
Housekeeping Mage from Another World
Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!
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BY You Fuguruma
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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 6 [Complete]

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Part 1: A Place to Call Home

Chapter 1: The Darkness Lurking in the Depths

1

Shiori opened her eyes as gentle rays of sunlight drifted into the bedroom from between the curtains. The clock showed that it was just past nine, which in the north meant the arrival of dawn. It was quiet outside, with none of the everyday sounds of passersby and horse carriages that Shiori was used to. Most people were still enjoying the quiet of morning in the warmth of their homes, as it was still only two days into the new year.

Shiori, too, enjoyed the air of the new year—it had a unique, refreshing feel all its own. And it was all the more true this year, for she was with her slime companion and her beloved sweetheart. Shiori thought of all the days they would spend together in the future, and the nights they would share in the same bed, and her heart danced.

She turned gently to look at her lover, who was sleeping by her side. She put a hand to his cheek and gently kissed him on the lips. His name was Alec Dia, and he was so utterly dear to her.

“Alec...” she whispered, and just the sound of his name alone sent warmth through her heart.

Shiori stayed there smiling as her slime, Rurii, who had just woken, poked her in the hand. The slime had been with her for two years now, and though it was her familiar on the surface, it was also a most valuable friend. As for Alec, she had known him less than half a year. Her relationships with her familiar and her lover had not been long by any means, but for Shiori—who had come to this world with nothing—they were precious.

Alec and Rurii were her family.

Shiori Izumi (or Izumi Shiori, as she was known in her home world) was a Japanese woman who had fallen into another world just a few years ago. She had been pulled into what must have been an accidental space-time warp, ripped from the life she knew and dropped into another one entirely.

The world in which she found herself was completely different from the one that she was used to. However, it was at least similar in terms of custom and culture to that of early modern Europe—apart from the magic and the existence of magical beasts, that is. Perhaps this was a silver lining of sorts—it was a world in which Shiori could live a life not that different from what she knew to be normal, and in which she could still interact with those around her.

All the same, in the beginning, Shiori couldn't speak even a single word of the local language. She had arrived, quite literally, with only the clothes on her back, and had no choice but to start her life in her new home by learning to read and write. Her brand new life began from nothing, and it was the beginning of a long and arduous journey.

Without any language dictionaries to assist her, Shiori had started her language learning with picture books and communication through pointing. But when it came to the customs and common practices of her new world, there was much that Shiori, who had been born and raised in a developed country, could not easily grasp.

Though she was eventually able to hold a conversation, many still did not trust Shiori, whose appearance was similar to that of a race of rare and uncommon Eastern people. Unable to find work in any ordinary profession, Shiori eventually had no choice but to follow a more dangerous career path: that of the adventurer.

Through hard work, experience, and a great deal of practice, Shiori was able to support herself and live on her own, and this was exactly when she found herself at the heart of an incident that would change her life.

Shiori had reached the point where she was able to live on her own in her new world, but there was still much about its customs that she had yet to grasp. This made her prey, defenseless against certain individuals—many of whom set out to devour her. On numerous occasions, Shiori was approached by

unscrupulous types looking to pull her into shady businesses or to sell her because of her foreign appearance. The first time this had happened, the one who had approached Shiori had spoken so eloquently that she couldn't tell what she was getting into. It was her guarantor, Zack Ciel, who rescued her from that danger.

But Zack could not save Shiori from everything, and so in the end, she had fallen into a trap laid by a man she thought of as kind and gentlemanly—a man who was, at the time, her boss. He had used the people she thought of as her companions like puppets, and little by little, before she was even completely aware of it, Shiori's self-respect had been scraped away, to the point that she could no longer make rational decisions. Shiori's rewards for her work were stolen from her, and after the entirety of her meager savings had also been taken, she was abandoned and left to die in the depths of a labyrinth. Even her equipment was taken from her. Shiori had been so weak that she could not even stand on her own, abandoned in darkness so deep that she could not even see her own fingers before her face. To this day, the memory stirred in her a fear the likes of which she would never, ever forget.

From the very brink of a slow-approaching death, Shiori had been saved by a slime that hailed from the Blue Forest—Rurii. The slime had felt indebted to her when she had shared her food with it, and it had decided to keep watch over her. When Shiori had been left for dead, the slime had wrapped her in its gentle lapis-colored body and carried her back to town. Since then, the friendly slime had remained by her side, and it had offered some healing for her battered heart.

Zack, who had looked after Shiori since her arrival and helped her to become independent, vowed never to let such a thing happen again, and thus positioned himself as her older brother. His friends Nadia and Clemens, too, continued to watch over her silently, like family.

But even then, mental fatigue slowly ate away at her. She felt as though she had been exiled from her own home, and she'd been horribly betrayed by those she thought of as her companions. As such, she decided to close off her heart. She felt that to open it would only invite another betrayal, and that this in turn would only cause trouble for those around her. She grew weak and cowardly,

and though on the surface she was calm and gentle, within her lurked a great darkness which slowly ate away at her soul.

Shiori carried the burden of this darkness for as long as she could, and just as it was about to consume her completely, a man by the name of Alec Dia appeared. He was intrigued by Shiori as they started to work together, and little by little, the distance between them closed, until suddenly she found that his existence had taken root deep inside her heart. Alec accepted her—he accepted the damaged heart that she hid behind her smile, and the wounds that haunted her.

Ever since then, he had been by her side as her lover. More recently, he had invited her to move in with him. He had told her that someday, they would be a real family—a married couple—and together with his pledge, he gave her a gift—a one-piece dress decorated in snow violet embroidery, that in times of old was considered a wedding dress.

Today was the day that Shiori would move in with Alec. Their new residence was on the top floor of the same apartment building she now lived in, and it had originally been designed for families. As of today, Shiori, Alec, and Rurii would share a life together. And as of tonight, she would put on the symbol of the bride—the dress, decorated with snow violets, that a woman wore on the night of the consummation of their marriage—and she would sleep by the side of the man who had given it to her.

Could anything else have made her this happy?

When I first came here... No, even just six months ago, I never could have imagined this. I had thought that I would always be alone...

Shiori had never imagined that a person would appear in her life that she could love so much—someone she would give both body and soul for. She had spent more than a few nights in the same bed as Alec, but there was still a line in their relationship that had yet to be crossed. Though Alec had never said it in as many words, she now knew that it was likely that he was a member of the royal family—an illegitimate son of the past king. He had a complicated past, and had abandoned his identity to live among the citizenry. It could not have been easy, and there was much that Alec still needed to face and resolve before

moving on. Until he did so, he was not ready to accept the whole of his lover, Shiori.

Shiori, too, bore a wounded heart and complicated circumstances of her own. Alec had told her that they did not need to take the next step in their relationship until she felt ready. And when it came to the matter of Shiori's greatest secret—she did not know how much he had worked out yet, but after all, she was a person from another world—Alec had told her that if she never wanted to reveal it to him, she never had to. He had told her—declared, no less—that no matter who she was, his feelings for her would never waver.

This was the extent to which he, the person she held most dear, cared for her and treasured her. No matter what happened, he'd promised to stay with her, and he would accept her as she was. Nothing could have made Shiori happier.

"Alec..."

Her heart was filled with so much love in that moment that she leaned forward to kiss Alec once more, then stopped. His sleeping visage, which had been until then so peaceful, twisted in sudden discomfort.

"Alec...?"

She called his name but he did not respond. Instead, a pained sigh escaped his lips, and in that sigh was a word, whispered as though he were begging.

"Stop..."

He was in the throes of a nightmare. Alec was occasionally prone to them, and the moans that accompanied them were always distressed and sorrowful.

"Stop," he said, or, "Help," or "Forgive me."

This must be the same nightmare again.

Shiori did not know exactly when she had realized that Alec was plagued by the same recurring nightmare, but she was certain that it was something that he had experienced firsthand—something in the past that still haunted him.

"Shiori...!"

He called her name, reaching with his words as if to cling to her, as if begging her not to leave. Shiori gripped his tough hands in her own.

“Alec, wake up!”

I’m here, she said. *I’m not going anywhere*, she said. And as the shaking in his shoulders subsided, Alec slowly woke. His dark magenta eyes were at first worried and unfocused, but when he saw her in front of him, he let out a long, deep sigh, and wrapped her in his arms, his expression somewhere between laughter and tears.

“Alec...? Are you okay?”

Alec always looked like this upon waking from his nightmares. Exhausted and wounded, like a person whose shoulders were weighed down by sin, and who would face judgment for it. In his face was a deep, deep sadness.

“I just had the most horrible dream...” he uttered with a weak smile.

The dark magenta of his eyes was tinted with shades of deep regret and despair.

2

The dream always began with him stuck in the midst of a sticky, clinging darkness. His body was heavy, his breathing strained. The darkness enveloped him as if it were where he belonged, and once it had him, it refused to let him go. He struggled to break free, and behind him he heard a voice, telling him not to go. It went on and on, over and over, pleading with him.

“Say what you will,” Alec said, “but I must—”

I must go.

But before he could finish his sentence, something took Alec’s hand and stopped him. It was a beautiful man with a head of golden hair, and one who wore the face of his only living relative, with his mouth twisted into a grin.

“How awful. You are the only family I have, and yet you insist on abandoning me.”

The man spoke gently, but there was an accusatory tone to his voice as well. He was kind, and he was gentle, and he was one of the few who truly understood Alec. He was Alec’s brother, but now there was something almost

muddy in his eyes, and Alec knew that that look stemmed from feelings of contempt and hatred.

Alec gulped. As the man went on, Alec found that he could not move.

“You said you’d support me, but now you’re going to run off and live a leisurely life of your own? Are you renouncing your royal duties so that you, and only you, can live free? Is *that* it?”

Alec wanted to tell his brother he was wrong, but his throat constricted, and no words escaped his lips. All he could do was shake his head.

I didn’t have any other choice. I thought it would be best if I disappeared, so I...

He tried his best to speak his thoughts, but his words melted silently into the darkness. Left without a voice, and trapped in that shadowy grip, Alec struggled, unable to turn from the crooked grin on the face of his brother, Olivier. His smile was awful and wicked.

“We made a promise, but you have abandoned all your royal responsibilities, even going so far as to abandon the lover you held so dear. Just how far do you intend to go, betraying people like that?”

As Olivier cut Alec down with his criticism, a woman wrapped her arms around him—the very woman that Alec had once loved, that he had been forced to break up with. Her soft flaxen hair was done up, but her bangs fell over her eyes as she looked downward, her expression hidden. She did not even try to look Alec in the eye, but her words were filled with a resentful enmity as they left her pink lips.

“You tossed a hint of marriage in the air, but then at the last minute, you took it from me. You took the most valuable years of my life and made them worthless, and on top of that, you abandoned the glory of the royal family. You ran away from anything and everything. What is any of it worth? What you did then, what you do now—what meaning, what worth, does any of it have?”

Alec wanted to cover his ears, to tell the woman to shut up, but he was completely captive. And she was right—he was guilty as charged. He had fled from all his responsibilities.

As a youth Alec had been given the finest treatment and provided an education beyond what illegitimate children were usually afforded. He'd lived a life of luxury on the tax paid by the nation's citizens. He had done nothing to repay that kindness, and had instead run away. That was who Alec Dia was, and he was guilty.

"Let the punishment fit the crime."

Alec turned his eyes to where the voice gestured. The cackling nobility pointed to a dark-haired woman, hanging in place. She was dressed in cloth prison garb, far too thin for the cold of winter. It was his beloved, Shiori, and her eyes locked on his own. In them was despair and resignation, and on her face there grew a sad smile.

And right before his eyes, she was run through with a blade.

Alec wanted to shout stop, but there was no time. The blade plunged deep into the woman he loved more than anything else in the world.

Alec woke with a start and an almost soundless cry, blinking slowly until he recognized Shiori's face watching over him. The realm between dreams and reality felt hazy in that moment, and for an instant he could not understand what was going on. But as he felt the warmth of Shiori's hand, he knew that he had returned to real life.

Slowly, Alec's mind extracted itself fully from the world of dreams. He pulled Shiori into his embrace and held her tight. Her delicate frame was warm and soft. She was alive and breathing.

It's okay. She's alive. My beloved lives.

"Alec...? Are you okay?"

Her hand touched his cheek. Her fingers were kind in their softness.

"I just had the most horrible dream..."

Since he had begun opening his heart to Shiori, and as they spent more nights in the same bed, Alec's nightmares had lessened considerably. He had experienced the harsh criticism of those he knew in dreams before, but never

had they ended in such a way. The new year had only just begun, and Shiori was all set to move into his new apartment. It was supposed to be a day of celebration, but the timing of the nightmare filled Alec with dread—it felt like a bad omen.

He held Shiori as a way to shake off the gloom of the experience, and felt her hands wrap around his back. They soothed him with gentle pats, and Alec felt comforted by the slight scent of soap that drifted from her.

“I’m fine,” he said.

After breakfast, they’d have to start moving Shiori’s things in. Alec released his grip, and meanwhile, Shiori took in his expression.

“Really...?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

He forced a smile to his face. Shiori sighed with relief and planted a kiss on his cheek.

“I’ll make breakfast. Are you hungry?”

Alec nodded. He had no reason to refuse, and he was in fine physical shape—what he suffered from now was simply mental fatigue.

Alec was pulled out of bed by Shiori and the ever-energetic Rurii, and they sat him at the dining table. After giving him another kiss, Shiori went to the kitchen, where she took some vegetables and cheese from the cold storage and quickly threw herself into preparing breakfast. Just as a wonderful scent started to drift from the pot on the cooker, there came *another* delicious scent—that of melted cheese on the baguettes in the oven.

It was the very portrait of a happy home—a warm breakfast prepared by the one he loved. And though that joy was right there and clear in front of his eyes, Alec could not completely shake the gloom that still gripped his heart.

3

After breakfast, Shiori quickly started preparing for the move. She’d grown used to her place, but now she’d be moving to Alec’s new apartment, which

happened to be on the top floor of the same apartment building.

Because each apartment came fully furnished, the only things Shiori needed to move were her personal belongings. There was much less of that than she expected, and with the help of Alec and Rurii, they moved everything upstairs very quickly.

“At this rate, we’ll be finished before lunch.”

There were no cardboard boxes in this world, so it was wooden boxes from which she took her clothes, putting them in the shared cupboard in the new bedroom. Lastly, she took out the snow violet dress that Alec had given her. It was so precious to her, and the embroidery decorating it was the color of his eyes.

“Speaking of dark magenta...it’s the same as my bracelet,” she murmured to herself.

Shiori looked down at the bracelet on her left wrist, which Alec had given her as a gift for looking after him when he’d collapsed with a fever. The gold band had a purple magic stone in it. Both the bracelet and the dress brought to mind the color of his eyes.

“I feel like I’m being more and more dyed in his colors. It makes me...so happy.”

Shiori did not know to what extent Alec was actually aware of the connection, but nonetheless, she was all too happy to be wrapped up in such a color.

Shiori gently kissed the snow violet embroidery on the edges of the dress, then carefully put it with her other clothes. Rurii passed by, then, carrying an empty box, which it stacked with the other unused boxes in a corner of the apartment. It was also taking the paper off the more fragile items and gathering it all together in a paper bag. It was a very Rurii-esque way of helping, and the slime was nothing if not dexterous.

Alec, for his part, was unwrapping the cutlery and kitchenware. The color had since returned to his face. In the morning, the nightmare had left him pale as a sheet, but he seemed brighter now that they were setting about moving Shiori in. In fact, the smile on his face indicated he was now in a good mood.

Shiori let a quiet sigh of relief escape her lips, and began looking at the items that had just been unwrapped. She put the cooking utensils and the cutlery on the empty shelves in the kitchen, then lined up the various ingredients and bottles of preserved food.

Once that was done, Shiori changed the curtains in the living room and bedroom to ones she preferred, then covered the two beds in the bedroom with shawls decorated with traditional Storydian embroidery. Finally, she put her writing utensils in a beautiful candy can, which she placed on the desk. Once she was done, she peeked out into the living room, where Alec was putting books on the shelves.

“Finished?” he asked.

“Oh, yes. Literally just now.”

The wooden boxes they had used to transport everything were all empty. Shiori turned back to Alec and smiled. Rurii had been looking here and there curiously, but now stopped to wobble a message—*exploration complete!*

“Is that so? I’m done here too,” said Alec.

“Thanks for all the help, Alec.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s my pleasure.”

The two of them carried out the final wooden box, then washed their hands and wiped the dust from themselves. Then, without even really thinking about it, they found themselves back in each other’s arms.

“The place seemed so lonely before, but now it’s so pleasantly livable,” said Alec with a smile, looking around the room.

Shiori didn’t have many possessions to speak of, but Alec had even fewer. He owned very little aside from his adventuring gear and a few changes of clothes, and before Shiori moved her things in, the shelves had been largely empty. Perhaps it was something that couldn’t be helped—the last time he’d had any possessions to speak of, he’d left for a job which had spanned years, and ended up getting rid of all of them because of it.

“Now we’ll always be together,” he said. “Let’s make our time together

memorable.”

Shiori felt sure that here, too, in this house, they’d make a whole lot of shared memories to cherish. Whether that meant sentimental objects or just the time they spent together, the experiences they shared here would be precious.

“Yes,” Shiori replied, “let’s fill our life with lots of memories.”

They shared a kiss and smiled at one another.

“Well then,” said Alec, gazing at the clock, “perhaps we can have lunch outside, but then what? Shall we drop by the guild?”

“Yes, let’s.”

For most government offices, organizations, and shops, the first day of the new year was a holiday. This was true of the Adventurers’ Guild too, but as of today—the second day of the year—it was open. There were of course some adventurers who had returned to their homes, and others who were working protection for those heading home after the Tris Cathedral’s end-of-year celebration, so it was likely that the guild would be emptier than usual. All the same, the guild master, Zack Ciel, was sure to be there, and so Alec and Shiori decided to wish him a happy new year and inform him that they’d moved in together.

“Let’s take five and then we can head out... Hm?”

Alec’s eyebrows furrowed as he noticed Shiori’s hands. He brought them closer to his face and narrowed his eyes.

“They’re getting all roughed up again...” he muttered.

“Erm? Oh... They always get like this in the winter.”

Ellen had healed Shiori’s hands as a special gift at the end of the year, but they were already getting worn and roughened again. It was quite common for her, as even outside of work she was often cooking, and it got especially bad over winter.

“I have ointment, I just sometimes forget to use it...” said Shiori.

She could always have her hands healed through physicking, but physicking worked by speeding up an individual’s own healing abilities. If one relied too

heavily on magic for healing, their body would eventually lose the ability to heal itself. When that happened, even magic wouldn't work. In older times, when battle was more common, this sometimes resulted in tragedy. Physicking instruction manuals made it very clear that over-healing was to be avoided wherever possible. And in the case of rough hands, leaving the healing to the body's natural processes was by far the best option.

This was just common sense—or at least, it was *now*—but there were still some who weren't aware of that fact. Some went to the physicker even for things like minor scratches, and these patients were a great source of trouble for anyone who worked as a healer. Simply put, magic was not almighty. This was the very reason that people were still researching and working out the best ways to use it.

These thoughts ran through Shiori's mind as she looked at her hands. Alec sighed.

"In that case, let's drop by the dispensary. We'll have Nils put together something for your hands."

"Oh? There's no need for that..."

But Shiori didn't say another word—she could tell that Alec had made up his mind.

"Your hands are a sign of your hard work, but I just can't stand to see them in such shape. I'll pay—so just consider it a token of my love."

There was no way for Shiori to refuse, so she nodded meekly. When she did, Alec beamed with satisfaction.

4

Nils Aulin was a herbalist physician who ran the Aulin Dispensary. The place was almost always busy and full of people looking for medicines to buy, but perhaps because of the time of year, it was quiet and empty when Shiori and Alec arrived. The doorbell chimed as they entered, and Nils turned to greet them with an easy smile.

“Hey there, and happy new year,” said Alec. “Wishing you all the best for the new year.”

“And you too,” said Nils. “I hope the year is fruitful for the both of you.”

“Thank you so much,” said Shiori. “Happy new year to you too.”

Shiori loved this time of year. She had always liked sharing heartfelt greetings and well wishes among friends, and she liked how calm, quiet, and refreshing the air felt at the start of the year. Even though she lived in another world now, this fact had still not changed. It was something that made her happy.

“It’s quite rare for the two of you to be visiting so early into the year,” said Nils.

“Shiori’s hands are very worn,” said Alec, taking Shiori’s hands and pointing them towards the physician. “I’d appreciate it if you could recommend a good ointment for her.”

“Pardon me,” said Nils politely as he took Shiori’s hands and began to carefully study them. “Any itchiness?”

“No.”

“Any pain?”

“Only where the skin is cut.”

“Hm. I see.” Nils slowly lifted his head and smiled. “Well, there’s no sign of skin disease. But it’s clear you do a lot of kitchen work and chores. I know it’s cold, but to stop it getting worse, I recommend washing with cold water where possible, and keeping your hands well moisturized... And speaking of, I can recommend this—it’s an ointment that came out last year.”

Nils handled seasonal diseases and worn hands like Shiori’s rather often. He took an ointment from a wooden box that was easily within reach and opened it. Inside was a milky white, butter-like cream that wafted with the scent of berries.

“The ointment is a combination of water strawberries, which have wonderful moisturizing qualities, snow beeswax, and sunflower seed oil. It also includes elements that aid in softening the skin—the more worn your hands get, the

more likely they are to harden then crack open into sores. Using this cream often will help prevent that from happening. I use it myself. Would you like to try some?”

“Yes, please.”

Nils took a little of the ointment out with a small spoon, and put some on the back of Shiori’s hand. As he spread it over her hand, Shiori was surprised to find that, contrary to how thick it looked, it actually felt rather smooth. It wasn’t sticky, and rubbed gently into her skin.

“Wow...” she uttered. “It’s actually very light, and not sticky in the slightest. It’s like water.”

“Right? Even when something is a good moisturizer, it doesn’t feel nice when it’s too sticky. The smoothness of this ointment is thanks to the water strawberries. It’s very popular among housewives, as you can imagine. The scent of berries means that it doesn’t interfere with cooking either.”

As he spoke, Nils took some more ointment and rubbed it into his own hands. His hands were likely prone to wear and tear as a result of all the washing and combining of medicinal ingredients, and though his fingers and joints were a touch worse for wear, all in all, his hands were smooth and quite pretty.

“Shall we use this for the time being?” asked Alec.

“Yes.”

“And we’ll need some ointment for chapped skin too,” said Alec. “I’d like something on the strong side.”

Nils chuckled. Shiori didn’t know if this was in response to Alec’s overprotective nature, or for some other reason entirely.

“Worn hands are a common problem when it comes to work,” said Nils. “In this season I see a lot of kitchen hands, dry hands on people who work in laundry, and on farmers too. It’s perhaps a little pricey, but I have just the herbal answer for...hm? Huh?”

Nils stopped talking as he fished through a small cupboard. His face went pale as he hurriedly looked through the boxes above, below, and to the left and right

of his person. He went through box after box as Shiori looked on with wide eyes. Rurii, too, tilted quizzically at the physician's panic.

"What am I going to do? How thoughtless of me..."

The puzzled and worried Nils turned back to them, his eyebrows drooping as a pitiful look spread across his face. A few stray herbs fell from his hair.

"It looks like I used up almost everything I had during the snow wolf incident in November," he explained. "It's a herb that I rarely have to use, so I simply forgot to check how much I had left in stock. I can't believe I've been so careless."

Nils ruffled his own hair, frustrated, then collapsed across the counter while Rurii tried to placate him with a few soft pokes.

"Erm, well... Everyone makes mistakes," said Shiori.

Nils was very thoughtful and methodical, so this forgetfulness seemed very out of character for the man. Perhaps Shiori's words were no solace to the A-rank adventurer, but she couldn't bear to simply watch the man spiral into self-loathing.

"What are you missing?" asked Alec with a wry grin. "If you need it, we'll happily gather it for you."

Nils raised his head.

"Mandrake," he said.

"Oh—mandrake, huh?" said Alec, letting out a thoughtful murmur. "It's at least a two-day trip to the closest gathering spot in the winter."

Mandrake was filled with medicinal properties, and was used in a variety of different medicines. It was a plant-type magical beast, and considered a top-tier medicinal herb. The creature was about as large as a carrot, and spent most of its time in the earth, though it sometimes went walking in search of sustenance. For this reason, it was quite difficult to find, and on top of that, upon being pulled from the earth it screamed with such power that it rendered those that heard it paralyzed. As such, it was quite a difficult beast to handle.

As someone from another world, Shiori still had trouble wrapping her head

around the idea of screaming plant life, but Zack had done his best to explain the mandrake's cry to her.

"How do I put this...? It feels like the sound of metal scraping against metal, layered at high volume, right inside of your ear. It hits you hard mentally, and you're also deafened for a short period of time."

It seemed it was like the high-pitched scream of a woman in her death throes, and dangerous enough to leave someone mentally incapacitated and deaf. In other words, mandrake was anything but easy to gather.

"I know this is very sudden," said Nils apologetically, his eyebrows drooping once more, "but would you mind taking an emergency request for me?"

5

The following day, Shiori headed out on a mandrake gathering expedition. With her were Alec, Nils, Linus, and Ellen. They took a carriage to the village nearest the gathering point, and went the rest of the way on foot. The snowy paths they followed were surrounded by densely packed broadleaf trees, and located off the road by the Airola Marshlands in the southern part of Torisval. In this area, however, the snow only got to a few centimeters deep, which made walking surprisingly easy. The trees here were a kind of huge beech, and their interweaving branches covered the entire forest, blocking much of the snowfall.

As the party walked along the path, their rearguard—the archer Linus—stretched out his arms and spoke.

"We've got great weather and great traveling partners! Yep! It's got to be a good omen!"

Linus was nothing if not bright and energetic at the best of times, and he made traveling fun. Shiori was glad to have him along on her first request of the new year, and as her eyes met Alec's, the two shared a chuckle. Rurii, by their feet, bounced along happily.

"Indeed. And with Shiori along for the ride, we've nothing to worry about at night either," said the physicker Ellen with a smile.

Linus and Ellen had joined them on their gathering expedition, and had in fact been looking for companions of their own for sudden requests—Linus had been asked by a cook to gather ingredients, while Ellen—like Nils—needed mandrake.

Shiori was glad to have the two along. Linus was a former hunter with keenly tuned senses, and Ellen was a certified doctor and physicker. Where they were going, many of the magical beasts utilized poison, and given that they'd be underground, there was much to be concerned about.

"We were looking for people to join us too," said Nils. "It's a relief to be traveling with two healers and a veteran archer."

"Indeed," added Alec. "I was a little concerned about the prospect of me being the only one in the group with offensive skills. Last year we ran into a bear-bat, so you never know what you'll come across."

The gathering spot they were heading to was a cavern. Though Shiori imagined something cold and hidden from the sun, in actuality the temperature within stayed fairly consistent throughout the year. For that reason, the cavern was cool in the summer, and even when temperatures went below zero outside, it felt rather warm inside.

Known as Hortensia Cavern, the location's warmth in the winter made it a common hibernation point for magical beasts that were active in the summer, but the type and number of beasts differed each year. Apparently, it was impossible to predict. That uncertainty was one reason that the cavern was considered a difficult gathering spot.

"It's your first time, right, Shiori?" asked Alec.

"Yes. Is there anything I should be careful of in particular?"

Alec thought for a moment, and his eyebrows drooped slightly.

"Well, because it's such a cramped environment, high-power attack magic isn't recommended..."

Shiori could read between the lines of Alec's advice, and as a low-level mage, she cringed slightly.

“Oh, right. Well, *that* won’t be an issue.”

“Usually you’re looking at bugs, plants, and bird-type magical beasts, but they tend to be quite unique, so it’s best not to hesitate and to fight as soon as you encounter one. Outside of that, we’ll play things by ear—you never know what you’ll run into in caverns.”

“Right. Got it.”

Shiori nodded, her brow furrowing with thought.

“Bugs...” she muttered. “I hope we don’t run into anything with lots of legs, or anything long and thin, or anything slimy and squirmy...”

They were exactly the kind of thing you expected in dark, damp locations, and while Alec and Rurii seemed fine, Ellen cringed and nodded.

“They’re all rather creepy, aren’t they?” she said. “But in the winter, they often end up as food for magical beasts that can’t find food elsewhere, so there’s surprisingly few of them.”

“Oh, really? Well, that’s a relief.”

Reassured, Shiori patted her own chest as the three male adventurers chuckled.

“But when it comes down to it, I’m not particularly good with bugs either,” admitted Nils. “I’m better with them as long as they’re not popping up in my own house.”

“Our ol’ guild master wouldn’t fare too well down in the caverns,” said Linus.

“Yep,” agreed Alec.

The guild master, Zack, was well known at the Tris branch for his hatred of bugs. All the same, he had been on a great number of suppression requests that specifically called for bug extermination. Shiori had, in fact, joined him on just such an expedition, and she had seen how troubled he was in the moments before they departed. Still, pro that he was, Zack did not let his discomfort show on his face once they had gotten to work. Perhaps that was the mark of an S-rank adventurer—the ability to set aside their own preferences when it came to work.

“Zack really is good at controlling his inner demons...” uttered Shiori.

“Well, yeah, but, uh...” started Alec, who went on to reveal to Shiori a little of the truth. “Zack kills his feelings for bugs on the job, but it takes a huge toll on him mentally. Sometimes upon returning home after a bug-related request, he’ll be stuck in bed for at least a day.”

“For that long? But he’s so strong. I...I can’t quite...”

According to Alec, Zack was especially weak to bug-type magical beasts that were black, or had long feelers, and anything still in its larval state. He’d get home from a request and essentially collapse into bed, where he would lie there moaning until the moment he woke.

“I see...” said Linus. “Long feelers, huh?”

“Black bugs and larvae...” said Nils with a cringe.



Whether this was actually enough to leave someone bedridden Shiori didn’t

know, but it was certainly true that when it came to bug-type beasts, there were a great many that defied the powers of the imagination, in both size and form. There was even the possibility that they might run into bugs on their expedition here that Shiori had only ever seen in her bestiary.

"Ugh... Let's prepare for the worst."

"In any case, I've brought bug repellant with me, and I'll pass it around before we enter the cavern."

At Nils's words, Rurii quivered its own message: *You've got me too!* The slime was ever a trustworthy and reliable companion.

The team eventually broke off the path they were on, moving onto makeshift paths off the beaten track. They occasionally spotted wildlife and smaller magical beasts, but nothing that resulted in the need for combat. This area was apparently quite a safe hunting place in the winter season, and the local hunters' camping sites could be spotted in the remains of their campfires.

"I'd much prefer to camp outdoors, but it seems likely we'll be setting up camp in the cavern," said Nils.

"I'd expect so," said Alec. "But we've got an exceptionally talented housekeeping mage with us. We'll have to stay on guard for magical beasts, of course, but she'll make a homely campsite no matter where we end up."

"Erm... Alec..."

Though it was mostly fine because they were among friends, Shiori was still left flustered by her lover's open praise of her. She shot him a glare that said, *"Stop that, you're embarrassing me,"* and was met by a small chuckle.

"Seriously, though," said Linus, "With Shiori around, even winter expeditions don't feel like such a slog. I'm used to it, of course, but it's *so* different when you know you can end the day with a hot bath."

"I know the feeling so well," said Ellen.

"Right?"

"Ugh..." muttered Shiori.

"Are you still not used to compliments?" asked Alec.

Of course, she was happy to receive praise from her friends, but the truth was it still left her feeling embarrassed. Alec chuckled at her discomfort.

“Hm, but you know what? That housekeeping magic of yours? It’s remarkably handy,” said Nils seriously. “Like you, I don’t have particularly strong magic, and it’s certainly not at the level where I can use it in combat. I gave up on that route completely. But perhaps even *I’m* capable of doing some housekeeping magic. I think I might be able to use it for concocting medicines and the like, so if there’s a chance, I’d love for you to teach me some. I can do some cooking too.”

“There are others who have mentioned that they’d like to learn housekeeping magic,” said Ellen. “There’s no small number of people who feel bad that their only job in a party is support. They say they’d like to make up for what they’re lacking with housekeeping magic.”

“Is that so?” said Shiori. “Hm...”

Recently there had been more and more requests coming in for housekeeping mage work. Shiori knew that scheduling all of it was giving Zack a huge headache, and she’d begun wondering if one answer was simply to increase the number of housekeeping mages.

I guess there are others out there who are just like I was—people who lack special powers and have trouble finding work.

It seemed that there *were* other people like Shiori—those who had only a small amount of magical power, but who were also unsuited to any job outside of adventuring. She wondered if housekeeping magic was a potential option for these people.

There was much in housekeeping magic that required delicate control, and this was why ordinary mages were often *too* powerful—they failed when it came to precision. This made Shiori think that perhaps housekeeping magic was, conversely, perfect for those who lacked magical power.

“How about holding a small lecture next time you’re free?” suggested Alec. “You might find more people attending than you expect.”

“Hm, good idea,” replied Shiori. “I’ll think about it.”

Nils then added that he'd love for her to inform him of the date and time if she ever did so.

"Oh—looks like we might see the birth of a second housekeeping mage," said Linus. "I imagine with Nils we'll see more in the way of herbal cuisine, no?"

"I like the sound of that," added Ellen. "Maybe it would help us even more with physical recovery... Though perhaps not everyone will like the taste."

Everyone laughed at Linus's words, which, for all they knew, might actually one day come true. The laughter helped to calm everyone's nerves, and Rurii happily bounced along with them.

The party went along chatting until they noticed a gaping hole between the trees—the entrance to their gathering spot, the Hortensia Cavern. The entrance was surrounded by rockface, and it framed a pitch-black dark hole that seemed to warn people away from entering.

"All right, time for bug repellant," said Nils. "Hang it from your belts, please."

Nils handed them all small cloth bags with leather straps, which they put on their belts as directed. The bags gave off the slight scent of mint as they swayed. It was quite pleasant for humans, but perhaps a different story when it came to bugs.

"Well then, shall we?" asked Alec.

The party lit up their magical lanterns and shone them towards the darkness of the cavern entrance. With that to guide them, they stepped inside.

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The inside of the cavern opened into a passageway of pitch-black bedrock. The path forward continued for about ten minutes before it split off into different forks. Perhaps because they were so close to the entrance of the cavern, there was nothing that could be gathered in the vicinity, so the party headed deeper inside.

Located in Torisval's southern region, Hortensia Cavern was a total length of one thousand five hundred meters, which made it a cave of considerable scope. The passageway from the entrance was quite wide and comfortably walkable. It must have been about ten meters long and ten meters tall. Deeper in, however, the passageway broke off into a complicated series of splitting paths that made the cavern very labyrinthine. Without a guide or a map, getting lost was inevitable. The abundance of medicinal herbs, however, made the cavern an oft-traveled spot for herbalists.

"What makes this particular cavern an ordeal is that protection is a necessity," explained Nils. "Herbs grow in abundance, but dangers also abound."

The mandrake plant could sometimes be found under the snow, but this was relatively uncommon, and trying to gather anything in the heavy snow seasons wasn't easy. That was why many opted to visit Hortensia Cavern. Its wide passageways were easy to traverse, and it was dotted with openings by which one could escape back to the surface. It was a popular gathering spot among herbalists.

However, most mandrakes made their homes near the habitats of dangerous magical beasts, so protection on gathering expeditions was a necessity. Looking at it from this perspective, it was no wonder that the mandrake was considered a valuable and expensive medicinal ingredient.

"I'm assuming you have a gathering spot in mind?" asked Alec. "There are quite a few, yes?"

"Yes," replied Nils. "There are a few places near the entrance of the cavern that I'd like to try first."

Listening to Alec and Nils, Shiori tilted her head. She was puzzled—she had thought that there would be fewer gathering points because of how valuable mandrake was.

“Are there really that many gathering spots?” she asked.

“There are. The conditions in the cavern are particularly good for them,” said Alec.

“Mandrakes are often found deep in the forest or in caverns, where there’s only a small amount of sunlight,” added Nils. “In forests, you find them where the sunlight filters through the trees, and in caverns, they live where the sunlight breaks through holes in the ceiling. Hortensia Cavern has many such spots, and so mandrakes are not usually hard to come by.”

“Wow... I see. So that’s how it works.”

Mandrakes tended to live in small packs in the ground. As a pack consisted of anywhere from two to ten individuals, going on a gathering expedition usually meant visiting at least a few gathering spots.

“I want to look for other ingredients, so we may need to make a few stops along the way. Hope you don’t mind!” said Linus.

“That goes for me too,” added Ellen. “As for mandrakes, I’d like to go home with at least two of them.”

Unsurprisingly, nobody had an issue with these requests.

There were almost no magical beasts around the entrance of the cavern, and inside, the party arrived at the first junction without issue. The party was certainly powerful, for one thing, but perhaps it was also thanks to the bug repellant that Nils had passed around. Though Shiori felt the presence of bug-type magical beasts, she never actually saw any they needed to deal with. In this way, the party talked among themselves until they reached a point where the passageway broke off into three separate paths.

“Three ways to go... Which way are you thinking, Nils?” asked Alec.

Nils replied immediately.

“The one on the far right. The leftmost path is a dead end with only one

gathering point. It's also quite a trek, which makes it something of a pain. The middle path meets with the path on the right, but the right-hand side offers more gathering spots. We're looking for quantity, so we'll go right."

Nils looked quite excited, and readied his knapsack, which was filled with his gathering tools.

"Speaking of which, how does one go about gathering mandrakes?" asked Shiori. "Everyone says they scream when you pull them from the ground."

"Ah, that," said Nils. "It's easy—you just don't pull them out."

"Sorry?" asked Shiori, confused by the answer.

"Mandrakes only scream when they are pulled from the earth by their leaves. That means all you have to do is dig up the earth around them."

"Really...? That's it?"

Shiori couldn't believe it. Nils laughed at the look of surprise on her face.

"Yes, that's it. Surprising, isn't it?"

"Yes. I thought there'd be a more specialized technique or something of that nature."

Shiori didn't think her pocket bestiary included that particular detail, so she made a mental note to write it in later.

"This gathering method was only discovered quite recently," said Nils. "When I was just a rookie, we still didn't know what actually made the mandrake scream. So professional gatherers often used magical beast familiars that were hard of hearing. In far older times...slaves were made to pull up mandrakes with only earplugs for protection..."

"Oh my..." uttered Shiori.

She had heard that the scream of the mandrake was of such power that earplugs offered little, if any, protection. It was shocking to her that such inhumane methods existed, but Alec explained that it had been used in the days of the Empire, and had since been abandoned in Storydia. Which was also to say that, in the Dolgast Empire, where slavery still existed, it could very well still be in practice.

Shiori's expression clouded at the thought, and Alec placed a hand on her shoulder.

"The rebel forces emerged victorious in the uprising," he said. "The person who leads them is of fine character, and I expect that slavery will be abolished soon enough."

"I do hope so."

Shiori couldn't help but think back to the last job she had done with Akatsuki and their client. The man was one of the Empire's high nobility, and Shiori no longer clearly remembered what he looked like. Nevertheless, she still remembered how arrogant he had been, both to his servants and to her party. Shiori had been in horrible shape at the time, dressed in threadbare equipment, and he had treated her no better than a lowly maid.

"She's little more than a cook. Leave her. Anyone can see that she doesn't have much longer, no?"

He'd spoken the words as if he had used and discarded countless slaves in the past, and Shiori's companions had agreed. Shiori would probably never forget that moment for as long as she lived.

But what had happened to that Imperial? The citizens had risen up in the Empire, and they had swarmed the Imperial capital. It was almost guaranteed that their former client had been taken in by the rebel forces, which meant that he would never use a slave ever again. Shiori hoped this was the case—she did not want anyone else to suffer misfortune like her own.

Perhaps because their companions were so nearby, Alec avoided his usual public displays of affection. All the same, she could feel the consideration in his eyes—they were filled with worry, and their gentle gaze sent her a question: *Are you okay?*

I'm fine, she answered silently, and Alec smiled at her.

"That's the very reason that mandrakes were once so highly valued as a resource," said Nils. "These days you don't have to be a specialist to gather them, so even though they're still quite expensive, you can find them at a reasonable price if you're willing to search."

“I’m glad for that,” said Ellen.

“Unfortunately, the problem now is one of overharvesting,” said Nils.

“Overharvesting?”

“Yes. Some people use earth magic to just dig up entire packs of mandrakes, roots and all, and... Oh my. That might be exactly what we’re looking at...”

Nils stopped talking and let out a groan. Further along the passageway, where a dull light shone, the ground had been dug up. The party ran over to the gathering spot and was shocked by what they saw.

“This is the easiest spot to get to from the village, so this isn’t entirely unheard of...”

“They certainly didn’t even try to be neat and tidy about it...”

The space had, for all intents and purposes, been turned upside down. Rocks, soil, and withered plants and mushrooms were scattered everywhere. Between them all were what looked to be male footprints.

“Based on the state of the soil and the plant life...I’d guess that quite some time has passed,” said Nils.

“Yep. At least two or three weeks, by my estimation,” added Alec.

Linus kneeled to pick up a withered mushroom, which had been dug out down to its roots.

“This is awful,” he said. “You can eat these. They’re good!”

“Those, and these too,” said Ellen. “And this is a medicinal herb... Who *were* these idiots?!”

Though usually calm and composed, Ellen could have something of an enraged demonic side to her—she could be utterly terrifying when she was in work mode. Rurii, too, poked at a withered herb and trembled.

“They were only looking for mandrakes, clearly,” said Nils. “They’ve gotten cheaper in recent times, but selling them can still earn you a decent sum. That said, anyone with more than a little knowledge would still dig them up individually...”

“You mean it was laymen who did this?” asked Shiori.

“It certainly could have been. Unfortunately, there *are* some herbalists who think only of their own personal gain.”

Using magic to force the earth up like this would have certainly damaged the mandrakes that these people were looking for. Much like the plants that were scattered across the floor, the mandrakes may well have been in pieces.

“Damaged goods will naturally sell for a lower price,” said Nils, “but some people will happily grind them into powder and process them to sell at a lower price on the market. Other times, the seller may have a relationship with a poorer herbalist... There’s any number of reasons they could have chosen this method. But the problem with digging them all up like this is that you eliminate any chance of new crops—the mandrake has a certain level of intelligence, and they’ll flee if they know a place is too dangerous to stay. I dare say we won’t be able to use this gathering spot for quite some time.”

There were certain unspoken rules when it came to gathering herbs and materials. Don’t take too much from a single area. If a gathering spot is becoming sparse, don’t touch it—let it regrow. When a plant has roots, leave those roots. It was not so different from the way gathering mountain vegetables and mushrooms worked in Shiori’s home world.

“I guess there are unscrupulous types wherever you go,” muttered Shiori.

Alec chuckled.

“So the same sort of thing happens where you come from?” he asked.

“Yes. Sometimes, people who only think about themselves completely uproot the best gathering spots.”

“I always thought of your hometown as a kind of utopia, but you get unsavory types there too, huh?”

Shiori couldn’t help but wonder exactly what sort of an image Alec had of Japan. She giggled to herself.

“It’s an ordinary country,” she said, “with ordinary people. Some of them are good, and some of them are bad.”

As she spoke, Shiori sent out her search magic further down the passageway. She met nothing but magical beasts. There were no signs of fellow adventurers or suspicious types. She told Alec as much, and he nodded.

“As much as I’d like to teach those overharvesters a lesson,” he sighed, “it’s not like there’s a clear punishment for what they’ve done. And it might be better for us not to meet any trouble, like we did at the tower.”

“Good point...”

When Shiori and Alec had gone to Silveria Tower, they’d run into a trio of outlaws, and it had caused them rather a lot of trouble.

After searching the area for a short time, Nils and Ellen got to their feet, disappointed.

“Nothing we can do,” said Nils. “Let’s move on, shall we?”

There was a good chance that the people who had done the overharvesting here had also done so deeper into the cavern. That in turn would mean the party would have to venture even deeper into its depths. Everyone mentally readied themselves for what was almost sure to become a longer expedition than they’d thought.

And, just as Nils expected, the second and third gathering spots had been dug up completely too. He let out a quiet sigh while Ellen’s face morphed into that of an enraged demon. Linus grimaced at the tragic sight of the gathering spots, and then his eyes nearly bulged from his face as he noticed the rage emanating from Ellen.

“A great many herbs had to be used during the incident in Brovito,” said Nils. “The people who did this likely knew they could find buyers, even if the quality of the mandrakes was poor.”

When the snow wolves had attacked Brovito Village, it resulted in around one hundred and seventy injured, and because physicking magics wouldn’t help some of those people in time, a huge amount of medicinal herbs had been used. Of the patients who had lacerations or were bitten, at least half were in critical condition, and the physicians dispatched to Brovito were forced to reach into their private stock of medicines in order to help them. As such, mandrake

was used in great quantities—and not just for its efficacy on wounds, but because it could be boiled to produce an effective analeptic, to help people recover their stamina.

The most valuable medicinal herbs took time and money to gather. When it came to how much one needed, exactly, in some cases it was actually cheaper just to buy them in bulk on the market. Nils's best guess was that perhaps the overharvesters had exactly that sort of customer in mind.

"But I just can't wrap my head around the idea of people who would look to profit from the misfortune of others..." he said.

"They're the literal worst!" said Ellen, her rage still bubbling. "If we find them *anywhere* around here I will chop them into pieces!"

"What?!" cried a shocked Linus, who let out a small sigh before flashing his usual cheerful smile. "Either way, there's nothing we can do about it, so let's just keep on keeping on and hope that there's something rarer waiting for us further down."

"I suppose you're right," said Nils, empowered by Linus's smile. He smiled to himself, then added, "I apologize, but the deeper we go, the more likely it is we'll run into dangerous magical beasts."

"Don't let it bother you," said Shiori. "That's just adventuring—preparing for the unexpected."

"That's it in a nutshell," said Alec in agreement. "Let's keep on going."

The disheartened party settled back into a positive mindset, and marched on further into the cavern.

As they continued their search, the party stopped a few times so that Linus could gather things like mushrooms and strange wandering jellyfish.

"That said..." Linus uttered with a wry grin, "I can't help but wonder if *everything* has run into the cavern's depths."

He wasn't just talking about the plant life that was rooted to wherever it was located—the party had come quite a ways but had yet to see much in the way

of magical beasts, including the mandrake, which could walk on its own power. It seemed that perhaps the overharvesting had scared the inhabitants of the cavern and forced them to flee into the deeper parts of it.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” said Nils. “They might have done exactly that—take a look.”

The next gathering spot they reached had, fortunately, not been uprooted. However, there were noticeable holes in the ground around it. Each hole was about three or four centimeters wide, and soil from them dotted the ground, leading deeper into the cavern.

“Oh... Are these mandrake marks?” asked Shiori.

“Yes, that’s right. When they sense danger, they uproot themselves and run to somewhere safe. The mandrake is quite a cowardly creature.”

“Oh... Is that so...?”

Shiori still couldn’t quite grasp the concept of a cowardly plant that could walk somewhere safe on its own. Having come from a place where magical beasts did not exist, such a thing was completely perplexing to her, even if it *was* just part of everyday life for Alec and the others, who were born and raised here.

“All the same...something isn’t quite right. I sense something odd,” said Linus, carefully observing the area before pointing up at the ceiling above them. “That nest up there contains cellar birds. They’re very aggressive, but they haven’t come down at all.”

Shiori looked up to the stone roof some ten meters above, to a bird’s nest built from branches in a craggier section of rock. It was a cellar bird nest. The cellar bird was a medium-sized bird-type magical beast that most commonly made a home of dark places like caves and underground ruins. They were about fifty centimeters in diameter, and were often traded for their meat and eggs, which had a very unique scent. It was something of an acquired taste, but in certain gourmet circles, the cellar bird was quite precious.

“I would have loved to take at least one home with me, but it’s not happening if they don’t leave their nest,” said Linus.

As a talented archer, Linus could easily have disturbed the nest to force the birds out, but the nest was made with materials that stunk quite badly—a means of warding away intruders. If he slipped up while trying to get their attention, it might end in a reeking tragedy.

“Whether it’s mandrakes or other magical beasts, it’s clear to me those birds are worried about something, and that’s why they’re not coming out. It doesn’t make sense. It’s been weeks since the overharvesting, right?”

“You think there could be some *other* reason the creatures here are on guard?”

Everyone turned to look into the deeper darkness of the cavern.

“I wonder if a snow bear or something is inside?”

“Could be...”

“I’ll check a little deeper down the path,” said Shiori.

Alec nodded.

“Just don’t overdo it,” he said. “All we need to know is if there’s something dangerous in here.”

“Got it. I’ll be quick about it, then.”

Nonetheless worried that Shiori would run out of magic, Alec reached a hand to his “For Shiori” pouch. Shiori let out a slight giggle at the sight, but upon spreading out her search magic, her smile quickly faded.

“I’m detecting something strange,” she said. “It’s very close... There’s two of them, in fact. They’re coming this way.”

“What? What are they?”

“I think they’re...probably medium-sized, but they’re carrying a *lot* of magical power. I’d say they’re only a couple of hundred meters away.”

She knew one thing for sure—the presences she’d picked up were not human. They were dense with magical energy, and yet they did not have the unique feel of a specific magical element—in other words, they were non-elemental.

“You must be kidding,” said Alec, clicking his tongue. “That probably means

they attack primarily with magic, then?”

“In which case, they’re definitely not snow bears,” said Ellen.

“And if they’re non-elemental, that rules out is grodas and snow wolves,” added Nils.

“There’s no doubting that they’re powerful—the cellar birds wouldn’t be in hiding otherwise,” said Linus. “I don’t like this. What *are* they?”

Everyone was on high alert, their faces filled with concern.

“We can always retreat for the time being,” said Nils, though it was clear that he was prepared for the worst.

Though he worked a support position, Nils was still A-rank. He could feel the presence of the magical beasts in the air around them, and knew they were no ordinary creatures.

“If they weren’t heading straight for us, that might have been an option,” said Linus, “but...they are.”

“Yep,” said Alec.

The air was thick with tension. Alec and Linus both reached for their weapons. Shiori backed away with Nils and Ellen, and drank one of her magical energy recovery potions. Rurii had turned red and was on high alert.

“Here they come,” said Alec.

Two creatures emerged from the pitch-black darkness, wobbling slightly as they moved. They were strange, bald-headed creatures in tattered rags—perhaps the creatures had stolen them, or perhaps they were things that people had left somewhere in the cavern.

The magical beasts’ eyes drooped at the edges, and it was impossible to ascertain where their muddy purple eyes were looking because they lacked pupils. Their skin had a creepy glimmer to it, as if the mucous membrane under the skin covered the exterior of their bodies. Something wriggled from their mouths, and at first it seemed like another magical beast that had since become the creature’s food, but upon closer inspection, it was just a part of the creature itself. Several feelers poked out from amongst the tattered rags.

“A martian?!” shrieked Shiori.

Shiori shook at the sight of them—the creatures looked like aliens straight out of a science fiction movie.

“Eww... Are you for real?” said Linus, clearly creeped out.

As if hearing their comments, one of the beasts narrowed its eyes slyly.

“Brain suckers,” said Alec.

The brain sucker was a rare and terrifying magical beast—one that fed on the brain of its prey.

7

Alec faced the strange creatures, his sword at the ready as he put himself in front of his friends.

“When I said ‘rare’ earlier, I didn’t mean *this*!” said Linus.

“However rare they are, these things *won’t* give us any medicine or anything else that’s worthwhile!”

“Agreed!”

Shiori could do little more than accept the opinions of her companions—the brain suckers were dangerous.

“Are they really *that* dangerous?” she asked.

“It’s your first time facing them, isn’t it?”

Shiori’s face had gone pale. Of the whole party, she was still the least experienced. When she had encountered a yeti—a mythical beast—she had at first thought it was some kind of joke, but these two were, in their own way, no laughing matter.

The brain sucker was intelligent, and it wielded powerful magic allowing it to feast upon the brain and innards of its prey. It was sometimes said that brain suckers were survivors of inhuman and immoral experiments done in the age of the Empire’s rule, but all the same, they were now well-known magical beasts that had been categorized. They were ruined, ravaged spirits, and some

scholars said they were not unlike ghosts.

In older times, the brain sucker had been an unidentified creature and was thus treated as a mythical beast. Now, it was recognized as a magical beast. But, as was common of any creature considered a mythical beast, whether in the past or otherwise, they were encountered only rarely. They generally lived in underground ruins and ancient graveyards, and were, once in a blue moon, found in the darkness of caverns.

“Linus, have you ever fought a brain sucker?” asked Alec.

“I’ve run into one only twice,” replied Linus, who dexterously held a few arrows in his hand, one of them ready to fire. “But on both occasions, we slowed them down, then made a hasty getaway. There’s just no good reason to fight them. How about you, Master Alec?”

“Three times, but on two of those occasions, I ran too. The first time I was with Zack and a few others, so we managed to handle it.”

The first time Alec had fought a brain sucker, he’d been hit by its poison and collapsed. Thanks to the combined efforts of Zack, Clemens, and Nadia, however, who leveled all their power at the beast, he’d managed to escape the encounter without becoming food.

But right now, they only had two members with offensive capabilities—Alec himself, and Linus, from a distance. Rurii in this case was an unknown variable. Alec was uneasy about the idea of battling two brain suckers while protecting three support members.

“I’ve encountered a brain sucker once,” said Ellen. “But we spotted it from a distance and ran, as you might expect.”

“This is my first time,” said Nils. “Certainly creepy, aren’t they? Just imagining getting sucked into that thing gives me the shivers.”

It was a creature that every one of them wanted to run from, and to make matters worse, on this occasion, there were two of them. It was horrible luck to run into a rare and dangerous magical beast outside of its habitat. And it would have been one thing if slaying them left rare materials, but when they died, they almost immediately dissolved back into the earth. There was very little to

look forward to, save for a magical stone or two, and even that was rare in and of itself.

It was astonishing to think that some magical beast scholars would—in order to better understand the ecology and makeup of such beasts—travel with an army of seasoned adventurers and attack their foe, only to freeze them before the moment of death and carefully transport them home.

The brain suckers came to a stop about ten meters from the party. Perhaps they were watching to see what would happen, or sizing up who they'd attack first. It did not seem as though they had any intention of letting the party escape, however. The two creatures seemed to be discussing something between themselves, their eyes narrowing and their mouths wriggling.

"Listen up," said Alec. "The brain suckers attack with powerful magic, combined with attacks on your psyche itself. They have high magical resistance, so physical attacks are key, but they'll spit poison when you get too close. Breathe that poison in and you'll be hit with powerful hallucinations, so keep your distance at all times. Let me handle the close-range attacks."

"I remember reading in the Brovito Village report that you can get around the magical resistance of snow wolves by aiming your magic inside their body," muttered Linus. "I wonder if the same will work with these guys?"

He was talking about the report that Alec and Shiori had written. It was possible that the same rules applied to brain suckers, and there seemed to be no harm in trying.

"I don't know," said Alec, "but it's worth a shot. Linus, Shiori, Rurii—I'll need you on support."

"Okay!" said Linus, trying to sound as bright as usual.

"Understood," replied Shiori, though her voice trembled ever so slightly.

Rurii wobbled in the affirmative.

"Ellen and I will have to make sure we don't get poisoned under any circumstances," said Nils. "Leave the antidotes to us."

"Thank you."

Nils, Ellen, and Shiori were all support classes, without much in the way of physical strength and endurance. It would be impossible to outrun the brain suckers.

Still, running would have been our best option...

Alec fired off some light magic to improve visibility, and pushed his frustrations aside. The brain sucker loved nothing more than the fear of its prey. It used its poison to force hallucinations, and at the peak of the fear that the poison drew from its hapless prey, it would feast. That was how brain sucker poison worked—it heightened and strengthened the fear inside its target. Alec was in no mood to experience that poison a second time.

But it's not like we have any other options...

The second half of the party's offensive ability, Linus, fought from range. All of the close-quarters combat was Alec's responsibility.

The brain suckers wobbled, and a hint of magical energy wafted in the air. At the very moment Alec thought they would attack, he heard something cut through the air. Three arrows flew from Linus's bow, aimed at the brain suckers' eyes. One was knocked clear by a brain sucker feeler, one buried itself into the tattered rags at the center of that brain sucker, and the last arrow went into the neck of the other.

The creepy-crawly mouths of the brain suckers opened and an earsplitting cry echoed through the cavern. It was a voice that sounded like nothing of this world—it was like a bloodcurdling invitation to the world of the departed. But Alec did not falter, and in an instant he closed the distance between himself and a brain sucker, slicing horizontally with his blade. A few of the beast's feelers went flying, and wriggled on the floor where they landed as if they had minds of their own, grabbing for Alec's legs. Alec leapt backwards just in time to avoid them.

"How are they so resilient?!" he spat.

The brain sucker cried out, and cast fireballs out of the air.

"Ice Wall, Is Vegg!"

"Water Cage!"

Alec and Shiori's voices overlapped, their barriers blocking the fireballs. The timing was coincidental, but Alec let the hint of a grin show on his face—their defensive reactions showed how attuned they had become to one another.

"Great work!" he shouted.

But there wasn't even time to take a breath as arrows of lightning came at them from above, forcing them once again to cast barriers.

"Stone Wall, Stein Vegg!"

"Sand Cloud!"

Some of the lightning was absorbed into the stone barrier, while the rest was wrapped up in Shiori's sand cloud, which attacked the brain suckers. Sand and dust stuck to the eyes and skin of the magical beasts, and they writhed in discomfort.

"Excellent!" Alec shouted.

"Thanks!"

Though she was a support class, Shiori was still a mage. When it came to knowing the relative strength and weaknesses of each magical element, she was as good as any attack mage. It was essential for all mages to have a knowledge of the elements and how to use them, such as meeting fire with water or ice, or meeting lightning with earth.

"Is there any way we can create a wall over the entire passageway and make a run for it?!" shouted Linus as he fired more arrows.

The brain suckers inched forward, their bodies moving awkwardly as they cast their spells.

"But there were reports of destroyed walls causing passageways to collapse, which can lead to cave-ins!" replied Ellen.

"Wha?! Seriously?! Fine—no walls then!"

That Linus could hold a conversation while still hitting his target showed just how frighteningly skilled he was. However, he still couldn't hit the weak points of the brain suckers, as they either swiped away his arrows with their feelers or blocked them with barriers. Usually bright and energetic, Linus's face twisted

with frustration, and he clicked his tongue.

Just as one of the brain suckers was about to cast another spell, Linus fired an arrow. Seeing this, Alec moved in at the same time. When the brain sucker made to swipe the arrow away, it left an opening, and Alec's fiery sword plunged into the beast's eye.

The brain sucker let out a violent cry. Its one remaining eye, filled with a raging hatred, glared at Alec. Alec had put the sword in as deep as he could, but the attack still wasn't fatal. The brain sucker was a terrifyingly resilient creature, and it opened its mouth, which was filled with crooked teeth pointing in every direction. A tongue peeked out from inside, a sign that it was going to use its poisonous breath.

Here it comes!

Just as Alec was about to pull his sword free and leap out of range, the feelers of the brain sucker wrapped around his left arm and leg.

"Hngh!" Alec grunted.

He managed to remain standing as he was pulled off-balance, but he was left at an awkward angle. The brain sucker was strong, and though Alec did all he could to resist, it was useless. His sword couldn't reach the monster, and he could not cut himself free.

"Flame—Flamme!"

Alec sent flames towards the brain sucker's mouth. The monster let out a short cry, and for an instant, its feelers loosened.

"Master Alec!" cried Linus.

Something whizzed past Alec, plunging into the brain sucker's eye. The other brain sucker was also hit by the same thing—Linus's arrows. Once again, his ability to hit targets under these circumstances was a testament to his abilities.

However, the brain sucker was enraged by its wounds, and its feelers wrapped around Alec, refusing to let him go. Its strength squeezed the breath out of him, and was not at all what one would expect from a creature so badly injured.

“Hrngh...!”

Alec was bound completely. He could no longer move. The remaining brain sucker passed by him, heading for his companions. It had shifted targets. It fired spears of ice, which Shiori defended against with her Blaze Cage spell, while Rurii helped by using its body as a barrier. But the difference in magical power was too great, and Shiori could not block all of the incoming attacks—a few of the ice spears broke through, and Shiori shrieked in pain.

“Damn it!” shouted Alec.

He chanted the spell to engage his muscle-boosting magic, mustering all the strength he had. He roared, tearing the feelers from his body and putting everything he had into his right hand to cut himself free.

But at that very moment, a sweet scent hit his nostrils—one that he recognized. It was the poison breath of the brain sucker, even though he was sure he had taken its mouth out of action with his flame spell. Alec did his best to hold his breath, but he was struck by a sudden and violent dizziness.

The gas... It gets in through the skin...!

Holding your breath was useless against this poison gas. Once it got you, it had you. Alec felt a scream inside of his head, and his body began to tilt.

No...

With trembling fingers, he searched through his medicine pouch for an antidote, and bit down hard on his lip, strong enough to draw blood. He fought to stave off the hallucinations. It was said that willpower could defend against the poison to some extent, but he had always doubted that hypothesis. Here and now, however, he knew that if he were to be swallowed up by the hallucinations, it would all be over. And not just for him, but for his companions...and his beloved. With everything he had left, Alec tried to stay in the present, his shaking hands spilling most of his antidote potion as he drank what he could.

But at that very instant, Alec heard a woman’s scream. The voice was Shiori’s.

“Shiori!”

He shook his head to clear the mist clouding his eyes, and turned towards the scream. He was immediately met by the sight of the brain sucker, its feeler running right through Shiori's chest. Blood gushed from the wound, splattering the ground, and more of it was coughed up from her lips. Her cheeks went pale as the life drained from them. In an instant, the light faded from her eyes. The pain that twisted her features disappeared, and suddenly her expression went slack. It was the face of one who has passed from this world, across the border and into the next.

She would never smile again. Her soft, gentle lips would never speak his name again.

The brain sucker pulled its feeler free and tossed Shiori's corpse roughly to the ground, where blood pooled around her body, as if she were little more than an abandoned puppet.

An unfathomable fear and despair gripped Alec's heart, drenching it in a chilling darkness. He tried to open his mouth to speak her name, but his voice refused to come. The shortest of sighs escaped his lips.

He knew what had just happened, but his mind refused to accept it. But as the truth of it seeped inside of him, he felt his body grow suddenly cold.

I told her I would protect her, and I...I couldn't...

He told her he would be with her, always, and yet she had been taken from him. Her soul had left the realm of the living, and all that was left behind was the delicate frame of her body. He tried to get closer to Shiori but found someone stopping him. A young woman. He had forgotten her name, but he still remembered her face.

"Your Highness?" she said. "You will be spending the evening with me, yes?"

He caught the sickeningly sweet smell of her perfume. Her lips, smeared with a shade of red that made him sick, curled into a smile. She was a girl who, during the midst of the struggle over the throne, had attempted to trap Alec in a fait accompli of an engagement.

Alec held back the sudden urge to vomit, and attempted to push the woman away as she clung to him, but she would not let go. She wrapped herself around

his arm, and her cackles rang painfully in his ears.

As though the laughter had been a signal, suddenly, a group of disgusting nobles were gathered around Shiori's body. One among them, an elegantly dressed woman, laughed down at her and stepped on Shiori with her high heels.

Alec tried to scream at them to stop, but no voice came. The woman turned and put her arm in Alec's own.

"You are *awful*, Allen," she said. "Abandoning me like that and cheating on me with this foreigner."

He knew that face. It was the face of the woman he'd spent almost three years with while he was in the Empire. She flashed him a charming smile, that—while beautiful in appearance—was vulgar and disgusting at its core. Her fingertips, painted red, traced the outline of his lips. Alec remained frozen in place.

"How could you throw me—your lover—away like that? How very horrendous."

No. This woman was no lover of Alec's. She had been no more than a means for him to reach his target. That, and nothing more.

"Oh, I loved you, Allen," she said. "But you played with the hearts of women, and tricked them. You really think you can frolic off into happiness after that?"

She was the daughter of an Imperial arms merchant—a woman with many lovers, merciless with her romantic rivals, to the extent that some of them ended up dead. Alec had approached her in the guise of an Imperial noble to acquire useful information for Storydia. He had gotten what he needed, and by order of his nation, he had lit up her mansion. That had been the last he ever saw of her. They had spent three years together, but he had never felt a thing for her.

She had colluded with the upper nobility and reaped the benefits, but Alec had heard later that she'd been captured by the rebel forces. She would almost certainly spend the rest of her life in prison, and yet by some means, she was here before him now, a cruel smile on her face as though she were judging him.

Alec moaned as the woman's face suddenly twisted before him. The hideous smile lingered, but her face melted as it burned away and fell to pieces. As her skin crumbled, the face that appeared beneath it took Alec's breath away.

"Re...Rebby..."

This was the nickname of his past love—the woman he had broken up with some eighteen years ago. She had always worn such a kind, gentle smile, but now her face was twisted with gleeful spite as she reached out for his cheeks with her hands. They were cold and hard to the touch, and gave him goosebumps.

"You have no right to be happy," she said. "You didn't just abandon your lover... You abandoned your brother too."

"I did not!" said Alec reflexively, but there was little force behind his outburst. "No. You're...you're right."

And indeed, she was. Regardless of the circumstances, he had still led her on. He had not been dutiful to his lover—he had saddened her. He had pushed everything onto his brother, and then he had run away. These were the facts, regardless of the circumstances.

Rebby giggled.

"Yes. That is why you must atone. You, who hid behind the excuse of 'the greater good.' You, who ran from it all... You must atone."

"So it was me," said Alec, laughing. "*I* killed Shiori."



It was exactly as he had seen in his nightmare from the previous day. Shiori

had been killed because of his carelessness and his past mistakes. He had built up debts over these past two decades, leaving everything unresolved, and now, at last, it was time to pay his dues—the cost of which was the life of his own beloved.

And if that were what it had come to, then Alec had only one option left. He forced his numb right hand to pick up his sword, which he now turned on himself.

“I doubt that I will be able to join her...but at the very least, I can apologize with my life.”

Alec pressed the blade of his sword against his own neck, and just as he was about to pull it across to slice himself open...

“Antidote, Avgiftning!”

Someone shouted a spell from nearby. The muddy darkness that had enveloped Alec cleared in an instant, and the world opened up before him. Freed from his suffering, he crumpled to the ground.

“Alec! Stay with me! Alec!”

In front of him was a woman, looking down at him. The light behind her at first clouded her from his shaky vision, but slowly she came into focus, and he recognized her.

“Shiori...”

His lover. His beloved.

“I’m so glad...you’re alive...”

He pulled the woman he had thought dead into his arms, and buried his face in her shoulder. She was warm. She was alive.

He felt such relief that he almost collapsed again, but the urgent voice of Ellen pulled him back.

“Sorry, Alec, but we’re still in the midst of a crisis here! I know it’s hard, but we need you out there for just a little longer!”

Rurii, who had stretched its slimy body out to protect everyone, wobbled to

express the danger they were in. Alec's mindset immediately shifted back to the job at hand, and he surveyed the battlefield with a quick sweep of his eyes. He saw a brain sucker writhing on the floor, and the scent of it burned his nostrils.

Further away, the other brain sucker was also writhing on the floor in agony. Linus and Nils were having at it with everything they had—Linus with arrow after arrow, and Nils with his gathering scythe. Desperation was etched into their faces.

Alec did not know how any of this had happened, but he could see the wild desperation in both Nils's and Linus's faces—they were fighting with everything at their disposal. Reputation, face, etiquette, and bearing meant nothing in a battle like this—this was the kind of enemy you killed by whatever means necessary.

Alec took a breath and resolved himself.

The etiquette and rules of battle no longer mattered. This was an enemy that required one to be cutthroat and merciless. It had near-endless magical power and frightening resilience—and more than anything else, it would show its victims ghastly nightmares of such power that they were rendered completely powerless.

"Stand back," Alec said. "I'm putting an end to this."

"Got it!"

Shiori and Ellen took a step back, with Rurii in front of them as protection.

Alec watched this from the corner of his eye as he covered his blade in all the fire magic he could muster, then dashed towards the brain sucker. He plunged the sword into the monster's head with all of his strength. The brain sucker convulsed for a moment, went still, then began writhing wildly. But Alec sent bursts of lightning into it through his blade, and when his magic had been whittled down to the point that only a few sparks were emitted...the monster finally breathed its last, and was still. The slippery blue skin of the monster bubbled slightly, and its body began to crumble until it was just a pool of liquid on the cavern floor, which dissipated just as quickly.

That left the other one. Alec spun towards it and found that it, like its partner,

was melting into the ground, dead. Nils and Linus had killed it.

“We...We did it...” uttered Linus, dumbfounded.

Nils dropped his scythe to the ground and fell to his knees. Alec put his sword back in its scabbard and felt dizziness rock him. He fell to a knee, and Shiori rushed in to help support him.

“Alec! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah... Just a bit weak.”

“Are you sure?! You’re not injured?! Do you feel ill?!”

Shiori’s worried face watched him carefully. Ellen gave her a light pat on the shoulder to calm her down.

“He’s free of poison, but he’s still physically and mentally exhausted. He needs rest.”

Nils, still seated on the ground, agreed.

“She’s right,” he said. “Any poison with hallucinogenic effects is terribly draining on the mental faculties. There’s a spot not far from here that is perfect for camp. Let’s head there.”

The others were suggesting that the party set up camp earlier than scheduled. They were being considerate of Alec, and he knew it.

“I only need a little rest and I’m good...” said Alec, a touch hurriedly.

Nils, however, would not hear it.

“Absolutely not,” said Nils. “We cannot underestimate mental damage. You know that just as well as the rest of us.”

The words were heavy with meaning, and Alec fell silent before them. He had found out about Shiori’s wounds at Brovito Village, and he knew how deep they went, straight to her heart—*that* was what Nils was getting at.

“I do,” said Alec, nodding reluctantly.

Nils seemed satisfied. Shiori, too, let out a sigh of relief. Seeing this, Alec realized then just how much he’d worried her.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that,” he said.

It didn’t matter if they came from humans or monsters—Alec was very weak to attacks on his psyche. Shiori put a gentle hand on his back.

“But look,” she said. “We’re all okay, and it’s because you put your body on the line for us.”

By the looks of things, nobody in the party aside from Alec was injured. There were some light burns and scratches, but everyone was still more than capable of standing on their own two feet. Alec was the only one who needed support—he had sustained the most injuries out of all of them.

“Hm...” muttered Linus. “All that work and so little in the way of spoils.”

He was collecting all the arrows he’d used in the battle, and he opened his right hand to show them two transparent stones he’d picked up.

“They’re non-elemental magic stones,” he said. “They’ll fetch a decent price if we sell them, I guess...”

“We’re lucky we even got anything at all. But these are weaker than elemental stones, and in any case, they’re not at all worth the struggle we just went through.”

All any of them could do was manage a wry chuckle. Brain suckers were usually never in places like this—they’d just happened to be here. Whenever something rare like this occurred, it was even rarer for a party to be prepared for such a situation. Encountering a rare magical beast in a place that was a popular gathering spot for local herbalists was just sheer bad luck.

“Speaking of which...” said Alec, walking along with Shiori’s help. “By the time I came to my senses, the brain suckers were already writhing in what looked like pain... What in the world happened to them?”

When Alec had been hit with the brain sucker’s poison, they had been in a wildly dangerous predicament. But when he’d come out of his hallucination, both of the magical beasts had been rendered almost incapacitated.

“Oh, yeah!” said Linus. “I was wondering about that myself.”

His gaze turned to Shiori. Alec gathered that she was the one who had gotten

the creatures into that state. For some reason, however, Shiori looked uncomfortable. She wasn't sure what to do with herself.

"I remember you told me you had an idea and you asked me to keep them locked down," said Linus, "and then you were reaching into your knapsack for...what, exactly? Whatever it was, the moment it hit them they were screaming like nothing I've ever heard."

"Erm..."

"What? What is it?" asked Alec.

Shiori looked up at Alec, still troubled, but she resigned herself to answering and pulled a bottle from her pocket. It was about the size of a small liquor bottle, inside of which were a few red objects floating in oil. It was a flavoring or spice of some kind, but it was almost empty, even though it was still just the first day of their expedition.

"Their skin..." muttered Shiori, "it's like an open membrane. I thought maybe if I used red chili pepper oil, it would have an effect..."

"Chili pepper oil on an open skin membrane..."

Nils and Ellen whispered the words together like a chorus, their faces twitching.

"Um...what?" asked Linus. "What's that mean?"

The archer's face said he thought he already knew the answer to the question he asked, and that he might not like hearing it either, but he asked all the same.

"Think like the inside of your mouth, or the inside of your nose...or the softer, damper parts of one's genitals. These areas are incredibly sensitive, and very weak to pain stimulus, which means they're easily damaged."

"I...I see."

"And it seems as though, for the brain suckers, their outer skin is itself that same membrane..." said Nils.

"In other words, it's not unlike peeling away a person's skin and pouring hot sauce all over the open wound. I imagine the pain must have been nigh unbearable. I don't even think 'searing pain' is a powerful-enough descriptor."

At Ellen’s explanation, which made things all too easy to imagine, Linus let out a squeal of his own. Meanwhile, Rurii seemed to shrink on the spot. Perhaps it was just their imagination, but its blue seemed to grow a touch deeper.

“Shiori...” uttered Alec, shocked.

Even though the brain sucker had put him through something not unlike a personal hell, Alec couldn’t help feeling something like sympathy for it.

“At the time, I was desperate,” she said. “It was only afterwards that I realized the potential damage...”

The specially made chili sauce was a smooth liquid, crafted so as to be easily mixed with various ingredients.

“I see. And it certainly worked a number on the brain suckers,” said Ellen.

“She covered them from head to feeler...” muttered Alec, somehow managing to pick his jaw up from the floor and close his mouth. “But, still...drastic times call for drastic measures, so don’t worry about it. You did not have the luxury of time, or even thought.”

Shiori was still next to Alec, and he put an arm across her shoulders.

“We were on the brink of death, all of us. You did good,” he said.

Alec did not know if the words would be much of a compliment, but there was no denying the truth of the matter—Shiori’s quick thinking had saved his life. When she heard his words, Shiori’s face relaxed into a smile.

8

Hortensia Cavern was a labyrinthine structure, but at its center was a small, open space known as the purple flower garden. The location was filled with natt hortensia flowers, the cavern's namesake, in full bloom. The flower garden was one of a few spots in the cavern well suited for camping, and the nearby water supply made it the most popular.

The small purple flowers glowed lightly, and with such beauty that one almost forgot that they were in a cave at all.

"Wow..." uttered Shiori.

Ellen giggled.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "The flowers are imbued with a hint of holy magic, which gives these flower beds something of a barrier effect."

The natt hortensia flower was common to the rockier parts of the continent's northwest. Generally speaking, they only bloomed at night, but in caverns and similarly dark environments, they were in full bloom at all times. With its dull purple glow, it was almost fantastical to look at, and it was highly coveted in the world of horticulturists. Unfortunately, people had yet to succeed in cultivating the flower elsewhere and, perhaps due to the unsuitability of the environment, any buds refused to bloom, leaving only foliage.

Nils, who knew the cavern well, pointed to some holes among the rocks.

"We'll put the barrier stakes there," he said. "They'll help reinforce the light barrier the flowers provide."

It was clear that many barrier stakes had been put in the same places—marks of an oft-frequented campsite, and proof that many used this location to rest. A barrier would not be particularly helpful against a powerful foe like a brain sucker, but it would provide at least some protection and peace of mind. Nils and Linus took to hammering in the barrier stakes.

"You just rest, Alec," said Shiori.

But as she made to leave, he clutched her hand. It was only when she turned

to him silently, her eyes wide with surprise, that he came back to his senses.

“Oh... I... Sorry,” he muttered.

But he did not release his grip. Though he could not bring himself to speak the words in front of his companions, he wanted her to stay with him.

“Are you okay? Are you still feeling unwell?”

Shiori’s slender fingers touched his cheek. Her hands were warm. He felt reassured—she was no illusion. Alec let out a sigh of relief, then lifted his head when he felt his companions watching him. Everyone had stopped what they were doing. He slowly released his grip on Shiori’s hand.

For a moment, Shiori looked up at him in silence. Then she took her hand away and cast her earth magic, crafting a simple bed. She took a fur from her knapsack, laid it on the bed, then pulled Alec by the arm and forced him to sit.

“You’re still pale. I want you to rest, okay?”

“But everyone else is setting up camp, I don’t want to...”

Nils gave him a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“We’ll be fine. Rest. Leave the camp to us.”

“We’ve got this,” added Linus. “No need to worry about tents because we’ve got a ceiling here, so it’ll be easy-peasy.”

“I’ll craft walls for the baths so we won’t need tents for those either,” said Shiori. “So it won’t matter at all if you have a little rest.”

Alec felt it wasn’t a good idea to be too stubborn, and did as he was told. Shiori helped him to take off his knapsack, Ellen put a magical energy recovery potion in his hand, and he sat watching everyone set up camp.

Shiori crafted simple beds for everyone while Ellen covered them with furs. Nils and Linus worked together to make a stove. Once everyone was done, Nils took out his medicine box and began to speak with Ellen—it seemed they were discussing how to dress everyone’s injuries after the battle. Shiori, meanwhile, used her earth magic to craft a truly splendid bath out of stone.

Alec didn’t like being the only one resting while the rest of the party were

hard at work, and he let out a frustrated sigh. Rurii gave him a few pats on the leg to tell him not to worry about it, but all he could do was muster a half-smile in response.

“Well then, I’ll take a look at everyone’s wounds before the bath,” said Nils.

“I can handle disinfecting them,” said Ellen. “I’ll use magic to be thorough.”

“So who’ll be first in the bath, then?” asked Linus.

Shiori and Linus were being seen by Nils and Ellen, and they turned to look at Alec, as if silently pushing him to go first. He had, after all, been the only one to fall prey to the brain sucker’s slimy feelers. His coat had helped to keep most of the muck off, but all the same, he was still the one most in need of a wash.

Alec cringed slightly. If the damned brain suckers were just going to melt into the earth once they were dead, couldn’t they have at least taken their leftover slime with them?

“As much as I want to get all this grime off me,” said Alec, “I still want to rest a little longer. Shiori, you’ll have housekeeping duties to see to later, right? Isn’t it best if you go first?”

All of Shiori’s main work took place at camp, and because she’d helped Alec walk to the campsite, she too had some brain sucker slime on her—it would most certainly get in the way of her cooking.

Shiori looked at the rest of the party for their approval, and then, surprisingly, asked Ellen to join her for a bath. Usually, Shiori was very defensive about the scars on her arms and legs, but perhaps something had changed in her attitude.

“Okay,” she said. “Ellen and I will take our baths first, then.”

“By all means.”

“I’m going to take a look around and see if I can scrounge up some ingredients,” said Linus. “I’ll stay within sight of camp, though.”

“In that case,” said Nils, “Alec and I will take the next bath, and you’ll be last. Does that sound okay?”

“Just fine!”

With the order in which they would be taking their baths settled, Shiori touched Alec's hand, flashed him a gentle smile, then disappeared with Ellen into the bath.

"See you soon!" said Linus, who got his gathering equipment together and left the camp.

Rurii remained in place, perhaps wanting to stay on lookout while Shiori was in the bath.

When everyone had left, Alec let himself slump back on his bed. He let out a deep sigh and covered his eyes with an arm. He felt so utterly exhausted. The poison was out of his system, yet it still felt as though something was eating away at his heart, like some lingering aftereffect. This feeling was the very reason he'd wanted to run from the beast in the first place, and he could not believe that he'd been afflicted by the same poison a second time in his life.

"It got you very hard, didn't it?" said Nils.

"Undeniably so," replied Alec.

He let a wry chuckle escape his lips and turned to see Nils holding out a cup of medicinal tea. It had a refreshing, peppermint-like scent.

"The tea has calming properties. There's no need to force yourself to drink it, however—just take in the scent if you don't have the energy to finish it."

"No, I'll have some. Thanks."

Alec sat up, took the cup of tea, and sipped at it. Though the scent was refreshing and revived him slightly, the flavor was—contrary to what he'd expected—mildly sweet. Alec wondered for a moment if Nils had put honey in it, then the man himself chuckled and showed Alec a small, purple bottle.

"It's natt hortensia nectar," he explained. "It's a sedative, and it also helps with sleep."

"I've heard that hortensia can be poisonous," said Alec. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Some hortensia flowers are indeed poisonous, but the natt hortensia is not. Though they share a name, it's actually a different type of flower altogether. It's

only because it looks similar to a hortensia that it was named as such."

"I see..."

Once they'd settled in at camp, Nils explained, he intended to gather some more nectar. The two men talked about nothing in particular while they sipped at their tea, and Alec felt the darkness in his heart dissipate slightly. Just being with Nils like this made him feel a little better.

"In my hallucination," Alec said, "I saw Shiori. She died because of me."

With his heart a little lighter, the words came more easily. Perhaps this, too, was an aspect of Nils's healing, but Alec was surprised at how readily he could express what was troubling his heart and mind. And Nils's silent gaze told him that if he wanted to continue, Nils was there to listen.

"I was unfair to a past lover of mine. Ungrateful when I broke up with her. She was there in my hallucination, and she verbally attacked me. She told me that I was not worthy of happiness after I abandoned her, and after I abandoned my younger brother."

His nightmare had been a mix of his gloomy, dismal memories of his time in the Empire, and the pain he'd experienced as a youth—both of which still ached in his chest.

"The last time I fought a brain sucker, I saw the same thing. In that hallucination, too, she berated me for leaving her and abandoning my brother. She called me a coward for throwing away my responsibilities to live a life of comfort. But this time, it was even worse. As my punishment for running away, Shiori was killed before my eyes."

"Will you tell me what you mean by 'abandoned'...?" asked Nils.

Alec nodded. He had been wanting someone to hear his story. Someone who didn't know his past. Zack and Kristoffer were close to him in terms of their official and unofficial ranks, and so they were bound to take his side. Meanwhile, Shiori was kind, and Alec felt that if he were to talk to her about this, he would be leaning too much on that kindness.

What Alec needed was the opinion of an objective third party, ideally someone male. He felt that a woman might be far too generous in her opinion

towards him. In this sense, Nils was perfect for the job. This was how much the past weighed on Alec—this was the extent to which he still felt haunted by what he thought of as crimes.

“I was an illegitimate child, and my very existence was a hindrance to my brother, who was our father’s heir. There were those around us who looked to use me for their own gain. Our family felt as if it was in shambles...and so I decided to leave. I didn’t think there was any other way. My brother was always so good to me, even though we had different mothers, and so I had always done my best, believing that he would inherit his birthright from our father, and that I would be there to support him. He allowed me to leave, but I know that in his heart he must have felt terribly alone. As for the lover I had at the time...I was not able to tell her of my plans until just before I was set to leave.”

Before they parted, Alec’s brother’s eyes had clung to him with a certain desperation. Olivier never spoke what was in his heart, but his eyes had begged Alec to stay. He had close friends, but none could fill the loneliness he would have felt at the loss of Alec, his last remaining blood relative. And Alec knew this pain and this loneliness only too well, because he felt exactly the same way.

But even knowing this, Alec had left his brother and fled. He had told himself this was the best option, but then, he also wondered if perhaps this reasoning was merely an excuse to escape. This seed of doubt had haunted Alec ever since.

It was the same with Rebby, his past love. Their positions had put them under intense scrutiny, and so it had been difficult to escape prying eyes and meet. Alec had lost the vast majority of his time to work, and then he had fallen ill, and it had felt impossible to make time alone for the two of them. This, too, remained in his heart as a seed of doubt—had he simply found excuses to avoid talking to her?

“Whenever I spoke with her, I could see in her eyes that she envisioned nothing but the life we would share, so I knew that telling her would lead only to despair and disappointment. I was scared, and so I couldn’t say a thing until the very end...and by then, everything had already been decided. That was when I had to tell her that we couldn’t be together. That I was fleeing...”

Alec's voice trembled, and he could not immediately find the words to continue. Eventually, he spoke again.

"So in a sense, what I saw in my hallucination is true. She did not abandon me. *I* abandoned her. But I've always held on the words that she left me with—the ways she told me I was worthless—as a way to consider myself the victim."

Alec was a coward, and he had been irresponsible. He had never wanted to admit this, because he knew it would shake him to the core of his being. Rurii climbed onto the bed and gently patted Alec with a sympathetic feeler. Meanwhile, Nils was silent for a time. He looked at Alec with calmness in his gaze.

"Being that I wasn't there, I don't know the details of what happened," he said. "I can't tell you who was in the right and who was in the wrong. But now I understand that you have regretted it and blamed yourself for it all this time. The weight of that past, pressing upon your heart, has been so heavy that you saw the death of your own lover. Did you know that sometimes you talk in your sleep? You moan. You plead for forgiveness."

"I... I do...?"

Zack and Clemens had mentioned this to him on a few occasions. Nadia had never said anything, but it seemed chances were that she'd heard it too. But this was the first time he'd become aware that somebody outside of that circle of people had heard him, and he was shocked. He had worked with Nils on a number of occasions, and Nils had never said a thing. Alec realized then that perhaps others, too, had witnessed him in that state.

"Listen, Alec," said Nils. "You and I have been on many an expedition, and never once have I ever thought you a coward. Never once have I thought you irresponsible. You are always on the front lines. You are always aware of your companions, considerate of them, and you never neglect them. That fact has never changed—not since the first time we worked together some twenty years ago."

Though his eyes were kind and gentle, there was a chastising tone to Nils's voice, like he really wanted his message to get through.

"I remember a time when we were in a tough spot. Some of our companions

were so scared that they couldn't even move. But you stayed calm—you saw the situation for what it was, and you found a way out. You made it clear that we were all getting out of it together, and you inspired courage in me. You made me believe that if we were together, I would survive, and you saved me...just as you have on many occasions since."

Nils put his hand on Alec's shoulder. His grip was strong and smelled faintly of herbs.

"I remember thinking that you were a man used to leading others, and protecting them. Perhaps this was something you were born with, but still, it is no simple thing to make use of that character trait. Especially not for a young man still in his twenties. But you were used to it, and I remember wondering—who *is* this fellow? How hard did he work to get here?"

"Nils... I..."

Alec was shocked. He had never imagined that the placid herbalist would speak so passionately of Alec's good qualities. And he never imagined that Nils held him in such high regard.

"Perhaps you *were* ungrateful," said Nils. "But I know this much from having seen you at work—you are conscientious, thoughtful, and you have a strong sense of responsibility. You work extremely hard. You have always been that way, as long as I have known you. So if you thought that your only option was to run, then I have to believe that the situation was truly dire. It was something you *had* to do. It was a matter of survival."

"Something I had to do..."

"When you ran away, did things get worse for your family?" asked Nils.

"No..."

"Did they get better?"

Alec nodded.

"I suppose so..."

"You see?" said Nils, smiling. "I do not believe fleeing is always a mistake. Perhaps if you had chosen not to run, and if you had instead chosen to stay and

fight, then you would have found a path to victory. But there was also every chance you would have been crushed before that. I have seen far too many who did not have the option of running, who broke under the pressure instead. Surely you've heard of the term 'strategic retreat.' Where there is life, there is hope, and if things worked themselves out and you are here now, healthy, isn't that enough?"

Nils gave Alec's shoulder a few pats.

"When I look at things from that girl's perspective," Nils continued, "I can understand why she would have felt abandoned. And if you never consulted with her beforehand, nor tried to talk to her, it would have stung all the more. That's why you've carried this regret, isn't it?"

"It is."

The brain sucker's poison had taken the dark fears and guilt at the depths of Alec's heart and brought them to the surface, intensifying them. Having been through it a second time, he recognized this all too clearly. What he'd seen in the hallucination was the guilt he felt towards Olivier and Rebby, and his fear of losing Shiori.

These problems of his remained, and if he did not settle them, then Shiori might leave him. Or perhaps he would break her heart—she was, after all, beginning to realize the uncertainty of his position, with its lingering, unfinished business. Perhaps she would close off her heart to him completely. Even worse, given his position, there was also the potential that someone might use her, or slay her, to hurt him.

"What happened to your lover after you left?" asked Nils.

Alec shook his head.

"She said everything she wanted to say, as bluntly as she could, and that was the last I saw of her. I have heard that she married a widower and now lives peacefully, but...as to whether she is happy or not, I haven't the slightest clue. I took the most important years of her life from her, and on top of that, she married a widower at a relatively young age."

"I see. And as for your brother?"

“I still meet with him on the rare occasion. He is always happy to see me, but...we still haven’t properly discussed that time in our lives since it happened. We both avoid the topic.”

“That would appear to be where the problem lies. You still don’t know for certain how either of them feels. Though I can’t say for sure that finding out would be your very best option, your thoughts skew negative because of how hazy the truth still remains to you, and this has caused you great suffering.”

“You may well be right,” admitted Alec.

He had been unable to bring himself to take action, and to find out how his brother and his lover felt, for fear that it would cause him further pain. And so he had remained locked within his own shell, leaving the problem untouched for years. Like Shiori, he had remained frozen, unable to move. The fundamental difference between himself and Shiori, however, was that Alec’s problem came from within.

“I made so many excuses to run away from my problems...but I want to think of this as an opportunity. Not so long ago, I made up my mind to face my past, but even so, my words have yet to translate to action. A part of me wishes to keep avoiding it, I think. That’s why...yesterday, I had a similar nightmare. That dream, then the vision—they were warnings... They’re telling me not to run from reality.”

Alec was once again hit with the understanding that there was much that had to be done so that he and Shiori could live the rest of their lives together. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then nodded to himself.

“I’ve made up my mind,” he said. “I’m going to talk to them both and, if possible, do it soon. I don’t know if they’ll grant me the opportunity, but I will accept whatever happens, and however it turns out.”

“Just, please, don’t overdo it,” said Nils, who smiled gently. “And please don’t forget—I am your companion, and I am your friend. Whatever happens, I will be here, just as I imagine that Shiori will too.”

“Thanks. That’s a weight off my shoulders.”

Nils’s smile widened and he nodded happily. Rurii, who at some point had

moved into Alec's lap, wobbled. *Don't forget me!* it seemed to say. Its kindness and consideration brought a smile to Alec's face.

"What a catch! What a catch!"

Just as the gloomy air was dissipating into something light and easy, Linus appeared as if on cue. His arms were filled with mushrooms and white fish wrapped in vines, which were still flapping about. Alec couldn't believe it.

"Linus, you're...incredible."

True to his word, Linus had stayed within sight of their campsite. And yet, even remaining tethered within such a short distance, he'd brought back an abundance of ingredients.

"Right?" he said, beaming. "I mean, this *is* my profession, after all."

Though Linus was often brought on suppression requests on account of his impressive archery skills, his main work was that of ingredient gathering.

"Wow, that's amazing! Did you get all of this yourself, Linus?" asked Shiori, who had just gotten out of the bath with Ellen, and was just as surprised as Alec.

"That I did!"

"Astounding," said Ellen. "These mushrooms are quite the delicacy, aren't they?"

"Yes, ma'am! They're marbled mushrooms, commonly known as king mushrooms. Cook them in oil and they're like high-quality meat. Seriously delish. And these white snow mushrooms here? Simmer them and you get a seafood-style broth. And the stardust mushrooms and airola mushrooms? Just barbecue them with a little salt and pepper, and the mouthfeel is superb. Seriously good snacks to pair with drinks."

"Whoa... Sounds exquisite."

"And the fish?"

"Tris perch," replied Linus. "You can't find them anywhere except for Torisval's underground water streams. They're best smoked—practically melt in your mouth. They're also very beautiful, so luxury restaurants often serve them

marinated.”

All of the ingredients Linus had gathered were part of his gathering request, but he’d collected extra so they could have some for dinner at camp. As soon as he said as much, the party cheered.

“I figured that with Shiori here, she’d be bound to whip up something super delectable,” said Linus. “And it’s just a good opportunity for us to eat up!”

“Talk about pressure, Linus,” said Shiori, though the excitement on her face was obvious. “I’ll do my best to cook up a feast.”

“I’ll smoke these fish, then,” said Linus. “That’s why I brought wood chips!”

“Came prepared, didn’t you?” said Nils.

“In that case, let me gut them for you,” said Alec.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“Are you, uh...all right? Feeling better?” asked Ellen.

“Yep.”

Alec wasn’t going to say he was all back to normal, but he really *did* feel much better. On top of that, he simply wanted to be a part of the cheery atmosphere. At first, Shiori looked a touch shocked, but then her face relaxed into a smile.

“Thanks, Alec,” she said. “Let’s all pitch in for prep.”

“Great,” he replied.

Everyone shared smiles, and as Alec looked at them all—his companions and his lover—a thought flashed clearly through his mind.

I am so very, very fortunate.

He was an orphan who had lost his mother and had, through circumstance, come to meet his father and half-brother. Though he and Olivier had eventually separated, the bond between them still endured. But there was more to it than that—since then, Alec had met friends as well as a lover who were all irreplaceable to him. If he wanted to share his life with them, then it was all the more important that he settle his past...and the time for that was now.

When I get back, I think I’ll send Olivier a letter.

There was so much he wanted to talk to his brother about—both about the past, and the future. It was, of course, silly to think that it would all happen soon, and in the case of Rebecca, it all depended on her feelings and her circumstances. Alec was ready for her to deny him the chance to meet again. But if she *were* to give him such an opportunity, then he would endeavor to say that which he had been unable to when they had last met. And if she did not accept his words, then that would be a result of his own mistakes. No matter what she said—even if she rejected him outright—he would accept and respect her decision.

"I'll say this as often as I have to," said Nils, just loud enough that only Alec could hear him. "Don't overdo it, okay?"

It was only then that Alec realized that his body had grown tense. He let the tension dissipate from his shoulders and, with a wry grin, turned his gaze to Shiori, standing next to him. She felt his gaze and smiled back up at him. Her smile healed the shattered parts of his heart, with a kindness that made him think of an evening goddess.

She is *my goddess, no matter what anybody says.*

She was like a goddess of healing and affection, who had fallen from the heavens.

9

"There we go."

Shiori had just finished hanging up the washing that her companions had given her, and she sent a warm breeze from her fingertips to dry it. Most adventuring equipment was made of quick-drying material, and her companions' gear was no exception—it would all be ready to wear again soon.

Shiori glanced behind her and spotted Rurii. The ever-friendly and considerate slime bounced along by Ellen's side, apparently having decided to be her bodyguard as she set about doing some gathering.

Shiori smiled at the sight of the wobbly, adorable bodyguard, then turned back to the coats in her hands, which belonged to her and Alec. They'd been

covered in brain sucker muck, and so she was a touch hesitant about simply drenching them in magical water.

“Hm... What to do...?” she muttered.

The coats were made from a mix of erve foure leather and tris hare fur. The leather made them water-and stain-resistant, which was why erve foure material was popular among adventurers. Cleaning it was as simple as rinsing it off, apparently. The erve foure itself—a river sheep—made its home in watery environments, so its leather could be left in water for some time before it was damaged.

“Well, the coats are dry, so perhaps I’ll brush off the muck and rinse them lightly.”

Shiori took out a brush made especially for the task at hand, and thankfully, most of the now-dry grime on the jackets came off easily. Then she cast a warm stream of water magic to wash off what remained. All that was left now was to pat the coats lightly with a towel and send some warm air through them—they’d be dry in no time.

“Magical beast materials are so very convenient...” she muttered.

The whole cleaning process wouldn’t have been nearly as easy with anything made of ordinary fur or fabric.

“You can say that again,” said Linus, who was by her side, preparing to smoke some Tris perch. “Those materials weren’t all that prevalent in the past, you know. It’s only been the last twenty or thirty years that research into magical beast materials has really picked up. And now that there’s so much good equipment available, we’re also seeing more people pick up adventuring as a career.”

“Oh... Is that so?”

Long ago, adventurers had been little more than wanderers, traveling the lands to hunt magical beasts, explore, or sharpen their skills. Generally speaking, they were the type to do work considered rough or out of the ordinary. However, because that meant they’d do jobs that were hard to ask of the knights, they had become an indispensable part of everyday life.

The Adventurers' Guild was established some sixty years ago, and with it came a stronger organizational structure, and the recognition of adventuring as a serious career. Around this time, adventuring stopped being a job for just the battle-hardened, and became an acceptable profession for those who—for whatever reason—had nowhere else to go. As long as individuals fulfilled the requirements, anyone could join the guild—even those who lacked general knowledge and skills.

It was no overstatement to say that the guild had changed the lives of a great many. When people had no way to earn money, no place to look for work, no home, or circumstances that kept them from ordinary lives, options were extremely limited. They either went to the almshouse, sold themselves, or died. It was that or turn to banditry. Adventuring offered both work and a respectable position in society. For those who lacked options, there was little reason not to turn to it. The Adventurers' Guild was apparently linked to a decrease in the number of homeless and prostitutes, and it contributed to improved safety in communities.

For Shiori, too, if adventuring hadn't existed, she would have had to sell herself or otherwise die homeless. She was beyond grateful that the Guild existed, and remained in Zack's debt for his support when she'd joined it.

"I think it would have been about ten years back that Enandel Trading Company was founded and things really took off," said Linus. "It all started with the development of serious adventuring gear."

"Oh, really? What did people do about their equipment before Enandel?"

Linus had been salting the perch, but stopped for a moment and frowned.

"Well... There have always been dedicated makers of weapons and armor, so people made do. But when it came to things like clothes, accessories, tools, and other things of that nature, adventurers had to use what was usually made for travelers and knights... That, and just ordinary camping equipment. People with money could, of course, get tailor-made equipment, but most adventurers had to use whatever was on the market, customizing it to their individual needs. Too often that led to gear that was rough around the edges and didn't feel good to use, and...well...it wasn't very convenient. And for, uh...for women, you've

got their own circumstances to deal with, right?”

“Erm...yes, we do,” said Shiori with a slight cringe.

Even though he’d brought it up himself, Linus cringed awkwardly along with her, then went on.

“It wasn’t until Enandel Trading Company came along that you could find items that actually addressed the unique needs of adventurers. When that equipment became available, adventuring saw an influx of women and people of noble backgrounds. Expeditions became *so* much easier...though, still not nearly as pleasant as having you around, Shiori.”

Linus burst into a grin.

“If housekeeping mages do increase in number, adventuring will get even more comfortable. And I mean, seriously, if you look at the whole Guild, the results of the Tris branch have really taken off. It used to be that only a few very experienced adventurers were capable of getting good results for really tough requests.”

Even when a party was strong enough to defeat the target of a suppression request, the battle would leave them so exhausted that injuries would occur on the way home. Sometimes, parties would tire out well before they even reached their destination and head back home with their tails between their legs. To hear Linus tell it, failure was about more than just a party’s strength and ability to fight.

“Food, washing, baths, beds... We take all of that stuff for granted when we’re at home, but they have a huge impact on morale at camp too. Just eating well and getting a good night’s rest—it really improves your mood, you know? I feel like more and more adventurers are talking about eating well, and eating healthier. Myself included, for the record. Your camping recipes have been a real lifesaver.”

“I...I see. I’m so glad to hear it. That makes me happy.”

Magical beasts were all over the place, and a part of everyday life. In order to suppress those that lived in faraway locations, one had to first travel to them, and that in itself took time. It was not at all uncommon for parties to lose

morale on their expeditions, which too often led to unfortunate results. Many of Shiori's fellow adventurers now believed that housekeeping mages were essential to maintaining morale and safely accomplishing such quests.

Though the increase in adventurers had meant that more places had been fully explored, there were still a great many locations that had yet to be fully uncovered—this included the depths of large forests, underground labyrinths, and ancient ruins. There were many reasons to visit these places. For one thing, there was the research of magical beasts, but there was also the fact that much of the past had been lost amongst the many skirmishes in the battle for territorial reclamation between Storydia and the Empire. Unfortunately, the longer an expedition went on, the harder it became to explore a place thoroughly. That was where the housekeeping mage played an essential role.

"I know Nils said it already, but even though you're not specialized in any one area, you still handle a lot of different jobs, and that's a huge blessing. So if you really do hold a lecture sometime, I will totally help you promote it!"

"Thank you so much."

"Oh, but then again, if the number of housekeeping mages increases, does that mean you'll get less work?"

Linus had been all for helping Shiori to set up a lecture on housekeeping magic, but now his face was colored with a touch of worry.

"I suppose that would be the case, yes, but I'm no spring chicken anymore, and I honestly don't know how long I'll be able to keep working out in the field."

This wasn't just a matter of age—the truth was, there was also the potential for illness or injury. Even with stellar partners like Alec and Rurii, they alone were no guarantee that she wouldn't get hurt.

If Shiori were forced to give up her work as a housekeeping mage, what would become of the status and skills that she had developed? It seemed to Shiori a pity for it all to simply vanish into the ether.

"I don't know how good of a teacher I can be," said Shiori, "but it would make me happy to see others inherit the skills I've developed and continue my line of work."

“Yeah, I get it... And hey—*there’s* a prime example of housekeeping magic working its wonders!”

“Huh?”

Shiori had no idea what Linus meant, but when she turned and followed his gaze, she saw Alec leaving the bath tent. Now that he’d soaked away for some time in the hot water, the color had returned to his face.

“The guy practically looked on his deathbed,” said Linus, “but it seems some of the weight has left his shoulders. That bath let him sweat away his worries, don’t you think?”

“I do hope so...” replied Shiori.

She still couldn’t forget the look on Alec’s face. When he’d been affected by the brain sucker poison, there had been agony and suffering etched into his features. Despair, fear, and more than anything else, defeat. They left his face empty, and Shiori didn’t think she would soon forget it.

What kind of hallucination could have left him looking like that? What could someone as strong as Alec have seen that would fill him with such torment?

But the very moment that Shiori saw the smile on the brain sucker’s face—one that looked distinctly as though it were feasting on Alec’s emotions—something inside of her snapped. She was filled with a strong urge to save him. She couldn’t bear to endure the despair on his face, and she would not stand for the brain sucker keeping him there even a moment longer.

Before she had barely formed a further thought, Shiori sprung into action. She asked Linus to keep the brain suckers pinned down where they were, then reached for the bottle in her knapsack. Without so much as a hint of hesitation, she had covered the nearest brain sucker in its contents. She had thought that perhaps the chili oil would have an immediate effect on the monster’s membrane-like skin, but the effects were beyond her expectations. The creature had shrieked in pain and begun writhing on the ground, but Shiori had barely glanced at it as she moved in towards the brain sucker holding Alec and drowned it, too, in chili oil.

The brain sucker released Alec instantly and began rolling around on the ground, but Shiori ignored it. She took Alec into her arms, looking on as he shook, his hands clutching his chest as if he were fighting against something.

I'm sorry, he said. Forgive me. If only I was never here...

His face was deathly pale as he muttered, and Shiori could not bear to see it.

I never want to see that look on his face ever again...

Nils had told her that the effects of the hallucinogenic poison still lingered, and he had been right—even upon arriving at camp, a shroud of depression hung over Alec. Nils had told her he'd keep an eye on him, so Shiori had taken a bath, during which time Alec had perhaps confided in Nils. If Alec was indeed feeling better now, it was a testament to Nils's abilities, and it made her smile to see him chatting easily with the others.

"Alec, how do you feel?" she asked.

"Refreshed, now that I've sweated the worst of it away. Thanks."

"That's great..."

Whatever the reason, she was simply happy that he was back. He put a hand to her shoulder apologetically, then turned to Linus, who was still busy with prep.

"Linus, the bath is free."

"I'll jump in just as soon as I'm done with prep here."

The fish, slightly rose-colored, had been neatly gutted and dressed. Linus sprinkled them with some salt, pepper, and herbs, then put them on a clean sheet of cotton.

"I'll just let them sit here and dry while I take my bath," Linus said.

"Amazing work," said Alec, impressed by how deft Linus was with his hands.

"Back in my village, we made preserved foods like this all the time. Everyone got into it before the winter hit and we were all stuck indoors."

"But doesn't making smoked foods take a long time? I heard that even just

the prep can take a couple of days."

"Well, if you're after something you want to preserve for a long time, it *does* take a while. And the flavor is completely different. But if you're going to eat them relatively soon, there are easier methods. That said, the quicker methods don't keep very long, so they're best eaten without much delay."

"Ah, is that so?"

"Yep. You also have to be careful—if what you're smoking has too much water in it, you end up with something really sour. You need to make sure what you're working with is properly dry, so it helps to start with something that doesn't have too much moisture to begin with. Fortunately, even though the Tris perch contains a lot of water, it's okay. I learned through research that when you smoke it, you get this wonderfully delicious taste that just melts in your mouth."

Shiori was drying Alec's hair and listening to Linus speak when Nils peeked over his shoulder.

"Er... Research?" asked Nils.

The word seemed to have piqued his interest. Shiori noticed water dripping from his hair, and decided she'd dry it for him once she finished with Alec. At the same time, she filed away Linus's recipe and made a mental note to put it in her journal later.

"When you live in the mountains, you don't have much to do over winter. You hunt, you make handicrafts to sell at the market, and outside of that, you eat. Everyone at my village got really into the idea of researching and developing the tastiest preserved foods. When it comes to quick and easy smoked foods, there's the Tris perch and the Tris salmon, and I also recommend cheese, and boiled cave quail eggs."

"I see," said Alec. Most of the color was back in his face now. "I like the sound of that," he said. "Mind teaching me more later?"

"But of course! You can smoke food with gear you can find in ordinary shops. I'll give you the whole rundown."

"Wow," said Nils. "I'm starting to crave a drink. Would you mind teaching me

too?”

“Don’t use medicinal herbs to smoke things, you hear?”

“Of course I won’t... Oh, but wait a moment. What about the medicinal effects of smoking?”

“Let it be, would you? Just stick with regular herbs.”

The men were starting to get excited, and something about it struck Shiori as adorable. She couldn’t help but giggle.

“I suppose delicious food really *is* important...” she muttered, watching the men as they spoke, and looking at the smile that rose to Alec’s face.

You could get hurt on your travels and you could be utterly exhausted, but if a good meal was all it took to get your energy back, then Shiori was ready to put even more effort into campsite cooking.

Alec’s hair was nice and dry, and she ran a hand through it. When he looked up at her with his dark magenta eyes, she smiled.

10

Steam rose from the pot of mushroom stew as it bubbled pleasantly, and a wonderfully delicious scent rose into the air. Next to Shiori, Alec was filleting Tris perch with a knife he'd sharpened himself. She couldn't stop watching him—she was in awe of how cleanly he went about his work. He'd told her that he used to be inexperienced when it came to gutting and dressing bird meat, but that didn't seem to be at all the case for fish. Apparently, he'd often gone fishing as a youth.

Shiori pictured a young Alec working to fillet a fish, and she was certain it must have been an adorable sight. She couldn't hide the smile that bloomed upon her face.

"By the way, are Tris perch safe to eat raw?" she asked. "Are they prone to parasites...?"

"Fresh perch and salmon are fine, but they're the only river fish you can eat raw. You have to be especially careful of Alphan salmon. You have to get rid of the gills and make sure you cook the fish well, or it'll play havoc on your stomach. Alphan salmon are fished often and they taste great, but the parasites in their gills are a rough customer. Some say they can put a hole in your innards."

As he spoke, Alec took the perch's innards out, washed the perch with some water, then cut the meat from the bone. Rurii looked to him for permission, and once it was given, the slime took the innards and happily absorbed them into its body. Alec continued working for a time, but eventually, his eyebrows drooped slightly.

"It's not easy working with you looking at me so intensely," he said, cringing a little. "Makes me kind of embarrassed."

Shiori pouted.

"Well, what about you? You're always watching me while I'm at work."

"Ugh. Now that you mention it, that's a good point..."

“Do you have any idea how hard it was for me in Silveria, squeezed in between you and Dennis?”

“I, uh... I’m sorry about that. Really.”

Alec’s eyebrows continued to droop as he went back to his fish-filleting. His expression was adorable, and Shiori smiled at the sight of it. When he’d finished with the fish, Shiori had Alec cut it into bite-size pieces, which she lightly toasted with some fire magic before placing them in a marinade she’d prepared earlier, while the pieces were still hot.

Preparing the marinade had taken time, but the recipe itself was simple and relatively quick. It was made with wine, salt and pepper, and herbs, and it gave off a wonderful aroma.

“Looks delicious,” remarked Alec.

“It does, doesn’t it?”

The two smiled at each other as Linus, who was a little distance away smoking his fish, called out.

“I’m just about done here!” he said.

“Oh. He’s finished?” asked Alec.

“Seems like it.”

Everyone huddled around Linus’s pot, from which a thick, smoky scent wafted. This smell was unique to smoked foods—it was salty, with a touch of bitterness to it.

“Time for the unveiling!” announced Linus, as he took the lid from the pot.

Instantly, a dense aroma filled the air along with white smoke, which quickly dissipated. The smell that remained tickled all of their appetites. The white of the Tris perch’s flesh, which normally glittered with a shade of red, had turned a beautiful golden brown.

“Wow...” uttered Shiori.

“Looks delicious,” added Alec.

“Such a deep golden brown,” said Ellen. “And after only ten minutes too.”

“Hm, this scent...” said Nils. “Perhaps I should break out the medicinal spirits?”

“Medicinal spirits with smoked fish? That’s not an ordinary combo...” said Linus.

Linus sliced one of the fish into strips and placed the pieces on everyone’s palms. This was to be an impromptu taste-testing session. After Linus ate some of it himself, the others put the still-warm slices of smoked perch in their mouths. They were all hit with a salty smokiness, which was followed by the elegant sweetness of the Tris perch.

“Whoa...”

“Oh my...”

It was so delicious that everyone seemed to momentarily lose the ability to express themselves. Linus beamed triumphantly at their reactions. Rurii, for its part, wobbled—the slime seemed to enjoy the fish just as much as the rest of them.

“It’s good, right?” said Linus.

“I’ve had marinated perch a few times at restaurants, but this is *so* much better. The taste is quite addictive. It’s like a luxury ham,” said Alec.

“Yeah, I prefer smoked perch too,” said Linus, “but chefs at restaurants want to make the most of the perch’s color, so they haven’t really listened when I’ve recommended it. They think it’s a waste to turn such a beautiful fish all brown. If you ask me, though, it looks plenty delicious like this too.”

Shiori could understand a chef wanting to make the most of an ingredient’s visual appeal, but it wasn’t a bad thing to treat an ingredient purely for its flavor either. Not that the two were mutually exclusive.

“How about actually giving those chefs a taste test?” asked Ellen.

“Yeah, I’ve thought about it, but whenever I prepare one for such a taste test, I always end up finishing it off.”

“It’s not a taste test if you eat the whole thing...”

Ellen rolled her eyes and poked Linus, who just laughed and shrugged it off.

In later days, Linus would indeed bring his smoked perch to some of his regular clients, who had issues serving the burnt-looking fish to customers—even if it *did* taste great—and so it never made their menus. The story, however, doesn't end there. The chefs who tasted the smoke perch were so utterly taken by the flavor of it that they *did* shrewdly serve it under the title of "a test dish of questionable appearance." Later, smoked perch would become something of an "off-the-menu delicacy" that was only known to regular customers, and kept entirely secret.

"All the same, I never imagined you'd be able to smoke fish so easily. I've heard of people using smokehouses, but..."

It was most common for people to hang smoked foods in smokehouses or hollow logs, and leave them for long periods of time. The preparation for smoking—that is, flavoring and drying the ingredients—usually took days. It was truly a surprise to learn that there was a way to do it so quickly and easily.

In order to do things the Linus way, one needed the ingredients (dried at room temperature), a steel pot, two wire nets, a small metal plate, a lid for the pot, and smoking chips. The smoking chips didn't have to be anything special—they could be tree shavings, branches, or if neither were available, even tea leaves.

"My village is deep in the mountains," said Linus, "so we didn't have many luxuries. One time we got caught using tea leaves and the village elder gave us an earful. Said that there'd be punishments if we ever used such luxuries as smoking chips again."

He laughed at the memory.

At the bottom of the pot, place a handful of smoking chips, spread evenly. Place one of the wire nets on top of that, the corners of which need to be bent to act as legs. Then, place the plate on top of the net. (Everyone thought at first that this was where the fish would go, but actually, this plate was for catching whatever dripped from the fish while it was smoking.) Place the second wire net on top of the pot, then cover it with the pot lid. After that, light a fire beneath the pot, and wait for it to smoke. This could be a few minutes or half an hour—the duration was up to one's discretion.

“Is there a problem if the juice from the fish drips to the bottom of the pot?” asked Alec.

“If the juice gets on the smoking chips, it can extinguish them, or otherwise taint the smoke and spoil the flavor.”

“Ah... That makes sense.”

“Oh, and if the surface of the fish gets wet, it can go sour, so you have to be careful. That’s the whole reason it’s so important to make sure there’s as little moisture in the fish as possible before you start, and to let it dry in the wind for a little while. When you’re using anything that’s been chilled, you have to bring it back to room temperature first. If you don’t, you’ll get condensation during the smoking process. Tris perch is special, but for beginners, I recommend starting with something that doesn’t have too much water to begin with. Boiled eggs, cheeses, sausages, and dried fish. If you want to go for something a little richer, maybe beef or Alphan bison would be good.”

“Oh, that does sound tasty...”

“Alphan bison... Aren’t they quite large magical beasts? They’re edible?”

Shiori had seen the bison from afar a number of times, but they seemed like tough beasts to hunt. Linus was momentarily surprised to find that Shiori didn’t know the Alphan bison was edible.

“Huh? Oh, I see,” said Linus. “Alphan, meaning they’re only found in the Alphandis continent, and not in the east.”

He went on to explain that the Alphan bison made its home in the plains of the Alphandis continent. It was a magical beast that had been domesticated and was now raised as livestock for its quality red meat. In Storydia, Alphan bison were raised in Brovito Village, Dima, and the Violette region. However, because they were raised in fairly small numbers, only select shops could obtain the meat, which limited where you could purchase it as a consumer.

“I’m guessing it’s not available at Marius’s?”

“No, I’ve never seen it there.”

Shiori was a regular customer at Marius’s grocery, and she’d never seen

bison. That was potentially why she knew little about the beast. She had, of course, read the entry contained in her bestiary, so while she remembered the name and its general characteristics, she didn't remember the finer details.

"Hm..." she muttered. "Looks like I need to study more..."

"You're already so conscientious," said Alec. "When I was three years into adventuring, I barely even knew half of what was in my bestiary. Just remembering all the names is an achievement in and of itself."

"He's got a point," said Ellen. "All I knew by then was which magical beasts used poison."

"Being conscientious is a good thing," said Nils, "but worry too much and you'll wear yourself out. Go at your own pace."

To hear all of the veterans share their thoughts with her made Shiori feel a little awkward, but she smiled and nodded all the same. She was happy that they were all being so considerate.

"This pot is quite discolored, though, huh? Seems like the smell probably clings to it," noted Alec.

"Oh, yeah, that's on account of all the smoke," said Linus. "You can't just wash it away that easily, so I have a special pot for smoking food like this."

"In that case, it seems like a good idea to use pots you no longer need, rather than buying something brand new," said Alec thoughtfully. "Shiori, how about we use my pot for smoked food? Now that we're living together, we won't need most of what I've been using until now."

"That works," said Shiori.

"Ugh... How such conversations pain those of us who are single," muttered Nils.

Everyone burst into laughter. Alec finished jotting down everything Linus had taught him, then nodded. He looked very satisfied.

"There," he said. "Getting the heat level right could be a challenge, but I'll give it a shot. Anything else I should be mindful of?"

"Hm. I think the only other thing you need is a watch. Until you're used to it, it

helps to be able to time it. Smoke meat too long, and you won't just spoil the flavor—the meat will go hard too."

Nils jotted this down into his own notebook with a serious expression.

"I see, I see... I'll be mindful of that. I have had enough unchewable and strange-tasting meat for an entire lifetime."

"I will *never* go through that again..." muttered Ellen.

"Eating the knights' cooking really did a number on you two, huh?" said Alec.

Nils and Ellen had been part of the medic squadron sent to help in the aftermath of the snow wolf incident at Brovito Village. Both had been traumatized by the food the knights cooked, which they described as "Already-failed cuisine gone horribly wrong."

"But at least we have Shiori with us today," said Ellen, flashing her a smile. "I bet it's all delicious, and it already smells amazing."

Shiori nodded. "Shall we start dinner, then?"

The cheers of the adventurers rang bright through the campsite, which was surrounded by the dull light of the natt hortensia flowers. The small banquet they were all looking forward to was about to begin.

Linus had come prepared, and he put out homemade canapés made from the rye bread crackers and cheese he'd brought. He put some of the smoked perch on top, and Ellen sprinkled these with some herbs.

Alec ladled the mushroom stew into bowls, which Rurii deftly carried to the table, where Nils laid them out. Finally, Shiori put out plates filled with marbled mushroom butter sauté, stir-fried stardust and airola mushrooms, and Tris perch fried to crackling perfection. The party of adventurers cheered once more.

The air was filled with mouth-watering scents, and the table was all smiles.

"It's so good... It's bliss..." muttered Linus, who had filled his mouth with thinly sliced marbled mushrooms.

Marbled mushrooms were large and white, with thick hair growing from them. Inside of them was a vibrant red like that of marbled beef, and the flavor,

too, was like that of tender meat. Eating a slice of the mushroom filled his mouth with the flavors of butter and soy sauce. The mushroom was, of course, tremendously delicious on its own, but having it alongside the strong flavors of preserved foods, like butter and soy sauce, created a combination of flavors that was far more delicious than the sum of their parts. It was like high-quality beef cuisine.

“So tender, so very delicious... How I’d love to try this with sukiyaki,” said Shiori.

“Sukiyaki?” asked Alec.

“Yes, it’s a meal from back home. It’s got a sweet and sour flavor that I think you’d enjoy.”

Alec smiled at the idea of it—he was fond of that which was sweet.

“Is that so? Well then, next time we get our hands on some marbled mushrooms, do you think you could make it?”

“Of course. Though that said, it’s usually made with beef. So perhaps we’ll do that next time.”

“Can’t wait.”

Storydia didn’t have chrysanthemum greens or tofu, and it was a pity they couldn’t use raw eggs, but fortunately there was soy sauce and cooking sake, so she could still recreate the taste of home.

This was exactly the kind of luxury afforded to a kingdom so affluent. Shiori was once again filled with silent gratitude for having fallen into the nation of Storydia as she bit into one of the crackers that Linus had made. It was pleasantly crunchy, and the sensation went wonderfully with the rich flavors of the cheese and the smoked perch.

“This is marvelous,” she uttered. “You could roast these and make them even tastier.”

“Oh, come on,” said Linus, his sharp ears picking up her comment. “Don’t tempt me.”

Naturally, Linus immediately melted one of the crackers over a hot coal at the

oven. The cheese melted over the smoked perch, and began to crackle as it roasted. Linus threw it in his mouth as soon as it was ready, and after a little huffing and puffing over the heat, his expression settled into joy.

“So good...” he muttered. “So. Very. Good.”

“Certainly looks that way,” said Ellen. “Would you roast mine?”

“And mine too,” added Alec.

Alec and Ellen passed their crackers to Linus, and Rurii, too, got in on the roasting. As Shiori watched this all with a smile on her face, Nils leaned over to talk to her quietly.

“Um, Shiori,” he began.

“Yes?”

Nils’s voice was very soft, and Shiori got the sense that he didn’t want the others to hear. And though his expression was calm and gentle, there was something serious at the heart of it.

“Would you mind being the first to take guard duty tonight, together with Alec?”

“No, not at all, it’s just...”

Shiori wanted Alec to take the first rest. When she brought that very thing up, Nils smiled.

“Honestly, that would indeed be best, but I think...” He hesitated. “...he might not sleep very well. And if he *does* fall asleep, he might find himself having another nightmare.”

Talking to Nils had helped to take some of the load off Alec’s heart, but Nils still believed there was a chance that the brain sucker poison would continue to linger.

“He saw quite the terrifying hallucination earlier,” Nils said. “I think it’s likely he wants to talk to you about it, so would you mind making time for him to do so? If he elects not to say anything, that’s fine too, of course.”

“Yes, okay.”

Though he wasn't saying it directly, Nils was asking Shiori to take care of Alec tonight. Perhaps it was because she was his lover, or perhaps there was some other reason. Seeming to sense Shiori's confusion, he hesitated slightly before speaking again.

"I'm afraid it's not my place to say too much," he said, "but you were a part of the hallucination Alec saw."

"Erm... Me?"

"Yes. It seems to have hit him extremely hard. Though he may be able to distract himself from such thoughts here chatting with the others, what happens in the evening may be another story..."

If Nils, a herbalist physician, was this worried about Alec, then his concerns were most likely valid. Shiori had not wanted to touch upon the things that Alec had seen, but if there was a chance that his hallucinations had left deeper wounds, the sooner he talked about them, the better.

"If I can be of help, I'd be glad to," Shiori said. "When he was trapped in those hallucinations, it was like he was somebody else."

It had apparently been a vision of such power that it had taken someone as strong as Alec and reduced him to pale-faced trembling. The words he had mumbled were just like those Shiori had heard from him in dreams, and he had clung to her, desperate for her not to leave him.

"I know," nodded Nils. "So please, take care of him."

"I will."

Shiori sipped at her bowl of stew, indulging in the flavor as she looked at Alec. He was smiling with Linus and Ellen as they hovered by the stove. He noticed her gaze and turned to her, and his dark magenta eyes narrowed as he smiled at her.

And yet...something in that expression was weary and exhausted.

11

In the evening, after everyone had enjoyed their dinner, Alec and Shiori

remained on watch while their fellow companions retired to their beds.

"Well, please don't hesitate to wake me if something should happen," said Nils, his words deep with hidden meaning as he wrapped himself in his blanket.

It was not long before everyone was fast asleep. Rurii, too, who would be on guard duty together with Linus later, was already a pool on the floor, deep in slumber.

Outside of the breathing of their companions, there was only the occasional far-off cry of a magical beast, and the sounds of an underground stream.

It was incredibly quiet. The magical lanterns and the natt hortensia flowers illuminated the cavern with gentle light, and Shiori was taken by what was, to her, a fantastical sight. It was like something straight out of a story or a fairy tale. And yet it was right here before her eyes. Once an ordinary office worker in Japan, she had become an adventurer in another world entirely, and this was now part of her everyday life.

Even views like this are just part of my life now...

It was so real to her in the moment that it was her life back in Japan that seemed almost fantastical, and Shiori was suddenly aware of the extent to which she had grown used to the world she now lived in. She felt a slight pain shoot through her chest, but it was little more than that. Gone was the homesickness that had seared her very heart.

She had someone in her life who recognized her, who told her it was more than okay for her to be here in this world, in this place—and it was because of him that she could accept that reality herself. Shiori was now willing to accept that she was living here, and to look positively towards the future.

She could now accept her past life as memories, because she had someone in her life who accepted her, supported her, and loved her. She had never believed that such a person could make her heart feel so light.

Alec. It's all thanks to Alec.

Alec Dia, a man for whom she would give everything. Presently, he sat on a stone chair that Shiori had crafted with magic, looking at her. Knowing him, he understood his duties and was not letting his concentration slip, but there was

something different about his demeanor. This much was clear to her.

Shiori cast her search magic to make sure there was nothing in the vicinity, then drew closer to him.

“Alec,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Hm? Yeah,” he said, with a vague smile.

His eyes hovered around her, but he would not meet her gaze.

“I wish I could tell you it’s all fine...but I was confronted by old memories,” he said.

He reached out a hand and pulled Shiori in by her waist. He held her close, burying his head against her chest, and let out a long sigh.

“I’m just so glad that it wasn’t real,” he said finally.

His voice was weak and husky. When she peeked down at his dark magenta eyes, Shiori saw they were filled with fear and worry. He was scared, just as Nils had said.

Shiori wrapped her arms around Alec’s back, and patted him gently the way one would a small child. The tension in his body began to relax, and after a time, Alec spoke.

“In that vision, I saw something horrible. I saw you killed in front of my eyes.”

“Me?”

Seeing your lover killed before you... A terrifying and heartbreaking sight. And yet the fear she sensed in him told her that her death was not the only thing that he had seen. He had seen her death...and something else as well, something that had turned him frightfully pale and left him begging.

Alec tried to chuckle, but there was no energy in it.

“I told you once before—about my past love, and the words she left me with when we parted.”

Alec’s past lover had told him that he and all of their memories together were worthless. And she’d had reason to be angry. But even then, Shiori had felt that these words were terribly harsh. They were words that denied Alec’s very

existence. They wore at his heart, and gnawed away at it.

“In that vision...she was there by your side, where you had fallen, your body lying still. She told me that I had abandoned her and my brother, and that I had no right to be happy. She told me that your death was the price I had to pay. Your death was my fault. You were murdered to pay for what I had done.”

Shiori opened her mouth to speak, then stopped. She could almost see the words that lingered on Alec’s lips. And after some moments of hesitation, Alec gave voice to them.

“My past love appeared before me the last time a brain sucker got me too. That was long before I met you, and so you did not make an appearance in that vision at all, of course, but...I realized something when I was hit by that poison a second time. I realized that it had taken the guilt and the fears that I’d carried with me all this time, and intensified them. There is no way that a monster I was encountering for the very first time could possibly have known my past.”

“Your guilt?” Shiori asked.

“Yes. I...”

Alec paused, searching for the right words. Then he looked up at Shiori, resolute, and with a pained smile, he went on.

“When we broke up, her words to me were so harsh that...that I always saw myself as the victim. It didn’t matter if she was right or not. I was the reason we broke up—there’s no denying that. I never talked to her about my plans, and never tried to discuss things with her. I just made up my mind, and by the time I told her, there was no going back. That is an undeniable truth. I left her hanging through the most important years of her life, and so there was no way she was going to accept me telling her that we had to break up because the circumstances had changed. What happened then happened because I was a coward. And what happened with my brother was no different. I took advantage of his kindness, pushed all the responsibility on him, and I ran away.”

“Alec...”

So that was it. That was the reason he had been so terrified. Shiori had heard about Alec’s past a number of times, and she had always sensed a heavy

emotion lingering at the edges of Alec's words. She now knew that what she'd sensed was regret. He had lived his life until now suffering from past regrets. They had clung to him all this time, and in his vision, he had been told to pay for them with the life of his lover. There was no way anyone could have remained calm under such circumstances.

But...

Shiori took Alec's cheeks in her hands. She did not know his past in any great detail. He had only ever shared fragments of it, and only ever from his point of view. There may well have been inconsistencies between what he told her and the truth.

Shiori only knew the Alec of the present. She knew that he stood on the front lines, and did not run from battle. She knew he was strong, and that he'd told her that they were companions who supported and looked after one another. He was powerful, kind, and trustworthy. He was all of those things, and yet he was also fragile. That was the Alec she knew.

"You saved me, Alec," she said. "I felt so trapped I thought I would go insane, but you found my heart...and I believe in the Alec who did that. You put yourself on the front lines, standing your ground. You are strong, you are kind, and I believe in you."

Perhaps the people in Alec's past would not forgive him. But Shiori wanted to be his ally. He had saved her from the depths of despair. Alec's eyes widened.

"Shiori..." he uttered.

His face scrunched up like he might have burst into tears. He was so filled with emotion in the moment that, had he been younger, perhaps even a teenager, he might really have cried.

"I always knew you were kind. I depend on it far too much...I could lose myself in it."

Shiori ran her fingers through his chestnut-brown hair, his head still resting against her.

"Then let's lose ourselves together," she whispered.

Alec chuckled, his head still buried in her chest.

“The idea of living in the bliss of that sweet warmth is tempting...and an extremely enticing offer, but...I am done. I no longer wish to live a life of lies.”

Alec pulled Shiori into his arms. Their faces were practically touching as they faced one another. In Alec’s eyes was his strong resolve—a sign of his old self.

“Shiori,” he said. “I want to live my life with you, in the present. That’s why I told you that I intended to face my past, and yet...some part of me was holding back. I still haven’t put my words into action. So I see that vision today as a warning, however harsh it may have been.”

“Alec... It makes me beyond happy that you would say such a thing, but I don’t want you to push yourself too hard.”

Shiori was concerned—he was like a pendulum swinging between terrible anxiety and strong resolve.

“Nils said the same thing,” said Alec, with a chuckle.

Knowing that he was trying to shrug her comment off, Shiori pinched his nose between her fingers, and he let out a nasal yelp of surprise.

“I want to live my life with you too. I was suddenly thrown into this worl—er, *country*, and it took all I had just to make a living. It was all too sudden, and none of it seemed real...and I felt like I was caught forever in the clutches of a nightmare. But then you held me in your arms like this. You accepted me, and told me I was here, and that I was allowed to be here. You’re the one who taught me to live in the present, and now nothing could make me happier than living that present with you. But if it means watching you push yourself until you break down...I don’t know if I can.”

Alec had told her, all that time ago—*you don’t have to push yourself. If it gets hard, you can rely on me*. And it wasn’t just his actions—he had uttered variations of those very words to her, and often. It was the cumulative effect of those words that had saved her.

Words were powerful. They could be poison just as easily as they could be an elixir. They could hurt people just as easily as they could save them—Shiori knew this well. That was why she spoke her feelings to Alec. She wanted to

send their warm, soothing power to his heart.

“Please don’t push yourself too hard,” she said. “Don’t let it wear on you. When it’s hard, lean on me. I’m here with you...and I’m not going anywhere. Alec, I...”

I love you so much I want to give you my body, my soul, my everything.

Alec was stunned by Shiori’s words, and for a moment he didn’t know where to look, or what to do.

“If we weren’t where we are, I would take you in your entirety,” he said, after a long pause. “And nothing vexes me more than us being here right now when you’ve just said those words.”

Alec pulled Shiori into a tight embrace and chuckled.

“Thank you,” he said. “I was letting it all get to me...but I feel more relaxed now.”

“Good,” said Shiori, giggling as she brushed her face against his cheek.

He pulled his cheek away from her, and then they came together in a kiss. It was tender and thoughtful, and when they broke apart, Alec spoke once more.



“When we return home, I’ll send a letter to my brother. I want to talk to both

of them—my brother and my past love. There's a good chance she'll refuse me, but even if I am given permission to meet with them, it will likely not be for some time. In the meantime, I'll ready myself for whatever they may say."

Alec said it would be a number of months before such meetings could take place. Still, he smiled and assured her it would be a sufficient amount of time.

"You and Nils, you're both so kind," he said. "Both of you said you believe in the person I've become. The person I am now. To have two of my companions hear about my past and still believe in me... Just that alone is like salvation."

"I'm...I'm glad to hear it."

Hers was a heart that took two steps forward and then a step back—yet it was edging its way forwards, constantly. In a similar way, Alec was fighting to confront what was within himself. Not everything on that journey would go the way they wanted, but if it was lives free from regret that they were searching for, then the only way was through.

To live in the present...

For Shiori, the present meant the world into which she had essentially been reborn. And though Alec had said that he would love her no matter who she was, Shiori did not know for certain that he would accept the truth behind her existence. Some part of her still feared opening up to him. But if he was facing his past for the sake of their future together, then Shiori wanted to do the same. She wanted to be honest with him.

I, too, will have to ready my resolve soon...

Their eyes met once more. He closed his dark magenta eyes and kissed her again, deeply. His warm tongue felt like it was growing hotter as it pushed through her lips and met with her own. The palm of his hand moved from her back to her hips, then traced the line of her side, flowing past her collarbone before settling at her neck.

It's so hot I feel like I'm going to melt...

He seemed to swallow the moans that Shiori was trying to hold back so as not to wake their companions, and she lost herself in his intense expression of love. But even then she clung to him, desperate to respond to his feelings in kind.

When he broke apart from her, he put a hand to her cheek lovingly and whispered.

“I love you.”

Those words filled Shiori’s body and soul. He was so very dear to her for how he made her feel. And so, Shiori would share her own feelings in turn, over and over.

I love you too, she said.

Chapter 2: A Place to Call Home

1

Even though Hortensia Cavern was perennially dark, it still had its own day and night cycle. Around the time that the party's watches showed five in the morning, the unique sense of darkness that exuded from nearby nocturnal magical beasts subsided, and the refreshing feel of morning filled the air.

Rurii, who had just woken up, was busy doing its morning stretches. Shiori, who had taken the last watch so she could also prepare breakfast, glanced over at Alec, who had also just woken. He looked brighter, and there were no signs that he'd suffered from nightmares, as Nils had feared. If anything, he seemed to have slept quite peacefully.

"It looks like you got a good night's sleep," she said. "I'm so glad."

"It's all thanks to you," Alec said. "And you know what? I had the most wonderful dream..."

But at that point, Alec's voice trailed off. He stared at Shiori for a moment, then covered his mouth and avoided her eyes. He might have been blushing.

"Wh-What is it?" Shiori asked. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Hm? Oh, no. I'm fine. It was just...such a wonderful dream that I almost slipped back into it for a second..."

Shiori had no way of knowing exactly how wonderful Alec's dream had been, but it had clearly left him stammering and unable to find a place to settle his gaze. Shiori wasn't sure exactly what to make of this behavior, suspicious as it was, but at least his condition had improved.

"Still, don't push yourself," she said. "Make sure to tell me if you don't feel well."

Alec chuckled at the reversal in their usual roles, just as a voice piped up from behind them.

“What’s wrong? Are you not feeling well?”

It was Nils. He’d woken up a little early to boil some herbs, and he passed a steaming cup of tea to Alec while looking him over.

“Well,” he went on, “the color has returned to your face, but...what is it? You’ve gone red. A fever, perhaps?”

“Er, no, it’s...it’s nothing,” replied Alec. “I just had a dream that was far too good for me. Shiori was comforting me. Healing me...quite enthusiastically.”

“Erm, I was?”

“Hm...? A dream so good it could make a man blush... Whatever might you have—”

Nils’s words were suddenly cut off midsentence. His eyes turned to slits, and he turned them in Alec’s direction.

“Oh. I see,” said Nils, quickly snatching back the cup he’d just given to Alec. “Hold on, seems I forgot to add something.”

So saying, Nils put a spoonful of moss-colored powder into the cup, swirled it with a spoon, then handed it back. The moment Alec took a sip of the liquid, his eyes bulged from his head and he covered his mouth reflexively. He let out a groan, then glared at Nils.

“Oy,” he said. “What even *is* this concoction?”

“Well, it seemed to me that your mouth was already full of a sickening sweetness,” replied Nils, “so I merely added some especially nourishing—and might I add, *bitter*—herbs to the mix. Refreshing, no?”

“Nils...” muttered Alec.

As Shiori watched the interplay between Nils’s veiled aggression and Alec’s glare, it was only then that the exact meaning of “enthusiastic healing” finally dawned on her. She flushed red. It seemed that Alec had enjoyed quite his time with her, in his dreams.

“Alec...” she muttered. “I regret worrying about you for even a second!”

“It was beyond my control!” cried Alec. “It’s not like I asked for it!”

Cheeks puffed up into a pout, Shiori took out a bottle of chili oil. The moment Alec saw it, the color drained from his face. It was the very “stimulant” she’d used on the brain suckers the previous day.

“Alec, your soup is going to be a touch...*spicy*,” she declared. “That should warm you right up.”

“Now, now, there’s no need to be mad,” said Alec. “All I did was have a nice dream. So nice, in fact, I dare say I’m aching to know what happens next...”

“Alec...”

Nils chuckled as he watched their back-and-forth. Rurii, meanwhile, gave off the sense that it had something to add: *Just what are the two of you up to, at this hour of the morning?*

“Morning, everyone! You guys sure sound chirpy!” said Linus.

“Indeed. Like they’re having a grand old time. Good to see you looking well, Alec.”

With Linus and Ellen joining the mix, the campsite filled with relaxed smiles and laughter. So began the second day of the party’s expedition in Hortensia Cavern.

2

“Well, how should we do this?” asked Alec. “Shall we start at the nearest gathering spot and work our way around to the others in turn?”

The party had finished its breakfast and packed away the campsite. Everything had been pleasant and relaxed, but Alec’s question put all of their minds back on work. Nils took a look at his map and nodded.

“Yes, that sounds best. We don’t know how far the mandrakes have run, so let’s start nearby and slowly head deeper inside.”

“We’d best stay on guard,” added Linus. “There are more magical beasts around now.”

The archer glanced around as he checked the arrows he’d used and collected

again during the previous battle. There were indeed more magical beasts in the cavern than there had been yesterday—Linus could feel their presence.

"I *did* feel as though there weren't that many magical beasts around yesterday," said Ellen. "I suppose it must have been because of the brain suckers."

Shiori spread her search magic out in a hundred-meter radius. She, too, noticed the increased density of magical beasts—now that the brain suckers were gone, perhaps the beasts felt it was safe to return.

"You're right," she said. "I sense more of them. I'm not sensing anything nearby outside of midsize beasts, however."

"I see," said Alec. "I don't expect us to encounter anything tougher than a brain sucker, but let's stay on guard all the same."

"Got it."

Everyone readied their knapsacks, and the party headed for the first gathering spot.

"I must say," said Nils, as they walked, "that search magic of yours is *very* useful, Shiori. It seems especially necessary for those like myself, who don't actually fight. Am I right to assume that you've taken ordinary search magic and expanded it?"

"Yes, that's right."

Search magic was a type of magic originally used to detect anything with a strong magic resonance within the scope of a single room. In general, it was used to find things like items in ancient ruins, or jewels in ore. Anything with a magical presence would react to the caster's spell, and as long as it remained in effect, it acted like a perception boost. In this sense, it expanded the caster's senses.

When Shiori had read this explanation in a text on the subject, she was intrigued by the idea of finding objects through the use of magic. And through much practice and experimentation, she came to learn how useful it really was.

Magical power was found in all living creatures. Similar to physical or mental

strength, even between creatures of the same species, it could differ in amount. That said, it seemed to be the case that animals had more of it than plants, and that magical beasts had more of it than animals. All of these life-forms drew magical energy from the air around them, and search magic was capable of detecting these larger masses of that energy. In other words, if one could maintain the accuracy of their search magic over a wide area, it could be used as a kind of radar.

Upon realizing this, Shiori had put more time into exploring how to use the spell, and had eventually developed her own unique take on search magic—one that could be aptly named “enemy detection magic.”

However, the act of maintaining the spell while stretching it over a wide area required both magical energy and focus. Shiori knew she had the latter covered, but the former was always going to be her weakness. In the end, she learned not to spread her magic evenly, but to cast it out like a net, so as to better preserve her magical energy.

“I see...” said Nils. “That doesn’t sound like something particularly easy to master, even with practice.”

“I’ve tried it myself a few times,” said Alec with a wry grin, “and it’s very difficult to maintain your magical energy output over a wide area. It’s not the energy that I have an issue with—it’s the amount of focus required. If you can’t maintain your concentration, you can’t even create the netlike shape Shiori mentioned.”

“Perhaps if you mean to use it, you should start with focus and image training *before* practicing with magic itself,” said Ellen. “However, casting and maintaining a spell is not so different from physicking. Physickers who are used to that sort of magical output might have an easier time learning your search magic.”

Put in simple terms, one cast attack magic by expelling magical energy from the body and releasing it at a target. But when it came to search magic and illusion magic, one had to maintain control of the magic they were casting, which required focus and imagination. Perhaps the very reason that the two spells were not particularly popular was because casting and maintaining them

were so much trouble.

“Perhaps I’ll experiment with it upon our return,” said Nils.

Shiori cringed slightly as she offered a warning.

“Just be careful,” she said. “When you don’t have a feel for how much magic to use, you can exhaust yourself rather quickly.”

Like Shiori, Nils didn’t have much in the way of magical power. As such, he could easily exhaust himself on just his first attempt. It would have been dangerous to collapse from magic loss when alone, so Shiori made sure to tell him that practicing somewhere safe was the best way to avoid a potentially fatal accident.

In this way, the party went on talking about magic and occasionally battling smaller magical beasts. Eventually, they arrived at their first gathering point. A dull winter light filtered in from holes in the cavern ceiling, which imbued the location with a dim glow.

“Ah... Yes, they’re here. A few of them are sprouting too. Great.”

There was much about magical beasts that was still unknown, and though there were many that could not be easily categorized as either flora or fauna, it was interesting to Shiori to hear a few of them described as “sprouting.”

“At a glance, I’d say there’s six here,” Nils continued. “Not nearly enough, though, so I’ll take half and move on to the next spot.”

“Got it,” said Alec. “We’ll be on watch, so just shout when you’re done.”

“Great, thank you.”

Nils thus began gathering, following the unspoken rules against overharvesting. Linus and Ellen, too, decided to use the time for their own gathering. Rurii, meanwhile, bounced around the perimeter and kept watch in its own slime-like way.

“Um, Alec,” said Shiori. “Do you mind if I watch Nils at work?”

Shiori was very intrigued by the idea of strange plant-type magical beasts that could walk on their own power.

“Be my guest,” replied Alec with a nod. “Leave guard duty to me.”

“Thanks.”

Shiori left Rurii and Alec to keep watch, then took up a spot where she wouldn’t get in Nils’s way.

“It all just looks like weeds to me,” she remarked.

“And to be fair, most of this *is* just weeds,” replied Nils. “The mandrake buries itself among them, and they can be hard to spot when you don’t know what you’re looking for... Ah, here we are.”

Nils pointed to a corner of the cavern, where a few weeds were growing. Perhaps the plants here were unique to dark locations like caverns. They were unlike anything Shiori had seen on the surface. Stemless, glossy leaves grew in a few places among the rocks. In the center of the deep-green, lustrous leaves were a few stems with buds on them.

“When there’s nothing but leaves, they’re very hard to find, but when they have buds or flowers on them like you can see here, it’s a little easier to tell them apart.”

“Oh... You’re right. There are a few flowers among the clusters of leaves. They’re so pretty and purple.”

“After they bloom like this, they bear a bright red fruit which makes them easier to find. Unfortunately, it’s not something you see very often as the fruit falls quickly.”

“Wow...”

The small purple flowers sprouting from the plants were so beautiful that they would have been a wonderful addition to a window sill. Their elegance made it hard to believe that they were part of a magical beast.

“Well, the parts aboveground are beautiful, yes,” said Nils. “But the parts below it belong to a creature...and something of a grotesque one, at that.”

The herbalist took out a thin shovel and began digging around the leaves. Upon reaching a set depth, he set the shovel aside and began using his hands so as not to damage the mandrake’s roots. He then brushed the dirt from the

mandrake he'd dug up, revealing a vivid orange root vegetable. Though at first glance it appeared just like any other carrot, it soon began to jiggle, and its roots began to writhe like arms and legs. The lines on the mandrake's body twisted like that of a frightened old man.

"Oh... Oh my..." uttered Shiori.

Nils laughed.

"Quite creepy, no?" he said.

"Yes, but...I feel like some women would like them. The ones who are into the adorably ugly, so to speak."

"'A-Adorably ugly'? You think some people are into that?"

Nils murmured in disbelief. Clearly, "adorably ugly" wasn't something he could wrap his head around. The mandrake, meanwhile, began to twist as if it were making itself comfortable.

"Oh. It's actually kind of cute," Shiori remarked.

"It is? It's...cute, you say?"

Not quite able to believe what he was hearing, Nils burst into laughter. He wrapped the mandrake neatly in wax paper, put it in a leather bag, and began digging out a second one.

"That makes me wonder," said Shiori, as Nils worked. "Do the mandrakes not try to run away? I remember you told me that they run when they sense danger."

"Ah, yes, that. It's still just a hypothesis, but it's believed that they don't run unless they feel that their community as a whole is in danger."

"Which means...?"

"If you try to pull them all up at once, they'll run. If you leave some of them, they won't."

"Oh... I see."

Shiori felt awed by it all, and looked at another buried mandrake. Perhaps it noticed her in return—its leaves quivered.

“Are they...intelligent?”

“We don’t actually know if they have ‘brains,’ so to speak, but...well, they’re magical beasts, after all.”

Shiori wasn’t sure what to make of the end of Nils’s reply. “They’re magical beasts, after all,” didn’t give Shiori any answers, though it seemed to satisfy Nils, who had lived his whole life in this world. Still, Shiori didn’t feel as if she could mention this, and so remained silent.

Nils dug up a total of three mandrakes, then announced that he was done. Linus and Ellen, meanwhile, finished up their own gathering and regrouped with the party.

“How’d it go?” asked Alec, as they were walking to the next gathering point.

“They’re so fascinating,” said Shiori. “I’m even a little interested in their screams now, though I’m perfectly satisfied with what I already know.”

“Ah, the mandrake scream... I recommend listening to it from afar, myself.”

“You’ve heard it before?”

“From a distance, yes. It’s like a cry echoing up from the pits of hell. Sure to send a shiver down your spine. A couple of times I’ve heard the scream and chased it, only to find someone who didn’t know any better collapsed on the ground.”

“Yikes.”

“So be careful, okay? In dim locations, it’s best not to go pulling up grass without some thought.”

“Sure sounds like it.”

If you were with someone, that would be one thing, but if you were affected by a mandrake’s scream when you were by yourself, there was a chance you’d end up falling prey to a different magical beast entirely. Shiori wasn’t one to venture into the mandrake’s environments by herself, but she did sometimes take on gathering requests, so she filed the advice away in her memory. Rurii also tapped her leg reassuringly: *“You’ll always have me, but it pays to play things safe!”*

“By the way, I can feel there are more magical beasts around us today, but they’re not really attacking us,” remarked Shiori.

“It seems like a few of them are keeping their distance and seeing how things play out,” said Alec.

“After all the recent trouble here,” added Ellen, “they might think it best to be careful.”

“That might be because of *you*, Shiori,” said Linus. “If they get hit by that oil of yours, there’ll be nothing left of them.”

“What...?!”

Shiori pouted at Linus’s playful banter, but it quickly turned to a giggle. None of them had been sure how things would go yesterday, but today they all felt more at ease. No one was letting their guard down, but Shiori couldn’t help thinking that easygoing expeditions were nice, sometimes.

However, at that very moment, Shiori felt something pierce her skin. It was the sensation of something sizing them up as enemies. Alec and Linus immediately readied their weapons, and all the support members of the party backed up a few steps. Rurii, too, now bright red, had taken up a position to protect them.

A pack of beasts leapt out from the shadows, blocking their way forward. It was a pack of is grodas. Their springy, long tongues, which snapped like whips, were capable of slashing and ripping their targets. The giant, frog-like magical beasts also breathed ice magic that had poisonous, paralyzing properties.

The battle began with mutual intimidation, at which the adventurers were clearly stronger. Initially, the is grodas seemed to wilt before the aura of the two A-rank adventurers, and did not attack. Unfortunately, they didn’t retreat either.

“Come to think of it, these beasts have open membranes on their skin too...” murmured Linus.

“Knock it off,” said Alec with a wry grin.

“But I don’t have enough oil left...” said Shiori.

“So you’d use it if you did...?” joked a surprised Nils.

There was no doubt that the chili oil was terrifyingly effective, but there was also a chance that the oil might send beasts into a frenzy. And using it while standing downwind could be even more dangerous, because you’d essentially be covering yourself in the stuff.

“Still, as long as you know the monster you’re dealing with and have the right amount of oil, it’s a very effective countermeasure,” said Nils. “You don’t encounter brain suckers very often, but a little chili oil might make for a nice good luck charm when exploring caverns and old ruins.”

Though Nils wasn’t letting his guard down with the beasts nearby, he did chuckle and mention that he might do some research into the use of chili oil at a later date.

“Here they come!” said Alec.

One of the more aggressive is grodas pounced forward. Alec sliced it in half while it flew through the air, then let the momentum carry him into the rest of the pack. Linus quickly shot down two more of the frog monsters as they leapt into the air, then fired again to impale them on the ground.

“Oh no you don’t!” he shouted.

Linus fired his arrows at the mouths of the is grodas to stop them from attacking with their tongues. Then, while they were writhing helplessly with their best weapons locked down, he finished them off with his dagger. As he did this, Alec took care of those that remained. The is grodas rolled across the ground, their corpses in pieces thanks to the heavy swing of Alec’s blade combined with his magic.

“They’re so...graceful...” uttered Shiori.

The two A-rankers worked without a hint of wasted movement. The battle was over in just two minutes.

Until C-rank, even just two or three of those beasts would have sent me reeling...

Shiori was in awe of how quickly the pack of beasts had been dispatched. Is

grodas were by no means an easy fight, and this skirmish had shown just how battle-hardened Alec and Linus were. The two had gained lots of experience over time, were fast on their feet, and quick-thinkers as well. They had truly polished their battle abilities.

Though their party had been thrown into disarray during their fight with the brain suckers, even that had been filed away as experience, so that what they'd learned could be put to use in future battles.

Once all the is grodas were downed, Nils went about collecting their poison sacs and happily putting them into a container he'd brought.

"All done," he said. "I've got everything I need, thank you."

The poison sacs could only be gathered in the winter and were very valuable —they deteriorated quickly and so had to be processed quite soon after they were gathered. However, magical tools had advanced to the point that the sacs could be preserved for longer periods, which meant more time could be spent looking at how to put them to use.

"Antitoxins are in very high demand," explained Nils. "Certainly better to have a surplus of them."

The party walked on as Nils talked about the herbs some more. They encountered a few battles along the way, but in time, reached their next gathering spot. Just as before, there were a few holes in the ceiling through which the dim light of day filtered. A few centipedes noticed the adventurers and froze in place, but quickly scuttled away and disappeared between the rocks as Rurii looked to chase them down.

The slime trembled in disappointment, and Shiori giggled before taking a better look around. The gathering spot was covered in weeds and moss, and the sensation of a few presences blinked from within it. Most of them belonged to magical beasts, but Shiori felt no aggression. The party stayed on guard, but it seemed the creatures here were of the more placid variety.

Shiori looked down around her feet to see if there were any mandrakes around, but all of the leaves were similar to those of the mandrake, and she couldn't tell any of them apart. She sent out her search magic, and sensed a few signs of magical beast among the weeds.

“Hm...” she murmured, pointing. “They’re around here, aren’t they?”

“Oh, great work,” said Ellen. “Caught them with your search magic, huh?”

“Yes, but only the general area that they’re in. I don’t think I’d be much help digging them out.”

All the leaves looked awfully similar, and Shiori couldn’t find the mandrakes by sight alone. She didn’t feel confident about digging them out without harming them.

“How about the others?” asked Alec.

Shiori sent out her search magic once more.

“There,” she said, pointing. “And there. I think that one might be a big mandrake. And over that way I think there’s a different magical beast.”

One such set of leaves was similar in color to a mandrake’s, but were shaped differently. Some of those conifer-like leaf formations also emanated the same energy that magical beasts did.

“Oh, do be careful,” said Nils. “Step on that and it’ll throw its leaves at you. The ends are quite sharp and you can get injured. Oh, I see—so you can sense their general location with your search magic, but it’s difficult to discern them individually when they’re all bunched together like this.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Shiori looked a little disappointed at her own limitations, but Nils laughed.

“Nevertheless, this saves us from having to search through all the clumps of weeds. It’s much easier this way,” he said, placating her. “And because there’s so many at this gathering spot, I dare say we’ll be able to find everything we need right here. Shiori, would you mind pointing out the general locations again?”

“Not at all.”

Ellen was also going to collect a few mandrakes here. She needed to get some for herself as well as a few for an acquaintance in the knight’s medical corps.

“It’s difficult for them to easily buy high-grade herbs, apparently,” she

explained. “Some people don’t think there’s much point to buying herbs when you have dedicated physickers around.”

The knight squadron was a public organization maintained with taxpayer money. It was looked on favorably in Storydia, but nonetheless, it still had its detractors.

The conversation eventually tapered off as everyone silently went about their gathering. Because of all the different leaves, it seemed that even Nils—who was an experienced gatherer—had to take his time digging up the mandrakes.

“Sometimes when you do this kind of work, it gets to the point where you just want to rip a few of them out of the ground,” said Nils.

“I know the feeling, but please be careful,” chuckled Alec.

As soon as the words had left Alec’s mouth, though, he raised his head and turned around to stare at something. His hand dropped to the handle of his sword, worry and caution rising to his face. Linus, too, put a hand to his quiver. A powerful gaze could be sensed from the direction in which Alec was looking. Rurii still had yet to change color, so it probably wasn’t dangerous, but the strange presence was nonetheless worrying.

“Is something...staring at us...?” asked Linus.

“I think so,” muttered Alec.

At a glance, they saw nothing but grass. However, upon closer scrutiny, they noticed something like a face peeking out from between the blades. It was the magical beast that Shiori’s search magic had picked up—the one that was just like a mandrake.

It had light purple leaves and a pale white face. Only the upper part of the beast’s face was visible, so it was uncertain if the creature even had eyes, but the way the slits on its body closed made one think of eyelids. All the same, it was definitely looking at them.

“Is it a...wraith...?”

Shiori shivered slightly as she spoke—the creature gave her the creeps. Alec stood in front of her.

“No, that’s a plant-type magical beast. An alraune.”

“An alraune...”

A mandrake variant. Generational turnover happened quickly with plant-type magical beasts, so variants were comparatively common—enough so that there was a set chance of running into one on a gathering quest.

“A variant,” uttered Linus. “Not all that exciting, but how about that? It *is* rare.”

The alraune didn’t seem aggressive, but it appeared to be trying to say something to them, which left them all confused. The unfortunate truth was that nobody wanted to get particularly close to it. It was a very serious-looking radish, and its expression was enough to keep them all at bay.

“They’re more valuable than ordinary mandrakes, but I’d prefer to leave it and go home,” said Ellen. “It’s looking at us like it has...motives. I’ve never seen anything like it...”

“And it might scream even if we don’t pull it out. I don’t want to scare it... Erm, Rurii? What’s wrong?”

While Shiori and the others had their fingers inching towards their ears in preparation for an unexpected attack, Rurii bounced closer to the alraune. In response to the slime’s wobbling, the alraune ruffled its leaves. The gestures all appeared very conversational, but this was only for an instant—and then Rurii was casually gripping the alraune’s leaves with its feelers.

“Wait... Rurii, what?!”

“Stop, Rurii! Come back!”

Everyone was in shock at the slime’s behavior. It was usually so conscientious and considerate, after all. But the slime wobbled as if to say it would all be okay, and began to pull upon the alraune’s leaves.

It was pulling the beast out of the ground...

Shiori dropped to her knees and covered her ears. Alec jumped over her to protect her even more. Ellen did the same as Shiori, and Linus, following in Alec’s footsteps, shielded her. This left Nils all on his lonesome, and he shrunk

down and covered his ears with his scarf to lessen the incoming damage.

With a smooth motion, the alraune was pulled from the ground...but the scream everyone expected never came. Instead, they heard something else entirely.

“Ah...”

An incredibly relaxed, listless, and lazy utterance. The party was left dumbfounded, and their shock wafted through the air around them. The sound was the very opposite of the scream they had expected—it was made by a voice so lazy that they sensed little, if any, enthusiasm whatsoever. Shiori gingerly pulled her hands from her ears, confusion and uncertainty filling her face.

“Ah... Ah...” uttered the alraune, as it wobbled where Rurii had pulled it from the ground.

“Oh, you pulled me out...” it seemed to be saying, to which Rurii wobbled a disgruntled, *“Didn’t you literally just ask me to do that?!”*

“Erm...” said Shiori after a long silence, wriggling free of Alec’s grasp. “What in the world is going on?”

Alec seemed to come to his senses too, and released Shiori from his grip.

“I, uh...I guess it wanted to get out and...Rurii helped it...?” said Ellen.

“It couldn’t manage that itself? These creatures can walk, can’t they?” asked Linus.

The archer was right. However, the alraune remained on the floor where Rurii had left it, its leaves rustling with clear dissatisfaction. It made no attempt to stand up, and instead rolled along the floor.

“Quite the lazy one, isn’t it...?” said Nils.

“Are, um...are plants capable of laziness?” asked Shiori.

“Well, it is a magical beast, after all,” muttered Nils.

Shiori still didn’t know what Nils meant by that, but she remained silent. In the end, she realized it was also true that she had come to accept the various behaviors of her slime, which, at the end of the day, was a single core protected

by a gelatinous body.

The alraune remained on the ground, rolling left and right, and occasionally facing them for a moment to say, “Ah...” as if asking them to help it stand.

“Uh... Stand up on your own?” Linus suggested.

“Ah?” replied the alraune.

It seemed to be saying, “*But that is so* very *tiresome.”*

Nils looked on in surprise, mainly at the fact that they were essentially conversing with a plant, but after a time he smiled and laughed.

“Oh, you *are* interesting, aren’t you? Do you need something from us?” he asked.

The alraune wobbled. *“Finally, someone who listens.”*

Nonetheless, it remained where it was, rolling along the floor. Alec let out a disgruntled sigh, then casually lifted the alraune’s white body off the ground. The alraune’s roots reached out like feelers and touched Nils’s pouch.

“Oh? My pouch?”

Inside the pouch—which was specially made for medicine bottles—Nils kept a variety of different salves and antidotes neatly at the ready. The alraune pointed at one bottle in particular.

“You want a magical energy recovery potion?” asked Nils.

The herbalist reached into his pouch without so much as a thought, and had already taken the lid from the bottle when Alec stopped him from actually feeding the creature.

“Wait, wait. Hang on a second,” he whispered. “Is that safe? I mean... Is it possible it’ll drink the potion, then attack us?”

Though the alraune didn’t at all seem aggressive or dangerous, as the party leader, it was Alec’s job to be sure. Still, given that the creature *had* so far been friendly, Alec made a point of whispering so the alraune couldn’t hear him.

“I think it’s fine,” said Nils with a smile. “It means us no harm.”

Oh...

Shiori felt a sudden sense of déjà vu, and looked more closely at Nils and the alraune. She'd felt this somewhere before—when she had met Rurii for the first time.

No matter how placid a magical beast was, it was still a creature that did not obey human laws or common sense, and so they needed to be approached with caution. And yet, in this situation, there really was no enmity at all, and it truly did seem like it would be all right. Rurii wobbled as if it, too, were remembering the past. It slid over towards Shiori and wrapped itself around her leg.

This feeling... I think Nils and this magical beast...

The alraune dipped one of its roots into the recovery potion, and joyously soaked the liquid into its body. Then, it ruffled its leaves with satisfaction and clung to Nils's arm. It seemed to have taken a liking to the herbalist.

"Friendly one, aren't you?" said Nils, dropping to a knee. "And quite cute upon closer inspection. I suppose this is what one might call adorably ugly?"

"Uh... Cute?"

The rest of the party stood in place, somewhat perplexed, as Nils put the alraune on the ground and made it face him.

"Would you like to join us?" he asked.

"Ah!"

The sound that came from the alraune was, most likely, one of agreement. It pointed a root at the now-empty recovery potion.

"Ah... Ah..." it said, stating something.

"Ah, I see..." said Nils with an amused grin, reading the alraune's intentions. "You have certain conditions, yes?"

"Ah..."

Apparently, the alraune wanted a daily dose of recovery potions, and Nils found its terms acceptable.

"Just to be on the safe side, let's enter into a magic contract. It would be a tragedy if someone were to mistake you for a medicinal herb and whisk you

away.”

Nils took out his knife, disinfected it, then made a small cut at the tip of his finger. He then held out the drop of blood that beaded from it to the alraune.

“This should be enough,” he said.

The alraune reached out with a root and absorbed the small drop of Nils’s blood.

This was the establishment of a magic contract—the magical beast ingesting a small portion of Nils’s own magical energy. This accepting of bodily fluids was a kind of marriage, almost—“marriage” being a convenient term for the relationship, though gender had nothing to do with it. Magical beasts were creatures that cared strongly about their mates, and the magic contract was a kind of pseudo-marriage that linked the human with their beast, and put the beast under the human’s control.

It was not a showy ritual, and was in fact very peaceful, but Shiori still had yet to bind Rurii to a magic contract herself—she did not like the idea of tying her own friend down via a contract essentially sealed by blood. Nonetheless, she looked on with as much fascination as the rest of the party.

“Ah...” uttered the alraune lazily, as if to say, *“Finally, done...”*

Nils motioned to the creature, and it lifted itself up and slumped across his shoulder.

“Another *weir*—er, I mean, another *unique* friend enters the fray,” said Alec.

Rurii seemed to gather that Alec was referring to it with his use of the word “unique,” and it gave him a silent stare.

“Still, you pretty much contracted it on the spot. That’s amazing.”

In that sense, it was like a case of love at first sight and getting married on the same day.

“It felt like the most natural thing in the world,” said Nils, putting a bandage on his finger. “It just felt right.”

“Oh. It was exactly the same for me,” said Shiori. “Watching you and the alraune made me think back to how it was for me and Rurii—it was awfully

similar. We were meeting for the very first time, and yet there was no enmity at all...”



Back then, Shiori had literally been about to leave Rurii’s side to be

abandoned by her party, and she was in perhaps the worst state of her life. She could only remember it in fragments. However, among those fragments, she *did* remember how natural it felt to accept the slime as it approached her, so innocent in its wobbling. She hadn't sensed any aggression—rather, she'd felt like she had made a new friend.

"Some say it is the attraction of one soul to another," said Ellen. "There is a set chance that it can happen—the chance that you may encounter a beast for the first time, but feel as though you have known their soul for a lifetime."

This was ostensibly the experience of encountering a magical beast, but one that was more like meeting your own kin.

"Happens with humans too," added Linus, nodding. "That feeling you get when you meet someone that tells you you're going to be friends the rest of your life."

Magical beasts were creatures with sharper senses than humans. And perhaps it was this "sixth sense" of theirs that allowed them to sense when they had met a friend of another species.

Shiori looked down at Rurii, and the slime seemed to notice her gaze—it trembled up at her. Perhaps her meeting with the slime—a resident of Blue Forest—had not in fact been coincidental, but rather, inevitable. It was an inevitability brought on by the incomparable Rurii. A meeting that never would have happened for all of eternity if Shiori had not gone to Blue Forest, and had not in the first place crossed over into this world. These inevitabilities that coincidence yielded were the very experiences that humans called fate.

This is true of Alec too...

From the very start, she had been drawn to him strongly. However, she had been through much, and she did not want to take all of those experiences—the roads she'd chosen to walk after crossing over into another world, how she'd strived to survive and to live, and how she'd discovered within herself a heart that could feel love for another—and wrap them up nicely, with a word as simple as fate.

But if this were to be called a miracle, perhaps I would agree...

Shiori's meeting with Alec was one she never would have had, had she not entered this world. And there was no doubt that they had passed many crossroads to reach the path that they now walked together. Born in different places, with different upbringings... The chances of their lives ever intertwining felt so infinitely small.

The fact that they'd still found each other, even amidst all of that, could perhaps be called a miracle.

Shiori smiled down at the wobbling slime, and slid over towards Alec without the rest of the party noticing. His rough fingers wrapped around her own. And it was with this thought of miracles in her mind that Nils's mandrake expedition came to an end.

"Thank you," said Nils, looking very pleased with himself. "Thanks to all of you, we're safe, and I have some fantastic mandrakes."

"But are you sure it's okay?" asked Ellen. "The mandrakes you gathered are your new familiar's friends, no? Are you sure it's okay to take them?"

"It would appear to be fine so long as we don't take all of them. That, and..." Nils picked up a mandrake that had bright red fruit attached to it, and the alraune rustled its leaves. "It seems I've been asked to spread these somewhere far away to help grow their numbers."

Plants did not simply grow in one place. Their seeds were taken on the wind, or caught on magical beasts, and they sometimes traveled far and wide before they ever took root and multiplied. Perhaps this was what the alraune wanted for its kin. Perhaps this had been one of its conditions.

"Well, if we're all done, shall we head towards home?" asked Alec.

Linus and Ellen, who had both finished their respective gathering tasks, nodded. Shiori then cast some water to wash everyone's hands of dirt, after which they all gathered their knapsacks and made for home. The alraune, on Nils's shoulder, ruffled its leaves. In response, some of the leaves in the gathering spot rustled back. A few magical beasts peeked out from the rocks, silently watching as the alraune left on its journey.

"I guess they're seeing it off," remarked Shiori.

“Indeed,” said Alec with a chuckle. “This big goodbye, the way that alraune holds itself... It might be something like a king or queen in these parts.”

The alraune was indeed almost twice the size of an ordinary mandrake. That alone was proof of how long it had lived. Perhaps it had spent its time until now watching quietly over the cavern. And, as if to confirm what the two were talking about, the alraune spoke.

“Ah!”

And so, the curtain fell on a short, surprising, and at times difficult gathering expedition. The party put Hortensia Cavern and its strange creatures behind them, and made for town, where their friends at the guild were sure to be waiting for them.

3

The party arrived back in Tris just after sunset. Shiori, Alec, and Rurii first went to the Guild to report on their expedition, then exchanged the magical stones they’d gathered for money, and then finally, indulged in a short party with their friends to celebrate a job well done. With all of that done, they returned to the top floor of their apartment building—the place they had just moved into, which they now called home.

“We’re home,” said Shiori.

“Nothing quite like it,” added Alec.

Rurii wobbled at their feet.

“It makes me happy, being able to come home with company,” said Shiori.

“I agree,” replied Alec, smiling and nodding.

He took off his gloves and ran a hand through the black hair under Shiori’s hat.

“And now,” he added, “this will just be a part of everyday life for us.”

There would be no more returning to an empty apartment. Not now that they could welcome each other home, or wait for each other’s return. Such things

were by no means grand acts of kindness, but just having someone there felt so terribly precious to both of them.

Shiori felt moved to tears, and suddenly found herself wiping at her eyes. Noticing this, Alec wiped away her tears with touches of his warm lips. He kissed her temple, then her cheek, and finally covered her lips with his own. They held each other silently, their kisses gentle and kind, with their slime bouncing joyously at their feet.

They had stumbled into a battle that had nearly wiped their entire party out, and Shiori had come to know of the heavy regrets hidden in the depths of Alec's heart. They had also welcomed a new "friend" of sorts. The expedition had been short but eventful. And yet, now that they had come home, to a place where they felt safe, all of it felt like it had happened in the distant past. Such was the sense of peace that the new apartment brought to Shiori, Alec, and Rurii.

"I still can't believe the look on Zack's face," said Shiori.

"Certainly was quite the sight," said Alec. "First time I've ever seen him look that way."

The two looked at each other and laughed as they thought back. When Zack had first been introduced to Nils's alraune familiar, his jaw had dropped in such shock that perhaps even now he still hadn't picked it up off the floor.

In response, the alraune—which had been lazily draped over Nils's shoulder, exhausted after their journey—had uttered, "Ah?" as if to say, *"You got a problem?"*

To this, Zack had been entirely unsure how to react.

"Well, uh... At least it's got a personality, yep," he muttered eventually, before throwing himself into the paperwork to officially register the familiar.

The registration, however, was still only temporary, and would be finalized when Nils decided on a name for his new friend.

"I wonder what he's going to call it?" asked Shiori.

Shiori had decided on Rurii's name almost immediately. The name came from

the slime's color—*ruri-iro* in Japanese. In Nils's case, however, the herbalist had decided to take a few days to think about it.

"Nils being Nils," said Alec, "I'm sure he'll come up with something fitting." Surely, the man would give it a name befitting the lord of an entire cavern. "How about we ask him when we next visit to pick up your ointment?"

"Great."

The ointment that Shiori had asked for—to soothe her dry, worn hands—had been the very thing that instigated their expedition in the first place. The ointment, which included mandrake as part of its ingredients, took about three days to complete. Shiori couldn't help but wonder how the alraune would spend its time at Nils's shop.

"I can't imagine that alraune doing anything other than lazing around," said Alec.

"Me too."

Shiori pictured the alraune lounging in a pot of soft soil with its roots in a recovery potion—an image she could see all too clearly.

"Well, what should we do now?" asked Alec, putting his knapsack on the floor and taking off his armor.

Shiori thought about it while she brushed the dust off both of their coats, then looked down at her clothes. Just like their coats, she was covered in dust.

"Once we're unpacked, I think I'll take a bath," she said.

She wanted nothing more than to jump in the bath first, but the trip had been short—just two days, in fact—and they had little in the way of gathered materials to take care of. Unpacking would only take about ten minutes, so handling that first would make everything else a bit easier.

"Good call," said Alec. "After that...it's still a little early for bed, so perhaps we can relax for a spell, then head out for some food. I could do with a drink or two."

"Shall I cook something?"

"No, I'm sure you're tired after the expedition. We'll pick up something from

a food stall.”

The food stalls weren’t quite as abundant as when the Nativity Festival had been in full swing, but there were still a few out there, looking to target those visiting the Cathedral to make New Year’s wishes and such. The Religious District was right next to the Third District, which was where adventurers were most commonly found. They could get to the road leading to the Cathedral, complete with all its food stalls, in around ten minutes on foot.

“After tasting that delectable smoked Tris perch, I’m in the mood for more seafood,” said Alec.

“Sometimes you find them roasted with salt. They’re caught in the local rivers, yes?”

“Ah, you mean Storid trout. It’s not bad, and sometimes peddlers sell it here and there. With some luck, we might get our hands on some.”

“You really were taken by the smoked perch, weren’t you...?”

Once she finished unpacking, Shiori looked in the bathroom to get the hot water running. The bathroom in this apartment was vastly bigger than the one in her previous apartment.

And more than enough room for two...

The thought simply popped into Shiori’s head, and was quickly followed by her imagination conjuring an image of a naked Alec. Shiori blushed, and found herself in a mild panic.

“W-Well, I suppose there may be times we might well take a bath together...”

Alec might even invite her to join him in the bath like it was the most natural thing in the world. Shiori also couldn’t rule out Alec doing something mischievous, like joining her uninvited. The thought of it all left Shiori reeling.

“Oh my, oh my...”

Being that they intended to spend the rest of their lives together, shared baths wouldn’t be the end of it either—there’d be more. Shiori knew that she shouldn’t let herself be flustered by a mere bath, and yet she couldn’t help feeling a little bashful and embarrassed. Her face flushed even more.

At that point, Rurii slid in through the gap in the door and trembled as if to ask what was wrong.

“I...I’m fine, it’s nothing,” Shiori said.

Still flustered, she cast some hot water and filled the bath. She then put some hot water in the large washtub next to the bath, which Rurii happily dove straight into. The slime loved baths, and was quickly at play in the water.

Shiori felt calmed by the sight of the slime, then put a hand to her face to make sure she wasn’t blushing before walking out of the bathroom.

“Alec, the water’s ready,” she said casually. “Feel free to go first.”

She felt ever so slightly on guard, but Alec had his sword-polishing gear out.

“I’ll take a bath once I’ve seen to my sword,” he said, “so you go first.”

“Oh. I see. Got it.”

On the one hand, Shiori was disappointed by his reaction—which hadn’t been what she expected—but at the same time, she was also relieved. Alec seemed to notice this in Shiori’s body language, and a grin flashed across his face.

“What’s wrong? You wanted to take a bath together?”

Alec put his gear down and acted like he was going to stand up, but his face showed that he was clearly joking with her. However, Shiori didn’t think it was much fun to always be on the receiving end of jokes, so she replied with a smile.

“You want to join me?”

Alec never saw this coming. For a moment he froze, and his gaze grew panicked in an instant. He always laughed at her and said she was so adorable when she was flustered, but it seemed that when the shoe was on the other foot, Alec was no different. His reaction *was* cute, and Shiori giggled.

“I’ll take the first bath,” she said, turning around.

But just as she put her hand to the doorknob, she heard the sound of Alec’s chair sliding as he got up and walked over to her. Before she could even turn around, he had wrapped her in his arms.

“How could I say no to such an invitation?” he said. “I’ll join you.”

“A-Alec...”

She’d meant to respond to his joke with a joke of her own, but she could sense serious passion in Alec’s voice.

“You don’t want to?” he asked.

“It’s not that...but...”

“But?”

“I feel a little embarrassed, and...I don’t have a very nice body.”

The scars that covered her arms and legs were still fairly recent. Alec shook his head and smiled down at her.

“My body is covered in scars too,” he said. “And more importantly, your scars are proof that you fought to survive. In the face of adversity, you chose to live, and that...that makes you so beautiful.”

Shiori felt something hot rushing up from behind her eyes, and though she did her utmost to hold it back, she could not hold back the feelings that welled from deep inside of her. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Thank you, Alec...” she said. “So...you’ll join me?”

“I will.”

Alec wiped the tears from Shiori’s eyes with a finger and smiled at her happily.

“Relax,” he said jokingly. “It’s just a bath we’re taking. Anything more than that is something to look forward to in the future. We’ll make the most of that particular opportunity in bed.”

“A-Alec...”

It was so embarrassing for her, but Alec spoke about it openly and without a hint of trepidation. She shot him a glare, but promptly found his lips covering her own. The kiss was briefer than usual, but it was deep and passionate.

“Let’s take our bath,” said Alec, after his lips had parted from hers.

Shiori opened the door with Alec’s arms still wrapped around her, and found Rurii splashing about in the water. The slime waved at them as if to say, *“It’s*

about time! I've been waiting for you guys!"

The door of the bathroom closed behind them.

4

“Hnnngh...”

Shiori opened her eyes to the light of the morning sun. She let her gaze wander as she lay wrapped in her blanket. Winter sunlight slipped into the room from between the curtains, and beyond them, she heard horse carriages outside. It looked like the day was shaping up to be one of beautiful clear skies.

Dawn in Storydia came late in the winter, and sunrise over New Year’s was around half past eight. Shiori knew instinctively that she’d slept in much later than usual.

The bed next to hers was empty and already made. Rurii, who would usually have been asleep on the floor, was also missing. Still, Shiori knew that Alec and her slime familiar were up and close at hand—she could hear them in the room next door.

“Time to get up...” Shiori muttered to herself.

And yet her body refused to listen—it felt sluggish and lazy.

“I feel a bit...heavy.”

Shiori closed her eyes and felt the exhaustion in her body crush her motivation to rise. But it was not an unpleasant feeling, and her body warmed as she thought back to the feel of Alec’s rough hands on the soft, hidden parts of her body.

True to his word, Alec had not let things progress too far during their first bath together. However, at some point, the goalposts had shifted, and his promise had come to mean something much more along the lines of, “I won’t go all the way.” Shiori had been powerless to resist the pleasure of his touch. She had longed for it—for him, and her, together.

And so, Alec and Shiori had indulged in one another in the evening, but everything that happened afterwards was hazy. Alec had told her he wanted “just a taste,” and he’d proceeded to let her know, physically, how intensely he loved her. The rest was a vague blur. Shiori felt as if she’d closed her eyes for

but an instant, only to open them to the morning sunlight.

“If that was ‘just a taste,’” Shiori muttered, “what’s going to happen when we *do* go all the way?”

Just then, the bedroom door quietly opened.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

Alec had been trying not to wake Shiori, but upon seeing her with her eyes open, he walked over, with Rurii bouncing along behind him.

“Erm... Good morning,” said Shiori. “Sorry, I guess I slept in again.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re always up so early. There’s no harm in taking it easy once in a while.”

Alec dropped a kiss on Shiori’s lips in place of a “good morning,” and grinned.

“I did my utmost to hold back,” he said, “but if a mere taste leaves you like this, I’m going to have to be more controlled when the time comes. Probably best we shy away from doing anything before any big expeditions.”

“A...A ‘mere taste’? *That* was you holding back?”

“Yeah. The way you wriggle is so adorable that I can’t even begin to imagine—hrngh!”

Shiori couldn’t believe that her own lover would bring up something so embarrassing this early in the morning. She thrust her pillow into Alec’s face and went behind the room’s partition screen to get changed.

“Unbelievable...” she muttered.

Once she was done, she left the chuckling Alec with his pillow and went to the bathroom, where she quickly realized—thanks to her reflection in the bathroom mirror—that she was blushing. She calmed herself by washing her face and applying a little makeup, then let out a relieved sigh.

I’d heard rumors that Alec had an endless appetite... I guess they must be true.

She could see the bath in the mirror, and the events of the previous evening flashed across her mind. Shiori didn’t think that it would be an every-night occurrence, but she knew that even giving Alec just “a taste” every few days

would be more than enough excitement for her.

For whatever reason, Rurii had chosen to leave the bathroom at just the right time, as if to say *“Take your time and enjoy yourselves.”* The slime must have understood what was happening. Shiori had no idea where it could have learned such things, but the slime was clearly smarter than it seemed.

She still wasn’t exactly sure what to make of what had happened between her and Alec, but nonetheless, she was happy.

He wasn’t put off at all. He even... He called me beautiful.

“Just as I thought... You’re so beautiful.” He’d said the words kindly, as he gently touched the horrible scars that still remained on her arms. “I know they may be uncomfortable for you, and I know you never asked for them, but your body is proof of your will to live. So do not be ashamed. I will tell you as many times as I have to—you fought to live, and that makes you so very beautiful.”

And then he’d wrapped her tight in his arms. This was why Shiori was willing to sacrifice everything for him...

And all of a sudden, Alec was right there behind her in the bathroom, stirring her from her thoughts and once again wrapping her in his arms.

“I know you might not always be in the mood,” he said, “so just tell me when you’re not, and I’ll understand.”

“Thanks, Alec. I love you.”

Shiori turned, reached up, and brought Alec’s lips closer to her. He hunched down, and she kissed him on the lips. And just as everything was feeling nice and warm...

“And I don’t mind if you want to take the lead sometimes either.”

...he went and spoiled the atmosphere with a cheeky comment.

“Oh, Alec...” she muttered.

But all the same, she kissed him again, and he took her hand.

“Breakfast is ready,” he said. “Though it’s nothing fancy—just freeze-dried soup and grilled sausages.”

“Oh, sorr...I mean, thank you. You’re so kind.”

She felt as though she could drown in his kindness, and when she uttered as much to herself, Alec grinned.

“This much is to be expected,” he said. “And I want nothing more than for you to drown in me. You might find it hard to breathe in all the love I intend to shower upon you.”

“Erm, wow...”

Shiori was embarrassed by Alec’s open affection, and yet it also made her so happy that her heart stung. They were sharing a precious morning together—one in which they enjoyed breakfast under the same roof, as a family.

After breakfast, the two adventurers put on their work gear. Before they headed to the guild, they decided to drop in at Nils’s dispensary to pick up the ointment they had ordered for Shiori’s hands.

“He should be finished by now,” said Alec. “It’s been a few days since our expedition.”

The two adventurers hadn’t been able to visit Nils when they’d first wanted to because a few requests had come in. Still, because Shiori’s hands could get dry and chapped easily in the colder weather, Alec wanted to pick up the ointment today.

“That said, the ointment we bought last time has already been incredibly helpful,” said Shiori. “Using some as a preventative measure before work has made a marked difference.”

“I can see that—your hands don’t look like they hurt nearly as much as before.”

“Right?”

The two chatted back and forth until they arrived at Nils’s shop and went inside. The dispensary had been empty at the start of the year, but as of today, it was as busy as usual. Shiori noticed a couple of fellow adventurers and waved hello.

“Oh, you came,” said Nils.

“I’m sorry we’re late,” said Shiori.

“Not to worry. Work, I presume?”

“Yes.”

As the three of them spoke, however, Shiori and Alec couldn’t help feeling their gaze pulled in one particular direction—to the counter that separated the shopkeeper from the customers. On it was a stunning flower pot, placed to the side so as not to get in the way of transactions. Nils’s alraune was lounging half inside of the pot, its roots dangling off the side. It held a magical energy recovery potion so it could take a sip whenever it wanted.

The shop was a pleasant and relaxed place filled with a gentle light, but this one part of the counter gave off a completely different feeling—and though the dispensary was packed with customers, the area around the flower pot was noticeably devoid of people.

“Exactly like we imagined...” muttered Alec.

“Yep...”

The alraune looked not unlike a drunkard enjoying a hot spring bath, with a bottle of wine in one hand. The two adventurers burst into laughter, and Rurii wobbled as if sending a message of some sort. Nils and the alraune, for their part, looked happily satisfied.

“Ah...ah...”

“Bliss...such bliss...”

Though nobody really knew how the alraune managed to speak, this was what they heard in its mutterings.

“Did you, uh...come up with a name?” asked Alec hesitantly.

“That I did!” said Nils with a grin. “Meet Eir!”

“Eir... Ah, I see. Quite fitting, isn’t it?” said Alec.

Shiori looked puzzled, so Alec explained it to her.

“In northern mythology, it’s the name of the goddess of healing and medicine. In ancient times, it was the name of a certain herbalist.”

More accurately, the name was Eira or Eyra, but Nils was uncomfortable naming his familiar directly after a goddess, and so he'd instead used it as inspiration for a nickname.

"What a wonderful name," remarked Shiori.

It was a name befitting the familiar of a herbalist, and the lord of a cavern. In response to Shiori's remark, Eir—a somewhat ugly and strange creature, but one that had its own unique charm—ruffled its leaves proudly, as if to say, *"A pleasure to make your acquaintance."*

When Nils was done introducing it, he brought out a small can of ointment from beneath the counter. It had Shiori's name written on a label stuck to the lid, so it wouldn't get mixed up with any others.

"Here's the ointment you ordered," said Nils.

Inside the can was a pale and transparent green gel. However, when Shiori put a little on her finger, she realized it was far more viscous than she'd expected.

"I put some elements in it that are water resistant," said Nils. "Be sure to rub it on any particularly affected areas of skin. And don't worry—it won't come off easily."

"You mean...like this?"

Shiori smeared some of the ointment on a red and cracked portion of skin, then pushed it gently into the sore.

"Yes, just like that," said Nils, nodding. "It has pain-relieving and disinfectant properties, and should work very well on sores. I recommend using it on any cracked areas of skin after you've rubbed your hands with the ointment you bought last time you were here."

Perhaps it was just the psychological effect of hearing the words "pain-relieving," but Shiori really felt like the pain eased where she had applied the ointment. Once it was rubbed in and had set, it didn't seem to come off easily.

"Thank you so much," said Shiori. "This will be a great help for housework over the winter."

“Hm... I have to admit, I’d *much* prefer you to try and avoid such damaging work where possible,” said Nils with a wry grin.

Alec took out his wallet and paid for the ointment. As was to be expected of specially made medicine with high-quality ingredients, it wasn’t cheap. Shiori felt quite apologetic and wanted to pay for some of it out of her own pocket, but Alec wouldn’t hear of it.

“I’m the one who suggested it in the first place,” he said.

“Thank you, Alec,” said Shiori. “And you too, Nils.”

Shiori took the ointment can with a smile, and put it carefully in her medicine pouch. Alec rubbed her hand gently. That was where it had all started—Shiori’s worn hands had needed ointment, and to make that ointment, they’d left on an expedition that, while short, had been action-packed.

“It was only a few days, and yet so much happened,” said Nils, thinking back. “Yes, there was the life-or-death battle we found ourselves in, but we gathered much in the way of quality ingredients and valuable data, and I met a new friend too. All’s well that ends well.”

Nils thanked them for having been the instigators of the expedition, while Eir rustled its leaves.

“It wasn’t easy,” said Alec, “but I got the chance to take a good, hard look at myself, and now...” He took a moment to put a hand on Shiori’s shoulder, looking down at her with his kind, dark magenta eyes. “We are...*even closer* than we once were. Not a bad expedition at all.”

Shiori’s heart raced at the secret meaning in Alec’s words. She knew exactly what he meant by that, but fortunately, Nils took the words at face value.

“Well, if it means reaching greater heights in your relationship, I’m glad to hear it,” he said. “As your friend, I’m just... I’m happy for the two of you.”

They shook hands with the kindly Nils, and left the dispensary. Meanwhile, Eir saw them off with a lazy utterance.

“Ah.”

The bell above the door rang as Shiori and Alec left.

"I really *am* glad, you know," said Nils, smiling. "It's so nice to see the two of them happy. And not just that—it also feels like the two of them coming together has had a number of positive effects."

Eir twisted its body, as if it were tilting its head and asking Nils exactly what he meant. Nils smiled at the gesture, and touched the silver coin that Alec had paid with.

"Shiori was in an incident, and it cast a long, dark shadow over many of our hearts. We all knew she was in some kind of trouble, but none of us reached out to help her. The guilt of that inaction has worn away at us. It became a burden we carried, a burden which weighed us down in everything we did."

Ever since the Akatsuki incident, the air in the Tris Adventurers' Guild had felt stagnant. Everyone felt pity for Shiori, and guilt over their inability to act, but nobody said any of this aloud. This complicated atmosphere had made it so that none of Shiori's friends could truly enjoy themselves. Perhaps it was merely the impression that Nils had in hindsight, now that it was all over, but as someone who had worked with Shiori and become her companion, that was how he remembered it.

"Zack, Clemens—it doesn't matter who. I wish she'd be with one of them."

This topic had come up more than a few times among Nils and the other adventurers. Everyone knew that the incident had pushed Shiori further into her shell and made her more determined to live alone. And yet nobody had the courage to save Shiori from her own solitude. If the two men closest to her had backed off, what more could anyone else do? This was the excuse that Nils and others had fallen back on, and as a result, Shiori had grown all the more lonely.

But the solitude Shiori was trapped in back then was not something she could have overcome on her own. She was trapped in a darkness so profound that she needed someone to pull her out. That was how deep her scars ran, and how horrible the incident truly was. However, because nobody wanted to see Shiori hurt any further, everyone put up walls—of hesitance, of distance between them. Nobody had an answer for how to heal her wounds.

"But perhaps the very problem was that our desire to heal was one-sided,"

muttered Nils.

At the end of summer, Alec had returned from a long spell of work in another country. In what seemed like an instant, he had grown close to Shiori—he'd leapt the walls of hesitation, and approached her. He'd gotten to know her, and just like that, the walls had come tumbling down.

Nils now knew that Alec carried a deep pain of his own, and that his relationship with Shiori was not one-sided. He knew that theirs was a relationship of mutual understanding and support. Shiori was conscientious and independent, and what she had needed from a relationship was a sense of balance and of being equals.

And now that Shiori had been released from her past, those around her were changing too. Zack, who had always had mixed feelings about Alec and Shiori, now looked at them warmly. Clemens, who'd had his heart broken at some point—by whom, nobody knew—had recently freed himself from his malaise, and was growing closer to Nadia, whose own complicated past had at one time been a source of rumors. Even Linus and Ellen, who had once been so focused on work, seemed to be keeping an eye out for potential romantic partners.

"And me? Well, I met you," said Nils.

The herbalist gave Eir's white body a pat and fed it a recovery potion. The alraune's leaves shook with joy.

"Perhaps it might be a stretch to put it this way, but...I wonder if freeing ourselves of our burdens opened the door to good fortunes that had long been locked away?"

After all, positive attitudes could lead to favorable encounters.

"It's a good omen for the start of the year, isn't it?" muttered Nils, smiling as Clemens and Nadia entered the store to do some shopping.

The herbalist hoped that the New Year would bring with it much happiness.

5

Dear Olivier,

Are you doing well? I imagine that, knowing you, things are peaceful. I am in good health. I fell ill in the fall, but recovered in just a few days. Zack and a fellow adventurer by the name of Shiori took care of me. I'm sure you've already heard of her. Thanks to the two of them, I made a complete recovery.

However, you and I, we're not as young as we once were. Let's make sure we take care of our bodies—for our sakes, and for our families as well.

You might think it funny for me to bring up family so suddenly, but I'm on the verge of starting one. Shiori and I are in love, and we moved in together at the start of the year. I intend to make her my wife, and nothing makes me happier than telling you that she has given me permission to propose.

Before that, however, there are a few things that must be resolved... No, that isn't quite right. The truth is, I need to settle a few things in my heart. Things that happened in the past. Our past. I left you on your own, and ran off in search of an easier life. That, and I was unfair to Rebby. Not a day goes by that I don't regret my actions. I never properly spoke with either of you about it—I simply ran away, and I have always regretted it.

That is why I wish to request a chance to meet with you, and talk. If you will allow it, I would like the chance to apologize—both to you, and to Rebby. I understand that it may not be a simple thing for me to meet with Rebby, but if such an opportunity could be created, I would be beyond grateful.

If at all possible, I would like you to help me set up such an opportunity. That said, I do not want you to force it. If she does not wish to see me again, then it is what it is. This is my own burden to bear.

But by all means, I wish for the chance to see you again, and to talk things through.

PS I considered a number of places when looking for a knapsack in which you could fit a familiar, and have decided to go with Enandel Trading Company. They have the finest craftspeople, and they listen carefully to all requests. I'm certain they'll make you something of the finest quality, so that's one thing for you to look forward to.

Alec put the letter in the usual envelope and sealed it. For the sender's name,

he left only the initials of a fake name. Once this letter was delivered to Zack, it would then reach Olivier by way of the duke and margravine.

Outside the window, snow fell like cotton from the sky. It looked chilly. Alec put on his usual coat, scarf, and hat, then tucked the letter into his shirt pocket.

“I’m going out for a bit,” he said as he stepped out into the living room. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay. Be safe.”

Alec dropped a light kiss on Shiori’s lips as she went about mending some equipment, then left the apartment. Rurii waved goodbye behind him.

The snow that fell had mixed quickly with the dirt on the roads, and passing carriages sprayed mud and sludge as they drove through the streets. Perhaps the drivers were a bit on the rougher side, because one rushed past and sprayed dirt over the coats of a few young women, causing them to scream. Alec chuckled as he walked to the Adventurers’ Guild, which, fortunately, wasn’t too far away.

“Hey, aren’t you off today?” asked Zack as Alec entered. “What’s up?”

“Just a letter.”

As Alec casually passed over the envelope, Zack put his paperwork on pause for a moment, taking the letter without a second glance. Many adventurers left postal matters in the hands of the guild, because they were so often away from home due to work. The guild often sent and received a lot of request-related items and documents, so the postman visited twice a day. It also happened to be a safe place to keep mail—not to mention the fact that there was almost always someone at the guild to receive it.

So even though Alec’s letter was confidential, nobody gave his interaction with Zack any thought. Zack would have a special messenger take the letter to the margrave, where it would get to Zack’s family home in the royal capital—the House of Fauchelle. His half-brother or father would take care of things from there.

“Oh, by the way,” said Zack, changing the subject. “Headquarters came asking about your S-rank promotion again.”

This wasn't the first time, and Alec responded with a wry grin. "Again? Persistent, aren't they?"

Alec didn't think he was ready. Not next to Zack, at least, who had a whole host of achievements to his name, including taking down dragons in the Florit Mountain Ranges and Lyria Valley, and solving the incident at Gegerfelt Manor, which for a time had been all over the newspapers.

Then there was the fact that S-rank promotions were reported in the newspaper. Being S-rank meant more requests coming from those in the upper classes, and more dinner parties with such clients. This was the last thing someone like Alec wanted while trying to conceal his identity, so he'd continued to turn down requests for promotion.

However, Alec still gestured to the guild master's office to indicate he wanted to talk in private. Zack nodded and ushered him into the room, where the two sat across from one another.

"To be honest, I'm thinking about going for the promotion this time around," said Alec.

He saw himself reflected in his brother's blue eyes.

"Oh? What brought this on all of a sudden?" asked Zack.

"Well, it's about time I finally saw things through, for one thing..."

Since losing his mother, Alec's life had essentially been one of defeat and giving up. He had used his identity and his circumstances as excuses, but because of everything he'd given up on, he'd lived with regrets.

Alec no longer wanted to live that way. Rather than give up again and make things worse, he wanted to start reaching for what he desired—for all that he thought he'd never have. It was a decision he had come to both for his own sake, and for the woman he had chosen to share the rest of his life with.

"I don't have anything to fall back on," Alec said. "Of course, I have my brother, and I have you, and that gives me confidence...but I threw away much to live in hiding. I don't have the right to lean on you or my past identity, and so I want to build a status and reputation of my own. To protect Shiori, and to live my life with her, I will need more than just my own strength—I'll need the

power and authority that social standing and reputation can bring. I want to acquire that, and I want to go back to using my original name."

"Alec..."

After the Nativity Festival, it had become clear to everyone that Shiori was far from any ordinary easterner. Yes, things had calmed down since then, but she knew what the world looked like from the throne of the gods, and for a time many had dug around looking for her, believing her to be the second coming of the saint herself. They'd been able to rely on the help of the margrave and Rurii to ward off the especially nosy, but that was not to say that people wouldn't try again.

One thing was certain—Shiori was hiding a huge secret of some kind.

Though she was extremely knowledgeable within her sphere of housekeeping, because she never left that sphere, Shiori had been able to blend in among the ranks of the support classes. However, when one considered the breadth of her knowledge, skills, and the famed scenery of the view of the gods, it was all too easy to imagine people wanting to have her for themselves.

During the Nativity Festival, Alec and Shiori had made the acquaintance of Reverend Conny Envary, and though he had not spoken much on the topic, it seemed clear that some within the Cathedral essentially wished to cage Shiori. At present, she was little more than an easterner without any known relatives, and this position meant she was particularly vulnerable when dealing with large organizations and powerful nobles.

"Shiori's standing is even vaguer than my own," said Alec. "Through her own power, she's earned the support of the Lovner margravine, and probably the archbishop too. We're also fortunate that the Enqvist family remembers her, but that is still not enough. If I am to live as who I really am, and live that life with Shiori, we need more than that. That starts with me growing my reputation as an adventurer."

"Alec..." muttered Zack again. His eyes were wide with shock, but they eventually settled into a kind, gentle gaze. "I see. So you're serious."

"I am," said Alec, nodding resolutely before breaking into a grin. "The truth is, I still haven't talked to her about it, so I don't know how things will actually go.

But wherever the dice may fall, I want to make sure we have a place to stand. I will strengthen our position."

"I get it... I really do," said Zack. He smiled and put a hand to Alec's shoulder. "I'm rooting for the two of you, Aleksey."

"You just watch, Bleyzac. This time, there will be no regrets."

The New Year had brought with it a new and stronger resolve.

Alec got the feeling that a life with the mysterious Shiori would not all be smooth sailing, but he was prepared to endure whatever the world threw at him, if it meant carving out a life they could call their own.

Alec bid his brother farewell and returned home. When he opened the door, he was met by a neatly decorated room and a mouth-watering aroma. Shiori turned to look at him from the kitchen, where she was stirring the contents of a pot.

"Welcome home," she said.

Rurii, who had climbed onto the kitchen counter to peek into the pot, greeted him with the wave of a feeler.

"Shiori, Rurii," Alec replied. "I'm home."

He walked over to the smiling Shiori, wrapped her delicate frame in his arms, and placed a gentle kiss on her lips.

A warm, happy home. What Alec had always dreamed of was right here, and now he, too, was a part of it. The joy of that feeling enveloped him, and he kissed Shiori again. She was soft and sweet in his arms, and he felt lost in her lips. His tongue traced her teeth, then wrapped around her own tongue as he breathed her in. His arm followed the shape of her body through her clothes, and past her hips to the plump softness beneath. He felt her jump with surprise, and it made him smile. Her breaths between their kisses echoed passionately in his ears, and Alec chuckled.

"How about a bath, then?" he said.

His voice was low and filled with heat, and with misty eyes Shiori smiled, embarrassed.

“Alec,” she said, “if we do that, dinner will become breakfast.”

“No doubt about it.”

The two of them looked each other in the eyes and giggled before sharing a softer kiss. By their feet, Rurii hopped around—half in joy and half in impatience—then wobbled at their feet.

Interlude 1: The Resolve of Two Doctors

As the sun began to set, most were heading home after work or otherwise shopping for the evening. This was the time that Ellen chose to enter the dispensary, which was largely empty of customers as it neared closing time. Nils was at the counter going through a ledger, and looked up as the bell at the door rang. Ellen raised a hand in greeting as she walked towards the counter, and Nils waved back.

“Hello,” Nils said. “Don’t often see you around this time. How can I help you?”

Next to the herbalist, the alraune that was now his familiar raised a root in what Ellen assumed was an extremely lazy attempt at a greeting. Ellen’s face was a little tense despite her smile, and Nils could tell that there was something on her mind. He motioned her to a seat by the counter, and she hesitantly took it.

“There’s something I want to ask you about a...patient,” Ellen said. “Would that be okay?”

“Of course. Do you mind waiting until I close up?”

“Sure.”

Ellen turned away from the counter as Nils engaged in some banter with another customer, and looked around the dispensary. The shelves were filled with medicines for use both at home and in the field, but some had clearly been sold, because various sections of the shelves were empty.

Medicine was now something that people took for granted, but until a few decades ago, it was not something that ordinary citizens could easily purchase. It was thanks to the work of the predecessors of today’s doctors that it was now so abundantly available.

The average life span for citizens of Storydia had risen dramatically thanks to improvements in general lifestyle and more abundant access to food, but that was not the whole picture—developments in medicine, surgery, and physicking had also lowered the rate of injury, illness, and death.

This was in no small part thanks to being able to address health issues early—people could be seen by doctors quite easily, and medicine could be purchased at low cost.

And yet, there is still so much current medicine cannot do...

One thing that came to Ellen's mind was the fact that it was still impossible for current medicinal science to remove old scars.

When the last customer left, Nils saw them to the door, then hung the "closed" sign on it. He lowered the curtains and took a seat next to Ellen.

"Apologies for the wait," he said. "What is it you'd like to ask? You mentioned it was about a patient."

"Yes..."

She'd come to the dispensary feeling determined, but now that the moment was upon her, Ellen felt a sense of hesitation. Was it really okay to ask about this? After all, it was an unwritten rule that patient information was not to be shared with a third party, outside of the doctor and patient themselves. But perhaps Nils had intuited some of this, because when Ellen opened by saying, "It's about Shiori," he did not look surprised.

"I see," he said simply, nodding. "I'm happy to tell you what I can. Perhaps it's best that we share a certain amount of information anyway, as the two doctors closest to her."

"I won't ask a lot. It's just... I thought it best to ask your opinion, being that, in the future, people may see her bare skin more often."

The unnatural scars on Shiori's arms and legs were still quite recent—Ellen knew that they had been left on her only one or two years ago. She also knew, without even having to think about it, how they had been inflicted, and about Shiori's circumstances at the time. And yet, even with the number of scars Shiori carried, not a single rumor had spread—likely because the woman herself had done her utmost to keep them hidden. In the past, she had been happy to join other women in the bath, but then, all of a sudden, she had found all manner of excuses to ensure that she always bathed alone.

The Akatsuki incident was what marked that turning point.

The first time Ellen had worked with Shiori was half a year ago, and so she had not noticed the scars immediately. It was only when they had recently shared a bath together—during a gathering expedition—that Ellen had seen them for the first time.

Nils had been present for the examination of Shiori's body following the Akatsuki incident. At some point, he had also become her main doctor. It was for this reason that Ellen wanted to ask him how she should approach Shiori, in case Shiori ever came to worry about her scars again. The fact that Shiori was willing to reveal them now, when she had kept them hidden for so long, perhaps indicated an improvement in her level of trauma, but one never knew when something might once more set her back.

The idea that scars were a sign of shame, and that they impacted one's marriageability, were stories of the past. Though it was true that certain noble families still thought it important, it was no longer uncommon for noblewomen to become knights or adventurers, and so these ideas around the necessity of "physical purity" were becoming less prevalent. Now that it was known that the queen herself—formerly a knight—had scars from her work, people had become less likely to consider scars on the body a personal defect.

Still, Shiori bore far more scars than most. And even aside from the subject of marriage, there were those inclined to point them out or perhaps turn them into rumor fodder. Ellen couldn't help but worry that such things might cause Shiori to relapse.

"I may simply be worrying too much, and perhaps I'm only asking for my own satisfaction," said Ellen, "but...I must ask—those wounds were made during the period of her life when she was with Akatsuki, yes?"

"Yes, that's right. But they weren't inflicted by any human. They were all caused by damage from magical beasts. Shiori herself has admitted as much."

"I see..."

The wounds that had left scars on Shiori's body had been inflicted during her time with Akatsuki, but they were not inflicted by any one person intentionally. Ellen did not know if this was a good thing, however—there were simply far too many of them. The fact that Shiori had gone to great lengths to hide them was

also a sign of how heavily they weighed on her heart. Nils did not deny this either.

“That time at Brovito Village, when Alec asked you about scars,” said Ellen. “Back then I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but now I know.”

Ellen watched Nils closely. His gentle face was an apt accompaniment to his kindly demeanor, but for a brief moment, his eyes wavered in the light of the magical lanterns.

“Those scars are like the wounds on Shiori’s heart,” Ellen said. “After the incident, she always hid them, but now she is allowing them to be seen.”

It was a sign of Shiori’s resolve. It had to be. She was freeing herself from a past that had so long weighed her down.

“Our job now, and the best we can do, is to watch over her as we’ve been doing,” said Nils. “Showing too much concern will only weigh her down more. That’s no good for anyone. But things are different now. I will not slip up again. If I see her in trouble, I will not stand back and do nothing.”

Nils’s words were heavy with great meaning. He had been the first of Shiori’s friends to notice that something was amiss, but he had done nothing, and he had always regretted it.

“You’re... Yes, you’re right.”

Ellen nodded and smiled softly.

Over the last few decades, the production and study of medicine had developed in leaps and bounds, but the same could not be said of the field of mental health, which was still in its early days. Doctors were still looking for the best ways to deal with wounds inflicted upon the heart and mind. Still, it was true to say that none wanted treatment to end with just the healing of illness and physical damage. As doctors, they could not stop there.

And besides, Shiori was not just one of Ellen’s companions—she was also the doctor’s friend.

“I won’t stand back either,” Ellen said. “No doctor should ignore a friend in need.”

“Ouch,” said Nils.

“That goes for both of us.”

The two doctors shared an embarrassed chuckle, but their smiles remained slightly pained. It was not easy to stay on top of changes in patients, but Ellen and Nils had both experienced the consequences of inaction.

And so, in the dim light of the dispensary, the two doctors silently agreed never to make the same mistakes again.

Interlude 2: The Diary of Eir, the Familiar

■ December XX

I can’t.

■ December XX

I can’t even.

■ December XX

Being buried in the ground is so very tiresome. Even moving is an incredible bother. I have lived here for so very long. I can’t even remember the last time I left the ground.

■ December XX

Uninvited guests had my brethren fleeing. They aren’t like those that usually come, who at least know moderation. Whoever it was, they seem to have dug up my brethren, roots and all. Ugh, how very tiresome.

After they took all that they came for, they left. However, my brethren are now terrified. They have announced that they will live around here for a while. It has made things a little livelier.

■ December XX

More uninvited guests. The cavern is in something of a panic. Some gluttonous thing or another seems to be wandering about eating creatures at random.

■ December XX

Everything is quiet. Either everyone was eaten by the uninvited gluttons, or they all fled. The cavern brims with a strange, nervous energy. Apparently, the

gluttons are brain suckers. How utterly tiresome.

■ December ⟡

A cellar bird came to visit and told me to do something about the brain suckers. Said something along the lines of me having lived long enough to at least have *some* method of dealing with them. Asking too much, if you ask me. Anyway, I told it that I'd fill one of my leaves with deadly poison and it could take the leaf and put it in the brain sucker's gob, but the bird flat-out refused. Inconceivable.

■ December ⟡

The brain suckers came. I had no choice but to confront them. "If you're going to feast on everything you see, how about trying something nutritious like me?" I said, daring them.

"We don't do veggies," they said.

Utterly inconceivable.

■ December ⟡

A group of the creatures that were running for their lives passed me by. I gave some of the wounded my sap and leaves. It should help heal them a little more quickly.

One of the cellar birds got greedy and ate too many leaves. It started frothing at the mouth and rolling around on the floor. One of its buddies dragged it back to the nest, but I tell you—it doesn't matter where you go, idiots are always the same.

■ December ⟡

It is quite tiresome being stuck in the ground like this, but it feels good to do some work once in a while. Giving away my sap and my leaves has made me a little lighter, but I guess this is what elders are for. Then again, I'm only called

the elder because I happen to have lived for so long.

■ January XX

The brain suckers are back and settling in again. It seems they like the food here, so they plan on sticking around.

How very, very tiresome... A true annoyance.

■ January XX

Guests have arrived again, but considerate ones this time. And a feeling in the air like a new friend is among them. It has been a long time since I felt this way. They also did us a favor and got rid of the brain suckers. Truly worthy of praise. I would thank them myself, but I do not know if they will come this way. Though, that said, it would be a shame to let this potential new friend escape.

My brethren have told me that if I want to meet them so badly, I should head out there myself, but moving is so utterly tiresome...

Truth be told, it has all been so tiresome that I've already let two potential friends slip through my grasp. When my brethren heard this, they were quite taken aback, and couldn't even bring themselves to speak. Eventually, however, they urged me not to let this opportunity pass me by, given that it's been decades since the last one. I suppose their reaction was to be expected, however—these opportunities *are* exceedingly rare.

■ January XX

THEY CAAAAAAAAAAME!

I was so very excited that I nearly screamed, but one of the giant centipedes slapped some sense into me and told me to knock it off. A close call, I must say.

A fateful encounter with a new friend. Fortunately, the group that appeared had a slime with them, and after a little back and forth I was brought to the surface. The one I thought might become my friend smelled of medicine and herbs. I caught the scent of a stronger magic in one of his bottles, and asked to

drink of it. Truly delectable.

We negotiated the conditions for our relationship, and I asked that I be given a bottle of his magical water each day. I also asked that he spread my brethren far from this cavern. It was a wonderful day—I must wonder if I were planted here for this very encounter.

Everyone saw me off as I left with my new friend. It has been decades since I last left the cavern, and some of my brethren said, “Don’t come back for another forty or fifty years, then.”

Perhaps not the nicest of send-offs, but I cannot complain.

■ January XX

My new friend is called Nils. He appears to make a living through the selling of medicines. His place of residence smells nostalgically of herbs, and it will make a fine home. We will live together. Nils even made me my own chair in his shop. He gave me a most wonderful name too—Eir. I am so very comfortable I have lost all desire to move.

However, a slime by the name of Rurii tells me it is good to exercise occasionally. It sounds rather tiresome, but if it means a pleasant life with Nils for company, I will see to this exercise once a day.

Rurii tried to teach me some of its exercise routine, but many of its movements appear impossible for me, given the differences in our bodies...

Left with no other choice, I decided to attempt my own exercise routine. I began with something very simple—I rolled on the floor and wriggled my roots, which for me is quite the effort. However, as soon as I started, Nils very nearly jumped out of his skin.

“Wh-What’s wrong?!” he cried in shock.

To him, it looked as if I were merely writhing on the floor. Inconceivable.

■ January XX

Nils is nothing if not a diligent worker. Up early in the morning to concoct

medicines, then always making time for the people that visit, and examining their ailments where necessary. He appears to be very well liked. I expected nothing less of a new friend.

Nils always keeps me by his side. Our life together is one that surpasses a mere difference in species.

I must say, I do quite enjoy this life of rolling around in my chair and watching the various humans that visit Nils's shop. I find them all rather fascinating. I am glad that I made the effort to leave the cavern.

However, it is not good for my reputation to merely allow myself to be cared for, no matter how tiresome I find everything. When it comes time to work for Nils's sake, I intend to give it everything I have.

Interlude 3: The Diary of Rurii, the Familiar

■ January 1st

It's the start of a new year. Everyone went out to watch the Rings of Light last night, so we all went to bed late, but I was so excited I woke up early anyway. Maybe it's because we stayed at Alec's place, seeing as he's now moved into the top floor of our building.

When she woke up, Shiori made quite the luxurious breakfast. Alec was all smiles as he helped her out. They were all smiling smiling smiling, and it made me a little worried. I think they're just mega happy because Shiori is moving in tomorrow. But even when Shiori was packing for the move, the whole time—literally the *whole* time—she was just smiling, smiling, smiling, smiling, *and* smiling. It was almost like she was a different person. Kind of scary.

■ January 2nd, morning

Today, Shiori moved in with Alec. I really liked the place we lived in until now, but Alec's place is really spacious, and the bath is *big*. Also, because he's on the top floor, the sunlight through the windows is super nice. Today marks the beginning of our life as a trio! Shiori looked like she was having fun, and I know I was. Alec was a little out of sorts because of a dream he had, but I'm glad to see he seems to be having more fun now.

Shiori didn't have all that much in the way of stuff to move, so we finished really quickly. We all decided to go to the guild after lunch, but Alec didn't like how worn Shiori's hands looked, so he suggested going to the dispensary first. Alec really cares about Shiori, which makes me happy.

■ January 2nd, midday

We went to Nils's medicine shop, and Nils took a good close look at Shiori's hands. He's examined her before, back when she ran into trouble and was left with scars all over her body. That made him really mad. He's a really good person—kind, trustworthy, and someone who will laugh with the people he

likes and get upset when they're treated unfairly. That's why I'm a big fan of Nils!

Nils said he would make Shiori some medicine, but...turns out he doesn't have all the materials. Back when the snow wolves from the Blue Forest attacked the village, he used up all of his stock on the injured. The herb he needs is something he rarely uses, so he just forgot to get more of it.

That's why we're heading out as protection so Nils can gather some medicinal herbs. Linus and Ellen are coming along for the ride because they need to gather stuff of their own too. It's our first job of the new year, and I think it's going to be so much fun!

■ January 3rd, midday

We have officially departed on our gathering expedition! We're looking for mandrakes. They're bitter and a bit on the spicy side, so they're not particularly delicious, but I like them because they always have something interesting to talk about. The last mandrake I met told me where to find good water and also pointed out some beautiful scenery. I wonder if the mandrakes we meet on this expedition will have fun things to say too. I can't wait to see them.

The place we're going to is called Hortensia Cavern. We took a carriage to somewhere nearby, then walked the rest of the way.

Unfortunately, it looks like some pretty bad people got here before us. They tore up all the mandrakes at the first gathering spot and didn't leave anything. The ground was all messed up from magic, and even the delicious mushrooms and other plant life were rendered useless. And it looked like this scared all the mandrakes, so they fled deeper into the cavern.

I can't believe anyone would do that. But just when I was thinking that there are some nasty magical beasts out there, and how there are heaps of humans who are weird and unpleasant, we ran into one of the worst magical beasts of all—brain suckers.

Brain suckers act very high and mighty, and they're pretty intelligent. I don't like them. They're always babbling incoherent nonsense like, "Fresh organs are the pinnacle of fine dining," and, "Eating vegetables and bugs is for peons. It's

unbecoming of any respectable magical beast."

If you ask me, it's fine for everyone to just eat what they like. No need to be a snob about it.

Shiori was injured slightly when we fought the brain suckers, and they even took someone as strong as Alec and hit him with some awful hallucinations that had him on the verge of breaking down. I hate those guys, seriously. I hope they're all hit by a curse that makes it so that they can only eat vegetables for as long as they live.

Shiori got super mad at the brain suckers bullying Alec, and so she covered them in this liquid stuff, and it knocked them out. Everyone just went to town on the brain suckers after that. Still, what *was* that liquid? You should have heard the screams that came from those snobby brain suckers.

Huh?

It was chili oil...?

Damn, that must have hurt like *crazy*.

Shiori is legit scary when she's properly mad. I almost feel a little sorry for those brain suckers.

Only a teeny bit, though.

■ January 3rd, evening

Alec was super exhausted after dealing with the brain sucker poison, so we set up camp early. We still haven't found any mandrakes yet, but Alec's health comes first!

Even after we set up camp, though, Alec was really down. He was all clingy and he didn't want to let Shiori go, and he was all depressed like maybe he was going to die right then and there. I was very worried. I get sad when I see Shiori down in the dumps, and the same goes when it's Alec too.

When Shiori went to take a bath, Alec talked to Nils, then ate delicious food together with everyone. Then, in the evening, he had a heart-to-heart with Shiori, and he seemed to get better. Color me relieved!

Here’s a secret you can’t tell anyone—I heard Nils sigh and whisper, “I wish *I* had a cute lover too...”

■ January 4th

After a good night’s sleep, Alec woke looking refreshed and full of vigor. He said he had a really good dream, where Shiori was super enthusiastic about healing him back to full strength. That’s awesome! Well, at least, *I* thought so, but Nils and Shiori said they regretted ever worrying about him. What in the world did Alec even dream about?

After we finished Shiori’s homemade breakfast, it was on to day two of our gathering expedition!

Deeper in the cave, we found lots of mandrakes. They were all really talkative, so it was lots of fun. They taught me all kinds of things, like where the most comfortable soil is, and the most beautiful place for enjoying the blooming natt hortensia flowers. Some of the mandrakes decided to tell me what the cellar birds get up to at night, but I don’t really care about that.

While I was chatting with the mandrakes, Nils was hard at work gathering some of them. He’s a good herbalist, so he doesn’t take too much from just one spot—he takes a little from a number of different gathering spots. He was really happy because he could get a bunch of high-quality mandrakes. How great! Now he can make a whole lot of medicine!

Everyone was all excited, but then suddenly, an alraune who’d been staring at us silently the whole time decided to talk to me. Alec and the others noticed it too and thought it was a threat, but actually, the alraune just wanted to leave the ground to talk to Nils. It told me that it was too tiresome to get out on its own, so it asked me to pull it out.

I told the alraune to just do it by itself, but it said the same thing—too tiresome. I don’t get it.

So anyway, I pulled the alraune out of the ground. I did what it asked, but then it just stayed there rolling around on the floor. Nothing would happen if that kept up, so Alec got frustrated and just picked it up.

Turned out, the alraune just wanted to become friends with Nils. It said it had a feeling that Nils would make a great best bud. So I was like, “Then why didn’t you just get out of the ground yourself?” and the alraune was like, “Because it was so tiresome I just couldn’t even.”

Yeah, it’s a bit of a weird one, that alraune...

For all the talk of tiresome this and tiresome that, Nils and the alraune became friends, and after they went through the magic contract stuff, it stayed there, happily draped over Nils’s shoulder.

When we were leaving for home, all the magical beasts saw the alraune off. “Thanks for taking care of those big-headed brain suckers!” they said. “Spread our brethren far and wide!”

“Bring us back some of those Brovito Village foot bath sweet buns as souvenirs!”

It was a very lively goodbye, and it felt pretty good. The alraune looked like it was having a grand old time. Zack, on the other hand, was pretty shocked when we brought it back and he saw it for the first time.

■ January 4th, evening

Yay! Alec and Shiori are finally going to do the mating ritual!

Well, that’s what I thought, but actually they just took a bath together.

That’s it? For real?

It seems like they just had a taste-testing session. The old grandfather in the sewers told me that, when humans get up to that stuff, you should be considerate and give them some privacy. So that’s what I did. A part of me figured it was fine to stay because it was just a taste test and not the *actual* ritual, but I figured it was still pretty important to them!

At the same time, for a so-called “taste test,” I think Alec might have been a bit greedy. They took so long in there that I went to check up on them and Shiori had fallen asleep. Alec made an excuse like, “You’re so cute, I just got carried away.”

Does he even know what a taste test is?

■ January XX

Alec had another round of taste testing. Shiori fell asleep again, but she looked really happy. Still, Alec doing all the taste testing is unfair—I think next time Shiori should do it. According to Ludger, the magical swordsman, when it comes to his mate, Marena...

Oh?

I shouldn't talk about that stuff so openly?

I see. I'll keep that in mind.

Thanks, sewer grandpa. You sure are knowledgeable.

When sewer grandpa was younger, he was extremely—but secretly—very intrigued by the process of birthing various creatures, and so he researched a number of different mating rituals. He said he researched humans a *lot*.

Huh? But wasn't it grandpa himself who said you should leave humans alone when two of them are doing that?

How odd...

■ January XX

We were going to pick up Shiori's ointment, but then an emergency request came in. Looks like it's going to take at least two days, so we decided to go to the dispensary when we get back. Shiori's hands are looking pretty good with the ointment she already bought, fortunately. Nils is amazing. I think people who can heal injuries and illnesses with medicine really are something.

■ January XX

Today we went to pick up Shiori's ointment. It's really effective and it feels great to use—Shiori loves it. Now she'll be able to handle doing her housekeeping work better. Hooray for you, Shiori!

Well, Alec and Nils still told her to take things easy.

The alraune barely even moved the whole time. Nils gave it a wonderful name, Eir, and he treats it so well that it spends all day just lazing around in the bed that Nils made for it. I told it that it should exercise occasionally for good health. Eir said it wants to be with Nils for a long time, so I showed it my slime stretches—both the morning and the evening routines. They're super good for your body!

Unfortunately, Eir said that my stretching routine might not be compatible with its body. That was when I realized that our bodies are different. Eir decided that it would do its own routine by moving its roots while it was on the floor, but Nils got in a panic and thought Eir had fallen to the ground and couldn't get up.

Still, the two of them look like they're enjoying every day together. I like it when everyone is having fun.

■ January XX

Alec sent a letter to his little brother to tell him that he wants to make Shiori his mate. He also had a few favors to ask.

Actually, Alec even asked *me* for a favor. He wants to get a knapsack that can carry a slime, so he asked me to come along with him. Apparently, the knapsack is a gift for his brother. Alec's little brother is Pel's friend, so it's got to be for Pel. Alec said that they're going to travel around, playing a kind of hide-and-seek. Sounds like so much fun!

Birthdays, huh? Magical beasts celebrate whenever a new one is born, but I think only humans celebrate birthdays every year. They're so fascinating. I don't know when my birthday is. But Shiori said that the day she named me is the day we started living together, and that's our anniversary. She makes me food that's a little on the more luxurious side on our anniversary. I love that day—it makes me feel special.

Oh! And maybe Alec can celebrate our anniversary too!

So much to look forward to!

Part 2: A Tale of Two Princes

Chapter 1: Two Fateful Encounters and a Parting Omen

1

“Let’s take a short break, shall we? I’ll prepare some tea.”

The middle-aged teacher pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. He left the room with a pained look in his eyes. When the door had closed behind him, Olivier slumped across his desk.

Last week marked the start of Olivier’s royal education, but there had been little, if anything, in the way of progress. It wasn’t that the young Olivier was a poor student—rather, his heart simply wasn’t in it. He found it difficult to focus, and half a day was the very best he could manage.

“Brothers... Mother...”

Olivier’s two brothers, both of whom he looked up to, were gone. His gentle mother was now bedridden, leaving Olivier and his father all alone.

Olivier’s eldest brother was sharp and intelligent. He was exactly what everyone thought he would be—his father and grandfather were praised for being wise kings, after all. Olivier’s second brother—the middle child of the three princes—showed a startling potential for both study and the military arts. Everybody believed that Storydia’s future was in safe hands, but then, just as Olivier was about to turn nine, that future crumbled to pieces.

First it was the eldest son, who was on the way home from an inspection when his ship was caught in a storm in the Storydian seas. The ship had suffered terrible damage and ran aground. Medical support and a search party were readied in haste, but no survivors were discovered, only a few bodies—Olivier’s brother among them. The funerals for the majority of those who’d perished in the accident were held with closed, empty caskets.

Then, before even two months had passed, Olivier’s second brother lost his

life in an accident—falling from his horse on the way to pay his respects to his elder brother. The way he landed left the young man comatose, and by the end of the day, he had breathed his last.

The nation was still reeling from the loss of the crown prince, and now, all of a sudden, the one who would have been next in line was also gone. Naturally, many suspected foul play. However, a thorough examination revealed that this was not the case. Though he was a skilled horse rider, even one as steadfast as the second prince had been shaken by the loss of the brother he held so dear. This was not a surprise—he was but fifteen years of age, and still just a boy. Lost in thoughts of his older brother, he had not been ready for the bird that had flown by, and it'd caused him to lose his balance and fall.

The misfortunes only continued. Olivier's mother had tried to stay strong at the loss of the crown prince, but she could not bear the weight of losing another son while she was still mourning the first. She became paranoid, manic about making sure that nothing happened to Olivier—her last remaining child—and was in such mental anguish that she was moved to the royal villa, where it was hoped she could recover in peace. Unfortunately, there was no other choice.

The king was now forced to grapple with more than he could surely handle—the problems that had arisen as a result of his sons' deaths, the preparations for his wife's care, and his duties as the king of an entire nation. He thus spent most of his time in his office, often sleeping there. Occasionally, he would squeeze enough time into his schedule to check on Olivier, but it was only ever brief, and they did not see each other much.

Until just a few months ago, Olivier had been happily surrounded by his family. He still couldn't fully comprehend the sudden loss of his siblings, and having to begin his royal education at such a time wore down the young boy's heart.

To make matters worse, whispers were spreading that Olivier—who had never stood out—was not fit for the position of crown prince, which had been thrust upon him. He was but a boy of just nine years, and he could not stand how many of the adults looked at him.

He felt heavy. Heartbroken. Sad. Lonely. Distressed.

“Brothers, mother...”

He called out to them, sitting there in that empty classroom, but received no reply. The silence in the room only grew heavier.

But it would not be long before the young Olivier would receive a ray of light, in the darkness of those empty days.

“A brother?” asked Olivier.

The king had finally been able to take a half-day break, but the words he spoke when they met confused Olivier.

“Yes. A brother the same age as you. He has been living apart from us due to circumstance, but he lost his mother, and is now alone. That is why I thought to bring him in. I know you will need some time to think, but...how about meeting him?”

Olivier had a hidden brother—a brother the same age, born from a different mother. Of course, Olivier knew what this meant, but that fact was overpowered by the joy and excitement that ran through him. Olivier had been lonely, and the weight of his rank weighed on him. Nothing could have made him happier in this moment than the news that he had a sibling.

So it was that the young boy called Aleksey came to visit the castle. He had lived among the general populace with the name Alec Dia. He did not share any real resemblance to Olivier—side by side, some might have thought them related because of the color and shape of their eyes, but that was the extent of it. Aleksey had clearly inherited his mother’s looks.

Aleksey hid timidly in the shadow of his father. This was to be expected—he had spent his whole life until this point as an ordinary boy, and was now suddenly a member of the royal family. What surprised Olivier, however, was the extent to which his father also seemed rattled. The man had met Aleksey only once prior—when Aleksey was just a baby—and apparently, their most recent meeting had not gone at all as he’d hoped. Even now, he worried whether it was okay to welcome his former lover’s child—and a secret one, at

that—into the family. These complicated feelings had made the king tense when he'd approached Aleksey, and unfortunately, he had only scared the boy. He had acted like a king instead of just a man, and this had been a grave error.

Olivier's father was fond of saying, "The first steps in any endeavor are paramount," and he was a fine king for his ability to live by these words. However, as a mere man, he was nonetheless prone to mistakes.

It was with this in mind that Olivier thrust his hand out towards Aleksey, looking to make up for the mistake his father had made. He was offering the boy a handshake. They were in a private space, and the boy was his brother—there was no need to adhere to royal ceremony.

"Nice to meet you. I am Olivier, but you can call me Ollie."

It was the kind of greeting that Aleksey was used to, and some of the tension in his body visibly eased.

"Hello. I'm Aleksey. Everyone calls me Alec, though."

Aleksey looked a touch relieved as he hesitantly reached out with his own hand. Olivier squeezed it tight in his own. Their hands were the same size, but Aleksey's were a little sweaty because he was so nervous.

"Great," said Olivier. "Let's play, yeah?"

"What? Already?"



The king was shocked—the two boys had barely even introduced themselves.

But Olivier had also received a certain piece of advice from Bleyzac Fauchelle, a friend of his second brother: “When it comes to kids, playing is the best way to make your introductions.” And this was clear in the smile that shattered the stiffness in Aleksey’s face.

With that, Olivier took his new brother’s hand and the two ran off.

The color in Olivier’s life had faded with the loss of his brothers and mother, but now things had suddenly become bright and vivid once again.

Visitation hours were carefully controlled when it came to Olivier’s mother, and this pained him. When he finally did see her, it was when she was near her end. Having Aleksey was the support Olivier needed to overcome the loss—the two of them had both lost their mothers, and they could share their pain with one another.

Study, too, was something that Olivier could apply himself to, when he was together with Aleksey. They worked through problems together, and explained to each other the subjects they each struggled with. Between classes, the two boys would sneak out of the classroom and explore the castle.

Olivier loved that he could indulge in things with Aleksey that he couldn’t with brothers who were so much older. They ate and bathed together, and on special occasions were allowed to sleep side by side. Olivier enjoyed the time he spent with Aleksey.

In this way, the two brothers learned to live in such a way that they could support each other’s weaknesses. And in just the space of a year, Aleksey began to carry himself like another member of the royal family. He was conscientious and thoughtful, and did his best to catch up to Olivier.

Together, they were a future king and his most trusted aide. That was how those around the two brothers came to speak of them when they were nearing their twelfth birthdays. This was also around the time that Aleksey met Rebecca, one who—like Olivier—would come to understand Alec’s heart.

2

The first time that Rebecca Hallonsten—a lady-in-waiting employed at the palace—first talked to Aleksey, she was fourteen, and had been working at the castle for two years. Aleksey was, at that time, still twelve, and considered on the verge of adulthood.

The job of lady-in-waiting at the palace was one that noble girls aspired to. However, Rebecca had only just graduated from the position of apprentice and was still coming to grips with her new responsibilities—she largely ran errands and helped in the dressing room that she was assigned to. Among the other ladies-in-waiting, Rebecca was also the youngest, and came from the lowest-ranking family among the nobility. She felt no shame in this, however—she thought it an honor just to be stationed here at the palace.

Over the last few years, the number of staff at the palace had been greatly reduced, following the passing of the queen and the two princes. Rebecca was fortunate to have been allowed to stay—it was a sign of her servitude, and the hard work and loyalty of her father, Viscount Hallonsten.

Rebecca's mother was also glad to see her daughter's position kept. The girl had actually begun work at the palace on her mother's orders, because the woman wanted her naive and timid daughter to learn the manners of the palace to give her a little extra shine for potential marriage partners. Being a lady-in-waiting at the palace was one of the best ways to ensure a good husband, and Rebecca's mother hoped that perhaps her daughter would be noticed by a high-ranking noble now that she was one of the few who had been given permission to remain at the castle.

However, there were many beautiful girls of high standing at the castle. Including the military division, where the royal knights headquarters were stationed, and the religious division, where the royal chapel was, there were many girls throughout the castle with far better standing than Rebecca's own. It was for that reason that she was like a single snow violet buried amongst a blooming rose garden, and no noble gentlemen ever seemed to notice her.

However, Rebecca herself was not in any particular hurry. Though her worried mother pushed her somewhat, her father merely told her, with a certain wry chuckle, "You will always have the option of marrying into a merchant's family or some other family of means." Rebecca herself also knew that if she were to

continue at the palace, her life would be fine even if she never got married, and so she took a rather optimistic view of things.

Perhaps Rebecca's lack of insistence about her marriage hopes came from the fact that she had been born and raised in the countryside. In any case, she continued her work dutifully and she thoroughly enjoyed the lavish palace lifestyle that she had never known at home.

And then...she'd met Aleksey.

On the day Rebecca met Aleksey, she had been given the afternoon off. Plans had changed and there was less to do, so she had been able to finish up her duties by midday. While she was heading back to the employee lodgings, wondering what to do with the rest of her day, she heard whispers and giggling just as she approached a long corridor. It sounded derisive.

A few of Rebecca's fellow ladies-in-waiting were engaged in chatter. They were gathered under the roof of the terrace that ran through the courtyard, behind some trees. None of the girls had a particularly good reputation, and this much was clear in the snippets of conversation that Rebecca heard.

"However precious his bloodline is, His Highness Aleksey is the one potential partner I'd prefer to decline," said one.

Rebecca gasped silently in shock at the words of the girls, who were openly disparaging a member of the royal family. Aleksey was both at once a prince, and an illegitimate child who had been summoned to the castle some years ago. Though on the surface it was said he had been brought into the family on the grounds that he was orphaned, many had come to see him as a "spare." In other words, he had been brought to the family because of the sudden decrease in members of the royal family who could inherit the throne. In just three short years, Alec had been educated to the point that he could carry himself as a member of the royal family, but this by no means put him in an advantageous position. That largely came down to the fact that the identity of his mother was still unknown. For this reason, many wondered—aloud and disparagingly—if Aleksey was the son of a whore.

Aleksey also happened to be around the same age as Olivier, and—even

worse—was just slightly older than him. This complicated things—as an heir, Aleksey's status was beneath that of his brother, but as a prince, he was technically above Olivier. As such, unsurprisingly, there were many who did not look kindly upon him.

"I must agree," said another girl. "Why, does anybody even know who his mother is and where she even came from?"

"Well, surely His Majesty knows."

"And yet he does not make the information public. She must be a woman whose identity he wants to keep hidden. Disgusting."

Rebecca didn't want to hear another word of it. She understood some of what they were getting at, but none of them were in a position to look down on others. They were the very definition of subservient in the face of potential suitors, but changed in an instant when it came to those they deemed beneath themselves, or those they didn't like. This vulgarity in their hearts was all too clear in their faces, and it was the very reason that all of these girls found themselves in positions where men would not approach them.

In any case, all of those girls are far too old for either prince...

The two princes were twelve, and the gossiping girls were all nearing their twenties. There were others who were far more suitable for the two princes.

I don't want to go near them if I can help it...

Rebecca slipped by quietly, but made sure to bow politely as she did so. Fortunately, the girls were far too interested in their bad-mouthing to notice her.

However, just as Rebecca reached the corner of the corridor, she noticed a figure and gasped. It was a boy, his dark magenta eyes peeking out from beneath his chestnut-brown hair. He wore a jacket that only royalty could don—a jacket that Rebecca herself had laid out in the morning, by order of the third prince's aide.

It's Prince Aleksey...!

Rebecca was stunned. The boy stood before her, biting his lip with such force

it had turned white. His face was pale, but there was a depth of strong emotion in the glare he sent in the direction of the gossiping girls. It did not strike her as the gaze of a boy of just twelve—it was so fierce that it would have stunned anyone caught in it. It reminded Rebecca of something her father had once told her.

"The royal family are kindhearted and generous people. They are calm, and gentle like a cool breeze. But their depth of emotion goes both ways, and their anger can run as deep as their compassion. There are a great many who forget this fact, and suffer greatly for it. Some have even said that the royal family are as terrifying as the ice dragons of legend."

Though Aleksey's hair was different, as were his other features, his eyes were the color of his royal heritage. They were the stunning dark magenta of the evening sky.

I bet that when Prince Olivier gets angry, his eyes look exactly like this.

Rebecca felt frozen in the face of the boy's glare. What was she to do? Should she walk away as if she had heard nothing, or was it best for her to say something?

As she stood there hesitating, Aleksey noticed her. His eyes grew wide with surprise, and then he looked away, unsure of what else to do. It seemed clear to Rebecca that he wanted nothing more than to leave, but knew that if he did so, he might be spotted by the girls. Perhaps he had gotten lost in the palace—Olivier was not with him, and the knights assigned to him were gone. If Aleksey were to be seen like this—completely on his own—he would almost certainly be subjected to more ridicule.

Rebecca had heard that some openly criticized his position as an illegitimate prince, even though they were of lower rank. Some even said as much to his face. But Aleksey himself also seemed to understand his position and standing, and it was clear to Rebecca that he was the sort of boy to take everything thrown at him as his own cross to bear.

While Rebecca and Aleksey stood in place, frozen, the chief lady-in-waiting discovered the gossiping girls and, after giving them a harsh scolding, sent them back to work. When the girls had disappeared from sight completely, Rebecca

and Aleksey looked at one another. Tears began to run from the boy's eyes, now that the tension of the moment had dissipated.

"Oh..." he uttered.

He panicked, wiping at his eyes, but this did not stop the tears that fell from them.

It had been three years since Aleksey arrived at the castle. At the time, he'd had little more than a basic understanding of reading, writing, mathematics, and etiquette. But he had thrown himself into study, royal customs, and even the art of war. In just three years, he could do everything that was expected of a royal family member his age. And yet, at the same time, he was only a boy of twelve years. Yes, he was a prince, but that did not mean he could simply accept and endure the heartless things that people said about him.

But as Aleksey stood in front of Rebecca, he fought to wipe away his tears so as not to embarrass himself. It moved Rebecca, just as much as it tore at her heart. She saw in him her little brother, struggling in his own way to one day inherit the viscount's household. And so she walked up to Aleksey, took his head of chestnut-brown hair, and pulled it close to her. In hindsight, she would have thought this act disrespectful, but in the face of such pain, she could not help herself.

"Nobody is watching," she said. "So now is your chance. Cry. Let it out. Let it all out—it will help you feel better."

Aleksey tensed in Rebecca's grasp, but then melted at her words, and not long after, he began to sob. He cried so hard that his shoulders quivered, and Rebecca silently patted him on the back, just as one might placate a child.

After a time, Aleksey calmed down and silently released himself from Rebecca's embrace. His eyes were red and swollen, but his mood seemed to have improved slightly.

"I apologize," he said. "You should never have seen me like that. I simply could not bear to hear my own father and mother insulted in such a way."

He spoke with a certain childlike tone, as his voice still had yet to break.

"His Highness was steadfast," said Rebecca. "I believe you were remarkable."

And she truly believed he had been. He had fought to remain calm. Much of it was likely a kind of self-preservation, but he had endeavored to stay coolheaded, as was expected for a person of his standing. Though there was no shortage of those who would enact punishment on those lower than them for a mere trifle, Aleksey had carefully considered the circumstances before making the best decision.

Aleksey was left wide-eyed at Rebecca's words, but eventually let the hint of a smile cross his face.

This was where Rebecca's relationship with Aleksey had begun.

After the incident, Aleksey sometimes spoke to Rebecca. Naturally, because of their respective positions, they said nothing truly noteworthy where others could overhear. However, Rebecca could sense that Aleksey was fond of her. She felt embarrassed by the adoration she saw in his eyes.

The boy thinks of me as a new big sister.

Aleksey had lost his mother before he had turned ten, and perhaps his interactions with Rebecca helped to bury that particular loneliness. Rebecca did not mind, as she felt like she, too, had gained another younger brother.

They were only small interactions, and conversations had in passing, but in time, they developed into private meetings held in secret, at agreed-upon times. These were like adorable little rendezvous, where the two could sit close together and whisper quietly to each other.

And yet, when one year of acquaintance turned into two—when Rebecca was sixteen and Alec was fourteen—their relationship blossomed from one of siblings into one of lovers. Around this time, Aleksey was afforded more freedom of movement, and they often met in the evening, away from prying eyes. And then, one evening, they shared their first kiss. By this time, Alec was now taller than her, and had grown to be rather dashing. Being held in his arms made Rebecca feel like the heroine in a fairy tale.

"When we are alone like this, call me Alec," he'd said. "You need not use my title, Rebby."

"I will gladly do so, Alec."

It was the first time they had called each other by their nicknames. Rebecca had no issues with this, and with her agreement, they smiled at one another. Aleksey always looked so stern and tense, but here he shared with her a true, honest smile as he kissed her again.

In hindsight, this would be the happiest time in their relationship together.

Aleksey and Rebecca wanted nothing more than to love one another, but after another year had passed, their relationship was no longer so simple. Aleksey was in a position of great responsibility, which made him a man of great worth, and the buds of ambition within Rebecca began to sprout.

A little less than a year after the two professed their love for one another, King Robert fell ill, and it was revealed that he did not have much time left. Soon after, an air of unease fell upon the palace. However, it may have been more accurate to say that this had been building since the passing of the first and second princes. The kingdom was rocked by the successive passings within the royal family, and in that short period, the balance of power had shifted several times. There was order, but it was a very precarious balancing act—and the king's illness had made it crumble.

Now, there was a choice—a choice between the peace and security that came with supporting the crown prince Olivier, or backing the illegitimate son Aleksey and ruling the kingdom through a new puppet leader.

The ambitious were quick to take action. The most important people in the kingdom split into factions, but they were not alone—the young also followed suit. Young men with lofty career aspirations fought to become aides to the princes, realizing one of these princes would soon be crowned the new king. Meanwhile, many young girls stood in opposition to one another, all of them hungry for the chance to become queen.

All of this had, of course, been happening in the shadows, but King Robert's illness brought it all to the surface.

Rebecca, too, lost herself in this, desperate to protect her position as future queen, now that she was Prince Aleksey's secret lover.

The day that things would end between them was fast approaching.

Chapter 2: Broken Bonds and a Decision to Part

1

Aleksey slowly opened his eyes. The sunlight that streamed in through the curtains stung, and his body was leaden, but it was time to rise. As he forced himself to sit up in bed, his brain throbbed with a dull pain, and he let out a low moan.

His schedule was far too busy for a boy in his mid-teens, and Aleksey felt as though his own well-being and health were being stolen by the excessive demands of those around him. He did not know when he had begun feeling so out of sorts, and so very, very ill. Still, he refused to complain—his brother Olivier seemed fine, even though he bore far greater and heavier responsibilities. In any case, Aleksey could not afford to show weakness; he did not know how it might affect the current political situation. That was the extent to which the royal palace was in disarray. Aleksey, an illegitimate son, had been thrust into a world of political upheaval, and the situation was anything but safe. Quite simply, collapsing due to illness was out of the question.

Aleksey mustered up the energy to stand, took some of his sedatives, and buttoned up his shirt. He had so little vitality that his reflection in the mirror struck him as ghostlike. He wondered if perhaps he was in even worse shape than his father—a man on his deathbed—and his lips curled into a pained grin as he wandered to his desk. He took out the pile of letters hidden deep in one of its drawers, and touched the one on the very top—the most recent. All of these missives had come from his lover.

“Rebby...”

She was kind like an older sister and generous like a mother, and her presence healed him. He loved her. But the royal palace was in the midst of an upheaval, and he could not afford to be careless when it came to meeting her in person. For one thing, she was not an officially approved fiancée, and he could not tell

what would happen if it were to be revealed that he was seeing a daughter from a family with little in the way of power and influence. Aleksey had assigned a number of his own personal guard to protect Rebecca in secret, but he was nonetheless racked with concern.

Though they had, for a time, met in the royal gardens in the middle of the night, such meetings had recently become almost impossible. Order in the palace had been disrupted as the battles for political power dragged on—all of them hidden beneath the guise of the battle for succession—and this sometimes meant that outsiders were given access to the gardens. Aleksey was not even sure how many of his own knights he could trust.

To make matters worse, he was falling apart physically, and if he was not given the opportunity for an extended rest, he would not even be able to handle his clerical duties. So weak was he that ensuring a safe location for them to meet in the dead of evening was well beyond him.

“I long to see you... To hold you...”

And though Aleksey believed the words that escaped his lips, some part of him hesitated. The way things were in the palace, Aleksey would soon become a burden to his brother Olivier. If he had never been here in the first place, this so-called battle for succession would never have happened. Aleksey had begun to think that perhaps it would be best if he disappeared altogether, and this thought made the longing, expectant gaze of his lover all the heavier and harder to bear.

Aleksey was serious about his relationship with Rebecca. His own father had noticed as much, and had added the girl to Aleksey’s list of potential marriage partners. In this way her change of station had been meaningful, and yet, ever since she had been moved to a position slightly closer to Aleksey, she had begun subtly looking to control the space around him—including the girls who approached him. This made Aleksey all the more worried.

He knew how Rebecca felt. She was eighteen, and a noble girl without a marriage partner at this age was not looked upon highly. Rebecca’s mother had also cottoned on to the potential identity of her daughter’s lover, and was stubbornly insistent about proving her suspicions. All of this must have weighed

on Rebecca's shoulders, and on more than a few occasions, she had subtly pressured him to hurry up and announce her as his fiancée.

But Aleksey could not simply ignore Olivier and do so before his brother. More to the point, he could simply not ignore the selection process and declare that his lover was now his fiancée. In any case, he was practically drowning in his work.

Rebecca was aware of all this, but she could not accept it. They saw each other every day, but their conversations were only ever about work. They could not make time alone, and so they exchanged letters in which Aleksey told her how much he wanted to see her. However, compared to when they had rendezvoused every week, his words must have felt cold and distant.

That said, Aleksey had heard that, as of late, Rebecca had begun to speak out of turn, and it was hurting her relationship with her coworkers, who did not know the circumstances. Aleksey had been able to placate her somewhat in his letters, but he was also starting to lose confidence. If she could not shoulder these duties, and if, perhaps, she was beginning to change as a person, then could he *really* make her his bride?

This was not a matter of mere dissatisfaction. Rebecca had, after all, told him that she did not care about his legitimacy—or lack of it—and that she loved him for who he was. However, as an illegitimate son of the king, Aleksey had little in the way of support. Being the wife of such a prince was a more perilous position than Rebecca likely imagined it to be. He could not bear to have her looking after him in his current state. She dreamed innocently of marriage, but he had lost all faith in his ability to protect her. That was why, when she looked at him with eyes that saw nothing but a bright future, it was like a mountain weighing him down.

Aleksey's vision blurred and wavered, and he struggled to hold himself up. He closed his eyes and forced his breathing back under control, then dropped a kiss to the letter in his hand.

Then, he put it back in the drawer, as if pushing away the uncertainty smoldering in his heart.

2

“Well, well, Your Highness. His Majesty is so ill, while everyone is bending over backwards to support the crown prince, and yet here you are, gallivanting around with women so late in the day.”

“It would appear to me he is unable to grasp the prudence required of his position. Why, I can practically hear the king’s cries of grief already.”

Olivier was in the courtyard taking a short break when he heard these voices. There was such spite and disdain in them that he stopped in his tracks. He peeked quietly through the hedges, and frowned at the sight that met his eyes. A few who were looking to take sides in the political upheaval had Aleksey surrounded while he was trying to rest.

Olivier glanced to his side, at his trusted knight. The man frowned—why was Aleksey without a knight of his own?

“Most likely, this is the work of the crown prince faction,” said the knight. “The girls with him have been frequenting the guard house under the pretext of ‘comforting’ the third prince. Unfortunately, it’s more likely that they mean to tempt him.”

“As I expected,” replied Olivier. “Those people berating him... Recently, I’ve seen a lot of them around here.”

The two princes had just turned fifteen when the king fell ill. One minute he’d been working, the next minute he’d collapsed. A closer examination revealed he had roughly one year left to live. There was no effective way to treat his illness, and it slowly ate away at him. After six months, even getting out of bed was a struggle.

Olivier and Aleksey had taken up the king’s governing duties, and the two had since become unavoidably busy. They were worried about having to take on such responsibilities well before it had ever been expected of them, but thanks to the help of trustworthy aides, they came to handle the work in a matter of a few months. Their father had approved their work himself, and said that he could now rest easy.

However, the uncertainty and worry around the situation had not been so easy to brush off. The matter of Aleksey's physical health—and the circumstances he found himself in—were entering dangerous waters.

As soon as it had been announced that the king had little time left to live, the palace nobles had split into two factions. There was the crown prince faction, made up of noble families with positions as aides and high-ranking officials; and the third prince faction, made up of new nobles rising through the ranks and distinguished noble families that did not have high-ranking positions. On the surface, it looked like a battle between preservationists and reformists, but the truth was far more complicated.

They may have been called the "crown prince faction," but this was little more than a convenient title for the key noble families and the royal aides. Antiquated and stubborn nobles who only wished to make clearer the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, along with young nobles looking to curry favor with the prince himself, were the ones who shamelessly paraded their support for the crown prince. It was their plan to purge the kingdom of the illegitimate child—whose mother's identity was still unknown—and by doing so, put themselves in a position of favor with the future king.

The third prince faction, on the other hand, consisted of those noble families who had been elbowed out of high-ranking positions due to staffing and promotion policies that put a premium on ability, as well as rising nobles looking to increase their renown. Their overarching plan was to turn the largely defenseless illegitimate prince into a puppet leader, behind which they could lead the nation.

In any case, the royal palace was in a most precarious situation—one that had begun with ongoing deaths in the royal family, and was now further exacerbated by news of the king's coming demise. Given the two princes' youth and inexperience, there was no better time to take advantage of the circumstances.

However, though the two princes were the supposed figureheads of the opposing factions, their bond was one of steel. Aleksey himself was, in essence, a supporter of the crown prince faction, and it was believed that this would cause the battle for succession to eventually peter out on its own.

However, the hot-blooded youths of the palace, who had grown tired of long years of peace, were galvanized by the battle for succession. There was also backing from certain powerful groups looking to incite conflict, which only added fuel to the fire. The crown prince faction spoke loudly of bloodlines and the importance of maintaining them, while the third prince faction cried passionately of revolution and the winds of change. Those who had started out merely enjoying the spectacle from a distance were now being dragged into it, and choosing a side was now a matter of status for young nobles. What had started as the foibles of the immature playing foolishly at politics had now become something much greater.

But the one hurt most by it all was Aleksey. One side named him the son of a whore, while the other said that, as someone who had lived the life of the common people, he was now the one most suited to leading them, after his royal education.

To make matters worse, the cowards who wished to protest—but who did not want to damage their reputations with those who ranked above them—ended up lobbying their grievances through Aleksey. This was all too easy, as the boy's position in the family left him essentially defenseless. Many were all too happy to use Aleksey as their shield, and some of the kingdom's aides even allowed the behavior—claiming that it was a convenient way to weed out dissidents. As a result, Aleksey bore the full brunt of the palace's discontent. At the same time, many young women at the palace, suddenly seeing Aleksey as ripe for the picking, began to flock to him.

Aleksey's schedule was already more than he could handle, but it quickly reached the point that he could not find even a single moment to rest, and the exhaustion ate away at him. It was already obvious that his health was ailing, and Olivier knew that he was relying on sedatives in secret. His medication was the reason he had tried to slip away for a short break. Little more than a few minutes had passed, but his detractors had not let the opportunity escape—perhaps they had even been lying in wait.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The young men gasped at the sudden appearance of the crown prince, and saluted, as was expected of their positions. Aleksey let a hint of relief flash

across his face, but it was clear that he was uncomfortable. At once, the young men tried to curry favor with the prince, and from the heart, he lashed out at them for not knowing when enough was enough.

“We took it upon ourselves to admonish His Highness Aleksey for being so frivolous during such a dire time,” said one.

“There’s nothing frivolous about it!” spat one of the girls, who was clearly a member of the third prince faction. “His Highness is clearly unwell, and I merely wanted to look after him.”

“She’s telling the truth,” said another. “I ask that you not slander His Highness in this way.”

“There was no frivolous intent in my actions. These girls surrounded me against my will,” said Aleksey, sounding utterly exhausted, and ignoring the angry glares from around him. “I told them that I did not require their nursing, but they would not listen. Please, I beg of you, leave me be.”

Olivier could see that Alec was deathly pale and needed a quiet place to rest at once. He did not hide his annoyance nor his anger as he addressed the young men and women gathered before him.

“Are you done?” he said. “Not a single one of you knows Alec as well as I do. He is not the sort to play around with women in a time of crisis, nor is he one to be tempted so easily by wily charms.”

Just the other day, a count’s daughter had tried to make Aleksey her fiancé by attempting to bed him, though that situation had fortunately gone nowhere. She had trapped Alec in a closed room filled with a scent that spurred the libido, and approached him, but he had been so unwell that instead he’d vomited. Unfortunately, the incident had caused him to lose his faith in women entirely. This was exactly why Olivier knew that they were all lying.

“Alec is in his position because of his blood, sweat, and tears,” said Olivier. “You ignore your own duties to play at politics? To admonish him? To ‘nurse’ him back to health? Ridiculous. Nobody is even allowed into this area, save for the royal family and a very select group of people, which begs the question—by whose authority are you even here? Who allowed you entry?”

All of them were dressed in the uniforms of royal servants and ladies-in-waiting. None of them had the right to be here. All of them had left their posts and snuck into the royal courtyard, and Olivier knew it.

“Leave,” he said. “And know that you will receive fitting punishments for what you have done.”

Everyone went pale. They bowed and quickly left, but their reverence was little more than show.

“The kingdom is in disarray,” muttered Olivier. “They think little of even me. Something must be done.”

But it was not just the court servants—some of the knights tasked with defending the royal family had clearly grown lax also. The family was losing the faith of its people. All of them would need thorough and harsh warnings. But Olivier felt he should apply this same strictness to himself as well.

“I will find out who was behind this, and have the guards on duty punished,” said the knight with Olivier.

Olivier nodded, then put a hand to Aleksey’s shoulder.

“Alec,” he said. “You should return to your room to rest. I will send someone to get you when you are needed.”

“Thank you.”

Aleksey was still seated, and he stared in the direction that the intruders had come from. He stood sluggishly, and forced a smile to his face. But in the next moment he was already beginning to wobble, and Olivier reached out to support him.

“Alec! What in the...?”

“I’m sorry. Just a dizzy spell.”

The words were an attempt at a verbal shrug, but his face was pale and the sickly look of him went all the way down to his nails. His breathing was faint, his temperature was high, and his pulse fast but very weak. His condition was even worse than Olivier could have imagined, and the crown prince bit his lip in worry.

“Take the rest of the day off,” he said. “Rest.”

“But...”

“I said *rest*. If anything were to happen to you after father, I...”

Olivier did not want to lose anybody else. He was so tired of losing his family.

There may be no other time but now...

There was a plan—a last resort—that Olivier had, for a time, considered only vaguely. Now, however, he was growing more and more certain of. It was time to make a decision as to whether to see it through.

“Okay. Then I’ll retire to my room.”

Perhaps Aleksey could feel the heavy weight in Olivier’s heart, because he agreed to his brother’s wishes. Olivier ordered one of his knights to have a doctor at the ready, then he helped the shaky Aleksey back to his room.

Perhaps it would be good to call upon Rebecca in times like these...

Rebecca Hallonsten was the girl Aleksey was in love with. She was calm and kind in nature, and she soothed his battered heart. Aleksey was sixteen and already showing a strong distrust of women, but Rebecca, the daughter of a viscount, was the lone exception.

Still, Olivier had his concerns. Everything had been fine until her exemplary work saw her posted to a position among the royal family’s private staff. It was then that she began to take on a more suggestive attitude, flaunting her position without actively revealing it, and blatantly swiping her coworker’s duties. She was attempting to stop her fellow ladies-in-waiting from getting near her lover, but her behavior went well beyond that of a mere jealous young lady.

Olivier also had misgivings when it came to Rebecca’s mother. Viscount Hallonsten was a fine public servant, but his wife had very high expectations of their daughter, and the daughter’s behavior had given the mother reason to believe she’d found a suitor. It was no surprise that the woman expected big things—her daughter worked as part of the royal family’s private staff, and was keeping the identity of her lover a secret. One merely had to put two and two

together. Still, Olivier had been very troubled to hear that the viscount's wife had made her way to the royal palace, claiming she had a gift for her daughter —only to demand to be introduced to her daughter's lover.

Working in the castle as part of the private staff came with the expectation of confidentiality. Information that was learned through the course of work was not to be leaked, not even to family. And yet Rebecca had dropped hints of something that should have necessitated the greatest discretion to her own family. Her mother—the woman's personality being what it was—was, in turn, sure to poke around the royal palace for the truth, and perhaps even spread rumors that her daughter was in a relationship with a member of the royal family. At this rate, it would not be long at all before Aleksey and Rebecca's relationship was uncovered. Aleksey had been forced to assign another guard to Rebecca, as she bristled or otherwise ignored his attempts to advise her on how she ought to act.

Long story short, Olivier simply could not place much trust in Viscount Hallonsten's wife and daughter. Their actions had gone beyond that which he could merely shrug off. It was not that either of the women were bad people. However, regardless of their intentions, this was a matter of a marriage between a viscount family and the royal family, and there was a danger of them leaking confidential information. This would erode Aleksey's position even further, and potentially lead to people accusing him of planning treason and revolt. In fact, given the current circumstances, such an outcome was very likely.

Rebecca couldn't seem to see this, and was constantly pressuring Aleksey. Was she even capable of assuming the position that would be bestowed upon her with marriage?

Perhaps I am overthinking things. Perhaps I am being paranoid. And yet...

The process of selecting brides for the two princes had been put on hold when it was announced that the king had only a year left to live. However, not long afterwards, the king himself had taken the stance that his two sons should "within reason, marry the partners they desired." This had led to Rebecca being secretly added to the list of potential marriage partners for Aleksey. However, everyone on the list had been subjected to a confidential inspection, and

Rebecca did not even meet the baseline expectations. She was being tested in a time of crisis, and though she should have been in the most advantageous position as the prince's actual lover, of all of his prospective partners, she was considered the least suitable.

It was clear to Olivier that Aleksey was having difficulty making time for Rebeca. But Aleksey was also panicking—he knew that he was not in a strong enough position to support and protect his lover. Yet Rebecca was doing nothing to make that any easier for him. Rather, she was only concerned with keeping her coworkers restrained, as if *they* were her rivals.

On just one occasion, Olivier had asked her what qualities she thought a princess or queen required.

"To be a place for her husband to find healing, and to serve him wholeheartedly," she had said.

Oliver had been unable to hide his disappointment—how was that any different from a concubine?

There is of course the option of having her study further, or making special allowances for her, but...

Olivier wanted only for his brother to be with a woman he loved. But in Rebecca, he saw an ambition and carelessness that made him hesitant to accept her as a partner for someone as important as his own brother. And if it came to light that she'd never wanted Aleksey in the first place, and only had her eyes on the status that came with marrying him...

Olivier shook his head and let out a pained sigh.

"Just a little further," he said, helping Aleksey along to his room.

Whatever the truth of the matter was, Olivier knew that his brother needed rest more than anything else. But these vague worries lingered in his heart and mind as he opened the door to Aleksey's room.

The doctor was already waiting. Servants helped Aleksey change into his pajamas and lie down on his bed. Olivier stood back from it all so as not to get in the way, and waited until the doctor was done.

“He’s overworked, and stress has left him very mentally drained and weak. The excessive mental fatigue has resulted in severe physical symptoms. This is very, very bad. I know that it is a hard and trying time for the both of you, but what he needs is time to rest and recover. If this continues, he’ll be lucky if he can even stand.”

Though he did not say as much outright, the doctor’s prognosis sounded all too similar to what had afflicted Olivier’s mother. Olivier put his face in his hands—he had expected this much, but it hit him hard nonetheless.

Olivier had the doctor leave, along with everyone else—he wanted to talk privately with his brother. But when he opened his mouth to speak, Aleksey, who was still lying on his side, spoke first.

“I am thinking of leaving the castle,” he said.

It was exactly what Olivier had been about to suggest, and yet, to hear it from Aleksey’s own mouth broke Olivier’s heart. He did not *want* to send his brother away. He wanted them to work together, to support each other, here and now, and into the future as well. Aleksey shared his blood, and he was the only brother Olivier had left. Was it wrong to wish for him to stay?

“I have thought this often of late,” said Aleksey. “I wanted nothing more than to be by your side, and to support you. But as it stands, I am doing the opposite—I am a burden. My very existence obstructs your path forward.”

The battle of succession had come about because of Aleksey’s existence, and it had thrown the royal palace into disarray. They were on the verge of a new reign, and Aleksey did not want a dark shadow to fall over it.

“I know how to handle it,” Aleksey went on. “I’ve already discussed things with Bleyzac. I’ll return to the regular populace, like him, and I’ll become an adventurer. By taking on the work that the knights can’t handle, in some small way, I can still contribute to the betterment of our nation.”

Olivier’s middle brother was friends with Bleyzac, who had left the duke’s family not long after Aleksey had been welcomed into the royal one. Bleyzac had renounced his position as heir and joined the common people. He, too, was an illegitimate child, and so he likely understood the position that Aleksey was in.

Their similar circumstances had made it easy for Aleksey to connect with Bleyzac, who was six years his senior. The fact that Bleyzac also worked in the place that Aleksey thought of as home helped as well. Olivier had known that Aleksey and Bleyzac had stayed in touch via letters, but he had never imagined they would have discussed this.

Olivier did not want to let his brother go. Aleksey was his best friend, and the most trusted of his retainers. But he knew Aleksey would not last much longer under these conditions—he would break down, both physically and mentally.

When Olivier thought of his brothers and his mother, and his father, who was soon to be among the gods, he realized that the only blood relative he had left was Aleksey. And he realized he would rather see his brother live safely, somewhere far, far away, than to lose him, like he had the others in his family.

From the very beginning, Aleksey was meant to be free. He had only been brought to this labyrinth of a castle because of Olivier's own weaknesses and shortcomings. And if Olivier had been diligent in his studies, then perhaps his father would never even have considered the idea of bringing his illegitimate son into the family. Olivier was the reason that Aleksey had been dragged into this, and now Olivier couldn't even protect his own brother.

But that was the very reason that Olivier had to release him. For the nation's sake, as well as for Aleksey himself.

"I understand," Olivier said, forcing the words out. "I'll talk with father."

He could feel the edges of his voice quiver.

The king accepted the decision that his two sons had come to. He, too, was vexed that he had been unable to protect his own son, and it pained him that he would leave them in this situation when he passed.

After talking with his father, Olivier arranged for their most trusted people to prepare Aleksey's safe passage out of the castle. The most important parts of this were handled by Bleyzac's father, Chancellor Frederick Fauchelle, who acted as the go-between with Bleyzac, and readied a concrete schedule.

Over time, Aleksey's work duties were slowly and subtly decreased—to

ensure nobody noticed—and he was given time to rest in order to prepare for the journey ahead. All that was left now was to wait for the right time.

Unfortunately, a certain incident occurred first.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!"

It was near midnight, and Olivier had been about to fall asleep when the panicked voice woke him. The corridors were filled with noise, and the servant kneeling by Olivier's bed was as pale as a sheet.

"It's His Highness Aleksey! He's collapsed!"

Olivier was out of the room before the servant could even finish speaking. His personal guard followed him silently. The corridor was filled with nervous and tense-looking doctors and servants. Cries of anger and sadness echoed through the halls. The anger came from the doctors, but the sorrow was all Aleksey.

"Alec!"

Olivier rushed into the bedroom, where he found a deranged Aleksey screaming and crying as several men desperately tried to hold him down. His chestnut-brown hair was messy as he cried out to any and all who would listen.

"Kill me!" he shouted. "Let me die! It's my fault! None of this would have happened if I were never here! I am worthless!"

His voice was distressed, utterly wounded, and filled with deep suffering. Olivier was dumbfounded. Aleksey's condition had become more stable of late—how had this happened?

As he stood in place, unable to move, a knight whispered in the prince's ear. It was one of Aleksey's personal guards, and the knight he trusted the most. What the knight told Olivier filled the prince with rage. To think that someone had taken his brother, at his weakest and most vulnerable, and completely shattered him.

Rebecca Hallonsten... Of all the people it could have been, it was the woman who was supposed to be Aleksey's lover.

All of Olivier's worries had been dead on the mark.

3

Rebecca was frustrated and angry. Earlier, she had taken great pains not to be noticed, but she now opened the door to her room with such force that it rendered her previous efforts completely pointless. She threw away the stole she'd been wearing and fell onto her bed with a thud.

"How could he?! I can't even believe it! Detestable! I hate him!"

She had thought that something was amiss. For the past year, it had become harder and harder for them to meet, and then, most recently, they hadn't met at all. They saw each other every day, yet never even had the chance to speak.

Rebecca knew that, with the king on his deathbed, Aleksey had been forced to pick up some of the duties that his father could no longer attend to. But she could not believe that he was so busy that he could not even spare a moment for her. When she tried to push him on it, she still did not get a private conversation—only the news that he was working extremely long hours, and could not make any spare time. He would not even make any time for her before bed. Aleksey was no old man—surely he could have spared a little time later in the evening for her. Two or three letters a week was far too coldhearted.

He had told her, over and over again, that she needed to be patient, and that he was doing his utmost—given the circumstances at the palace—to ensure that no harm came to her. But Rebecca herself was filled with doubts. And now he was saying that they had to break up, and in the worst way imaginable.

"A commoner, he says?! He takes the best years of my life, then says he's returning to the regular populace?! I don't believe this! I hope he disappears for good!"

Rebecca buried her head in her pillow and let out every rude and bad-mouthed comment that she could imagine. She closed her eyes, and behind her closed eyelids saw the events of that evening play out all over again.

The last half a year had been trying for Rebecca—she'd been impatient, indignant, and frustrated. Though her efforts at work had been rewarded with a

placement in the royal family's private staff, she had not grown any closer to her lover. If anything, they were meeting even less.

Immediately upon Rebecca's promotion, her lover's father—that is to say, the King of Storydia—collapsed due to an illness that was revealed to be terminal. This, in turn, led to his two sons scrambling to take up their father's political duties, which meant it was almost impossible for them to make any free time for themselves. They were tasked with inheriting the responsibilities of the king while seeing to their own public duties and royal educations. They were so incredibly busy that it wasn't just free time they lacked—they barely had time to eat and sleep.

Rebecca was, of course, aware of the circumstances. However, she felt certain that Aleksey was capable of making time for her. All he had to do was turn away the helping hands around him at dinnertime, and they would have time alone. Even just a moment before he went to bed would be enough, or—if that was too much—then perhaps he could have risen just a touch earlier for them to meet.

Instead, all Aleksey did was talk to her with his eyes, or surreptitiously touch her hand as she poured his tea. They saw each other every single day, but there was nothing romantic in their meetings—the apologies and professions of love came only in his private letters. Could he have been any colder? Rebecca had no need for the textbooks that he sent her as gifts—she wanted time for the two of them, alone.

I can't believe it. He can't even spare five minutes for his own lover?

They had not seen each other alone in such a long time. Rebecca could scarcely remember when Aleksey had last kissed her. At this rate, she would end up discarded and thrown away. Rebecca felt panicked—she was paranoid that her beloved prince would be taken from her by a woman with stronger support behind her.

Making matters worse was the stubborn insistence of Rebecca's mother, who was intent on meeting her daughter's suitor. Rebecca regretted nothing more than having revealed the existence of the relationship in a moment of cheeky and suggestive playfulness.

“I’ve earned the favor of a dashing noble gentleman,” she’d said to her mother, “but I can’t say a word more—it’s a secret.”

Most likely, Rebecca’s mother wanted to lord this fact over her peers. Her daughter had never been particularly popular with men, and now it would seem that a high-ranking noble had the young girl in his sights. Rebecca knew how her mother felt, but her relationship with Aleksey was not officially recognized—there was no way she could introduce him to her parents as her lover.

But with her mother and her own paranoia pressing upon her, Rebecca could not stay calm. She felt a certain conceitedness at being the lover of a prince, and this drove her to take actions above her own authority. It had reached the point now that, just a few days earlier, the head lady-in-waiting had pulled her aside and scolded her.

At the heart of it was Rebecca’s belief that—as the prince’s lover—she knew the young man best. She also knew Olivier’s preferences, having heard them from Aleksey himself. This was why Rebecca had told her coworkers they were doing their work wrong, or had otherwise simply taken their duties as her own without asking. The head lady-in-waiting was at her wit’s end.

“Rebecca, your job is not to compete with the others like you are competing for the royal family’s favor. Your responsibility is to ensure the royal family lives without issue. You’ve not been yourself, recently. What’s gotten into you?”

The woman was implicitly warning her to learn her place—it was even likely that she had cottoned on to the girl’s relationship. But as far as Rebecca was concerned, if anyone needed to know their place, it was the head lady-in-waiting herself. If ensuring the royal family lived without issue was so important, then Rebecca—who knew the two princes best—was *the* most appropriate person for the job. After all, the truth of the matter was that the prince had chosen *her*. The head lady-in-waiting, therefore, was simply wrong.

Rebecca was, of course, sound enough in mind as to not utter her thoughts aloud, but her feelings were all too clear in her carriage. The head lady-in-waiting had sighed at the sight.

“We must all work together to support the family,” she’d said. “Please do not do anything untoward that will displease or offend any of the family.”

The woman was doing her utmost to warn Rebecca, but the girl herself did not notice.

At the very least, you could have made me Alec's private lady-in-waiting.

The two princes were still not engaged, and so while they had private servants, they did not have private ladies-in-waiting. The girls worked in shifts, seeing to the prince's needs. This was a measure put in place to ensure that no untoward affairs occurred, but Rebecca was not at all satisfied by the arrangement.

Though Rebecca was in a lower position than a high-ranking noble, she was nonetheless the daughter of viscount working as one of the palace's public servants. She had also earned her position in the royal family's private staff by the merits of her work. With all that in mind, was it such a big problem for the prince to make such a girl his private lady-in-waiting? Rebecca thought not.

Rebecca knew that Aleksey was worried about the fragility of his position as the king's illegitimate son, and that he was being very careful to ensure that nothing happened to her, but surely there were other ways. He was a *prince*, for goodness' sake.

Rebecca gathered the used tea cutlery and headed to the kitchenette, but stopped at the sound of cheers outside. She peeked through a nearby window to the square beyond, where the two princes were surrounded by girls. All of them were asking the princes to choose them to accompany them and as guides for their inspections.

Rebecca couldn't stop from scrunching up her face in frustration. All the girls were hungry and ambitious, and had their sights on making one of the princes their betrothed.

"Shameless, all of them..." muttered Rebecca, her contempt drifting through the empty corridor.

Until recently, there hadn't been many girls who approached Aleksey, whose mother was still unknown. Those that did were usually interested in reaching the crown prince through him to the crown prince, or otherwise sympathized with him and wanted to be a friend. But with the king's passing on the horizon, and Olivier's position as the next king all but confirmed, many a girl eyed

Aleksey differently now.

What Rebecca had not expected was how much the girls valued Aleksey because of his relationship with the crown prince. They were as close as twins. So close, in fact, that regardless of Aleksey's heritage being a mystery, he was still sure to be promoted to a high position.

Though there were separate factions inciting a battle for succession to the throne, Olivier's enthronement was most likely. And given their tight bond of trust, Aleksey was almost certainly going to serve as Olivier's closest aide. Though it was still not known whether he would remain in the royal family or be given the rank of duke, it was nonetheless clear that there was value in marrying him. And this was not to mention that if Aleksey somehow became king, his wife would become queen. For girls with fiery ambitions, the situation was win-win.

There were also a great many who superficially felt that Aleksey, being an illegitimate son, was thus within striking range. None of this was helped by the fact that certain parents were also pushing their daughters onto him. Because of how clearly important he was to the crown prince, Aleksey became all the more appealing.

But it doesn't matter. He has me. And it was because I was recognized that His Majesty and the crown prince had my station changed.

Rebecca took a letter from her pocket, one written by Aleksey, and quietly—though at the same time, with a knowing air about her—gave it a kiss.

"I do think they could publicly announce it soon," she muttered to herself. "They should make it known that the prince has chosen me."

That simple action would put a stop to all the desperate girls aggressively trying to sell themselves to him. It would also mean that some—like the girl who had tried to force herself upon Aleksey—would now end up detained.

If only His Majesty would pass a little sooner, so that we could speed things up...

Rebecca gasped as she became truly aware of the thought that had just crossed her mind. It was the very height of disrespect. It was indecent. But this

was just a sign of how blinded Rebecca was by the hopes she had about her position. She was just a girl from the countryside, and a prince had fallen in love with her—the very thought of it was like a fairy tale come true. The idea of it entirely clouded over and hid who she really was.

Had she been of calmer and cooler mind, perhaps she would have noticed her lover's poor health, and the hesitance he clearly showed in opening up to her about something very important. Had she been herself, she most certainly would have noticed such things long ago.

However, she shrugged off Aleksey's condition as merely the result of a hectic schedule, and she believed that all he needed to heal him of that weariness was herself. It was because of this that she did not notice anything until the very last moment.

And then, there was the incident.

It was the beginning of summer, and about two months before the king would pass away. The evening was cool, and Rebecca had been called upon to meet with Aleksey. But not in her capacity as a lady-in-waiting—he wanted to meet her as his lover. He'd told her that he had "something important to discuss," and though it was late, he had made plenty of time for them to talk—he had, in fact, said explicitly in his letter that he hoped they could take their time.

The letter had filled Rebecca with excitement. "Something important" could mean only one thing, could it not?

After work, she took a bath and got herself ready, putting on just a little more makeup than she usually would before heading out to their agreed-upon spot. The knight who was helping to deliver the letters back and forth between them was there to meet her with an expressionless face, and he saw her to the royal gardens.

Aleksey was already waiting for her, at the gazebo at the center of the gardens. Rebecca could not contain her excitement, and she ran to him, where he met her with a tight embrace. It had been months since he'd held her like this. This moment was also when Rebecca first noticed how gaunt and sickly he looked, but she did not say anything. He held her, and he kissed her, and then

he looked down at her with a deep seriousness etched into his face.

This is it. He's going to ask for my hand in marriage.

Such was the girl's excitement that she could not muster a moment of concern for Aleksey's present condition. Her dreams were so strong, in fact, that she could not immediately comprehend the words Aleksey spoke, and was left in stunned silence.

"I must apologize," he said. "I have decided to leave the castle. This is the only way to end this battle of succession that has consumed the palace. I cannot express how sorry I am...for keeping this decision from you until the last moment."

His voice was weak, but his words were clear. They were the complete opposite of what Rebecca had been hoping for, and she stood in place, utterly perplexed. Perhaps it was not that she did not understand, but rather, that she did not want to.

"You're...leaving...? You mean, to become a retainer?"

Rebecca knew, by the look on Aleksey's face, that this was not the case. And yet, she wanted to believe that he was merely throwing away his right of inheritance, and a shift to the rank of retainer was like a last glimmer of hope for the girl.

Aleksey's answer, however, coldly shattered that hope.

"Dropping to the rank of a retainer would not change the current circumstances," Aleksey explained. "The conflict and infighting will continue as long as I am here. The third prince faction will not give up while there is still something for them to cling to. That is why I am leaving the royal family and going into hiding."

It was not difficult to imagine how difficult and painful a decision this was. Aleksey had worked himself to the bone for the sake of his younger brother, who would one day lead the nation. To leave his own family behind—his own blood—just as they were set to shoulder the weight of the entire nation was not something he had decided on flippantly.

But what did that mean for her? She had spent her time until now looking to

be a source of healing for him—what did he intend to do with her? Rebecca stopped her racing thoughts as she slowly considered the facts.

Aleksey was renouncing his right to become heir. He was not going to become a retainer. He was going to leave the family and go into hiding. He would no longer be a member of royalty, and no longer even be a noble. He would simply be a citizen. He was going back to being just a member of the general populace.

And I...I won't be a queen, a princess, or the wife of a duke...

The future Rebecca had dreamed of was suddenly and completely closed off to her. She fell into despair. And judging by the way Aleksey spoke, it was as if the decision was already final. It had already been discussed with the king and the crown prince.

"And what of me?" she asked, clinging to his sickly frame. "I will be left behind. What will become of me? I am not a commoner, you realize? At the age of eighteen, noble girls become little more than unsalable goods. You make me wait until the very last moment, until my best years are gone, and *this* is what you tell me? Is this not unreasonable?! It's too much!"

Rebecca's shoulders shook with rage as Aleksey softly put his hands to them.

"I am sorry. I wasn't able to think of anything else. I knew that, no matter what I said, I would disappoint you, and thus found myself unable to speak. However, as long as I am one of the common populace, and you are the daughter of a viscount, we cannot..."

But before he could finish, Rebecca cut him off.

"You think I don't know that?!" she cried.

Aleksey was left frozen for a moment. She was always so kind and gentle, and her sudden rage shocked him. Still, he mustered what energy he had to speak again.

"I am so sorry for what I have done," he said. "My desire to be with you was no lie. It is what I want. But for the sake of Olivier, and the sake of our nation, this was the only choice I had."

"So you choose family and country over me?"

“I... I’m so sorry.”

“So you are saying that, as far as you are concerned, I am beneath them. You are saying that, even though I have tried my utmost, you will cut me loose and throw me away for the sake of the nation.”

She may have been the daughter of a mere viscount, but was it not the height of disrespect to inform her of such a serious decision at the very last moment? Could he not have saved her from the depths of this injury, had he only told her earlier?

“However...yes, I see. You were a commoner to begin with, weren’t you? A commoner and—on top of that—an orphan, yes?” Rebecca’s words turned ice cold. “I suppose this horrid behavior is to be expected. No wonder they can’t even reveal your mother’s past. I suppose no matter how hard you try, you cannot hide a vulgar upbringing. At the end of the day, you will always be one of the lower class—this world never suited you.”

He had been her lover—no, he had merely pretended to be such—and now his dark magenta eyes began to fall into despair. This gratified Rebecca somewhat, and she let a heartless smile flash across her face. She felt like the victim in all of this. He was a prince in name only, and she had fallen for his sweet nothings, only to find herself discarded at the end of it all. It was all too much for her, and it left no shred of the kind and thoughtful person she was in her soul.

“I’m sorry,” Aleksey rasped. “All I have left you with are painful memories.”

“Oh, do not be mistaken. Do not be so conceited as to think they mean *anything*,” said Rebecca, her tone growing more spiteful as she spoke. “You renounce your position, throw away all your ties to the royal family—just what are those memories we shared worth anyway? That they remain all disgusts me. If you cannot understand how precious and valuable your rank is, then you are worthless. You were just a commoner, and commoners can be punished by death for deceiving nobles, just as it should be. That you are even allowed to do this sort of thing is only because you are still a prince. You will live the rest of your life without your proper sentencing, but I pray that you live filled with regret!”

Aleksey gasped, these harsh words striking him to his core, and all expression drained from his already-pale face. He stumbled backwards, unsteady on his feet.

“You disgust me,” Rebecca said. “I never want to see you again. I never even want to breathe the same air as you. You are sullied.”

Rebecca no longer wanted to share anything with this low-class peasant who had disguised himself as a prince. He was entirely worthless to her, just as he had made her worthless too. She wiped the lips that he had touched with his own, and she left. She did not even deign to give him a second glance.

She left Aleksey at the gazebo alone, in utter shock, his face horribly pale.

That night, Rebecca barely slept a wink. She felt awful; frustrated and angry. She could not believe that Aleksey had dangled the position of queen before her, only to discard her and lower himself to becoming one of the common populace.

Her feelings refused to subside, and, just as she was falling into a doze around dawn, she heard a banging at her door. It was far too early to be up and getting ready for work, and at first Rebecca thought it was just her imagination. But the knocking continued, and it grew stronger.

Who would be visiting at this hour?

Perhaps it was Aleksey, who had just broken up with her the prior evening. And if it was, Rebecca was not about to hold back—she would give him another piece of her mind. But when she opened the door, she was shocked by the sight that greeted her. Two high-ranking personal knights, both of them wearing stern expressions.

“Miss Rebecca Hallonsten,” said one. “A warrant has been issued for your detainment. Ready your things and come with us.”

“Huh...?”

Rebecca was forced to prepare with such haste that she didn’t even have time to be properly confused by what was happening. She did exactly as she was told. She was to be detained, and the stern knights walking ahead and behind

her made her feel like a criminal.

When Rebecca had calmed enough to consider what could have caused this, she arrived at a conclusion—the warrant the two knights carried had been issued by the crown prince, because she had made him unreasonably angry. The only reason she could think of for this was the verbal bashing that she had inflicted upon Aleksey the previous evening.

I suppose I should have seen this coming, considering how much the prince loves Alec...

The pale-faced Rebecca was taken to a restricted section of the palace, located on its top floor. Before the royal family had pared down its staff, the floor had been used by the royal family's private ladies-in-waiting. Rebecca was thrown into a room at the end of a corridor, where she spent an entire day with the female knight watching over her, wafting in a vague uncertainty.

It wasn't until the following dawn that things began to happen. Rebecca was woken from her half-sleep, and told to freshen herself up and get ready. Not long afterwards, the crown prince himself appeared with a stern look on his face. Behind him were Rebecca's parents—pale-faced and surrounded by knights. The viscount and his wife looked as though they had something to say, but were kept silent by the knights who accompanied them.

"Do you understand why you were brought here?" asked Olivier, his voice unusually calm.

But though his demeanor was cool, the prince's dark magenta eyes burned with a fierce rage. It was a gaze Rebecca had seen before...in a young boy with chestnut-brown hair.

"I do," she replied, forcing out the words.

She knew that she would not be allowed to remain silent in response to a question asked by royalty. Ordinarily, the kingdom of Storydia was generous in this respect, but judging by the rage which bled from Olivier's gaze, she understood that silence here would not be tolerated.

"As you are surely aware, there is a crime known as lèse-majesté. You will find it in most nations ruled by a monarchy," said Olivier. "The highest punishment

for this crime is death. However, at least in the nation of Storydia, very few cases have ever ended in the most extreme punishment. Usually the punishment is confinement, demotion, or in particularly bad cases, the complete expropriation of noble title. Do you know why this is?”

“I do not...”

“Because the world of nobles is a game of tug-of-war. It is a world where people crush others to maintain their own authority. The royal family is no exception. Where there is weakness, people will criticize and fling insults. But if we were to pursue every single case of lèse-majesté, then we would waste valuable manpower. Imagine how many would fall, in the case of this battle for succession. That is the very reason we do not take the punishment to its extreme. However...”

Olivier let his words trail off. Rebecca stood in place, trembling, knowing that she could not escape as the prince delivered a guilty judgment.

“In light of what you have done, none would utter a single word of complaint were you to be executed. I have heard what happened and, had I been there, I would have carried out your punishment with my own hands.”

Olivier placed a hand upon the sword at his waist, and Rebecca felt like she would faint. But she held fast, fearing that such an act would only further shorten her life.

“In response to his attempts to break off your relationship, you told Aleksey that your shared memories were nothing, and that Aleksey himself was entirely worthless. You even told him that, as a commoner, he should be executed, and that he should live in regret for the rest of his life.”

Rebecca’s father had been silent until now, but he could no longer bear it.

“Rebby, how could you?!” he shouted.

Rebecca’s mother, meanwhile, fell to her knees, sobbing. Rebecca’s parents had raised her thoughtfully and were so very proud of her, and it left them aghast to learn of the disrespect and humiliation she had vented upon the prince.

“One should *never* tell another human that they are worthless. But you

directed the words at a member of the royal family. There are many who gossip and bad-mouth the royal family, but you are the first I have known to be so brazen."

"Erm... Uh..."

Rebecca couldn't breathe. The words she had spoken now saw her facing extreme punishment. But even worse than that was the fact that her crimes would potentially see her family punished too. At best, her father would lose his viscount title, and at worst, Rebecca's parents would be executed along with her.

"Aleksey begged me," said Olivier. "He wanted only to make sure that you were taken care of in his absence, and he begged me to find you a marriage partner of good standing. For me, and for our very nation, he is prepared to throw *everything* away. He even wants to work among the common populace for their benefit. And you? You who dared to judge him as worthless? What worth do *you* have? What have *you* done for our country? What will *you* do for it? What more can *you* do than him? Tell me! Speak!"

Olivier was the nation's second highest-ranking individual, and for all intents and purposes, its most powerful. Every particle of his rage was crystal clear. His fury washed over Rebecca, and she had no retort. She, who had dared to dream of marrying a prince, crumpled to the floor.

With his wife and daughter weeping on the floor, the viscount got to his hands and knees before the prince also. He would not ask for a pardon—he understood all too well how grave the circumstances were.

"Your Highness, I am so deeply sorry! The crimes of our daughter are the fault of us, her parents! I beg of you, see to it that we too are punished in kind! Take my rank and title! I will give you all the valuables and money we currently possess!"

The kingdom had fallen into a time of uncertainty in the seven years since the passing of the first crown prince. The balance of power had shifted with each of the three following losses, and nobles were scrambling for footholds with which to maintain their positions. This had led to chaos. With nothing to celebrate, and long stretches of only bad news, the country's economy was in a slump.

To make matters worse, the king was now on his deathbed. This left his son—a boy in his teens—to govern over the political situation. Storydia had once been an affluent and stable nation, but now that its politics and economy were in disarray, neighboring nations, including the Empire, saw this as an opportunity, and were starting to make suspicious moves.

In every way, it was a national crisis. It was a moment during which the vassals under the royal family needed to come together. During all of this, Aleksey had packed his schedule far too full—at the cost of his own health, no less—in order to support the crown prince. And yet, upon trying to break things off with a mere lady-in-waiting obsessed with their romance, he was met with rage-filled words informing him that he was worthless, and deserved nothing more than death. This action was not something that could be taken lightly.

And that was why, at this point in time, the only thing the viscount could do was prostrate himself before the crown prince.

With his hand still on the handle of his sword, Olivier looked down at Rebecca.

The tassel on his sword—it's the same design as Alec's...

Rebecca's brain was frozen, but some part of her noticed this fact, as if in an attempt to distract her from reality.

"We, too, are to some extent responsible for this," said Olivier coldly. "You were given hope for the future, and made to wait while the most important years of your life went to waste. It was humiliating. I can understand how you must have felt. And Aleksey himself does not wish to see you punished. Viscount, you are loyal, and your work is highly regarded. No action will be taken against your family, but there are still conditions that you *will* abide by."

Olivier dropped into silence for a moment.

"You now know that Aleksey plans to leave the royal family. Though Aleksey himself bears some responsibility for this, it cannot be overlooked. Until the air is cleared and the plan is successful, Rebecca will remain in this room. Viscount, you will continue your work as per usual, but knights will be watching you day and night. This goes for your wife too."

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Rebecca. You, too, will have to pay for the crime you have committed. Though Aleksey did not wish to see you punished, you cannot simply be allowed to go free without consequence.”

Rebecca gulped. She did not know what punishment awaited her.

“You are to be released from your position as lady-in-waiting, and banished from the royal capital. You will spend three years confined to your family domain. You will never speak a word of your relationship with Aleksey to anyone. This goes for your parents also. As long as these conditions are meant, viscount, you will be allowed to maintain your current position.”

“Understood. We appreciate your boundless magnanimity, Your Highness.”

The viscount nudged his sobbing wife, and the two bowed their heads to the floor. Rebecca, however, was aghast. Though the punishment appeared to be extremely generous, it remained incredibly harsh in certain ways, despite the fact that she would escape with her life.

By the time Rebecca finished her three years of confinement, she would be twenty-one. For a noble woman, this was practically untouchable. Banishment from the royal capital also meant she could not attend any social events. For all intents and purposes, she had been banished from social life entirely.

This was fatal for a noble. What value would a wife have to a nobleman if he could not take her to social events in the royal capital? To make things harder, she was not particularly beautiful. She could essentially kiss any favorable marriage proposals goodbye. There were only two remaining choices—to marry a widower, or to marry someone in a similar predicament. Neither were particularly appealing.

Rebecca could not simply take this sitting down like her father, and foolishly, she began to think in terms of self-preservation. She had been the love interest of a prince, and she desperately clung to the words he had spoken, of a “marriage partner of good standing.”

“Your Highness,” she said. “I beg of you, allow me a chance to apologize. I was disrespectful in the extreme. Please, allow me this one chance.”

“Oh, shut up, Rebby!” cried her father.

But Rebecca ignored him, begging on her hands and knees. If she were sincere and honest in her apology, the ever-generous Aleksey was sure to ease the crown prince’s anger and perhaps even arrange a marriage partner for her. Rebecca was almost certain of it—such was the depth to which she knew Aleksey.

That was why she threw herself into the request without shame. It was exactly what Olivier had expected—Rebecca’s greatest fault was that, when it was most necessary, she put herself before others. A princess or a queen was expected, in times of emergency, to rule in place of her husband. In times of great need, she would rule the nation on their behalf. Rebecca’s selfish nature made her problematic for such a role.

Olivier stared at her. Everything had been decided, and she understood the weight of the situation, but still she attempted to use this apology as a kind of foothold, as if she were bargaining. His face was like a beautiful carving, and there was no expression in it as he replied.

“I cannot allow you to meet him,” he said. “Not while he is in such poor health.”

“Whatever do you—?”

Rebecca did not immediately understand what she had been told, but could not even finish her sentence. Olivier had her in his sights, and the searing flames of his rage left her unable to even flinch.

“The night before last, immediately after the two of you had your talk, Aleksey collapsed. This whole year, his health has been deteriorating. His busy schedule was not the sole reason that he could not make time for you. He had grown so weak that he could do little more than collapse into bed upon completing his duties. Even just holding himself upright was near impossible. And then, on top of that, you ‘poisoned’ him.”

Rebecca couldn’t believe it.

“No!” she cried out in shock. “I did nothing of the sort! It is true that I was not myself, but I will not be accused of poison!”

Olivier then replied, in a voice so low and cold that Rebecca felt impaled by it.

“The poison was in the words you spoke!” he said.

“But their depth of emotion goes both ways, and their anger is of the same depth as their compassion. There are a great many who forget this fact and suffer greatly for it. Some have said that the royal family are as terrifying as the ice dragons of legend.”

The words of Rebecca’s father whispered from the back of her mind. And in the wavering, icy fire of Olivier’s eyes, the frigid winter in his tone of voice, and the murderous rage that drifted from his very person, Rebecca saw a dragon, and realized that she had drawn its ire.

“Foul words are a toxin,” he said. “And right now, Alec suffers from a poison that *you* have inflicted. He moans and he weeps, and do you know what he says? *I’m sorry. Forgive me.* He will not stop apologizing to *you*. He asks that we let him die. He calls himself worthless, and he begs for his own death! He has always been battered by those around him, and ‘worthless’ was the worst thing anybody could have ever called him. And yet, when he was at his weakest, you took that word like a knife and you plunged it into his heart. I can *never* allow you to *ever* see him again!”

Olivier had seen his own brother broken before him, and it filled him with naked rage and bloodlust. Rebecca twitched as she let out a cry.

“When I saw his high fever, and when I saw him deranged beyond anything anyone could have considered normal, at first I really *did* believe he’d been poisoned,” said Olivier. “I thought perhaps it was a poison that fanned the fears in his heart to the extreme, and I had a physicker see to him, but all to no avail. Finally, I realized that his already weakened mental state had been pushed well beyond what it could handle. But Alec was in no state to tell me what had happened. All I knew was what his knight told me—that he had collapsed after what looked to be a heated argument. That was why you were detained. I only heard the details of it all this morning, once Aleksey had regained consciousness. He didn’t want to open up at first, and didn’t want to admit what had happened, but with some soothing words he eventually did so. Even now, he still wants to protect you.”

Olivier looked down at Rebecca, still collapsed on the floor in tears, and he sighed.

“It is all so truly regrettable. Once, I could have called him back and you could have been together, after everything had settled down. That was once an option. You would have been a princess, as you so desired. But now, that option has been thrown away, and it is you yourself who discarded it.”

Rebecca had dreamed of being a happy bride. She had dreamed of marrying a prince, and becoming his princess. That dream had been so close she could have touched it. But she had ended up clinging to it with such insistence that she could see nothing else.

“Words, once spoken, cannot be unheard. It is a royal saying, and the meaning of it is absolute. Even when the words are not the feelings you truly hold in your heart, they still exert power. You failed to understand this, and so all roads to the royal family are now closed to you.”

Olivier spoke this quietly. It was a declaration of Rebecca’s failure, and now that the words had been spoken, they would stay with her for eternity.

“However, Aleksey also said that *you* were the reason he could go on. With that in mind, this is the one concession I can give you—abide by the conditions I have set, and you will be allowed to marry. There will be no restrictions placed upon you with regard to bearing children either. You will be free to go anywhere outside the royal capital. You can go on a journey to broaden your horizons, if you so desire. Everything is up to you, and how you decide to consider your future.”

And with those final, generous words, Olivier quietly left, leaving Rebecca with her father, her mother, and the knight on watch.

4

Following Olivier's visit, the viscount and his wife were released, though guards were assigned to keep watch over them. Meanwhile, Rebecca began her life of solitude. She was served the same food as what she usually ate, and was allowed to bathe once every three days. Though she was forbidden from leaving the palace, once a day she was given a brief period of time to soak in the sun on the terrace. Occasionally, there were visitors. To pass the time, Rebecca received an embroidery kit as well as books, which were delivered to her room during the week. All of these provisions were to ensure that she stayed in sound physical and mental health.

Though she was essentially a prisoner, Rebecca was not otherwise particularly inconvenienced—all things considered, the experience was not unlike that of a noble undergoing recuperative treatment away from prying eyes. This was extraordinary in light of the fact that nobody would have raised a single objection had she been sentenced to execution.

Nonetheless, Rebecca lashed out during her first week of confinement—she let it be known to all who would listen that she was unhappy with the royal family. Between her tantrums, Rebecca was known to sigh incessantly as she imagined herself a glittering princess, waving to citizens by the side of the road from a luxurious carriage.

And then, one day, she learned an important lesson. It came from one of the women who was brought in to keep her company.

"To be a wife means to take on the responsibilities of your husband when he is unable to fulfill his duties," said the woman. "This is true of both nobles and commoners. But the higher one's rank is, the heavier those responsibilities become. The royal family bears the weight of an entire nation, and as such, a princess must be prepared to carry the weight of that nation too."

Rebecca knew this in theory, but Storydia had seen generations of peace, and she did not imagine it would ever find itself in especially dire circumstances. The woman—the chancellor's wife—seemed to recognize this sentiment on

Rebecca's face, and her eyes drooped into a slightly pained smile.

"As of this year, there have been one thousand and twelve intrusions into our territorial waters," she said. "It has only been six months, yet that number is already three times greater than what it was for the entirety of last year. The ships are from all over the world, and some are from nations heretofore unknown. Do you understand what this means?"

Rebecca was unable to reply.

"It means that the number of nations that have Storydia in their sights has increased dramatically," explained the woman. "The palace has been in dire straits over the last few years, has it not? And now it is almost a certainty that our next king will be a teenager. If this goes on, some nations may look to strike. Tensions are so high that even trainee knights are being sent to our borders to help reinforce our defenses."

Rebecca couldn't believe it. She had felt the concern in the air, but she had never imagined that the situation was so incredibly precarious. This was not something that happened in Storydia—to her, it was something that only ever happened in other, far-off lands. The woman cringed slightly at the girl's shock.

"You would know this if you read the newspapers. Those who wish to become princesses must always have their eyes on the current state of society, and the issues of the time."

"But, if I may..." uttered Rebecca. "Had I been told this earlier, I would have done that very thing."

She meant this honestly, but the woman shook her head.

"You were one of the royal family's private ladies-in-waiting," said the woman, with a sad smile. "Given the current state of our nation, your lack of interest in current issues was a fatal flaw. You had to have known that the royal family's responsibilities include handling diplomatic affairs. But you did not seem to realize this, and the fact that you did not was seen as troubling. It was all Prince Aleksey could do just to ensure that you were protected—providing you a private tutor who would kindly explain everything was simply beyond the scope of his abilities."

“What do you mean...protected?”

“You did not notice, then. Your relationship with His Highness was not officially recognized. For this reason, knights could not be assigned to you, even if there was a danger that you, too, might be targeted. Nobody knew what might happen if the fact of your relationship was uncovered, and, given the circumstances, not all of the royal family’s private guard could be trusted... Thus, Prince Aleksey assigned one of his most trusted knights to protect you.”

The woman let out a sigh at the look of sheer confusion on Rebecca’s face.

“Your mother also made the foolish mistake of asking after your lover’s identity in a public setting. Fortunately for her, there weren’t many around at the time, but it was quite the dangerous move. It could well have resulted in people sniffing around about your relationship. I don’t mean any offense by this, but it is not particularly difficult to have the daughter of a mostly powerless family die in an ‘accident.’ That was why His Highness assigned yet another guard to your protection. You know yourself that he lacks support among the royal palace—he left himself very vulnerable in his efforts to look after you.”

At that moment, the reality of it all finally hit Rebecca. She had needed to be so much more than she was. She had underestimated the dangers of the palace, and she had not understood the true responsibilities of her position. It had been her duty to support the royal family, and yet she had not even noticed when she herself was being protected. She had almost leaked confidential information to her mother, and her mother had, for all intents and purposes, added fuel to the fire. Their actions had put serious pressure on everyone around Rebecca. It would have left a horrible impression on the royal family and any high-ranking nobles who’d understood the circumstances.

But that wasn’t all that Rebecca realized...

“I... He warned me of this very thing...so many times...” she muttered.

Aleksey had told her that her actions and her words would not be looked upon favorably. He understood why she felt the way she did, and so he had written to her over and over again in his letters—*I’m so sorry, but we must endure, I need you to help me*. He had even brought her textbooks detailing

exactly what it was that she needed to be doing. In his own way, he had tried to impress upon her what was necessary. But she had always made excuses to not listen, and she had made up her own mind about what was going on. She had never opened a single one of the books that Aleksey had given her.

Rebecca covered her mouth with a trembling hand. Now that everything had been laid out before her, she finally understood.

“One who knows nothing...” she said. “One who does not even *try* to learn...has no right to be a princess...”

The former crown prince’s fiancée was up-to-date with current events, and also wrote articles for the kingdom’s youth by request of publishers. She was fluent in five languages, and had since married the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The fiancée of Olivier’s second brother was well versed in the textile industry. She had contributed to the advancement of national textiles, and was said to have promoted the preservation and development of traditional crafts. Unfortunately, she was at present missing due to the political upheaval in Litoanya, but there was no doubting the worth of her services.

But Rebecca had no abilities that were even remotely similar. She was confident in manners of etiquette and the serving of tea, but you did not have to be a girl of noble origin to master either of those things. What had she been hoping to do? She had no skills at all to support the status and career of her potential husband.

To make matters worse, Aleksey had been in a very precarious position, and things had gotten so bad that his physical and mental health had suffered for it. Being a mere place of solace was not nearly enough—by doing nothing else *and* requiring his protection on top of it, Rebecca had only made his predicament more dire. And finally, to cap it all off, with her parting words, she had run a stake through Aleksey’s heart.

She had not the verbiage to capture how foolish she had been, and could only cover her face as she cried. The woman put a gentle hand to Rebecca’s shoulder, and soothed her with a few pats before silently taking her leave.

But it was a long time before the weeping that echoed from Rebecca’s room ceased.

5

Though summer had just begun, it was comparatively cool on that particular evening. Those who had prepared for summer by wearing lighter materials chose to spend the night indoors rather than out in the chilly air. And while the royal capital was always lively during this season, the streets were almost entirely empty by the time the stars were out.

It was the perfect evening for a secret escape.

Clouds dotted the dark magenta sky as Olivier faced his brother, Aleksey, who was all prepped for the journey ahead. He had always thought of Aleksey as a piece of himself, but the day that they would part had finally come.

Aleksey had tried to act as though the events of that fateful evening meant nothing to him, but he would need at least a few months to fully recover. Even now, he looked decidedly pale. Would he be able to handle what now awaited him? Olivier could only pray that he eventually recovered fully.

“Be well,” said Olivier. “And send me letters. But nothing would make me happier than to see you in person... That is, if the mood strikes you.”

“Letters won’t be a problem, but visiting might prove more challenging,” replied Aleksey. “But if you’re ever in trouble that you can’t handle on your own, call on me. I promise I will be there for you.”

“Thank you. But I, too, will do the best I can. I will make this nation a place where even you can feel at home. And when I do, I hope you will come home. In the meantime, I expect you to reach for great heights as an adventurer.”

Olivier was ashamed of himself. It was as if they had all used Aleksey, only to discard him when they were done with him. But Olivier pushed these feelings aside and hid them behind a smile. He did not know how Aleksey would interpret his expression, but then his brother replied with his own, tearful smile.

“I will. I promise.”

“It’s a deal, then.”

The two brothers bumped their fists together as a sign of their pledge to one another, and then Aleksey left. He was the only brother Olivier still had. His best

friend, and his most trusted retainer. The years they'd spent together, though short, had been deeply fulfilling and priceless to Olivier, and he knew that he was here now as the crown prince because of the life they had shared.

Olivier wanted nothing more than to demand Aleksey stay, but he swallowed the words, and whispered from his heart to Aleksey's silhouette as it faded into the darkness.

Thank you. I'm sorry. Be well.

And may fortune find you on your travels.

"There he goes."

Chancellor Frederick Fauchelle had kept his distance so as not to disturb the brothers in their parting moments, but he now quietly emerged and walked over to the young crown prince. He pretended not to notice the single tear that shone on Olivier's cheek in the evening light, and instead turned his gaze towards Aleksey, who was heading to the other side of the castle walls, where Bleyzac was waiting for him.

"Chancellor," said Olivier. "I will not stand for him perishing in an unforeseen accident, or due to unexpected illness."

"Do not worry. Everything has been taken care of."

Aleksey was heading for the place he had been born—Tris. Everything about Aleksey's youth before the castle, from his mother's place of residence to his true hometown, had been concealed from all but a trusted few.

Bleyzac, too, was Frederick's own son, and could be trusted completely. The Torisval Margrave was also an acquaintance, and both he and Bleyzac were fully prepared to ensure that nothing "unexpected" befell Aleksey. Olivier did not see either of the men often, but they did keep in touch via letters.

Zack, Kristoffer. I'm counting on you. Take care of him.

"It is time for us to return, and for you to rest," said Frederick. "Starting tomorrow, your life is about to get even busier than it once was."

When it came to light that the third prince was gone, shock waves would

ripple through the entire palace. Time would have to be made to settle things.

“Yes, of course.”

Olivier looked towards the castle walls one last time, and just for an instant. When he turned back to the castle, his tears were all but gone.

The following morning, news spread of the disappearance of the third prince, Aleksey Frenvary Storydia, shocking the palace to its core. Many asked the crown prince directly if he knew what had become of Aleksey, but all were met with the cold gaze of the young man’s dark magenta eyes.

“He has left,” said the prince, “and there is no use looking for him.”

Whispers filled the palace. Some of them suspected that Aleksey had fled the nation, others insinuated that the crown prince had driven Aleksey out, and yet others claimed that the third prince had been murdered. The topic commanded the halls for a time, but largely dissipated some weeks later, when King Robert Valenti Storydia passed away. His death was followed by a grand national funeral, and by the time Oliver Fersen Storydia was crowned king two months later, talk of the third prince had essentially evaporated. In part, this was due to how busy and hectic a time it was—the kingdom was restructuring and there were many official ceremonies to attend—but also because the third prince faction had lost its figurehead, leaving its members scrambling for new allies.

In any case, the disappearance of the third prince put an end to the battle for succession. Over the following months, the kingdom’s hierarchy was restructured, and though there was not very much in the way of people moving between posts, harsh punishments were doled out to those who had instigated the battle for succession, and no benevolence was shown to the young nobles who had neglected their responsibilities to play at political games.

“I have no need of corrupt and stupid retainers under my reign. I desire only those truly loyal to our home.”

The young king of just sixteen years spoke these words to those who had looked to shamelessly cling to him to gain his favor. He was sick of those who were consumed by the idea of power and riches, and who looked down upon Storydia and its people. He had no use for them, and his words would go down in the history books.

Those who inherited the blood of the Storydian kings were generous and loving, and they poured their hearts into their nation and the people who called it home. But so deep was their emotional well that they were also capable of a truly fearsome rage when anyone tried to harm that which they loved. This was a trait unique to the royal family, and those who had forgotten it paid the price in the aftermath of the battle for succession.

During all of this, very few were aware of the punishment doled out to Rebecca Hallonsten, a royal lady-in-waiting. All that was said was that she had come down with a sudden illness and had no choice but to return home to rest and recuperate. But even among those who *were* aware, even fewer knew what happened to her afterwards—how she eventually married a lord with a pleasant and temperate domain, and settled into a life of peace.

6

After a few weeks of solitary confinement, Rebecca was returned to the Hallonsten domain. She was surprised by how soon she had been released, but the chancellor's wife told her secretly that Aleksey's departure had been moved up, slightly ahead of schedule.

"He makes it look as though he has recovered," the woman explained, "but he is still in anything but good physical health. As such, the decision was made to hasten his departure."

"Oh... I see..."

This was all Rebecca was capable of saying, for she knew that she was the reason for his poor condition.

Though life at the family manor came with guards keeping watch over her, it was nonetheless more relaxing and pleasant than Rebecca had expected. She could not help thinking that there really was nothing quite like home, after all.

Rebecca's mother had also been made to return to the manor, at which point she locked herself away to wallow in her own depression. However, after some time, she began visiting the manor gardens, and eventually took up looking

after potted plants as a hobby, with some help from the manor gardener. She never once mentioned what had happened at the royal capital, as she, too, was under strict orders not to speak a word.

Rebecca took to her new life slowly. Until her return, she had entertained herself with embroidery and romance novels, but now took to her father's study to ease her boredom. There was much that was difficult for her to understand at first, but the new knowledge broadened the young woman's horizons. She pleaded with the manor steward—much to his initial chagrin—and began helping him with the management of his paperwork. Within a half a year, he had little choice but to begrudgingly acknowledge her as an irreplaceable assistant.

In this way, three years passed. Though Rebecca had done her duty per Olivier's demands, she continued to live a quiet life at Hallonsten manor. It was, perhaps, what had suited her best all along.

One day, her father returned home with her younger brother—who was on summer vacation from classes—and revealed that he had a marriage proposal for her.

"The man is an associate of the late king, and has made a name for himself through his agricultural research. It must be said, however, that he is about the same age as me, and a widower. He has asked for the chance to meet you, but does not wish to force you into anything you do not want."

The man's name was Count Lindvall, and his wife had passed away when both were still young. Though he was the same age as Rebecca's father and not yet at the age of retirement, he was nonetheless looking to hand his title down to his son so he could spend more time on his passion for researching plant life. He had heard of Rebecca only recently, and was looking for a research partner and companion. Lindvall had no interest in socializing, and felt no need for producing another heir. With all of this in mind, he asked her to consider his offer, and assured her that he would place no pressure upon her.

"If you can overlook his age and his status as a widower, the offer is actually quite good," said Rebecca's father. "What do you think?"

The marriage proposal was, given Rebecca's past, rather incredible. She was

even told that it would be fine to meet in person in advance to help her make her decision. Rebecca considered for a time, and eventually agreed to meet for dinner—she realized she had no reason to refuse such a generous offer. And then, at the conclusion of that dinner, Rebecca did not return home, and instead began her life as the second wife of the former Count Lindvall. As someone who had a past she did not want dug up, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The former count was far livelier than his age suggested, and a true gentleman—he was a splendid match for the placid Rebecca. It also helped that he was very much her type. He explained that the manor in which they resided had a separate villa which doubled as a research laboratory, and servants were employed there only as much as they were necessary, eliminating any unwanted interactions.

Rebecca was agreeing to Lindvall's proposal before she even knew it.

In the beginning, I, too, was naive like a child, and perhaps that is why I grew close to Aleksey. And he, still so worried about who he was and what it all meant, had loved the girl I was.

But at some point, Rebecca's own feelings had grown distorted, and she had come to harbor conceit and arrogance over having won the prince's affection. In the end, however, all she did was shatter his weak and delicate heart.

It was here that Rebecca truly understood, for the first time, the weight of what she had done. Rank and title was irrelevant to the matter. What she had done was unthinkable and unforgivable, no matter who her words had been directed towards.

And that was why Rebecca told children at the orphanage that words could easily hurt a person, and that within them could reside a poison so strong it might even kill.

"Words, once spoken, cannot be unheard," she said, and told them that her own words had once stolen not one, but two futures. "So please, do not ever be as foolish as I once was."

It was not until much later that Rebecca learned that her marriage proposal

had, in fact, been arranged by King Olivier. Though it came with the understanding that, even in her new life, she remained under observation to some extent, Rebecca was nonetheless happy. Her husband provided her with clothing, food, and a place to live, along with freedom and work. She was even allowed to visit the orphanage. Lindvall took her with him when he went on gathering expeditions, and showed her remarkable scenery all across the lands. Sometimes he also gave her jewelry and precious texts.

It was by no means the lavish lifestyle that Rebecca had once longed for during her relationship with Aleksey, but her life now—with a kind husband, in a peaceful and beautiful land—had become priceless to her. And now that she was finally ready to become a mother herself, she had a new life forming inside of her. She imagined that it would not be long before her quiet life with Lindvall grew considerably more lively.

Aleksey had asked that Olivier find her a fitting marriage partner, but on the day of her sentencing, Rebecca had resigned herself to such a thing never coming to pass. And yet, all the same, it had.

Rebecca had no way of knowing what Aleksey was doing. She had no way of knowing where he had disappeared to either. However, as she lived her own peaceful life, she nursed a hope within her heart. She hoped, even though she had no right to, having hurt him so deeply.

She hoped that he was alive, and that he was living a peaceful life of his own too.

Side Story: Of Wraiths and Haunted Villages

1

A couple of weeks had passed, and Storydia's end-of-year events had all come to a close. Tris was back to its usual calm and quiet, and the Tris branch of the Adventurers' Guild had no important requests to speak of. The adventurers within thus relaxed and indulged in easy conversation.

The theme of the day was "things you can't stand." It was a little different for everyone, and it made for fun and interesting banter—for the archer Linus it was foul-tasting food, for the physicker Ellen it was disease-causing bacteria, and for the spearmaster Marena it was anything slimy. The whole guild already knew that Zack wasn't a fan of bugs, but the guild master opened up to them and said that, as a young adventurer, he'd been so shocked at the sight of what he called a "giant black bug" that he'd chopped an entire table in half, much to the ire of the guild master at the time. Any adventurer within earshot burst into laughter.

Rurii, it seemed, wasn't a fan of fire. The slime could handle a campfire, but one of Nadia's explosive fire spells could easily evaporate it completely. Not that such a thing was especially likely...

"How about you, Shiori?" asked an adventurer. "Anything make your skin crawl?"

For a moment, an image began to form in Shiori's mind, but she quickly thrust it away.

"Those long and wriggly bugs," she said. "You know, the ones in the ground that don't have any legs?"

"Oh..."

They bothered Shiori so much that she didn't want to even speak their name aloud. Zack and all the female adventurers in attendance nodded gravely and sympathetically.

“You have to admit, though,” said the farmer and swordsman Olof as he walked by. “They *are* wonderful when it comes to making fertilizer.”

“Let me guess—do you hate them because they wriggle around when you’re making baths and beds at campsites?” asked Alec.

“Eww,” said Shiori. “That certainly plays a part...”

Shiori was used to camping in the outdoors, but she still couldn’t stand the creatures popping their heads up to say hello when she was in bed or, even worse, bathing. That was why she used her search magic to check for them, and then her earth magic to drive them all away. After that, she had to disinfect the entire campsite before she’d feel at ease.

“I always knew you were a tidy camper,” uttered Alec with a chuckle, “but I had no idea that those critters were the reason for it.”

“What about you, Alec? Anything you can’t stand the sight of?”

The moment someone asked the question, Alec’s face grew suddenly tense. He opened his mouth, but at first no words came out. After a moment’s hesitation, he finally spoke.

“Uh... Nothing in particular...” he muttered.

“Oh?”

Shiori was puzzled by the contrast between his words and his manner, but didn’t have time to think about it because, at that very moment, a request came in for her. It seemed that someone had requested her specifically, and she walked over to Zack, who was with a young merchant. As soon as Shiori realized who the merchant was, however, her eyes almost popped right out of her head. Alec, by her side, couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s been about a month, hasn’t it?” said the merchant.

The young man was none other than Conny Envary, a reverend at the Tris Cathedral. The two adventurers had first met the reverend at the end of last year, during the Nativity Festival, and he was now among their supporters, so to speak. And yet, instead of his usual Cathedral garb, he was dressed today as a merchant. Even his hairstyle looked the part.

“I realized that it is *so* much easier to walk among the people while in disguise,” he said, by way of explanation.

“You look awfully comfortable, though,” said Alec. “Sure this isn’t a hobby of yours?”

“I won’t deny it,” replied Conny casually.

Once they’d caught up on recent news in one of the guild’s meeting rooms, Conny got down to business.

“I’d like to ask you to investigate an abandoned manor in Airola Village,” he said. “An acquaintance of mine is posted there, and he fears that a wraith may have settled in.”

“A wraith? That means...”

In Japan, any story about ghosts had to be taken with more than a grain of salt, but in this world, spirits were an officially recognized magical beast. In fact, knights and religious organizations both had groups that specialized in handling them. A matter of this nature usually would have been handled by the Cathedral knights or holy mages, but unfortunately, the necessary forces were currently dispatched elsewhere. Conny couldn’t speak very openly about the matter, but he could at least share what he knew with the two adventurers.

“Our forces have been dispatched in great numbers to the national border,” he said. “Lynching has been rampant due to the uprising, and a great many bodies ended up in the swamplands...which has resulted in wraiths.”

“Oh...”

The uprising in the neighboring Dolgast Empire had started less than half a year ago, and though it was largely over by now, it had by no means been bloodless and without conflict. What was happening now was common during large-scale wars and revolts, and so the Cathedral’s forces had been sent to the swamplands to exorcize the miasma that had built up at the location. It was for that reason that, barring any emergencies, other work had to be put on hold.

“According to my acquaintance, they have yet to confirm the existence of a wraith, and whatever it is still hasn’t caused any harm. The case was deemed low priority, and no knights have been sent to investigate the problem. Airola

wasn't asking for a whole squadron, and would have been satisfied with just a person or two to look into things, but the Cathedral unfortunately won't accommodate them."

When a problem had broken out during the Nativity Festival, the Cathedral had practically bent over backwards to reach a resolution, but it seemed that same organization was far less generous when it came to matters that took place outside of the Cathedral itself.

"However, the villagers are terribly frightened," said Conny, "and so I came to ask for your assistance."

Users of holy magic were considered the most effective against wraiths, but even general mages were capable of handling them. This had led to wraith suppression work making its way to various adventurers' guilds.

"The Cathedral may have deemed the matter low priority, but the villagers are sure that *something* is at the manor in question. Witnesses suspect that it may be a phantom, and so I'd at least like someone to do a preliminary investigation. According to my associate, the villagers are at their wits' end."

Phantoms were high-level wraiths. Their lack of physical forms meant that only magic could harm them, so they were considered very difficult to suppress. This was not to mention the fact that the area in which Airola Village resided was famous for being home to spirits. It was a curious place, where humans and spirits were hard to tell apart among the scattered and drifting presence of undead magical beasts.

"Quite the predicament..." muttered Zack.

High-level wraith suppression was, generally speaking, a job for B-rank adventurers and above, though an A-rank magical swordsman or mage was ideal. Nadia and Clemens were both out on other business, which left only the A-rank Alec and the B-rank Ludger, both of whom were magical swordsmen.

"Thinking in terms of teams," said Zack, "I think you specified the right people for the job. Shiori is excellent at sensing and tracking targets, and Alec is a magical swordsman. That said..."

Zack paused for a moment, then, and glanced at Alec as if there were

something on his mind. Shiori, too, looked over at her lover, who had, rather strangely, been silent this entire time.

“Alec...?” she asked.

At the sound of her voice, Alec seemed to return as if from a well of deep thought. He looked to her a touch pale. She thought perhaps he might be unwell, but he assured her he was just thinking.

“I am fine to take up the request, as long as Shiori is,” he said.

It was clear that Alec had no intention of turning the request down, but he *did* sound noticeably more subdued than usual.

“Are you sure?” Shiori asked. “If you’re not feeling well, we don’t have to...”

“I’m fine. I’m just a little weary of soft and floaty magical beasts that I can’t easily handle with my blade alone.”

Alec went on to say that, actually, this was the reason that he didn’t much like slimes either. A somewhat disgruntled Rurii then proceeded to poke him in the leg as if to say, “What the heck, bro?”

“Then...does that mean you’ll take up the request?” asked Conny hesitantly.

Shiori glanced at Alec again, who this time nodded, resolute.

“We’ll do it,” he replied.

The relief on Conny’s face was clear to all of them.

“Still,” said the reverend, “I’m surprised that even you have weaknesses, Alec. I never would have suspected it would be enemies that are difficult to fight with a blade.”

“Well, we all have our strengths and weaknesses,” replied Alec. “It’s not unlike mages who avoid snowy mountains because their fire magic can cause avalanches, or the way spearmasters and two-handed swordsmen dislike confined spaces. That’s why it’s so important to have a party where everyone can make up for one another’s weak points.”

Alec looked over at Shiori. She and Rurii were the party he was talking about, and Shiori beamed.

“I see, I see,” said Conny. “Then allow me the chance to strengthen your party. I’m afraid I can’t join you, but I *did* bring some things that might be of help. Use them as you see fit.”

As he went on, Conny brought out some items used for battling wraiths.

“The holy water is for healing possession and spirit damage, but please drink it before going into battle—it also works as a defensive measure. Holy water also has an effect on wraiths, but only low-level ones, so I think you’re best off relying on your usual methods. The amulets here are in case you encounter a ghost with a physical form—please rest them on the corpses when you’ve defeated them, as it will prevent them from turning into wraiths again.”

“All of this? Are you sure?”

Conny had prepared for them a case of holy water and a number of amulets. All items for dealing with wraiths were specially made, and imbued with holy magic essence courtesy of holy mages. They could only be bought from church facilities, and the amount that Conny had provided would have been by no means cheap. Still, the young reverend grinned at Shiori’s question.

“Consider it a gift from one friend to another,” he said, “and an investment of sorts.”

This made it much easier to accept the specialty items than if they had simply been a gift, and Shiori took them humbly.

“We’ll make use of them with thanks,” she said.

“What about this manor we’re looking at?” asked Alec.

“It’s an old, two-story manor with more than twelve rooms, including the kitchen and storehouse,” said Conny, reading from a letter he’d received from his acquaintance. “The surrounding area is wetlands, and it appears there’s no basement. Apparently, it was originally a villa belonging to a minor noble. It’s not as big as you might be expecting. People have seen a strange light from within the house and its garden, and...some have reported seeing a human figure in the second-floor window. However, these reports have come from outside—nobody has checked the place itself out.”

“Is there some reason in particular that it came to be a haunted manor?”

asked Shiori. “Is it a place with history?”

“Yes. And it’s no mere rumor fodder either...” replied Conny, his face growing serious. “A murder took place there. On top of that, the case remains unsolved.”

2

The skies had been clear before they left, but as Shiori and Alec neared their destination, ominous clouds covered the sky above. They hung like curtains of watery ink, and snow fell around them.

Shiori watched from the window of their carriage as the forest suddenly opened into a vast wetland. It was the Airola Marshlands, home to all manner of spirits. Snow and withered reeds covered the marshes, through which a river snaked. Trees grew on the banks of that river, their branches covered in hoar frost as they stretched towards the sky.

The scenery that spread out before Shiori reminded her of what she had seen on a trip to Kushiro in Hokkaido. However, the lights that hovered and blinked among the scenery revealed something that did not exist back home—it was the dancing luminescence of young spirits.

“No matter how many times I see them, they’re always so fantastical.”

Airola was a place dense with magical energy, and the immature spirits that called it home could be seen as wandering balls of light. As they matured, the spirits would lose their visibility, but it was said that, if one was lucky, they might encounter the spirit of ice, Undine. From spring until early summer, the illumimoss glowed, and the pipewort flowers bloomed like fragments of stars. Watching the spirits dance among this scenery was beautiful in a way that many called otherworldly.

Shiori had never actually visited the wetlands herself, but she had passed by it on expeditions, and was always captivated by its beauty.

“To think wraiths arise even in places as beautiful as this...” she muttered.

“A wraith is made when lingering memories and feelings are given

embodiment through magical essence. Wherever both of those elements exist, a wraith can come into existence. And it's especially likely here."

There was something like sorrow in Alec's face as he went on.

"Wraiths are common in watery locations where magical essence gathers, so the wetlands are the perfect environment for them. On top of that, as a home to spirits, this place is dense with magical energy. If anyone should leave strong feelings of regret here when they perish, don't be surprised if a wraith appears."

Though ghosts and wraiths differed in nature, it was thought that they were the same thing at their cores. It was no surprise that the spirit of one who had died a violent death had appeared in a place where spirits were said to gather—ultimately, Airola seemed the perfect place for this.

The carriage entered the wetlands proper, and lattice-like, crisscrossing roads led to a hamlet on hard soil. The place known as Airola Village was composed of a few such hamlets dotted through the marshes.

The carriage came to a stop upon arriving at the third hamlet. This was where the village's most important facilities and buildings were located, including the village office, the vigilance committee, the assembly hall, the grocer and supply store, as well as a bar and inn. The village was often bustling during the tourist season, but was quiet during the winter. There were many strange sensations rippling through the air, most likely belonging to spirits.

Two men came to meet the two adventurers and their slime—the reverend who had requested their help, and the village chief.

"We're so glad you're here," said Revered Wille Nordenson, smiling with relief. "The Cathedral knights and the northern knights all have their hands full, we're told. We really were at a complete and utter loss."

The village chief, too—a placid-looking man in his fifties—cringed slightly as he explained.

"I never could have imagined that the Imperial revolt would have had this effect... It's made things harder for everyone."

It wasn't just the northern knights who lacked manpower since the revolt had

begun. Knight squadrons all across the kingdom faced similar problems. With so much manpower diverted to the nation's borders, suppression and investigation tasks were at a standstill. If anything was considered low priority—as was the case here in Airola Village—there was little else to do but wait.

"But it's not like we can do anything about it," said the chief. "It's safe enough here compared to places closer to the borders, where beggars and thieves are sprouting up everywhere. Estervall to the east had trouble of its own not so long ago."

"Ah, you mean what was in the newspaper..." said Wille. "Wanted nobles attempting to blend in among the refugees."

"I dare say we won't see change for a little while yet. But in times like this, that's why we fall back on the Adventurers' Guild, right?"

"We're beyond grateful, truly."

Their two hosts talked among themselves as the group walked towards the village church. Hot tea and sweets were served, and once he was sure that everyone was settled, Wille got down to business.

"I'm sure you would have heard the broad strokes from Conny, but I hope you don't mind if I start from the beginning?"

Wille went on to explain that the haunted manor in question was located in a hamlet at the edge of the village. The manor was most recently owned by the wealthy Mr. and Mrs. Abenius. The original owner, a minor noble, had passed away some decades ago, after which the Abenius family had bought the place and moved in—they'd bought the location hoping to spend the rest of their lives in their home of Airola.

Mr. and Mrs. Abenius had made a local associate their butler, and begun their life in their new home. They'd spent the following decades peacefully—they had no children, but often spent time with old friends in the village. They were satisfied, and enjoyed each day as it came.

However, at the end of the year before last, the Abenius family had met a sudden end. A thief had snuck into their manor in the middle of the night, killing both husband and wife and their servants, and running away with their

valuables. The scene of the crime had, according to reports, been quite horrendous.

Wille shivered as he thought back to it.

“The culprit has not been found,” he said. “And the murder remains unsolved. However...”

“Yes?”

The reverend looked gloomily down at his feet, and the village chief picked up the story for him.

“The butler went missing right before the incident took place. On the day that it happened, there was a great snowstorm, and there were no footprints, so we didn’t even actually know if someone had really entered the manor from outside. The knights therefore suspected that the killer might have been the butler. The back door was wide open, and the servants lay murdered right next to it. The running theory at the time was that he probably killed them before making his getaway.”

“Oh...” uttered Shiori.

“The butler was the son of one of the Abeniuses’ associates, and they’d known him since he was a boy. He got on very well with both Mr. and Mrs. Abenius, and their servants too. He was practically their son. I just don’t think there’s any way he could have done something so horrible. That’s what I think, and a lot of people here feel likewise. But there are also those who think that the temptation of riches will blind even the most trustworthy...”

The Abenius family had amassed quite the sum of personal wealth. They’d left the vast majority of it with their bank, but a portion of it had remained in their possession. Being that even that portion was a hefty amount of coin, some couldn’t ignore the possibility that the murder had been fueled by greed.

“There’s an unsettling friction between those who believe the butler is innocent, and those who don’t,” said Wille. “Ever since the murder, things have been awkward between people. The Abenius family and their butler were friends with many.”

“The families of the deceased servants—they really ran the butler’s name into

the ground any chance they got," said the chief. "And I know how they must have felt. But now there's doubt and suspicion floating in the air, and...that's how things got to be like they are. The whole village is on edge."

"I see," said Shiori. "That explains why the request is such an emergency."

It wasn't just that wraiths were terrifying on their own; it was that the village had lost people dear to them. The villagers' rage and grief in the face of this loss had nowhere to go, and the sudden appearance of a wraith now had them at boiling point.

"A year later, and we still don't know where the butler is," said Wille. "The manor has remained empty and abandoned since the murder, and is under the jurisdiction of the knights, but those who lived in that particular hamlet have since moved out—they either can't stand the memories they have to face each day, or they're just plain scared. The whole hamlet is deserted."

"Still, it's rather strange for a wraith to appear so suddenly after a year of quiet," said Alec. "Have there been any other signs? Rumors, perhaps?"

Wille and the village chief nodded.

"There have indeed been rumors," said Wille. "Tourists are constantly visiting the place in the summer as a kind of test of courage. We've had the vigilance committee patrolling a number of times to keep them at bay, but those that come and go as they please aren't much for listening... But I suppose that's neither here nor there. In any case, given the character of the location, everyone here is used to phenomena that others might consider out of the ordinary. Local folklore speaks of the souls of the dead turning into spirits, and nobody even flinches at a little flashing of spiritual light, or strange creaks and bumps in the night. The vigilance committee hasn't found anything, and I went to the manor on the date of the family's passing to offer prayers—I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. That's why we've brushed it all off as little more than disrespectful ghost stories, until now."

"But then, at the start of last month, some young'uns came along and visited the place looking for thrills, and ended up running home pale as sheets."

The group of young people had visited from out of town. They'd been touring ghostly locales, but had seen a blood-soaked face in the window of the manor

and ran off with their tails between their legs. They'd reportedly heard a forlorn voice echoing out from within the place. At first, everyone had shrugged it off as the work of overactive imaginations, but now even the villagers themselves had begun noticing things.

"There are two ways to get into the village from the opposite side, and one of those is near the abandoned hamlet," said Wille. "The villagers avoid it during the summer season, but because it's so wide, when the snow piles up in winter, it's by far the most convenient path. More and more people have been using it when they're just passing through the area. As a result..."

People had been seeing a figure at the entrance to the manor, passing through the corridors. There were reports of human shadows in the windows, the sound of a woman screaming, and other suffering cries echoing from the manor. Some had even seen strange lights in the manor gardens. All sorts of reports were coming in recently, and more frequently than anyone had expected.

"We couldn't just go on acting like nothing was happening, so we sent the vigilance committee to look into things," said the village chief. "They told us that it was definitely a wraith. I don't much want to believe it, but it could well be a phantom..."

There had been two such investigations. While the committee had gotten within close range of the manor, they still had yet to enter it. This was, apparently, because they had seen a vengeful spirit in a burial gown, a dark light emanating from its sunken eyes as it laughed horrendously and crawled along the walls of the manor.

Alec's fingers twitched as he listened to the story, and though Shiori was so focused that she didn't notice, Rurii looked up and watched him very closely. Alec's face, however, remained as calm as usual.

"That's...remarkable..." uttered Shiori.

It was like something out of a horror film. She had seen little wisps floating through the air like tiny balls of flame on a number of occasions, but had yet to experience facing a higher-level wraith. It made her shiver to think that such a magical beast had made a home of the manor they would soon visit. Rurii

tapped her on the leg a few times to keep her spirits up.

“I must admit, it’s a surprise that such a request is considered low priority...” Shiori muttered.

“Well, it hasn’t left the manor so far, and it’s well known that phantoms haunt particular locations and don’t stray from them, so the knights said there was no need to hurry... The place has been surrounded in barrier stakes just to be on the safe side, but everyone is still mighty worried.”

Phantoms were spirits tied to a specific place, and it was incredibly rare for them to ever leave the places they haunted. But “rare” did not mean “never,” so it was no surprise that the villagers were still terrified.

“Our village runs on what we make from tourists,” said the village chief, “and we’re expecting people to visit in the spring. If we let this situation drag on, I’m worried whispers will go around and hurt our earnings. I really want to nip this problem in the bud.”

There was an urgency to the man’s words. But whether it was because of how the family’s resentment may have taken the form of a wraith, or some other reason, the adventurers did not know. What *was* clear, however, was that the village didn’t think it was right to simply leave things as they stood.

“Reverend Conny said we need only do a preliminary investigation, and that depending on the situation, it may be better to call upon the holy mages,” said Alec. “With that in mind, I need you to understand that we might not be able to take care of this on our own.”

“Understood,” replied Wille. “We’d be more than grateful even just to know what things are like inside the manor.”

“In the case of a battle, we may end up damaging the manor itself. Of course, we’ll be as careful as we can, but we can’t promise that we’ll leave the place spotless...”

“Do what you must. All the ruffians that have tried to explore the place have already roughed it up anyway,” said the village chief. “And given what happened there, I dare say that the whole place might be taken down soon enough. So, please put your own safety above all else.”

“Thank you.”

None of the Abenius family’s distant relatives were interested in inheriting a manor with such a past either—the place was, in every sense of the word, abandoned.

“When would you like to start?” asked Wille.

“Well, the best time is clearly when it gets dark, so...in the evening.”

Wraiths were rarely ever seen in strong light, and even if it was a bit risky, the best time to find one was in the evening. At the same time, night was when the magical beast was active, and the frightening visage of a wraith had the ability to sap one of their will to fight. That was why the job required one with nerves of steel.

“Then how about taking it easy and resting until then?” offered the village chief. “I’ll take you to the inn, and come back to get you around sunset.”

It was a generous offer, and one they accepted. Nightfall came early—around half past three in the afternoon—but that still left them a little time to rest and perhaps nap. Both of the adventurers wanted to make sure their bodies were well rested for working in the evening, and so they headed with the chief to the inn.

3

The inn was decorated with traditional Airola handicrafts, and felt very much like a local home. At first, Shiori had worried that she might be put off by all the spirits drifting around the place, but in the end they were much less concerning than she'd expected.

"When you get used to them, they're like a gentle breeze," said Alec, "but some people are very bothered by them. You okay?"

"Surprisingly, yes," replied Shiori. "Though the spirits might interfere with my search magic somewhat."

"Oh... I guess because of all the presences floating around."

The wisps and spirits weren't people, but they would nonetheless trip Shiori's search magic net as they flew around. Even now, there was the sense of something invisible drifting through the air around them. Shiori would have to stay focused to ensure they didn't get in the way when she cast her spell.

Rurii seemed to be able to see something they couldn't, because the slime occasionally stretched out its feelers and wobbled—as though it were playing a game with the spirits.

"Well, just do the best you can," said Alec. "I feel like everything's a bit easier when you're around."

"Hm... Well, that *is* my job, when you think about it..."

The key responsibility of the housekeeping mage was to ensure that the mage's companions could always make the most of their abilities. That said, Zack and a few others had told her to stick with mid-rank parties and above—they were worried that making things too easy for rookies now would actually make things harder for them in the future. Zack wanted them to understand the unforgiving nature of the job while they were still early on in their careers.

"Ah," muttered Alec, as a knock came at the door. "Looks like they're here for us."

The two adventurers tidied the table they'd been eating at and stood to their

feet.

The manager of the inn brought them down the stairs, to where the village chief was waiting with two young men, who introduced themselves as Artur and Egil. Both were members of the local vigilance committee, and would act as guides to the manor and as points of contact.

“I know it’d be best if we went into the manor with you,” said Artur, “but it’s well beyond the scope of our abilities. Sorry...”

The young man looked truly apologetic—wisps and meandering spirits he could have handled, but high-level wraiths were a different kind of terrifying. Both he and Egil had been to the manor and seen the ghost climbing the walls, and it had frightened them to the point that even getting close to the place took significant mental fortitude.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Alec.

“That’s what the Adventurers’ Guild is for,” added Shiori.

The comments were a relief to the two young men. It was the job of adventurers to handle anything that ordinary people couldn’t, as well as what the knights couldn’t address immediately.

“Here’s a key,” said the village chief. “Not much of a point to having it, but all the same, here you are.”

The key was for a lock that had been put in place to ward off intruders. Unfortunately, some of the more rowdy visitors had broken windows or the front door to get in, and the manor had been left in disrepair since.

“The patrols used to patch things up when they saw damage to the manor, but too many people kept coming,” said the village chief, clearly disgruntled. “So most of it has been left neglected and dilapidated.”

With night beginning to fall, the village chief saw them off, and the two adventurers and their slime followed their guides to the haunted manor. The hamlet where it was located was at the edge of the village, and past a number of other hamlets. It was about twenty minutes on foot from the inn.

“The two of us will be on standby at the guardhouse near the abandoned

hamlet," said Artur. "The village chief and the reverend will be at the church all night, and they'll be ready to move should anything happen."

"Much obliged," said Alec. "If we're not back by dawn, send word to the knights."

"You got it," said Artur, looking ahead and letting out a sigh. "People say a lot of different things, but if you ask me, Kenneth is innocent. He was always looking out for everyone, and he was like a dad to many of the village's youth. I just can't believe that someone so kindhearted would..."

"Artur," said Egil. "Knock it off."

Artur was talking about the murder, of that there was no doubt. And it was clear that the Kenneth in question was, in fact, the missing butler. However, the two vigilance committee members spoke not another word on the matter, and the adventurers did not push them on it.

As they walked towards the abandoned hamlet, the villagers they met—either passing by, or at their hamlets—spoke to them. Some even left their homes to speak a word or two of greeting—clearly, everybody was worried.

At the last hamlet they reached that still had residents, however, there was no sign of people outside, and every home had a secure door that was locked tight. It seemed all of them lived in fear of the abandoned hamlet that was just around the corner. It was here that Shiori and Alec noticed Artur and Egil growing nervous; their faces were tense.

Their two guides finally came to a stop in front of a small hut—the guardhouse. There were a number of them stationed around the village so the vigilance committee could watch over travelers who came to visit. Artur and Egil told Shiori and Alec that this was as far as they'd go, and pointed to the shadowy shape of a manor in the distance.

"That's it," said Artur. "Used to be that in the evenings it would be lit up, and it sure was beautiful, but now..."

The young man's voice trailed off as he thought back to the manor of old, and his eyes wavered, illuminated by the light of passing spirits. To him and Egil, the murdered couple, the servants, and the missing butler were neighbors they'd

cared about.

Shiori took two bottles of holy water from her pouch and glanced at Alec, who understood what she wanted to do and nodded his agreement.

“Erm... Please drink this,” she said, holding the bottles out. “They’ll help protect you while you’re on watch.”

Artur and Egil looked shocked.

“Are you sure?”

“We received them from a friend at the Tris Cathedral,” Shiori explained. “We already have enough for ourselves, so please help yourselves.”

“The Tris Cathedral, huh? They’re the real deal, then, I’d wager. Thank you.”

The two men relaxed a little, smiling as they each took a bottle of holy water. Shiori opened a bottle for Rurii, and the slime happily drank it down while she and Alec drank a bottle each. The addition of natt hortensia made the holy water sweet, and the scent of it was that of the refreshing snow peppermint. The taste and aroma swirled around them as the holy energy settled in their bodies.

“Quite calming,” said Alec. “I feel refreshed.”

“They say that the natt hortensia and snow peppermint have a soothing power,” said Shiori.

Perhaps it was just a placebo effect, but such was the power of the Tris Cathedral—the tension in Artur and Egil’s faces eased as they put the empty bottles in their pockets, handling them like they would good luck charms.

“Well then, shall we?” asked Alec.

“Let’s.”

Shiori swallowed nervously, and Alec placed a hand on her shoulder. From here on out, it was just the three of them, and though Shiori was worried, she also knew she was in good, trustworthy company. She was also reassured by the knowledge that Artur and Egil were close by. On top of that, they had the prayers of the villagers, the village chief, and Reverend Willes to protect them. Shiori was confident that they would be fine.

“Be careful,” said Artur.

“We will. See you soon.”

Shiori and Alec turned towards the manor and began walking as snow fell around them like a fine mist. It seemed to hide the scenery, and made it feel as if they were passing from the world of the living into another one entirely.

The road they walked was originally wide enough for a carriage to pass through, but nobody came through here anymore except for the patrols. Now, with the snow piled up, there was only enough room for the two adventurers to walk side by side.

Shiori and Alec walked on in silence and, without being entirely conscious of it, held hands as the abandoned hamlet came into view. It seemed that the place had been left in a state of disrepair since everyone had moved out. Between clumps of piled snow they saw withered weeds, and the empty, dilapidated houses gave the shadowy hamlet a very creepy atmosphere.

“To think things could get this bad in just a single year...” muttered Shiori.

“Yeah. Looks like getting to the manor will be tougher than I thought,” said Alec.

“Shall I melt the snow to make a path for us?”

Doing so would alert whatever was in the manor to their presence, but perhaps at this stage it was a moot point—it seemed like every time someone passed by, something strange reared its ugly head. There was every chance that, even now, someone was already inside the abandoned manor, watching them, and both adventurers sensed the presence of something that was not a ghost. A magical beast, or perhaps...

“Shall I cast my search magic before we go any further?”

“Good idea. Then we’ll come up with a plan of action.”

“Got it.”

Shiori focused, trying not to think about the fact that her search magic net might come into contact with wraiths. That said, she still couldn’t quite believe that ghostly creatures were simply a part of the world she now lived in. Alec

must have felt her hesitation, because he wrapped his arms around her from behind. Rurii, at her feet, wobbled. She was nothing but grateful to her two thoughtful partners.

Shiori smiled as she let her magic net spread towards the manor. Fortunately, she felt nothing in the abandoned hamlet save for a few wandering spirits. However, past a broken gate, she sensed two strange readings that were not like the spirits she had encountered until now. They weren't human either. They were like magical beasts, but different—*colder*.

"You got something?" Alec asked.

"Yes. Two of them. Not especially big, but they're in the manor garden. It's amazing—this is the first time I've come in touch with a presence so...creepy."

This was not creepy in the way that the brain suckers of Hortensia Cavern had been—these were like clumps of emptiness, despair, and hate.

"Shiori. You mustn't sympathize with them," whispered Alec. "It's how they get you."

Shiori gasped as she came back to her senses. Alec explained that wraiths looked for companions, which they then absorbed.

"I see now that you're sensitive enough to get in touch with their emotions through your magical senses," said Alec. "Be careful. Some wraiths take a liking to you if they feel like you're on their wavelength. All we need to know is their general location and how many of them there are."

"Got it. Thanks, Alec."

Shiori let herself feel Alec's warmth, then once more focused her attention. She stretched her search magic net past the garden and into the manor. A few light, drifting readings popped up—wisps, perhaps. There weren't many of them, but there were also a few stronger, scarier presences in the manor. It was indeed home to wraiths. However...

"Hm...?"

Noticing something strange, Shiori focused her search.

"What is it?" asked Alec.

“I’m getting what appear to be magical beasts,” she replied. “They’re not moving, so they might be plant-types.”

“What?”

Alec frowned. His eyes darted around the abandoned hamlet.

“Before last month, the people on patrol said there was nothing out of the ordinary here. But a plant-type magical beast propagating in just one or two months? That’s weird. They might have only installed run-of-the-mill barrier stakes around here, but that doesn’t mean they don’t work.”

“Is it possible that a beast immune to barriers passed through and dropped seeds? But even that’s strange. If they arrived at the same time as the wraiths, then I wonder if they’re connected...?”

“Yeah, something could be going on. Can you search a little more?”

“Sure, leave it to me.”

Shiori carefully stretched her search net further, and deeper into the manor, she discovered the presence of something human. It remained in a reasonably confined space, occasionally moving back and forth. It was as if it were wandering around a room.

“A person?” Alec asked.

“I think so...”

The two adventurers looked at one another. Rurii, too, tilted its body quizzically as if to say, “That’s odd.”

“A living human being in a haunted manor? Something suspicious is afoot.”

“You think they might have brought the magical beasts in?”

“It’s possible. They may even be responsible for the wraiths too.”

Shiori gulped. A man-made wraith incident? That could mean only one thing.

“A necromancer...?” she asked.

“Yeah. For a wraith to have suddenly appeared after a whole year, that makes the most sense.”

A necromancer was one who could control the spirits of the dead. They were considered part of the same family as spirit summoners, and were experts at conversing with ghosts. However, because necromancers essentially used the drifting, suffering souls that could not leave this word as their tools, they did not have a good reputation.

“But why?” asked Shiori. “The idea of filling a place where so many died with wraiths, it’s...it gives me the creeps.”

“They could be up to something unsavory. What are they doing? Are they still wandering around?”

“Yes. They’ll stand still for a moment, then wander somewhere else and come back. They’ve been doing that the whole time. What are they up to?”

“Perhaps...they’re searching for something,” muttered Alec, thinking. “Or perhaps they’re back for something they forgot.”

“Searching for something? Looking for something they forgot... Wait, you don’t mean?”

“I do. The missing butler... Huh?!”

But before Alec had finished his sentence, he drew his sword and spun around. He gestured with his free hand, and Shiori quickly leaped behind him. Rurii was on guard too, but, oddly enough, the slime remained blue.

Alec’s blade was pointed directly at a blue-eyed young man with curly, flaxen hair, whose eyes were wide with shock. He was dressed in traveler’s garb and had the air of a naive youth.

Where did he *come from...?!*

Right until the very last second, they hadn’t sensed him at all. Even Alec hadn’t detected him. There was indeed something fleeting and vague in the impression the young man gave, but there was a good chance he was also used to hiding his presence.

“M-My apologies. I didn’t mean to scare you,” said the young man, mustering a smile.

Alec didn’t let his guard drop, but he was nonetheless confused—he sensed

zero enmity from their surprise guest, and Rurii still hadn't changed color.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Oh, right. I heard you were going to investigate the manor, and, well, I thought maybe you'd let me tag along?"

"You must have passed by the guardhouse, though. Didn't the two men there say anything to you?"

The young man stood on the road that Shiori and Alec had already walked, and it was clear by his footprints that he'd walked the same path. There were no other paths from the guardhouse to the manor either—Artur and Egil had to have noticed him.

"Er...about that," said the young man awkwardly. "Being seen would have put me in a spot of bother, so I, uh...used some illusion magic to put a veil over their eyes, so to speak."

"What do you mean, 'a spot of bother'? Is that how badly you wanted to come with us?"

The young man seemed hesitant, but mustered up his courage and spoke.

"I want to clear my brother's name," he said. "I'm hoping I might find something in the manor."

"Your brother...? But that would mean..."

"Yes. My older brother Kenneth was the manor butler. You heard about the incident, I assume? If those two at the guardhouse saw me, there's no way they'd let me through. So I had to be a touch stealthy about it."

The butler had been missing ever since the incident. He'd been labeled a thief and a murderer, but all the evidence was circumstantial. He had been a live-in servant and rarely spent his money—it was said he had amassed a considerable fortune of his own.

"That's why I just can't believe the idea of my brother stealing from and murdering Mr. and Mrs. Abenius and their servants. He was already set to receive a generous inheritance. Mr. and Mrs. Abenius took care of him. Looked after him. The idea that he'd kill them and steal their money? It's absurd."

Shiori looked up at Alec and wondered what to do, but it seemed that Alec still hadn't made up his mind. The young man appeared harmless enough, but he was related to a suspect. On that note, they didn't actually even know if he really *was* a relative. How much could they trust him? The quickest solution would be to return to the guardhouse and check with Artur and Egil, but that was bound to cause a stir—it could even potentially interfere with their investigation of the manor.

"Look, I know it would be better to do something like this more openly, but the suspect is my *brother*," said the young man. "I wish it was easier to talk to the villagers, but it's not. That's why I'm asking you. And look, I'll stay in line—I'll do things however you decide is best."

The young man was desperate. It was possible he didn't have a very good standing in the village. Alec sighed.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Oh, right. Yes. I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. I'm Roland."

"It's fine. Now, Roland—was your brother capable of necromancy?"

"Er, no. I have some spirit-talking skills and can use a little magic myself, but my brother has no such powers whatsoever."

Alec chuckled. He'd picked something up from the information Roland had shared.

"So you're a summoner," he said. "That explains the strange presence you emit."

Summoners had a unique quality about them because they carried with them presences aside from their own—spirits which they had befriended. The more spirits a summoner carried—and the more powerful those spirits were—the more the summoner themselves started to melt into the natural environment.

That Roland had stayed invisible to even Alec was proof that his presence was very nearly invisible...and that he was probably a formidable summoner. If he'd approached them with bad intentions, they could have been in quite a dangerous spot.

However, as a class, summoners were largely incapable of malice towards others. The more powerful a spirit, the stronger their bond with the summoner—and such spirits did not approve of their hosts showing open hostility towards their own kind. The moment a summoner *did* kill a fellow human, their magic suffered for it.

It was for this reason summoners did not join the knight corps—the knights often did battle with their fellow man, and summoners proved little help in such skirmishes.

I guess that's why Rachel grew so weak...

Shiori thought back to her old companion as Alec and Roland talked. Rachel had been a summoner, and a fellow member of Akatsuki. At first, she'd been capable of summoning mid-level spirits, but over time the act of summoning had taken longer and longer, and eventually she could call forth nothing more than low-level spirits with no willpower whatsoever.

It was this deterioration of her abilities that had resulted in Rachel dying in battle soon after Shiori officially left the party. Rachel's own teammate, who had lost her in battle, was quite disparaging of the woman and claimed her death was inevitable. "She had so little magical energy she could barely hurt a fly," she'd said.

It wasn't that she didn't have magical energy—it was that she could no longer use it. The others just didn't want to admit it.

Admitting to Rachel's issues would have meant admitting to their own crimes. But in truth, there was only one reason for Rachel's sudden loss in power—the spirits tied to Rachel viewed her treatment of Shiori as no different from killing one of her own.

That was what Akatsuki did not want to admit to.



“All right, then I’ll take point. Is that okay?” asked Roland.

“You’d be doing us a big favor,” said Alec.

From what Shiori could hear, Alec had accepted Roland into the party, and he would act as their guide—mostly because Alec still didn’t trust him enough to show the young man his back. Shiori didn’t object to the decision. There was also the fact that Roland had met both Mr. and Mrs. Abenius, and had been invited to the manor on a number of occasions, so he knew it better than both of them.

“But a necromancer, huh?” mused Roland. “Outside of the ghosts they wield, I won’t be much help when it comes to the caster themselves. I begged you to take me with you, but the most I can do is show you the way and help with exorcisms.”

“Well, we don’t know that it’s a necromancer yet. It’s just a possibility,” said Alec. “However, we *do* know that there’s a human here among these ghosts. We just don’t know if they need rescuing, or if they’re here for some other reason.”

“So which way do you want to go?” asked Roland. “If we go by the front, we’ll have two ghosts to deal with—based on what I can sense, they’re midsize foes.”

“Taking out what we can would usually be the best approach, but with a potential necromancer up there, the enemies might just keep on coming. I think our best bet is taking the shortest route to the person in the manor. So...where’s the best entry point?”

“We could try a different entrance, or...use magic to create a path straight to the second floor?” offered Shiori. “I could open a hole in the wall.”

Roland couldn’t believe what he was hearing from the placid housekeeping mage, and his eyes almost popped out of his head.

“Whoa! You’re a rougher customer than you appear!” he exclaimed. “That’s a pretty old building we’re talking about, so let’s not go crazy.”

Alec laughed.

“For now, let’s work our way around and see how things look. If we have to, we can use the route that all the thrill-seekers have been taking.”

“Ah, in that case I know a spot. The back entrance on the first floor... It faces away from the rest of the hamlet, which makes it a handy blind spot.”

“All right, then let’s try going via the back way first,” said Alec, after a moment’s thought. “If the wraiths in the garden circle our way, we’ll deal with them then.”

“Okay,” said Shiori. “Oh, and please, drink this.”

Shiori took out a bottle of holy water and held it out towards Roland.

“I appreciate the gesture, but I’m good,” he said. “I already had one. I run into wraiths a lot given my class, so I’m always carrying some.”

“Oh, I see... I apologize.”

This made sense to Shiori, but she wondered if her old companion Rachel had done the same. Perhaps it was simply a matter of preference among summoners. Shiori put the holy water back in her pouch.

“All right, let’s get to it. Lead the way, Roland,” said Alec.

“Leave it to me.”

The two adventurers and their slime walked towards the manor with their new impromptu party member leading them. As they ventured forth, Shiori looked to Alec, who tilted his head slightly and signaled to her with his eyes. Rurii, too, wobbled.

It was clear from talking to him that Roland was not a bad person. However, there was much about him that was still unknown. He had a near invisible presence, for one thing, and they did not know how long he had been following them—and it made them all a little uncomfortable that they hadn’t noticed him in the slightest. Perhaps he was a truly exceptional summoner. That, or...

Roland was right there, walking in front of them, and yet his presence was so...delicate, and sparse. Shiori felt as though he might simply vanish if she did not actively keep sight of him. Without completely realizing it, she moved closer to Alec, who draped an arm across her shoulders.

What the two adventurers and their slime sidekick had failed to notice was that, further down the path that Roland had come, his footsteps simply

vanished. Or to put it another way, his footsteps simply appeared, as if out of nowhere, along the road that they themselves had walked.

4

Shiori melted a way through the deserted snowy path, and, after a time, the party arrived at the back side of the manor, where the path continued along the hedge fence surrounding the property. The hedges had been left to grow free and wild, but they were not particularly tall, and the old manor was never out of sight.

The silhouette of the Abenius manor and its two symmetrical spires was beautiful, and might well have been truly stunning against the snowy backdrop, had the location been better illuminated. However, with its garden in disrepair and a curtain of shadowy darkness hanging over it, the manor was little more than an abandoned ruin, its former glory long lost.

“You can make out the manor so clearly from here,” uttered Shiori.

“That’s why passersby were so flustered. A wraith that reveals itself here would be clear as day...” said Alec, cutting himself short as he noticed something.

He’d noticed something in the window on the second floor—what looked like a corridor window. A human figure had walked slowly by...or at least, what had *appeared* to be a human figure. None of them could make it out clearly enough to be sure. The figure’s upper body walked along in an unnervingly unnatural manner, and, judging by the size of the window, its proportions were all distorted—it was a grotesque and giant, human-shaped thing.

Shiori gasped, and slowly sent out a thread of search magic to touch the figure. But the moment she made contact, she was lost in horrible, muddy emotions, and shrunk backwards as she cut the magic thread linking her to it completely.

“That’s not a person, and it’s not any ordinary magical beast,” she uttered. “It was cold, and sticky, and incredibly disturbing...”

Alec let out a long sigh.

“So it’s a phantom, after all...” he muttered.

Eventually, the specter disappeared from sight. A brief silence fell over the party.

“Let me ask you something, Roland,” said Alec. “Can you reason with wraiths...?”

Roland answered in an instant.

“Nope,” he said, watching wisps darting around among the spirits in the air. “Can’t get through to them at all. Most of them are angry, or wailing about something or another. There *are* wraiths you can enter into dialogue with, but I’ve never run into one myself.”

“I...see...”

If a summoner could not converse with them, then perhaps spirits and wraiths were like different species within a shared family.

“Well, as long as we’re careful around their mental and magical attacks—and as long as we don’t underestimate them—we can handle them. That leaves the problem of working out who, exactly, is up there.”

If it was just a regular person, that was one thing, but if it was a necromancer, then it was hard to imagine they’d be friendly and open to conversation—they’d gone to the scene of a murder and raised the spirits of the dead to frighten the locals, after all. Whatever they were up to, it wasn’t good.

“Shiori, is the human still in the same place?” Alec asked.

Shiori sent her search magic to the last place she’d traced the lone human, then nodded.

“Yes. They just keep walking back and forth in the same spot. What could they be doing?”

“Wow, that search magic of yours sure is something!” remarked Roland, before offering an opinion. “Perhaps they’re looking for something...?”

“You think so too, huh?” uttered Alec.

“That manor’s been around since this land belonged to the Empire,” said Roland. “Apparently it was full of tricks, traps, and hidden passages. You would have needed a professional to find it all, but Mr. Abenius was only interested in

the place as a home, so he had anything dangerous dismantled or otherwise locked down. Maybe whoever is in there is looking for something like that?"

"But why? Old imperial treasures?"

"Who knows? I mean, the vast majority of the old treasures were dug up and plundered after the battle for reclamation. I wouldn't put much faith in a place like this having any hidden treasures left. The manor is just too well known."

"That would only leave whatever Mr. and Mrs. Abenius left when they were killed..."

"Which is why my brother is a suspect. But he's missing," said Roland. "Damn it! It makes me so steaming mad that they all treat him like a criminal based on just circumstantial evidence! The *real* criminal is laughing their way to complete freedom!"

Roland bit his lip. He was vexed, and Alec put a kind hand on his shoulder.

"But that's why you're here—to get to the bottom of things. And if we're lucky, you'll find something to help you."

Rurii poked Roland in the leg to perk him up, and the young man looked about ready to cry from the kindness.

"Well then, let's get in there," he said. "We want to get to that human as quickly as we can, yeah? And you said they're in the back room on the right?"

"Yeah, the sooner we reach them the better," said Alec. "But be careful. If we see a wraith and they leave us alone, we won't bother with them—we'll only fight if they threaten us."

If the human in the manor was indeed a necromancer, taking down the wraiths one by one would probably just be a waste of energy—the necromancer would simply summon them again. Worse, whoever it was might even flee while the adventurers were fighting off the wraiths.

"And if they try to run?" asked Alec, voicing his thoughts.

"Based on the layout of the manor, as long as they don't jump out the window, they'll have to go through us first. But then again..."

Roland dropped into thought, and Rurii wobbled before poking Alec in the leg.

“Hm...? Oh, I see. So you’ll catch them, will you, Rurii?”

The slime wobbled in the affirmative—it didn’t matter the size of the gap, Rurii would squeeze through it.

“Are you sure? What if they summon a wraith?” asked Shiori.

She was still quite worried, but Rurii wobbled again. *I’ll be fine!*

“Well, if you say so,” said Shiori. “We’ll be counting on you, but do be careful, okay? We don’t know who we’re dealing with.”

With the slime now given a major responsibility, it trembled with confidence. *I got this!*

The uncertainty on Roland’s face dissipated into a gentle smile—the slime was nothing if not reassuring.

With their direction now decided, Shiori used her wind magic to crush the snow on the other side of the hedge fence and make enough space for the adventurers to walk and, if necessary, fight. However, there were no signs of wraiths as she did so. Perhaps the ghosts were mostly hands-off. Or, perhaps, they were simply lying in wait...

The adventurers passed over the hedge fence and carefully dropped down into the manor garden, but as they did so, a mysterious chill surrounded them—a freezing cold air that told them they had entered wraith turf.

“So this wraith territory neatly borders the manor hedges,” muttered Alec. “Now we know for certain that we’re not dealing with naturally formed wraiths.”

A few steps into the garden, and two floating objects appeared before them, like clumps of mist with black shadows for eyes and mouths, watching the adventurers. They were ghosts—low-level spirits in human form. This tragic magical beast had no will of its own, and was spurred to action purely by feelings of jealousy and hatred.

A dilapidated old manor and ghosts floating in the air, against a backdrop of bluish-white wisps... It was like something out of a nightmare, and it felt decidedly unbelievable to Shiori, except for the undeniable fact that it was all

right there in front of her eyes. Alec settled into a fighting stance, his sword aflame with magical fire and ready to cut the ghosts down. Behind him, Rurii turned itself into a wall of red, protecting Shiori and Roland.

“Use your magic to create barriers!” said Roland, ready to support Alec. “As long as our magic is more powerful than theirs, they won’t break our defenses!”

“Got it!” replied Shiori.

As Shiori cast her wind magic, Roland cast a winter spirit’s snow barrier. He also released fire wisps, but they did not hurt the ghosts as much as the summoner hoped, and simply evaporated.

“So the wisps are no use!” he said. “That means we’ve got a necromancer on our hands. The wisps would have done more damage otherwise!”

The wraiths summoned by a necromancer were stronger than the natural kind, and more resistant to summoning magic. Apparently, this was due to the summoner’s spirits feeling “troubled” by the idea of entering a battle between fellow humans.

Alec had already cut one of the ghosts down, but clicked his tongue in frustration.

“Doesn’t look like they’re going to let us get to their master so easily!” he said.

Just as the remaining ghost floated over Alec—the strongest party member—and set its sights on Shiori, he sliced it in half, and the magical beast dissipated in an instant. Alec’s strength of will was boosted by his magical sword, and it was far and away more powerful than the ghost, which acted only upon its raw emotions.

“Wow,” said Roland, “I figured you were capable, but you are truly something else!”

“Speak for yourself,” replied Alec. “I’m betting you’re well known among summoners.”

“I don’t know about that. My life has me wandering from place to place, and I haven’t done all that much of note. I’m still a rookie, really,” said Roland

bashfully, before turning serious. “But those ghosts came for us the moment we passed the hedges. They didn’t care what we were up to on the other side of them.”

“The necromancer might not be capable of anything too complicated,” said Shiori. “You’d think it would be fine for a wisp to pass through.”

“Perhaps the necromancer may not want to draw *too* much attention to himself,” said Alec. “If any of the ghosts or wraiths left the manor grounds, you can bet the knights would start taking notice. In any case, we’ll know for certain when we confront whoever is inside.”

Shiori reached out to sense the person in the manor again. Perhaps they hadn’t noticed the disturbance on the other side of the grounds, or perhaps they simply didn’t think it was a problem—either way, they had not moved from their room.

“Let’s head inside.”

Shiori gave Rurii a little push as it was waving away the wisps, and the adventurers walked along the manor walls. The walls were made from sturdy brick, and would not break easily. That was likely why the thrill-seekers who’d come previously had instead broken windows to get inside. All of those windows, however, had since been boarded up.

“Some of the windows have been left as they are, broken glass and all,” said Shiori. “Oh my. There are footprints on the wall.”

“I really don’t understand those thrill-seekers,” muttered Alec. “I really don’t.”

“Same here... Oh, how about here?” said Roland. “I daresay it would make for an easy entry.”

Roland pointed to the back door. After the incident, it had been chained and padlocked, but these had since been cut through by a blade. Perhaps this, too, was the work of trespassers looking for fun.

“I can’t believe it...” uttered Shiori. “Those hooligans even brought *tools* to help them break in?”

In Japan, there were people who trespassed for kicks. It would seem the exact same thing happened here, and Shiori couldn't help feeling utterly sick of it all.

"This door leads to the food storehouse by the kitchen," said Roland. "I remember people using this door to bring in food and various ingredients."

"You mentioned that you'd been here a few times, but you really do know the manor well," said Alec. "Even the storehouse, it seems."

"Mr. Abenius was a friend of my dad. Unfortunately, my dad passed away relatively young, and Mr. Abenius often looked out for me and Kenneth. Took care of us in a whole manner of ways, really. On special occasions he'd invite me to stay the night too—that's probably why I know this place better than even the villagers do."

"Aha, I see..."

Alec was, very subtly, drawing information from their traveling companion, but nothing had struck them as especially suspicious yet.

"Still, the back door, huh...?" uttered Alec.

He let out a low groan. Both he and Shiori knew that through the back door was where corpses had been discovered. Alec checked the door very carefully, and found that it was just slightly open. He cautiously put a hand to it. They sensed nothing behind it, save for the weak pulse of wisps. Nonetheless, Alec was ready for anything as he softly pushed it open with a creak.

Fortunately, no gruesome remains waited for them inside. Everything had been cleaned up after the incident. All that was left in the storehouse now were a few empty bottles on otherwise bare shelves. Alec let out a sigh of relief as he slowly, cautiously entered. Shiori, Roland, and Rurii followed after him.

It wasn't especially bright, but it wasn't too dark either—they had just enough light by which to navigate.

"That's a lot of footprints."

The dusty floors of the storehouse were covered with footsteps, large and small alike. But the footsteps themselves were also dusty, meaning that some time must have passed since the last set of trespassers. Well—all except for one

set of footprints, which were noticeably fresher than the others.

“Looks like these were made not so long ago,” said Alec.

“Yes, and oh... This table,” said Shiori. “The dust on it has piled up...almost like someone dragged something heavy along it? These marks are quite recent.”

“Yep. Maybe they brought in some food, like cans or bottles,” added Roland.

“Seems like it,” said Alec. “Perhaps they had to go out a few times to buy food. All of the more recent footprints look like they belong to the same shoes.”

Of the most recent footsteps, some were dustier than others, but all of them looked the same—someone had been in and out of the manor quite frequently, in a short period of time.

“But where would you buy food? The village?” asked Shiori.

“It’s not tourism season here, so any outsiders would give themselves away in an instant,” replied Roland. “And it takes half a day of traveling to get to the nearest village and back. That’s just not realistic.”

“Which means our intruder might be one of the villagers,” said Alec. “Are there any necromancers in Airola Village?”

Roland thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“Not as far as I know. I’m trying to think if anyone moved in recently... But if anyone *did*, and they did anything funny, everyone would know straight away.”

“Well, the culprit would be trying to hide it, anyway. Singling anyone out will prove difficult...”

There was a general prejudice against those who were born with the powers of necromancy, and so, in most cases, children with such powers were brought to churches or temples upon their discovery—this was to help them best understand and use their skills. Once they had the church’s approval, such individuals were allowed to work as exorcists.

However, it was not uncommon for parents to abandon children with such powers, or to make sure their children kept their powers a secret—this was, unfortunately, the extent to which necromancy was seen as heretical.

“Well, first things first...” muttered Alec, drawing his sword.

Past the door that led to the kitchen, they felt the presence of magical beasts. The door itself was just barely hanging by its hinges, and pots and cutlery were scattered along the floor beyond it. None of them could see the magical beasts, but they were definitely hiding near the doorway.

At Alec’s signal, Shiori tossed a snowball at the doorway. In an instant, silver-blue vines snapped through the air, impaling the snowball. Alec moved quickly, burning through the vines with a slicing motion, then plunging his magical sword at the point they’d come from. The beast he impaled let out a small squeak not unlike that of a mouse, crumpling to the floor as a charred odor filled the air.

“It’s a vampire rose larva...”

This plant-type magical beast fed on the blood of living creatures, using their corpses as fertilizer to grow.

“It’s so much smaller than the one we saw in Silveria Tower,” remarked Shiori.

“I’d say it hasn’t been here very long,” said Alec. “A month at most.”

That would have been around the same time that the reports of wraiths had started too. It seemed very likely that whoever had broken in recently had planted the plants that the adventurers could sense around the manor. Now it was becoming clear to them that the vampire roses had all been placed in strategic locations.

“Looks like whoever put these here didn’t want people getting inside,” said Alec. “Let’s hurry upstairs.”

The party entered the manor, with Roland leading them. Past the kitchen was a corridor leading to the entrance hall, on the opposite side of which was a dining room, a reception room, and a study.

“Mr. Abenius loved that the dining room faced the marshlands, because you could take in the scenery over meals,” whispered Roland, a melancholy nostalgia in his voice. “He held garden parties in the summer, and...well, everyone laughed at me because I was more interested in the food than the sights.”

The house had clearly been cleaned since the incident, as there were barely any signs of the horrific murders that had occurred. However, there were still dark marks on the walls and roof in some places, reminding them all of what had taken place. The wallpaper, filled with the lively images of blooming flowers and ripe trees bearing fruit, left, instead, an impression of emptiness.

The corridor was dimly lit by magical light, and a hint of tiny presences drifted by, just barely visible in the light. These were spirits formed from the slightest of lingering regrets, and with the passing of time, they would eventually disappear into the air. As the wisps flitted around them, Rurii reached for them with its feelers, and the fact that the slime's taps were enough to cause them to dissipate showed only how fleeting their connection to the world was.

"But if we leave a phantom-level wraith here unattended," said Alec, "it will absorb all these wisps and perhaps grow even more powerful... Oh, here's another one."

Without so much as blinking, Alec cut down the ghost that appeared before them with two quick slices of his blade. The ghost responded with a twisted, silent cry, and melted into the air. It was so incredibly fantastical a sight that Shiori didn't even have the chance to feel frightened.

"These ghosts aren't any hassle, but I have a feeling that the one upstairs is going to be a handful," said Alec.

"The phantom?" asked Shiori.

"Sure wasn't pleasant to look at earlier either," said Roland.

"Yeah, it was a pretty awful sight, wasn't it?" muttered Alec.

In the dim light of the corridor, Shiori caught a flicker of tension in Alec's face —perhaps even he was frightened by the sight of wraiths and spirits that lacked true physical form.

"That said, I'm glad we're not dealing with any of the living dead," said Alec. "That's about where I draw the line."

"And the stench..." added Roland with a wry chuckle. "I feel you."

"Do they really smell that bad?" asked Shiori.

“If there was just one in a manor this size? You would know it immediately.”

“Eww...”

The living dead weren’t particularly strong, but even mid-level parties sometimes fell into panic because of their stench. This was not to mention the rotting flesh and bodily fluids that would get thrown around during battle.

“But if there really is a necromancer here,” said Alec, “they wouldn’t release something like that—nobody could sleep with that kind of foul odor lingering around, let alone eat.”

“Erm... I see...”

It seemed they were magical beasts that even necromancers avoided. But they were not dealing with that kind of monster here, and Shiori thanked her lucky stars that there were no zombies around for her first-ever undead suppression request.

As the party moved on, they took down another two ghosts and another two vampire roses without issue. It was not long before they arrived at the entrance hall and the staircase that led upstairs.

“This place really is in disrepair,” uttered Shiori. “It’s so much worse than we were told.”

The nude portraits that decorated the hall had been scribbled over and vandalized, and people had hastily written names and dates underneath them. The sight of it all made Shiori frown.

“To think it got this bad in just a year...” muttered Alec. “I guess it doesn’t help that the manor is so accessible.”

They’d come expecting the manor to have been desecrated by thrill-seekers, but none of them had expected this. The old wallpaper had been torn down in places, leaving the walls themselves bare. The delicate candleholders were bent out of shape and broken, probably by those hoping to find something of worth in them. All of the drawers in the dressers had been opened and ransacked, and now lay on the floor, empty.

Roland’s face scrunched up in pain at the sight of the place, and he let out a

deep sigh—the manor held lots of memories for him, but it had ended up abandoned and ransacked.

“Time to head up to the second floor,” he said. “Be careful of the phantom roaming the halls.”

“Want me to take the lead now?” asked Alec.

All of them expected danger ahead, and Alec must have decided this to be best for everyone. Roland was surprised for a moment, but quickly replied with a smile and a nod.

“Good call,” he said. “Once we get to the top of the stairs, I’ll drop back. Let’s make our way up nice and slow.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

The spiral staircase opposite the entrance was beautifully designed, and ornately decorated. Unfortunately, it wasn’t particularly wide, however, so the party would have to make their way up one after the other. This was where Roland had shown a certain kindness of his own—he knew that Alec was hesitant to show his back to a stranger in such a confined space, and so he offered to stay in the lead until they had more space.

“I’ll keep watch with my search magic,” said Shiori.

“Thanks.”

Shiori sensed nothing in the immediate area around them, or at the top of the stairs. There were a few wisps floating about, but wraiths were capable of appearing out of thin air—there was every chance that one might pass through a far wall and attack them out of nowhere. However, the phantomlike presence remained with the person on the second floor, who still had yet to leave the room they were in.

The party slowly made its way upstairs without issue, and Shiori let out a sigh of relief. The others apparently felt the same way, and the three of them chuckled quietly amongst themselves.

“Perhaps a bit anticlimactic,” uttered Alec, as he swapped places with Roland.

“I think it could be that the necromancer has their hands full with controlling

the phantom and maintaining the territory it acts within," said Roland.

"Could be. The manor isn't all that big, but it would take considerable effort to fill it with wraiths."

Alec peeked down the corridor and gave the all clear. Shiori, Roland, and their rearguard, Rurii, then joined him.

"Looks like the most recent set of footprints went to the room at the end of the hall," said Shiori.

"There's no hesitation in them either," added Alec. "They knew exactly where they were going, and didn't even stop to check any of the other rooms."

The older footprints were more random and showed more hesitation, but the most recent set strode directly towards the room at the end of the hall—as if they had a clear goal, and knew that that room was exactly where they needed to be.

"Is it someone who knows the manor well?" asked Shiori.

"That would mean we're looking at a former employee, a villager who was invited over on occasion, or...perhaps someone related to the owners before Mr. and Mrs. Abenius?" mused Alec. "But our pool of potential suspects grows much too large if we stretch that far."

"Indeed..."

Roland remained silent as Shiori and Alec talked. There was a listless, sorrowful look to him. As long as his brother, Kenneth, remained missing, the man would always be the prime suspect. They also could not discard the possibility that Kenneth was the person in the room ahead of them.

But if the person here went down to the village to shop for supplies, then it can't be Kenneth. Surely, then, it must be someone else...

That didn't make the situation any more pleasant—they were still dealing with someone who had unleashed wraiths at the scene of a horrific murder. That same person had then stayed here for some weeks—they were likely anything *but* an ordinary person.

The party made their way down the hall, but met nothing noteworthy. The

creepy sense of something or other was always floating in the air around them, but nothing jumped out to attack them—perhaps the person in the room had given up on trying to slow them down.

Finally, the party reached the end of the hall, and stood before their objective—a closed door.

“This was Mr. Abenius’s living room,” whispered Roland. “The adjoining room was his bedroom, and next to that was my brother’s room.”

The butler’s room was located so he could respond to Mr. and Mrs. Abenius quickly—a sign of how much they trusted him.

“We’ve got the culprit and the wraiths waiting for us behind this door,” said Alec.

The adventurers and their slime nodded to each other—they were ready for anything as they opened the door into the room.

All the curtains were closed to ensure no light escaped, but the room was nonetheless dimly lit. It was also much neater than any of them had expected, and looked comfortable enough for a short-term stay. Cutlery and canned food were placed on the table at the center of the room, and at its legs lay a cloth bag filled with empty cans and wrapping paper. All of the food looked like it had been brought in fairly recently, and the sofa had clearly been slept on. This was all proof that someone had been staying in the manor.

At the far end of the room, a man stood in front of a bookshelf. The adventurers were all on guard the moment they spotted him, because the fearsome phantom they had spotted earlier hovered by his side. This made things crystal clear—this man was indeed the necromancer at the source of the recent trouble.

The man’s face wrinkled as he smiled at them. He looked to be in his fifties, and held himself in the relaxed manner of a scholar—a far cry from what any of them had expected from a necromancer.

“Why, hello there,” he said. “It would appear that my cover is finally blown. Welcome to my place of study.”

The man’s smile and body language all struck them as welcoming, and yet, the

terrifying phantom by his side sent a different, but very clear message—that none of them were meant to be here. The two-meter-tall wraith was dressed in a tattered three-piece suit, and it looked down at them with a face so empty, there was no telling what it might have looked like when it was still living and breathing.

"Your place of study?" asked Alec, incredulous. "This used to be your manor?"

"No, it did not. Though I will admit to unlawful entry. I have to imagine that's why you're here, yes?"

Alec had his hand on his sword, ready to unsheathe it in an instant. To this, however, the man merely gave an unconcerned shrug.

"I am a scholar of architecture," he said. "My field of study is structures built in the time of the Empire. Now, I must admit I'm not a fan of the Empire per se, but there's no denying that it made major contributions to the cultural development of the northwestern regions. The Bazarova dynasty was a period of cultural maturation. You see, the truly exceptional characteristics of their architecture show that they were at once stunning, logical, *and* practical, all at the same time. The age of Askalonov the First—when the almighty king was wealthy, without peer, but also ruled methodically—was truly remarkable. This particular manor would have been built during the transition from Storyeva to Askalonov, and such structures are exceedingly rare. The vast majority were destroyed in the battle for reclamation, so what locations remain are incredibly valuable."

The man glanced lazily around the room. Though it had been roughed up by intruders, it was—compared to the first floor, at least—in considerably better condition. The ivory walls and pillars, with their dull golden paint, gave the room a relaxed elegance. The ceiling, too, was painted the deep navy blue of night, and was dotted with stars and an image of the moon. The design was decidedly refined.

"It would appear that the manor has been renovated somewhat since the end of the war, but it is still very much worth studying," said the man. "Though many claim it to be ostentatious, I happen to think it is exquisite. I had long wanted a chance to see the place for myself, but lost my opportunity when that

horrid incident occurred. A true pity."

"So you came here knowing that it would be considered unlawful entry?"

"That I did," said the man.

The wraith, he explained, was to stop people from disturbing his study. It acted purely as a bodyguard and watchdog. He had never intended to use it to cause harm.

"I merely wanted things to calm down enough that I could go about my study in peace. But I heard that pesky thrill-seekers were ruining the place, and so I hurried here in quite the panic. At least this way I can keep them out. I assure you, I'll leave as soon as I'm finished, and though I feel slightly bad for the villagers, would you mind keeping this secret of mine until I'm done?"

None of the adventurers could truly abide by the man's reasoning, but there did seem to be *some* truth to his words. The specialized documentation on the table and sofa led credence to the idea that the man really was an architectural scholar. However, though he said he didn't mean any harm, harm had nonetheless been caused. For one thing, the disturbance had made it difficult for the villagers to get to and from the main roads. They were also forced to stay in during the evenings because the location was deemed potentially dangerous. On top of it all, the whole situation had affected everyone emotionally, *and* brought back awful memories.

"Shouldn't you at least say something to the village chief, then?" asked Alec, his hand still on his sword. "I'm aware it might result in difficulties, but the village might well be open to or even welcoming of the idea of you studying here."

Roland glared at the man. Rurii, meanwhile, slowly shifted from blue to red—a warning. There was a threat in the air...and a gaping hole in the man's story.

"You said you always wanted to come here to see the place yourself," said Shiori. "Does that mean it's your first time here?"

"But of course," replied the man.

This struck Shiori as extremely odd.

“You say that,” she said, “and yet you came to this room directly, and without hesitation. You did not even glance into any of the other rooms. Why were you so intent on making this particular room the focus of your study?”

The man had been a portrait of calm until this moment, but at the question, panic flashed across his face.

“Because I am an expert,” said the man. “I have been at this for a very long time, and I understand the interiors of these structures rather well. In fact, my name is one known among researchers of the Bazarova dynasty. Show me a manor in the style of Askalonov the First, and I’ll tell you its basic floor plan.”

“Wow, that’s *amazing*,” said Roland. “You so-called *experts* sure are something.”

The mocking and belittling tone of his voice took Shiori and Alec completely by surprise—this was not the polite young man they had known him to be moments before.

“You know, when Mr. Abenius bought this manor, he thought it was inconvenient,” said Roland. “He actually had the whole place rebuilt to modern standards. He spent a lot of money too—he played with the floor plan, he tinkered with the corridors, and he had the wallpaper carefully removed so it could be reused elsewhere. The exterior and the first floor didn’t change much, but the second floor is entirely different. You experts can even work *that* out from a glance? You didn’t get lost or confused at all?”

In an instant, the man’s expression changed, but Roland was not done.

“This *isn’t* the first time you’ve been here, is it? You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

The man took a step back, but did not speak. It was, for all intents and purposes, a silent confirmation.

“Come on,” said Roland. “Say something, old man. You knew what you were looking for, didn’t you? You know that there’s a secret passage behind that bookshelf, don’t you?”

Roland took a few steps forward, and his face was lit by the magical lamp on the table in the center of the room. The man stared at him dubiously, but slowly

his expression turned to one of astonishment.

“You...” he uttered. “But you’re... You should be dead! How do you still live?!”

“Tch. Looks like you let the cat out of the bag, old man. It wasn’t me that died—it was my brother!”

Shiori and Alec were shocked by what was unfolding before their eyes, but now the truth was revealed to them. The long missing butler was, in fact, dead...and the only person who could have known that would be the man who’d killed him.

“A lot of people said that my brother and I looked alike,” said Roland. “He was twelve years older than me, so I always wondered if I looked older than I was. Can’t say I liked the comparisons.”

Roland flashed a sad smile, standing next to Shiori and Alec as the would-be scholar—his face a picture of rage—summoned a new wraith.

“But it’s this face that has brought the truth to light, isn’t it?” said Roland. “Bet it was a shock for you to see it again.”

“You really could have told us about all of this a bit earlier, couldn’t you?” asked Alec, pointing his sword at the necromancer.

Roland had likely known this man’s identity—and his objective—before they had even entered the manor.

“What should we do?” asked Shiori. “He’s summoned more wraiths.”

There were seven in total. Two four-legged beast skeletons, and another four phantoms in addition to the one acting as the necromancer’s bodyguard. The skeletons had likely been snow beasts of a kind, because an icy breath left their mouths as they looked to intimidate the adventurers.

Each of the five phantoms took up a position from which to protect the necromancer. Upon closer inspection, two of the phantoms were dressed in tattered servant uniforms—they were probably maids. The other two were a disfigured gentleman and what looked to be his wife—Mr. and Mrs. Abenius. Which would mean that the phantom in the three-piece suit was, in all likelihood, the butler, Kenneth. All five of the wraiths had been murdered when

the house had been broken into. All of them were victims.

Shiori glanced at Alec and Roland, both of whom wore tense grimaces.

“I don’t like it much,” muttered Alec, “but the best way for us to respect these five dead souls is to cut them down. I don’t imagine that any one of them enjoys working in servitude to the man who killed them. None of them are who they once were.”

Beneath the messy hair of the phantoms were faces with hollow eyes, their expressions filled with despair. They had lost all the vigor they’d once had in life, and now they existed solely to curse and resent the living. All five of them likely wanted nothing more than to rest their souls, and yet, despite their wishes, they had been forced back into this world and brought under someone’s control as terrifying wraiths. It was hard to imagine a worse fate.

“Please, don’t hesitate. Release them,” said Roland. “None of them will know peace otherwise. Not my brother, not Mr. and Mrs. Abenius, and not any of their staff. I’m sorry that I can’t return them to the earth myself, but please... I beg of you...”

As a summoner, Roland could not take down his former family, even when they were under the control of a necromancer. The spirits he worked with would not allow him to kill his own people. Shiori had trouble understanding the inner workings of spirits, but perhaps those spirits, too, were no longer able to understand the ways of humans. The bond of summoner and spirit was built on friendly relationships, but there was a line that was not to be crossed, and their alliance relied on each side protecting their individual domain.

“Leave it to us,” said Alec. “Roland, you join Shiori for support, and both of you—stay strong no matter what attacks they launch on your psyche! As long as you stand strong, we’ll have the upper hand! Rurii, look after them!”

“Got it!” said Shiori.

“Okay!” added Roland.

Alec took a step forward, and with his lightning-imbued blade, sliced at the nearest wraith. An instant later, the room filled with a scream, and the other four wraiths let out sorrowful screams of their own, as if in response. This was a

wraith attack, known as a “death-invoking scream.” It was a truly terrifying and nausea-inducing sound—it combined the high-pitched scream of a woman, the low roar of a beast, and the resentment of the dead.

Shiori’s body threatened to freeze under the pressure, but she held herself together with a cry of encouragement. Alec, too, winced at the screams, but gritted his teeth and sliced down one of the phantom maids. The wraith let out something like a sigh before dissipating into the air.

“Just as I thought,” said Alec. “The necromancer has bitten off more than he can chew. It’s taking everything he has just to keep control of these wraiths. I’m willing to bet that only the butler and the two skeletons will put up a proper fight.”

There was no other way to explain how Alec had dealt with such a powerful wraith so easily.

“Their movements are sluggish!” shouted Roland, analyzing the spirits. “He probably doesn’t have a strong control of them—he has to fight their resistance to make them obey!”

The necromancer’s face twisted with rage—both men had hit the nail on the head.

“You bastards!” he shouted. “Have at you!”

So saying, he furiously cast a spell that emitted black magical energy. The remaining phantoms and nearby low-level ghosts were absorbed into the phantom butler, which then transformed into something truly gruesome.

“How awful...”

Shiori felt herself on the verge of tears as she fought, so stunned was she by this creature—like a fusion of a mummy and an unknown magical beast—which was no longer human, but nonetheless wailed with a deep, bitter sorrow.

The phantom screamed as it swung a deformed arm at the humans before it, all of them symbols of a world the wraith could no longer return to. Alec met the phantom with his sword, but his first strike only grazed the spirit, which passed by him, targeting Shiori and Roland.

“Get out of the way!” cried Alec, dodging the phantom’s attack as he faced off against the incoming skeletons.

Phantoms did not have a physical form, and so they could not be harmed with physical attacks. By the same logic, they also could not inflict physical attacks. Instead, they carved away at the psyches and souls of the living, which, in its own way, was far more effective. The most powerful attack of the phantom was an invitation to the eternal depths so strong it was near irresistible—a temptation so powerful that the target would throw away the trappings of life to embrace it.

The phantom took a human form, but was by no means human, and Shiori was frozen before it. Fortunately, she was brought back to her senses by the slime tapping at her legs, and she forced herself to move and avoid the phantom’s attack. Roland, however, was not so quick, and, stunned in the face of the wraith that was once his brother, he faltered. The chilly hand of death thus plunged into him.

“Roland!” shouted Shiori and Alec in unison.

For a moment, Roland’s figure seemed to waver as though it might vanish, and he took a step back, his body tilting as he tripped on his own feet. Alec brought his sword around from the side, pulling the phantom away from him. Roland pulled himself back from falling over and gave Alec a thumbs-up—he was hurting, but his smile said he was okay.

“That was rough!” he exclaimed. “I really thought I was heading to the underworld for a second there!”

“You’ll only make your brother sad if you leave before he does!” shouted Alec. “Be strong!”

For a moment, Roland seemed uncertain of what to say, but a second later, he smiled and nodded.

“You’re right. I can’t rest in peace until I’ve released my brother from his suffering.”

These words meant nothing to the adventurers at the time, but the deeper meaning hidden within them would hit the adventurers and their slime before

the night was through.

“That’s the spirit!” cried Alec. “Keep your will strong and we’ll prevail. Let’s do this!”

Formless beasts were powerful especially because they were not tied to the physical world, but Alec’s words encouraged the party to keep fighting. Their physical bodies, and the blood that coursed through them, were a powerful tether linking their souls to the land of the living. As long as they were filled with a will to continue on, their minds and their hearts would remain strong.

“He’s desperate!” said Shiori. “And he’s ready to do anything! Wind barrier!”

“Lightning Strike, Osca! You’re right!” replied Alec.

“Damn, this is annoying!” added Roland. “Until he’s all out of recovery potions, he’ll just keep the wraiths coming! They always say it’s a bad idea to fight a necromancer in a place dense with magic and lingering regrets, and now I know why! Never would have thought it’d be *this* troublesome!”

The necromancer and self-proclaimed scholar drank down another potion and summoned more wraiths, all of which were lower than mid-level in terms of power. The weak wraiths, lacking any intelligence, instinctively attacked the living without the need for orders. This made it clear that the necromancer—who was focused on controlling the phantom—intended to win by sheer force of numbers. He was also working his way slowly towards the door while the adventurers had their hands full with his summoned beasts—he was going to make a run for it as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Every time the necromancer imbibed another potion, the phantom and the skeletons were also revitalized.

The wraiths were attacking in a manner reminiscent of the snow wolves—one after another, so as to never let up their offense. Alec parried the blows while Shiori and Roland cast barriers behind him, which disintegrated the low-level wraiths upon contact. Rurii made an attempt at a surprise attack on the necromancer, but was frustrated by a huge wisp which rained fireballs upon it. The slime trembled with annoyance.

“We’re going to have to hurt him—we’ve got no other choice,” said Alec. “I wanted to bring him in unharmed, but it’s not looking possible.”

Alec was on the verge of S-rank, and if he had his hands full, it meant that Shiori and Roland had to be extra careful to ensure they weren't possessed or hit by spirit attacks. In this situation, the two of them were like hostages—Alec could not afford to make any mistakes, or it was the two of them who might pay the price for it.

"I've got an idea," whispered Shiori. "I'll try frightening him with illusion magic."

Though taken by surprise, Alec quickly nodded. The necromancer was not intimidated by the terrifying phantom under his control, and so Shiori did not know if her illusion magic would work, but in a pure battle of magic, Shiori did not stand a chance—she had to make use of the powers at her disposal.

Alec faced off against the attacking wraiths, inching closer towards the necromancer to draw the man's attention. Roland, meanwhile, subtly shifted position so as to hide Shiori from the man's line of sight. The housekeeping mage took a deep breath, and as she released her magic, she cried aloud, "A most befitting curse!" to give the impression that she was a summoner. And then—

"O mighty lord of the depths of the underworld, heed my call!" she shouted.

A deafening roar came from behind the necromancer as the room crumbled behind him, and a creature quite literally unlike anything in this world crawled from the depths with a liquidy echo. The creature's pale skin was translucent, and clung to the sinew and bone beneath it. But the creature was by no means thin—the way it moved its limbs demonstrated its power. It had grotesquely long arms, and its tail moved like a monster independent of the rest of the creature. Its huge head was unsightly against its body, its face lacked a nose and eyes, and its ragged, uneven teeth gave it a heavy presence.

The necromancer let out a squeal at the sight of it, and in response, the creature opened its mouth and let out a truly earsplitting roar. It eclipsed any sound a phantom might have mustered, and the necromancer fell to his butt in sheer terror, screaming as the creature came nearer.

Even Alec was left momentarily frozen at the sight of the creature which, to Shiori, was something straight out of a science fiction horror flick. Still, he

realized that the necromancer's control was slipping and took the opportunity to throw everything into an attack aimed at one of the skeletons. The moment he took it down, he used the momentum to swing back and take out the other. The skeletons had been incredibly tough, but they crumbled to pieces as the control over them wavered, and began returning to the earth from whence they had come.

Alec readied himself to finish the skeletons off, but they did not reform, and instead crumbled into a fine white sand and vanished. Alec then turned his sword towards the phantom.

"You're next, butler," he muttered.

The phantom, still a grotesque amalgamation of different wraiths, turned to the adventurer, and for a moment its skull-like face appeared to smile. It moved with dull, stuttered movements, as if it were fighting against the necromancer's control, and opened its arms wide.

Cut me down, it seemed to say. *I beg of you. Finish this.*

"Please, Alec. Do as it asks," said Roland, his voice at once sorrowful and yet filled with resolve.

"We'll give him the peace he deserves!"

Alec took a step forward and brought his sword down in a flash. Lightning sparked through the blade as it cut clean through the phantom, which wavered as Alec then impaled it on his sword.

The phantom did not make a sound, instead quivering as the end grew near, releasing spirits from its body as it did so. Eventually, all that remained—and just for an instant—was the core of the phantom, in the shape of a man. He was in his forties, similar in appearance to Roland, and he smiled calmly as he disappeared into the air.

"It's over," said Alec.

"Great work," said Shiori, as he let his sword drop to his side.

Roland stood in place for a time, staring at the air into which his brother had vanished. Finally, he turned towards them, a sad smile on his face.

“Thank you so much,” he said. “Finally, my brother and everyone here is released from this curse. Now, for what’s left...”

The three of them turned towards the necromancer.



The so-called scholar had fainted under the pressure of the creature Shiori

had “summoned,” and Rurii had him all wrapped up. However, perhaps because of how creepy the creature was, Rurii was careful not to go near it.

“Shiori...” muttered Alec.

Shiori cringed under Alec’s gaze and the slight twitch in his features, and dispersed the illusion.

“Sorry,” she said.

“What in the world *was* that thing?”

“Erm, uh... A creature from back home?” Shiori replied, unconvincingly.

“Why does your reply sound like a question?”

“Oh... Well, it’s a creature I envisioned from the realms of my imagination...”

“Don’t even tell me what would allow you to bring a monstrosity like that to life...”

Alec shivered as he thought back to the creature.

“You’re from the east, right?” said Roland. “You guys must have the wildest imaginations...”

Still looking somewhat shaken by Shiori’s magic, Alec nonetheless took out some rope and tied the necromancer’s arms and legs. Finally, he fastened the rope with an amulet that hindered the man from accessing his necromancy spells. The amulets weren’t effective against anyone stronger than the standard level, but it would help slow the man down all the same.

“The rope is meant for packaging, so it’s thin and it’ll cut into the skin a little, but it should still be bearable.”

Alec was careful with the rope, and made sure it wasn’t so tight that it cut off the necromancer’s circulation. It was far better treatment than a suspected thief and murderer likely deserved. Rurii then oozed on top of the necromancer —still lying on the floor—and wobbled them a message—*I’ll keep watch here!* It was clear to the adventurers that Rurii was ready to melt the man’s clothing if he tried anything suspicious, so they left the slime and joined Roland, who was investigating the bookshelf.

“Have you found anything?” asked Shiori.

“I only heard about it once, but... Hang on a moment,” muttered Roland. “Once you start it, you have to do things in a certain order for the passage to unlock from the other side.”

The necromancer likely wasn’t aware of this. He had probably seen it once at the time of the murders, and had come back and tried to replicate the process. Unfortunately for him, he’d been too persistent on just one portion of the bookshelf. He’d left the marks to prove it too—the dust had been cleared away, and he’d made markings with a pencil. The papers by their feet also held detailed notes he’d taken on potential methods for opening the bookshelf. It seemed he’d even removed all of the books at one point.

“He really poured himself into trying to open this door,” remarked Alec. “Did he have a reason to be so obsessed?”

None of them wanted to think that this had all been in a vain search for hidden Imperial treasures. There wasn’t even a guarantee such treasures existed here.

“There’s a hidden passage here,” explained Roland. “A way out, from what I know. My brother tried to escape through it, I’m sure of it.”

Roland told them that, given the relationship between his brother and Mr. and Mrs. Abenius, it was not a case of him stealing their fortune and making a break for it—rather, it was far more likely that they had *entrusted* him with their money, and sent him through the secret passage. Theirs was not a relationship of just master and servant—they had spent so much time together that they were more like family.

“But the necromancer said he was dead. How is that possible if he ran away?”

“He would have sent one of his wraiths through the door because he couldn’t get there himself...”

And though the necromancer would have succeeded in killing the escaping butler, the closed passageway would still have deprived him of the valuables he had tried to steal. Nor did he have the option of trying to find the passageway’s exit, since he had no idea where it came out. He had killed five people and been

forced to leave empty-handed—and then had possibly decided it was more worth his while to sneak back once the dust had settled to try again.

“Aha,” muttered Roland. “I think I’ve got it.”

He pointed to a pillar between the bookshelves, elaborately decorated with engravings of vines, flowers, and spirits. Roland put a hand to its natural wooden surface.

“Here, here, and here,” Roland said, as Shiori and Alec drew nearer for a better look. “Oh, and here. If you look closely, you see that the coloring is just slightly different, right?”

The leaves and flowers that Roland had pointed to were just slightly darker in color, and made a loud clicking sound when pushed.

“Hiding this kind of thing in an engraving makes it that much harder to see,” said Roland. “Each and every design is so delicate, so detailed.”

“So the mechanism to open the door wasn’t in the bookshelf at all, it was in the pillar!” said Alec.

It was very common to put the switch or mechanism for opening a secret door in bookshelves. That’s why it was only natural for people to start their search there when they knew there was a hidden door. The mechanism at the Abenius manor was designed to take advantage of this assumption.

“Guy calls himself a scholar,” muttered Roland. “Couldn’t even work out this bookshelf.”

“I don’t know,” said Alec with a wry chuckle. “There weren’t many buildings like this to begin with, and most of them are no longer standing, anyway. I don’t know how much that guy really knows, but it’s not that surprising that he couldn’t work this out.”

Still, the eyes which gazed upon the still-unconscious necromancer were filled with contempt.

After Roland tinkered with the pillar, they heard a click from a part of the bookshelf. When they pushed against it, the bookshelf moved with an ease that surprised them, given how heavy it looked. It opened to a passageway just wide

enough for one person to enter, with a stone staircase leading downwards. It was too dark to see below, and so they could not tell what conditions were like further down the stairs.

"I'll check it out," said Roland, summoning a wisp for light.

Shiori and Alec shared a glance and a nod, then left Rurii with the necromancer and followed after Roland.

"This isn't too different from other secret staircases," muttered Alec as they headed down the stairs.

"Other staircases?" asked Shiori. "Are they all that common? And you've seen them?"

"A few times, yes. They're built so you can't tell from the outside that the passage exists. It's why they tend to be so narrow."

If a secret passageway was too wide, one could work out if it was there—it would show in the number of windows or their placement, the size of the rooms, or the length of the corridors. A secret passageway was meaningless if everyone knew it was there. However, in more recent years, it had become clear to scholars when there were secret passageways in a given building.

"But isn't a secret passageway also a risk?" asked Shiori. "What if someone uses the exit to sneak inside, instead?"

"Yes, that has to be carefully looked after too," replied Alec. "These days, there's only a small number of families that still use such passageways, and the majority have either filled them in or otherwise locked them tight. Some houses make them open to the public for a small fee, but as a manor ages, its secret passageways deteriorate too, so it can be rather dangerous. That's why so many manor owners choose to fill them in completely."

"I see..."

It reminded Shiori of Silveria Tower, and how parts of it had deteriorated and crumbled away. When there was nobody to look after a home, it did not take long at all before it fell into disrepair.

At the bottom of the staircase was a stone pathway, and the chilly tunnel was

wider than expected—in comparison to the staircase, two people could walk side by side. It was humid, with sporadic patches of moss, and water dripping from between the stones—this made it clear they were underground.

“Is it safe?” asked Shiori, taking a step closer to Alec without realizing it.

Alec took a few cautious breaths.

“It doesn’t seem like any toxic gases have built up here, but the air is stale.”

Alec took a thin sheet of packing paper from his waist pouch and let it dangle from between his fingers—it didn’t move.

“No wind,” he said. “Which means...”

Roland called back his wisp and seemed to discuss something with it before sighing.

“The other side is blocked,” he said, finishing Alec’s sentence.

Shiori knew what this meant, and yet, they still had to make sure. The three of them walked on in silence, but after no more than ten meters, Roland came to a stop. When Shiori and Alec saw what he was looking at, their breath caught in their throats. They had expected this, but to see it before their eyes filled them with a lonely sorrow.

Illuminated by the wisp’s light was a man in his pajamas, lying on his back. Next to him was a broken magical lantern, and an old box. The box was blackened and decorated in dull gold engravings—it was the strongbox that Mr. and Mrs. Abenius had entrusted him with.

Roland walked up to the man in silence, then knelt down to look at his face.

“I’m here for you, brother,” he said.

It had been one year since the murders, but the man’s corpse—which had been left in a cold, chilly location—had been preserved to the point that it was almost as it was when he had lived. However, his pale skin and his deteriorating clothes told the tale of his demise. He’d been preserved by his corpse wax.

Perhaps the only saving grace was the placid look on the man’s face—whatever fear he’d felt at the time of his death had long since scattered to the winds.

“Fortunately, the body was never used as a necromancy vessel...” said Alec.

If it had, it may well have been in pieces by now. Though the butler had been spared this fate thanks to being locked in a confined space, the thought of it all still filled Shiori with complicated, uncomfortable feelings, and she couldn’t even speak. Alec cast some light magic to illuminate the rest of the passageway, and Shiori gasped.

A few meters ahead, the passageway had caved in. Judging by the dirt and the debris, it had been some time since it’d happened—perhaps even years.

“He was never getting out of this alive...”

Realizing that their end was near, Mr. and Mrs. Abenius had placed the last of their hope in their butler, and given him a chance to escape. The reddish-black on the man’s hands and the strongbox told the tale of what had happened. However, they had never expected to use the passageway, and so it had fallen into disrepair, and collapsed in on itself many years ago.

“The reason his feet are facing the stairs and his body is facing up is probably because he was attacked while turning around.”

The butler had felt the presence of something, turned, and in that instant, been attacked. There was no way to know which kind of wraith the necromancer had sent to kill the butler, but Shiori’s heart ached to think of it—how had he felt, facing off against a spirit in a confined space, without hope of rescue?

“An amulet, please,” said Alec.

Upon taking it from Shiori, he knelt down on the other side of Roland—who was deep in a silent moment with his brother—and placed the amulet on the corpse’s chest. This was less a matter of ensuring he would not return as a wraith, and more a way to mourn his passing. Alec wanted to give the man one last drink too, but knew that doing so might interfere with the investigation that would surely take place later. For now, the amulet was the best they could offer.

“The last time I saw my brother, we fought,” said Roland. “I was always a free spirit. I wanted to travel the world and explore all its sights, but my brother was

completely against the idea. He wanted me to get a regular, stable job, and to live a regular, stable life. But I was a summoner, and I didn't think I needed a life of luxury to enjoy myself. Above all, I was just optimistic. But that fight was the last time I saw him. He was like a father to me, really, and I never got to pay him back for what he did for me. I always hoped I'd save up enough money that we could go on holiday some day."

Roland mustered a weak chuckle, and the lonely sound of it echoed through the damp, chilly passageway. Roland's one hope for the future was now lost to him for eternity.

The three of them offered their own prayers, and hoped that the man's eternal sleep would not be disturbed again.

"Shall we go?" asked Alec. "We have to inform the village, and make sure the necromancer is taken into custody."

He gave Roland a gentle tap on the shoulder, and the three of them headed silently back to the room upstairs, where Rurii was waiting for them on top of the necromancer. The slime waved at them and Shiori waved back, but the housekeeping mage was shocked to see the necromancer shivering, embarrassed, and without pants. He was, however, still tied up.

"Ew!" she cried a moment later.

"Whoa," cried Roland, "Now *that* is a spectacle."

His voice trembled slightly as he tried to hold in his laughter.

"I don't know if...spectacle is the right word. Perhaps—I don't know —'shriveled' might be more apt?"

Alec's words didn't quite make logical sense to Shiori, but she opted not to think about it. Doing her best to avoid looking at the man at all, Shiori took the blanket by the bookshelf and covered the man with it.

"Rurii..." she muttered. "Do I need to ask?"

Gesturing wildly, the slime did its best to explain that the necromancer had been in quite a state when he woke, and there'd been "no other way" to calm him down and render him powerless. Given that the man was sobbing *and*

covered in slime, Shiori felt there was more to it than the slime let on, but she did not push any further.

The necromancer, his spirit broken as he wallowed in his shame, did nothing more to cause them any sort of bother. So great was his trauma—on one side bloodcurdling terror, on the other complete and utter humiliation—that he had almost lost the ability to speak, and when asked a question, responded mostly incoherently. With some work, the trio were able to work out that the necromancer had resorted to theft as a way to support his scholarly passions. There was no other way to raise enough capital to support such expensive research.

Regardless of the motives, however, the necromancer had still killed five people. Whether the man really was a prominent scholar, nobody knew, but he would nonetheless receive a harsh punishment for his crimes.

Shiori did not have words for the feelings in her heart as she looked down silently upon the man.

5

Though the necromancer had committed horrible crimes, wheeling him out of the manor half-naked was beyond pitiful, so the adventurers rolled him up in a blanket, essentially turning him into luggage. Rurii offered to carry him, and that was how they made their way out of the manor.

Wisps still drifted about inside the house and out in its gardens, but they would dissipate in time. That, or perhaps an exorcism rite would be held after the ensuing investigation. In any case, the spirits at the Abenius manor would now be given the eternal rest they deserved. This was what Shiori hoped for most.

The snow that had fallen so heavily earlier had eased up considerably, and the clouds in the sky were no longer as thick and ominous—the twinkling, starry sky even peeked out from between them. The night was bright, and at this rate, it would not be long before the snow stopped completely.

Perhaps some of the residents of Airola Village were still up, because the trio noticed the lights on in some of the houses as they walked through the marshlands. Past the abandoned hamlet, Shiori could see the lights of the guardhouse, where Artur and Egil were waiting for them.

“Oh, it’s still so early,” muttered Alec, looking at his pocket watch. “It’s only eight.”

Everything had been wrapped up much quicker than expected once they’d learned that a necromancer was at the heart of everything. However, this was not something worthy of celebration. Something was clearly tugging at Roland’s heart, and after having left the manor with them and walking a time in silence, he finally managed to speak up.

“I, uh... I’m sorry, but I’m going to stay here,” he said.

“What’s wrong?” asked Alec, surprised.

“I just... I want to spend a little more time with my brother. He’s been all alone for so long, and I can’t bear to leave him like that again.”

“Look, I understand how you feel, but...”

Was it right to leave Roland alone at an empty manor, and one that had been—until just moments ago—home to wraiths? The man was a relative of one of the murder victims, after all. Alec didn’t think Roland had taken the loss *too* hard, but he still felt a little worried.

“Shall we at least call over someone from the vigilance committee?”

Artur and Egil were right there, and calling one of them over would at least have allowed Alec to relax with the assurance that Roland was safe. All the same, Roland smiled and shook his head.

“I’m not going to kill myself, if that’s what you’re worried about. Not really my style. But...” Roland’s voice trailed off for a moment as he looked over at the guardhouse. “I’ll leave it to you. In any case, I’m going to be with my brother, and that’s where I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay...”

“Please be careful,” said Shiori. “We’ll have someone come a little later.”

“Thank you for indulging a young man’s selfish request,” said Roland. “I really appreciate it.”

He waved goodbye and turned back towards the manor. Rurii, still carrying the necromancer wrapped in a blanket, waved back. But just as Roland was about to disappear into the darkness of the manor, he called out to them.

“By the way, tell the village chief that Roland says hi.”

Just as his voice trailed off into silence, Shiori felt as though she saw a light glimmer in the darkness of the manor. It danced softly in the air, and then vanished in an instant. Shiori couldn’t help thinking that it felt like a ghostly ritual of some kind, like respects paid to an old friend.

“Well, shall we?” asked Alec.

“Okay.”

Shiori noticed a certain loneliness in her partner’s voice. She touched his hand gently, then squeezed it. She did not know exactly why—she simply felt like doing it, as though she wanted to feel through her own body the life of another.

Alec squeezed back, and she enjoyed the warmth that passed through his large hand. Rurii, too, reached out with a feeler to join them in the hand-holding, and the two adventurers laughed.

And with that, they all began walking back towards the guard house.

6

Though the snow had mostly stopped now, it had piled up while they were exploring the manor, and their footprints from earlier had completely disappeared. All that remained were a few indentations here and there that gave the impression that someone had perhaps passed through there.

As Shiori and Alec neared the guard house, they saw a silhouette in the window, which was quickly joined by several others—it appeared that others had come to accompany Artur and Egil while the adventurers were at the manor. A moment later, the silhouettes disappeared from the window, and the guard house door opened.

“You’re back!” said Artur.

“Boy, are we glad to see you safe,” said Egil. “Come on inside where it’s warm.”

In addition to Artur and Egil, there was the village chief, Reverend Wille, and a few villagers that Shiori and Alec hadn’t met. Apparently, everyone had been so worried that eventually they’d come out to the guard house. They welcomed the two adventurers and their slime with a smile, and let out cries of shock when they noticed the man wrapped in the blanket.

“What in the world...? Mr. Jarnefelt?”

It seemed all of the villagers knew the necromancer.

“This is the man responsible for the recent disturbances,” said Alec. “He also murdered the residents of the Abenius manor a year ago. We found the butler’s body in the manor’s secret passageway.”

The village chief moaned, and the other villagers had to hold Artur back as he lunged for the necromancer—the man they had called “Jarnefelt.” But even as

they did this, the villagers were all clearly angry. Even Reverend Wille, a man of the cloth, could not hide his ire. He did not, however, voice his rage, and instead funneled it into prayers for the deceased.

"Jarnefelt lived here as a scholar," said one of the villagers. "He moved in from out of town about six months ago. He said he was a renowned and published author..."

He'd written a number of theses, and published a number of books—two of which were even in use at educational institutions as textbooks. The man was indeed a scholar of a fairly high social standing. The village chief couldn't believe that Jarnefelt was the man behind the crimes.

"I don't know how he presented himself to you, but the man is pretty rotten to the core," said Alec. "He killed five people for money, then turned them all into wraiths. The sooner we hand him over into the custody of the knights, the better."

At the village chief's order, one of the younger villagers dashed out of the guard house to ready a messenger bird and inform the knight corps in the royal capital. Given the circumstances, they would not wait until dawn—they would likely send someone immediately.

"I recall Jarnefelt saying he had some old ruins to investigate and heading out not so long ago," said the village chief. "I never imagined he would go to the manor. He pulled one on us good and proper, he did. Just the other day, he said he was passing through and bought a bunch of food—I really believed he was heading out on an expedition!"

The village chief's comment backed their suspicions—the only people able to buy food without drawing suspicion outside tourist season were the villagers themselves. Jarnefelt had bought his supplies, left by the village's main gate, then circled the marshlands and reentered via the gate nearest the manor. He had moved to the village six months ago because he wanted a base of operations from which he could break into the manor.

Jarnefelt was to be held in the vigilance committee's holding cell until the knights arrived, so he was plonked onto a sled like a piece of luggage and promptly taken away. Jarnefelt himself hadn't appreciated the treatment and

attempted to speak out about it, but was summarily silenced by the sight of Rurii—the slime's eyeless gaze warning him not to continue. Jarnefelt's pale complexion and anxious sweating told Shiori that he'd had quite the harrowing experience earlier.

"I must say," said Reverend Wille, as they watched Jarnefelt go, "you handled this all much more quickly than any of us expected. Conny truly has an eye for talent among adventurers."

The reverend's words were meant to clear the air of the gloom that still drifted around them, and they revealed that Conny was quite fond of the two adventurers. Shiori and Alec shared a glance—both of them felt a little awkward receiving such praise. Yes, they had played a part in getting to the bottom of things, but Roland had been the key player in it all.

"Yes, about that," said Alec. "We actually had a little company along the way, and we owe him for solving everything so quickly. He opted to stay at the manor while we came here to report to you, but we owe him much in the way of thanks."

"Oh, and before we forget," said Shiori, "he asked us to pass you a message—Roland says hi."

"Roland...?"

The air in the guardhouse froze. The villagers dropped into confusion, all of them shocked.

"He's the younger brother of the Abenius family butler, and a summoner... Do you know him?"

Shiori felt suddenly worried—the village chief looked at them very closely, then dropped once more into thought. She'd been certain that everyone knew who Roland was—why else would he have asked them to pass on a message?—but the villager's reaction was not what they had expected. Then again, Roland himself had admitted to being something of a wanderer, so perhaps he hadn't visited the village in some time. This was not all that uncommon among youth who left the countryside to explore the wide world.

But the village chief's reply threw all of that out the window.

“Oh, we know Roland, all right,” he said, “but the boy passed away a long time ago. Must have been ten years, now.”

“Erm...?”

Shiori and Alec were suddenly at a loss for words. Rurii shook by their feet, confused.

How? Was that possible? And if so...who was it they’d traveled with?

“But he definitely told us he was the butler’s younger brother,” said Alec. “He said he’d come to clear the man’s name. Admittedly, he didn’t prove it exactly, but...”

“It’s true,” said Shiori. “He said he was looking for a clue, anything that might prove his brother was innocent. That’s why he followed us. He was very knowledgeable about Mr. and Mrs. Abenius and their manor. He had flaxen, curly hair and blue eyes, and a bit of a mischievous expression. He was young, about twenty...”

At this point, Shiori paused. Something didn’t add up.

Roland had said that his brother was twelve years older than him. But when they’d found his brother’s corpse, his frozen features showed a man in his forties. That would have made him at least twenty years older than Roland—a clear contradiction.

The village chief watched the two puzzled adventurers for a moment, then took a well-worn leather notebook from his chest pocket, and fished a photograph from it.

“This is a photo from a while back. We took it with Mr. and Mrs. Abenius. Photographers were decidedly rare back then, but they’d called one over, and invited the whole village to be in it. Roland was there too. Would have been right around the time he turned twenty.”

The photograph was creased and wrinkled from having been taken out and looked at so often, but the image in it was still clear—an elderly couple smiling along with the happy faces of the Airola villagers. A younger village chief and the Abenius family butler were also apparent, their smiles tense with obvious nervousness.

Next to the butler was a young man, and when Shiori and Alec laid eyes on him, they gasped. It was a young man who looked just like the butler, complete with a head of curly hair and a carefree grin. He looked exactly like the young man they had just parted ways with at the Abenius manor, but the date scribbled on the back of the photograph told them it had been taken twelve years ago. That would have made Roland over thirty. And yet, the Roland they'd met looked the spitting image of the one in the photo.

"The year after this photo was taken, Roland took off and left the village. Said he wanted to see the world. Right before he left, Roland and Kenneth got into a big fight, and Kenneth always wished he'd been able to give his little brother a warmer send-off... Unfortunately, Roland died less than a year into his travels. There was a horrible flu going around at the time, and Roland caught it. Kenneth ran over as soon as he heard, but by then Roland had already been cremated."

Kenneth—the Abenius family butler—then paid a rather large sum of money to have his brother's ashes removed from his grave so they could be taken back to Airola Village. They were the only family either of them had, and Kenneth always regretted the fact that he hadn't been more open-minded and generous. It pained him to think that his last memories of his brother were that of conflict and argument.

"Roland seemed to truly regret parting with his brother on bad terms," said Shiori. "He said he wanted to save up some money so that he could take Kenneth on a trip somewhere. He said his brother was like a father to him."

But of course, Roland had never had the opportunity to make good on his hopes—the book of his life had instead closed just twenty years into it.

"Wraiths are a physical manifestation of one's regrets, but it is not just the dead who leave such feelings behind," said Reverend Wille. "The living, too, leave all sorts of emotions in their wake. The stronger they are, the more likely they are to linger and, eventually, take a shape of some kind. I believe it was the strong feelings of remorse in the two brothers, and the villager's prayers for them, that formed the Roland you encountered. This is a place known as a home for spirits, and perhaps both Roland and the friendly spirits of this village lent you their strength."

Wille thought it possible that in the year since the incident, the swirling feelings of the village and its people had formed around the core of Roland's soul. He had then appeared in this world as a person with his own will, as if he were no different from any of the living. Roland himself had said that he could not rest in peace until his brother was released, and he had meant the words quite literally.

"Roland said that he would be waiting at the manor with his brother," said Shiori, "so..."

The village chief nodded.

"I understand," he said. "When the knights arrive, I will go to meet them both."

He would go to collect Kenneth, who had spent so long in the darkness of night, and the brother who never lost faith in him, so the both of them could greet the fair light of morning. It was so painful, so lonely, and yet, there was also a warmth to it all, and it brought tears to Shiori's eyes. She wiped them away with a finger, then glanced at her lover...and she was utterly astonished.

Alec had remained unusually silent through most of their conversation, and Shiori saw now that he was awfully pale. He'd broken into a sweat, his breathing was shallow, and the hand covering his mouth trembled.

"Alec?!" Shiori exclaimed. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

When Shiori thought back on it all, something had been slightly off about Alec since the moment they'd accepted this request. Alec had said he was fine, but perhaps he wasn't actually feeling well.

"Oh my," said the village chief. "He needs to rest immediately. Your room at the inn has been kept for you."

Alec shook his head.

"No, I'm quite all right," he replied. "Just a little tired, that's all. I'll be perfectly fine just as soon as I head home and relax for a spell. We'll take our leave now."

"Wait just a second," said the village chief. "It's night out there, you realize?

The carriages aren't running until the morning, and I'm certain the knights are going to want to speak with you both."

"Oh, yes, b-but, however..." stammered Alec. "You're right. That's right. I suppose we'll just have to walk home."

"What are you talking about?!" cried Shiori. "We'll do no such thing. We'll take them up on their generous offer, and take it easy for the rest of the evening, okay?"

"I don't see a need for such rest and I see no problem in us simply—"

"Alec, we. Are. Going. To. Rest. At. The. *Inn*!"

Far from being ill, Alec was unusually stubborn in his grumbling, and Shiori couldn't understand what was going on with him. Nonetheless, she managed to soothe him somewhat, and, together with Rurii, they somewhat forcefully escorted him back to the inn. The villagers watched the adventurers in dumbfounded silence, which was finally broken by the village chief.

"That *is* what I think it is, isn't it?" he uttered.

Reverend Wille nodded sagely.

"He's afraid of ghosts, yes," he replied.

Airola was a place famous for the spirits that gathered there, and it received a great many tourists and travelers. Among these, there were always a set number that were simply not very comfortable with spirits, existences which were humanlike without ever being *truly* human. Regardless of whether or not they were as beautiful as the ice spirit Undine, many spirits were not so different in appearance to ghosts and phantoms. There were always some who were just as afraid of these as they were afraid of wraiths.

Alec's reaction was something that all the villagers had seen before. It was not uncommon for people to turn pale as a sheet and insist on returning home as soon as humanly possible.

"The guy is petrified out of his own skin, and yet he still came all the way here," muttered the village chief. "I don't know whether to feel grateful or sorry..."

Nonetheless, it was thanks to the devoted work of the two adventurers that the unsolved case had finally reached a resolution. The name of one of the village's own residents was finally cleared, and the heartfelt wish of one who'd left the world far too soon had been granted.

The villagers looked out the window, where, in the distance, they could see the Abenius manor against the backdrop of the evening sky. It had fallen into darkness and become a nest for wraiths, but now, finally, they felt the sense of gentler spirits returning to its grounds. Reverend Wille spoke a few words of prayer, hoping that their kind and peaceful neighbors could finally rest easy.

7

"You're afraid of ghosts?"

Shiori had managed to get Alec to the inn, only for him to stubbornly insist that they share the same bed. It was only once he was safely in Shiori's embrace, his pale face blushing a shameful red as he buried it in her chest, that he told her.

Shiori was stunned. She recalled quite clearly that he'd said he didn't like magical beasts that he couldn't cut easily with his blade, but she'd never imagined that it was as bad as phasmophobia. It was exactly the same kind of fear as Zack's when it came to bugs—and, like Zack, Alec had swallowed his fear and taken the request.

So that's *why Zack gave Alec that look when we took the request...*

Zack was aware of Alec's fear, and so he'd known that Alec was putting on a front when he'd calmly accepted Conny's request.

When it came to the work of an adventurer, there were times when one needed to push away their own fears and do what had to be done, but Shiori was nonetheless amazed and in awe of how Alec and Zack could do such a thing without letting it show.

"While I'm working, I can focus on the job at hand and bear it," said Alec, his voice flat and defeated, "but that business with Roland was like a sucker punch that came straight out of nowhere. I thought we were done, and I let my guard

down, and I paid the price. I know that summoners have a unique presence of their own, but I couldn't help feeling there was something different about Roland, even then. But I never imagined he'd turn out to be a spirit himself. Guess I've still got a long way to go..."

When Shiori thought back, there were a few things that now struck her as strange. There was, of course, the fact that the seasoned Alec hadn't sensed Roland until the man was right behind them, but there was also his refusal of holy water, and the way he seemed to know his brother was in the secret passageway even before they'd explored it.

Perhaps because Roland had shown them no enmity, the two adventurers had given him the benefit of the doubt. However, all of it had shocked Alec like a bucket of cold water—the fact that their traveling partner wasn't a living being, the fact that he hadn't noticed it, and the fact that the truth had been revealed right as he'd let his guard down.

"But it's said that many spirits have the power to block their presence," said Shiori, "and perhaps this is what Roland used. Everyone has things that they don't like and things they have trouble dealing with. Try not to let it get to you."

In truth, even Shiori had felt a little shiver of fear when she'd been asked to investigate a "haunted manor." However, in the end, and thanks to having two companions she felt so confident with, it wasn't nearly as scary as she'd expected. She was still much more terrified by the wriggly critters that wormed through the earth—just the sight of them caused her mind to shut down completely.

But everyone had their own individual weaknesses, and that was why it was best to find people who could cover for them.

"You seem fine," said Alec.

"I suppose it's because...well, I'm kind of used to seeing them."

"You're used to wraiths?!"

"Oh, erm... Well, if it's just the appearance we're talking about, I'm used to hearing scary stories and seeing scary visions."

You couldn't put real wraiths on the same level as that which was invented

for movies and illustrations, but speaking purely in terms of appearances, real wraiths looked much more ordinary.

“Scary visions... Hm... I see...” Alec assumed that Shiori was talking about illusion magic, and this made a lot of sense to him. “Well, you *did* unleash that horrendous monstrosity on the necromancer. Your hometown never ceases to exceed my wildest imaginings.”

It was as if he now saw Japan as a place where all sorts of wild and terrifying creatures roamed, but he did not say any of this aloud.

“I am a little surprised, though,” said Shiori. “I figured you’d be fine with ghosts and things like that.”

“I never used to be so scared of them,” said Alec, his eyes growing distant, “but when I moved in with my father, I was invited to his friend’s villa. It was an old place with a long and storied history, and after sharing ghost stories, we decided to indulge in a little test of courage...”

According to Alec, that test of courage was like a yearly tradition, where adults would dress as ghosts and hide in the villa gardens, scaring the children. It was a playful and fun event, in which the kids did a lap of the gardens and then returned. However, there was something different about the year that Alec took part—namely, the fact that an actual ghost decided to participate.

“My group was the only one with an odd number of kids, so I was left without a partner. Because I was also the highest in terms of social status, I was put at the end of the group.”

The young Alec, petrified on the inside, was walking at the back of the group behind the other pairs when a young boy ran up behind him and took his hand.

“I got left out too,” the boy said.

The boy was just a little older than Alec, and Alec was grateful for his kindness. However, around the time they got to the middle of the gardens, the boy told Alec that he knew a shortcut, and pulled Alec deeper into the hedges. Alec protested, saying it wasn’t a good idea to leave the rest of the group, but the boy assured him that everything would be fine and tugged Alec further along. After a time, the boy took Alec’s wrist instead of his hand with a power

well beyond his years, and his face grew pale and twisted as he let out a sad scream.

That was as far as Alec's memories of the moment went.

"I slept for a whole day before waking," said Alec. "The knights and even an exorcist were called while I was passed out. It seemed that a wraith had taken a liking to me."

The kids realized at some point that Alec had gone missing and informed the adults, who went looking for him in a panic. They'd found him with his hand shoved inside a hedge, screaming. He'd fainted the moment the adults rescued him, but Alec's arm still bore marks where someone had grabbed his wrist, and the villa burst into an uproar—everyone believed that someone had snuck into the villa to intrude on the usually safe test of courage.

However, the hedge into which Alec was being pulled ended in thick trees, the likes of which no ordinary person could hide among...

"The holy knights said the grip marks on my arm were spirit blight. Later, upon investigation, it was revealed that part of the garden hedging had once been a pond, and a boy had drowned there more than a hundred years ago. The master of the villa at the time had been in such sorrow that they'd filled the pond in entirely—the holy knights thought it was likely that the ghost was lonely, and that my own wavelength matched that of the wraith's... They said they're drawn to me."

And perhaps this was why Roland, too, had appeared before them.

"Oh, my..." uttered Shiori. "That must have been quite traumatizing..."



A frightening experience at such a formative age was not something easily

forgotten, and it lingered in Alec as trauma. Shiori could understand now why he was still so afraid. The deeper she knew Alec, the more his unique weaknesses floated to the surface, and she loved these as much as she did any other part of him.

“Are you still scared?”

“A little, but I don’t feel the urge to rush home anymore.”

Being here together with Shiori helped to ease Alec’s fears, and though he was usually so confident, his eyebrows drooped bashfully as he smiled. Shiori pulled him in closer and gently rubbed his head of chestnut-brown hair.

“Let’s try and rest until the knights arrive. I’ll be right here sleeping by your side,” she said.

Night brought with it uncertainty, but Shiori and Alec both had people with whom they could share their worries, and ease them. No loneliness would get them here, as they slept in each other’s arms and partook of one another’s warmth. Their worries, too, would eventually fade.

The half-asleep Rurii wobbled drowsily as if to remind them that it was there, and the two adventurers shared a laugh before silently pulling together for a kiss and closing their eyes. It had been an action-packed night, and Shiori’s exhaustion left her quickly dozing off. But as she did, she heard Alec’s voice whispering in her ear.

“It’s nice, not being alone...”

And Shiori, too, agreed, as her consciousness sunk into a warm sea of sleep.

8

A few days later, Shiori and Alec visited the Tris Cathedral to inform Conny of the results of their request. The incident had already been reported in the papers, but hearing the details from the two adventurers left Conny with his jaw agape.

“My goodness,” he said with a sigh. “I can scarcely believe it...”

The newspapers had all reported on how the murders in Airola Village had

been solved, along with the haunting of the Abenius Manor. Tremors of shock ran through greater society as they learned that not only had a renowned scholar killed a whole family to silence them, but he'd also used his research into nearby ruins as a cover so he could recover from the manor what he had failed to steal on the night of their murder. It was a thorough and dogged crime, through and through.

Some articles noted that the scholar's crimes were brought to a halt by two adventurers, but none included any information on Roland and his efforts to clear his older brother's name. The village chief had opted to hide this particular detail so as not to further disturb the spirits at rest in Airola Village. A few nosy reporters tried to dig around about this particular rumor, but with other news happening all across the land, they would soon lose interest.

The arrested scholar and necromancer, Hugo Jarnefelt, would almost certainly be sentenced to death. After thorough and harsh interrogation into what were clearly well-practiced methods, Jarnefelt admitted to having committed thefts in a great number of locations across Storydia. On one other occasion, like with the Abenius Manor, he had killed a family upon being discovered. Considering the number of lives he had taken, most felt the death sentence to be almost too lenient.

Jarnefelt had used his status as an architectural scholar to visit a variety of old buildings and manors. These visits were essentially scouting operations, during which he would evaluate a location's valuables. However, knowing that he would become a suspect if he broke into a location in the days following his visit, Jarnefelt left years between the scouting and execution of his robberies, selecting the most convenient locations for his crimes at the moment.

And, just as Jarnefelt expected, because his target locations had so many visitors, none suspected him—a scholar who'd visited years ago—as the culprit. Just as Roland had surmised, Jarnefelt had in fact visited the Abenius Manor not long after it had first been renovated and reconstructed. He was not even on the suspect list—he had visited at the height of the tourist season and, because he'd blended in with the other travelers, he was barely even a whisper in the memories of Airola's villagers.

During the murders at the Abenius Manor, Jarnefelt had used his necromancy

just once—to kill the butler who had fled down the manor's secret passageway. The Tris Times concluded their article by noting that the knight corps would be examining its own knights quite harshly, being that those investigating the murder scene had not picked up on the lingering aftereffects of Jarnefelt's magic at the time.

However, even if the knights *had* noticed that a necromancer was involved, it was hard to believe that any would have made the link to the thefts around Storydia, or to the scholar named Jarnefelt. The man himself was very adept at hiding the fact that he was a necromancer. He never walked around with spirits harbored inside himself, and instead was careful to only ever "procure" them on-site. Jarnefelt's parents did not want their son's reputation tarnished, and so from a young age they'd made him hide his abilities. He would then grow up to use this for nefarious purposes.

"Jarnefelt was stripped of his title, and is banished for life from the academic world," said Alec. "It's not surprising. He committed theft while he worked, and was involved in two separate murder cases. He will not escape harsh punishment—not as a scholar, nor as an ordinary human being."

"But to think that such a person was teaching at schools and educational institutions," said Shiori. "It must come as such a huge shock."

Many had thought the term "scholar" merely a way for Jarnefelt to express his love of architecture, and were shocked to find that he had once been a teacher at the royal capital's boarding school. Naturally, the school was pushed to respond with an investigation of its own—after all, a known murderer and thief had been teaching at a school for the children of the nobility. It was thus discovered that several students attending the school had been the victims of theft at their family homes. For a prestigious school, this was a major scandal.

Jarnefelt's work was pulled from publication. Though the work itself was not criminal, the problem was that Jarnefelt's work had been funded by his evil deeds. Much criticism was also leveled at the fact that his research was conducted completely alone, leading many to suspect that Jarnefelt had forced local spirits to act as his assistants. The archaeological and architectural societies could not simply overlook the fact that the man had gathered the regrets of dead spirits and essentially enslaved the residents of a location to be

his assistants—the dead deserved more respect than that.

“Necromancy is, in its original form, a method of soothing wandering spirits so they may pass to the afterlife without regret,” said Conny. “To instead use that power for nefarious purposes... We simply cannot stand for it.”

The reverend whispered a prayer, likely for the sorry souls that had been caught up in it all.

“Those with the powers of necromancy are, by their nature, often predisposed to wrongdoing. The ability to enslave the souls of once-living beings can twist the soul of the necromancer too,” he added.

This predisposition was the exact reason that it was necessary for those with necromantic powers to be taken in by the church so they could be taught both how to use their powers correctly, and how to maintain their mental and spiritual health. Though Jarnefelt’s parents likely had their son’s best intentions in mind when they’d made him hide his power, they had unknowingly led him down the wrong path.

“That said, whether or not one will actually commit a crime will always come down to the individual,” said Conny. “And there are indeed people who use necromancy for the well-being of the dead, even though they’ve never once been taught by the church about proper mental care. In exchange for help with their work, these necromancers pay spirits by seeing them safely to the afterlife.”

Jarnefelt, however, did not even do that—he used spirits as conveniently available tools, then discarded them when he was done. Worse still, he used the souls of those he had killed. He was the very worst kind of necromancer.

“Do you think Roland and the others will safely make their way to the afterlife?” asked Shiori.

The investigations had yet to completely finish, and the purification of the Abenius Manor was set to be held upon their conclusion. The butler’s corpse was to be buried with Roland, but Shiori still worried whether they would finally be at peace.

“Of course,” replied Conny, who explained that two of Tris Cathedral’s holy

knights had been sent for that very purpose.

“Oh... That’s such a relief,” said Shiori.

“I’m glad to hear it,” added Alec. “He was our companion for just a few hours, but...I hope he and his brother find peace.”

Even Alec, who was scared of ghosts, smiled and hoped that their onetime “companion” would have a safe journey.

“There is something about Roland’s desire to clear his dead brother’s name that is at once both beautiful and yet sorrowful. Upon death, a spirit is supposed to be free of all that bound their body to this earth, and yet Roland’s regrets kept him here. However...”

And here, Conny paused to let a kindly smile fill his freckled face.

“I suppose that simply shows the strength and depth of human emotion.”

9

“The strength of emotion, huh?” muttered Alec, as he looked at the people passing them by on the street.

After a purification and blessing from Conny, and after accepting their reward for the request, Shiori and Alec headed home.

“If I were to die now,” he continued, “I would become a wraith in an instant. There is too much within me that remains in a state of flux—matters to do with you, my brother, and my past love. I can’t help but think that what would emerge from those regrets would be a truly horrid sight.”

Shiori knew that Alec was just talking in terms of assumptions, but Shiori was nonetheless surprised to hear her lover speak of his own death, and she gasped. However, she knew that Alec had not finished, and so she waited silently for him to continue.

“Nobody knows how or when a person will leave this world,” said Alec, reaching a hand to the back of Shiori’s neck to gently touch her hair. “However much we may try, we cannot stop the clock. That’s why I want to live each day without regret.”

Though Alec did not, and could not, tell Shiori as much, upon his return from the Dolgast Empire at the completion of his duties, Alec had considered for a time that perhaps death was the easiest option. The empire—like a nightmare of the past—had been dismantled, and he had been able to clear one of his younger brother's anxieties. At that point, Alec really believed that perhaps it did not matter if he himself was no longer a part of the world.

Alec had felt that way because in his mind, he had run away from everything, and so all that was left was to give himself up for the sake of his brother, the king, should there be a need for it. He could not deny that he was also drawn to the idea of death as a chance for eternal rest.

However, when Alec met Shiori, a desire had awakened in him—he wanted to simply be together with her, and in her company he dreamed of a shared future. He had since shared his feelings with her, and was finally in a position where his desired future was becoming reality. Thus, Alec could no longer allow his life to be taken so easily. He wanted nothing more than to live without any further regrets.

"That's why I want to do everything I have to, until I can put my past behind me. If it doesn't work out, then it doesn't work out—but I'm doing this for myself, and so I have to give it my best shot. I have to, because it's so important to the future we'll share."

Shiori felt awed by the strong conviction in Alec's words.

"Alec..." she uttered, before breaking into a gentle smile. "I can look back now and feel glad that I gave it my best and kept trying. I'm glad that I hung on and tried my best just to live."

It was because Shiori gave up on life that she'd met Alec, and that—with the support of her kind friends—she could learn once more how precious it was to be alive. She'd come to have a desire of her own too—the wish that she and Alec could share a future together. She was no longer bound by the mere act of living day to day—Shiori now thought of her own future happiness.

"I, too, want to keep giving it my best for our life together," said Shiori.

"I don't want you to overdo it, but...I'm just happy you feel the same way. Perhaps you and I are like birds of a feather."

Rurii listened to the two adventurers talk as it perused the food stalls, but made sure to wobble them a message to ensure they knew that it, too, felt just the same as them. It quickly climbed onto Alec's shoulders and poked out two feelers towards the sky as if to shout "Hooray!"

Knowing that Rurii was enjoying their new family life together filled them with warmth. Shiori's life here had not been easy, and yet it was because she had held on that Alec now had so much he could now think of as irreplaceable and priceless. He had friends for life, and a woman he loved—he had met them all on the complicated path of his life, and the relationships were all the more precious for it.

Shiori looked up at him, and he leaned down to kiss her on the lips. He wanted nothing more than to treasure this bond between them, and for the story they wove to continue on its way.

Shiori smiled up at him, and the slime on his shoulders wobbled joyously.

10

"Hm...?"

Shiori woke in the middle of the night to find that she could not move. It seemed she'd fallen asleep in Alec's strong embrace. And though she was glad for it, she had to admit—it was also a little uncomfortable. She turned her gaze on him to get him to loosen his grip, and then it hit her.

Alec was without a single article of clothing. She could feel his legs against her own, and then another fact dawned on her.

Shiori, too, was completely naked.

"Oh my..."

Shiori vaguely remembered them delving deep into one another in the bathtub the previous evening, but she had little memory of what had happened afterwards. She'd probably fallen asleep, and Alec had taken her to his bed.

She could still feel pulses through her body from their time in the bath. They hadn't crossed the line, so to speak, but Shiori felt incredibly fulfilled. She could

feel the warmth of Alec's body and the strength of his heart through her own, and it was like a silent message that they were both alive in the moment.

"Shiori...? What's wrong? Can't sleep?"

Alec's eyes fluttered open, perhaps because he'd noticed she was awake. His voice was husky and languid, and he was most likely in the world between dreams and reality.

"You're just holding me a touch too tight... It's a little uncomfortable."

"Oh... Sorry about that."

Alec's grip loosened, and then he buried his face in Shiori's chest. She let out a squeal, and she heard a distinct chuckle. They may not have crossed the line yet, but they certainly indulged in one another deeply, and Alec was once again up to mischief.

"You are just adorable, you know that?" he said.

"Alec..."

She let a little ire slip into her voice, but she was by no means seriously mad. Rather, she could barely suppress the joy she felt at the overflowing love he gave her.

"Well, let's get a little more sleep," said Shiori. "There's still time until morning..."

She wrapped Alec's head in her arms as she drifted off, and felt him nod. Within an instant, he was asleep. He always looked so dashing in person, and yet here, asleep, there was something more youthful in his expression.

"You don't even know how adorable *you* are," she uttered.

Shiori loved Alec. He was willing to show this unguarded side of himself to her, and that made him so very precious.

"I'm so happy..."

She felt the warmth of Alec's body and his breath on her skin, and she, too, drifted into slumber.

Afterword

Hello, this is You Fuguruma. Thank you so much for picking up volume six of Housekeeping Mage from Another World.

In this volume, Alec's past—which until now was seen only in fragments—is revealed in its totality. I was a little worried about devoting so many pages to a story without Shiori, but I knew this was a story that had to be told, so I took the chance on it. I'd like to thank my editor for letting me write it.

Alec's story—from his arrival at the castle to his departure—is written from three points of view: Alec's, Olivier's, and Rebecca's. I think your impression of this story is going to differ depending on whose feelings you sympathize with most. On one side is the person who could not balance their public and private lives, and on the other was the person who was not ready for the responsibility expected of them—and in the end, they broke up. Though you could say that nobles and royalty are educated on these matters, it is not easy for teenagers to make the best decisions in the midst of extreme circumstances. Had the two of them been in their thirties at the time, complete with the experience of their age, perhaps things would have been different.

Through this volume, we learn just how deeply Alec regrets his past, and that he is now intent on facing it. This goal has allowed him to open his heart, and made his relationship with Shiori reach another level. I hope to continue bringing you all stories of these two and their slime as they strive for their future together.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor and my family for their support, Nama-sensei for the wonderful illustrations, and Ono-sensei for bringing the world to life in the manga. And of course, thank you to all the readers.

See you again!

Reference Materials:

The Simplest Recipes for Homemade Smoked Cuisine: Do it at home with just

a pot and some tea leaves! (*Ichiban Kantan na Tezukuri Kunsei Reshipi - Nabe & Chaba sae Areba Ouchi de Tsukureru!*) (Tamiko Kuroda, Kawade Shobō Shinsha)