Nadia had been kind enough to invite her out, but neither knew each other very well at the time, and so Shiori had refused. She knew that the end of the year was an occasion meant for spending time with those dear to you, and she had only just arrived—she did not want to get in the way.

Shiori had been studying, but she went to the window when she heard a commotion, and that was when she had seen the Rings of Light. As the people in the streets joyously celebrated the new year with those they loved, Shiori had felt alone in her room. Hers was an existence cut out of one place and then abandoned in another. Her heart had felt heavy, crushed under the weight of being alone in this world without a single remaining connection to who she once was. Even now, she could still remember those feelings with painful clarity.

“The next year, I started watching the Rings of Light with Zack and the others. But it was still lonely—there were always a few people missing who had gone home or were otherwise meeting up with old friends. I always thought that someday, Zack and the others, too, would go back home or start families, and then they’d celebrate the new year with a different group. I felt so alone.”

After Shiori had realized that some people didn’t like that she, a rookie, was getting so friendly with veteran adventurers, and after the incident with Akatsuki, she’d become fearful of building new relationships.

Life was a constant repetition of meeting and parting with others. Shiori knew it wasn’t possible for everyone to get along with one another. People were different in all sorts of ways, and Shiori knew that this cycle of meeting and parting went on, over and over, before one met the people they could call lifelong friends. Shiori knew this, and yet...

“So much happened that I became scared. I thought that even if I became friends with someone, it would go sour. Building up relations with people requires so much effort, and it felt so much easier just to be by myself, instead. It was lonely, but it was easier too. So I spent most of my time with Rurii and Zack. But then—” And Shiori took this moment to look up at the gentle face of her lover, watching her. “You are the reason those feelings of mine changed. You showed me that humans can’t live without others, and that life is lived through mutual support. You helped me realize that the only way for me to stand on my own was to accept the help of those around me.”

Shiori took a breath, then went on.

“So thank you, Alec. Thank you for being born into this world, and for meeting

me. You opened my heart, and you promised to be with me forever. Thank you. You helped me remember so much of what's important. Thank you so much for being here with me, and seeing in the new year together."

You are my beloved. You are so dear to me that I would give you everything.

"I love you, Alec. I want to be with you this year, and forever more."

"As do I," said Alec with a smile, wrapping Shiori in a tight embrace. "Thank you for living. For meeting me. For healing my heart, and...for giving me the courage to face my past. I love you too."

He put a hand to her cheek and brought her face to his for a kiss. A voice nearby let out a startled "Wow," but it was quickly drowned out by the cheers of the gathered bystanders. They weren't the only ones kissing among the many people sharing words of celebration among friends and family. They were just two in a crowd, sharing a passionate moment together. Rurii, all the while, jumped around happily.

Another round of the Rings of Light launched into the sky, illuminating the city of Tris as it entered the new year. For Shiori, this place with its warm and gentle light was now her second hometown. It was here that she had been fortunate enough to meet her beloved, and she looked up at the sky, her heart filled with joy that they could enter the new year together.

"Shiori, Rurii," said Alec. "Let's make this year a good one."

"Yes!"

The slime wobbled by their feet, then crawled to Alec's shoulder and sat like a child on its father's back. Shiori giggled.

I know I still haven't fully put my feelings to rest, but all the same...I'm so very happy.

The evening sky was a gentle navy blue, and it was filled with an even bigger Ring of Light than had been launched until now. It was the peak of the performance, and the gathered people let out cheers, their faces filled with smiles.

I want to watch this with everyone next year.

They were like flowers of light blooming in the beautiful sky above, and she wanted to see them with the friends she now thought of as family.

At the same time, Shiori wanted to send a message to the people she missed as she gazed upon this happy sight. If the gods truly existed, then she hoped they could share how happy she was with those people. She wanted them to know that she had found joy.

Shiro, dad, mom, everyone...happy new year. I've been through so much, but...I'm happy. I have a brother here, I have friends, and I have a lover.

She would not ask that they forget her. But she was happy now, and she was surrounded by good, trustworthy people. She wanted all those who might be worried about her to be at ease.

It was a distant prayer for peace and good fortune—one that she sent to the people in the world she'd left behind, and also to the people she would spend the rest of her life with.

Alec's arms wrapped Shiori in a tight hug, and Rurii raised its feelers up high and waved them happily. All of them looked brilliant in the gentle light of the Rings above.

Side Story

Side Story: The Temptation of the Snow Violets

It was four in the morning. Alec awoke, thirsty, and slowly sat up. He poured himself a glass of fruit-infused water, and drank it in a single gulp. Shiori had made the drink herself, and he felt it softly soak into his body as he let out a relieved sigh.

Alec looked over at Rurii. The slime was occasionally twitching, as if it were in the midst of some enjoyable dream, and Alec chuckled. He turned his gaze on Shiori.

Her eyes—usually framed by her black eyelashes—were closed, and her mouth was slightly open as she let out gentle breaths. She was so safe in her slumber that the look on her face was entirely defenseless, and it made her look much younger than her actual age. Her body was wrapped in the ecru garment that Alec had bought for her—a traditional wedding dress embroidered on its sleeves and neck with snow violets.

Seeing Shiori in the dress he'd given her brought a smile to Alec's face. Just a few days ago, Alec had essentially proposed to Shiori, and she had accepted. They had known each other for less than half a year, and yet the feelings that had developed over that time were incredibly deep, to the point that they now shared the same bed. And as of tomorrow—or more accurately, given the time, today—they would sleep together every day.

Without thinking, Alec stretched out a hand and touched the snow violet embroidery along Shiori's neckline. The flower was a symbol of the women of the kingdom—it bloomed resplendently amidst the snow, and represented love and loyalty. When the bridegroom's collar and belt were also embroidered with the flower, it symbolized a pledge of eternal love for one another.

Shiori looked exquisite, wrapped in the flowers. And it was especially because the dress was simple—not covered in lavish jewels or lace—that it gave her the image of a quietly blooming, elegant lily.

The room was blue in the colors of night, but the glow from the streetlights outside filtered into the room through the curtains, softly illuminating the figure of Shiori as she slept. The loose, open collar of her dress revealed her neck, delicate shoulders, collarbone, and the valley between her breasts. Strands of her black hair, messy from sleep, hung over her milky-white skin, sticking to her body. To see her like that, and to see the contrast between the innocent impression of her dress and the sensuality of her person struck Alec as incredibly erotic and seductive.

Alec gulped. Shiori had no idea that in older times, the bride wore her wedding dress on a couple's night of consummation. Alec touched Shiori's cheek, and the smooth skin softly accepted his touch. Alec enjoyed the sensation for a time, then touched her lips with his thumb. Her breath on it was warm, and her lips took it in with a few kisses. She was completely unaware of the slight moan that escaped her own lips as she did so. Her actions were the very definition of inviting, and Alec felt his self-control suddenly wavering.

"I just want to take her, all of her, right now..." Alec whispered.

In truth, there had been several close calls, so to speak. As their relationship deepened, they had spent quite a few nights in bed together. On those occasions, Shiori's sleeping figure had, on more than a few occasions, brought Alec's self-control nearly to breaking point.

But Alec had made a decision—he would not take that step until the wounds upon her heart had properly healed. Shiori herself was also worried about the scars that still remained on her arms and legs. With this in mind, Alec felt it best to wait until the cloudiness in her heart had truly, finally cleared.

"All the same... I can't help it... I *do* want a little taste..."

If Rurii had been awake to hear Alec's mutterings, the sometimes surprisingly strict slime would have likely wobbled a message along the lines of *"If you're going to sleep talk, do it in your sleep!"* But the slime was off in the land of dreams.

Now feeling a certain racy naughtiness, Alec moved his hand to Shiori's neck. He felt the warmth in her thin neck, and felt the pulse that ran through it, and Shiori twitched slightly in her sleep, her brow furrowing. She did no more than

that, but the expression was so like that of someone in the midst of intercourse that Alec felt his restraint wavering.

Just then, Shiori's eyelids fluttered and opened. The light from outside blurred with the color of her eyes as she looked at Alec.

"Hm... Alec...?" she uttered, her sleepy words ringing with a slight lisp. "What's wrong? Can't sleep?"

She was still half asleep, but her eyebrows drooped with concern, as if she were worried that he'd woken from a nightmare.

"Uh, no... I was just thirsty," Alec said softly. "After that, I was just indulging in your beauty."

"Indulging..."

Shiori blinked a few times, then wrapped her arms around Alec's neck and smiled.

"I want to indulge in you too," she whispered.

It was so sensual a smile that it made Alec dizzy. His self-control all but vanished in that instant, and he could no longer bear it—he kissed her lips and slid a hand into her dress through the collar. He told himself that she had given him permission as his hand went on a sensual exploration.

He could tell that the skin underneath her dress, even covered by her thin underwear, was soft. Alec had once worried that perhaps Shiori might be too thin, but having held her in his arms so many times, he knew now that she carried her weight in all the right places. She was more of a woman than he had imagined.

And while he knew that the night to truly indulge in his lover was on the day that they both revealed their separate truths, here and now, at the very least, he wanted to explore some heretofore unexplored territory. And it was there, in his rushed impatience, that Alec heard a slumbering sigh. He glanced at Shiori's face to find that she was fast asleep, a happy smile drawn across her face. She'd been sleeptalking. Her enticing, sensual invitation had been little more than the mutterings of a woman asleep.

Feeling like his adventure had suddenly been postponed, Alec felt foolish for going any further and getting any more excited with a partner who was asleep. He gently straightened her dress.

In just a few hours, the first morning of the new year would be upon them. Alec would enjoy a breakfast that Shiori prepared, and then they would move into Alec's new apartment. Their new life together would thus begin, which meant that from now on, they'd be sleeping together. It also meant that on the nights when his heart fell into doubt, and when nightmares left him moaning, there would be a comforting presence by his side.

Alec told himself there was no need to rush. All good things would come in time. However, he also knew that his days of self-control, and days of holding in his more animalistic urges, would start here too, and he let out a quiet moan. It would mean days of Shiori's adorable face, and her sensual sleeping figure, right there in front of him. And perhaps, along with them, there would be her tempting and inviting sleeptalking.

"So it begins..." Alec muttered. "My days of mental and spiritual training..."

He would partake of Shiori in whole once her wounds were healed, and once both of their hearts were at peace. He had pledged this of himself, and yet he cursed himself for having given Shiori a dress that was to be worn on the night of consummation.

"Mm..." muttered Shiori, turning in her sleep and revealing the allure of her legs.

"Hrngh," grunted Alec, his restraint once more reeling.

That was when he felt a tap at his shoulder, and turned to see, in the blue of the night, a giant eyeball the color of the sea. Alec's breath left him for an instant, but upon looking more carefully, he realized it was just Rurii. The eyeball was simply the slime's core, floating within its lapis-colored body. In the darkness, it was actually rather creepy.

The slime crept up from the floor and stared at Alec for a time, as if asking him what he was moaning about at this time of night.

"Er... Um, sorry," Alec said. "Just had some things on my mind."

The slime seemed skeptical of his hasty excuse, but nonetheless gave him a pat on the shoulder as if to say, *“Well, that’s all well and good, but get some sleep.”* Rurii then promptly slumped across the floor and fell asleep. The moment had lasted forty seconds at most. The slime, too, had most likely been sleeptalking in its own way.

Alec let out a long, heavy sigh. He laid down, then wrapped Shiori in a tight hug. He could bear it, and he could endure it, if he avoided looking at her and just went to sleep.

Endure? Really, Alec?

The feel of her soft skin, the sweet scent of her shampoo, the lightness of her breath. Alec fought against everything that tried to tempt him, but in the end, he did not sleep a wink.

Afterword

Hello, this is You Fuguruma. Thank you so much for picking up my book. This is the fifth volume in the Housekeeping Mage series, and it has been made possible thanks to the support of so many. I'd like to use this space to thank everyone.

"The Eve of the Songstress," which sees Shiori and Alec's relationship further deepen, started online in February of 2019. This was before the world was hit by trouble on a global scale. When it came time for this volume, I was worried about whether or not to use a highly infectious virus in the story, given the state of things. Though the virus triggers the incident that Shiori and Alec are pulled into, it is not at the crux of the story, so I was able to include it without revision. This volume made me think about the difficulties that are sometimes presented when taking delicate real-world issues and putting them in fiction.

As of this volume, our two main characters start living together. However, for the two of them to become true partners, there are still problems that must be solved. The two of them both now truly understand the meaning of supporting one another, and can face not just their own problems, but each other's too. Shiori and Alec (and Rurii) have pledged to accept one another no matter who they are, and I hope to continue writing about the deepening of their love and their relationship.

In closing, I'd like to thank the following people.

Thanks once again to Nama-sensei for the wonderful illustrations. The cover is beautiful and bright, as the Sacred Night should be, and so is the opening illustration of the girls who are each different and unique, but each enticing in their own subtle way. My favorite illustration is of Alec and Shiori as a Holy Knight and Saint, respectively—I was so moved I even let out a gasp. Thank you so much!

Thanks as always to my supervising editor, who not only supports my writing, but also listens to my perhaps dubious stories of romance too. Thanks to Ono-sensei and the manga supervisor for turning the story of the Housekeeping

Mage into a manga. And of course, thank you to all you readers who are supporting this story—it's because of you that I've been able to get this far. Thank you all so much.

Until we meet again,

You Fuguruma